

Is the Doctrine of Justification a Meta Doctrine in Lutheran Thinking?

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Introduction: Yes, No, or “Yes, but?”

Another paper on justification. It is tempting to echo what Martin Luther knew would likely be a common response: “this doctrine will quickly become nauseating to contemptuous souls.”¹ Even in Lutheran circles this doctrine can become “ho, hum,” if not nauseating.

Growing up on the Canadian prairies, I wasn’t able to learn everything I needed to know from kindergarten. My village school didn’t have such a luxury. Rather, everything I needed to know I learned from my parents. They taught me, for example, that apparently simple questions do not always get simple answers. When I would ask them for something – which I always thought was reasonable – they would answer with either a simple “Yes,” “No,” or a cryptic “Yes, but.” “Yes, we know your friends are allowed to stay out until midnight, but that doesn’t mean that you can.” Or, “Yes, you can play hockey, but only so long as you keep your grades up and pass all your piano lessons.”

I would like to approach the question before us by providing the same answers: “Yes,” “No,” and “Yes ... but.” Historically, for Luther, there is ample evidence to argue that the doctrine of justification is a meta-doctrine – the doctrine that functions like the hub of a wheel, related to all the other doctrines. This is the “yes” part of the sentence. The “but” part of the sentence, however, involves both theological caveats and actual praxis. It is the “but” part of the response that will form the major portion of my presentation.

The Original, Historical Yes

In his 1530 exposition of Psalm 117, Luther declares: ‘If this one teaching [on justification] stands in its purity, then Christendom will also remain pure and good, undivided and unseparated; for this alone, and nothing else, makes and maintains Christendom. Everything else may be brilliantly counterfeited by false Christians and hypocrites; but where this falls, it is impossible to ward off any error or sectarian spirit.’² Only a year later, in his *Warning to His Dear German People*, he reiterates this assertion about justification: “This doctrine, I say, they will not tolerate under any circumstances. We are able to forgo it just as little; for if this doctrine vanishes, the church vanishes. Then no error can any long be resisted.”³ “It is nothing to be trifled with.”⁴ In the same time period, Luther states: “...if this article stands, the Church stands; if it falls, the Church falls.”⁵ This claim is later condensed to the popular phrase, “justification is the article by which the church stands and falls.”⁶ In the Smalcald Articles, “this faith [that] alone justifies” is called “the first and chief article.”⁷ As Carl Braaten concludes, “Luther regarded the article of justification as not merely a single article among many others, but as the foundational truth with generative power affecting the entire organism of Christian faith, life and thought. The relative

¹ LW 34: 157 (“The Disputation Concerning Justification,” 153).

² LW 14:37. (“Exposition of Psalm 117,” 1530). Cf. Eberhard Jüngel, *Justification: The Heart of the Christian Faith. A Theological Study with an Ecumenical Perspective*, Jeffery F. Cayzer, trans. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001), 17.

³ LW 47:54. (“Warning to His Dear German People,” 1531). See also his great Galatians commentary, published in 1535: “for if the doctrine of justification is lost, the whole of doctrine is lost ... for if we lose the doctrine of justification, we lose simply everything” (LW 26:26).

⁴ LW 26:112 (Galatians Commentary, 1535).

⁵ In *XV Psalmos graduum* 1532-33; WA 40/III.352.3. Cf. Jüngel, *Justification*, 17.

⁶ Oswald Bayer claims that this formulation first appears in Valentin. E. Löscher, *Vollständiger Timotheus Verinus* (Wittenberg: Samuel Hannauem, 1718), Vol. I:342-3. Oswald Bayer, “Justification and Boundary of Theology,” *Lutheran Quarterly* XV no. 3 (Autumn, 2001) 273-292. n. 4, p. 288.

⁷ SA II.I.1-4.

importance of any Christian doctrine was determined by its proximity to this central article of faith. All doctrines, in fact, must somehow be corollaries of the vital principle of justification.”⁸ Philipp Melancthon also indicates in his *Apology* that the doctrine of justification is the overarching doctrine of the Christian faith. Justification, he says, is “the most important topic of Christian teaching which, rightly understood, illumines and magnifies the honor of Christ.”⁹

While the reformers themselves considered justification a meta-doctrine in Lutheran thinking, its elevated status among later Lutherans did not last. In the period of later Lutheran Orthodoxy, followed by Pietism, the Enlightenment, and liberal Protestantism, justification’s pre-eminence disappeared. Braaten credits Martin Kähler (1835-1912), as the one who led the retrieval of justification to the status originally afforded it by Luther.¹⁰ In the last century, Paul Tillich, Carl Bertram, Gerhard Forde, Eric Gritsch, Robert Jensen and Carl Braaten, to name a few in North American circles, have all made justification the core doctrine of their thinking.¹¹ The most well-known European scholars who have written recent works in English on this topic are Eberhard Jüngel and Oswald Bayer. All followed Luther’s emphasis on the centrality and importance of this doctrine, not just in terms of its content, but also as a hermeneutical principle.

