

PAUL, LUTHER, AND JUSTIFICATION IN GAL 2:15-21

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I. *Paul*

The succinct but powerful description of justifying faith in Gal 2:15-21 in terms of union with Christ provides an appropriate place, perhaps the most appropriate place, to examine this theme in Paul's letters. In a manner typical of the apostle, this introductory passage presents the larger argument of the letter in a highly condensed form, as a sort of preview to the thought he is about to develop. Indeed, it is at this point in the letter that Paul introduces "justification" as the *Leitmotiv* which continues until the conclusion of the body of the letter.¹ It is not surprising, therefore, that various expressions of "justifying union" with Christ (if we may so put the matter) appear throughout Galatians, as may be seen in some rather obvious examples: Paul expects Christ to be "formed" in the Galatians (Gal 4:19), that to be justified in the Law is to be "dismissed" from Christ (καταργέω, Gal 5:4; see Rom 7:2, 6), and that those who are "of Christ" have crucified the flesh (Gal 5:24). We proceed, therefore, under the assumption that Paul's brief articulation of "justification" in terms of union with Christ in Gal 2:15-21 reveals a central thread in the fabric of the letter.

Before we turn our attention to the text, a caveat or two are necessary. First, we obviously cannot explore every exegetical detail. We shall have to confine ourselves to its salient features, especially those related to our theme. At certain points, particularly with regard to Paul's use of righteousness language, we shall have to draw on more extensive arguments which cannot be repeated here. Secondly, our theme of "union with Christ" represents an old battleground in the field of New Testament study, where fresh skirmishes regularly erupt. Not infrequently the "forensic" and "participatory" aspects of Paul's thought have been regarded as separate and irreconcilable conceptions of salvation, forming an unstable configuration which scholars must somehow disentangle if the apostle is going to make sense. Albert Schweitzer's resolution of the supposed problem often has set the terms of the discussion: "The doctrine of justification by faith

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¹ The initial reference to justification appears in Gal 2:16, the final in Gal 5:5.

is therefore a secondary crater, which arises within the primary crater of the redemption-mysticism of "being in Christ."² Schweitzer's case was built in part on the argument that "justification by faith" was *merely* a polemical doctrine which, although it is joined to an "eschatological mysticism" in Galatians, comes to be separated from it in Romans where Paul's thought appears in more mature form.

Although we do not have time or space to argue the matter here, we may suggest that Schweitzer is wrong on both counts. The "good news" of the apostle announced in the face of sin and death is by its very nature polemical, so that there can be no talk of "justification" as a combative appendage to an otherwise irenic doctrine. Nor is it proper to speak of a "forensic" doctrine being separated from an "eschatological mysticism" (or "participationist" soteriology of any sort) in Romans. Admittedly, these objections to Schweitzer's theory (and its more recent representations) deserve an elaboration and defense that we cannot supply just now. Yet in so far as they are valid, we may regard the thought of Gal 2:15-21 as indicative of Paul's broader understanding of justification, and not merely a stage on the way to a more mature doctrine.

The passage follows Paul's summary of his confrontation of Cephas in Antioch in the face of Cephas's withdrawal from table-fellowship with Gentile believers and therewith from the common celebration of the Lord's Supper. This action on Cephas's part, which precipitated the same decision by all Jewish believers who were present, signaled that believing Gentiles as such were not acceptable to God. It was necessary to "judaize" in order to share in the salvation offered in the Messiah (Gal 2:14). That, at least, was Paul's analysis of the situation: Cephas and those under his influence were not "walking rightly" (*ὀρθοποδεῖν*) with respect to the truth of the Gospel (Gal 2:14). As his following statements reveal, this reformation of life is integral to Paul's understanding of justification. It is predicated, moreover, on a change of "being":

If you, although you have your existence as a Jew (*Ἰουδαῖος ὑπάρχων*), possess life (*ζῆς*) in a Gentile way and not in a Jewish way, how is it that you compel the Gentiles to judaize?³

Cephas's life as a Jew in this fallen age (see Gal 1:4) has been transcended by another life, that of the new creation (see Gal 6:15), even if for the time being these two "times" are simultaneously and paradoxically present.

In all likelihood, the continuing argument in Gal 2:15-21 represents a summary of what Paul said on that occasion in Antioch, not least because Paul immediately includes himself and all other Jewish believers in the following narrative:

² Albert Schweitzer, *Die Mystik des Apostels Paulus* (Tubingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1930), 220.

³ I have translated the verb *ζῶω* here in a way that indicates that it is best understood as an anticipation of Paul's closing statements concerning participation in the life of the risen Lord, and not as a description of Cephas's "manner of life." Above all else, the argument in Gal 2:15-16 argues for this reading, since it follows precisely this line of thought.

