

Theses on Justification: A Review and Analysis

From the Commission on Inter-Church Relations

In May 1983 the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LC-MS) issued a report entitled *Theses on Justification*. This was in response to a 1981 resolution of the LC-MS calling for a study by the CTCR, the joint faculties of the seminaries, and the Council of Presidents of all aspects of the doctrine of justification. The Commission on Inter-Church Relations (CICR) of the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod has carefully studied the CTCR report in the light of Holy Scripture and is pleased to present the following review and analysis.

Format

The *Theses* consist of an Introduction and 11 parts or sections, which present the doctrine both thetically and antithetically. These parts are as follows:

- I. Centrality and Function
- II. Definition
- III. The Nature of Justification
- IV. Man's Need for Justification
- V. The Basis for 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

Individual paragraphs in the document are numbered consecutively from 1 to 60. Our comments follow the order of the *Theses*.

Introduction

The purpose of the *Theses*, according to the Introduction, is to present 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." This purpose, it can be said, has been substantially accomplished. No aspect of the doctrine has been overlooked. Most current aberrations in this doctrine have been addressed.

A commendable feature of the *Theses* is that, as the Introduction notes, "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 history of the church has demonstrated that if a doctrinal statement is to speak clearly, exclude every form of error, and avoid all ambiguity and compromise, it is essential that it present the scriptural truth not only thetically but also antithetically. When doctrinal error rears its head, a competent and effective defense of the truth requires that the error be clearly identified and firmly rejected (Tt 3:10; 2 Tm 4:2-4). The CTCR is to be commended for drafting its statement in this time-tested confessional form.

The *Theses* follow the sequence of the articles in the *Augsburg Confession*. The stated intention that the *Theses* are not "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" has been conscientiously observed.

I. Centrality and Function

“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.” This opening statement of the *Theses* is beyond dispute. The doctrine of justification has been recognized as the article by which the church stands or falls. Our Confessions, as the references cited in the *Theses* indicate, repeatedly call it “the first and chief article.” For that reason under no circumstances dare this doctrine be surrendered or compromised. The antithesis emphasizes that God’s verdict of justification is something that has really taken place. It is no mere figure of speech. It is not a dispensable concept.

The antitheses throughout the document are introduced with the formal and solemn refrain: “It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach...” This strongly suggests to the reader: We do not intend to tolerate any deviation from this sacred truth.

II. Definition

This part of the *Theses* consists of six paragraphs with two sets of antitheses. Paragraph 2 properly emphasizes that “justify” is a forensic, that is, declarative act. It points out that when used to refer to a sinner’s relationship to God, it denotes “a verdict, i.e., a forensic act whereby a person is counted righteous, declared righteous, reckoned to be righteous, absolved, or forgiven.” As the references to Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions which are cited clearly demonstrate, justification is in no way a sanative or medicinal act. It does not involve a transformation in the sinner. The antitheses in this paragraph reject various forms of the view that God’s verdict is based on some kind of righteousness within the person. The point is made that “justify” is often a synonym for “forgive,” which means “to blot out [sins], to pardon” (par. 3). The claim “that forgiveness and justification before God do not involve each other, or that justification and reconciliation are entirely different from each other” is properly rejected.

In paragraph 4 the statement is made, “In normal biblical and ecclesiastical usage the terms ‘justify’ and ‘justification’ refer to the (‘subjective’) justification of the individual sinner through faith.” “Most common” would probably be a better term than “normal” since the latter suggests that the use of “justify” to refer to objective justification is in some way “abnormal.” Though less frequent, it is, nevertheless, thoroughly scriptural as the next sentence in the paragraph clearly states: “...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.”

In view of what is said in paragraph 3 about the overlapping of the terms ‘justify’ and ‘forgive,’ it would perhaps have been well to add the adverb “biblically” in the statement that “theologically justification is the same thing as the forgiveness of sins.” It would also have been well if Romans 4:25 had been included in the references cited in this paragraph for the doctrine of objective justification just as it is cited in paragraph 23.

