

# Bound, Freed, Freed to Be Bound: The Wittenberg Understanding of Justification

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## Abstract

This essay focuses on the Wittenberg teaching on justification directly following the presentation of the Augsburg Confession in 1530. Martin Luther's understanding of justification was based on Christ's atoning work in dying to eradicate sin and guilt and in rising to restore righteousness to his people. The benefits of Christ are given through the pronouncement of forgiveness by the effective word of absolution in all forms, and appropriated through trust in the promise of Christ. Despite scholarly attempts to drive a wedge between him and his Wittenberg colleague, Philip Melanchthon shared Luther's view, though they expressed some elements differently. Both agreed that those who receive righteousness, a new identity as God's child passively, will actively practice God-designed righteousness toward others.

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## I. *Historical Context*

**B**y 1531 Wittenberg theology had taken on its fundamental shape. The maturing thought of its leaders, Martin Luther and Philip Melanchthon, had had thirteen years in which to test the agenda for reform which they had developed in the heat of controversy, as it unfolded after Luther posted his Ninety-Five

Theses on indulgences in late 1517. Very seldom did he comment further on that topic, which, while symptomatic of his deep pastoral concern for the consolation of believers, only implicitly addressed the heart of what he was discovering in his biblical lectures. His Ninety-Five Theses generated fear that he was undercutting papal authority among its defenders, and their attacks focused attention on issues of ecclesiology. Luther pursued a different path, for his biblical studies had led him to define the Christian faith in a different way than had his predecessors. The “article [on which] stands all that we teach and practice against the pope, the devil, and the world,” from which “nothing ... can be conceded or given up, even if heaven and earth or whatever is transitory passed away,” to use his words in his Smalcald Articles of 1537, had become the teaching “that pertain[s] to the office and work of Jesus Christ, or to our redemption, ... that Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, ‘was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification’ (Rom. 4[:25]); and he alone is ‘the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world’ (John 1[:29]); and ‘the Lord has laid upon him the iniquity of us all’ (Isa. 53[:6]).”<sup>1</sup>

The faith fostered by Luther’s forebears at home, university, and monastery reflected ancient, pre-Christian rhythms that had been incorporated into the new religion when newly converted princes converted their subjects en masse as the faith spread into the lands north of the Mediterranean world. Biblical figures and concepts mixed with the pagan structures as the faith took form in Germanic and Slavic villages across northern Europe. Ritual approaches by human beings sustained the relationship between them and God, and they looked to priests within a hierarchical sacred structure for assurance that the religious activities they were performing actually would obtain the needed help and favor they sought through their performance. Instead, Luther discovered a different understanding of being Christian as his strongly emotional character read Holy Scripture through lenses ground by instructors in the Ockhamist tradition. Luther rejected their understanding of the necessity of human merit to earn the grace necessary to perform truly good works. But their insistence on the absolute, unconditioned power (*potentia absoluta*) of God formed his perception of the Creator as the almighty re-creator of sinners, as he acts through the message of the forgiveness of sins on the basis of Christ’s death and resurrection.

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<sup>1</sup> *Die Bekenntnisschriften der Evangelische-Lutherischen Kirche*, ed. Irene Dingel (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014) [henceforth BSELK], 726–29; *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) [henceforth BC], 300–301.

Luther was assimilating a series of new insights into what God was saying to him in Scripture as Philip Melanchthon accepted the position of professor of Greek at the University of Wittenberg in 1518. The two of them shared insights and ideas; by 1520/1521 the framework of Wittenberg theology had reached a form that it would retain through the lifetimes of these two despite continuing experiments in how to address new questions in the rapidly changing context of their time.<sup>2</sup> Luther formulated his understanding of God's bestowal of righteousness on sinners through Christ's death and resurrection and through the gift of trust in him in his treatise *On the Freedom of a Christian* (Latin: *De Libertate Christiana*) in 1520. What God's justifying action means for believers he summarized in two theses: "A Christian is a free lord over all things and subject to no one. A Christian is a submissive servant, subject to all," claiming that he was only repeating what Paul had said in 1 Corinthians 9:19.<sup>3</sup> Christians, he elaborated, are liberated from all their spiritual foes: Satan, sin, death, hell, the accusation of the law, and God's wrath. He aimed to console the conscience. The comfort of the gospel frees sinners from striving to secure their own lives, and so he argued that this person is now free to exercise humanity as God designed it, in service to others.

By 1531 the Wittenberg theologians had been subjected to the political test of explaining their positions before Charles V, the emperor of the German lands. Melanchthon drafted the justification of the introduction of Wittenberg-encouraged reforms for the emperor at the diet of the German empire in Augsburg in 1530. At first, he intended to call this explanation a defense, an "apologia," but he changed its title to "confession" when he decided that it was necessary to set forth the fundamentals of Wittenberg teaching. The emperor commissioned a group of theologians faithful to the papacy to draft a confutation, and Charles accepted their arguments and commanded the followers of Luther to return to papal obedience by April 15, 1531. The Confutation of the Augsburg Confession found many points of agreement with Melanchthon's statement of the faith, but on many topics took exception to Luther's departure from medieval teaching. It acknowl-

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<sup>2</sup> On the much-disputed question of whether Melanchthon abandoned and undercut Luther's understanding of justification, see the answer to the nineteenth-century liberal and twentieth-century "Luther Renaissance" charge in Rainer Flogaus, "Luther versus Melanchthon? Zur Frage der Einheit der Wittenberger Reformation in der Rechtfertigungslehre," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 91 (2000): 6–46. Flogaus demonstrates their essential agreement even when they differ in expression.

