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Foreword

This issue begins with a funeral sermon for Pastor John Dukleth, who died of cancer at the age of 50 years. He was the pastor of Bethany Lutheran Church, Luverne, Minnesota, at the time of his death. He was a graduate of Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary and served the Scarville-Center Parish, Scarville, Iowa, prior to his pastorate at Luverne. He is survived by his wife and seven children. Blessed be his memory!

Pastor Jay Webber of Trinity Lutheran Church, Brewster, Massachusetts in his essay answers the question: "Does the Roman Catholic doctrine of justification in contemporary Roman Catholic theology differ from that of the Council of Trent?" After an interesting comparison of the two the essayist concludes "that the basic assertions of Trent, albeit often recast in non-Scholastic categories, still predominate in Catholic teaching." Trent's anathema of justification by faith alone still stands.

In his essay *The Theology of the Atonement* Pastor Erwin Ekhoﬀ begins by quoting Francis Pieper who wrote in his *Christian Dogmatics* that "instead of praising the compassions and love of God, man has criticized and keeps on criticizing the divine method of reconciliation as unnecessary, as unworthy of God, as self-contradictory and unjust, as utterly unsuitable, as too juridicial." He then expounds the biblical doctrine of the atonement and compares some of the "theories" that have been advanced by those who are offended by this doctrine, and concludes by pointing out that there are only two religions in the world, one includes all who expect salvation by their own doing; the other, all who expect salvation by something accomplished by God. All religions outside of Christianity teach the former and, therefore, deny the atonement.

True believers will never tire of hearing the Lenten-Easter message of a crucified and risen Savior "who was delivered for our offenses, and raised again for our justification." (Rom. 4:25)

WWP

The Funeral Sermon

for
John Dukleth

by
Norman A. Madson

Prayer

Dear heavenly Father, we come to You in this time of grief, asking for Your grace and guidance and strength. We thank You for having brought John Dukleth to faith in Christ Jesus, his Savior, and for having kept him in that faith to the very end. We also thank You for the shed blood of his Savior, Jesus Christ, in which he placed his only hope for eternity, and through which blood he now has been permitted to enter the eternal home above. Bless us in our worship of You, O God, at this time and in this place. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen!

Text — I John 1:7

Fellow redeemed in Christ, and especially you bereaved members of the family. Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen!

We have gathered here this afternoon for the funeral service of a dear husband, a beloved father, son, and brother, a shepherd of the Lord's flock here at Bethany & Rose Dell Lutheran churches, and a brother-pastor in our Evangelical Lutheran Synod. But more importantly, we are here for the funeral of a Christian — a redeemed, justified, sanctified, and now glorified child of God.

It is one of those funerals where the question may arise, even in the minds of Christian people, "Why did the Lord allow this death to happen?" Here was a man who just a few weeks ago celebrated his 50th birthday, an age in life that is often referred to as "the prime of life." Here was a family man, who had a wife and seven children who still looked to him for guidance and physical and moral support. Here was a full-time servant of the Lord, who under normal circumstances would

still have had 15 to 20 years in the active ministry. And all of a sudden, without any prior warning, he is struck down with cancer, and in a few short months his life on earth is ended. "Why?" we may ask. We do not know the answer to that question. Only God knows the answer.

What we do know is that whatever God allows to happen in the earthly life of His children is for their good. Through His Old Testament prophet, Jeremiah, He assures us: "I know the thoughts that I think toward you, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end." Jeremiah 29:11. And by His New Testament apostle, Paul, He tell us, "All things work together for good to them who love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose." Romans 8:28. And in one of our hymns we sing the words:

What God ordains is always good;
 He is my Friend and Father;
 He suffers naught to do me harm,
 Tho many storms may gather.
 Here I may know both joy and woe,
 Some day I shall see clearly
 That He hath loved me dearly.

— TLH 521, v.4

On the basis of our text, which was one of the favorite Scripture texts of John Dukleth, we shall speak to you briefly on a subject that was very dear to Pastor Dukleth's heart, and that is this, that we sinners are *saved by the blood of Christ*.

Now, for that statement of our theme to have any real meaning for us we must first of all know that

1. We are in need of being saved!

And there ought not be any doubt about that, when the Bible has spoken so clearly on that matter. It says that "We are all as an unclean thing, and all of our righteousnesses are as filthy rags." Isaiah 64:6. "All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." Romans 3:23. "There is none that doeth good, no not one." Romans 3:12. And the Apostle Paul is speaking for us all when he writes in the 7th chapter of Romans, "For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) dwelleth no good

thing; for to will is present with me, but how to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would, I do not; and the evil which I would not, that I do." Romans 7:18-19. And in a verse that follows closely after our text it says, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us... If we say we have not sinned we make Him a liar, and His Word is not in us." I John 1:8 & 10.

Your loved one, and our friend, knew that he was a sinful human being. That's why this Bible text meant so much to him. The Holy Spirit had revealed to his heart that he had not only been conceived and born in sin, but that throughout his life he had committed more sins than he could enumerate. He knew that even with his best efforts he had not been the perfect husband, the perfect father, the perfect pastor. He knew that in those various roles of his life he had failed many times. I am sure that the hymn verse that is often sung at our communion services expressed the inner feelings of his heart:

Lord, to Thee I make confession;
I have sinned and gone astray;
I have multiplied transgression,
Chosen for myself my way.
Forced at last to see my errors,
Lord, I tremble at Thy terrors.
- TLH 326, v.1

And I know that he would want the preacher of his funeral sermon not to gloss over the fact that he was a sinner, who was in dire need of God's mercy and forgiveness. And I know that he would want me to remind you, his relatives and friends, that you do not forget that you also are sinners, and that you too desperately need the grace of God in your lives. It also says in a verse following today's text, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." I John 1:9.

But even though the deceased knew that he was a sinner, and that for those sins he really deserved God's anger and punishments, yet he did not despair over his sins. And why? Because the Holy Spirit had also revealed to him that in spite of our sins,

II. We will be saved by the blood of Christ!

And oh, how he was comforted by that fact, and especially in these last few weeks. God permitted Pastor Dukleth to celebrate one last Christmas here on earth before being taken by the angels into Abraham's bosom. In many of the carols written for the Christmas season, the authors place a lot of emphasis on the tiny baby, and cattle sheds, and hay and straw and stars. But for Pastor Dukleth the emphasis had to be on the Incarnation — this, that our Creator/Savior God took on human flesh and lived among us here on earth. And that baby of Bethlehem did not remain a baby, but He grew to manhood, and as a man he died upon the cross for us all. And in His dying, His holy, precious blood was shed. And it is in that blood that all of the guilt of our sins has been washed away. To Pastor Dukleth the manger without the cross in the life of Christ was meaningless. For him everything revolved around the cleansing blood of His Savior. To Him the real meaning of Christmas could be found in those words of one of Brorson's Christmas hymns:

That God has laid His anger by,
He by His gift has shown us;
He gives His Son for us to die,
In Him He now doth own us.
These joyful tidings tell abroad,
That Jesus Christ, the Son of God,
From sin doth us deliver.
Who then should not be glad today
When Christ is born, the sinner's stay,
Who is of grace the giver.
— Hymnary 185, v.4

During his stay in a Sioux Falls hospital Pastor Dukleth was visited on occasion by a professional counselor of the hospital. This counselor figured that John must be angry with God because of his incurable illness and approaching death. And the counselor wanted to get this anger out in the open, and for John to talk about it. After several attempts at this methods of therapy, John finally told the counselor: "I am not angry

with God. How can I be angry with the One who loves me so much that He was willing to die for me so that all my sins might be forgiven, and so that when I die I can go to heaven." That, dear friends, was a beautiful testimony of a dying Christian.

How can any of us ever be angry with what God allows to happen in our lives, when He has given us so much. And what more can we ask for our loved ones, or for ourselves than what is told us in this brief text, that "the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanseth us from all sin."

"Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end."
Amen!

JUSTIFICATION IN CONTEMPORARY ROMAN CATHOLIC THEOLOGY:

DOES IT DIFFER FROM THE POSITION OF THE COUNCIL OF TRENT ?

By
Pastor David Jay Webber

Introduction

The Roman Catholic Church is the largest Christian church body in the world, and in the United States. All of us are no doubt acquainted with Roman Catholics, in many cases we have relatives who are Roman Catholics, and some of the members of our congregations are married to Roman Catholics. For all of these reasons it is important for us to understand Roman Catholicism, and to be able to answer questions about the Roman Catholic Church with clarity and accuracy.

Until recent times the relationship between the Evangelical Lutheran and Roman Catholic churches was almost always characterized by mutual suspicion and animosity. When the Council of Trent (1545-1563) defined post-Reformation Roman Catholicism in ways that seemed to contradict the Lutheran view on almost every doctrinal point, the die was cast for a division within Christendom that would appear to both sides to be irresolvable. During the four centuries that followed Trent there was very little cordial contact or communication between the two churches, or between the laity and clergy thereof. However, for the past 30 years or so there has been a "thawing" of sorts in this relationship. On the Roman Catholic side this has been due in large measure to the influence of the Second Vatican Council. According to David P. Scaer,

The Second Vatican Council, known simply as Vatican II, meeting intermittently from 1962 to 1965, changed church

direction. It will probably be considered the most important event for the Roman Catholic Church in this century. ...

Vatican II tried to remove barriers between Roman Catholics and Protestants, Jews, Mohammedans, and even unbelievers. Some Roman Catholic theologians are suggesting that their church recognize the Augsburg Confession, considered the first formal expression of Protestant Reformation faith. ... The anathema against Luther has not been lifted, but it would be no surprise to many if this happened. ...

The internal developments within Roman Catholic theology were complex and even contradictory, but the developments within the worshiping life of the people were clear. The basis of these developments was the fresh understanding of the universal priesthood of all believers, so essential to the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century. The mass was no longer recited in Latin but in the vernacular, and individual bishops had the liberty to offer to the laity both the bread and wine, thus correcting abuses of long standing. Protestant hymns including Luther's "A Mighty Fortress" were sung and more attention was paid to preaching. ...

The changes within Roman Catholicism have been real and internally disruptive. That church is simply not the same today as it was in 1945.¹

Since the reforms of Vatican II Roman Catholic worshipers have been able to hear and sing every week, in a language they can all understand, such evangelical liturgical texts as the *Gloria in Excelsis* and the *Agnus Dei*. The lessons from Holy Scripture are likewise read in the vernacular, and Catholic laity are also encouraged to own and read their own copies of the Bible. We joyfully welcome any developments among Roman Catholics which would bring about for them an increased exposure to the Scriptures and their Gospel message, and we sincerely pray that God will graciously work through the power of his Word to create and sustain faith. Yet not all the developments in the Catholic Church since Vatican II have been positive. The use of the

¹ David P. Scaer, in an added chapter in *The History of Christian Doctrine* by E. H. Klotsche (Baker Book House, revised edition 1979), pp. 367-69.

historical-critical method of Biblical interpretation, and the teaching of theistic evolution in the scientific disciplines, have become the norm in many of the educational institutions of the Church, and have done much harm. "Liberation Theology" and similar theological trends and movements represent doctrinal aberrations that are arguably more serious than those which Luther and the other Reformers addressed in the sixteenth century.

A thorough analysis of all aspects of the doctrine and practice of the post-Vatican II Roman Catholic Church, and of the changes which have occurred in recent decades, is far beyond the purview of this paper. We will therefore limit ourselves to a study of the *locus* of justification, both in its Tridentine formulation and as it is currently understood in modern Catholic theology. We have chosen this *locus* as the focal point of our attention because Lutherans, by definition, are preeminently interested in the way in which God's justification of the sinner is explained in the various corners of Christendom. Indeed, our Confessions describe the subject of justification as "the chief article of the entire Christian doctrine."¹ And in the words of Luther, as quoted in the Solid Declaration,

Where this single article remains pure, Christendom will remain pure, in beautiful harmony, and without any schisms. But where it does not remain pure, it is impossible to repel any error or heretical spirit.²

As a "barometer" for our analysis of Rome's doctrine of justification it would probably be helpful to have before us a brief summary of the Confessional Lutheran doctrine of the same. Article IV of the Augsburg Confession reads as follows:

It is also taught among us that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merits, works, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith, when we believe that Christ suffered for us and

¹ Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration III:6, in *The Book of Concord*, translated and edited by Theodore G. Tappert (Fortress Press, 1959), p. 540.

