JUSTIFICATION BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH IS THE DOCTRINE BY WHICH THE CHURCH EITHER STANDS OR FALLS

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Introduction

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, esteemed members of the Confessional Ev. Lutheran Conference,

Two things make this meeting a special occasion. First of all, as Christian representatives from across the globe we are privileged to assemble in one place during the holy Easter season to celebrate Christ's resurrection and our life in Christ (Romans 6: 4). But secondly and above all, we came to listen to God's Word concerning the doctrine of the Christian faith that is based on the Easter message—the news that we sinners are justified freely by God's grace alone through faith in Christ Jesus.

Because the doctrine of justification stands at the center of Christian life, Lutheran confessors insist that this teaching be clearly taught for one reason only. The message of justification is nothing else than the holy gospel by which the Christian church throughout the world lives. The church does not live by being moral, by the knowledge and observance of God's law. Nor does the church live by religion, by lofty experiences of the divine and an awareness of the mysteries of God. The church does not live by the results of its preaching—by a pious life or by doing right according to God's law, as important as these are for the life of faith.

The church *lives* solely by the forgiveness of sins. And that faith rests squarely on the person of our Lord Jesus Christ, who said of the Scriptures, "These are the Scriptures that testify of me" (John 5:39). Justification by faith in Christ alone is the special insight that Martin Luther by God's grace brought to the church after years of confusion about the meaning of the righteousness of God. It is our intention in this final essay to highlight the importance of this teaching for the life of the church and our mission in the world.

JUSTIFICATION BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH IS THE DOCTRINE BY WHICH THE CHURCH EITHER STANDS OR FALLS

A. The standing church

But if the message of justification is so simple and so clear, where does the problem lie? Why has the Christian church throughout the centuries struggled to identify the central truth to which it owes its existence? More serious still, what happens to the church when the life-giving work of Christ is covered over, neglected, even abolished by the church itself? Why does the Lutheran Confession at Augsburg make the point that justification is "the main doctrine of Christianity [which] especially serves to bring a clear, correct understanding of the entire Scripture and alone points the way to the unspeakable treasure and true knowledge of Christ and alone opens the door to the entire Bible" (CA Apology, IV, 2)? Simply put, what do Lutheran confessors mean when they call justification by faith the article by which the church either stands or falls (*articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*)?

1. Built on a rock

To understand what is meant by the standing or falling church, Scripture leads us to think of the church as built on a rock. The Psalmist says, "The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge" (Psalm 18:2). In his great confession the Apostle Peter identifies the rock as Christ Jesus, the LORD. "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," Peter stated in childlike faith. And Jesus commended Peter that by God's revelation he had blessedly come to recognize the rock ($\pi \epsilon \tau \rho a$) on which the church rests (Matthew 16:18). Already before Peter in Old Testament times, the church rested on the Christ, present in the Promise. St. Paul reminds the Jews how their forefathers in the wilderness "all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink, for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ" (1 Corinthians 10:4).

One of the most striking modern paintings of the Christian church is the picture of the Rock of Ages. In this painting the artist portrays a woman in a stormy sea, clinging with both arms to a rock which is the shape of a cross. There on the Rock of Ages, the woman, representing the believer or the church, finds refuge from the waves that are about to pull her down to a sure death. There on the Rock of Ages she also finds safety and security from the storm. For that Rock is Christ.

But sad to say, the Rock of Ages which provides salvation can also cause faith to shipwreck. St. Paul warned his fellow Jews not to be offended at Jesus by citing an old prophetic word about the church, "See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame" (Romans 9:33; also 1 Peter 2:8). The prophet Simeon in the Temple likewise understood the place of Jesus in the life of the church. As he cradled the baby Jesus in his arms, he prophesied, "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against" (Luke 2:34). Why did Simeon say "the falling and rising of many in Israel," that is, the falling and rising of many in the church ? And what did he mean by the "sign to be spoken against"?