The Theological “No”

Not all modern theologians agree with the pre-eminence that Lutheran theologians give to justification, however. Karl Barth, one of the strongest vocal opponents in the last century to any attempt to make justification a meta-doctrine. Barth was vehement in his support of the doctrine of justification, but he was unwilling to give it a special status above all other doctrines. As he states, “In the Church of Jesus Christ this doctrine has not always been *the* Word of the Gospel, and it would be an act of narrowing and unjust exclusiveness to proclaim and treat it as such.”¹² The “*articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae* is not the doctrine of justification as such, but [justification’s] basis and culmination: The confession of Jesus Christ, in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col 2:3).”¹³ The core” of Barth’s Christian faith is the confession of Christ, not the doctrine of justification.¹⁴

⁸ Carl E. Braaten, *Justification: The Article by Which the Church Stands or Falls* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 28.

⁹ Philip Melancthon, *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, IV.2. Not content to leave it there, Justus Jonas, in his German translation of the *Apology*, adds these words: “[justification] ... is especially useful for the clear, correct understanding of the entire Holy Scriptures, and alone shows the way to the unspeakable treasure and right knowledge of Christ, and alone opens the door to the entire Bible.” *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 121, n 49.

¹⁰ Braaten, *Justification*, 28. A few pages earlier, he writes, “the article of justification lost its commanding place in Lutheran theology because it gave way to a preoccupation with the subjective conditions required to motivate God’s decision to justify sinners. When regeneration is placed logically and causally prior to justification, the focus of interest shifts from God’s unmotivated decision to justify the ungodly to the restoration of their human capacity to apply themselves to grace, to repent and believe, and thereupon to be justified.” *Justification*, 22.

¹¹ Braaten names these first five, along with himself, as followers of Luther’s tradition in North America in his work, *Justification*, 15-17.

¹² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/I. Authorized translation by G. T. Thompson. (Edinburgh : T. & T. Clark, 1956), 523.

¹³ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/I, 527. As Bayer, *Justification*, 18-9, n.7, notes, this claim was repeated by Jürgen Moltmann, “Okumene unter dem Kreuz. Evangelische Sicht auf die katholische Kirche,” *Evangelische Kommentare* 31 (1998), 446-8, and E. Busch, “Ein Wort zur Versöhnung. Die Debatte um die Rechtfertigungslehre aus reformierter Sicht,” *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* No 199, 29/30 August 1998, 33.

¹⁴ Jüngel, *Justification*, 18-19. One might be sympathetic to Barth when one looks at the chart in Charles S. Anderson, *Faith and Freedom: The Christian Faith According to the Lutheran Confessions* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1977), 134, where the doctrine of justification takes centre stage, and the source of justification (Christ) is relegated to one of the “supporting players.” To separate the work of Christ (justification) from its source is to create an artificial dichotomy, however. The doctrine of justification is Christ revealed in action. One cannot separate Christ from justification, nor justification from Christ.

In one sense, it is hard to argue with Barth. Surely the one who justifies should receive more attention than a doctrine, even the doctrine of justification. Luther's *Smalcald Articles* of 1537 seem to point to Christ, as Barth does, as the heart of the matter. As Luther states, "Here is the first and chief article: That Jesus Christ, our God and our Lord, 'was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification' (Rom 4:[25])."¹⁵ Here it appears that Christ is the "chief doctrine" on which not just the church, but life itself is based. Yet Luther very quickly adds the clarifier: "for our justification."¹⁶ The Christological confession is important because of what this Christ does: justifies the sinner. This prevents Christology from being relegated to a historical knowledge about the Christ, and turns it into the "sword of the spirit" that flips everything upside down.

Part of the problem with Barth's formulation is that he is comparing apples to oranges. His "confession of Christ" is couched in relational, rather than doctrinal, terms. The confession that the "church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord," is a relational statement, relating the church to Christ. Justification is a doctrine, on the other hand, that names why this confession of Christ is essential *pro nobis*, for us. Moreover, the work of Christ cannot be separated from the person of Christ. As Melancthon puts it, "To know Christ is to know his benefits,"¹⁷ and his blessings.¹⁸ Braaten makes the same point: "When Barth says that not justification but the confession of Jesus Christ is the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*, we must respond with a question: What is the difference? After all, justification is not a free-floating ideal that conveys any particular meaning in itself. It derives its meaning from its relationship to the person and work of Christ." Braaten further claims that "The Christological concentration of justification makes [justification] the 'canon within the canon'."¹⁹ Justification lies at the heart of Christ's work.

In ecumenical circles, there is a resistance to making justification the canon within the canon of Christology, however. Many theologians are more comfortable stating that justification is not *the* central doctrine, but rather one of many important doctrines. This argument surfaces in the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*. In paragraph 18 it declares, "the doctrine of justification ... is more than just one part of Christian doctrine. It stands as *an* essential relation to all truths of faith, which are to be seen as internally related to each other."²⁰ This view of justification, moderated from Luther's position, is reiterated in the "Annex to the Official Common Statement:" "The doctrine of justification is that measure or touchstone for the Christian faith. No teaching may contradict this criterion. In this sense, the doctrine of justification is an 'indispensable criterion that constantly serves to orient all the teaching and practice of our churches to Christ' (JD 18)."²¹ An indispensable criterion, however, is different from an article by which the church stands and falls.