“Objective justification or reconciliation” is clearly defined as “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” (par. 5). This definition is in marked contrast to that in the unhappy *Common Confession* of 1950, which stated that “forgiveness of sin has been secured and provided for all men” and declared that “this is often spoken of as objective justification.” The pairing of justification with reconciliation indicates that these are synonymous terms—as indeed they are (cf. Ro 5:9,10).

The definition of “subjective justification or reconciliation” in paragraph 6 states that it is “this same forgiveness as it is received, appropriated by, and applied to the individual sinner through Godgiven faith alone (*sola fide*).” This definition is scriptural, clear, and complete.

III. The Nature of Justification (What Happens When the Sinner Is Justified)

The *Theses* here properly point out that when a sinner is justified, two things happen: “a) God does not count his sin against him, and b) God imputes to him the righteousness of Christ” (par. 7). These are two sides of the same coin, two ways Scripture uses to describe God’s wonderful act of justification. These are not two constituent parts of justification, one being preliminary to the other, as some theologians have claimed. Rather, to use the analogy of our orthodox fathers, the act of covering one’s nakedness and the act of putting on clothes are identical.

In justification, according to paragraph 8, *all* sins are forgiven. The one who justifies, paragraph 9 asserts, is God. The antitheses reject the view that God’s verdict of justification is dependent on the fulfillment of certain conditions by the sinner or that a person can contribute anything to his own or someone else’s justification.

IV. Man’s Need for Justification

Man needs justification, as paragraph 10 says, “a) because the offense and guilt of Adam, the first man, have been imputed, or reckoned, to all mankind, and b) because every human being is a sinner by the hereditary corruption of his nature...and sins daily.” Consequently, all people are guilty before God. They owe Him an insurmountable debt and are condemned to hell. Because He is absolutely holy and righteous, forgiveness is possible only on the basis of the satisfaction made by Jesus Christ.

This part of the *Theses* is an essential premise to the doctrine of justification, and in Romans 5 Paul, of course, draws a parallel between the imputation of Adam’s sin to all people and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to all.

The antitheses are directed against the view that God judges all people to be guilty only because of their hereditary corruption and actual sins or only because Adam’s offense and guilt are imputed to them. They reject the claim that Adam was not a historical person or that everyone is “his own Adam” and the false belief that a loving God would not require propitiation and satisfaction before he forgives.

If there is any weakness in this part of the *Theses*, it is in the antitheses. In view of the all too prevalent denial of man’s total spiritual depravity and the widespread opinion that there is some inherent goodness in man, it would have been well to address these issues not only by way of thesis but also antithesis. Bultmann, for example, calls the idea of original sin as an inherited infection “sub-ethical, irrational, and absurd” (*Kerygma and Myth* [New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, 1961], p 7). Tillich rejects the terms “original” and “hereditary” because in his view they are “burdened with literalistic absurdities” (*Systematic Theology* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957], II, 46). For Barth sin is an ontological impossibility. He calls it “nothingness” and denies that it has any “objective existence” (*Church Dogmatics* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1960], III, 3:363). The errors of such influential theologians which have infected so much of contemporary theology ought to be rejected in no uncertain terms.

V. The Basis of Justification

This part of the *Theses* consists of six paragraphs, each of which includes not only a thesis but also one or more antitheses. The source of the sinner’s justification before God is identified as “solely God’s grace in Jesus Christ” (par. 13). This grace is defined as God’s “undeserved mercy and loving kindness, His powerful and active love which sent Christ to be the Savior of the world” (par. 14). This grace is “universal, including all people of all times and places” (par. 15). The basis for the sinner’s justification before God is “the work of God’s only begotten Son in the flesh, His work of obedience.” This includes his “living under God’s law in the place of all sinners” and “His substitutionary, sacrificial, and atoning death for all the sins of all sinners” (par.

16). His death was a penal death, paid as a ransom to satisfy the penal justice of God. By the perfect obedience of his life and death Christ completely expiated the sins of all mankind and propitiated God's wrath.

