

# MARTIN LUTHER AND GOD'S SAVING RIGHTEOUSNESS (3)

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## **E. The Significance of the Righteousness of God**

It only remains to stress three aspects of the importance of God's saving righteousness, both practically and ecclesiastically. We shall consider in turn its significance for Luther personally, for his reformatory labours and for reformation generally.

### **1. Significance for Luther Personally**

First, the truth of the righteousness of God meant salvation for the German monk. He would not have to endure endless, divine punishment for, through the gospel, he had been delivered from guilt and hell. "Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:1)! Luther knew the blessedness of David in Psalm 32 and Paul in Romans 4, the blessedness of all who believe the gospel that God preached to father Abraham (Gal. 3:8-9, 14). As the former papist put it in his famous testimony, through believing and receiving the righteousness of God, he felt that he "had entered paradise itself through open doors."

Second, Martin Luther was assured by the Holy Spirit of his salvation. The answer to the old questions—Have I done enough? Are my works good enough? Have I now rendered sufficient satisfaction to the Almighty for my sins?—was found in the gospel of the righteousness of God. Luther, the Reformers and all true believers were and are justified by faith alone, not only in the divine or heavenly forum but also in the forum of their consciousness (*in foro conscientiae*).

The Wittenberg theologian affirmed,

We can and should be more certain of the things which God has promised us than we would be if we were already holding them in our hands ... But, you say, I do not feel it. I reply:

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One must learn with the fathers to hope for that which is not seen and to fix one's eyes on heaven [cf. II Cor. 5:7; Heb. 11:1]. With the fathers you must learn to ride on the clouds. The kingdom of heaven is yours, your sins are forgiven through the blood of the Lamb; only see to it that you believe this. The promises of God are not made in jest; God does not lie. He says that you are justified, holy, saved ...<sup>1</sup>

Commenting on Galatians 4:6, this great sixteenth-century preacher of God's grace declared,

Let us thank God, therefore, that we have been delivered from this monster of uncertainty ... The Gospel commands us to look, not at our own good deeds or perfection but at God Himself as He promises, and at Christ Himself, the Mediator. By contrast the pope commands us to look, not at God as He promises, not at Christ our High Priest, but at our own works and merits. From the latter course, doubt and despair necessarily follow; but from the former, certainty and the joy of the Spirit. For I am clinging to God, who cannot lie. He says: "I am giving My own Son into death, so that by His blood He might redeem you from sin and death." Here I cannot have any doubts, unless I want to deny God altogether. And this is the reason why our theology is certain: it snatches us away from ourselves and places us outside ourselves, so that we do not depend on our own strength, conscience, experience, person, or works but depend on that which is outside ourselves, that is, on the promise and truth of God, which cannot deceive. The pope does not know this; therefore he and his furies have the wicked notion that no one, not even those who are righteous and wise, can know whether he is worthy of love. But if they are righteous and wise, they surely know that they are loved by God; otherwise they are not righteous and wise.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Plass, *What Luther Says*, pp. 1394-1395.

<sup>2</sup> Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 26: *Lectures on Galatians, 1535, Chapters 1-4*, p. 387. *Canons V:R:5* also opposes "the doubts of the papist." Sadly, these Romish doubts have returned to



Third, the truth of the righteousness of God not only opened “the gate to paradise” to Martin Luther; it also opened the Word of God to him. Knowing the blessedness of God’s saving righteousness, he also knew the joy of a clear understanding of the divinely inspired oracles: “a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me.” This made him a superb expositor, lecturer, preacher and theologian of the Word of God.<sup>3</sup>

For Luther, the Holy Bible can only be truly understood by those who know themselves to be wicked sinners who have received the righteousness of God by faith alone. This is the case because of the content of Scripture:

The entire Bible has two principal thoughts. The first: Human nature is in its entirety damned and ruined by sin, nor can it come out of this calamity and death by its own powers and efforts; the second: God alone is just and out of mercy destroys sin and justifies.<sup>4</sup>