“We are by nature Jews, and not sinners from the Gentiles.” This Jewish self-description with its necessary, antipodal characterization of Gentiles is fundamental to the thought of the passage, especially the radical turn that it takes at vv. 17-18. Being a Jew or a Gentile involves both ethnicity and praxis, both heritage and deeds: the Gentile is a “sinner,” while the Jew is a “person of the works of the Law” (ἄνθρωπος ἐξ ἔργων νόμου), according to Paul’s statement in Gal 2:16. I cannot here take time to defend the reading of the prepositional phrase ἐξ ἔργων νόμου as an adjectival modifier rather than as an adverbial one, other than to say that Paul uses the phrase adjectivally in both Gal 3:5 (assuming an ellipsis of ἐστίν) and Gal 3:10 (“Ὅσοι γὰρ . . . ἐξ ἔργων νόμου εἰσίν), and that this interpretation provides a neat solution to the otherwise perplexing problem presented by the following exceptive clause.⁴

The point at the moment is that, on the one hand, Jewish identity cannot be reduced to personal achievements, nor, on the other hand, can it rightly be conceived as mere ethnicity. The same is true inversely for the Gentiles. To *be* a Gentile is to *be* a sinner, just as to *be* a Jew is to *be* a person of the works of the Law. Human beings, with their endeavors and their histories, are not distinct from nature. They are comprehended within the fallen order (φύσει, Gal 2:15). That means, conversely, that “nature” cannot be reduced to substances and forces external to human existence. The natural order *includes* that existence. More straightforwardly stated: the fallen world exercises its lordship over us, holding us captive to sin and death. We have been enslaved under the “elements of the world” (στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου, Gal 4:3), “the present evil age,” from which Christ came to redeem us (Gal 1:4). This inner connection between personal existence and the fallen order reappears in Paul’s final description of redemption in the letter: “But may there be no boasting for me, except in the cross of our Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom the world was crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal 6:14). Paul’s own person and history, his way of life in Judaism in which he outstripped his contemporaries was merely one manifestation of the fallen world that was brought to an end by the arrival of salvation (Gal 1:13-14). In Christ neither circumcision nor uncircumcision “exists as something” (τί ἐστίν): there is nothing but a new creation (Gal 6:15). Redemption for Paul is irreducibly ontological.

Paul’s exposition of the Gospel for his Jewish audience in Antioch is built upon the understanding of the fallen world we have just traced, especially the place of Jew and Gentile within it. It is highly significant, therefore, that he presents this Gospel in terms of “justification,” and that “justification” here is

⁴ If one allows the clause exceptive force, one finds Paul saying that, “a person is not justified by works of the Law, unless they are justified by the faith of Christ.” The usual solution of reading the ἐάν μή clause as adversative is hardly likely, as even a quick scan of New Testament usage shows. Paul’s reference to a “person in Christ” forms something of a parallel (2 Cor 12:2), as do the various references to “those of the circumcision” and “those of the Law.”

bound up with the entrance of the new creation in Jesus Christ, in which the realities of the fallen world have been transcended:

Recognizing that a "person of the works of the Law" is not justified except by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by works of the Law, because by works of the Law no flesh shall be justified. (Gal 2:16)

Paul here at first simply draws out the significance of the earliest proclamation of Jesus as Messiah within its Jewish setting: only those who believe in him shall be justified. If that is the case, Paul argues, even the one who is "of the works of the Law" is justified by faith alone, and not by these works. The exclusion of "works of the Law" from justification means the end of the distinction between Jew and Gentile that is bound up with nature itself. In other words, justification for Paul presupposes the end of the world as we know it. The reserve with which he speaks in the following verse likewise shows that he is thinking of justification in terms of an eschatological event: believers are those who are "seeking to be justified in Christ" (Gal 2:17). In a crucial sense, they do not yet have their justification but wait for it in hope (see Gal 5:5).

The forensic thrust of the argument in Gal 2:16 should not be overlooked. Fallen humanity, which Paul characterizes here as "all flesh" (again, an expression which joins nature and existence), cannot be justified by works of the Law (see Gen 6:12; Ps 143:2). If humanity was to be justified, its justification had to come from without. That is exactly what God has done, of course. Those who believe seek justification outside themselves in Christ (Gal 2:17). Already in Gal 2:16, Paul depicts this justification as an extrinsic reality when he (twice) speaks of justification through (and by) "the faith of (Jesus) Christ." While we cannot take time to defend at length a fresh interpretation of this now contested expression, we may at least suggest that the current debate has too quickly limited the interpretive options to that of the traditional objective genitive ("faith in Christ") and the newly popular subjective genitive ("Jesus' believing" or his "faithfulness"). For a variety of reasons, it is more likely that we find here a genitive of quality, source, or possession.⁵ That is to say, when Paul speaks of "the faith of Christ" he is not indicating that faith is directed to Christ. For Paul, the thought that Christ (or God's work in him) is the object of faith is already presupposed in the term "faith" itself (as, for example, in Gal 1:23; 3:5, 23-25; 6:10). The "faith of Christ" rather signifies that the crucified and risen Christ is the source of faith, or that faith "belongs" to him and his work. Paul's similar language at the conclusion of our text sheds some light on the expression: in v. 20 he speaks of the "faith of the Son of God, who loved me and delivered himself up for me." Paul describes the "person" of the Son of God here in terms of his will and work "*for me*," a willing and working, which he obviously regards as

⁵ An example of similar usage appears in Acts 3:16. For further discussion, see Mark A. Seifrid, *Christ, Our Righteousness: Paul's Theology of Justification* (New Studies in Biblical Theology 9; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 139-46.