Simeon knew his Bible. It was not a set of principles that some itinerant philosopher passes by us to flatter our intellect, to excite our emotions, or to strengthen our will. The Holy Scriptures put us face to face with God, under the veil of God's inspired words, so that we might know that God's truth is not divorced from the person of God, from that tiny baby whom Simeon held in his arms. As a Jew, Simeon knew that his people were sign-seekers. They had been trained by miracles, ceremonies, and prophecies to look for signs of the Messiah. But when the Messiah came, many continued to look only for the signs that Moses and the prophets had told them about. In disbelief, they overlooked the fact that these signs were fulfilled in the person of Jesus, the baby in Simeon's arms.

What Simeon foresaw in the baby happened. When Jesus began his public ministry in Galilee, he identified his work in personal terms. After performing a miraculous sign by feeding over 5000 people with a few barley loaves and two small fish, he informed the people that he was that Bread of Life come down from heaven. This glorious news won some to faith. But it caused others, even some of his intimate followers, to fall from faith. Old Simeon had foreseen things rightly. And St. John records that "from this time many of his disciples turned back

JUSTIFICATION BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH IS THE DOCTRINE BY WHICH THE CHURCH EITHER STANDS OR FALLS

and no longer followed him" (John 6:66). This is hardly an inspiring mission text for building the church. Or is it?

2. Faith shipwrecked

What happened? What caused faith to shipwreck after the miracle? We can understand that Jesus' own playmates and townspeople rejected him. Jesus himself explained that a prophet is not accepted in his own country. But to be deserted by one's own disciples—why? They had been Jesus' followers, people who clung to him, who had studied with him, and believed his Word. What suddenly turned them off so that they quit school on this famous Rabbi?

Simply stated, they fell into a fatal error. They never really got over believing Jesus to be a new Moses. In fact, they had followed Jesus just because they thought he was another Moses. Like Moses, Jesus brought spiritual precepts in legal form and explained them with reference to the Almighty God. Like Moses, he did great miracles and signs to show them his sayings were true. But the breaking point came when Jesus explained the miracle of the loaves and fishes. They still followed Jesus when he claimed to be a divine messenger, "1 am the bread of life come down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread he will live forever." But when Jesus flatly stated: "This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world"—that was too much for them to stomach. Why?

They wanted a master who merely taught them divine truths which they could put into practice. But when Jesus told them that he was the truth, that the truth of God was anchored in this flesh-and-blood person standing before them, they were perplexed. At the words of Jesus, "I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day" (John 6:53), they left. Little did they realize that the church was built on the flesh and blood of Jesus, that is, on the incarnate Son of God who became fully human to suffer and die for the sins of the world and rose again for our justification (Romans 4:25). Without this faith the church would fail.

3. The foundation must stand

It was given to Martin Luther to bring the truth of justification by faith in Christ back to the church with a clarity that had been lost for hundreds of years. Certainly the church in Luther's day kept remnants of the Good News of justification. In its liturgy it still proclaimed the gospel message when it sang: "Oh, King of majesty tremendous, Who does free salvation send us." And it continued to announce forgiveness to sinners by absolving them "in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." This Word kept the church alive.

But the church's penitential practice obscured the gospel and threw people back on their own efforts. The gospel turned into a law when the priest demanded that we complete our forgiveness by doing penitential works. The believer was thrown back upon himself *(incurvatus in se)*. No longer is it the message of justification by faith in Christ *alone*. Free salvation is no longer free when we need to add our righteous works to the righteous work of Christ. The church's teaching fell into confusion. And confusion is Satan's work to undermine the foundation of the church, the life-saving work of Christ.

In his Sermon on *Two Kinds of Righteousness* (LW 31: 297ff), Luther aimed to undo this confusion. He drew a line that the church had not clearly drawn when it confessed in the Apostles' Creed, "I believe in the forgiveness of sins." To clarify what forgiveness really means, Luther pointed out that there are two kinds of righteousness in Christian life that need to be distinguished with utmost care. The first is Christ's righteousness. This is a righteousness that is not part of us. It is the righteousness that lies outside of us *(extra nos)* and comes to us from the outside in, not from the inside out.

