

CHANGING SOTERIOLOGY IN ECUMENICAL CONTEXT: A LUTHERAN REFLECTION

When a Catholic walks into the confessional and says, "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned," I as a Lutheran find myself at home with what is being said. Something is being affirmed about sin and something is being affirmed about grace. Yet outside of this meeting hall such talk about sin and grace is irrelevant if not nonsensical. The vast majority out there does not use the word sin except to poke fun at it, and they surely do not talk about salvation in the sense of salvation from sin. In fact, most people, even those who are nominal believers, do not think about sin and grace at all.

To be sure, the vast majority out there is well aware that life is full of problems and that these problems need to have solutions. Literally hundreds of problems and solutions are being debated in our culture—problems such as mental depression, acid rain, nuclear death, and relativism; and solutions such as Zen, technology, world government, and new religious cults, to name but a few. Someone like Avery Dulles would be able to put together "models of salvation" in order to give us a perspective on such long and varied lists.

But no agreement exists out there on either the problems or the solutions. More importantly, no agreement exists on a method of determining what the problems or solutions are.

In the first place, the world out there does not accept any method that the church might offer for dealing with either problems or solutions. In this we are at fault. A community of discourse is seldom found among us. Rather we are divided among ourselves. Nor does the world out there see in us any other kind of fruit which would convince them of our methodology. In the second place, the world out there does not agree on a philosophical method. This is disturbing enough to a Lutheran. And because of Roman Catholic concern for a perennial philosophy, diversity in philosophical method could be very disquieting. In the third place, and parallel to the point just made, the world out there does agree that as a last resort we can appeal to experience, but there is hardly any agreement on which experience, what is common in experience, or a method of generalizing about this experience. Some may still have the "terrified conscience" of the sixteenth century. Others may be subject to *anomie*. And yet others, according to William James, may have optimistic natures no matter what the circumstances because they are born that way.

Method is the problem. How it is the problem can be shown by reflecting on the theme of justification in the Lutheran/Roman Catholic dialogues, although this is not a report on those dialogues.

When the Lutheran/Roman Catholic dialogue in the United States

began to work on the theme justification, one Lutheran said to me: that should not take you very long, maybe six months, because justification is no longer a problem between Lutherans and Catholics. To be sure, we had just completed five years of work on the theme infallibility, and infallibility in the Roman Catholic context is the counterpart to what Lutherans mean by justification in their own context. Justification, one could expect, should be just as difficult. Yet general ecumenical sentiment holds that justification is no longer an issue which could block church unity. After all, over twenty-five years ago Hans Küng wrote a book about justification¹; he claimed to demonstrate that Catholics do not believe something about justification which is basically different from what Karl Barth, the leading Protestant theologian, taught, and Karl Barth had written a forward approving of Küng's analysis, at least of Barth's own theology. The international Lutheran/Catholic dialogue in its so-called Malta Report (1967-1971) had only found it necessary to devote one column to justification and stated that "a far-reaching agreement" (28) on justification appears possible, although the implications of justification for life and teaching might still be a question. Furthermore, in the Augsburg Confession the meaning of justification is tied directly to the terrified conscience: "This whole teaching is to be referred to that conflict of the terrified conscience, nor can it be understood apart from that conflict" (20:17). And we were all aware that the terrified conscience seems to have disappeared in our modern world. In fact, once a Roman Catholic theologian brought me up sharply by exclaiming, "I have never had a terrified conscience—does this mean I am not saved?!" And if terrified consciences no longer exist, then it is useless to talk any more about justification. The whole conceptuality surrounding justification belongs to a past era. It cannot be translated into our present context. The real question today, it is often said, is not justification but does God exist at all. It should therefore only take a short time for a Lutheran/Catholic dialogue to move beyond this old difficulty. Yet six years later the Lutheran/Catholic dialogue in the United States is only approaching the end of its task. Why has it taken so long? Why has it not been possible to resolve the differences between Roman Catholics and Lutherans on this subject?