Fourth, the gospel of gracious justification was crucial in his theology, and central in his doctrinal perspective and task. Preaching on John 6:37, “All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out,” Dr. Luther declared,

We perceive clearly from this text how St. John stresses the great and chief article of our Christian faith above all others, namely, faith in Christ. It is from this article that we derive the name “Christians.” John’s Gospel contains but few references to the Ten Commandments. This is his chief task, to implant and imprint this sublime article of the righteousness of faith into man’s heart. Wherever it remains pure, unadulterated, and firmly upheld, all is well; but where it falls, we are all lost. Then we are no better than the Jews, pagans, Tartars, and Turks; yes, then we are even as bad as the papists. Therefore

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some measure in some Protestant churches through an unhealthy form of introspection which takes men and women away from trusting Christ alone as the basis for their acceptance with God.

<sup>3</sup> The full title of Arthur Skevington Wood’s fine work indicates its relevance here: *Captive to the Word: Martin Luther, Doctor of Sacred Scripture*.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Plass, *What Luther Says*, p. 68.



the evangelist John is to be commended highly for treating this doctrine with such diligence.<sup>5</sup>

Thus Luther saw that everyone needed to hear the gospel truth of God's saving righteousness: his university students and faculty, the people of Wittenberg and Saxony, the Germans, other Europeans and, indeed, men, women and children all around the world.

## **2. Significance for Luther's Reformatory Labours**

Now we come to the massive importance of the righteousness of God in justification in Luther's reformatory labours. We begin with indulgences, the issue that precipitated the Reformation over 500 years ago. Some years after the posting of his *Ninety-Five Theses* (1517), the German Reformer thundered,

All heretics have continually failed in this one point, that they do not rightly understand or know the article of justification. If we had not this article certain and clear, it were impossible we could criticise the Pope's false doctrine of indulgences and other abominable errors, much less be able to overcome greater spiritual errors and vexations.<sup>6</sup>

Second, since indulgences are intrinsically connected to penance, and penance was, and is, one of Rome's seven sacraments, the gospel of God's saving righteousness meant a reform of sacramental theology. This was necessary not only because Rome's sacramental theology is false but also because its sacraments are a substitute for the true gospel of justification.<sup>7</sup>

The German Reformer is correct:

Where that article [of imputed righteousness] is correctly

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<sup>5</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 23: *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John, Chapters 6-8*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, trans. Martin H. Bertram (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), p. 56.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas S. Kepler (ed.), *The Table Talk of Martin Luther* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1979), p. 188.

<sup>7</sup> William Cunningham writes that "the doctrine of the Church of Rome as to the bearing and influence of the sacraments in the justification of sinners ... is a very important feature of the Romish system of theology," before adding that "it has been called" "the doctrine of sacramental justification" (*Historical Theology* [London: Banner, 1969], vol. 2, p. 121).



preached and held, nothing can be evil; for by the antecedent: *Sola fides iustificat*, Only faith justifies; the Mass, purgatory, monastic vows, and all things fall.<sup>8</sup>

This leads us to a third issue: the church. Rome taught that the church is primarily institutional, that organization with the pope as its head which, it foolishly claims, can never apostatize. Luther came to understand that the true church is the body that believes the good news of God's saving righteousness in Jesus Christ alone. The Wittenberg theologian proclaimed that the church was recognized by two central marks: the preaching of the gospel of justification by faith alone, and the sacraments that signify and seal this gospel.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, Luther frequently and forcefully warned that a church's apostasy from the gospel of the righteousness of God is not only possible but, especially over a longer period of time, probable (cf. II Tim. 4:1-4), because of the radical sinfulness and deceitfulness of fallen man, who instinctively, wickedly and self-destructively seeks justification by works, as did the Jews (Rom. 9:30-10:5). His dire predictions have been fulfilled in most of Lutheranism, his native Germany and, indeed, much of Protestantism.