Luther calls this righteousness an alien or foreign righteousness because it is not ours by nature but belongs to another. It is the righteousness that Jesus won for all mankind by his suffering and death on the cross. In an unforgettable passage the Reformer explains what it is: "This righteousness, then, is given to people in baptism and whenever they are truly repentant. Therefore a person can with confidence boast in Christ and say: 'Mine are Christ's living, doing, and speaking, his suffering and

JUSTIFICATION BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH IS THE DOCTRINE BY WHICH THE CHURCH EITHER STANDS OR FALLS

dying, mine as much as if I had lived, done, spoken, suffered, and died as he did." And then using Scripture's bridal imagery, the heart of the doctrine of Christ and faith in the (mystical) union of Christ and the church, he continues: "Just as a bride-groom possesses all that is his bride's and she all that is his—for the two have all things in common because they are one flesh [Gen. 2:24]—so Christ and the church are one spirit [Eph. 5:29-32]" (LW 31:297).

In the Smalcald Articles, Luther describes this righteousness as the foundation of our faith, without which the church will fall. With firm and unyielding conviction, he states: "Nothing in this article can be given up or compromised. . . . On this article rests all that we teach and practice against the pope, the devil, and the world" (SA II, l, 5). What this rock-solid testimony is Luther puts in Scripture's own words:

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 justification" (Romans 4:25). He alone is "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). "God laid on him the iniquities of us all" (Isaiah 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" (Romans 3:23-25).

But there is a second righteousness, as Brother Martin had indicated—equally important because what Christ did he did not for himself but for you and me. The other is the righteousness that we possess by faith. Luther labels the second a proper righteousness, that is, a righteousness that properly becomes our own by faith. This righteousness is based on Christ's work, that primary righteousness, and it does not come to us by anything we have done or can do, but by faith alone. This faith activates our Christian life. "The second kind of righteousness is our proper righteousness," Luther explains carefully, "not because we alone work it, but because we work with that first and alien righteousness. This is the manner of life spent profitably in good works. . . . This righteousness consists in love to one's neighbor, and . . . in meekness and fear toward God" (LW 31:299). If teaching justification in this way seemed to deaden and deactivate the church because it is the work of a foreigner, the dear Doctor objects. Luther was of the firm conviction that justifying faith works. Not faith and works, as if the two could be disjoined. Such an expression would be as foolish as saying about a glowing lamp, "Light and shines"—which doesn't make sense! No, light shines, unless it has gone out. And faith works, unless it is dead (James 2:26).

The Apostle Paul was the teacher here also. The same apostle who identified primary righteousness by saying that we are "justified by faith apart from" our activities also described our proper righteousness by writing that the faith which makes us alive also works in our life. He said as much when he instructed the Galatians, "The only thing that counts is faith which works by love" (Galatians 5:6). And Paul reminded believers of the fact that personally, as a Christian, "I no longer live, but Christ lives in me." What does this mean? It means that "the life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 3:20). In this way faith in Christ does not make us idle or unconcerned but activates our life.

In the *Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans*, Luther spells out how the church lives by the preaching of justification. He describes the dynamic of faith within the church in terms that every instruction class needs to learn: "Faith is a divine work in us which changes us and makes us to be born anew of God, John 1 [:12,13]. It kills the Old Adam and makes us altogether different people, in heart and spirit and mind and powers; and it brings with it the Holy Spirit. O it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good works incessantly. It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, it has already done them, and is constantly doing them" (LW 35:370).

In this clear and colorful way Luther sharply distinguished between what we do before God and what Christ has done for us, between Christ's righteousness and our righteousness. His own experience in the church taught Luther how foundational that distinction is for the life of the church. In simple biblical terms Luther spelled out the difference between Christ's work

JUSTIFICATION BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH IS THE DOCTRINE BY WHICH THE CHURCH EITHER STANDS OR FALLS

and our works, between faith in Christ and our life of faith. In doctrinal terms, he clearly distinguished between justification and sanctification, between the gospel and the law.