<sup>3</sup> D. Martin *Luthers Werke* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883–1993 [henceforth WA]), 7:21, 1–6; *Luther's Works* (Saint Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1958–1986 [henceforth LW]), 31:344.

edged that faith plays a role in the justification of sinners but nonetheless insisted on the role of human good works in sustaining the relationship between God and his human creatures. “To reject human merit, which is acquired through the assistance of divine grace, is to agree with the Manicheans and not the catholic church.”<sup>4</sup> Two different understandings of the Creator’s relationship to human creatures, two different interpretations of what it means to be human, and differing definitions of key biblical concepts—including “grace,” “faith,” and “Christ’s merits”—had created a serious gap between the two sides in Augsburg. This demanded extensive explanation from the Wittenberg theologians, which they undertook in the course of the early 1530s in lectures and publications.

In the tense political situation, with the threat of military action hanging over the heads of all those committed to Luther’s reform, the Wittenberg theologians struck back with what had become their most powerful weapon, God’s Word. Melanchthon drafted his *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, publishing his initial version in April 1530 and a revised rendition in September. Christian Peters has demonstrated the vital role which Luther played in this revision.<sup>5</sup> From July 3 to December 12 Luther lectured on Galatians. The next year Melanchthon lectured on Romans. Both Melanchthon’s treatment of the justification of sinners through faith in Christ in the *Apology* and his Romans lectures and Luther’s discussions of the same topic in the Galatians lectures contain classical expressions of the Wittenberg understanding of how God has rescued sinners from their sin and its consequences and how he restores their relationship to himself through his Word.

## II. *Christ’s Atoning Work*

The Wittenberg understanding of justification was anchored in Luther’s and Melanchthon’s understanding of Christ’s atoning work. They did not sharply distinguish the Holy Spirit’s creating and nurturing saving trust in God from the deeds and activities of Jesus Christ, as delivered by the Holy Spirit through the Word from the cross and empty tomb that they believed formed the basis of the Spirit’s saving activity. Because their contemporary opponents took for granted that salvation rested in one fashion or another (depending on the specific approach of individual scholastic and monastic

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<sup>4</sup> *Die Confutatio der Confessio Augustana vom 3. August 1530*, ed. Herbert Immenkötter (Münster: Aschendorff, 1979), 85–86; ET, *Sources and Contexts of the Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and James A. Nestingen (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 108–9.

<sup>5</sup> Christian Peters, *Apologia Confessionis Augustanae: Untersuchungen zur Textgeschichte einer Lutherischen Bekenntnisschrift, 1530–1584* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1997), 421–60.

theologians) on Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection, they paid less attention to their specific formulation of their teaching on the atonement, concentrating the focus of their proclamation of salvation on the role of trust in salvation.

### 1. *Christus Victor and Joyous Exchange*

Nearly a century ago the Swedish theologian of the Lundensian school Gustaf Aulén opened a discussion of doctrines of the atonement that focused at least partially on Luther; his method sought to identify the primary motifs in Christian thought. He argued that among medieval and modern theologians Luther stands alone in holding primarily to the ancient church's emphasis on atonement through "Christus Victor"; the relationship between sinners and their Judge is restored through Christ's victory over the sinners' enemies: the sinner, sin, death, and Satan. Aulén conceded that Luther had occasionally spoken in terms of the medieval doctrine of the atonement through vicarious satisfaction of God's legal claims on the human being, but he dismissed such references as falling outside Luther's fundamental orientation.<sup>6</sup> Ian Siggins provides a healthy corrective to Aulén, arguing that Luther has no "coherent explanatory discourse about how the atonement works," but instead his sermons and lectures "abound in the motifs which figure in the historic atonement theories—patristic, classic, dramatic, or Western, Latin, and penal; objective or subjective."<sup>7</sup> Luther indeed spoke of the Savior's assuming the sins of the world, tying together Romans 4:25, "Christ was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification," and the delivery of the blessings of his substitutionary death and resurrection in baptism (Rom 6:3),

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore, we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.<sup>8</sup>

Early in his career Luther had appropriated the image of the bride and bridegroom and their "joyous exchange" (*fröhlicher Wechsel*) from the

<sup>6</sup> Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, trans. A. G. Herbert (New York: Macmillan, 1961). What follows is derived from Robert Kolb, "Das Kreuz—die wirkliche Befreiungstheologie," *Confessio Augustana* 4 (2016): 43–54.