The argument found in the JDDJ strongly follows the approach proposed earlier by Hans Küng, who published his thoughtful reflection on Barth's view of justification one year after the Lutheran World Federation Assembly in Helsinki in 1963. That assembly failed to come to a common understanding of justification, even though it was riding on the wave of renewed ecumenical fervour due to the Vatican II council.²² According to Braaten, Küng argued, that "... the doctrine of justification is *not* the central dogma of Christianity. [it] is only one doctrine within the fullness of Catholic tradition, just one bead on a

¹⁵ SA II.1.1.

¹⁶ SA II.1.1.

¹⁷ Philip Melancthon "*Loci Communes Theologici* (1521)," *Melancthon and Bucer*, Wilhelm Pauck, ed. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1969), 21.

¹⁸ Ap IV.101.

¹⁹ Braaten, *Justification*, 77-8.

²⁰ The Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church, *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 16.

²¹ "Annex to the Official Common Statement," *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, 46-7.

²² Hans Küng, *Justification: The Doctrine of Karl Barth and a Catholic Reflection*. Translated by Thomas Collins, Edmund E. Tolk, and David Granskou (New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1964), 6-11. The record of the debacle debate over justification at the LWF Assembly in Helsinki is found in: *Proceedings of the Fourth Assembly of the LWF, 1963*, (Berlin: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1965).

string of doctrines clasped together by the unity of the church.”²³ Küng’s image of justification, as “one of the beads on a string of doctrines, held together by the unity of the church,” hints that the church is more of an essential doctrine than justification.

Increasing pressure – especially in the area of contextual and ecumenical theologies – has come to bear on the classic Lutheran preoccupation with justification. This “Lutheran addiction” is increasingly deemed politically, if not theologically, incorrect. Pressure is put on Lutheran theologians to adapt to a new reality. As Braaten notes, “The doctrine of justification seems to be eclipsed in most current academic trends in theology, including the various liberationist and feminist models of theology, as well as the theologies of process and theologies of religious pluralism. The cumulative impact of these theologies has relegated theologies normed by the article of justification to a relatively marginal existence.”²⁴ While marginalizing the chief Lutheran doctrine may open doors to more convergence over various theological themes in contextual and liberative theologies, such as economics, gender and racial injustices, and ecological issues, excluding justification from the conversation silences a critical voice that needs to be heard.

The same can be said for ecumenical dialogues. A common criticism heard from ecumenical partners is, “Why do you Lutherans spend so much time focusing on how people enter into a relationship with God? Why don’t you focus on other doctrines in theology? You’re way behind in your theology!” These critics have a point. Dialogue in the areas of ministry, sacraments, ecclesiology, sanctification, as well as economic, social, political, racial, gender, and ecological liberation theologies and practices would be much simpler if Lutherans were not fixated on the doctrine of justification.

Another critique of the doctrine of justification by contemporary theologies is that it operates by artificially creating a problem – such as sin – so that God can then provide a solution. Justification, it is claimed, is by its very nature an unnatural, “polemical” doctrine. As Jüngel notes, these critics claim that the doctrine of justification requires “an overly developed consciousness of sin and guilt, which it projects onto human beings.”²⁵ A polemical situation is thus created. Since the doctrine of justification makes a person a sinner, it operates out of polemical categories no longer meaningful to Europeans and North Americans. Yet Luther himself recognized this “artificial” polemic when he states: “The chief purpose of this letter [Romans] is to break down, pluck up, and to destroy all wisdom and righteousness of the flesh ... [and] to affirm and state and magnify sin.”²⁶ The doctrine of justification magnifies, rather than reduces, this polemic, simply because it reveals humanity standing before the God who is their creator, not a human creation.

The critique of justification as a polemic is found in some feminist theologies, where justification is predicated upon, as Saiving states, a particular definition of sin, namely,

the self’s attempt to overcome the anxiety [of survival] by magnifying its own power, righteousness, or knowledge. ... Sin is the unjustified concern of the self for its own power and prestige; it is the imperialistic drive to close the gap between the individual, separate self and other by reducing those others to the status of mere objects which can then be treated as appendages of the self and manipulated accordingly.²⁷

Saiving proposes that the opposite of sin is not righteousness, but love. She states that the male sin is one of “pride, will-to-power, exploitation, self-assertiveness, and the treatment of others as objects rather than persons,” while the female sin, or temptation, is one of “surrendering self-identity and being included in

²³ Carl E. Braaten, *Principles of Lutheran Theology*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 36-7.

²⁴ Carl E. Braaten, *Justification*, 10.

²⁵ Jüngel, *Justification*, 38.

²⁶ LW 25:135. (Romans Lectures, 1515-1516).

²⁷ Valerie Saiving, “The Human Situation,” p. 26, *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, edited by Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 25-42.

another's power of being."²⁸ The implications are that Luther's classical doctrine of justification addresses only male sin. A doctrine of justification that accounts for the sins of women would have to look differently for Saiving.