With Luther we are indebted to the Apostle Paul for clarifying the gospel in his instruction manual to the Romans by concluding: "For we maintain that a man is justified by faith (alone) apart from observing the law" (Romans 3:28). All other teaching confuses the hearers and leads to a law-bound gospel. And that is "another gospel," which must be condemned (Galatians 1:8).

B. The falling church

Are we able to keep that clarity today in our insensitive world? Do the temptations for success in the church drive us to *rely on* other strategies than preaching, teaching, and confessing the two kinds of righteousness as the Bible carries them out? Are we still convinced on the basis of God's Word that the preaching of Christ and the cross and repentance and faith work? Is the precious teaching of justification by faith alone still central to our work and mission as a Christian church? In short, do we believe that the doctrine of justification is the article of faith whereby the church stands or falls?

1. Reworking the foundation

Walter Altmann in his book, *Luther and Liberation: a Latin-American Perspective*, suggests the time has come in our history to reassess the central teaching Luther won from the Scripture. According to Professor Altmann of the Escola Superior de Teologia in Sao Leopoldo, Brazil, Luther's words and ideas fit his times and circumstances. But our cultural contexts in the Western world today demand that we modify the doctrine of justification. "Much of Luther's liberating and revolutionary impact has been lost" today because of its social ineptness, Altmann maintains. It just does not work. What once was a liberating theology in a personal and churchly sense needs to be made applicable on the grander scale of social and political life (Altmann, viii-ix).

The problem, as Altmann sees it, is a matter of emphasis. For Luther justification involved personal guilt and a passive reception of the gift of Christ's righteousness. Freed by faith, Luther saw the individual Christian as an instrument of love in the world. But the question arises "whether Luther's emphasis on passivity [that is, being inactive] in justification would also lead to ethical passivity and, therefore, to the denial of the task of liberation" (ibid., 38). In simple terms, would the justified sinner, freed by Christ, become insensitive to and inactive in the quest for social justice? "When we emphasize the passivity in justification we may—without wanting to, perhaps—be justifying a comfortable ethic," Altmann maintains, and then explains himself, "The passivity of Luther's experience of justification is used to justify not participating in the task of liberation" (ibid.).

For Altmann the position of Luther during the Peasants' War is a case in point. For cause Luther "rejected the attempt of the peasants to use the Bible to legitimate their political and social demands." "He was afraid," Altmann says, "that the hard won victory over [Catholic] religious control of political power would be reversed, and that the gospel, distorted into law, would be lost" (ibid., 39). Therefore despite the peasants' social grievances, Luther sided with the princes over against the peasants for the sake of political order.

But things are different now. "Today," Altmann indicates, "it is important to emphasize that political will is exercised from the bottom up. The people, specifically the oppressed, are the new historical subjects who seek transformation of current situations and systems of social justice" (Altmann, 10). Christian freedom now has a different ring, a decidedly social and political ring to it. "Today, our emphasis must be different," Altmann affirms and gives the reason why. "It is important that life under grace, a life of compassion, not be understood as an individualistic life, a mere inner peace, but rather a communitary, collective life that takes concrete form in our societies" (ibid., 39).

What then is to be done today? We must see to it, the professor says, "that the realm of God must become visible by means of *signs* that are made visible by those who follow Jesus" (ibid., 39; emphasis mine). The way to do so is to modify the doctrine of justification by adapting the biblical terminology to our times. He suggests we get away from the juridical words used to preach justification and use words more compatible to life in the 20th century.