<sup>7</sup> Ian D. K. Siggins, *Martin Luther's Doctrine of Christ* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 109.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Kolb, "Resurrection and Justification: Luther's Use of Romans 4, 25," *Luther-jahrbuch* 78 (2011): 39–60.

monastic-mystical tradition in which the Augustinian Eremitic order had immersed him. For example, his *On the Freedom of the Christian* had compared what Christ does for sinners with the property arrangements made under Germanic common law for a married couple, that is, the complete sharing of ownership. This model did not provide the perfect depiction of Christ's gift of forgiveness and the eradication of guilt, but Luther used it to proclaim that Christ had taken full possession of the sinner's sin and guilt while sinners now possessed their sins no more but possessed only the righteousness and innocence of the bridegroom Jesus.<sup>9</sup> It must be noted that this form of union with Christ, in contrast to strands of mysticism that posit the loss of materiality and identity of the individual who is taken into the divine, is a union in which the individuality of the two partners is heightened and, in the case of the bride, perfected—once again, through this union.

In his lecture on Galatians 3:13 in 1531, Luther adopted another expression of the “joyous exchange”: Christ takes on the criminality of the sinner before the judge, and sinners receive Christ's innocence in the judge's perception. The prophets [Luther was probably thinking above all of Isaiah 53<sup>10</sup>] had foreseen

that Christ was to become the greatest thief, murderer, adulterer, robber, desecrator, blasphemer, etc., there has ever been anywhere in the world. As such, he is not acting in his own person. In this case, he is not God's Son, born of the Virgin. He is instead a sinner, who has and bears the sin of Paul, the former blasphemer, persecutor, and mugger; of Peter, who denied Christ; of David, the adulterer and murderer, who caused the Gentiles to blaspheme the name of the Lord. To summarize he is the one who possesses and bears all the sins of every person in his body.<sup>11</sup>

Luther repeated this thought in a dialogue constructed between Jesus and God the Father, in which God tells him,

you are Peter, the denier; Paul, the persecutor and blasphemer, the man of violence; David, the adulterer; that sinner who ate the apple in Paradise; the thief on the cross. To summarize, you are the person of all people, the one who commits the sins of all people. Therefore, see to it that you pay and make satisfaction for them.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> WA 7:25, 26–26, 12; LW 31:351.

<sup>10</sup> See his lectures on this chapter from 1529, WA 31, 2:428, 5–441, 11; LW 17:215–32, and from 1544, WA 40, 3:685–746.

<sup>11</sup> WA 40, 1:433, 26–32; LW 26:277; Luther labeled this the “joyous exchange,” WA 40, 1:443, 23–24; LW 26:284.

<sup>12</sup> WA 40, 1:437, 23–27; LW 26:280.

There can be no doubt that Luther taught that Christ's crucifixion as the substitute for sinners satisfies the law's demand for the sinner's death.

Thirteen years later Luther regarded the concept of "satisfaction" as too weak to express what had taken place in Christ's atoning work, since it gives insufficient honor to Christ's suffering; for "he not only made satisfaction for sin, but he loosed the chains that held us under the power of death, the devil, and hell. He secured for us the eternal kingdom of grace and the daily forgiveness of all sins that are in us."<sup>13</sup> Christ's payment for sin was not a fine—he used Peter's words (1 Pet 1:18) in his Small Catechism (1529)—as could be paid with gold or silver, but it was rather a sacrifice.<sup>14</sup> In 1531 he told his students, using one of his favorite Bible passages, John 1:29, that the Lamb of God, though without spot or blemish, bears the sins of the world:

Christ was not just found among sinners, but he freely, according to his Father's will, desired to be the comrade of sinners, assuming the flesh and blood of those who are sinners, thieves, those immersed in sins of all kinds. Therefore, the law found him among thieves with the result that it condemned and executed him as a thief.<sup>15</sup>

Through this imagery Luther had repeated the theme that had given his only larger work on the justification of Christ's people, *On the Freedom of a Christian*, its structure and title. Christ rose from the dead and left the grave to give his chosen people freedom to be truly human again and enjoy the Edenic relationship with their Creator. Aulén's "Christus Victor" theme is certainly present and prominent in Luther's writings, as his Galatians commentary reveals. Luther writes in his comments on Galatians 1:1 that Christ's

victory is a victory over the Law, sin, our flesh, the world, the devil, death, hell, and all evils; and this victory of his he has given to us. Even though these tyrants, our enemies, accuse us and terrify us, they cannot drive us into despair or condemn us. For Christ, whom God the Father raised from the dead, is Victor over them, and he is our righteousness.<sup>16</sup>

He informed his students that Paul was telling them that "I could be liberated by nothing else than Christ's death and blood from sin, death, and the curse upon me. Therefore, I conclude with full certainty and assurance that it was necessary for Christ to conquer sin, death, and the curse upon me"

<sup>13</sup> WA 21:264, 21–35.

<sup>14</sup> BC 353.

<sup>15</sup> WA 40, 1:434, 16–20; LW 26:278.