² Weimar Edition 31:255; quoted in Solid Declaration III:6, p. 540.

that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness, as Paul says in Romans 3:21-26 and 4:5.¹

Article III of the Solid Declaration tells us

that a poor sinner is justified before God (that is, he is absolved and declared utterly free from all his sins, and from the verdict of well deserved damnation, and is adopted as a child of God and an heir of eternal life) without any merit or worthiness on our part, and without any preceding, present, or subsequent works, by sheer grace, solely through the merits of the total obedience, the bitter passion, the death, and the resurrection of Christ, our Lord, whose obedience is reckoned to us as righteousness. The Holy Spirit offers these treasures to us in the promise of the Gospel, and faith is the only means whereby we can apprehend, accept, apply them to ourselves, and make them our own. Faith is a gift of God whereby we rightly learn to know Christ as our redeemer in the Word of the Gospel and to trust in him, that solely for the sake of his obedience we have forgiveness of sins by grace, are accounted righteous and holy by God the Father, and are saved forever.²

The truly catholic character of the Lutheran teaching is confirmed by the following statement from St. Ambrose, the fourth century bishop of Milan, which is quoted in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession:

But the world was subjected to him [God] through the law; for by the commandment of the law all are accused and by the works of the law none is justified, that is, by the law sin is recognized but its guilt is not relieved. The law would seem to be harmful since it has made all men sinners, but when the Lord Jesus came he forgave all men the sin that none could escape and by shedding his blood canceled the bond that stood against us (Col. 2:14). This is what Paul says, "Law came in to increase the trespass; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (Rom. 5:20) through Jesus. For

¹ Augsburg Confession IV (German), in Tappert, p. 30.

² Solid Declaration III:9-11, pp. 540-41.

after the whole world was subjected, he took away the sin of the whole world, as John testified when he said (John 1:29), "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" So let no one glory in his works since no one is justified by his deeds. But he who is righteous has it as a gift because he was justified after being washed. It is faith therefore that frees men through the blood of Christ; for "blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered" (Ps. 32:1).¹

Trent's Position on Justification

The Council of Trent offered an official, definitive response to the claims and teachings of the Reformation, and its decrees and canons are still considered to be binding for members of the Roman Catholic Church. (In this regard, however, we do observe that a large number of Roman Catholic theologians seem to be willing to "submit" to the doctrinal standards of their church only in a qualified and less-than-wholehearted manner, similar to the way in which many theologians in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America "subscribe" to the *Book of Concord*.) Lutherans are usually very familiar with those Tridentine canons, from the sixth session of the council, which deal directly with "justification by faith," and which condemn it. Those which have most often been quoted by Lutheran historians and polemicists are:

Canon 9. If anyone says that the sinner is justified by faith alone, meaning that nothing else is required to co-operate in order to obtain the grace of justification, and that it is not in any way necessary that he be prepared and disposed by the action of his own will, let him be anathema.

Canon 11. If anyone says that men are justified either by the sole imputation of the justice of Christ or by the sole remission of sins, to the exclusion of the grace and *the charity which is poured forth in their hearts by the Holy Ghost*, and remains in them, or also that the grace by which we are justified is only the good will of God, let him be anathema.

¹ Ambrose, Epistle to Irenaeus: quoted in Apology of the Augsburg Confession IV:103, in Tappert, pp. 121-22.

Canon 12. If anyone says that justifying faith is nothing else than confidence in divine mercy, which remits sins for Christ's sake, or that it is this confidence alone that justifies us, let him be anathema.

Canon 20. If anyone says that a man who is justified and however perfect is not bound to observe the commandments of God and the Church, but only to believe, as if the Gospel were a bare and absolute promise of eternal life without the condition of observing the commandments, let him be anathema.¹

To the Lutherans of the sixteenth century, and of the centuries that followed, some of these statements seemed almost blasphemous. J. T. Mueller's interpretation of their meaning, written in 1934, is highly illustrative:

The Roman Catholic sect is the greatest enemy of the Christian Church; for all Christians live, move, and have their being in the doctrine of justification by faith. But this doctrine the papacy does not permit its adherents to accept and believe. It rather reviles and curses the Scriptural doctrine of justification by faith (*c.f.* Council of Trent, Sess. 6, Cans. 9, 11, 12, 20) and trains its followers to seek salvation by works. The Church of Rome has murdered thousands bodily for their adherence to the doctrine of justification by faith and millions spiritually by teaching them to trust in justification by works.²

From the perspective of the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions, we would have to say, at the very least, that the above-cited Tridentine canons do not follow "the pattern of the sound words"³ of St. Paul and the other New Testament writers in their teaching on justification. Yet if we want to understand the intended meaning of these canons, we cannot simply assume that they are operating with "Lutheran"

¹ The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, in *Creeeds of the Churches*, Third Edition, edited by John H. Leith (John Knox Press, 1982), pp. 421, 422-23.

² John Theodore Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics* (Concordia Publishing House, 1955), p. 368.

³ 2 Timothy 1:13, Revised Standard Version.

definitions of the terms “justification” and “faith.” We know what those words mean to us, but what did they mean to the bishops and theologians at Trent? When we examine and evaluate Trent’s canonical rejections of “justification by faith,” we must do so within the broader context of that council’s other pronouncements, and in light of its own understanding of the words “justification” and “faith.”

According to Trent, justification

is not only a remission of sins but also the sanctification and renewal of the inward man through the voluntary reception of the grace and gifts whereby an unjust man becomes just and from being an enemy becomes a friend, that he may be *an heir according to hope of life everlasting*.¹

When Trent speaks of “justification,” therefore, it is using that term in a “broad” sense. To borrow some Lutheran theological categories, Trent’s definition of justification includes not only the “alien” righteousness of Christ, imputed to Christians when their sins are forgiven, but also the “inherent” righteousness which is present and active in the life of a believer but which, on this side of the grave, is always incomplete. Correctly understanding the Tridentine definition of justification allows us, then, to understand how Trent can speak of the “increase” of justification:

Having, therefore, been thus justified and made the friends and *domestics of God*, advancing *from virtue to virtue*, they are *renewed*, as the Apostle says, *day by day*, that is, *mortifying the members* of their flesh, and presenting them as instruments of justice unto sanctification, they, through the observance of the commandments of God and of the Church, faith cooperating with good works, increase in that justice received through the grace of Christ and are further justified...²

In regard to “faith,” Trent speaks of it as

the beginning of human salvation, the foundation and root of all justification, *without which it is impossible to please God* and to come to the fellowship of His sons; and we are

¹ The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, p. 411.

² The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, p. 414.

therefore said to be justified gratuitously, because none of those things that precede justification, whether faith or works, merit the grace of justification.¹

Yet Trent does not endorse the Lutheran *sola fide* formula, due in part to the fact that Trent defines the term "faith" in a very different way. For example, Trent can make the following statement about the continuation of "faith" even in those who have forfeited their salvation:

Against the subtle wits of some also, who by *pleasing speeches and good words seduce the hearts of the innocent*, it must be maintained that the grace of justification once received is lost not only by infidelity, whereby also faith itself is lost, but also by every other mortal sin, though in this case faith is not lost; thus defending the teaching of the divine law which excludes from the kingdom of God not only unbelievers, but also the faithful [who are] *fornicators, adulterers, effeminate, liars with mankind, thieves, covetous, drunkards, railers, extortioners*, and all others who commit deadly sins, from which with the help of divine grace they can refrain, and on account of which they are cut off from the grace of Christ.²

"Faith," according to Trent, does not involve a heartfelt, personal trust in the promises of God, but is merely a mental acceptance of the doctrines of the church. (And, of course, no genuine Lutheran has ever claimed that this kind of faith justifies us.)

Therefore, when Trent anathematizes "justification by faith," it is not so much anathematizing the actual Lutheran doctrine but a non-existent doctrine of "justification and sanctification" by "correct doctrine." Most Roman Catholic historians now acknowledge that the Tridentine fathers did not really understand the Lutheran teaching, due largely to the fact that they defined "justification" and "faith" in different ways, and that Trent therefore condemned only a caricature of the Lutheran/Protestant position. P. De Letter, for example, writing in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, speaks of "the Council of Trent's overtly anti-Protestant bias, which stiffened the oppositions and blurred or left

¹ The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, p. 413.

² The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, p. 418.

unmentioned the points of contact between the Catholic and the Protestant doctrines."¹ De Letter admits that "Few, if any, Protestants, past or present, would recognize their faith" in the views attributed to them by Trent.²

Positively speaking, Trent describes "the justification of the sinner" as "a translation of the state in which man is born a child of the first Adam, to the state of grace and of the adoption of the sons of God through the second Adam, Jesus Christ, our Saviour."³ Trent does not embrace the *sola gratia* principle in the form in which it was used in the Lutheran construction, but as a partial corrective to some of the more crass forms of medieval semi-Pelagianism. Trent does emphasize the absolute priority and necessity of divine grace in the conversion and justification of the sinner. Under the category of "preparation for justification," especially in regard to adult converts to the Christian faith, Trent declares that

the beginning of that justification must proceed from the pre-disposing grace of God through Jesus Christ, that is, from His vocation, whereby, without any merits on their part, they are called; that they who by sin had been cut off from God, may be disposed through His quickening and helping grace to convert themselves to their own justification by freely assenting to and co-operating with that grace; so that, while God touches the heart of man through the illumination of the Holy Ghost, man himself neither does absolutely nothing while receiving that inspiration, since he can also reject it, nor yet is he able by his own free will and without the grace of God to move himself to justice in His sight. Hence, when it is said in the sacred writings: *Turn ye to me, and I will turn to you*, we are reminded of our liberty; and when we reply: *Convert us, O Lord, to thee, and we shall be converted*, we confess that we need the grace of God.⁴

¹ P. De Letter, "Justification," in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. VIII (McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1967), p. 87.

² De Letter, p. 90.

³ The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, pp. 409-10.

⁴ The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, p. 410.

