THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION IN LUTHER

IT would be little exaggeration to say that in the doctrine of justification we have the key to all the thought of Luther and to the successful work of reformation which he accomplished. Prior to Luther there had been many critics of the traditional formulations of the church, sometimes at crucial points. But none of these reformers had initiated a full-scale movement of revolt because none of them had attacked the existing system at a point which was not merely crucial but decisive. It was the genius of Luther to seize upon the pivotal theme, the doctrine of justification, and in so doing he started a movement of which he himself can hardly at first have perceived all the implications but which was destined radically to alter the whole life and teaching of the western church.

The story of Luther's approach to the evangelical doctrine of justification has often been told, but it is vital to an understanding of Luther's position and may be briefly recapitulated. For the most part it is the story of a religious rather than a purely academic development. In the Augustinian convent at Erfurt Luther was instructed in the teaching and practice of Scholasticism, especially in its later nominalist form.[1] His monastic effort was directed primarily towards the attaining of that perfect *contritio* which was essential if there was to be the knowledge of forgiveness.[2] To that end he devoted himself almost fanatically to the monastic works which according to nominalist teaching God had freely chosen to accept as meritorious and therefore deserving of grace.[3] Side by side with these austerities he made diligent use of the sacramental observances of penance and holy communion from which he hoped to receive the promised gifts of infilling and cleansing.[4]

For Luther, however, the way of legal and sacramental righteousness was a way of despair, and as such it had at least the negative value of revealing the impossibility of justification by human effort. But even at Erfurt there were more constructive influences at work, the chief of these being the counsel of

[1] Cf. R. Seeberg, *Die Lehre Luthers*, pp. 63 f., 74 f.; also K. Holl, *Gesammelte Aufsätze, Luther*, p. 49.

[2] *Werke, Weimarer Ausgabe* (W), xl. 2, p. 412.

[3] Seeberg, op. cit., p. 63.

[4] Ibid., p. 64.

Luther's friend and superior, Staupitz, who taught him the first great lessons that true *contritio* consists in love to God, and that it is not the result of human striving but of the divine movement towards man in Jesus Christ.[1] At this time too Luther realized that not " penance " but " penitence " or " repentance " is the true meaning behind the Latin word *poenitentia.*[2] Instructed from Scripture and much helped by Staupitz and the writings of Augustine[3] he gradually attained to inner tranquillity by way of faith in the redemptive grace and work of God.

It is fairly certain that Luther experienced the truth of justification by faith before he worked out the doctrinal implications, but possibly by 1509, certainly not later than 1513,[4] he had won through to that interpretation of God's righteousness which made possible the dogmatic formulation. In his earlier years Luther always thought of that righteousness in terms of the personal attribute, the quality of righteousness in virtue of which God issued the Law and judges the world, the divine *iustitia activa.*[5] But now he saw that in the New Testament the righteousness of God is primarily that righteousness which God gives or imputes to man, the divine *iustitia passiva.* The discovery was not perhaps entirely original to Luther, for as many commentators have pointed out, the later Nominalists did at least speak of a negative righteousness in man by the non-imputation of original sin,[6] and it may be that this provided the starting-point for Luther's reinterpretation. But his earlier conception of God's righteousness was certainly dominated by the normal scholastic understanding which derived from Aristotle,[7] and when the true scriptural sense of the word did come to him it came with all the force of a revelation. For to Luther it had far more than academic significance. It gave him the clue which enabled him to interpret his inward experience in terms of an evangelical rather than a scholastic understanding of justification.

[1] W. i, pp. 525 f. [2] Loc. cit.

[3] Especially *De spiritu et littera.*

[4] W. liv, pp. 179 f.; iii, pp. 31, 42 f.; *Tischreden,* ii, p. 177. Since the tower incident was in Wittenberg it must have been during 1508–9 or 1512–13, most likely the latter.

[5] Cf. W. xl. 1, pp. 407, 410.

[6] Seeberg, op. cit., pp. 112–13.