<sup>16</sup> WA 40, 1:65, 12–17; LW 26:21–22; Uwe Rieseke-Braun, *Duellum mirabile: Studien zum Kampfmotiv in Martin Luthers Theologie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999), 66–100.

since his own works could not accomplish this liberation.<sup>17</sup>

Luther labeled the confrontation of Satan and Christ a “magnificent duel.” In that one-on-one battle,

Christ abolishes the law, kills my sin, destroys my death in his body, and empties hell thereby; he judges the devil and crucifies and casts him down into hell. ... Everything that once tormented and oppressed me Christ has gotten rid of. He disarmed it all and put it on public display. He triumphed over these things so that they cannot lord it over me but are compelled to serve me.<sup>18</sup>

His conquering of all the enemies of the sinner liberates his people and transfers them from Satan’s realm to Christ’s.

Living in me, Christ destroys the law, damns my sin, murders my death, because they are not able to not vanish in his presence. Christ is my eternal peace, consolation, righteousness and life. Therefore, the terror of the law, melancholy of the soul, sin, hell, and death cannot do anything else but give way to him.<sup>19</sup>

Christ’s resurrection liberates from the accusation of the law and guilt. Christ took upon his shoulders all human sin, the law’s accusation, death, the devil, and hell, and in his death he has slain them.<sup>20</sup> The most powerful, most cruel tyrant, sin, which exercises dominion and governance over the whole world, stands over against eternal, immoral, invincible righteousness.

It assaults Christ and wants to gobble him down along with all other human beings. But sin did not perceive that this person is invincible and eternal righteousness. Thus, in this duel it was inevitable that sin be conquered and killed and that righteousness conquer and live. Thus, in Christ all sin is conquered, executed, and buried. Righteousness remains the victor and the ruler forever.<sup>21</sup>

Christ now terrorizes the devil: with his victory over sin, death, and Satan, he has destroyed his rule, and continues to preserve and protect his people against the gates of hell itself (Matt 16:18).<sup>22</sup> Luther used the victory motif in Ephesians 2:14–15 and Psalm 68:18 to demonstrate that

with his victory Christ has made the law flee from our consciences so that it cannot take away our confidence in God’s presence anymore, and drive us to despair as it

<sup>17</sup> WA 40, 1:458, 22–27; LW 26:295.

<sup>18</sup> WA 40, 1:274, 24–34; LW 26:160–61.

<sup>19</sup> WA 40, 1:283, 34–284, 14; LW 26:167.

<sup>20</sup> WA 40, 1:272, 19–273, 32; LW 26:159–60.

<sup>21</sup> WA 40, 1:439, 17–27; LW 26:281; cf. on Christ’s duel with the accusation of the law, WA 40, 1:564, 26–367, 12; LW 26:369–71. Cf. Rieske-Braun, *Duellum*, esp. 89–100.

<sup>22</sup> WA 40, 1:356, 31–34; LW 26:224.



condemns us. It does not cease showing us our sin, accusing and frightening us, but the conscience takes hold of the apostle's words, "Christ has redeemed us from the law" and is set up straight by faith and takes hold of his consolation.<sup>23</sup>

Christ came into the world to bestow grace and peace, the words Paul used from the common greetings of his day to express God's greatest gifts. He does so by "condemn[ing] sin, destroy[ing] death, and stomp[ing] the devil underfoot."<sup>24</sup>

Christ's victory over Satan secured his reclamation as his own of the people who had belonged to God's family and had strayed from their home with him. In his *Small Catechism* Luther explained that Christ had "redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, acquired possession of me and won me from sin, death, and the devil." He had done this "that I might belong to him, live under him as he reigns, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, blessedness, and innocence."<sup>25</sup> Two years later he commented on Galatians 4:7 that Christ's liberation of sinners from their slavery to Satan had given them "nothing but freedom, adoption, and sonship."<sup>26</sup> This status, closely linked with Christ's setting sinners free from all that held them as slaves, means that Christ's people enjoy through faith all the blessings that God's acting as their father provides as they accept him as such through faith.<sup>27</sup>

## **2. Re-creation and New Birth**

The realization of this new life that has experienced justification in God's sight comes through Christ's act of re-creation. Luther's belief that God's Word fashioned all reality in the beginning provided the background for his description of the application of Christ's atoning work throughout the history of the church through the pronouncement of the forgiveness of sins. Luther's Ockhamist background bequeathed him his conviction that God accomplishes his saving will through selected elements of his created order—above all the human language that announces and pronounces forgiveness of sins and bestows life and salvation with this forgiveness. His concept of God's Word as the actual power of God for salvation provided great comfort for those who experienced the Holy Spirit's dynamic action in this act of re-creation and renewal of righteousness in God's sight. Luther demonstrated Christ's divinity through the fact that he creates "grace, peace, eternal life, the forgiveness of sins, justification, life, and deliverance from

<sup>23</sup> WA 40, 1:566, 21–28; LW 26:371.

<sup>24</sup> WA 40, 1:82, 26–27; LW 26:32.

<sup>25</sup> BSELK, 872; BC, 355.