Evangelical Lutherans would not recognize here a fully acceptable form of teaching concerning the grace of God, but it is an improvement over some of the expressions regarding "free will" which had often antagonized Luther and the other Reformers. Also under the category of "preparation for justification," Trent makes some interesting statements about the importance of "hope" and "trust" in a person's relationship with God, demonstrating that it does not promote the crass "justification by works" doctrine sometimes attributed to it:

Now, they [the adults] are disposed to that justice when, aroused and aided by divine grace, receiving *faith by hearing*, they are moved freely toward God, believing to be true what has been divinely revealed and promised, especially that the sinner is justified by God *by his grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus*; and when, understanding themselves to be sinners, they, by turning themselves from the fear of divine justice, by which they are salutarily aroused, to consider the mercy of God, are raised to hope, trusting that God will be propitious to them for Christ's sake; and they begin to love Him as the fountain of all justice, and on that account are moved against sin by a certain hatred and detestation, that is, by that repentance that must be performed before baptism; finally, when they resolve to receive baptism, to begin a new life and to keep the commandments of God.¹

From a Lutheran perspective we might say, therefore, that Trent's teaching on justification, when carefully analyzed, may not be as "bad" as we might have thought it was, but at the same time it is still not as "good" as it could be. There are two very basic problems which remain in the Tridentine system:

1. The distinction between "justification" and "sanctification," so crucial to Lutheran theology, is not recognized, and the two kinds of righteousness associated with each category, "alien" and "inherent," are blended together. And when a Christian's right standing before God is attributed to this blended "righteousness," rather than exclusively to the gracious imputation of *Christ's* righteousness, then the absolving and

¹ The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, pp. 410-11.

liberating message of the Gospel is seriously distorted. There is also, as it were, a "frame-shift" in the Tridentine approach, so that the kinds of things Lutherans would say about justification, Trent says about the *preparation* for justification; and the kinds of things Lutherans would say about sanctification, Trent says about justification. Trent does teach that justification is the work of God, yet God's justifying grace is presented not in the form of a divine promise to be believed, but in the form of a divine process to be experienced. Lutherans do teach that the "experiential" righteousness of a believer's sanctification will of necessity manifest itself in God-pleasing "fruits" of the Holy Spirit, and in the good works that naturally flow from a genuine faith. But Lutherans also recognize that, in this life, this righteousness is never untainted by sin. From the perspective of the New Testament, and especially the writings of St. Paul, the "inherent" righteousness of sanctification is not, and cannot be, in whole or in part, the righteousness which avails before a holy God and brings reconciliation with him. A penitent Christian who looks to this imperfect righteousness as a factor in his or her acceptability to God cannot be fully comforted by the certainty of God's complete and unconditional acceptance in Christ, on the basis of Christ's *perfect* righteousness, as revealed in and bestowed through the Gospel.

2. The proclamatory theological approach of the Scriptures is replaced by the speculative theological approach of the medieval Scholastics, so that an undercurrent of rationalistic synergism permeates the entire Tridentine construction. Confessional Lutheran theology allows two paradoxical assertions to stand side by side within the symbiotic tension of its law-gospel dialectic, namely that those who are lost are lost by their own hardness of heart alone, and those who are saved are saved by God's grace alone. Lutheran theology avoids the extremes of determinism, on the one hand, and Pelagianism, on the other, through a proper distinction and application of law and gospel. In contrast, Tridentine theology seeks to find its balance in an awkward *harmonization*, or unnatural *synthesis* of law and gospel, giving due emphasis

neither to the complete spiritual incapacity of fallen humanity, nor to the complete sufficiency and recreative power of God's forgiveness.

Justification in Contemporary Catholic Theology

As we now jump ahead to a study of the way in which Trent's teaching is interpreted in post-Vatican II Roman Catholicism, we must note at the outset that Vatican II did not reconsider, or make any specific pronouncements on, the doctrine of justification. However, the spirit of open theological inquiry which Vatican II engendered has, in the past several years, facilitated and encouraged a renewed discussion of justification among Roman Catholics, and between them and other Christians. We must be familiar with this ongoing "discussion," and not only with the sixteenth-century pronouncements of the Council of Trent, if we want to know what kind of justification theology is actually being taught and preached in the Catholic Church of today.

Carl J. Peter is a Catholic priest and Dean of the School of Religious Studies at Catholic University of America, and a participant in the official U.S. Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue (involving representatives of the Roman Catholic Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and the Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod). He has offered a modern interpretation of Trent's Decree on Justification which he thinks might allow the Lutherans of today to "see in the doctrine articulated by Trent on justification a truly Christian understanding of the gospel."¹

According to Peter, Trent's position regarding the attainment of justification is that

Human assets do not suffice — not the works of nature, nor those of the Mosaic law, nor those in general which are still possible for a free choice that is not destroyed, however weakened it may be. Human works of whatever kind are not of themselves enough; God's grace given through Jesus Christ is needed. ...

¹ Carl J. Peter, "The Decree on Justification in the Council of Trent," in *Justification by Faith, Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VII*, edited by H. George Anderson, T. Austin Murphy, and Joseph A. Burgess (Augsburg Publishing House, 1985), p. 228.

But the issues are not thereby all resolved. One could hold that fallen human beings need such grace merely to *facilitate* their living as God wishes and meriting life everlasting. The unspoken assumption would be that free choice could accomplish both but just barely and only with the greatest difficulty. Trent would have none of this. To live righteously one needs to be *enabled* and *empowered* by God's grace. That grace is an inspiration and aid that comes from the Holy Spirit. It is given prior to the passage of human beings from sin to forgiveness. Without it no one can believe, hope, love, or repent in such a way that the grace of justification is bestowed. ...

For Trent, because of the divine promise in Christ, eternal salvation (heaven) is both a grace and a reward for the justified adult who hopes in God and perseveres to the end in good works. But justification is only a grace for the sinner, who has no merits; nowhere is it proposed as a reward for works of nature, free choice, or some combination of these with divine grace.¹

In discussing Trent's teaching on the "preparation for justification," Peter describes the nature of "faith" in a way which he hopes will be acceptable to Lutherans:

The process does not begin with fear or with repentance. It begins with faith. That faith comes from God's grace enabling the sinner to accept freely God's revelation of human sinfulness and promise of forgiveness. In more contemporary terms this faith, which accepts that revelation and promise as *true*, is incipiently self-involving for the sinner. It is not a detached and impersonal awareness of the truth of just any proposition; it is an appreciation of the truth of a general situation that involves the believer and calls for a reaction. In this faith the general need of forgiveness comes home personally to the sinner, who is struck with a fear resulting from a keen awareness of the distance between God and self. Such fear is beneficial in directing the sinner to the divine mercy promised in Jesus to all the unworthy, and therefore to himself or herself as well. Devastated by the prospect of divine

¹ Peter, pp. 220-21.

justice, the sinner is brought by grace to hope when confronted with the prospect of divine compassion. In context, hope means confidence that the forgiveness God has promised to all in Jesus will be given to the one who has come to believe, fear, and hope here and now.¹

Peter seems to be aware of the fact that he will have a difficult time convincing Lutherans to accommodate themselves to Trent's teaching on the cooperation of the human will in conversion and justification. With the use of what the Reformers might have called "subtle sophistry," the logic of which is not always easy to follow, Peter nevertheless does make a valiant attempt:

Receiving the grace one could reject is the believing, fearing, hoping, beginning of love, repenting, and desire of baptism that were described above. That receiving, one recalls, is a choice against rejection. Not to reject the grace one is well able to reject is freely and as a result of God's grace to refrain from doing what a sinful creature could do on his or her own resources, namely, sinning yet more. As a whole that preparation is God's work; his grace precedes, accompanies, and completes it; to that grace all that is positive in the process relates entirely and not just partially. As a whole it is also the work of the unjustified human being who does not do altogether nothing when all he or she does as a result of grace is not to sin further at any stage of the process. ...

For all that is positive in the process leading to justification, God is decisive; for the fact that more sin does not occur by rejecting the grace leading to justification, the sinful human being is decisive. In the second case decisiveness has reference to what does not happen although it could. Called by grace to be justified, the human being does not respond: "I prefer to remain the way I am, God!" That restraint, that refraining from uttering a sinful refusal to the invitation of God's grace, does not suffice to start, maintain, or complete the process leading to forgiveness and new life; there God is

¹ Peter, p. 223.

decisive just as the human would be in further sin and possible damnation.¹

In his discussion of the "causes" of justification, Peter notes first that, according to Trent,

The agent at work is the merciful God, whose *efficient causality* is expressed in terms that deserve special attention. Under no obligation to do so (*gratuito*), God not only washes clean and sanctifies (1 Cor. 6:11) but also signs and anoints the sinner with the Holy Spirit of promise, the pledge of our inheritance (Eph. 1:13ff.). ...

In terms of merit the cause is Jesus Christ, who out of love (Eph.2:4) for us while we were yet sinners (Rom.5:10) won justification for us by his suffering and cross. ...

The sole *formal cause* is the justice of God, not that by which he is himself just but that by which he makes us just. This is the justice...by which we are renewed and by which we are not only reckoned just but are so in fact. Each of us receives his or her own justice according to the measure meted out by the Holy Spirit, who distributes to each as he wishes and according to the proper disposition and cooperation of each recipient. When the merits of Jesus Christ are communicated to sinners, something happens. Through the Holy Spirit the charity of God is poured forth into the hearts (Rom. 5:5) of those who are justified. The latter are engrafted into Christ and united with him; they receive not only the forgiveness of sins but also faith, hope, and charity. What is it that is within a justified person and that makes him or her just in his or her own distinctive way? That is, in the council's terms, to ask about formal causality; to this question Trent answered: "A created justice distinct from that of God and Christ!"²

With all due respect we must respond to this last point by saying that such an understanding of justifying righteousness is "distinct from" that of St. Paul the apostle!

In the concluding paragraph of his essay, Peter imploringly writes:

¹ Peter, p. 224.

² Peter, pp. 225-26.

Trent clearly meant to maximize the role of faith in all justification; do Lutherans today regard the results as sufficient or at least as not deficient to the point of being necessarily church-divisive?¹

While we recognize and appreciate the emphases on grace and faith which Peter's interpretation includes, Confessional Lutherans cannot respond in the affirmative to Peter's question as posed above. Even when putting the best construction on Trent's teaching regarding grace and faith, that teaching cannot ultimately be disentangled from the pre-suppositional flaws (a basic law-gospel confusion and a spirit of synergism) which color and shape the Tridentine formulations.

Another participant in the Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue is the Jesuit scholar Avery Dulles, also on the faculty of Catholic University of America. In an essay on the doctrine of justification in contemporary Catholic theology, Dulles states at the outset that

The theology of justification in Roman Catholic teaching has undergone no dramatic changes since the Council of Trent, which gave the classic response to the problems raised by the Reformation. The general thrust of Trent was to reduce justification to an element or aspect of grace. Catholic theologians have felt more at home with the theology of grace, viewed in its transforming impact on the recipient (rather than simply as God's graciousness), and have generally given only passing attention to justification as God's forensic deed on behalf of sinners. Justification is rarely discussed at length except in polemics against, or dialogue with, Protestants.²

Dulles also notes, however, that

In the twentieth century there has been a strong movement away from Scholasticism, especially in its modern forms. In part the new tendency was supported by the Thomistic revival, which led to fresh interpretations of the Angelic Doctor. Even more powerfully, it has been supported by other trends such as the biblical revival, the patristic revival, and

¹ Peter, p. 228.

² Avery Dulles, S.J., "Justification in Contemporary Catholic Theology," in Anderson et al., p. 256.

personalistic phenomenology. As a result of these movements, the leading Catholic theologians of the past generation have considerably modified the theology of grace found in early twentieth-century Scholastic manuals.¹

Dulles then summarizes some of the more influential treatments of justification by recent Catholic theologians, who often wrote in response to the concerns of Lutheran and Reformed theologians, and who sometimes were influenced by them.

Under the heading, "Imputed and/or Inherent," Dulles writes:

In reaction against some Protestant statements that stress the alien or extrinsic character of justification, Catholics have tended to emphasize that righteousness is really communicated to the recipient, who becomes inherently just. God's justifying sentence is regarded as effective and thus as producing what it declares. Not untypically Karl Rahner, while admitting that the objective event of God's act in Christ is causally prior to any change in the redeemed, holds that the subjective justification of the individual is really identical with that individual's sanctification. He criticizes Hans Küng for leaving it unclear whether justification and sanctification are two aspects of a single process or two successive phases. Piet Fransen, like Rahner, holds that justification and sanctification are "simply different approaches, through different symbolisms, to one identical reality: that through grace we share in the divine life."²

It may be helpful at this point to see how Lutheran theologian Robert Kolb addresses some of these concerns in his newly-published book, *The Christian Faith*:

Some Lutherans have understood Luther's teaching regarding the pronouncement of righteousness upon the sinner in an unclear manner. They have thought that Luther was suggesting that "God says I am righteous, and we will let him believe that. But that is not really the case. The fact of the matter is, I am a sinner. But I will be glad to let God think otherwise

¹ Dulles, p. 257.