effective. According to Paul's perspective, Christ's work is not an isolated event of the past: in that it took place "for me," it embraces me, and thus creates my faith here and now. For this reason, as well as others, he is able to say that he (and all believers) live by that faith which has its source in and flows forth from the Son of God. As further evidence for this reading, we may point to the way in which Paul connects the coming of faith to the coming of Christ in Gal 3:22-29. Significantly, he again speaks here of the "faith of Christ." Given that the larger argument in Gal 3 is based on the faith of Abraham (see Gal 3:6), Paul's indication that faith as a reality has only now arrived is quite startling. It forces one to recognize the fundamental significance of his identification of Christ as the seed of Abraham, to whom *alone* the promise made to Abraham belongs (Gal 3:16). It is because, and only because, the divine word of promise has come to fulfillment in him (whose person is inseparable from his work, Gal 2:20) that faith has "come." Faith has been "revealed" *now* (Gal 3:23), because only now has Christ been given as the source and object of faith. According to Gal 3:24, the "Christ" who has arrived is the equivalent of the "faith" which has "been revealed" of which Paul speaks in the preceding verse. Furthermore, as is clear from Paul's continuing discussion, the arrival of faith represents the arrival of the eschaton. Faith unites us with the risen Christ, the one to whom God granted his promises of blessing, in whom the present age and its distinctions have been transcended: there is no longer Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male and female (Gal 3:26-29). This framework of thought, I would argue, is implicit to Paul's usage of the "faith of (Jesus) Christ" in Gal 2:16, where he likewise moves directly from speaking of "justification by faith" to "justification in Christ" (Gal 2:17). Because Paul understands "justification" (and all that it entails) as an eschatological event, he here speaks of "faith" as a reality that has arrived in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen.

The apostle further unfolds the forensic aspect of justification in Gal 2:17, when he speaks of those Jews who seek justification "in Christ" as being "found" to be sinners. The justifying event necessarily brings judgment with it. This judgment, moreover, is passively received: the Gospel does something more than call for a decision; it *effects* self-judgment, the knowledge of oneself as a sinner (see Gal 2:16, εἰδότες ὅτι . . .). "In Christ" Jews themselves are found to be "sinners," just like the Gentiles: Paul's language in Gal 2:17 obviously recalls the earlier contrast between Jews and Gentiles and announces its overthrow (Gal 2:15).⁶ One finds justification in Christ only as one finds oneself a sinner. The passive slant to Paul's language implies that the converse is true as well: one finds oneself a sinner only as one finds justification in Christ. It is worth observing that the way in which Paul includes judgment within the justifying event excludes the currently popular interpretation of justification as an expression of a saving covenant faithfulness of God. Here as elsewhere, the justification of

⁶ We cannot further explore the apostle's perspective here, which is decidedly different from that in Romans, except to note that it is bound up with his understanding that Christ alone is the promised seed of Abraham (Gal 3:16).

the sinner is inseparable from the justification of God over against the sinner.⁷ That is to say, the event of "justification" reflects the Creator's contention with the rebellious world as to who is truly God.

In context Paul is dealing with the matter of *Torah* observance which has dictated the conduct of Cephas and the other Jewish believers in Antioch—and which has become a burning issue in the Galatian churches: "And if, as we seek to be justified in Christ, we ourselves are found to be sinners, is Christ an agent (*διάκονος*) of sin?" (Gal 2:17). Paul brings to light the unresolved question which lay behind Cephas's failure (and which, we may add, remains for Protestants to this day): doesn't the claim that faith in Christ *alone* justifies promote disobedience to the Law? This question, which is a concrete form of the one Paul raises in Rom 6:1, receives the same immediate, emphatic denial that Paul issues there: "Certainly not!" In both cases Paul answers by describing justification as an event in which those who believe participate: those who share in Christ share in his death and resurrection.⁸

We have suggested already that the expression "faith of Christ" presupposes that Paul understands "justification" as an event, and that this perspective is made explicit in the language of "seeking to be justified in Christ." It is further important to see that Gal 2:18-20 (in which the theme of union with Christ comes into prominence) explicates Paul's statement on justification in Gal 2:17: both vv. 18 and 19 open with the explanatory conjunction *γάρ*. The significance of "being found a sinner," which characterizes justification in v. 17, is clarified in v. 18 by the statement, "For I have destroyed these things," which in turn is interpreted by the (passive!) death to the Law, crucifixion with Christ, and new life which Paul describes in vv. 19 and 20. The reason that Christ is no agent of sin is that believing involves participation in his saving death and resurrection. If we had any doubt that Paul continues to speak of "justification" in these verses, it is removed by v. 21, where he emphatically summarizes his argument: "I do not set aside the grace of God, for if *righteousness* is through the Law, Christ then died for nothing." The context shows that Paul understands "justification" as a sharing in the event of Christ's death and resurrection that takes place by and through faith.

The re-creation of life that is integral to this justifying event becomes apparent in vv. 18-20. Those who believe have "destroyed" sin and the fallen world that it rules: they implicitly act in the very role of God the Creator and Judge!⁹ As we have noted above, Paul obviously regards personal existence as a dimension of the world, and therewith includes it in the *reductio ad nihilum*. The passage anticipates Gal 6:14: "The world has been crucified to me, and I to the world." To

⁷ See the larger discussion in Seifrid, *Christ, Our Righteousness*, 13-93.

⁸ The righteousness-language that appears in Rom 6:7, 13-21 reveals that Paul has not at all left the topic of "justification" behind. The passage in Galatians is distinguished from that in Romans in that it is directed to the particular issue of Jewish identity, and that in it Paul shifts to first-person, singular usage.

⁹ Surely the relative pronoun (neuter, plural) at the opening of v. 18 refers to these realities, just as in Gal 3:22 Paul speaks of "all things" (including human beings!) as having been subjected to sin.