Ecumenical and contextual theologies question the central place Lutherans give justification, arguing that other doctrines, along with economic and political injustice, racism, and the care of creation, are obviously much more important theological issues. Yet what principle in these theologies acts to guard against an ecclesial triumphalism in which the human agenda is considered identical to the realm and purpose of God? What guards contextual theologies internally from displacing God with their focus on human responsibilities?²⁹

At times, it must be admitted, Lutherans dismiss too quickly the cries of injustice, under the pretense that they are not as important as one's relationship to God. Such dismissals, however, forget the intimate connection between justice and justification, and the hermeneutical nature of the doctrine of justification.³⁰ For Lutherans, justification is not just a doctrine; it is, at the same time, that which provides the framework by which all doctrines are viewed. As Müller and Pfnür put it, nearly 25 years ago, "... we are not dealing with one theological doctrine out of many, but with the basic aspect of theology and religion on which all the various doctrines depend."³¹ If theologians put aside the doctrine of justification, they give up one of the most valuable critical tools at their disposal. Justification probes and explores human motives and all attempts at self-justification or self-aggrandizement that consistently creep into human agendas for building God's realm.

Theological "Yes ... but" Caveats

While in Lutheran circles the doctrine of justification is "the first and chief article," there are some caveats. However, yes, justification is *the* meta-doctrine in Lutheran thinking, but it ceases to be so when justification becomes "unhooked" from certain other important components.³² Justification is not a "stand alone" doctrine; it is an interrelated dynamic in theological formulations. At least five interconnections involving justification must be maintained for the doctrine of justification to operate as it is intended: (1) the connection between justification and the Word, (2) justification and sanctification, (3) justification and faith, (4) justification and ecclesiology, and (5) the doctrine of justification and the hermeneutic of justification.

1. Justification is the "first and chief article," but not when it becomes separated from God's creative and creating Word.

²⁸ Saiving, "The Human Situation," 35-6.

²⁹ As Braaten argues, "The liberation ideologies of our time need to be challenged by the Protestant principle. The principle is the guardian against the attempts of the finite and the conditioned to usurp the place of the unconditional in thinking and acting. It is the prophetic judgment against religious pride, ecclesiastical triumphalism, as well as secular self-sufficiency and their demonic consequences. The Protestant principle functions to warn us against expecting to see the Kingdom of God in its fullness in history. It tells us that the human situation is profoundly distorted, rooted in original sin. Original sin is a cleavage in human nature which cannot be overcome by any kind of human liberation praxis." Braaten, *Justification*, 54.

³⁰ For the connection between justice and justification, see Michael Haspel, "Justification and Justice," *The Doctrine of Justification: Its Reception and Meaning Today* LWF Studies 2003, Karen L. Bloomquist and Wolfgang Greive, eds. (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 2003), 171-186.

³¹ Gerhard Müller and Vinzenz Pfnür, "Justification-Faith-Works" *Confession One Faith: A Joint Commentary on the Augsburg Confession by Lutheran and Catholic Theologians*. George W. Forell and James F. McCue, eds. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1982), 118.

³² The first two damaging separations were noted in an Anglican report to the Archbishop of Canterbury fifty some years ago. This report claims that the two radical errors that Luther made were to disassociate justification from the doctrine of creation, and to disassociate justification from sanctification. *Catholicity: A Study in the Conflict of Christian Traditions in the West being a Report to His Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury* (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1947, reprint 1952), 25.

For Luther, the proclaimed word is simultaneously the living word (*vox vivendi*) and the creating and creative word of God. God's proclamation brought creation to life (*ex nihilo*), and this spoken word sustains life. God's proclaimed word is not restricted to a one-time event, but is a word which creates new life in relationships and defines the very boundaries and parameters of those relationships. God's unilateral declaration, "You are forgiven," when spoken to the one at enmity with God, simultaneously justifies the sinner and creates a new reality for that person. As Oswald Bayer notes, "The passive righteousness of faith takes place only in virtue of the Word (*solo verbo*)."³³ God's creative word not only creates and announces the new reality of the person in the presence of God (*coram Deo*), but continues to create and preserve life in every moment.

When justification is understood only in a narrow, forensic way, then the creating Word of God is severely misrepresented. God's proclaimed Word that declares a person righteous cannot be separated from God's creative Word that makes one righteous. God's Word declaring a forensic justification effects a new creation in a person. To reject this is to put boundaries on the unilateral proclamation of God.

In Luther's explanation to the first article of the creed in the *Small Catechism*, he intimately connects creation and justification:

I believe that God has created me together with all that exists. God has given me and still preserves my body and soul: eyes, ears, and all limbs and senses; reason and all mental faculties. In addition, God daily and abundantly provides shoes and clothing, food and drink, house and farm, spouse and children, fields, livestock, and all property—along with all the necessities and nourishment for this body and life. God protects me against all danger and shields and preserves me from all evil. And all this is done out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all! For all of this I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him. This is most certainly true.³⁴

Bernhard Lohse's comments on this article are interesting: "The uniqueness of Luther's exposition of the article on creation consists first in its existential reference, then in its inclusion in justification."³⁵ Two obvious connections exist in this passage between justification and creation. First, God alone is the initiator and creator of all that creates, justifies, and sustains life. Second, Luther emphasizes that "all this is done out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all!"³⁶ God's act of creation and creating, and God's act of justification and justifying are completely in God's hands. Bayer takes the position that Luther sees "God's activity in creating us is the giving of life, intertwined with the life of the world, as sheer gift. ... the generosity of God's creative activity is akin to God's generosity in his saving activity. Insofar as both creation and salvation are gifts, they are similar with respect to God's agency in the world."³⁷ Thus, in his explanation to the first article, Luther names the forensic aspect of the doctrine of justification; "without any merit or worthiness of mine at all," and his hermeneutical principle, which could be summed up in four little words: "God alone is righteous."³⁸

