

Theses on Justification

Part I

A Report of the
Commission on Theology and Church Relations
of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod

May 1983

CONTENTS

- I. Centrality and Function
- II. Definition
- III. The Nature of Justification
- IV. Man's Need for Justification
- V. The Basis of Justification
- VI. The Universal and Finished Results of Christ's Work of Obedience
- VII. The Appropriation of Christ's Righteousness
- VIII. Unbelief, The Rejection of Christ's Righteousness
- IX. The Gospel and Absolution
- X. Justification and Renewal
- XI. Certainty of Salvation

Citations from the Lutheran Confessions are taken from The Book of Concord edited by TG Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), and, where noted, from Concordia Triglotta. The following abbreviations have been used:

AC -- Augsburg Confession

Ap -- Apology of the Augsburg Confession

Ep -- Epitome of the Formula of Concord

FC -- Formula of Concord

LC -- Large Catechism

SA -- Smalcald Articles

SC -- Small Catechism

SD -- Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord

Tr -- Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope

Trig -- Concordia Triglotta

INTRODUCTION

The 1981 convention of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod adopted a resolution asking "the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, the joint faculties of the seminaries, and the Council of Presidents to make a study of the doctrine of justification within one year, which gives proper expression to all the aspects of what the Scriptures teach on this matter" (1981 Res. 3-12 "To Make a Study on the Doctrine of Justification"). In response to a request from the President of the Synod that the Commission on Theology and Church Relations coordinate the preparation of this study, a set of theses on justification was drafted by the CTCR and shared with the Council of Presidents and the seminary faculties for discussion and review as they carried out their own independent studies of this doctrine. On the basis of the written responses received, the CTCR revised the original draft of the theses and distributed them once again to the Council of Presidents and seminary faculties for final review. The Commission now presents these theses for synod-wide study and discussion. In keeping with the Synod's recognition that "the need has been expressed to study anew what the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions teach on this doctrine, "these theses have been formulated for the purpose of presenting the Biblical doctrine of justification by grace through faith for Christ's sake in as comprehensive a manner as is possible in a format of this kind. In order to elucidate certain key aspects of the doctrine of justification as precisely as possible, the document presents a number of antitheses which point out and reject past and present errors which obscure and even vitiate this central doctrine.

The theses are here presented in accordance with the sequence followed in the articles of the Augsburg Confession. The article of justification is therefore presented in the context of its basis in the work of Christ, the means of grace through which the sinner is brought to faith and to possession of the benefits of Christ, and the renewal or Christian life of the sinner which results from his justification through faith in Christ. The theses are not intended to go beyond the pattern of thought and terminology of Scripture, the

Lutheran Confessions, and the presentation of our respected Lutheran theologians of the past.

This study on justification is presented to the Synod in the year of the 500th anniversary of the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther. It can therefore serve as a timely reminder of the debt of gratitude we owe to God for this our father in the faith, who so faithfully labored to restore this doctrine to the center of the church's life and proclamation. The Commission on Theology and Church Relations offers the theses which follow with the special prayer that they will assist pastors and congregations as they seek to bring comfort and peace to troubled consciences in their midst and to edify one another for the work of Christian service.

I CENTRALITY AND FUNCTION

1. The doctrine of the sinner's justification before God by grace for Christ's sake through faith is the central and most important teaching of the Christian faith. (Is. 53; John 1:29; 3:16; Acts 4:12; Rom. 1:16- 17; 3:23-28; 4:25; 1 Cor. 2:1-5; 3:11; Gal. 2:16; 5:4; 1 Tim 1:15, 2:4-6; AC XX, 9-11; XXVI, 4; XXVII, 48; Ap IV, 2; SA 11, i, 1-5; SA 11, ii, 21, 24, 25; SA II, iii, 2; FC SD III, 6)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach:

That justification or forgiveness for Christ's sake by grace through faith is not central in Scripture or does not really take place, but is merely one of a number of modes or theological interpretations or metaphors or pictures or motifs--each of these really dispensable--of Christ's saving work found in the Scriptures.