“rebuild those things” of the former existence would be to become a transgressor, for the Law itself has sanctioned this death to itself—so that “I” might live to God (Gal 2:19). The Law finds its purpose outside itself in the Gospel. Paul’s reference to it here also underscores the forensic nature of the justifying event, and prepares for the abrupt and succinct summary, “I have been crucified with Christ.” The question of the relation of the Law to the Gospel also lies behind the concrete issue of Jewish identity with which Paul is dealing, and therefore had immediate, practical implications for his first hearers and readers. The new life had to be expressed in table-fellowship with Gentile believers in Antioch, and in the abandonment of judaizing in the Galatian churches, just as it had once demanded that Paul surrender his accomplishments within Judaism. It is in this light that we ought to read Paul’s continuing statement: “I live, yet no longer I, but Christ lives in me” (Gal 2:20). Paul does not have merely his inward life in view, but his whole person and history, which has now been manifestly taken up in the cross and resurrection of Christ. That is also how we are to understand his parallel statement in Gal 1:24 concerning the churches of Judea. When they heard that the persecutor of the faith had become its proclaimer, Paul says, “They were glorifying God *in me*.” This same is true of his prior description of his conversion when, as he says, it pleased God to “reveal his Son *in me*” (Gal 1:16).¹⁰ Paul’s “person” is not confined to the inner sanctum of his heart, but includes the entire history of his life, the “before” and “after” of his encounter with the Son of God.¹¹ The eschatological reserve that he maintains in this context—he has not yet been raised from the dead—does not diminish the unreversed character of his statements: “I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.” Paul’s “person” has been exchanged for that of another with whom he has been united.

At the same time, the distinction of persons remains: Paul continues as one who “lives in the flesh.” That is to say, he continues to be a sinner, who lives “by the faith of the Son of God.”¹² Christ himself creates the vehicle of faith, by which he comes to and remains with Paul the sinner, who lives in the hope that the justification already given to him in Christ shall yet come to reality in him, that is, he lives in the hope of the resurrection from the dead. In this union of faith, the sinner and Son of God remain distinct even as they are united.

¹⁰ This usage clearly appears in Phil 1:26, 30 (2x); 4:9; 2 Cor 11:10; 13:3. It has its counterpart in Rom 7:8, 17, 18, 20, where Paul speaks of sin “indwelling” him: i.e., not merely inner life, but in his actions—his whole person.

¹¹ One cannot help but think of the sufferings of the apostle and the entire argument of 2 Cor at this point.

¹² Paul uses the term “flesh” consistently in Galatians to speak of humanity in its subjection to sin and death, so that it is highly unlikely that it has any other sense here, especially given the preceding reference in Gal 2:16 (“no flesh shall be justified by works of the Law”) and the following one in Gal 3:3, where he speaks of the Galatians in very much the same way as he does of himself here in v. 20 (“having begun by the Spirit, are you being perfected by the flesh?”). One should recall, as well, his defining statement in v. 17 that those who seek justification in Christ are found to be “sinners.”

Indeed, the very distinction is necessary to the union, since only if *I* am a sinner has the Son of God given himself for *me*.

II. *Luther*

In turning to Luther's understanding of justification, we shall focus our attention on his lectures on this passage delivered August 1–21, 1531, and first published in 1535. Although the breadth of his understanding of justification obviously is not comprehended in this single example, these lectures are a particularly appropriate point at which to sample his thought, not least because they offer the opportunity for a direct comparison with Paul.¹³ As was the case with Paul, we shall have to confine our comments on Luther's lengthy and rich exposition of the text to his statements on justification and union with Christ, which appear here in the first place in the context of a debate Luther takes up with scholastic theology. Aside from a few brief footnotes, we shall also, of necessity, not engage at any length the mass of secondary literature on Luther in which peaks upon peaks and mountain upon mountains arise.

The starting point for Luther's polemic is Paul's statement in Gal 2:16, that a person is "not justified by works of the Law, but through faith in Jesus Christ." This leads Luther immediately to argue (surely rightly) that Paul here has in view the whole Law, and not merely the ceremonial laws. At issue is the nature of justifying faith, which according to the scholastic understanding of grace, required the "form" of love in order to be effective, just as a wall requires the "whiteness" which inheres in it in order for it to be what it is.¹⁴ Love is here regarded both as a "work" demanded by the moral Law and as a gift given to us by God (*opus et donum*), which constitutes the "formal righteousness" by which we inherit eternal life.¹⁵ As Luther puts it in his complaint: "They cannot climb any higher than this cogitation of human reason: a human being is righteous by means of formal righteousness, which is grace which makes one pleasing to God (*gratia gratum faciens*), that is, love."¹⁶ His following description of justifying union with Christ in this context is colored and formed by this debate.

After a brief and scathing aside on the scholastic response to the *via moderna*, Luther takes up his topic: "Where they [sc., the scholastics] speak of love, we speak of faith." Faith is no mere *μονόγραμμα* ("sketch") to which love must add "living colors." It rather apprehends Christ, so that he is the "form" which

¹³ They furthermore represent his second series of lectures on the letter, a remarkable concentration—indicative of his self-described betrothal to the letter as his "Katy von Bora"—when one considers that he primarily taught the Old Testament, lecturing on only seven NT letters in his thirty-three years of teaching. Even further, they both echo the themes of one of his signal 1520 reformational writings, *Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen* (*The Freedom of a Christian*), and serve as something of a surrogate for the tractate *de iustificatione* which Luther planned, but never found opportunity to complete. In short, they provide a very good introduction to his understanding of justification.