The antitheses reject the claim that there is grace outside of Christ as well as the Roman Catholic teaching that grace is a divine power infused by God into man which enables him to do good works and to become righteous before God. The antitheses also reject the thought that there is any conflict between saying that "Christ by His saving work *made God* gracious toward the world" and that "God *in His grace sent* Christ to be the Savior" (original emphasis). The latter is sometimes forgotten or even denied by some who view reconciliation as a change in God from wrath to love as a result of Christ's redemptive work. John 3:16 says plainly, however, that "God so *loved* the world, that he gave his one and only Son." His love motivated him to send his Son as our Redeemer, and that love or grace was manifested toward the world prior to Christ's sacrificial death (cf. also 1 Jn 4:9,10; Ro 5:8).

Other errors rejected are the view that grace is extended simply because all are the children of the Creator and not because of Christ's atonement, the teaching that God's grace extends to only a segment of humanity, the opinion that the basis of the sinner's justification is Christ's inherent righteousness as God, and that Christ according to his human nature cannot render to God adequate obedience to substitute for all men, or that his obedience which is the basis of the sinner's justification is that of only his divine nature or only his human nature. Finally, the antitheses repudiate the belief that Christ's condemnation under the wrath of God is a mere metaphor or in some other way not a reality, the claim that Christ has not propitiated the wrath of God, and the teaching that Christ paid the ransom to the devil.

Christ's propitiating the wrath of God does not mean, of course, that all who are born into this world are not still "by nature the objects of wrath" (Eph 2:3). This is so because man by nature is an unbeliever and continues to reject Christ's work in his behalf until through God's Spirit a change is worked in his heart by the Gospel.

To speak of Christ as propitiating, that is, appeasing, the wrath of God is, of course, an anthropopathism. The word "propitiation" occurs three times in the King James Version, namely, in Romans 3:25 for *ἱλαστήριον*, meaning "mercy seat," and in 1 John 2:2 and 4:10 for *ἱλασμός*, meaning "atoning sacrifice." The sense of these derivatives of *ἱλάσκομαι* is expiation (cf. Adolf Hoenecke, *Ev.-Luth. Dogmatik* [Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1912], III, 192–194). Expiation, of course, results in propitiation. Since the antithesis emphasizes that it is unscriptural to teach "that Christ has not propitiated the wrath of God," it would have been well to support this statement by referring to such passages as Psalm 85:3, "You set aside all your wrath and turned from your fierce anger," and Isaiah 12:1, "In that day you will say: 'I will praise you, O LORD. Although you were angry with me, your anger has turned away and you have comforted me'" (cf. also Is 54:7–10).

VI. The Universal and Finished Results of Christ's Work of Obedience

This section is of critical importance in view of the current controversy in the LC-MS concerning objective justification. The *Theses* clearly state that "the whole world of sinners has been redeemed, forgiven, and reconciled to God" in Christ (par. 19), that "for Christ's sake God's wrath against all sinners has been and remains stilled" (par. 20), and that "complete and perfect righteousness and forgiveness have been acquired for all sinners" (par. 21). The key statements occur in paragraphs 22 and 23. There it is said that "God, by raising His Son from the dead, has justified Him...and in Him...has declared...the whole world to be righteous" (par. 22). Objective or universal justification is defined as meaning "that God has declared the whole world to be righteous for Christ's sake and that righteousness has thus been procured for all people" (par. 23).

One is happy to read the explanation, "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 it." If this were not so, there would in reality be no Gospel to bring to a lost world. Then the Gospel would be a conditional Gospel, or, in Paul's words, "a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all" (Ga 1:6,7).

The *sedes doctrinae* are cited, namely, Romans 3:24; 4:25; 5:18,19; and 2 Corinthians 5:19–21. Some references to the Confessions are listed. Although the listing is perhaps not intended to be complete, one misses such a telling one as that in the *Large Catechism*, “Not that he does not forgive sin even without and before our prayer; and he gave us the Gospel, in which there is nothing but forgiveness, before we prayed or even thought of it” (LC III, 88; Tappert, p 432; *Trig.*, p 723).