<sup>26</sup> WA 40, 1:593, 9; LW 26:389.

<sup>27</sup> WA 40, 1:593, 15–600, 20; LW 26:389–94.

death and the devil—works not of any creature but of the divine majesty.”<sup>28</sup>

The theme of “new creation” or “new birth” formed Luther’s perception of the essential identity of those who trust in Christ and of their capacity to live out the righteousness Christ has freely bestowed on them in daily life through the power of the Holy Spirit. When the law’s accusation has reduced sinners to nothing, God acts: “He is the almighty Creator who makes everything out of nothing.”<sup>29</sup> God’s justifying action is thus forensic, the action of words that create reality because they come from the one who creates by speaking. What God says does not describe what is already there; instead, God speaks reality into existence. As in the beginning of creation, God fashions from the nothingness of sin new children of God and does so through his Word.<sup>30</sup> Luther described God’s Word that conveys the forgiveness of sins as a “womb”:

God’s Word is the divine womb in which I was born. It is the birth through which I came into existence. He created me and made me his child. We are his heirs and have the forgiveness of sins. We are safe in confronting the devil because salvation has been given us because we have been created as new creatures.<sup>31</sup>

Obedience to the law could not revive the sinner; it could not serve as a path to a different life. “The law cannot produce a new nature, a new birth. It places before our eyes our old birth by which we were born under the rule of the devil. It prepares us for the new birth which comes to be through faith in Christ Jesus.”<sup>32</sup> This new birth does not take place, Luther told his students, through imitating Christ. (Luther associated the imitation of Christ with the late medieval model which saw copying Christ’s way of life, particularly celibacy and poverty, as the most efficient way to gain merit in God’s sight.) Rather, this new birth is a new creation. In Paul’s words in Galatians 3:27, it is putting on Christ and taking off the leather tunic of Adam, “a deadly tunic and a garment of sin,” worn by those “who were subject to and sold into slavery under sin, horrible blindness, ignorance, contempt for and hatred of God in us.”<sup>33</sup>

<sup>28</sup> WA 40, 1:80, 25–81, 13; LW 26:31.

<sup>29</sup> WA 40, 1:488, 19; LW 26:314.

<sup>30</sup> On the discussion of Tuomo Mannermaa’s rejection of Luther’s understanding of justification as non-forensic, see Risto Saarinen, “Justification by Faith: The View of the Mannermaa School,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther’s Theology*, ed. Robert Kolb, Irene Dingel, and Lubomir Batka (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 254–63, and Mark Mattes, “Luther on Justification as Forensic and Effective,” in *ibid.*, 264–73.

<sup>31</sup> WA 40, 1:597, 6–7 (in student notes on the lecture on Galatians 4:7, but not in the printed commentary of 1535). This imagery occurs often in Luther’s preaching and teaching, e.g., WA 5:505, 29–34; WA 10, 1, 1:232, 12–15.

<sup>32</sup> WA 40, 1:539, 13–16; LW 26:351.

<sup>33</sup> WA 40, 1:540, 17–22; LW 26:352.

It is in the context of this conviction that the restoration of human identity as God's child takes place through the re-creative Word of God that Luther's appropriation of the terms *imputare* and *reputare* are to be understood. Relatively seldom used in medieval theology,<sup>34</sup> they express the Wittenberg reformers' conviction that when God regards his chosen as righteous, or pronounces them righteous, he is not merely observing or describing reality but rather creating it. When God says "forgiven," sin vanishes from his sight, where the ultimate reality rests. Luther despaired over the mystery of the continuation of sin and evil in human life,<sup>35</sup> especially in the lives of God's faithful people, and he perceived that God's chosen remain in the struggle against the permeating sinfulness that makes daily repentance necessary. But their fundamental, essential identity once God has spoken them free from sin is that of a child of God.

Luther favored the image of new birth because the passive nature of the gift of life and identity through birth made clear that God's re-creating love sets no conditions and has no basis in the sinner. Paul's reference to believers' becoming heirs of Christ in Galatians 4:7 gave the professor the opportunity to make this clear:

For by being born a person earns the status of heir. No work, no merit appropriates the inheritance, but birth alone. An inheritance falls to a person in a totally passive manner, not in an active way. That is, being born, not producing or laboring or worrying, etc., make a person an heir. For a person does nothing in order to be born; it simply happens to a person. Therefore, we gain these eternal blessings passively, not actively. They include remission of sins, righteousness, the glory of the resurrection and life eternal. ... Thus, only faith fashions children of God, born from the Word, the divine womb, in which we are conceived, gestate, are born, raised, etc.<sup>36</sup>

Thus, Luther labeled this distinction between the passive righteousness that God unconditionally bestows in relationship with himself upon his chosen people and the active righteousness they then display in the performance of God's commands because they have been born anew. In sketching the *argumentum* or basic message of Galatians in the preface to the published commentary of 1535 Luther labeled this distinction of the two aspects of God-given righteousness "our theology."<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Johannes Altensteig, *Vocabularius Theologie complectens vocabulorum descriptiones ...* (Hagenau: Johannes Rynmann, 1517), CXIIa and CCXVIIIb, where the terms should occur.