¹⁴ Here I cannot help recalling a maxim which a carpenter I once hired loved to repeat to me about the work he was performing in my house, "Caulk and paint make it what it ain't."

¹⁵ LW 26, 128 = WA 40.1; 226, 15.

¹⁶ Cited from LW 26, 127, slightly altered. See WA 40.1; 225, 31–226, 13–14.

“adorns and forms” it. Thus, “Christ is the object of faith, or rather not the object but, so to speak, in faith itself Christ is present.”¹⁷ Luther here overturns scholastic categories, using them for his own purposes. There is no necessity for love to be infused as a quality so as to form faith. Faith inherently possesses its own form that makes it alive and effective, namely, Christ. Is it too much to suggest here that Luther—although he reads the expression “faith of Christ” as an objective genitive—takes up an important aspect of Paul’s thought in this context, namely Christ himself creates faith?

In his following discussion, Luther continues this inversion of the traditional understanding: the faith that is thus formed is therefore a “knowledge” or a “darkness which nothing can see.” That is to say, justifying faith is not something outwardly visible and apparent, like a white wall, or a “faith formed by love,” but rather a “mere cloud” in our hearts. Yet Christ dwells within this faith that apprehends him, in the same way that God was in the darkness at Sinai and in the temple. We trust in Christ, whom we do not see, and who is present to the same degree that he is so exceedingly invisible.¹⁸ This rejection of the metaphor of the “visible wall” in favor of that of an “invisible cloud” is bound up with Luther’s insistence that “formal righteousness” does not have to do with a formal quality which is added to a power, but rather with the union of two “persons.” More concretely stated, it has to do with the distinction between the person of the sinner (who is outwardly visible) and the person of the Savior (who cannot be seen). In the union of these two a radically different ontology emerges, as Luther himself is obviously aware. He finds it necessary to clarify the matter:

Therefore faith justifies because it takes hold of and possesses this treasure, the present Christ. But how he is present—this is beyond our thought, for there is darkness, as I have said. Where the confidence of the heart (*vera fiducia cordis*) is present, therefore, there Christ is present, in that very cloud and faith.¹⁹

Luther is not concerned to explain biblical ontology without remainder, and indeed claims that it is inherently impossible to do so. The same is true in his subsequent discussion of Gal 2:20, where he leaves the scholastic metaphor behind, and describes the union between Christ and the believer with Paul’s more appropriate image of the union of husband and wife (Eph 5:29-31): “Faith couples Christ and me more intimately than a husband is coupled to his wife.”²⁰ This way of speaking, Luther says, is “not human but divine and heavenly.”

¹⁷ LW 26, 129, slightly altered; WA 40.1: 228, 34-229, 15: Sic ut Christus sit objectum fidei, imo non objectum, sed, ut ita dicam, in ipsa fide Christus adest.

¹⁸ I have ventured to differ slightly from LW 26, 130 (“who is present especially when He cannot be seen”): ut maxime non videatur, tamen praesens est, WA 40.1: 229, 20-21.

¹⁹ LW 26, 130 = WA 40.1: 229, 22-25, see 22-23: Sed quo modo praesens sit, non est cogitabile, quia sunt tenebrae, ut dixi.

²⁰ LW 26, 168 = WA 40.1: 286, 16-17. As he subsequently indicates, the idea of Christ as a “form” which adorns faith only crudely expresses Christ’s “clinging and dwelling in us,” LW 26, 167 = WA 40.1: 283, 27-29.

His interest lies in the effect of the union, not in a final definition of it. In his 1520 tractate *Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen* he had made lively use of both the Pauline text and the story of Hosea: Christ, the rich and divine bridegroom marries the poor, wicked harlot, thus redeeming her from all evil. Here he employs the language of marital union in much the same way: just as the believer says, "I am as Christ," Christ says, "I am as that sinner who is attached to me."²¹ For Luther, then, although the nature of this union with Christ ultimately remains in "darkness" beyond our finding out, its reality is not thereby diminished. While his emphasis on the ultimate inwardness and invisibility of the union of the believer with Christ is very nearly an inversion of Paul's emphasis on a new, but unexpected form of life, his view does not oppose that of Paul, but instead focuses upon a dimension of Paul's thought that remains more or less undeveloped in the context of Gal 2:15-21.

Other distinctions from scholastic theology emerge with Luther, of course. In his rejection of the definition of formal righteousness as "faith formed by love," he locates righteousness outside the Christian in "the Christ who is grasped by faith and lives in the heart."²² As with Paul, union with Christ does not do away with the distinction between sinner and savior, but rather is paradoxically dependent on it. Luther's repeated definition of Christianity and Christian righteousness in his lectures at this juncture makes this point quite clear. We are driven to Christ by the knowledge of ourselves gained from the Law, by which we learn to sing, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" and "none is righteous, not even one."²³ This condition does not mark merely the beginning of our faith, but its entire course according to Luther: "Therefore we define a Christian as follows: A Christian is not someone who has no sin or feels no sin; it is someone to whom, because of faith in Christ, God does not impute sin."²⁴ In a manner which closely parallels Paul's thought, union with Christ for Luther irreducibly involves our being sinners to whom God has freely given Christ "as justifier and savior."²⁵

Consequently, Luther speaks of union with Christ in terms of union with Christ in his saving work. At least in the first instance, the significance of the relation lies not in the work for which Christ frees us, but in our continuing participation in the work that already has been accomplished.²⁶ This "historical" conception of the union is especially apparent in Luther's portrayal of justification as a "most joyful duel" (*iucundissimum duellum*). His comments in this context are drawn forth by Paul's statement in Gal 2:19, that "through Law, I died

²¹ LW 26, 168 = WA 40.1; 285, 27.