² Dulles, p. 257. The Fransen quotation is from *The New Life of Grace* (Herder and Herder, 1972), p. 55.

even if his view of me is not the real me." This "unreal" understanding of God's justifying Word tends to place the center of human reality in human consciousness, in human activity. Luther did not believe that was the case. Luther placed the highest level of reality in God's Word and in his gracious disposition toward his children. When God says that we are righteous, that we are his children, nothing can be more real. All reality came into being through God's Word. We still experience how sin permeates all our thoughts, words, and deeds, weakening the best of our own righteousness (Is.64:6). But that experience does not determine the ultimate reality of our life, even here and now. God's Word, which has re-created us through its pronouncement of our innocence and righteousness, is the ultimate reality of our lives.¹

Returning to Dulles' essay, we read that, Rahner's and Fransen's viewpoint notwithstanding,

many Catholic theologians regard justification language as indispensable. Hermann Volk, for example, holds that imputation is an essential aspect of the event of justification, for according to Paul righteousness is given by grace through the merits of Christ, which are reckoned to the believer. Ricardo Franco takes the term justification in the active sense as signifying primarily God's judgment which creates a new bond between the human person and God. In this sense, he insists, justification is not a mere synonym for the infusion of grace. It signifies not simply that we are made just but that we are acknowledged as such by God, whose eschatological judgment determines both our present condition and our ultimate destiny. Because of the centrality of the forensic element, it would be wrong to imagine that we are pronounced righteous because we are inherently such. Rather the reverse: any inherent righteousness of ours is consequent upon God's gracious, creative sentence of pardon, involving non-imputation of the sins we have committed. ...

¹ Robert Kolb, *The Christian Faith* (Concordia Publishing House, 1993), p. 162.

In speaking of inherent righteousness or sanctification, Catholic authors today try to bring out more clearly than did some post-Tridentine authors that the righteousness of the creature always remains a gift; it is a participation in the righteousness of God, given in Christ. ... Our righteousness is, so to speak, the imprint upon us of the righteousness of Another. In that sense the Reformation categories of *iustitia aliena* and "imputed righteousness" convey an important truth that Catholics do not wish to ignore.¹

Even if Dulles is, as it were, "putting the best foot forward" in his summarizing of the views of these theologians for a Lutheran audience, some of the statements he makes are truly remarkable. One is forced to wonder how the views of Volk and Franco, if Dulles has accurately represented them, can be reconciled with the canons and decrees of Trent. It would seem that in some respects Trent is simply being ignored; or, that its pronouncements are being "reinterpreted" beyond what their context would honestly permit in order to accommodate a more "Lutheran" position on some questions.

But, of course, not all modern Catholic theologians sound so "Lutheran" in their discussions of justification and related themes. Dulles writes:

Drawing on certain elements of Rahner's sacramental theology and of Paul Ricoeur's doctrine of symbol, Regis Duffy, an American sacramental theologian, maintains that theology would do better not to take its departure from biblical or dogmatic concepts, which are derivative from, and inadequate to, the experienced mystery. Categories such as "imputed" and "imparted" justification are static, dichotomized terms expressing limited aspects of a dynamic event more concretely symbolized by worship. Sacramental symbolism suggests the inexhaustible richness of a mystery which is at once objective and subjective, forensic and moral, communal and individual. The manner in which we worship shapes and manifests our real definitions of justification, no matter what definitions we may verbally profess. ... Baptism and the Lord's Supper

¹ Dulles, p. 258.

symbolize the commitment to participate communally in the actualization of the kingdom. Justifying faith, therefore, cannot be merely cognitive or fiducial; it must include the "new obedience" of love.¹

It is, of course, important to recognize the crucial connection that exists between the church's confession of the Gospel and the church's worship. We must be ever diligent that we do not employ liturgical forms which give testimony to a different "gospel" than the one we want to proclaim. Yet it seems that Duffy's mystical, experiential approach, as outlined above, allows "the tail to wag the dog" as far as this connection is concerned. The Lutheran Reformers were very appreciative of the ability of the church's liturgy to mold and shape the faith of the people, but they believed that the Biblically-defined message of justification by faith may, and indeed must test, weigh, and judge the rites and ceremonies of the church. When there were incongruities, adjustments were made in the church's worship so that it conformed to the Gospel, and not in the Gospel so that it conformed to the church's worship. The Reformers declared in their Confessions:

The purpose of observing ceremonies is that men may learn the Scriptures and that those who have been touched by the Word may receive faith and fear and so may also pray.²

Places, times, persons, and the entire outward order of worship are therefore instituted and appointed in order that God's Word may exert its power publicly.³

So in our churches we willingly observe the order of the Mass, the Lord's day, and the other more important feast days. With a very thankful spirit we cherish the useful and ancient ordinances, especially when they contain a discipline that serves to educate and instruct the people and the inexperienced.⁴

Among us the ancient rites are for the most part diligently observed, for it is false and malicious to charge that all

¹ Dulles, p. 263.

² Apology XXIV:3, p. 250.

³ Large Catechism I:94, in Tappert, p. 378.

⁴ Apology VII/VIII:33, pp. 174-75.

ceremonies and all old ordinances are abolished in our churches. But it has been a common complaint that certain abuses were connected with ordinary rites. Because these could not be approved with a good conscience, they have to some extent been corrected.¹

In regard to the *sola fide* formula, with which Tridentine Catholicism traditionally has had little sympathy, Dulles observes in his essay that

Hans Küng, among others, has made a strong case for the acceptability of this formula. For him it makes good sense when it is used to express the fact that in justification the sinner stands with empty hands, receiving everything as a sheer gift from God. Faith, in this formula, includes trust in the Lord from whom one expects everything. In the Pauline sense faith is the radical surrender of boasting or self-glorification.²

However, a popular universalistic trend in modern Catholic theology would seem to counteract any renewed appreciation of justification by "faith alone," since those who have *no* recognizable Christian faith of any kind are also described, by some theologians, as recipients of God's justifying grace. Dulles summarizes the controversial but very influential views of Karl Rahner on this topic:

As Rahner puts it: "What is brought to effective manifestation in the dimension of the Church in the sacraments is precisely *that* grace which, in virtue of God's universal will to save, is effective everywhere in the world where man does not react to it with an absolute denial." ... Rahner, holding that all grace is in a hidden way related to Christ and the church, speaks of "anonymous Christians," meaning those who live by the grace of Christ without awareness that they are so doing. Rahner's thesis has been an object of much debate. Rahner himself attaches no importance to the term "anonymous Christian," but he does insist that it is possible for non-Christians and even atheists in good faith, even

¹ Augsburg Confession, epilogue to XXI,4,5 [Latin], p. 48.

² Dulles, p. 265.

though they lack explicit faith in Christ, to be justified, to live in the grace of Christ, to have the gift of faith, and to attain eternal salvation. In so holding Rahner seems to be supported by a number of important texts from Vatican II...¹

In view of their position regarding the universal efficacy of Christ's redemptive mediation, Rahner and many other contemporary theologians argue that grace is omnipresent, at least as offer, and that therefore every free moral act, considered in the concrete, is either an acceptance or a rejection of the proffered grace. In that case "every morally good act of man is, in the actual order of salvation, also in fact a supernaturally salutary act." Correspondingly, any act not sustained by grace is, in its concrete actuality, a sin.²

We had earlier observed that a misunderstanding and co-mingling of law and gospel lay at the root of much of Trent's theological confusion. It is interesting, therefore, that Dulles' essay includes a section on Law and Gospel, in which he notes that "several Catholic commentators have observed" that "the doctrine of law and gospel, as the twofold form of the word of God, stands at the heart of Luther's entire system and provides the structural framework for his doctrine of justification."³ Dulles then admits that

The duality of law and grace has a good biblical foundation, especially in Paul. The law-gospel dialectic, proposed in an unacceptable form by Marcion, is detectable in certain passages of Origen and Augustine. Medieval scholastics such as Robert of Melun and Thomas Aquinas, in their treatises on the relationship of the old law to the new, foreshadowed some of Luther's insights. Thus the law-gospel contrast, as Gottlieb Söhngen observed, has a Catholic past. Nevertheless it was not thematically taken up by Trent, nor has it been in modern Catholic systematics. Walter Kasper regards it as

¹ Dulles, p. 262. The Rahner quote is from "Introductory Observations on Thomas Aquinas' Theology of the Sacrament in General," in *Theological Investigations* (Seabury Press, 1976), 14:158.

² Dulles, p. 264. The quotation is from Rahner, "Nature and Grace, in *Theological Investigations* (Helicon, 1966), 4:180.

³ Dulles, p. 275.

regrettable that law and gospel never became a major theme in Catholic theology.¹

We would add that we, too, regard it as regrettable. If both parties at the time of the Reformation had used the same organizing principle in their theological language, then maybe there might have been a better understanding between them, and Luther's proposals for theological reform might not have seemed so strange to his opponents.

In the concluding paragraph of his essay, Dulles summarizes the overall Catholic attitude toward the enduring challenge of the Lutheran Reformation, and toward the theological task as it is being carried out in the post-Vatican II Catholic Church:

Ever since the Reformation Catholic theology has been striving to correct what it regards as Luther's imbalances without falling into imbalances of its own. Trent, while it did not canonize the categories of Scholasticism, was powerfully influenced by the theology of the schools, against which Luther had himself reacted. Trent therefore gave strong emphasis to human responsibility and to the created gifts of grace, and this emphasis became excessive in post-Tridentine Scholasticism. Contemporary Catholicism, in search of a more theocentric outlook, has borrowed heavily from the mystical tradition and from post-Kantian transcendental philosophy. Dissatisfied with the anthropology of Aristotle, this theology draws on modern personalist phenomenology. Distrustful of the objectifying categories of the Scholastic tradition, the new Catholicism is strongly oriented toward mystery and symbol. A theology that approaches justification in terms of uncreated grace and symbolic actuation may perhaps succeed in transcending the impasses of the sixteenth century and inaugurating a fruitful dialogue with Lutheranism.²

The Roman Catholic Church is in a state of theological transition. It is clearly a transition *from* the Scholastic method, but what it is a transition *to* is still undetermined. Until this is made clear we can expect to hear many different voices coming out of Rome. Some of these, under

¹ Dulles, p. 276.

² Dulles, p. 277.

a Lutheran analysis, are seen to represent not an evangelical *correction* to the Scholasticism of the past, but an even further *departure* from the faith of the apostles and ancient catholic Fathers. But others *do* sound almost "Lutheran."