[7] Note Luther's violent hostility to Aristotle, e.g. W. ix, pp. 27, 43.

A further important point is that Luther had also begun to see that faith was something quite different from what he had learned in his scholastic reading. Faith in its biblical sense was much more than the acceptance of historical information or an intellectual assent to doctrines.[1] It was a work of the Holy Spirit whereby Christ was received with all His gifts.[2] It was a movement of the whole soul, and as such it involved a new creation. Basically, it was still a matter of the intellect, but even intellectually it meant assent and committal not merely to abstract truths but to truth *in concreto*, that is, to Christ Himself.[3] And that intellectual committal did not exhaust faith, for faith was trust (*fiducia*) as well as belief (*fides*).[4] And trust meant a simple clinging to the divine promises of grace: an act of the will and the emotions just as much as the intellect. Both as belief and also as trust faith carried with it assurance, an assurance based not so much upon the consciousness of faith itself, although this consciousness was necessarily present in experience, but upon the grace and power of God revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ and testified in Scripture.[5] It may be noted that the close associating of *fides* and *fiducia* was not entirely new, for mediaeval thinkers had also brought the two into conjunction.[6] What was new in Luther's conception was the characterization of faith as receptivity and the relating of this receptive faith to the concrete revelation of grace in Jesus Christ. Again, Luther had a new insight into the comprehensive character of faith as something which affects the whole nature and life of the one who possesses it. Thus faith formed one of the links which connect the knowledge of forgiveness with the new life of righteousness.

By the year 1513, when Luther gave his first lectures on the Psalms, the main elements in his doctrine of justification were already to hand. Negatively, he had a vivid consciousness of the universality and radicalness of sin and the impossibility of attaining to righteousness by human effort or merit. Positively, he saw clearly that from first to last salvation is a gift of the grace of God, a gift actualized in the atoning work of Christ, applied individually by the Holy Spirit and appropriated by faith. In the light of these basic factors we may now attempt a

[1] W. xl. 1, p. 243.
[2] W. ii, p. 458; viii, p. 35.
[3] W. xl. 1, pp. 243, 447, 460.
[4] W. iii, p. 56; xlii, p. 564.
[5] Cf. W. xliii, p. 511.
[6] Seeberg, op. cit., pp. 233 f.

characterization of the doctrine of justification as Luther himself presented it both in his earlier and later teaching.

But first, it is necessary to speak a word of caution. Traditionally, the distinction between Luther's conception of justification and that of mediaeval and Tridentine theology is supposed to consist in this: that Luther defined justification simply as a declaration of righteousness, whereas the mediaevals and Tridentines thought of it as an actual attainment of righteousness. And most of the controversies concerning Luther's teaching have centred upon this vital matter of exegesis. But a strict examination of Luther's own writings does not seem to support the view that he consistently interpreted the term justification as a " reckoning or declaring righteous ",[1] or that he envisaged the distinction between himself and his opponents simply as a distinction between the divine " declaring righteous " on the one hand (followed no doubt by an actual attainment of righteousness), and the divine-human process of " making righteous " on the other.

It is quite true, of course, that Luther did emphatically speak of justification as a " declaring righteous " and that in his later writings especially he laid very great stress upon this aspect of the matter. For because Jesus Christ bore our sins on the Cross we do know by faith that they are not imputed to us.[2] And because Jesus Christ is righteous, and fulfilled the Law of righteousness in His life upon earth, we know too by faith that the perfect righteousness of Christ is imputed to us.[3] Indeed, it is because salvation is grounded upon this twofold work of Christ that a true assurance is possible. The sinner is already reckoned righteous in Christ, and he knows that he is righteous because God has reckoned him righteous. To that extent justification is in truth an " accounting righteous " on the sole merits of the atoning work of Christ.