²² LW 26, 130 = WA 40.1; 28-29.

²³ See LW 26, 131 = WA 40.1; 231, 20-25; see LW 26, 126-27 = WA 40.1; 223, 29-225, 22.

²⁴ LW 26, 133 = WA 40.1; 225, 15-17.

²⁵ LW 26, 132 = WA 40.1; 233, 22.

²⁶ Karin Bornkamm, *Luthers Auslegungen des Galaterbriefs von 1519 und 1531: Ein Vergleich* (Arbeiten zur Kirchengeschichte 35; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1963), 104-5, 135-38. It is this "historical" nature of union with Christ that Luther further develops in the 1531 lectures over against the 1519 commentary where he expresses his thought in terms of Christ's preaching the divine name to us.

to the Law in order that I might live to God." Luther takes the first reference to "Law" as a personification referring to Christ, who in permitting the Law to accuse him overcame the Law and its accusation. Thus, he says:

. . . Paul would like to draw us away completely from looking at the Law, sin, death, and other evil things, and to transfer us to Christ, in order that there we might see this very joyous duel: the Law battling against Law, in order to become liberty to me; sin battling against sin, in order to become righteousness to me; death battling against death, in order that I might have life. For Christ is my devil against the devil, that I might be a Son of God; He destroys hell, that I might have the kingdom of heaven.²⁷

Whatever we might think of Luther's personification of "Law," his understanding of union with Christ as union with Christ's work obviously corresponds very closely with Paul's own decidedly historical language in the text of Galatians. As is the case for Paul, for Luther the "history" of the fallen human being, the sinner, is swallowed up in faith by the history of Christ, namely, his incarnation, cross, and resurrection. Likewise, in a manner that remarkably parallels Paul's thought, Luther employs the category of "*persona*" to describe the human being in all the relationships of the fallen world, particularly as they are apparent to others.²⁸ Christ, in his incarnation and saving work took the "*persona*," the mask of the fallen human being, upon himself and so became the maximal sinner, the *peccator peccatorum*, bearing the sins of all in himself.²⁹ Union with him therefore involves an exchange of "*personae*," in which my life with its history becomes his, and his becomes mine.

Consequently, for Luther, Christ is present as a gift not only because of, but "in" his giving himself "for me." While *favor* and *donum* cannot be separated, they necessarily are distinguished, in that (if we may borrow scholastic categories) *grace* continually informs the *gift*. This abiding relation is apparent in Luther's instruction that it is absolutely necessary that we learn to define Christ properly. He is not a "taskmaster or tyrant," but rather: "He who was completely God gave everything He was, gave Himself for me—for me, I say, a miserable and accursed sinner. I am revived by this 'giving' of the Son of God into death, and I apply it to myself."³⁰ The Christ whom faith apprehends is thus the "dispenser of grace, the savior, and pitier" who continues, precisely in his union with me, to be my high priest, my mediator, my justifier and savior: the language appears again and again in Luther's exposition.³¹ It is at this critical point that Luther's conception of a justifying union with Christ differs most significantly from that of Osiander. The latter treats the work of redemption as an event of the past that serves as a prelude, albeit a necessary one, to a union that justifies on account of the "essential" deity of Christ. Luther, in contrast, understands our union with Christ as a

²⁷ LW 26, 164 = WA 40.1; 279, 23-29.

²⁸ Bornkamm, *Luthers Auslegungen*, 100-105; see Gal 2:6, and, implicitly, 1:13-14, 22-24. "Persona" is capable of signifying an actor's mask, an actor's role or personage, or also the human being.

²⁹ LW 26, 276-78. See WA 40.1; 434, 30.

³⁰ LW 26, 177 = WA 40.1; 297, 19-21.

³¹ LW 26, 178 = WA 40.1; 298, 19-20. On the latter see, e.g., LW 26, 131-33, 137, 176-78.

union with him *in his saving work*. With Luther it is not only that Christ's humanity is included within the scope of the union, but that it is included concretely in the history of his incarnation, cross, and resurrection.

Correspondingly, the believer is constantly dependent upon and supported by God's favor given to us in Christ. The imputation of righteousness, that is, acceptance with God, coincides with union with Christ:

"Because you believe in me," God says, "and your faith takes hold of Christ, whom I have given to you as your Justifier and Savior, therefore be righteous." Thus God accepts you or reputes you righteous solely on account of Christ, in whom you believe.³²

Because of the "natural life" of the believer to which sin still clings, this "acceptance or imputation is very much necessary," says Luther. Only because we grasp Christ are "all our sins no longer sins." In this way God comes to be God in us, and receives "the glory of his deity," which, according to Luther, is "his being the one who dispenses his gifts freely to all."³³ Union with God through Christ paradoxically establishes the *distinction* between the fallen human being and the Creator, who in the cross, as Luther says in another context, ". . . makes out of unhappy and proud gods true human beings, that is wretches and sinners. Since we in Adam ascended to the likeness of God, therefore he has descended into our likeness, in order to bring us to the knowledge of ourselves."³⁴ The deification of the believer in Christ is simultaneously (and wonderfully) the "de-godding" of the human being. Consequently, as Albrecht Beutel has suggested, deification can be understood only as a "fideification." This very language appears, in fact, in Luther's preparatory notes to the Galatians lectures.³⁵