II DEFINITION[*]

2. When used to refer to the sinner's relationship to God, the term "justify" is used throughout the Scriptures to denote a verdict, i.e., a forensic act whereby a person is counted righteous, declared righteous, reckoned to be righteous, absolved, or forgiven. (Rom. 3:20- 28; 4:1-13; 5:1; 8:33; Gal. 2:16, [cf. Deut. 25:1; 1 Kings 8:32; Prov. 17:15; Is. 5:23]; Ap IV, 72, 158, 161, 252, 305; FC Ep III, 7; FC SD III, 17)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach:

That God judges a person to be righteous because that person is inherently righteous on account of what he has done;

That Christ's righteousness is reckoned to a person only in piece-meal fashion, as love is infused;

That justification is not a completely forensic act of God, but is realized at least in part in the "new creation" among Christians;

That God declares a person righteous because He has started to renew that person's life and conduct.

3. The term "justify" in Scripture often overlaps in meaning the term "forgive" which means to blot out [sins], to pardon. In Scripture the term "justify" is often used in the context of God's grace, Christ's work of obedience and redemption, reconciliation, propitiation, atonement, expiation, and faith in Christ. (Ps 32:1; Rom. 3:24-26; 4:2- 8; 5:1-11; 2 Cor. 5:18-21; Ap IV, 76, 103, 117, 132, 158, 163, 290; XII, 36; XX, 10; XXIV, 12; FC SD III, 30, 39, 54; FC SD V, 25; Trig. Ap III, 37, 61, 157, 261)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach:

That forgiveness and justification before God do not involve each other, or that justification and reconciliation are entirely different from each other, as though a person can be reconciled without being justified or justified without being reconciled.

4. In normal Biblical and ecclesiastical usage the terms "justify" and "justification" refer to the ("subjective") justification of the individual sinner through faith (Rom. 4:5, 5:1, etc.; AC IV, 3; FC SD III, 25). But because theologically justification is the same thing as the forgiveness of sins (Rom. 4:1-8; Ap IV, 76; FC Ep III, 7), it is Biblically and confessionally correct to refer to the great sin-cancelling, atoning work of the Redeemer as the "objective" or "universal" justification of the whole sinful human race. (John 1:29; Rom. 5:6-18; 2 Cor. 5:19; Col 2:14-15; 1 Tim. 3:16; Ap IV, 103-105; LC V, 31, 32, 36, 37; FC SD III, 57)

5. Thus objective justification or reconciliation is the forgiveness of sins both as it has been acquired for the entire human race by Christ's work of obedience in its stead and declared by His resurrection, and as it is seriously and efficaciously offered to all in the means of grace.

6. Subjective justification or reconciliation is this same forgiveness as it is received, appropriated by, and applied to the individual sinner through God-given faith alone (sole fide).

III
THE NATURE OF JUSTIFICATION
(What Happens When the Sinner Is Justified)

7. When the sinner is justified, (a) God does not count his sin against him, but forgives him, and (b) God imputes to him the righteousness of Christ. (Is. 45:25; Rom. 5:18-19; Phil. 3:8-9; Ap IV, 177, 305; XXI, 19; FC Ep III, 4; FC SD III, 15, 30-31)

8. When the sinner is justified, he is forgiven all his sin; no sin remains unforgiven. (Matt 9:2; Luke 7:47-48; Rom 8:1; 1 John 1:7; Ap IV, 149, 222; SA III, xiii, 2; SC V,16)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach:

That, although Christ by His work has earned forgiveness for all, there are still certain conditions which God demands of people before He will pronounce them righteous.

9. The one who justifies is always and only God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. (Is. 50:8; Rom. 5:19; 8:30, 33; 1 Cor. 1:30; 6:11; Col. 3:13; AC IV, 3; Ap IV, 224, 389; XV, 7; SA II, i,1-4; III, xiii, 1; LC II, 63-65; FC Ep V, 5)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach:

That a person is able to bring about his own justification or that of anyone else by his own faculties, abilities, or works.