The difficulties can best be explained in terms of three levels of discourse: first, the level of agreement on words and facts; second, the level of agreement on concepts; and third, the level of agreement on the total approach to be taken, the *meta* level of agreement. Most people when they assume that today agreement on justification exists between Catholics and Lutherans assume this because they are thinking of agreement at the first level, of words and facts. And it must be admitted that there has been real convergence on this first level. In the past six years significant agreement or convergence has been possible on the New Testament materials. This

¹ H. Küng, *Rechtfertigung. Die Lehre Karl Barths und eine katholische Besinnung* (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1957).

past year a book by John Reumann, with responses by Joseph Fitzmyer and Jerome Quinn,² has summarized the New Testament issues.

Wide agreement has been reached on four controverted questions.

1) The old battle as to whether we are dealing here with a subjective genitive or an objective genitive when speaking of the righteousness of God, as in Romans 1:17, has been resolved by seizing both horns of the dilemma. As one who is righteous, God is effective as well.

2) At the time of the Reformation the battle was fought out in terms of faith and works or faith without works. In modern debate over this question in the New Testament there is agreement that faith always leads to good works (cf. Gal 5:6), although it is, of course, also agreed that salvation is not based on good works.

3) Much ink has been spilled by New Testament scholars in the modern era over the necessity of the metaphor "justification." Lutherans and Catholics can agree that we are not bound to a certain metaphor. What is at stake is the gift-nature of salvation, that salvation is only on account of Christ. Any metaphor—justification, reconciliation, redemption, salvation, freedom, or whatever—can be used as long as it is understood that salvation is totally God's work. The advantage of the metaphor "justification" is that by itself it points to the fact that salvation is totally God's work. This is not so clear with other metaphors.

4) Another attack on justification as central in the New Testament has been made by those who claim that Paul was the one who thought of salvation as justification, and even he only used this doctrine in certain very specific historical circumstances, most particularly in writing to the Galatians and Romans. But now New Testament study has shown that this doctrine was already present in formulas used in the earliest church and that Paul as well as the rest of the New Testament made pervasive use of this terminology. Each usage, of course, must be understood according to the context.

Yet it would be misleading to conclude from these four points that agreement had been reached on the New Testament materials and therefore agreement should be possible between our two traditions. It is not only that there is minimal agreement on the book of James, as you may well imagine. Rather, the problem is: after all the work that has led to wide convergence on the New Testament material, what conclusions are to be drawn? It is the same problem that surfaced in the New Testament task forces of the Lutheran/Roman Catholic dialogue dealing with the New Testament material on Peter and on Mary.³ In spite of all the consensus and convergence in those two books, in each case the final few pages

² J. Reumann, with responses by J. A. Fitzmyer and J. D. Quinn, *Righteousness in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; and New York: Paulist Press, 1982).

³ R. E. Brown, K. P. Donfried, and J. Reumann, eds., *Peter in the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Augsburg; and New York, Paramus, Toronto: Paulist, 1973); R. E. Brown, K. P. Donfried, J. A. Fitzmyer, and J. Reumann, *Mary in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress; and New York, Ramsey, Toronto: Paulist, 1978).

indicate that New Testament scholars could agree across denominational lines on details and much of the exegesis, but when it came to drawing broader conclusions which all sides might accept, few conclusions could be reached and an appeal had to be made to later tradition. With justification the same has happened. As soon as the claim is made by Lutherans that justification is central to the New Testament, the Catholic side draws back. We are faced with the classic problem of establishing the center (*die Mitte*) of the New Testament witness and on a more technical level of how one derives doctrine from any historical text. Already one is forced to discussions on the second and third levels of discourse because agreement at the first level, no matter how extensive, does not lead to real consensus.

When one moves to the second level of discourse, dealing with concepts, again there can be seeming agreement and continuing disagreement. A good example of what happens is the Colloquy at Regensburg in 1541, where the record shows that the two negotiating teams seemed to come within inches of reaching an agreement. Yet nothing moved, and one is forced to conclude no real consensus had been achieved. Formulas were found, to be sure, which all accepted, but it would seem that these formulas had only papered over hidden differences, and these differences were not merely political. In our modern attempts to deal with justification, can we avoid something very similar taking place? Do we invent formulas and construct carefully balanced consensus statements but paper over the real differences? For example, it will astonish no one when I assert that Lutherans and Catholics agree on grace alone. We together affirm the centrality of Christ and the seriousness of sin, and you might ask, then, what possibly can hinder full consensus.