This observation brings us back around to Luther's conception of faith and its place within the justifying union with Christ. In one of the earlier passages that we cited, Luther depicts God as saying to the believer "because you believe in Me . . . therefore be righteous." As Luther goes on to indicate, faith allows God to come to be God *in us*, and to glorify his Son *in us*. This action has two dimensions, which are obviously inseparably bound up with the cross and resurrection of Christ. On the one hand, in this faith in Christ, God comes to be the unqualified Giver of all good things; on the other hand, we sinners therewith "justify God in his Word," which declares us to be so.³⁶ We surrender our "persons" and our "histories," in that we know them to be swallowed up in Christ's history. Only in this way do we enter into communion with God, telling the truth about him and about ourselves. The event of the cross and resurrection thereby becomes an event in us, in which we are reduced to nothing and thereby given new life. As we have seen, for Luther this faith is no mere mental

³² LW 26, 132, slightly altered = WA 40.1; 233, 21-24.

³³ LW 26, 127, 133 = WA 40.1; 224, 28-29, WA 40.1; 234, 5.

³⁴ WA 5; 128, 38-129, 1.

³⁵ WA 40.1; 20, 29-30. See Albrecht Beutel, "Antwort und Wort: Zur Frage nach der Wirklichkeit Gottes bei Luther," in *Protestantische Konkretionen: Studien zur Kirchengeschichte* (Tubingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1998), 28-44.

³⁶ LW 26, 126 = WA 40.1; 224, 15-18.

exercise or existential decision, but a reality in which the crucified and risen Christ is present: we need only recall the signal passage with which we began our reflections: *in ipse fide Christus adest*.

III. Reflections on Union with Christ

While I want to express a word of appreciation shortly, I shall first voice some of my difficulties with the Finnish approach to Luther in the volume to which we are responding. My most fundamental objection is against the tendency on the part of some to dismiss the sort of "relational" ontology which characterized the Luther "renaissance" (Rudolf Hermann, H.-J. Iwand, and others). This move has as its natural consequence a privileging of "participatory" conceptions.³⁷ Am I wrong in thinking that this "participatory" approach starts looking very much in the end like the "substantial" conceptions which most are rightly concerned not to absolutize? Luther's refusal to enter into the ontological question as to "how" Christ is present in the believer surely provides a warning against playing "participatory" or "substantial" ideas off against "relational" ones. Indeed, the attempt to arrive at a definitive ontology is surely premature prior to the eschaton.

I take it that Oswald Bayer is correct when he claims that Luther steered his way between the Scylla and Charybdis of dualism and monism, between a metaphysics of substance (Aristotle) and a metaphysics of the subject (existentialism).³⁸ In the realm of salvation, he overturns the priority that the Aristotelian tradition gave to "substance"—here we must speak in terms of relation—and yet does not jettison the category: God really exists "per se."³⁹ Christ *really is* present in his saving work in a way that cannot be reduced to terms of value, just as his person cannot be defined in terms of substance—nor, I think, in abstract terms of "participation." Obviously large questions of anthropology and theology emerge here, which we cannot explore just now. I simply wish to point again to the distinctively historical cast of both Paul's statements about union with Christ and of Luther's interpretation of them. If I have read them both rightly, the faith which grasps Christ is no mere act of human cognition; it is the new creation itself, and, indeed, Christ indwelling the believer.

Perhaps some concrete examples will help to illustrate my uneasiness with the Finnish approach. More than once, Mannermaa claims that *reductio ad nihilum* does not imply a total annihilation of our person, but only of our constant

³⁷ I am thinking of the contributions by Mannermaa, Peura, and Juntunen in Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, eds., *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 1-20 (Mannermaa); 42-69 (Peura); 129-160 (Juntunen).

³⁸ Oswald Bayer, "Das Sein Jesu Christi im Glauben," in *Gott als Autor: Zu einer poetologischen Theologie* (2d ed.; Tübingen: Mohr-Stebeck, 1993), 112-27.

³⁹ See Oswald Bayer, *Theologie* (HST 1; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1994), 36-42, who points out the way in which Luther presupposes the two categories in his explication of the first petition of the Lord's Prayer: "God's name is indeed holy in itself, but in this petition we ask that it might be holy with us."

effort to be God and to justify ourselves.⁴⁰ But doesn't this claim rob the "historical" and "relational" statement, "I have been crucified with Christ," of its ontological weight so as to deposit it in a "participationist" ontology in which continuity of being is preserved?

In a similar way, Peura, much like the Formula of Concord which he criticizes, constructs his understanding of justification around the believer, to whom Christ is given as both grace and gift. I have no problem with his insistence that the imputation of righteousness cannot be separated from the new creation. But I would argue that his way of approaching the question transposes justification from its primary locus in Christ's cross and resurrection to the believer in a manner that de-historicizes it. As a result, it becomes impossible for Peura to see the priority of *favor* over *donum*, since this distinction is in large measure bound up with the historical character of justification. For this reason, I think, Peura has considerable difficulty coming to grips with the work of Rudolf Hermann, who (rightly, I think) correlates the distinction between *gratia* (or *favor*) and *donum* with the abiding distinction between God and the fallen human being who are united in justification. The "gift" of faith and righteousness remains *dependent* on the giver, who continuously creates faith in our hearts by the word of Christ, thus again and again removing us from ourselves, and so re-forming the temporal reality that is our life into the form of Christ.⁴¹