<sup>35</sup> WA 18:719, 9–12; LW 33:190.

<sup>36</sup> WA 40, 1:597, 15–25; LW 26:392.

<sup>37</sup> WA 40, 1:45, 24; LW 26:7; cf. Robert Kolb, "Luther's Hermeneutics of Distinctions: Law and Gospel, Two Kinds of Righteousness, Two Realms, Freedom and Bondage," in *Oxford Handbook*, 176–78, and Robert Kolb, "Luther on the Two Kinds of Righteousness: Reflections

Luther believed that righteousness bestows the identity of child of God on sinners as it comes through God's Word of absolution, whether encountered in oral, written, or sacramental form, and the Wittenberg theologians conceived of this word as a promise. Promises elicit trust from those to whom they are given. As Luther struggled in the 1510s with his doubts and despair over his own sinful identity, his unrighteousness, he came slowly to the conclusion that God's Word alone, which delivers what Christ had won for him in his death and resurrection, can change the reality of the sinner's life. That change comes through the promise that God will be faithful in viewing that sinner as righteous.

### 3. Faith

Luther defined faith as a gift of God that establishes the relationship between the faithful Creator and Savior and the forgiven sinner. Melancthon aided him in understanding that Paul's concept of *pistis* (πίστις) was better translated with the Latin *fiducia* or the German *Vertrauen* than with *fides*, which medieval theologians viewed as mere acknowledgement of facts, "historical faith," and *Glaube*. (Nonetheless, both Wittenberg professors continued to use *Glaube* for the faith that not only recognizes the factuality of Christ's death and resurrection and assents to the "for me" character of God's promise to deliver the effects of Christ's work to the believer, but also actually trusts totally in the promise.) This faith recognizes and shares God's regard for the believer and joyfully accepts being his child; it found early expression in Luther's use of the bride and bridegroom image of the relationship between Christ and believers. They trust in him who has loved them through death and resurrection. Trust in his promise produces trust in his person, which opens trust in the possibility of performing his will. Although Luther and Melancthon increasingly distinguished God's act of restoring human righteousness in his sight from the result of that restoration in his people's obedience to his plan for human living, they viewed the two aspects of human righteousness as inseparable, two sides of the same identity. Those who experience new birth through the Holy Spirit's delivery of the promise in oral, written, or sacramental forms of God's Word are righteous, passively in relationship to God and actively in their response to him in prayer and praise and in service and love displayed toward other human beings.

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on His Two-Dimensional Definition of Humanity at the Heart of His Theology," *Lutheran Quarterly* 13 (1999): 449–66.

As Erik Erikson's modern psychological theory has highlighted,<sup>38</sup> trust is foundational to the human personality. As Luther wrote in his explanation of the first commandment in the Large Catechism, human trust creates its gods. Only trust in the true God, who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ, can restore human identity to its original, God-created form.<sup>39</sup> This trust brings God into clear focus, according to Luther. With his reference to God's reckoning Abraham's faith as righteousness, Paul had made faith in God "the highest worship, the highest veneration, the highest obedience and sacrifice" to the Creator: faith "places Godness in the highest place ... it creates God's being God, not in his substance, but in us. Apart from faith, God loses his glory, wisdom, righteousness, truth, [and] mercy" for human beings.<sup>40</sup> "Faith restores righteousness because it gives God what is his due."<sup>41</sup> "Faith is nothing other than having the truth in the heart, that is, the proper recognition of God in the heart," a recognition that human reason cannot construct and is not accessible apart from God's Word.<sup>42</sup> Faith also identifies the believer as God's forgiven child.

Luther formulated his exclusive focus on faith as that which constitutes righteousness in the believer in opposition to the Roman Catholic insistence that human merit plays a significant, even decisive, role in making sinners righteous in God's sight.

It is praiseworthy and blessed to imitate the example of what Christ did—love the neighbor, to do good to those who have earned evil, to pray for enemies, to patiently bear the ingratitude of those who repay good with evil. But none of this bestows righteousness in God's sight.

Like Abraham, believers rely only on faith, for it is regarded by God as righteousness.<sup>43</sup>

The mystery of the continuation of sin and evil in the lives of those who have received God's promise commanded Luther's attention often. He told his students that it is sometimes hard to perceive external signs that faith is present, such as enjoying hearing the Word, confessing Christ, even at personal cost, not delighting in sin, serving in one's own calling and not interfering with others in their callings. Such confirmation may or may not

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<sup>38</sup> Erik Erikson, *Child and Society* (New York: Norton, 1950); *Insight and Responsibility* (New York: Norton, 1964), esp. 81–107; *Identity, Youth and Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1968), esp. 91–141.

<sup>39</sup> BSELK 930/931–936/937; BC 386–88.

<sup>40</sup> WA 40, 1:360, 17–35; LW 26:226.

<sup>41</sup> WA 40, 1:361, 12; LW 26:227.