IV
MAN'S NEED FOR JUSTIFICATION

10. The one who is justified by God is sinful man, man ungodly (Rom. 3:23; 4:5; Eph. 4:20-24) and guilty (a) because the offense and guilt of Adam, the first man, have been imputed, or reckoned, to all mankind (Gen. 3; Rom. 5:12-19) and (b) because every human being is a sinner by the hereditary corruption of his nature (Rom. 7) and sins daily. (Ps. 51:5; Eccl. 7:20; John 3:6; Rom. 1:32; 3:12,16-18, 23; 5:6, 8; 6:23; Gal. 5:19-21; 1 John 1:8; AC II; III, 3; XIX; Ap II, 5-13; IV, 34; XII, 142; SA III, i; SC III, 16; LC III, 86-87; FC SD I, 53)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach:

That God judges all people to be guilty sinners only because of their hereditary corruption and resulting actual sinful thoughts, words, and actions, or only

because He has reckoned Adam's offense and guilt to all human beings;

That Adam was not a historical person, the first man created by God;

That everyone is "his own Adam."

11. All people born according to the course of nature stand before God as sinful and guilty, owing an insurmountable debt, and condemned to eternal hell and punishment. (Lev. 19:2; Deut. 32:4; Is. 6:3; Matt. 5:20; Luke 10:15; Rom. 1:18; 2:5, 8-9; 6:23; Gal. 3:10; Rev. 15:4; AC III, 3; LC I, 31-34, 234; FC SD I, 6)

12. Because of man's sin, God, who is absolutely holy and righteous, is angry against all sinners, and there could be no forgiveness or justification except for the fact that propitiation and satisfaction were made by Jesus Christ. (Deut. 27:26; Ps. 5:5; Gal. 3:10; 2 Tim. 2:13; Heb. 2:9, 9:22; AC II, 2; Ap II, 40; IV 40, 128; LC I, 122, 234; II, 68; FC SD I, 6)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach:

That the loving God would not require propitiation and satisfaction before He forgives

V

THE BASIS OF JUSTIFICATION

13. The source of the sinner's justification before God is solely God's grace in Jesus Christ. (John 1:16-17; Eph 1:7, 2:5b; Ap IV, 41, 53; LC II, 43; III, 96; IV, 37; FC SD XI, 43)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach:

That there is grace outside of Jesus Christ.

14. God's grace whereby He justifies and saves the sinner is His undeserved mercy and loving kindness, His powerful and active over which sent Christ to be the Savior of the world. (John 3:16; Rom. 3:24, 5:15, 20; 2 Cor. 8:9; Eph. 1:19; Titus 2:11; AC III, 1-3; Ap II, 50; LC II, 65; III, 51)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach:

That the grace by which God justifies the sinner is a supernatural divine power or quality which God gives or infuses into man in order to enable him to do good works and become righteous before God;

That there is conflict between the fact that Christ by His saving work made God gracious toward the world and the fact that God in His grace sent Christ to be the Savior, or vice versa.

15. The scope of God's grace in Christ is universal, including all people of all times and places. (John 3:16; Rom. 11:32; 1 Tim. 2:4; 4:10; FC SD XI, 28, 68)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach:

That grace is extended to all simply by virtue of the fact that all are children of our Creator God, and not because of Christ's atonement;

That God's grace extends only to a segment of humanity, either those whom God has especially chosen to favor or those who have cooperated with God, sought after God, or believed in God.

16. The basis of the sinner's justification before God is the work of God's only begotten Son in the flesh, His work of obedience. This obedience is the perfect obedience of Christ according to both the divine and human natures. It is His vicarious living under God's law in the place of all sinners, as well as His substitutionary, sacrificial, and atoning death for all the sins of all sinners. (Rom. 5:18-19; Gal 4:4-5; 1 Peter 2:21-24; 3:18; Ap IV, 214; FC Ep III, 3, 4, 6; FC SD III, 9, 11-12, 14-15, 22, 30, 54-58; V, 22; VIII, 46-47; XII, 10)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach:

That the basis of the sinner's justification is Christ's inherent righteousness as God;

That Christ according to His human nature cannot render to God adequate obedience to substitute for all men;

That the obedience of Christ which is the basis of the sinner's justification is the obedience of the divine nature only or of the human nature only.