³³ Oswald Bayer, *Living by Faith: Justification and Sanctification*, Lutheran Quarterly Books, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), 42. Mattes notes this emphasis in Bayer, and comments: "Especially at stake for Bayer is the gospel as *promissio*, a speech act that delivers forgiveness of sins, life and salvation, and that is not to be transformed into an ethical directive, a metaphysical description, or a meta-experience. It is a word of address that changes not only the reality of the addressee but also the entire web of interrelations which sustains that addressee and which is sustained by that addressee." Mark C. Mattes, *The Role of Justification in Contemporary Theology*, Lutheran Quarterly Books (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 156-7.

³⁴ SC II.2.

³⁵ Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, Translated and edited by Roy A. Harrisville, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), 241.

³⁶ Bayer notes the same thing in his article, "Justification as the Basis and Boundary of Theology," *Lutheran Quarterly* XV, no 3 (Autumn, 2001), 274-5.

³⁷ Mattes, *The Role of Justification*, 160.

³⁸ *Luthers Vorreden zur Bibel*, 60; WADB 10/I:4,17. Bayer claims this is also, for Luther, the basis and conclusion of the book of Job, and "Luther's final word in *The Bondage of the Will*." Bayer, *Living by Faith*, 79.

The Smalcald Articles reiterate Luther's deliberate connection between justification and creation. Bayer notes: "When Luther writes about justification in the Smalcald Articles, he makes use of a different context: the context of the doctrine of creation: 'Nothing in this article can be given up or compromised, unless heaven and earth and things temporal should be destroyed (SA II.1.5).'"³⁹ Clearly, Luther keeps justification and the creating Word together. God is the only righteous one, and the only one who can create life and justify sinners.

2. The Doctrine of Justification ceases to be a meta-doctrine when it is isolated from sanctification.

When justification is separated from Luther's theology of the Word, forensic justification becomes isolated from – rather than correctly distinguished from – sanctification. Part of the reaction to the JDDJ comes from a Lutheran concern that justification and sanctification are not clearly distinguished, and this ambiguity allows human contributions to "sneak in the back door" of justification. Lindberg claims that when justification and sanctification are separated, faith is reduced to morality.⁴⁰ However, when sanctification is rightly perceived as the ongoing, creative and justifying activity of God's Word that makes people holy even though they continue to sin, then a self-justified sanctification cannot arise. Sanctification is God's ongoing activity proclaimed and first realized in forensic justification.

The care with which justification and sanctification are to be distinguished is clearly noted in the *Solid Declaration* of the *Formula of Concord*. Here the distinction is made between forensic justification (reckoned righteousness, or imputed righteousness), and effective justification (righteousness of new obedience, or inchoate righteousness).⁴¹ The rationale for this vital distinction is clear:

...these two kinds of righteousness dare not be mixed with each other or simultaneously introduced into the article on justification by faith before God. Because this righteousness that is begun in us – this renewal – is imperfect and impure in this life because of our flesh, a person cannot use it in any way to stand before God's judgment throne. Instead, only the righteousness of the obedience, suffering, and death of Christ, which is reckoned to faith, can stand before God's tribunal.⁴²

Because of various events that had happened in the Lutheran church in the quarter century after Luther died, the framers of the *Solid Declaration* wanted to insure that justification was not in any way contingent upon human works. While Luther insisted upon justification as totally God's act, he did not make the distinction found in the *Solid Declaration*. As Bayer notes, "For Luther the customary alternative of 'forensic' or 'effective' is no alternative at all. The forensic is effective, the effective forensic. That is his answer to the much-debated question. What God says, God does. The reverse is also true. What God does, God says; his doing is not ambiguous. God's work is God's speech."⁴³

It is important to not uncritically combine forensic and effective righteousness. While they must be clearly distinguished, at the same time, they must not be isolated from each other, for that would curtail the creative Word. Jüngel puts it succinctly:

This forensic act *is* the effective act of making the ungodly righteous. ... is not something that differs from *imputed* righteousness; it neither precedes nor follows it. The *imputation of extraneous righteousness (imputation alienate iustitiae)* can only be rightly grasped when it is seen as God *granting* divine righteousness in such a way as to *effectively change* the *being* of humans. If sinners

³⁹ Bayer, "Justification as Basis and Boundary of Theology," 274.

⁴⁰ Carter Lindberg, "Do Lutherans Shout Justification But Whisper Sanctification?" *Lutheran Quarterly* XIII, no. 1 (Spring, 1999), 1-19; 7. Earlier, he states that "But insofar as sanctification is a legitimate theological locus for Luther, it cannot be separated from justification. We have difficulty grasping this point not just because, as Luther said, we are all born Pelagians or because our thinking and speaking is sequential, but also because our Enlightenment mentality is dominated by an ideology of progress." "(Do Lutherans Shout Justification?" 1).