One of the most well-known examples of a "Lutheran" in the Roman Catholic Church is Georges H. Tavard, a participant in the Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue and a member of the Augustinians of the Assumption religious order. Over the years Tavard has earnestly endeavored to rehabilitate the reputation of the most famous Augustinian monk, but he is not the only Catholic scholar who has tried to do so. James Atkinson, an Anglican, makes the following observations about the published views of several "Lutheranizing" Catholic writers:

Harry McSorley is of the opinion that Luther was reacting against the semi-Pelagianism of [Gabriel] Biel and [William of] Ockham, whose *devotio moderna* was a departure from traditional Catholic thought, and that decadent scholasticism was wrong in teaching that to be acceptable to God, a man had to do "all that in him lies" and thereby merit forgiveness. Luther's protest was in full accord with Augustine, Anselm, Bernard, Gregory of Rimini, and the second Council of Orange: Aquinas, Trent, Vatican II are quoted to support McSorley's views. In his book *The Christian Dilemma* (1952) Willem van de Pol makes a similar argument, suggesting that the Reformers were battling against a dominant semi-Pelagianism that they understood to be implicit in Catholicism and that there is nothing incompatible between Luther's doctrine of justification and Roman orthodoxy. Louis Bouyer makes similar claims in *The Spirit and Forms of Protestantism*, asserting that Luther's view of salvation "is in perfect harmony with Catholic tradition, the great conciliar definitions on grace and salvation, and even with Thomism." And in his book *Protestantism* (1959), Georges Tavard states that there is no real contradiction between Roman Catholic theology and Luther's gospel; he refers to the eclipse of the gospel in Luther's day, and asserts that Luther's doctrine of justification is compatible with Catholicism. [Hans] Küng's

research shows that McSorley, van de Pol, Bouyer, and Tavard are essentially right in arguing that the rampant semi-Pelagianism of Luther's day was also condemned by the Catholic Church.¹

On a personal note, the present writer was enrolled in two classes in the Graduate School of Theology at the University of Notre Dame in the summer of 1985. *The Experience and Language of Grace* by Jesuit scholar Roger Haight was the textbook for one of these classes, called "The Theology of Grace." The instructor offered little if any criticism of Luther's theology, which was discussed for an entire class period. The following excerpts are from Haight's chapter on Luther:

In his lectures on Romans and Galatians the themes of the forgiveness of sins and God's non-imputation of the evil that is in man begin to emerge with more and more clarity. Gradually the *essence* of justification came to be seen by Luther as *forgiveness of sin*. In terms of Law and Gospel, that is, the two words of God, commandments and promises, one is justified when he or she receives the word of God's mercy, benevolence and forgiveness. Grace is God's word of forgiveness. Because people remain sinners and unworthy, their righteousness is imputed: "So Paul says in Rom. 4[:3] that Abraham's faith 'was reckoned to him as righteousness' because by it he gave glory most perfectly to God, and that for the same reason our faith shall be reckoned to us as righteousness if we believe." Because of this core of "the forgiveness of sin," imputed justice or reckoned righteousness, Luther's doctrine of justification often became characterized by Catholics as "mere imputation." In the sharp realism of Scholastic language, grace is conceived of as a created mode of being in the soul, a habit and new nature that effected a new way of being of the soul and consequently of the human person. Because in Luther the person remains a sinner, it was thought that for him grace had no created effect in human "being" or existence. And on his part, Luther simply denied the Scholastic conception of grace: "Grace must be properly

¹ James Atkinson, *Martin Luther, Prophet to the Church Catholic* (The Paternoster Press, 1983), pp.138-39.

understood as the 'favor of God,' not as a 'quality of soul.'" In effect, then, the Scholastic mind tended to regard "mere imputed justice" as no justification at all. Whereas the essence of justification is real forgiveness of sin, and paradoxically Luther could insist on this, it is also much more than this. Thus the interpretation of Luther's doctrine of justification as "mere imputed justice" is simply erroneous. Although Luther thinks in terms of relationships, one's relationships with Christ effect a *radical* and *real* change in the human person...

Luther asserts that a person's salvation is effected in utter and absolute gratuity and through the work of another, Christ. Faith, then, is not a work or a self-initiated act; it is a self-surrender and pure reception that renounces all efforts of self-justification. ... It is not an intellectual assent, as in Scholasticism, but an infinitely more complex attitude toward and relationship with God. ... Faith *is* the certainty of the trust in God's gift and fidelity. To speak of uncertainty in faith is to cancel the very act of faith. The certainty of faith that Luther is talking about is not a category of knowledge, that is, certain knowledge, as it is in the Thomistic discussion. Rather it is a way of existing. Quite simply, then, when Trent and Luther said no and yes respectively to the question of certainty of grace and salvation, they were not responding to the same question.¹

As we might expect, however, Haight does not endorse every aspect of Luther's teaching as he understands it:

Luther's spirituality has the advantage of its total anti-Pelagianism. Our inability to earn salvation, our radical dependence on grace, is affirmed not only *before* but also *after* justification. God's acceptance of a person is radically distinguished from his or her ethical and moral behavior. And...Luther's conception of the Christian life is supremely

¹ Roger Haight, S.J., *The Experience and Language of Grace* (Paulist Press, 1979), pp. 91-94. The first quote is from Luther, "The Freedom of the Christian Man," in *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, edited by John Dillenberger (Doubleday & Company, 1961), p. 60. The second quote is from B. A. Gerrish, *Grace and Reason* (Clarendon Press, 1962), p. 129.

altruistic: by justification through faith the Christian is freed to serve the neighbor without an eye for self-sanctification. However, by the same token, Luther's view of the human person seems to be demeaning. Moreover there is a tendency toward a dualism and separation between the two kingdoms and the inner and outer spheres of human existence. And because of this there is a danger of not integrating people's external and this-worldly behavior into their religious faith-life.¹

Conclusion

We are naturally curious as to whether the Catholic Church's pro-Luther revisionists really have a firm grasp on the full range of Luther's thought. We also wonder if some of them might be engaging in a certain amount of wishful thinking, engendered by a spirit of ecumenism which could be blinding them to certain irresolvable contradictions. It is clear to us that the main insights of the Reformation on the *locus* of justification have *not* been embraced by the Roman Catholic Church as a whole, and that the basic assertions of Trent, albeit often recast in non-Scholastic categories, still predominate in Catholic teaching. Yet if we sincerely believe that Luther's faith was based on God's Word, and that God's Word has intrinsic power to convert those who hear and read it, should we be all that surprised occasionally to find new "Luthers" emerging in an otherwise heterodox communion as long as God's Word is also present and active in some form? To the extent that a better and more faithful confession of the Gospel is heard in some corners of the Roman Catholic Church — in spite of the inconsistencies which may accompany it, or the overarching shadow of Trent, or the remnants of Scholasticism, or the inroads of historical criticism — then to that extent we say: *Deo Gratias!*

David Jay Webber +
The Name of Jesus, 1994

¹ Haight, p. 95.

The Theology of the Atonement

ELS Pastor's Conference

January 3-5, 1995

By Pastor Erwin Ekhoﬀ

For if we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son when we were still enemies, we are even more certain — now that we have this changed relationship — that He will save us by His life. More than that, our boast is only in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, who has now given us this changed relationship. Romans 5:10,11 GWN

For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. Romans 5:10,11 NIV

“Peace to soothe our bitter woes, God in Christ on us bestows, Jesus bought our peace with God, with His holy, precious blood; peace in Him for sinners found, is the gospel’s joyful sound.” N.F.S. Grundtvig’s words are a wonderful legacy to the church. Enemies we were, objects of God’s hatred, but children of God we have become through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ who has made peace between God and man. Because of the obedient life, the holy, spilled blood, and the resurrection of Jesus, God “changed his mind” toward us. This we celebrate, defend, and confess. Luther piercingly defends the office and work of Jesus Christ with these words, “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 doubts about it.

Otherwise all is lost, and the pope, the devil, and all our adversaries will gain the victory.”¹

The Disease of Contemporaneity

“We are now about to discuss the saddest chapter in the whole history of mankind. Think of it: man is unable to bring about his reconciliation with God, and so God Himself accomplished it by surrendering His own Son and placing Himself under obligation and curse of the Law. God has thus graciously prepared the way for men to exult that they are now ‘justified by His blood,’ the blood of Jesus Christ, and ‘are reconciled to God by the death of His Son’ (Rom. 5:9-11). Instead of praising the compassion and love of God, man has criticized and keeps on criticizing the divine method of reconciliation as unnecessary, as unworthy of God, as self-contradictory and unjust, as utterly unsuitable, as too juridical.”²

The sandy ground had been laid for the revision, denial, and rejection of the atonement by those who beforehand had tampered with the “clear fountain of Israel.” When you meddle with the Scriptures, you tamper with Christ. Dr. Herman Sasse writes, “The doctrine of the divinely inspired Scriptures is so closely linked to the central doctrines of the Creed, namely the doctrines of the Trinity and the Person of Christ, that any decay in understanding the Holy Scriptures as God’s Word lead necessarily to decay in believing in the God-Man Jesus Christ and in the Person of the Holy Spirit. The tragic history of modern Protestantism corroborates this relationship.”³

Church history records the battles which the “hearts of oak” have endured as they stood fast on the Word of God. The Patristic era faced the Christological questions, the Medieval era the soteriological issues,

¹ The Book of Concord, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1959), SA, Part II, Article I, p. 292.

² Francis Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, Vol. II. (St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 1951), p. 351.

³ John Montgomery, Crisis in Lutheran Theology, Vol. II, (Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1967), p. 13.

and the contemporary church finds herself presently wrestling with epistemology.

The majority of the visible church has walked away from the only rule and norm for faith and life, the Bible. She has been led to believe that she is now free to seek the deeper meaning of what lies in the mysteries of the Bible which was shaped wholly by human culture and tradition. Supposedly, wisdom has arrived with us and no one had ever had it before. The "Jesus Seminar" participants have voted. The search for the historical Jesus continues. The feminists are outraged by the harsh words of suffering in the Bible and want no part of "a blood dripping, cross religion." The re-imagining of God is as popular as the "power rangers." New research and better scholarship continue to make us wise! Sophia reigns and is worshipped! Sociological and human opinion has replaced Biblical authority and with that has come the repeated attacks on the atonement.

Just several modern day examples will suffice. Al Nier, the renowned physicist, who played a role in the creation of the atom bomb, said in a 1991 interview, "Christianity is a good story and a plausible one and it means a lot to a lot of people. The amazing thing about it is, here's something that has been going on for 2,000 years and survived, and things that survive so long have something to them. Christianity is an awfully good story if you don't believe in the details along the way."¹ The Christian News, in the section "Forum," under the title "Who wants eternal life?" states "to deny that Christ is a Deity, is not liberal theology, but a fact. Every nation must have a myth. All religions give reference to a sword and the shedding of blood. It's a heathen bloody mess of foolishness no matter how you look at it. Why should any intelligent person want eternal life anyway? Isn't one life enough?"²

The Biblical Doctrine of the Atonement

"The first and chief article is this, that Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, 'was put to death for our trespasses and raised again for our

¹ Star Tribune, Tuesday, May 17, 1994, 10A.

² The Christian News, November 21, 1994, page 15.

justification' (Rom. 4:25). He alone is 'the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world' (John 1:29). 'God has laid upon him the iniquities of us all' (Is. 53.6). Moreover, 'all have sinned,' and 'they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, by his blood' (Rom. 3:23-25). Inasmuch as this must be believed and cannot be obtained or apprehended by any work, law, or merit, it is clear and certain that such faith alone justifies us, as St. Paul says in Romans 3, 'For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the law' (Rom. 3:28), and again, 'that he [God] himself is our righteousness and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus.' (Rom. 3:26)"¹

B. W. Teigen, writing his I Believe series, comments, "one simply cannot understand Luther's statements in this section regarding the papacy if he does not recognize the overriding importance of what he here confesses. Luther uses four clear texts from the Scriptures. They merit the closest word-for-word study possible. All are sinners. There is no difference. But we are declared just by God's grace, as a gift, so that every service or work of our own is excluded. The gift of justification comes by way of redemption; through the ransoming which is in Christ Jesus. God sent forth Christ to be a propitiation for the sins of the world. God's wrath is directed towards mankind (Rom. 1:18, 24, 26, 28). But Christ's death is a sacrifice of atonement, a means of removing divine wrath (Rom. 3:25). The sins of the world were imputed to Him at His death; but, continues Paul, He was "raised again for our justification." (Rom 4:25). Christ the guilty One was acquitted at His resurrection. Now this is now theory of atonement, a speculation of the mind, but a real thing that has actually come to pass in history (Gal. 4:4,5). Christ has "given Himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet smelling savor" (Eph. 5:2). We are justified on the basis of Christ's vicarious atonement, His obedience under the Law, and

¹ The Book of Concord, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1959), SA Part II, Article I, p. 292.