But Luther himself did not stop there, for he saw that the righteousness which is God's gift is one and indivisible.[4] Formally, no doubt, it is quite possible to separate between the divine declaration of righteousness and the subsequent development of actual salvation. But in experience the distinction is

[1] *Römerbrief*, ii, p. 95; W. iv, p. 364; xx. p. 627; and cf. M. Rade, *Luthers Rechtfertigungsglaube*, pp. 8–9.

[2] W. xliv, p. 468.

[3] *Werke, Erlanger Ausgabe* (E) vii, p. 177; ii, p. 495.

[4] W. xxx. 2, p. 659: *una iustitia simplex, fidei et operum.*

non-existent and impossible, and Luther made little attempt to draw it. As he saw it, the divine gift of righteousness is at one and the same time both justification and regeneration,[1] and the one term justification may quite well be used to cover what are essentially two aspects of the one thing. The justified man is the man who by grace is accounted righteous. But the justified man is also the man who by the same grace is regenerated and being made righteous. Indeed, on one occasion Luther can even speak in a loose way of being justified on account of faith: not meaning that faith is a ground or merit, but that the presence of faith indicates and involves the inward presence of the righteousness of Christ.[2] In other words, Luther makes no final distinction between justification and sanctification, not because he makes justification in part a human work, but because he makes both justification and sanctification the gift of God in Jesus Christ.[3] Righteousness is imputed when the sinner believes. But also when the sinner believes the righteousness of Christ is inwardly received in regeneration,[4] initiating and indeed involving the development of holiness which is the very essence of the Christian life.

The close interrelating of imputed and actual righteousness answers to three characteristic insights in Luther's deeply evangelical understanding. The first is the insight into the power of the divine Word. Justification cannot possibly be described as a mere declaration or verbal fiction, for when God declares a thing to be so, it is so. The Word of God is always a creative Word.[5] In time, the fulfilment of the Word is not necessarily coincident with its utterance. To that extent the Christian is righteous only *in spe* and not *in re*.[6] But already from the standpoint of eternity the Word of God has not merely been uttered but fulfilled. The sinner is reckoned righteous and therefore he is righteous, and the process of sanctification, the life of penitence upon which he enters is simply an outworking of that

[1] W. iii, p. 44.

[2] W. xlii, p. 563; cf. xxxiii, p. 234 f.; xx, p. 692; ii, p. 146.

[3] W. ii, p. 146.

[4] Seeberg, op. cit., pp. 114 f. and pp. 243–5, suggests that this given righteousness was also imputed, at any rate according to the younger Luther (cf. the teaching of Osiander). There is a discussion of the point in Holl, op. cit., pp. 115 ff.

[5] W. xlvii, p. 33; *Disputationen*, p. 242.

[6] W. xl. 2, p. 24.

which in Christ the creative Word of God has already accomplished. According to the Word believers are justified (*iustificati*) even in the widest sense: before God they are accounted righteous and therefore they are made righteous.[1] And it is for that very reason that in this life they are always being made righteous (*iustificandi*), for in the power of the divine Word it is their constant aim and delight to become in time that which in the sight of God and by faith they already are.

The second insight is the insight into the nature of faith. If faith were merely intellectual assent, the declaration of righteousness might well be divorced from the actual attainment of it. A man could believe that God imputes the righteousness of Christ to him without allowing that belief to affect his religious and moral life. It was because his opponents thought of faith mainly in that way that they failed to see the drastic ethical implications of Luther's teaching, rather wilfully, perhaps, in view of his concern about the evil effects of Indulgences upon the moral life.[2] But the faith demanded by Luther, the faith by which alone we are justified, is something quite different. It is the revolutionary, life-giving, energizing faith which is the product and work of the Holy Spirit.[3] To have faith in God's declaration of righteousness is to be committed already to the attainment of righteousness in daily life. The faith which justifies is the faith which receives Christ and His righteousness.[4] And that faith is a leaven,[5] a faith whose works are sinless,[6] a faith which gives the power willingly and inwardly to fulfil the demands of the Law.[7] It is a faith which cannot and does not exist apart from that constitution of the new man which is the basis and the possibility of the Christian life. If this understanding of faith is accepted, then the righteousness inherent in the Christian is indissolubly connected with the righteousness imputed to him, and so close is the union that Luther does not scruple to use the one word justification to cover the process of sanctification as well as justification in the narrower and stricter sense.