⁴¹ FC-SD III.32.

⁴² FC-SD III.32.

⁴³ Bayer, *Living by Faith*, 43. Mattes claims that: "For Jüngel, forensic and effective forms of justification are not to be separated." Mattes, *The Role of Justification*, 47.

are pronounced righteous by God's judging Word – which is also pre-eminently creative in its judging power – and thus *recognized* by God as being righteous, they *are* righteous. Here we must again remind ourselves that *the Word alone* can in this way do both things at once: a *judgement* and a *creative Word* – a *pardon* and a *Word which sets us free*.⁴⁴

3. Justification ceases to be a meta-doctrine when justification is separated from faith.

When justification is placed in the wrong spot in the *ordo salutis*, it becomes separated from faith.⁴⁵ Just so, Lutheran orthodoxy separated justification from faith.⁴⁶ In this period, faith, which brings about a change in a person, was held to be essential prior to God's act of justification. Braaten argues: "The priority of regeneration over justification removes the article of justification by faith alone from the centre to a marginal role in the doctrine of salvation."⁴⁷ God's declaration of the forgiveness of sins (*remissio peccatorum*), in this system, is granted to those already regenerated by a prevenient (or infused) grace. Consequently, "One must become something other than what one was before God will forgive. The inner subjective change becomes the cause, and justification becomes the effect, rather than vice versa."⁴⁸ When this happens, justification becomes a step in a human process rather than the saving announcement of God's redeeming Word.

4. Justification cannot be a meta-doctrine when separated from ecclesiology

Scott Hendrix posits that there is a danger in making too sharp of a distinction between ecclesiology and justification.⁴⁹ This problem occurs when justification is represented only in individualistic terms. Undeniably, Luther was concerned about the justification of the sinner, but he also held that this sinner lives in community, in relationship with God, with others, and with all creation. Justification affects community. Furthermore, justice is always the community "effect" of justification. Bayer notes that "When Luther speaks of 'sanctification,' he is emphasizing in particular the *institutional* aspect of the

⁴⁴ Jüngel, *Justification*, 211. Braaten argues much the same: Justification is not only forensically imputative but effective, bringing about real transformation through participation in the new being that has appeared in Christ in the power of the Spirit. Of course, this effective justification that brings about real change must never be separated from its basis in the objective act of divine acceptance, which can never be motivated from the human side. Otherwise, we run the risk of works-righteousness and with that lose the good news of God's acceptance of sinners and doubters in spite of their unacceptableness. Braaten, *Justification*, 50.

⁴⁵ Braaten, *Justification*, 32. The *ordo salutis*, according to Calov, was: *vocatio, illuminatio, regeneratio, conversio*, and only then, *iustificatio*.

⁴⁶ "The first step in the process of relegating the material principle to a subordinate place (*locus*) was the rending asunder of what had been indissolubly united in the Reformation, namely, faith and the Word of God, or in other words, the formal principle (*sola scriptura*) and the material principle (*sola fide*) of Reformation Theology." Braaten, *Justification*, 29.

⁴⁷ Braaten, *Justification*, 22. He also states, "the article of justification lost its commanding place in Lutheran theology because it gave way to a preoccupation with the subjective conditions required to motivate God's decision to justify sinners. When regeneration is placed logically and causally prior to justification, the focus of interest shifts from God's unmotivated decision to justify the ungodly to the restoration of their human capacity to apply themselves to grace, to repent and believe, and thereupon to be justified." This problem with Lutheran orthodoxy's order of salvation, mirrors that of Thomistic theology, and contemporary conservative fundamentalism. Braaten, *Justification*, 35-6.

⁴⁸ Braaten, *Justification*, 35-6. The problem of Lutheran pietism, on the other hand, was that "in the experience of repentance and faith, justification became one aspect of the way of salvation, along with regeneration and the pursuit of holiness." Braaten, *Justification*, 12.

⁴⁹ "... in the life of the church too sharp a distinction between justification and ecclesiology can result in distortions. If the *individual* believer is first justified and on that basis incorporated into the church, then the community reality of Christianity may be subordinated to the personal religious experience of its adherents. If, however, the church is first called into being as a *community* of faith, then the personal piety and beliefs of individuals may be dismissed as aberrations from the communal norm. In both cases, one in which individual believers have too much voice and the other in which they have too little, the church suffers from an unhealthy balance." Scott Hendrix, "Open Community: The Ecclesial Reality of Justification," *By Faith Alone: Essays on Justification in Honor of Gerhard O. Forde*, Joseph A. Burgess and Marc Kolden, eds. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 235-47; 236.

event of justification.”⁵⁰ Not only does justification affect the community, the effects of justification set people free to be in the world and in all creation. Hendrix further states: “Justification and ecclesiology articulate the same reality from different angles and explore complementary dimensions of the one new life in Christ. ... to be justified is to belong to the body of Christ.”⁵¹ Luther makes this same point: “God’s Word cannot be without God’s people, and conversely, God’s people cannot be without God’s Word.”⁵² The creative, justifying Word of life is always spoken by God to a people at enmity with God. This reiterates the inseparability of justification from ecclesiology, as Hendrix rightly notes: “For [Luther] justification and ecclesiology were linked not by the effects of justification (good works as love that obeys the commandments), but through the means of justification, i.e., through teaching the gospel and offering the sacraments.”⁵³ The seriousness of the separation between justification and ecclesiology can be seen in the way that such a separation renders the church vulnerable to schisms based on personal pieties and moralities.⁵⁴