His atoning death as our substitute. This work of Christ becomes ours through faith alone.”¹

“It is also taught among us that God the Son became man, born of the virgin Mary, and that the two natures, divine and human, are so inseparably united in one person that there is one Christ, true God and man, who was truly born, suffered, was crucified, died, and was buried in order to be a sacrifice not only for our original sin but also for all other sins and to propitiate God’s wrath.”² B.W. Teigen remarks, “It is obvious that Melancthon here confesses an objective completed atonement, one which offers something to an offended God, and not some theory which suggests that a change in man is a factor in the world of atonement. The salvation of the world was accomplished through Christ’s substitutionary, sacrificial death. He made satisfaction for the sins of the world and restored communion between God and man.”³

The Atonement Outlined

I. Human Sinfulness and A Bound Will

We have a double need. All are sinners. All people are in need of redemption. God’s holiness, justice, and truth cannot allow him to overlook the sins of mankind, or treat him as if he had not sinned. The very nature of God, and of sin, make it imperative that sin be adequately punished. We also have a need to be convinced of this truth. We have a need to have the “blinders” removed so that we will see that we are separate from God, a people who justly deserve eternal punishment. By nature we are a people who have not only done wrong things, but we are in revolt against God, our whole being is hostile toward God. “This damage is so unspeakable that it may not be recognized by

¹ Bjarne W. Teigen, I Believe - A Study of the Smalcald Articles, Bethany Lutheran College, Mankato, MN, 1978, p. 6.

² The Book of Concord, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1959), AC III, pages 29,30.

³ Bjarne W. Teigen, I Believe - A Study of the Augsburg Confession and the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Bethany Lutheran College, Mankato, MN, 1978, p. 22.

a rational process, but only from God's Word."¹ Only from above, from divine revelation, are we able to begin to know our true condition before God, our spiritual blindness, deadness, and enmity toward God. The greatness of our sin, which brings all manner of evil thought and conduct, and finally death, can be better understood and measured by the payment for sin, Christ the Son of God. Combining all the numbers and strength of the world will not atone for one sin because of sin's strength and power. The hymn writer helps us ponder our sin as he moves us from self to the Sacrifice for sin. "Ye who think of sin but lightly, nor suppose the evil great, here may view its nature rightly, here its guilt may estimate, mark the Sacrifice appointed, see who bears the awful load, 'tis the Word, the Lord's Anointed, Son of Man and Son of God."²

II. God's Wrath and Love

God's wrath over against sin is poured out on Jesus in the Garden as He is asking for the "cup" to be removed. Not once does he make this plea, but three times until He ultimately submits to the will of His Father. The Old Testament Scriptures³ reveal the wrath of God as the "cup." However, the decisive anger of God is poured out on His Son as He deserts him and leaves His Son in solemn anguish on the cross. He calls out, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me" in the depths of his abandonment.

God's love always desires the sinner's good. Divine wisdom eternally devised the **plan** for man's redemption. The core of that plan is the grace of God as demonstrated in the incarnate Son of God. When the fullness of time had come, **Jesus Christ, the God-man, became man's substitute**. A multitude of passages⁴ from the Holy Scripture lead the believer to conclude that Jesus Christ is true God and true man in one person. "Our churches also teach that the Word — that is, the

¹ The Book of Concord, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1959), Epitome, Article I, p. 467.

² Hymnal, 153, Verse 3.

³ Jeremiah 25:15, Isaiah 51:17, Isaiah 23:32.

⁴ Luke 1:35, Isa. 7:14, Isa. 9:6, Gal. 4:4, Matthew 16:16,17.

Son of God — took on man's nature in the womb of the blessed virgin Mary. So there are two natures, divine and human, inseparably conjoined in the unity of his person, one Christ, true God and true man, who was born of the virgin Mary, truly suffered, was crucified, dead, and buried, that he might reconcile the Father to us and be a sacrifice not only for original guilt but also for all actual sins of men (the German translation adds "and to propitiate God's wrath)."¹

"What child is this?" "Whom do men say that I am?" "Who do you say that I am?" Jesus surely has two natures, but He is one Christ. Luther taught us the importance of the personal union when he said, "We Christians must know that unless God is in the balance and throws in weight as a counterbalance, we shall sink to the bottom with our scale. I mean that this way: If it is not true that God died for us, but only a man died, we are lost. But if God's death and God dead lie in the opposite scale, then his side goes down and we go upward like a light and empty pan. Of course, he can also go up again and jump out of his pan. But he could never have sat in the pan unless he had become a man like us, so that it would be said: God dead, God's passion, God's blood, God's death. According to his nature God cannot die, but since God and man are united in one person, it is correct to talk about God's death when that man died who is one thing or one person with God."²

God's love is indeed to be measured in His great gift toward us sinners, Himself! We must always think of Christ, our brother, as no less than God. To surrender this teaching is to lose the Gospel and our salvation. Faleide reminds us, "Modern Christology reverses the starting-point of traditional Christology. Its starting-point can be expressed as follows: Given the humanity of Christ, how can one then of this subject predicate divinity? Unlike traditional Christology, which presupposes the divinity of Christ, modern Christology presupposes the humanity of Christ... The condition of the possibility for the starting-point of modern Christology is the historical-critical method. Traditional Christology

¹ The Book of Concord, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1959), AC III, pages 29,30.

² *Ibid.*, FC, SD, VIII, p.599.

proceeds from above, with the divinity of Christ. Scripture declares that the Word became flesh. We can never think of Christ except as God.”¹

The Scripture also tells us that there is a communication of attributes between the two natures. From the very moment of its conception the human nature of Christ was in possession of all the divine attributes and all divine majesty and glory. While Christ at all times had complete possession of His divine attributes, He did not always make full and constant use of them. Firmly we must maintain this article of faith that Jesus remained God to the fullest extent even in his state of humiliation. Christ died according to both natures.²

This Christ put Himself under the law and fulfilled all its obligation. He endured the full penalty which was man’s just due. A completely innocent life, the spilling of holy blood which began at day eight of His life, and the shameful death by crucifixion are the sacrifice of the atonement. He did for man that all God’s righteousness demanded. “If anyone argues, therefore, that the New Testament must have a priest who sacrifices for sin, this can only apply to Christ. The whole Epistle to the Hebrews supports this interpretation. We would be setting up other mediators besides Christ if we were to look for some other satisfaction that was valid for the sins of others and reconciled God. Since the priesthood of the New Testament is a ministry of the Spirit, as Paul teaches in II Cor. 3:6, the only sacrifice of satisfaction it has for the sins of others is the sacrifice of Christ.”³

The resurrected Lord is the Father’s public announcement that we have been reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled shall we be saved through his life!” Since Christ has been raised, our faith is not in vain, we are not in our sins, and we are not a miserable people because our hope is anchored in the

¹ Rev. G. M. Faleide, “Toward an Understanding of Modern Christology”, Lutheran Synod Quarterly, December 1981, pages 36,41,42.

² See Formula of Concord, Thorough Declaration, Article VIII.

³ The Book of Concord, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1959), AP XXIV, p. 260.

risen Christ, the head of the Church, and not in what this life has to offer.

The love of God and the wrath of God are the motivating factors for the atonement. The Father is responsible for the death of his Son, for the words of the prophet Isaiah are clear, "God laid on Him the iniquity of us all." We, the human race, also brought about his death. However, the grace of God has appeared, bringing us salvation, in our substitute, Jesus. "Those who understand the death of Christ in terms of sovereignty, as does strict Calvinism, see in Christ's death a powerful demonstration of God's wrath against sin. His death is an example of how God will deal with the reprobate. In Lutheran theology the death of Christ may be used for preaching both the Law and the Gospel, so that man can see how great God's love was for man in overcoming His wrath. The cross as divine act in itself is a manifestation of God's love. A Scriptural and Confessional understanding of Christ's death balances God's wrath against sinners with His persistent love for them."¹

III. Faith Alone

This reconciliation becomes ours through faith in Jesus Christ, faith which the Holy Spirit works in heart and life through the Means of Grace. His Son came to this world to minister and to give His life as a ransom. Now He comes to us through the Means of Grace which creates and nourishes faith. This salvation, which we have obtained the rough faith, is sure and certain because it is nothing less than the work of God. "In order that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and the sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given and the Holy Spirit produces faith, where and when it pleases God, in those who hear the Gospel. That is to say, it is not on account of our own merits but on account of Christ that God justifies those who believe that they are received into favor for Christ's sake.

¹ David P. Scaer, Christology, (Lake Mills, Graphics Publishing Co., 1989), p. 78.

Gal. 3:14, "That we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith."¹

Our Confessions teach: "We begin by teaching that our works cannot reconcile us with God or obtain grace for us, for this happens only through faith, that is, when we believe that our sins are forgiven for Christ's sake, who alone is the mediator who reconciles the Father."² And again they confess: "There can be no forgiveness of sins and no conquest of the terrors of death and sin through any work or anything else but faith in Christ, as we read (Rom. 5:1), "Since we are justified by faith, we have peace."³

"Faith is an unceasing and constant looking which turns the eyes upon nothing but Christ, the Victor over sin and death and the Giver of righteousness, salvation, and life eternal. This is why Paul, in his epistles, sets Jesus Christ before us and teaches about Him in almost every single verse. But he sets Him before us through the Word, for in no other way can He be apprehended except by faith in the Word."⁴

The truth that we are saved by grace through faith in Christ must be upheld at all costs. As soon as the atonement is made to depend on something in us, or is to be an action of the human will, then we have lost the grace alone, faith alone principles.

A Brief Word Study

- Propitiation

Professor Judisch investigates this word as it is found in the Old Testament, seeking to discover its root, its usage, and its typology. He directs the reader to Genesis 32:21, Proverbs 16:14, and II Samuel 21:3 to demonstrate that propitiate has to do with "assuaging the wrath of someone, whether God or someone else." He concludes his study with

¹ The Book of Concord, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1959), AC, V, p.31.

² *Ibid.*, AC XX, page 42.

³ The Book of Concord, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1959), Ap. XXIV, page 260.

⁴ Ewald Plass, What Luther Says, (St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House), Vol. 1, p.466.

this summary: "Several lessons, then may be learned from a study of the concept propitiation in the language and typology of the Old Testament: (1) The wrath of God and His propitiation lies at the heart of the elaborate sacrificial system of the Old Testament. (2) The concept of divine propitiation lies at the heart of the elaborate sacrificial system of the Old Testament. (3) The sanguinary sacrifices had propitiatory power, but only because they symbolized the propitiating self-sacrifice of the Messiah and mediated its effects. (4) The Messiah, who would be both God and man, was to propitiate God for all sins on behalf of all sinners by means of his sinless life and vicarious death. (5) Only those people of the Old Testament era enjoy eternal life with God who trusted in the propitiation of God which the Messiah was to accomplish."¹

"Kapporeth," a derivative of "kaphar," finds its New Testament parallel in 'hilasterion.' This refers to the lid of the ark of the covenant and is applied to Christ who became our Covering for sin. The blood of Jesus provided the payment by which sin was canceled. Romans 3:25, "God publicly displayed Him as the Atonement Cover through faith in His blood." GWN

- Reconciliation

Reconciliation (katallage), redemption (apolutrosis) which is a releasing effected by payment of ransom, rescue, deliver and deliverance are words commonly used to speak of the atonement. Expiate, which means to make reparation, is frowned upon by some because it is believed that this work is used by those who speak about the atonement, but not about its price in blood which appeased the anger of God and covers sin.

The Offense of the Atonement

God's writer Paul said, *For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise;*

¹ Douglas McD. L. Judisch, "Propitiation in the Language and Typology of the Old Testament," Concordia Theological Quarterly. p. 233.

the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.” Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength.¹ What is so offensive about the atonement? Is it not the fact that it reveals the badness of man, so wretched that it took God himself in the flesh to give a blood sacrifice to satisfy the anger of God and make payment for sin? Is it not the fact that this is not a thinking, doing process, or human project, but rather a gracious declaration by God for His Son’s sake which is received through faith? Is it not the fact that this must be revealed to us, that God must come to us lest we perish. Is it not the fact that the cross moves us away from the perceived righteousness of the horizontal level to the fact that God sees and says that all our righteousness is like a filthy rag? Is it not the fact that God does things and acts in ways which we consider to be less than “godly?” Is it not the fact that the glory belongs to God alone?