<sup>42</sup> WA 40, 1:376, 23–28; LW 26:238.

<sup>43</sup> WA 40, 1:389–90; LW 26:247–48.

be present or powerful enough to combat doubt and despair. Therefore, believers must repeat to themselves that God is faithful in his favor for his own. Struggling against doubt, believers should say with confidence,

I know that God has accepted me, that I have the Holy Spirit, not because of my own worthiness or virtues, but for Christ's sake, who for our sake submitted himself to the law and bore the sins of the world. I believe in him. If I am a sinner and I stray, he is righteous and cannot depart [from his faithfulness].

With that faith believers break forth in praise for God and love for the neighbor.<sup>44</sup>

### III. *Melanchthon*

Melanchthon's way of expressing this teaching differed from Luther's at times, but throughout their more than twenty-five years as colleagues they shared the same essential view of the justification of sinners through faith in Christ alone. "All of Christian teaching revolves around that topic of how we become righteous in God's sight. This definition is the chief part and summary of all Christian teaching," he wrote in 1529.<sup>45</sup> Melanchthon spoke of "excluding particles" (*particula exclusiva*), such as "by grace" or "by faith alone" "or apart from the merit of the law" as vital for the proper understanding of God's justifying action through faith in Christ. These phrases exclude any possibility of human merit playing a role in the salvation of sinners, he argued in direct opposition to the Roman Catholics with whom he had negotiated in Augsburg.<sup>46</sup>

Melanchthon's description of Christ's atoning work tended to emphasize his vicarious satisfaction of the law's demand for the death of the sinner more than Luther's did. In his Apology of the Augsburg Confession, he wrote against his Roman Catholic opponents, "The wrath of God cannot be conciliated as long as we set our own works against it because Christ has been set forth as the propitiator in order that on his account the Father may be reconciled with us."<sup>47</sup> Melanchthon often attempted to express his contrary views in the language of his critics; he described this propitiation in terms of satisfaction and debt: the propitiator's

<sup>44</sup> WA 40, 1:578, 28–31; LW 26:379.

<sup>45</sup> *Corpus Reformatorum: Philippi Melancthonis Opera quae supersunt omnia* [henceforth CR], ed. Karl G. Bretschneider (Halle: Schwetschke, 1848), 15:445.

<sup>46</sup> CR 15:503–4; Philip Melanchthon, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. Fred Kramer (St. Louis: Concordia, 1992), 18.

<sup>47</sup> Apology IV, BSELK 301; BC 133.

merits must be authorized to make satisfaction for others who are given these merits by divine reckoning in order that through them, just as though they were his own merits, they may be reckoned righteous. It is as when a person pays a debt for friends, the debtors are freed by the merit of the other, ... Thus, Christ's merits are given to us so that we might be reckoned righteous by our trust in the merits of Christ when we believe in him, as though we had merits of our own.<sup>48</sup>

But Melanchthon also described justification as a liberation from the accusation of the law, from sin and death, a liberation that brings righteousness and joy to believers.<sup>49</sup> Christ is not only the one who sacrificed himself for sinners but also their liberator and savior.<sup>50</sup>

Melanchthon's emphasis on God's Word as the decisive factor in creating the new person in Christ relied, as Luther's did, on the biblical view of that Word as creative, in bringing all creation into existence in the beginning, and continuing as his re-creative Word of absolution in the rescue and restoration of sinners. His 1532 commentary on Romans defined *conversio*, conversion, or *regeneratio*, new birth, with three elements: God's forgiving the sinner, God's restoring righteousness or the reckoning of righteousness to the sinner, and the gift of the Holy Spirit as the source of the fruits of faith, and eternal life.<sup>51</sup> That this was an action that God carried out through his Word was clear for Melanchthon on the basis of Hebrew usage, Paul's expressions, and the use of the concept of "justification" in the ancient Roman world, using the "justification" of Romanus Scipio as an example.

It is therefore by faith that we are justified, in that we are regarded [*reputamur*] as righteous by God for Christ's sake when we believe. The word "righteousness" does not signify the righteousness of the law or obedience in general, or any of our qualities, for it says, "by faith righteousness is given to us," and that signifies the imputation of righteousness or our acceptance [by God]. This is to be understood in terms of relationship, as acceptance to eternal life. But it is necessary to recognize that with the remission of sins the Holy Spirit is given at the same time ... we are set straight through faith. Thus, the gift of the Holy Spirit is connected to justification, and he does not give just one virtue, faith, but initiates the others: fear and love of God, love of the truth, chastity, patience, the practice of justice toward the neighbor. ... These virtues do not merit remission of sins, nor is a person accepted as righteousness because of them.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Apology XXI, BSELK 567; BC 240.

<sup>49</sup> CR 15:507–8; Melanchthon, *Commentary on Romans*, 22.

<sup>50</sup> CR 15:509; Melanchthon, *Commentary on Romans*, 24.

<sup>51</sup> CR 15:506; Melanchthon, *Commentary on Romans*, 21.

<sup>52</sup> CR 15:510–11; Melanchthon, *Commentary on Romans*, 25.