[1] Cf. W. xx, p. 627.

[2] Rade, op. cit., pp. 13–15, suggests that had Luther wished to assert a cheap justification he could have related his teaching to the existing doctrine and practice of Indulgences.

[3] W. viii, p. 106.

[4] W. vii, p. 53.

[5] W. viii, p. 46.

[6] E. xii, p. 160.

[7] Ibid., p. 113; vii, p. 290.

The third insight is the apprehension of the fact that even the righteousness inherent in the Christian is itself the gift of God.[1] The attainment of actual righteousness is possible only as the righteousness of Christ is already present and as in the power of faith, and ultimately of the Word and Spirit of God,[2] it finds expression in the individual daily life. It is at this point more perhaps than any other that we see how radical is Luther's re-thinking of the doctrine. The fact that he finds in justification a real " making just " does not mean that he accepts the artificial sacramentalist conception, that in baptism and to a lesser extent in penance we are instantaneously made righteous and may therefore stand before God.[3] On the contrary, the only perfect righteousness which we ever enjoy in this life is the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, a *iustitia passiva*.[4] But again, the fact that justification is a real " making just " does mean that Luther excludes all possibility of a purely human attainment of sanctification upon the basis of a declaration of God already made. It is not that sanctification is the human process which succeeds and fulfils the divine act of justification. Sanctification no less than justification (in its narrower sense) is a part, or aspect, of the one gift of righteousness in Jesus Christ. It is possible only where there is regeneration in the Spirit and the power of the righteousness of Christ in daily life. As an active righteousness, *iustitia activa*, it does demand the co-operation of the believer,[5] but even that co-operation is evoked by the grace of God concretely revealed in the life and work of Christ.[6] The righteousness actually attained by the Christian is not in the strictest sense his own. It is a growing in the power of God to that perfect righteousness already declared by God. It is a part of the one gift of righteousness which is the divine work of salvation. It is possible only because the believer is already accounted righteous and has received of God the power to work righteously. And for that reason Luther can include this " making righteous " within the one gracious act of free justification by faith.

But if this is how Luther conceived of justification it will be seen at once that many of the arbitrary criticisms brought against his teaching fall to the ground of themselves. For they are criticisms of what Luther ought to have said or is presumed to

[1] W. ii, p. 146. [2] E. ix, p. 248. [3] *Römerbrief*, ii, p. 111.
[4] W. ii, p. 146. [5] W. ii, p. 146. [6] W. xxx. 2, p. 662; vii, pp. 30 f.

have said and not of what he actually did say. The most deeply rooted of these criticisms is that the Lutheran doctrine destroys all necessity of good works and therefore all incentive to them. In a word, it is antinomian. One man may strive earnestly to keep the commandments, but his effort is futile, for unless he has faith he cannot be justified. Another man may live in the grossest licence, but he has no cause for anxiety: he has only to take refuge in the imputed righteousness of Christ and he can stand before God. That was the supposed implication of the Lutheran teaching which caused even the more devout and earnest of the traditionalists to recoil from it in astonishment and anger. Now it can hardly be denied that theoretically, as well as practically, antinomian deductions can be and have been made from Luther's doctrine.[1] But such deductions are possible only where there is a fundamental disloyalty to what Luther himself both experienced and affirmed. For Luther did not intend to destroy the Law but to fulfil it. The man of true faith, the man who is justified, is the man who obeys the Law, not because he is enslaved to its external obligations, but because by the Spirit of God he has the Law written upon his heart, and it is his chief aim and delight to do the things which are pleasing to God.[2] Where this inward compulsion is lacking, it is evident that there is no Spirit and therefore no faith and no justification. But if faith and the Spirit are there, the spontaneous works of righteousness must be there too, not by an outward necessity, but an inward.[3]