Four items indicate what conceptual difficulties stand in the way.

1) We Lutherans and Catholics are agreed on *grace alone*, but we do not find ourselves in quite the same agreement on *faith alone*. When Lutherans talk about faith alone, *i.e.*, that faith is a gift and has no basis except through its object, Christ, Catholics become very nervous. It may seem to them that Lutherans have fallen into fideism, that their faith is faith in faith. Lutherans for their part are concerned when anything else in addition to faith is brought into the equation because they feel that any addition will detract from trusting in *Christ alone*.

2) What can be done about merit terminology? Lutherans have a visceral reaction against all merit terminology. To Lutherans merit implies salvation by one's own works. It can be argued that especially at one point in the *Apology* (4:362-376) merit is clearly affirmed. But Lutherans would argue in turn that such statements in the *Apology* and elsewhere must be understood according to the larger context of the Lutheran confessional writings. It can also be argued that merit is implied in many biblical passages, the most notable being a section by Paul himself in Romans 2:5-11: God "will reward each person according to his deeds." But the difficulty mentioned a moment ago of putting together the New Testament witness into a coherent whole (*die Mitte*) becomes apparent once again. One can find passages in the New Testament which imply some sort of

merit or rewards. Yet other passages clearly indicate another point of view about merit in the future life. For example, the laborers in the vineyard are all paid the same (Matthew 20:1-16), the servants are still unworthy after having done everything (Luke 17:7-10), and the wages of sin are not contrasted with the wages of good works but the free gift of God (Romans 6:23; cf. 5:9-10; 8:32-39).⁴ Catholics for their part seem to be comfortable with merit terminology and have, of course, such terms written into the decisions at Trent and in their literature up to and including the present day. If it were possible to create new terminology acceptable to all parties, Catholics and Lutherans could reach much greater convergence, if not consensus. The discomfort that Lutherans feel with "merit," and the reluctance that Catholics have to give up such terminology, point to a basic concern that has not been resolved.

3) Lutherans have a major investment in the phrase, *simul iustus et peccator*. Some in fact have thought that this is what is distinctive about the Reformation stance on justification. Lutherans have been challenged for their use of this phrase because of the diversity that some have claimed exists in Luther's usage of the phrase. However, Brian Gerrish in his recent book⁵ has pointed out that this diversity is not as diverse as some would claim. When Luther is speaking of the relationship between God and the human person, this phrase continues the dialectic of totally sinful/totally justified for all of the person's life. When at times Luther speaks of change and growth in the human being, it is in relationship to each other and not in relation to God that growth takes place. In other words, the dialectical character of Luther's thought does not break down at this point. And the attempt by Karl Rahner to reinterpret *simul iustus et peccator* in a way that both Lutherans and Catholics would find acceptable does not appear to leave room for Luther's emphasis on totally sinful/totally justified.⁶ Lutherans have a stake in this phrase first because of the seriousness with which they view sin, even though in the justified person sin no longer rules, and second because of the eschatological dialectic in all of God's actions, for although Christ in his death and resurrection has been victorious, this victory is not evident and will not be evident until the final judgment.

4) What are the possibilities of reinterpreting purgatory in an ecumenical age? For Roman Catholics purgatory is a doctrine fixed at Trent, and it continues to be a reality in Catholic piety up to the present time. A Catholic Sunday bulletin published by the Liguorians for last October 31 affirmed again the importance of the doctrine of purgatory. Perhaps it would be possible for Catholics to reinterpret purgatory to such a degree that Lutherans would no longer find it unacceptable. In doing so, of course, the question would have to be asked whether what Trent intended

⁴ Ernst Synofzik, *Die Gerichts- und Vergeltungsaussagen bei Paulus*. Göttinger Theologische Arbeiten 8 (Göttinger: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977), pp. 69-70.

⁵ Brian A. Gerrish, *The Old Protestantism and the New. Essays on the Reformation Heritage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 74-77.