Melanchthon held as clearly as Luther that God justified sinners in a forensic manner, that is, through his word of absolution that created a new person who trusted Christ. Through Christ, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world,

remission of sins and the imputation of righteousness are certainly given to us, not because of any works or merit of our own but by grace and by faith, when we believe that these things are truly for us and have certainly been given us for Christ's sake. When we are set straight by this faith and continue to fix our gaze on Christ, we truly receive remission of sins and are regarded as righteous, that is accepted in the presence of God, and we are given the Holy Spirit, and we are made children of God, heirs of eternal life (John 1:12–13).<sup>53</sup>

The forensic activity of Christ involved more for Melanchthon than his absolution from sin and guilt. Christ's activity as advocate and mediator before the Father's throne day in and day out assured sinners that the one who had sacrificed himself for them continued to intervene in their behalf.<sup>54</sup>

Melanchthon's understanding of faith as the constitutive factor in human righteousness in believers formed his defense of the Augsburg Confession's teaching that

we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God through our merit, work, or satisfactions, but ... we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God out of grace for Christ's sake through faith when we believe that Christ has suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. (IV)<sup>55</sup>

In the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* (IV) he wrote that "the faith that justifies is not only a knowledge of history; it is to assent to the promise of God, in which forgiveness of sins and justification are bestowed freely on account of faith. ... To have faith is to desire and to receive the offered promise of the forgiveness of sins and justification."<sup>56</sup> This kind of faith "is not an idle thought but one which frees us from death, produces new life in our hearts, and is a work of the Holy Spirit; it does not exist with mortal sin. Instead, as long as it is present, it brings forth good fruit."<sup>57</sup> Personal faith trusts that sins "are remitted on account of Christ and that God is reconciled

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<sup>53</sup> CR 15:501; Melanchthon, *Commentary on Romans*, 16; cf. CR 15:510–11; Melanchthon, *Commentary on Romans*, 25.

<sup>54</sup> CR 15:610; Melanchthon, *Commentary on Romans*, 120–21.

<sup>55</sup> BSELK 98; BC 38, 40.

<sup>56</sup> BSELK 287, 289; BC 128.

<sup>57</sup> BSELK 295; BC 131.



and gracious on account of Christ, receives the forgiveness of sins, and justifies us.” In the face of the terrors of conscience that recognition of sinfulness brings, “faith consoles and uplifts hearts, it regenerates us and brings the Holy Spirit that we might then be able to live according to the law of God, namely, to love God, truly to fear God, truly to assert that God hears prayer, to obey God in all afflictions, and to mortify concupiscence, etc.” This faith receives forgiveness and recognizes that Christ has stilled the Father’s wrath at sin. It does not try to argue God into being gracious with personal merit or deeds of love. It grasps Christ, renews the heart, and is the presupposition or basis for obedience to God’s law in the believer’s life.<sup>58</sup>

Not long after his arrival in Wittenberg, Melanchthon had recognized the nature of God’s justifying Word as a promise.<sup>59</sup> Melanchthon’s Romans commentary of 1532 repeated his conviction that historical faith in what Christ did on earth must lead to assent to the promise of God’s grace and then to “trust in his mercy, which has been promised for the sake of Christ.” This trust includes wishing for divine comfort and for rest and safety in hearing that God is reconciled in Christ to his people. This faith is a noun which describes a relationship, and this trust throws itself in total dependence on God’s promise in Christ.<sup>60</sup> The righteousness of faith stands in contrast to the righteousness of works when human beings attempt to define what makes them righteous before God, but Melanchthon affirmed the practice of the works that indeed express faith in relationships to the rest of God’s creation.<sup>61</sup> Lecturing to students in 1532, he summarized the fruits of faith as recognition of the forgiveness of sins, reconciliation with God, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Faith is not idle but receives the gifts of Christ’s death and resurrection from the Spirit, destroying Satan’s work and giving believers his aid.<sup>62</sup>

## Conclusion

In the crisis-filled months following the diet of Augsburg in 1530, the Wittenberg reformers, especially Luther and Melanchthon, made special efforts to confess clearly what they regarded as the heart of the biblical message, the doctrine of justification by faith in Christ. In their lectures

<sup>58</sup> BSELK 286; BC 127.

<sup>59</sup> Ernst Bizer, *Theologie der Verheißung: Studien zur theologischen Entwicklung des jungen Melanchthon, 1519–1524* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1964).

<sup>60</sup> CR 15:514; Melanchthon, *Commentary on Romans*, 28–29.

<sup>61</sup> BSELK 276–87; BC 120–27.

<sup>62</sup> CR 15:559–60; Melanchthon, *Commentary on Romans*, 71.

both men clarified and developed this teaching, and Melancthon focused on it in his *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*. They grounded their teaching in the re-creative Word of the gospel; its promise actually delivers forgiveness, life, and salvation. Faith's recognition of the reality of the passively bestowed righteousness in God's sight produces fruit in the active practice of righteousness in service and love for others in obedience to God's commands.