5. Justification ceases to be the first and chief article when its hermeneutic is separated from the doctrine. To describe the hermeneutical function of the doctrine of justification, Paul Tillich coined the phrase, “The Protestant principle.” Simply put, “[T]he important thing about justification is not merely its doctrinal content, but its critical function in determining the framework of theological thinking.”⁵⁵ A part of this critical function is to reveal all human attempts to play the role of God. Luther notes this unmasking function of the hermeneutic of justification well in his 1530 letter to Spalatin. Luther asks Spalatin to encourage Melancthon, who was filled with adrenaline from his successful presentation of the *Augsburg Confession* to the emperor. His advice to Melancthon was to “... fight that innate ambition to be like God, which was planted in us in paradise by the devil. This [ambition] doesn’t do us any good. ... In summary: We are to be human, and not God.”⁵⁶ Luther thus exposes the original sin in paradise: the human attempt to “be like God.” The hermeneutic of justification flushes out all attempts to be gods in God’s place while the doctrine of justification reveals that God alone justifies a person and forgives sin.⁵⁷ As a hermeneutical principle, justification refuses any human contributions, even if in some small way, to those things that are the sole prerogative of God. Here, the doctrine of justification closely parallels the hermeneutic of Luther’s theology of the cross.⁵⁸ Life and salvation are totally contingent upon God’s actions. Justification lays the sword to any attempts, no matter how well-meaning, to make it one doctrine among many, because then it becomes a doctrine controllable by humans rather than God. Justification is, and must remain in its totality, a theocentric activity. To turn a phrase from

⁵⁰ Oswald Bayer, *Aus Glauben Leben: Über Rechtfertigung und Heiligung*, 2nd rev. ed. (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1990), 65-6. Italics added.

⁵¹ Hendrix, “Open Community: the Ecclesial Reality of Justification,” 237. He also states, “... both justification and the church are best understood not as separate theological loci, but as different facets of the one new reality that embraces Christians because they believe that Jesus of Nazareth inaugurated the kingdom of God” 237. Hendrix notes that Robert Jenson makes a similar point in *Unbaptized God: The Basic Flaw in Ecumenical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 96-7.

⁵² LW 41:150 (“On the Councils and the Church,” 1539).

⁵³ Hendrix, “Open Community: the Ecclesial Reality of Justification,” 244.

⁵⁴ “... where justification and ecclesiology are not linked in this way, name, through word and sacrament, then the baptized community is more vulnerable to a schism based on the moral evaluation of individual believers.” Hendrix, “Open Community: the Ecclesial Reality of Justification,” 246.

⁵⁵ Braaten, *Justification*, 73. Tillich defines the principle as: “... the critical and dynamic source of all Protestant realizations, but it is not identical with any of them. ... the Protestant principle is the judge of every religious and cultural reality, including the religion and culture which calls itself ‘Protestant’.” Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, James Luther Adams, trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 163.

⁵⁶ LW 49:337 (June 30, 1530 Letter to Spalatin).

⁵⁷ Luther also deals with this in his explanation to the first commandment in the Large Catechism. LC, I.1-48.

⁵⁸ This is especially clear in Luther’s 1518 treatise, *Heidelberg Disputation*, where he insists that there is no cooperation possible between God and humans in terms of salvation, whether it be good works or the human will. Thesis 25 hammers home this point (LW 31:39-70). See also Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1997). In the preface, Forde notes, “God and his Christ, Luther will be concerned to point out, are the *operators* in the matter, not the ones operated upon (Thesis 27, Heidelberg Disputation). Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, xiii-ix.

Paul, the hermeneutical principle of justification insures that “nothing in all creation” (Rom 8:39) displaces the role of God in justifying sinners.

Justification as a meta-doctrine in theory but not in Actual Praxis

While Lutherans may claim that from a theological perspective justification is the chief and first article, actual Lutheran practices tell a different story. A recent Aid Association for Lutherans survey, conducted by the Barna Research Group, revealed that in response to the proposition that a person cannot earn a place in heaven, only 31% of Lutherans responded affirmatively. Hence, 69% of Lutherans in the United States do not see the doctrine of justification as a “meta-doctrine.” As Daniel Gard notes, “Pelagius would be pleased.”⁵⁹ Church leaders have lots of work to do!

Since taking up a teaching position at a Lutheran seminary, I have had opportunity to visit various Lutheran congregations in both United States and Canada. I have noted, to my dismay, that more often than not, the emphasis in the sermon is either on the need to “return” to morality, or to “fight for justice,” in order to “be” Christian. Have the pressures of contemporary theologies and the desire for ecumenical acceptance caused Lutheran leaders to mistrust the efficaciousness of the doctrine of justification? It appears that both the theologians of contemporary pietism and liberal theology have settled into the armchair of self-justification, while the doctrine and hermeneutic of justification is placed on the top shelf of an inaccessible bookshelf.