The alien righteousness of Christ alone graciously imputed to us only through faith is such an altogether spiritual and heavenly doctrine that it is the radical exposure, denial and repudiation of all of puny man's reason, wisdom, works and virtues. Dr. Luther explains, "Justification is hard to hold (*lubrica est*), not indeed in itself—for in itself it is most sure and certain—but so far as our relation to it is concerned."<sup>10</sup> Therefore, it is no wonder that

Luther admonishes his pupils in the introduction to a [1537] disputation: We cannot emphatically and often enough sharpen our thinking on this doctrine [of justification]. We must devote ourselves to it with the greatest theological diligence and seriousness. For neither reason nor Satan is so opposed to anything else as they are to this. No other article of faith is so threatened by the danger of false teaching.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Plass, *What Luther Says*, p. 718.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, pp. 289-293.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Plass, *What Luther Says*, p. 713.

<sup>11</sup> Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, pp. 224-225.



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Fourth, what about the papacy? As he grasped the ramifications of the righteousness of God, Luther came to realize that the pope was not ignorant of the “abuses” of indulgences, nor was he merely a badly advised leader. Rather, the Reformer proclaimed that the papacy is the Antichrist because it (and its hierarchy), worse than all the other false teachers and movements, most fiercely denied, hated and cursed the gospel of God’s free justification in Christ. The Wittenberg theologian declared,

One antichrist fights against the person of Christ, another against the humanity, a third against the divinity of Christ. These are antichrists in part, as are the enthusiasts (*Schwärmer*) [or Anabaptists]. Another is against the entire Christ, and he is the head of all, as is the papacy. For the head of Christian doctrine is that Christ is our Righteousness. He who attacks this article robs us of the entire Christ and is the true Antichrist, while the others offer him assistance.<sup>12</sup>

Rome was, and is, a false church, since it repudiated and repudiates the article of a standing or a falling church.<sup>13</sup> Salvation by man’s works, the “gospel” of Roman Catholicism, is essentially the same as that of Judaism and Islam.

If the article of justification is lost, all Christian doctrine is lost at the same time. And all the people in the world who do not hold to this justification are either Jews or Turks or papists or heretics; for there is no middle ground between these two righteousnesses: the active one of the Law and the passive one which comes from Christ. Therefore the man who strays from Christian righteousness must relapse into the active one, that is, since he has lost Christ, he must put his confidence in his own works.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Plass, *What Luther Says*, p. 30.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Muller explains that the Latin phrase *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*, “the article of the standing and falling of the church,” was “used by Luther and thereafter, especially by Lutheran theologians, to describe the doctrine of justification” (*Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*, p. 46). Similarly, McGrath writes, “by the beginning of the seventeenth century the *articulus iustificationis* appears to have been generally regarded as the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*, the ‘article by which the church stands or falls’” (*Iustitia Dei*, p. 208).

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Plass, *What Luther Says*, p. 703.

### 3. Significance for Reformation

The truth of God's saving righteousness was the platform for the Reformation. What a mighty doctrine for smashing the imposing, but false, Church of Rome, and building up the grand edifice of the Lord's true church!

Luther is right:

The article of justification is the master and prince, the lord, the ruler, and the judge over all kinds of doctrines; it preserves and governs all church doctrine and raises up our conscience before God. Without this article the world is utter death and darkness. No error is so mean, so clumsy, and so outworn as not to be supremely pleasing to human reason and to seduce us if we are without the knowledge and the contemplation of this article [of righteousness by faith alone].<sup>15</sup>

The significance of this cardinal article in God's Word and for the German Reformer is well stated by Paul Althaus:

The doctrine of justification is not simply one doctrine among others but—as Luther declares—the basic and chief article of faith with which the church stands or falls, and on which its entire doctrine depends. The doctrine of justification is “the summary of Christian doctrine,” “the sun which illuminates God's holy church.” It is the unique possession of Christianity and “distinguishes our religion from all others.” The doctrine of justification preserves the church. If we lose this doctrine, we also lose Christ and the church; for then no Christian understanding remains. What is at stake in this doctrine is the decisive question as to how man can continue to stand before God.<sup>16</sup>

The alien righteousness of Christ imputed by faith alone is the legal basis for God the Judge's declaration that we are innocent and just before Him. This leads to Christian liberty and the *simul iustus et peccator*: our state before God is that of righteousness yet our condition in this life is that of sinners.