The cross is indeed a sign which is spoken against. I have gathered statements from various sources in order that we might see how the cross is being spoken against. Our people are exposed to some of these things, and are even sitting at the feet of some of its teachers. In the following statements, ranging from the Christ of rationalism to the Christ of modern Lutheranism, from the women’s movement to the Jesus Seminar, the atonement is watered down and even rejected. In its place are social justice, liberation theology, and a different gospel which in truth is no gospel at all.

¹ 1 Corinthians 1:18-25, NIV.

Rationalism of the late 1700's has concluded, "Christ is a man who earned the right to be called the Son of God; his death was a sign that sacrifices have been abolished. God is not a blood-thirsty Moloch; it is only necessary for the sinner to mend his life; the resurrection was a recovery from a swoon; the ascension was a myth like that in regard to Romulus; righteousness before God is not acquired by works, nor only by faith, but by disposition well-pleasing to God; the effect of the Word is natural; there are no supernatural operations of God upon man; the sacraments are mere symbols; Baptism is a rite of consecration; the Lord's Supper is a memorial."¹

"At the root of the atonement is the understanding that we're all bad, and that we don't have the power ourselves to fix the problem," said Rita Nakashima Brock, an associate professor of humanities at Hamline University in St. Paul who has explored the new interpretations. "When we depend on one with more power to absolve us, we don't have to fear any consequences of our actions. When we say that Jesus takes on the sins of the world as the door to (personal) salvation, it doesn't get at the fact that a whole lot of innocent people are sinned against by bad people... It also denies the sense of even good people who get caught up in highly abusive, oppressive systems that cause pain to people," Brook said.²

"While the feminist Christian theologians do not reject the traditional view of God working through Jesus to create personal salvation, they don't believe that it is the total answer to the meaning of the cross for Christians."³

"Outside the mainstream of Christian Bible study, iconoclastic scholars are piecing together the portrait of a Jesus no one ever encountered in Sunday school. These experts believe that the Biblical Jesus was a myth created by church-building Christians decades after the crucifixion. The real Jesus, many of them say, was no more the

¹ James W. Richard, Confessional History of the Lutheran Church, (Philadelphia, Lutheran Publication Society, 1909), p. 567.

² Star Tribune, "Nation," Wednesday, February 16, 1994, p. 7A.

³ Ibid., p. 7A.

child of God than anyone else. He was a Jewish peasant - possibly not the firstborn in his family and probably illiterate. He was a spellbinding itinerant preacher, a social revolutionary who presented a peaceful but brazen challenge to both the Roman rule and the Jewish elite. This 'historical' Jesus performed no miracles, but he did have the healer's touch, a gift for alleviating emotional ills through acceptance and love... The authorities executed him, almost casually, after he caused a disturbance in Jerusalem during the Passover. Jesus lived on in the hearts of followers old and new, but he did not physically rise from the dead. Taken down from the cross, his body was probably buried in a shallow grave - and may have been eaten by dogs."¹

"Scripture never speaks of God as one who has to be satisfied or propitiated before being merciful or forgiving. Jesus himself, though he might have and quite possibly did reckon with a violent death at the hands of his adversaries, seems not to have understood or interpreted his own death as a sacrifice for others or ransom for sin... The cross is not a fact of history that interprets itself... Jesus dies for us and not for God. There is not just a little perversity [contrary to the evidence] in the tendency to say that the sacrifice was demanded by God to placate the divine wrath. We attempt to exonerate ourselves from the terrible nature of the deed by blaming it on God. The theology of sacrifice becomes part of our defense mechanism. This must now cease."²

Various Motifs of the Atonement

Prior to the Nicene Council, the focus of the theologians was primarily on the person of Christ. The method of the atonement and its necessity was not debated or systematized. Irenaeus (130-200) emphasized "Christ's entrance into the darkness in which the human creature was held prisoner. There he was buried and triumphed over

¹ Russell Watson, "Newsweek," A Lesser Child of God, April 4, 1994, p. 53.

² Patsy A. Leppien, J. Kincaid Smith, What's Going on Among the Lutherans? (Milwaukee, Northwestern Publishing House, 1992), pages 106, 107, 108.

the liar's death."¹ Origen (185-254) who did not clearly confess the unity of the Father and the Son claimed the death of Christ was the ransom paid to Satan, who had acquired rights over man by the Fall. Gregory of Nyssa (330-395) in his accounting of the atonement was, perhaps, the first to use the simile of the fish hook by which Satan was baited. Representation was at the heart of the patristic teaching rather than holding forth Christ as our substitute whose suffering, obedience, and resurrection extends to all people. Power, payment delivered to the devil, threats from the outside of mankind, and the evil world appeared to be the focus. One might conclude that the victorious Christ, the victor over evil, darkness, and Satan, was a persuasive theory of the early church.

Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) is noted as the father of scholasticism. For Anselm, meditation and theological speculation go hand in hand. His desire was to use reason to advance theological thought. He attempted to use all means to establish the truth of faith. He said, "I believe in order that I might understand. For I do not seek to understand in order that I might believe, but I believe in order that I may understand." "Theology and philosophy can be harmonized and faith and the principles of reason are not antithetical," Anselm concluded.

Anselm's theory of the atonement, as outlined in his book, Cur Deus Homo, has its roots in cosmology, feudal thought and in the history of salvation. God's plan was to establish a kingdom. When the angels fell God created man for this kingdom. When man fell the plan was disturbed and God was dishonored. God could not surrender his plans and since man was unable to make satisfaction before God none but God could make such satisfaction. It is necessary, then, for the God-man to make satisfaction. Christ, who is both God and man, is therefore the only one who could make amends for man's guilt. Satisfaction came not through the life of Christ, but through his death. Since Christ subjected himself to death thereby acquiring the merit which

¹ Robert Kolb, The Christian Faith, (St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House), page 150.

forever redeems the sins of all, the "broken plan" has been repaired through Christ. The honor of God has been restored. Anselm is credited for giving solid expression to salvation in spite of his scholastic inadequacies.

Peter Abelard (1079-1142), a philosopher and theologian at Paris, viewed the atonement very differently from Anselm. Christ's death served to awaken a reciprocal love in man, thereby destroying sin. Abelard taught that the Son of God came not to satisfy the justice of God, but to be a supreme proof of God's love and thus to awaken in us love for God, and through this love reconcile ourselves before God. Forgiveness is provided on the basis of this awakened love. Faith is an act of the will for Abelard. Faith and reason cannot contradict one another since they come from the same source, divine truth. He remained a theologian who was often "on the edge," who combined authority and reason, and faith and free scholarship.

During the age of Lutheran Orthodoxy, Fausto Sozzini (1539-1604), uniting a number of groups in Poland, became the founder of Socinianism, a movement which laid the footings for rationalism. The Socinians attacked the doctrine of the atonement saying that the righteousness of God does not demand atonement for sin. "Righteousness is only something that characterizes God's outward acts. It is not an 'essential' quality, or one that is part of His nature. God, of His free will and in 'absolute goodness,' can forgive and bestow eternal life upon all who believe and strive to live in innocence. As a logical consequence of this the Socinians denied that Christ's obedience had any substitutionary value and that His death provided satisfaction for man's guilt. The death of Christ on the cross merely proved that Jesus was obedient, and the Resurrection confirmed His divine mission. The Bible passages which speak of atonement, redemption, etc., were freely reinterpreted. Christ's work consisted only of this, that

he showed man how to live a better life before God. In this we find atonement.”¹

One of the radical Pietists, Johann Dippel (1673-1734), claimed that satisfaction was contrary to God’s love. God simply overlooks sin and recreates the heart.

Count Nickolaus von Zinzendorf (1700-1760) was the founder of the United Brethren or the Moravian Church. At the young age of 22, he purchased Bethelsdorf which later became known as Herrnhut where he gathered a community of “heart and soul Christians.” While it based its Confession on the Augsburg Confession, it thought little of the distinctions made between various communions and allowed non-Lutherans into its fellowship. This confession allowed him, in his travel, to become quite friendly with Roman Catholic and Reformed teachers and apparently became the reason of his being expelled from Saxony.

Zinzendorf rooted his theology in one point, the feeling of fellowship with Christ. Contemplation of the Crucified One, his blood and wounds, makes one feel released from punishment and ultimately unites us with Christ. Subjectivism remains the jewel of his teaching. In contrast to the radical Pietists who sought to abolish the atonement, the Herrnhutters emphasized the emotional experience of Christ’s suffering. Much of this group’s doctrine and practice has been categorized as “distasteful and offensive.”

Around the time of the founding of the Norwegian Synod, Frederick Denison Maurice (1805-1872), a minister of the Church of England, formerly a Unitarian, regurgitated the thoughts of Abelard’s atonement. Thinking that all men have a divine capacity, thus ignoring the fall of man, and that the unity of the church should be centered on the essentials, he denied the idea of an “artificial substitution.” “Christ satisfied the Father by presenting the image of His own holiness and love.” “He bore the sins of the world in the sense that he felt them with that

Bengt Hagglund, *History of Theology*, (Saint Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 1968), p. 323.

anguish with which only a perfectly pure and holy being, which is also a perfectly sympathizing and gracious being, can feel the sins of others.”¹

Albrecht Ritschl's (1822-1889) three volume book, A Critical History of The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation exercised great influence on the theology of Germany in the late 19th century. He rejected the wrath of God as being an “unrelated and formless theologumenon.” “The only adequate concept of God is expressed in the concept of love. God's disposition has not been changed by man's sin, but as the loving Father he has always been ready to forgive unconditionally and to readmit man into fellowship. When man in his sin refuses to revere and trust God, he constructs a false picture of the holiness of Him whose wrath he fears. As a result, man no longer ventures to draw near to God. To remove this false idea and to impress man with his never-changing paternal love, God revealed himself in Christ. The revelation in Christ never intended to establish a new relationship between God and man, but only to reveal the never-changing attitude of divine love. The example of Jesus inspires men with a believing contrition of the love of God and of their forgiveness and justification by him. They give up their mistrust of God or, to put it in other words, they are reconciled to God.”²

Gustav Aulen (1879-?), a systematic Professor in the University of Lund, lecturing in 1930, set forth three theories of the atonement. His book Christus Victor, which contains these lectures, received much attention and it initiated widespread debate. Aulen categorized the atonement in these ways: Classical or dramatic, the Latin or objective, and the Subjective-Humanistic. The subjective-humanistic came to be known as the moral example atonement theory. He defined the Classic view this way. “Christ— Christus Victor— fights against and triumphs over the evil powers of the world, the ‘tyrants’ under which mankind is in bondage and suffering, and in Him God reconciles the world to Himself. . . . God is pictured as in Christ carrying through a victorious conflict

¹ Otto W. Heick, A History of Christian Thought, (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1966), p. 353.

² *Ibid.*, pages 238, 239.

against the powers of evil which are hostile to His will. This constitutes Atonement, because the drama is a cosmic drama, and the victory over the hostile powers brings to pass a new relation, a relation of reconciliation, between God and the world.”¹ Aulen concluded that the early church did not have a developed doctrine of the atonement. He credits Anselm of Canterbury with the Latin theory and Abelard with the Moral theory. Aulen contends that man’s problem is that he is an unfortunate victim of the powers of evil, darkness, and Satan. Aulen stresses that Christ has won the victory over evil, but he does so to the neglect of the sacrificial offering of Christ made to God with holy blood for the sin of the nations.