A second charge frequently made against Luther is that his conception is fundamentally subjective.[4] On the one hand, faith itself is made into a work. And on the other, assurance of salvation is found in the personal experience of forgiveness. In other words, that man is justified who feels himself to be so. Now as far as the first point is concerned, it is clear that as Luther himself understands the matter faith cannot possibly be a ground of forgiveness. For one thing, it is the office of faith to receive, not to merit.[5] And for another, faith itself is a gift of God.[6] With regard to the second point, it must be remembered that even the experience of forgiveness is itself a work of God by the Holy Spirit so that the assurance which experience

[1] Cf. *Formula of Concord*, IV. [2] E. ix, p. 248; W. vi, p. 207.
[3] W. ii, p. 425; vi, p. 204.
[4] E.g., the very uninformed criticism of the Lutheran doctrine in the report *Catholicity* (Dacre Press), p. 25. [5] W. xl. 1, p. 243. [6] W. viii, pp. 106 f.

adds is an inward testimony of the Spirit, a testimony which is within us but not of us.[1] But further, the ultimate ground not only of assurance but also of the inward experience of forgiveness is the concrete revelation of grace in Jesus Christ and its attestation in Holy Scripture.[2] The subjectivism of Luther is no more than the necessary and legitimate subjectivism of a religion which is personal and inward. To pretend that that subjectivism is in any sense a new form of Pelagianism is possible only where the teaching of Luther is grossly misunderstood or misrepresented.

A final criticism of the Lutheran understanding is that it fails to encompass the full range of the New Testament teaching. As against the Scholastics Luther is fundamentally right, but he is hampered by his decisive interpretation of righteousness in terms of the formal and passive righteousness of imputation.[3] And in this respect he does not do justice to the true meaning of justification as it is found in the writings and indeed in the experience of the apostolic period. But quite apart from the fact that the declaratory sentence is indeed a basic part of justification, even when regarded from a purely forensic standpoint, it is surely obvious that Luther himself did not in any way restrict justification to the judicial act, nor did he think of the divine Word in terms of a merely formal and external pronouncement. Indeed, the very opposite is the case, and if anything, recent New Testament study has tended to confirm rather than to demolish the understanding for which Luther himself contended. In a wider sense, it may well be conceded that even in the vast corpus of his works Luther does not exhaust the meaning of the New Testament truth, but it would certainly be difficult to point to any other single thinker who laid hold upon so many different aspects of it.

Surveying Luther's doctrine of justification as a whole, we must indeed be astonished not merely at its richness and profundity but at its range and comprehensiveness. It may well be that for the sake of theological clarity a rather finer distinction must be drawn between justification and sanctification than that which Luther himself mostly drew. The need was met, of course, even in so early a statement as the Confession

[1] E. vii, p. 275.

[2] W. xl. 1, p. 130.

[3] Cf. the criticism in the report *The Fulness of Christ* (S.P.C.K.), p. 18.

of Augsburg, which under the heading justification treats only of our accounting righteous by imputation.[1] But the fact remains that Luther did penetrate to an essential understanding of the matter, and that by seeing imputation within the context of the whole work of God, and insisting firmly and constantly upon the basic unity of that work, he provided against the distortions and misunderstandings which can so easily corrupt the Protestant interpretation. The value of Luther's work may be seen in this: that by the correction he made at this point he undermined the elaborate but fantastic edifice of Scholasticism and shattered the whole structure of the mediaeval church. And his work was so thoroughly destructive because it was also and primarily constructive. To the problems which mediaeval theology could not solve Luther had found the answer in a doctrine of justification which was not only confirmed by his own experience but conformed to the clear teaching of the Word of God. In the last analysis, it is because that doctrine does answer the twofold test of Scripture and experience that the future of true and vital Christianity is bound up with those churches of the Word and sacraments which under God owe their existence to Luther's bold proclamation of free justification by faith.

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[1] *Confession of Augsburg*, IV.