17. The obedient death of Christ was a penal death, the death of an innocent victim under the condemnation of God, a sacrificial and atoning death paid as a ransom to a

just and wrathful God and vicariously given to satisfy the penal justice of God. (Is. 53:5-7; Mark 10:45; Rom. 8:32; 2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 3:13; Eph. 5:2; 1 Tim. 2:6; Titus 2:14,1 Peter 1:18-19; 1 John 4:10; AC III, 3; IV, 2; XXIV, 25; Ap IV, 40, 53, 57, 98, 178-179, 204, 292; XII, 160; XIII, 7-8; XXI, 19; XXIV, 22-24, 55, 59, LC II, 31, FC Ep V, 5; FC SD V, 20)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach:

That Christ's death was not a truly vicarious sacrifice because His condemnation under the wrath of God is a mere metaphor, or because it otherwise does not correspond to reality.

18. God imputed all the sins of all mankind to Christ, who by the perfect obedience of His life and death paid fully and made complete expiation for them and has thus propitiated the wrath of God. (John 1 :29; Rom 5:18-19; 2 Cor 5:15, 21; Col 2:14; 1 John 2:2; Ap IV, 40, 103; XX, 5; SA II, i, 1-3; III, iii, 38; FC SD V, 22)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach:

That Christ has not propitiated the wrath of God by the perfect obedience of His life and death;

That Christ paid the ransom to the devil.

VI THE UNIVERSAL AND FINISHED RESULTS OF CHRIST'S WORK OF OBEDIENCE

19. Christ is the Savior of all. This means that the whole world of sinners has been redeemed, forgiven, and reconciled to God in Him. (Rom. 3:24-25; 5:10; 2 Cor. 5:19; 1 Tim. 4:10; Heb. 9:28; Ap IV, 103; XXIV, 22-24; FC SD III, 57; XI, 15)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach:

That it is improper to speak of God being reconciled to man;

That we can only speak of man being reconciled to God by man's repentance or change of heart;

That God has redeemed but not reconciled the world.

20. God has accepted the vicarious offering and sacrifice of His Son, Jesus Christ, in whom therefore God is propitiated and reconciled with all sinners, so that for Christ's sake God's wrath against all sinners has been and remains stilled, and Satan, sin,

death, and hell have been and are conquered. (Rom. 5:18; Col. 2:14-15; 1 Thess. 1:10; Heb. 7:27, 10:12; 1 John 2:2; AC III, 3; Ap XXIV, 22-24; FC SD XI, 28)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach:

That God's acceptance of His Son's perfect sacrifice does not have as its necessary concomitant the propitiation of His wrath against all sinners.

21. Complete and perfect righteousness and forgiveness have been acquired for all sinners. (Ps. 130:4; Rom. 5:18; 1 Cor. 1:30; Heb. 10:12, 18; Ap IV, 103; LC II, 38; FC Ep III, 3; V, 5; FC SD III, 30, 57)

22. God, by raising His Son from the dead, has justified Him, declared Him to be the Righteous One, and in Him (i e , for the sake of His finished work of obedience and satisfaction) has declared (as proclaimed in the Gospel), or reckoned, the whole world to be righteous. (Rom. 3:24; 4:25; 5:18-19; 2 Cor. 5:19-21; Ap IV, 40-41; SA II, i, 1-3)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach:

That forgiveness of sins and justification for all have not been declared by God when He raised His Son from the dead, but have merely been acquired or made a possibility through Christ's atonement.

23. By "objective" or "universal" justification one means that God has declared the whole world to be righteous for Christ's sake and that righteousness has thus been procured for all people. It is objective because this was God's unilateral act prior to and in no way dependent upon man's response to it, and universal because all human beings are embraced by this verdict. God has acquired the forgiveness of sins for all people by declaring that the world for Christ's sake has been forgiven. The acquiring of forgiveness is the pronouncement of forgiveness. (Rom. 3:24; 4:25; 5:19; 2 Cor. 5:19-21; Ap IV, 40-41; SA II, i, 1-3; FC Ep V, 5; FC SD XI, 15)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach:

That God's acquisition and establishment of forgiveness in objective justification is a conditional verdict, depending on faith or any other human response or activity;

That it is not Biblical to speak of "objective justification."

Note:

* Definitions in part II are preliminary to the material in the remainder of the document and should be cross-referenced with more detailed statements in the later theses. For example, theses 5 and 6 are elaborated in theses 19-22.