How can we explain our current Lutheran *laissez-faire* attitude toward justification? Is justification passé for an affluent society where technology gives the illusion that we control our own destinies?⁶⁰ Is justification needed anymore in a world of high tech progress? North Americans already see themselves as “free,” in most areas of their lives, so applying a whole construct of justification feels artificial to people who think they are in charge of their destiny.⁶¹ Or, is the apparently “passé” doctrine of justification criticized because it addresses a question that no one is asking? As Braaten puts it, “some critics have argued that the message of justification does not meet the existential questions of contemporary life, that Luther’s struggles of conscience are no longer ours today.”⁶² More than forty years ago, at the LWF assembly in Helsinki, it was argued that the main question in modern society is not, “How can I find a gracious God?”⁶³ as Luther asked, but instead the main question involves asking “about God in general, or how can I find meaning in life?”⁶⁴ Tillich echoes the same question.⁶⁵ Yet Tillich clearly makes justification the “Protestant principle” in his work, placing “everything under the critical light of the judgment and grace of God, making every element in its relativity point to the absolute, the God who justifies by grace alone through faith alone on account of Christ alone.”⁶⁶ At the heart of the hermeneutic of justification is the reality, which humans do not want to admit, that humans are in a power struggle with God. This fight is taking place between self-justification and justification by God’s grace through faith alone. All attempts to paint the issues in different lights cannot hide this basic conflict.

⁵⁹ Daniel L. Gard, “Saint Augustine and Pelagianism,” 2001: *A Justification Odyssey: Papers presented at the Congress on the Lutheran Confessions, Bloomington, Illinois, April 19-21, 2001*. John A. Maxfield, ed. Association of Confessional Lutherans, National Free Conference No. 12, and Luther Academy, Lecture Series No. 8. (St. Louis: The Luther Academy, 2002), 1-18; 15.

⁶⁰ See here the work of Douglas John Hall, such as *Lighten our Darkness: Toward an Indigenous Theology of the Cross* Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976).

⁶¹ Jüngel, *Justification*, 43; Cf. Mark C. Mattes, *The Role of Justification in Contemporary Theology*. Lutheran Quarterly Books (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 167-8.

⁶² Braaten, *Justification*, 42.

⁶³ WA 37:661.22-4. (*Von der heiligen Taufe Predigten*, 1534).

⁶⁴ *Proceedings of the Fourth Assembly of the LWF, 1963*, 57ff. Cf. Jüngel, *Justification*, 38; Braaten, *Principles*, 38-9.

⁶⁵ “Paul’s question, How do I become liberated from the law? and Luther’s question, How do I find a merciful God? are replaced in our period by the question, How do I find meaning in a meaningless world?” Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Volume 3 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), 227.

⁶⁶ Braaten, *Justification*, 43.

How does my approach to the doctrine of justification influence my approach to my discipline?

This is the second question posed for my reflection. Constantly I am examining and re-examining all my courses and lectures from the perspective of the doctrine of justification. I am often dismayed at how easy one slips out of a justification perspective. Nevertheless, my courses are deliberate attempts to operate from the hermeneutic of justification. “It cannot be otherwise,” to borrow a phrase from Luther.⁶⁷ The attempt to function this way, however, whether it is in my own classes or sermons, or even committee involvements, reveals our basic human desire to self-justify. I want to justify myself before my peers, in the academy, before my students, in my family, and in the community. For me, however, this desire which I note serves only to further reinforce the idea that the doctrine of justification is not just the article by which the church stands and falls. Justification, free and God given, is also the reality by which my life stands and falls, the reality which shapes and defines my being in a community.

Conclusion

As does no other “doctrine,” the doctrine of justification insists upon human accountability in life lived in this world. We are accountable, *coram deo* and *coram mundi*. As accountable beings, we are freed to live justly with others and with God. Apart from being held accountable by our justifying, freeing God, we too easily become involved in our projects of self-justification. Any attempt to turn the “faith passed on to us” into a system of morality, any attempts to negate or downplay our relationship to others or to God, is an attempt to take God’s role for ourselves and to thus remove our accountability to God and the Gospel.⁶⁸

The doctrine of justification encompasses the multitudes of paradoxes faced by humans and offers coherence in the face of life or death, good or evil, self or others, selfishness or altruism, sin or faith, creation or Creator, and so on. Bayer puts it well: “For we cannot conceive of a view of the world that lies outside theology and the justification dispute. Outside theology, outside belief and unbelief, outside the Word that creates faith, there is no world.”⁶⁹ In this sense, justification is indeed, theologically and functionally, the meta doctrine of Lutheran thinking, the inseparable *sine qua non* of our freedoms and callings before God.

⁶⁷ LW 49:337 (June 30, 1530 Letter to Spalatin).

⁶⁸ Jüngel states, “the fact that people *must* justify themselves, that they can be *compelled* to do so, points to a further basic human requirement: to be human means *the necessity of being accountable*. ... As beings who are relational in every aspect, human beings exist *in a state of accountability* to others.” Jüngel, *Justification*, 7.

⁶⁹ Bayer, *Living By Faith*, 28.