Although, as has been mentioned in Part II, justification and reconciliation are properly treated as synonymous terms, it would have been helpful to explain positively here in paragraph 19 what reconciliation is. As Paul shows in 2 Corinthians 5:19, God’s reconciling the world to himself is his “not counting men’s sins against them.” Because of Christ’s atonement God now looks on the world as forgiven and righteous.

The antithesis rejects three claims: that it is improper to speak of God being reconciled to man, that man is reconciled to God only when he repents, and that God has redeemed but not reconciled the world. Although no Scripture passage expressly says that God has been reconciled to man, the Confessions frequently assert this or speak of Christ’s death as one that “reconciles God or placates His wrath” (e.g., Apol; III, 1; Tappert, p 107; *Trig.*, p 119; Apology IV, 382; Tappert p 165; *Trig.*, p 225; Apology XXIV, 19, 24; Tappert, p 252f.; *Trig.*, pp 389, 391). The passages mentioned in our comments above under Part V which say that God’s anger has been turned away fully justify such statements. They are also the warrant for the antithesis, rejecting the view 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” (par. 20). It must be remembered that the English word “reconcile” is used in a double sense. At times it means “to appease someone’s wrath” as in the Confessional references above. At other times it means “to change someone’s status.” The latter is the sense of the Greek word *καταλλαγή* as is explained below under Part VIII.

Of particular significance and importance is the antithesis in paragraph 22. This clearly identifies as unscriptural the claim “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.” The denial on the part of some that “by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life” (Ro 5:18, KJV) and that this justification is *ante fidem* cuts the heart out of the Gospel. This was the position of the former Ohio and Iowa Synods, an error never repudiated by them and recently espoused by some within the LC-MS.

When objective justification is denied, faith almost inevitably becomes a cause or condition of justification. The final two antitheses in this section address themselves directly to these false views, namely, “that God’s acquisition and establishment of forgiveness in *objective justification* [original emphasis] is a conditional verdict, depending on faith or any other human response or activity,” and “that it is not Biblical to speak of ‘objective justification.’” It could hardly have been said better.

VII. The Appropriation of Christ’s Righteousness (Justification through Faith)

Part VII, one of the longest in the *Theses*, consists of 14 paragraphs. It is matched in length only by Part IX, which also has 14 paragraphs.

The section begins by citing the *Formula of Concord*, which asserts that “the only essential and necessary elements of justification are the grace of God, the merit of Christ, and faith which accepts these in the promise of the Gospel” (FC, SD, III, 25; Tappert, p 543; *Trig.*, p 923). Good works are excluded as a cause, a basis, or the means of justification.

Subjective justification is described in these words: “Christ’s righteousness and all the benefits of His perfect obedience of life and death are imputed and communicated to the sinner through faith” (par. 25). Key passages from Scripture and the Confessions are cited. The antitheses in paragraph 25 are directed against various views that deny the reality of God’s justifying verdict or the imputation of righteousness. There seems to be some unclarity toward the end of the third antithesis: “That justification is not a real forgiveness or

imputation of righteousness but is merely a manner of speaking applicable to any conception of reality or specific doctrinal content.”

Faith is recognized as the only means by which a sinner can appropriate Christ’s righteousness and the forgiveness of sins. Faith is defined as trust in Christ. The antitheses in paragraphs 26 and 27 reject the view that sinners can appropriate the benefits of Christ by their works, that justifying faith is a mere knowledge of history or a “commitment to Jesus” apart from his work, and that faith justifies because it is assent to the teachings of the church or a work of virtue formed by love as Rome claims.

Paragraph 28 correctly describes faith as receptivity, “like an empty hand which does nothing, but solely receives a free gift.” The logical connection between this thesis and the first antithesis in this paragraph is not readily apparent. The antithesis asserts that it is contrary to Scripture to teach “that reconciliation only refers to a change in the heart and mind of man and to his transformation from a state of unbelief to a state of faith, rather than to the propitiation of God and reconciliation by the death of His Son.” In view of the fact that in Part II reconciliation was identified with justification and defined as the forgiveness of sins, the emphasis given here to its being the propitiation of God is rather surprising, especially inasmuch as the Bible itself does not use the word “reconciliation” in this sense. Much to the point, however, is the rejection in this paragraph of the idea that the atonement is complete only when a person comes to faith or that faith is an activity of man that does something to bring about his justification.