I have some corresponding difficulties with Professor Jenson's proposals. In light of the preceding considerations, it seems to me that we must say that the story of the Gospel does bear a linguistic and experiential stipulation: God raises to life only where he condemns and puts to death. God's "yes" is found only in his "no," both of which must be echoed in us.⁴² There is no justification of the sinner that is not simultaneously the justification of God in his wrath against us. Our healing lies in our finding ourselves in the one crucified and risen for us. Only here do we find ourselves encompassed by his marital embrace. As the veil that lies upon the hearts of the sons of Israel attests, the hermeneutical criterion of justification cannot be separated from its transformative work.⁴³ I do not at all mean to suggest that we are bound to the language of the Protestant confessions, but I cannot help but affirm that there is an irreducible minimum of content in the Gospel where the human being guilty of sin and condemned meets God the justifier and savior of sinners. I find the term *περιχώρησις*—used since John of Damascus to describe the inner-Trinitarian relations—which Professor Jenson has drawn from Orthodox theology to describe the union of the believer with God in Christ entirely unobjectionable,

⁴⁰ E.g., Tuomo Mannermaa, "Why Is Luther So Fascinating? Modern Finnish Luther Research," in *Union with Christ*, 10.

⁴¹ Rudolf Hermann, *Luthers These "Gerecht und Sünder zugleich"* (Güterloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1930; repr., Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1960), 108-9, 280-83.

⁴² See Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology* (2 vols.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 2:293.

⁴³ See Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 2:291.

and indeed, beautiful and useful in its simplicity.⁴⁴ Yet it seems to me that it inadequately describes the distinction between God and the sinner who interpenetrate one another in union, and consequently cannot bear the ecumenical weight which has been laid upon it.

At the same time, I have to express my appreciation for the fresh emphasis on Luther's conception of union with Christ in Professor Jenson's work and in his English publication of the work of Mannermaa and other Finnish scholars. Much of what we have discussed is commonplace to Luther scholars, even if there are debates over the details (where the devil is said to reside). Yet this understanding of justification is largely alien to American evangelicals, perhaps to Protestants as a whole, and almost certainly to a broad spectrum of biblical scholars. Luther's understanding of justification was distinctly different from the more narrowly forensic conception of Melancthon, which came to characterize most Protestant confessions. In the period 1530 to 1534, between his writing the Apology to the Augsburg Confession and his *Scholia* on Colossians, Melancthon increasingly moved away from Luther toward the strictly forensic conception of justification with which most of us are familiar. The two men were quite aware of the differences between them on this point, and in fact, carried on a series of remarkable debates and discussions in 1535 and 1536.⁴⁵ Luther, it must be said, did not reject Melancthon's view, and in fact, is quite deferential as far as the Greek usage goes. Yet he in no way surrenders the substance of his own view, which, perhaps apart from Johannes Brenz, seemingly was not fully appreciated by those who followed him. Undoubtedly the response to Osiander, "the heterodox father of Protestant orthodoxy," made it even more difficult for early Protestantism to appropriate Luther in this regard, since the two can sound very much alike despite the differences between them. Calvin's decidedly different conception of a mystical union with the exalted Lord came to play a large role in Reformed thought, further obscuring Luther's contribution.

Luther's conception of justification remains essentially forensic, yet he does not think of it as a bare declaration nor as a mere transaction that has been performed on our behalf to be appropriated later. As we have seen in the briefest sort of way, Luther instead finds justification in the divine and human Christ, crucified and risen for us. We have justification only as we grasp him, and, in fact, we have it *in* the grasping of him, whose person is inseparable from his work. Faith thus involves our apprehending—again and again—that work which took place for us in Christ. The divine verdict rendered in Christ was not a bare

⁴⁴ Robert W. Jenson, "Justification as a True Event," *Modern Theology* 11 (1995) 422-27

⁴⁵ See Robert Stupperich, "Die Rechtfertigungslehre bei Luther und Melancthon 1530-1536," in *Luther and Melancthon in the History and Theology of the Reformation* (ed. Vilmos Vajta, Philadelphia Muhlenberg, 1961), 73-88, Lauri Haikola, "Melancthon's und Luthers Lehre von der Rechtfertigung," in *Luther and Melancthon*, 89-104, Robert Kolb, "'Not without the Satisfaction of God's Righteousness' The Atonement and the Generation Gap between Luther and His Students," in *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte, Sonderband Die Reformation in Deutschland und Europa Interpretationen und Debatten* (ed. Hans R. Guggisberg and Gottfried G. Krodel, Gutersloh Gutersloher, 1993), 136-56, Timothy J. Wengert, *Law and Gospel Philip Melancthon's Debate with John Agricola of Eisleben over Poenitentia* (Grand Rapids Baker, 1997), 177-210

declaration, but an effective judgment of God, who gave him over to death and raised him to life. As faith makes Christ ours, so it makes the two-fold divine verdict of death and life with Christ ours. For Luther, furthermore, in a way which we have only brushed upon here, "imputation" itself is no bare reckoning, but a creative word of God, which effects what it says: "Because you believe . . .," God says, "therefore *be* righteous."⁴⁶ The forgiveness of sins brings with it the new creation. Rather than being parceled out into separate divine acts, the whole of the Christian life is thereby located in the one event of Christ's cross and resurrection. We are thus taught where to find help, and are delivered from the temptation of becoming technicians of grace.

⁴⁶ LW 26, 132 = WA 40.1; 233, 21-24.



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