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<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Plass, *What Luther Says*, p. 703.

<sup>16</sup> Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, p. 224.



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The truth of God's saving righteousness is profoundly paradoxical and deeply doxological.

All of this is further clarified by various distinctions arising from the Word of God. First, who justifies whom? Does God justify the believer or does the believer justify God or both? Second, of what sort of righteousness does a text of Scripture speak? Justifying righteousness or sanctifying righteousness? Third, who or what is justified? The believer or his works or both? Fourth, before whom is the believer justified? God or man or both?

The biblical and Reformation doctrine of God's saving righteousness involved a radically biblical view of the gospel and, hence, of theology. Justification by faith alone was rightly understood within the biblical and Augustinian framework of God's sovereign grace, and made central in the theological task.<sup>17</sup>

A. Skevington Wood is correct:

Luther coordinated theology in a creative fashion by seizing on the biblical fulcrum of justification by faith and using it to move the entire structure of belief into a new position. Whereas others have systematized the doctrines of the Word by arranging them in logical sequence with impressive cohesion, Luther did so by using a single though crucial article to interpret the whole.<sup>18</sup>

Along with justification's transformation of theology came the new ethic which flowed from it. In the very first paragraph of his fine treatise on Luther's ethics, Paul Althaus maintains, without exaggeration,

Luther's ethics is determined in its entirety, in its starting point and all its main features, by the heart and center of his theology, namely, by the justification of the sinner through the grace that is shown in Jesus Christ and received through faith alone. Justification by faith determines Christian ethics because, for the Christian, justification is both the presupposition and the source of the ethical life.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> In Luther's writings, God's sovereign grace is especially highlighted in his *Lectures on Romans* (1515-1516), *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518) and *The Bondage of the Will* (1525).

<sup>18</sup> Wood, *Captive to the Word*, pp. 42-43.

<sup>19</sup> Althaus, *The Ethics of Martin Luther*, p. 3.



The rediscovery of the gospel of justification by faith alone through grace alone in Christ alone to the glory of God alone according to Scripture alone, and the massive reorientation of theology and ethics that this caused, led to an outburst of new ecclesiastical confessions.<sup>20</sup> It also brought massive improvements in preaching and the theological training of ministers, as well as new understandings of the office of believer, work, marriage, the family and much more.<sup>21</sup>

*Post tenebras lux* (after darkness light)! With the rediscovery of justification by faith alone, a new age, so to speak, in the New Testament church dawned over 500 years ago. We are blessed to enjoy this light, to walk in this light and to spread this light. The gospel of God's saving righteousness or justification by faith alone is our personal comfort and our platform for reformation too!<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Responding to his opponents' mockery of justification by faith alone (*sola fide*), Luther declared, "Here we are perfectly willing to have ourselves called 'solafideists' by our opponents, who do not understand anything of Paul's argument [in Galatians and especially Galatians 2:16]" (*Luther's Works*, vol. 26: *Lectures on Galatians, 1535, Chapters 1-4*, p. 138).

<sup>21</sup> In his magisterial, seven-volume work on *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*, Hughes Oliphant Old rightly begins the fourth volume, which covers the Reformation age, with a lengthy section on Martin Luther (*The Age of the Reformation* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002]). Though he mentions justification by faith (without ever using the adjective "alone") a few times in his sections on Luther (pp. 3-43) and the other major sixteenth-century Reformers (pp. 1-3, 43-157), he fails to do justice to the radically different note of liberation that the gospel of God's saving righteousness brought to preaching, after many centuries of soul-destroying legalism.

<sup>22</sup> For a biblical, theological and creedal treatise on justification that covers its various aspects, stirs the soul, refutes the various heresies (especially those of Romanism, Arminianism, the New Perspective on Paul, the Federal Vision, and Evangelicals and Catholics Together), issues the call to reformation and is right up-to-date, see David J. Engelsma, *Gospel Truth of Justification: Proclaimed, Defended, Developed* (Jenison, MI: RFP, 2017).