Drawing on Paul Tillich, Altmann asks us to substitute the word *acceptance* as a more appropriate term than justification for the problems of our time, namely, social liberation. In a context of domination and dependence, the term acceptance means more in the lives of those who long for liberation. And "the term 'liberation' is particularly well-suited to express the 'wholeness' of salvation and its character as a process as well as its personal and its historical dimensions. 'Liberation,'" the critic emphasizes, "also communicates the biblical dialectic of being free from (a slavery) and free for (a service), weaving God's gratuitous action together with our human ethical commitment" (ibid., 41). If this reader understands correctly, God's work and our works are woven into one expression by this process.

2. Christian freedom

The critical words of Altmann make us pause to reflect on what he says, in the light of the two kinds of righteousness of which Scripture speaks. To get our bearings we need to throw his suggested modern modification of justification against the rock. Luther once admitted when there was a hard nut to crack, he threw it against the rock, which is Christ.

There is no question that Christians are to be lights in this world by the way they live and act and face problems in society. Jesus indicates that Christian activity is a visible sign to an unbeliever of our Christian faith. He admonished his followers to "let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). Our sanctified life of faith shows in the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22f). But this fruit is not the source or foundation of our faith. The source does not lie in weaving together our work and Christ's work into an outward corporate community. Nor are the visible works of Christians the outward sign on which the church rests.

The sign by which the church is built and on which it stands is Christ, who said of himself distinctly and exclusively, "Apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). All outward visible signs are vanity without faith in Christ Jesus, the LORD, no matter how good they seem. The Pharisees tried this route. No, the infallible visible sign of the church is the flesh-and-blood Jesus who justifies us freely by his grace. Plugged into this light, faith shines. For the light is Christ, who said clearly and unmistakably concerning himself, "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12; 9:5).

Being sensitive to the social needs of others is indeed the fruit of Christian faith. Christian love and concern for the neighbor and all mankind follows Christian faith, as surely as the second kind of righteousness is born of the first and primary. In his pamphlet, *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520)—usually the first of Luther's works to be translated when put into a new language—Luther clarifies what makes a Christian tick in very simple words: "A Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbor. Otherwise he is not a Christian. He lives in Christ through faith, in his neighbor through love. By faith he is caught up beyond himself into God. By love he descends beneath himself into his neighbor. Yet he always remains in God and in his love" (LW 31:371).

This simple summary statement of Christian life rightly and clearly distinguishes the heavenly source of Christian liberation from its earthly results in the everyday activities of love. At its source the Christian preaching of justification is not individualistic, even though Christ died "for you and for me" personally. Christ's work of justification of the sinner has a timeless global dimension.

The Holy Scriptures indicate that the work of Christ is unlimited and embraces all people in every society and culture on earth, no matter what their circumstances in life might be. He is the Savior from sin, which has enslaved all peoples, nations, and tribes and deprived them of life with God. "For God so loved the *world* that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." The marvel is that this righteousness came to all people by the work of One man, Jesus Christ (Romans 5:15-19). The truth of the matter is, as Paul told the Corinthians, that "God was reconciling *the world* to himself in Christ," and then explains that this means, "not counting men's sins against them" (2 Corinthians 5:19).

3. More than acceptance

Therefore, the appropriate name for justification, as the Scripture testifies, is more than acceptance on God's part—or on ours. Acceptance overlooks the One who stands between the sinner and the righteous God, Jesus Christ. To suggest that justification in our historical circumstances be modified by using the term *acceptance* in its stead skews the picture of what is really and truly happening between God and the world. To say that "God accepts" has a different ring to it than to say "God justifies." It conceals the fact that justification is a judicial act on God's part.

Here is the situation from Adam's time on. Sinners of every nation stand before the law court of God's justice, guilty as charged. We are sentenced to death. But God commutes our sentence and declares us free for the sake of the Right One who took our sin and the sentence of death on himself. This is the Good News. The holy God and righteous judge accepts the Son's substitution. He raises the Vicar from death on Easter morning. By faith in the Substitute, we sinners walk free and are raised to a new life with him. It is a gift. By God's Spirit in and through the great cleansing of baptism, believers are freed from captivity to sin and become slaves to Christ's righteousness (Romans 6:16-18). The believers are freed to serve and to offer their life as a living sacrifice in thanks to God and in love to others (Romans 12). Those who walk away from Christ in unbelief continue to live in bondage to the law and under the sentence of eternal death.