In 1959, the Westminster Press published the works of Carnell, DeWolf, and Hordern with the hope of providing the contemporary views of theology. These works approached the atonement in three different ways. Hordern walks the line of Aulen. DeWolf, following the steps of Abelard and Ritchie, sees in the cross the “climax of the life and teachings of Jesus, adding that faith in the cross can release men for righteous living.” Carnell beats the drum of the satisfaction theory. These views are still representative of contemporary American atonement thought.

Conclusion

There are only two religions in the world. One includes all who expect salvation by their doing; the other, all who expect salvation by something accomplished by God. You either “save” yourself, or you are saved by God. All religions outside of Christianity teach the former and, therefore, deny the atonement. But the atonement is also attacked by many within Christendom. There is the false belief, rooted in rationalism and the sovereignty of God which teaches that Christ died only for the elect. This limits atonement and makes God responsible in some way for the lost sinner. But this cannot stand, for God loved the world and sent His Son to reconcile the world to himself. Along with this

¹ Gustav Aulen, Christus Victor, (New York, Macmillan Co., 1945), pages 20,21.

skewed view of atonement is the emphasis of a holy life which proves individual salvation.

Koester, in contrasting the confessions of Luther and Calvin, says "Luther based his understanding of the kingdom of God on the fact that its King was the Lamb of God, who as a priest had sacrificed himself for the sins of the world and who built his kingdom on that message. Calvin, on the other hand, viewed Christ as a Priest because he is first King who had all things under his control, and as King accomplished the sacrifice necessary to save mankind. ... Why does Calvin do this? I will venture an opinion on which I will continue to expand: A person who is concerned with becoming holy in this life will automatically place a greater importance on submitting to the will of a Sovereign God than he will place on Jesus' sacrifice for him. Christ's office of King becomes more important for him than his office of Priest. And Christ's priestly office becomes merely the way in which God provided the means of man to come under his moral influence."¹ While not denying the Atonement as a payment for sin, the major thrust is on the example of Christ. Moral renewal rather than justification becomes the core of teaching, emphasizing life rather than doctrine. The life of Christ is the standard which we are to follow for salvation according to Calvin.

The Roman Catholic Church, with its gross "mediatrix-in-atonement" is claiming that Christ was not able to completely atone for the sin of the world. His mother was needed and now the sinner is able to complete what Jesus began through penance, offering the unbloody sacrifice in the Mass, prayer, and purgatory.

But the doctrine of the moral influence atonement rooted in the thoughts of Abelard, trumpeted by the ELCA,² and festooned by the

¹ Robert J. Koester, Law and Gospel: The Foundation of Lutheran Ministry, (Milwaukee, Northwestern Publishing House, 1993), p. 62.

² In a 1994 published book, Professing the Faith - Christian Theology in a North American Context, author Douglas John Hall writes, "The idea of a God who substitutes his innocent son for an indeterminate number of guilty men and women is literally a fantastic notion. Not only does it present the spectacle of a deity that only sadomasochists could learn to appreciate (as Abelard

feminists is the most dangerous because it is appealing to “itching ears.”

In short it teaches there is not enmity or wrath on God’s part for the sinner. God’s love is supreme. A loving God cannot be an angry God. Who Jesus was and what he did is of no real significance. Simply use the example of great love set by Jesus in going to the cross and love as you have been loved. You will then find the good life. This theology looks upon God’s atonement plan which was established before the creation of the world as a mere silly notion, a ludicrous thought. May God deliver us from such thinking, teaching, and preaching.

The moral influence theory must be rejected because it undercuts the grace of God. It is not founded on Biblical thought and therefore it cannot bring glory to God and salvation to man. In this theory the cross does not represent what Christ has done for us, but what we must do for ourselves and for God. This theory with its emphasis on Christ’s life and death as a moral example leads to a denial that his life and death were a propitiatory sacrifice. This theory assumes a high view of man’s moral ability. Within this dogma original sin is denied or held as not damaging man. God does not avenge anger on sinners or on Christ. The Incarnation is meaningless. This theory is more a psychological process or a subjective process which confuses justification and sanctification. This is the theory that has found its way through Pietistic groups, through strains of Calvinism, into the liberal, radical ELCA, and into feminist theology. These individuals and groups stress experience over propositional truth, the example of Christ for us to follow for salvation, over the objective atonement accomplished through the work of Christ, and “love” of God as seen in Christ’s example of dying for us, rather than the wrath of God which brought about the death of Christ and the true love of God for sinners.

An example of this modern day thinking appeared in the Minneapolis paper. “Feminist Christian theologians say the notion of suffering

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already felt), but it offers salvation as an act of transfer that is physically and rationally almost impossible for the modern mind to grasp.”

has been used by the church leaders over the centuries to subjugate women and people on the margins of society. Traditional Christian teachings say Jesus died on the cross to redeem the world's sins and thus relieved believers from responsibility for their own salvation. However, the feminists argue that people need to accept responsibility for their actions and work in relationship to God and other people toward salvation. The women believe that the message of dying on the cross should be one of sacrifice and courage and should promote a complex view of believers' relationship to God, rather than a simplistic solution to personal salvation."¹

We are confident that the moral motif of the atonement, the popular one being "preached," taught and practiced, is to be rejected. However, Scaer makes us take a second look so that we do not dismiss what is Biblical when he writes, "The objectionable features of the moral theory of the Atonement have led some to conclude that it has no part in Confessional Lutheran Christology and consequently has no Biblical support. Such a negative assessment may be too hasty... Significant biblical references to the death of Jesus as atonement are frequently found in pericopes in which the Christian is expected to follow the example of Christ. The moral view of the Atonement, understood as the Christian's involvement in Christ's suffering, is not only proper but necessary for a complete understanding of His death... The act of the Atonement belongs to Jesus Himself, but Christians demonstrate their belonging to Him by giving their lives for others. The same close connection between Jesus' death as atonement and example is found in 1 Pt. 2:21: 'Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his footsteps.'"²

Christ the Vicar, Substitute; Christ the Victim, Sacrifice; and Christ the Victor must be preached by every true Lutheran pastor. This Christ, revealed to us by Divine Truth, who left us with the message of objective truth, we are to preach. Our preaching of this Christ cannot be

¹ Star Tribune, p. 7A.

² David P. Scaer, *Christology*, (Lake Mills, Graphic Publishing Co., 1989), pages 81, 82. Another pericope to refer to in this matter is Romans 8:14-17.

without feeling, but must not be based on feeling or experience. This message of Vicar, Victim, and Victor is the Lutheran trumpet blast. A balance is called for in our preaching. We do not want to leave Christ on the cross or in the grave. We do not want to omit the active obedience of Christ. We are not to preach in such a way that we give the impression that we think of sin but lightly. We do not want to preach as if our sin is so bad that there is no remedy. We do not want to speak in such a way as if to imply that a ransom was given to Satan and not to God. We do not want to preach in such a way that leaves the impression that "cleaning up the world" and crushing the evil in the world, but forgetting about the evil within our nature, is what the Kingdom of God is really all about. Is our preaching sending a message that our good works are not necessary? As we think about our own preaching, what do we find ourselves emphasizing in this doctrine of the atonement? What patterns do we find ourselves in? Do we rightly preach the incarnate Son of God, whose active obedience as well as passive obedience satisfied the anger of God. Is His resurrection part of our preaching? Listen to Luther preach: "If the Son of God died for me, let death consume and devour me; for he will surely have to return and restore me, and I will stand my ground against him. Christ died; death devoured the Son of God. But in doing so death swallowed a thorn and had to get rid of it.¹ It was impossible for death to hold Him. For this Person is God; and since both God and man in one indivisible Person entered into the belly of death and the devil, death ate a morsel that ripped his stomach open.² Again listen to Luther: "By this fortunate exchange with us He took upon Himself our sinful person and granted us His innocent and victorious Person. Clothed and dressed in this, we are freed from the curse of the Law, because Christ Himself voluntarily became a curse

¹ Luther used this metaphor of the hook, the divinity of Christ, being concealed under the earthworm, the humanity of Christ. The devil swallowed it with his jaws when Christ died and was buried. But it ripped his belly so that he could not retain it but had to disgorge it.

² Jaroslav Pelikan, *Luther's Works*, Sermons on the Gospel of St. John, 1535, Chapter 1-4, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1957), p. 355.

for us, saying, 'For My own Person of humanity and divinity I am blessed, and I am in need of nothing whatever. But I shall empty Myself (Phil. 2:7); I shall assume your clothing and mask; and in this I shall walk about and suffer death, in order to set you free from death.' Therefore when, inside our mask, He was carrying the sin of the whole world, He was captured, He suffered, He was crucified, He died; and for us He became a curse. But because He was a divine and eternal Person, it was impossible for death to hold Him. Therefore He arose from death on the third day, and now He lives eternally; nor can sin, death, and our mask be found in Him any longer; but there is sheer righteousness, life, and eternal blessing."¹ Once more listen to Luther, "The Prince of life, who died, is alive and reigns. Through Christ, therefore, death is conquered and abolished in the whole world, so that now it is nothing but a picture of death. Now that its sting is lost, it can no longer harm believers in Christ, who has become the death of death, as Hosea sings (13:14) 'O death, I shall be your death!'"²

Many hymn verses have saved a "poor sermon," one which was inadequate in its exposition of the atonement. A sample of a great hymn verse is "Jesus, in Thy cross are centered all the marvels of Thy grace; Thou, my Savior, once has entered through Thy blood the holy place: Thy sacrifice holy there wrought my redemption' from Satan's dominion I now have exemption; the way is now free to the Father's high throne, where I may approach Him, in Thy name alone."³ One more is "Thanks to Thee, O Christ victorious! Thanks to Thee, O Lord of Life! Death hath now no power o'er us, Thou hast conquered in the strife. Thanks because Thou didst arise and hast opened Paradise! None can fully sing the glory of the resurrection story."⁴

Christ the Vicar, Christ the Victim, Christ the Victor, and Christ our Example are basic atonement theories which have been set forth and

¹ Jaroslav Pelikan, Luther's Works, Lectures on Galatians 1535, Chapter 1-4, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), p. 284.

² *Ibid.*, p. 281.

³ Hymnary, 227, verse 8.

⁴ Hymnal, 207, verse 2.

expounded over the centuries. These so called theories have been changed and embellished over the years as the church has struggled to express how God came to rescue fallen man. Kolb places before us this word of caution, "These atonement motifs summarize much of the church's attempt to organize answers to such questions. Of course, none of these descriptions can plumb the mind of God and give us explanation. If we had explanation, we would have the illusion of control, of knowing as much as God. That is not the case... As believers use the 'Christus Victor' motif, they will remember that the mystery of the atonement is beyond any capturing in human imagery and description... Again it is important to remember that these descriptions of the work of Christ do not explain or define how or why God saved us. They merely point us to his unconditional and immeasurable love."¹

May our confession of the atonement be as clear and complete as that of B.W. Teigen's when He wrote, "Through the vicarious suffering of Christ, God and the entire human race are reconciled (2 Cor. 5:14, I John 2:2; John 1:29; John 3:16). By raising His Son from the dead, God has pronounced absolution upon the entire race, justifying the ungodly (Rom. 5:9). Our sins necessitated Christ's atoning death. But His resurrection is the gracious reconciliation and justification of the world of sinners (Rom. 4:25)."²

¹ Robert Kolb, The Christian Faith, (St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House), pages 150, 151, 154.

² Bjarne W. Teigen, I Believe - A Study of the Smalcald Articles, Bethany Lutheran College, Mankato, Minnesota, 1978, p. 23.

*May this be our individual confession and the confession of our
ELS*

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost; born of the Virgin Mary; suffered under Pontius Pilate; was crucified, dead and buried; he descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and is sitting at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from there he shall come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord.

He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with his holy precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death.

All this he did that I should be his own, and live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness, just as he has risen from death and lives and rules eternally.

This is most certainly true.