⁶ Karl Rahner, "Gerecht und Sunder zugleich," *Schriften zur Theologie* 6 (Einsiedeln, Zurich, Cologne: Benziger, 1965), pp. 262-76.

had been respected. Catholic reinterpretations of purgatory leave Lutherans with nagging questions: was Christ's work insufficient, and, do our works somehow have merit?

Even if it were possible to work out answers to such problems to the mutual satisfaction of Lutherans and Catholics, a consensus has not been reached because at the third level of discourse, the *meta* level, the greatest difficulty surfaces. What place does justification by faith play in one's theological method? Is justification a dogma, perhaps even the first in a list of dogmas that one must use, or is justification the central dogma for all of one's theological work? The Malta Report of the international Lutheran/Roman Catholic dialogue (28) already raised this question. Roman Catholics become very nervous when Lutherans press this point, for Catholics wonder then if justification has not taken the place of Christology or the Trinity. What then happens to the sacraments and the church? Lutherans for their part are far from denying the importance of Christology. In fact, for them justification is simply one side of the coin, the other being Christology.

Could such a Lutheran understanding of justification be allowed in a reunited church? It is frequently said that all Lutherans have ever asked for is the freedom to proclaim this justification by faith on account of Christ. But such a request is deceptively simple. What would it mean if Lutherans were to be given such freedom in a reunited church? It would not mean that Lutherans would go off into their corner and talk privately to each other about justification understood in their own way. Freedom to proclaim this gospel would be an all-encompassing activity and would produce important criticisms of the sacraments, the church, and all of theology in a fashion that would be theologically disruptive.

Is there any way in which the difference between justification as a dogma and justification as *the* dogma can be resolved? Three suggestions have been made of possible ways to bring Catholics and Lutherans together on this point, but none of these suggestions carry the day.

1) One suggestion has been to say that we agree on the substance of justification, but that the form can be different in our two families. The trouble with this answer is that form and substance cannot be separated, even though they can be distinguished. As a Lutheran, the substance of what I hold about justification would involve its form, and the same has to be true for Roman Catholics.

2) Another proposal for combining the two views on justification has been to state that the modes of thought used by each side are not contradictory.⁷ Accordingly, Roman Catholics in their mode of theology would be understood to be sapiential, as in the theological system of Thomas Aquinas. Their concern is for the totality of what is Christian

⁷ See especially Otto Hermann Pesch, *Theologie der Rechtfertigung bei Martin Luther und Thomas von Aquin. Versuch eines systematisch-theologischen Dialogs*. Walberger Studien Bd. 4 (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald Verlag, 1967), pp. 935-48.

truth. Lutherans, on the other hand, would be understood to be existential. They are concerned for that which affects me in my problematic existence here and now. Neither side really excludes the other. Both have their place, and we should be able then to allow these two modes to co-exist in a reunited church. But as one Catholic pointed out: "It is clear to me that Lutherans, as they apply their existential mode, are critical of that which I hold as a Catholic sapiential mode. Lutherans seem to doubt that their existential concerns are adequately protected by the sapiential mode."

3) A third approach has been to say that when the two churches would unite, the Lutherans would be allowed to affirm justification as the meta-dogma, while the Catholics would hold to their "Catholic fullness." But the same objection arises as in the case of the existential and sapiential. Justification as the meta-dogma would have something to say about that Catholic fullness. How would such a reunited church stay reunited very long? What would happen if justification were to be used to criticize papal infallibility?

But you may object. What about the variety within the Lutheran tradition? The debates about justification at the Lutheran World Federation Assembly in 1963 at Helsinki prove there is variety. Yet on the issues presented here Lutheran diversity is not so great. On such questions as merit and faith alone and *simul*, Lutherans are alike no matter how broadly we may interpret our tradition.

In conclusion: even in bilateral dialogues the question of method proves to be the key question. But are questions of method church dividing? On a philosophical basis it might be argued that disagreements at the third level of discourse are not necessarily divisive, yet this would be a matter of dispute. From a theological point of view, however, the question has to be asked: since for Lutherans justification involves both the how and the what, is it possible for Lutherans to modify the claim they make for justification? We Lutherans and Catholics do have something basic in common, for I understand what is meant when a Catholic walks into the confessional and says, "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned." What needs to be worked out between us is what this implies, for here we differ, in spite of a basic commonality.

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