In the light of Christ's work, Altmann's suggestion that we substitute the word acceptance for justification is more than a modern modification. It is a substantial change. Acceptance alone easily passes over the great cost that it took for our justification. It cost God's own Son his life. The sacrificial death of God's Son on the cross cannot be obscured in the words which we use. Surely, God *accepts* us as pure and holy for the sake of Christ's righteousness. But the work of Christ must remain central to our preaching and mission.

Wilhelm Maurer points out that Luther's rediscovery of the gospel already countered a medieval emphasis on acceptance.

He writes: "Luther viewed divine forgiveness as the action on which the acceptance or nonacceptance of the sinner depended. . . . The decisive thing is not the measure of human merit but a declaration of acquittal that rests on Christ's righteousness. Where Luther saw himself differing from the acceptance theory of late medieval authorities was in his conviction that God forgives sinners out of a free and gracious attitude. Only when acceptance is understood in its biblical context can the concept be used as an expression of the doctrine of justification" (Maurer, 337).

Luther explains his insight in his own words: "It is the sweetest righteousness of God the Father that he does not save imaginary but real sinners, sustaining us in spite of our sins and accepting our works and our lives, which are all worthy of rejection. . . . When therefore he pardons, he neither accepts nor does not accept, but he pardons" (LW 31:63,64). This "entirely gracious acceptance on the part of God" Luther calls imputation of the righteousness of faith (LW 25:36). Following St. Paul's lead, he explains God's gracious forgiveness with the negative expression, as *not* reckoning our sins against us, and with a positive expression, as reckoning the righteousness of Christ to us. Like Abraham, we become righteous through the imputation of this faith apart from our cooperation and worthiness (Romans 4).

For this reason we easily confuse people by turning justification into mere acceptance. It confuses Christ's work with ours. More seriously, it can turn Christ's righteousness into a new law. In a social-oriented gospel Jesus Christ becomes a new Moses. Where such is the case, the church no longer lives by the forgiveness of sins alone. It lives by its work and impact on society. The flesh-and-blood Jesus fades into the background and is no longer central to the church's faith and life.

When faith loses hold of Christ, the solid Rock, the church falls. It sinks into the shifting sands of human commitments to earthly justice. We lose the sure confidence in Christ and with him the faith that works as salt in society. In trying to remake the world, we depart from the center of Christian faith, the holy gospel. In unbelief, we set aside our justification before God through faith in Christ Jesus, our LORD. And in the process we sidestep the

JUSTIFICATION BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH IS THE DOCTRINE BY WHICH THE CHURCH EITHER STANDS OR FALLS

revolutionary power of the gospel, which is able to change hearts and minds (Romans 1:16).

An afterword

Before we close this brief excursion into the doctrine of justification, allow one last comment by the person who by God's grace has taught us the central importance of the gospel in the life of the church and its mission. Speaking on the article of justification by faith in Christ alone, Martin Luther writes in prayerlike contemplation:

This doctrine is the head and cornerstone. It alone begets, nourishes, builds, preserves, and defends the church of God. And without it the church of God cannot exist one hour... For no one who does not hold this article—or, to use Paul's expression, this "sound doctrine" (Titus 2:1)—is able to teach correctly in the church or successfully resist the adversary... This is the heel of the Seed that opposes the old serpent and crushes its head. That is why Satan, in turn, cannot but persecute it (WA 33:82).

To this we say, Amen!—as we pray, "Lord, keep us steadfast in your Word" because the gospel of justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone is the rock on which the church in every age stands! There is a picture of the Rock of Ages even more striking than the first. In this picture the artist portrays the woman clinging to the Rock with one arm, while the other is reaching out to draw someone else to the Rock. This is our God-given privilege and mission.

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