Part VII continues by pointing out that a sinner is said to be justified “through faith alone, without and apart from any merit or works of the law that man does” (par. 29). Good works are “the inevitable fruit of faith” (par. 30). Justification through faith alone “does not exclude the work of the Holy Spirit and the means of grace in the sinner’s justification before God” (par. 31). Faith justifies, not because it is a meritorious or efficient cause or condition of justification, but because it clings to Christ’s benefits. “Faith justifies by virtue of its object” (par. 32). This important point is elaborated in two further paragraphs, and then this part of the *Theses* closes by emphasizing that anyone who does not teach that a sinner is justified alone through faith in Christ “does dishonor to Christ and obscures the Gospel” (par. 35) and that faith is a gift of God worked in a sinner through the means of grace without any cooperation or decision by man (par. 36).

These truths are also presented antithetically. The sinner does not contribute to his justification by his own works, good works do not precede or cause justification, and no one has justifying faith who continues to live impenitently in sin and has no intention of amending his life. Faith is not purely passive in the Christian life, and Christians need to concern themselves with good works and the law of God. In these days of the mushrooming neo-Pentecostal and charismatic movement it is important to emphasize, as paragraph 31 does, that the Holy Spirit will not impart his blessings apart from the means of grace. It is further correctly said to be contrary to Scripture to teach that faith appeases God’s wrath, that believing that God forgives *because* I believe is the same as true faith in Christ, and that faith is in any sense meritorious. The good works of believers do not contribute in any way to their justification before God.

Especially important in view of the controversy concerning objective justification in the LC-MS are the antitheses in paragraph 34. Since this controversy has had some limited repercussions in our own Synod, we quote them in their entirety:

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

- That God’s verdict of justification or forgiveness is a conditional verdict which specifies that justification occurs only when a person believes;
- That conversion or a change of heart is necessary before God speaks His divine sentence of forgiveness, or acquittal;
- That our justification before God is a process that involves not merely the work of Christ but also our own willing acceptance of faith, and that only when the process has been completed is man truly declared forgiven by God;
- That faith somehow creates forgiveness, rather than that it merely receives and embraces a forgiveness already obtained by Christ and offered and distributed in the Gospel;

- That forgiveness or justification before God is the granting of some inherent righteousness which resides in man, whether it be the indwelling Christ or man's own change of mind and will;
- That the redemptive work of Christ only makes it possible for God to pronounce His declaration of forgiveness;
- That the pronouncement of that declaration is done only when a person has satisfied the condition of faith.

It is gratifying to see that in these statements the doctrine of objective justification is carefully safeguarded against every form of error that makes God's verdict of justification dependent in some way on man's faith. It is to be hoped that these clear statements will help the LC-MS to purge itself of the leaven of error that apparently has penetrated into some of its highest circles.

The antitheses in paragraph 36 are directed against the teaching that unregenerate man can choose to accept the gift of faith or make a decision for Christ. With decision theology as rampant as it is these days, especially among so-called evangelicals, the biblical truth that natural man is spiritually dead and impotent deserves the stress it here receives.

VIII. Unbelief, the Rejection of Christ's Righteousness

This part of the *Theses* is an important corollary to the scriptural teaching that God's verdict of justification is, on the one hand, universal and, on the other hand, personally appropriated by faith. Paragraph 37 states, "Just as it is necessary and Scriptural, according to the Gospel, to speak of God as having declared the whole world to be justified for Christ's sake by raising Him from the dead, it is also necessary and Scriptural according to the terms of God's law, to speak of impenitent sinners as not justified and forgiven, but condemned." The following paragraph says that "without faith the redeemed sinner to whom God is reconciled does not have the righteousness of Christ or any of the benefits of His work of obedience, but is condemned by God and lost eternally."

The doctrine of objective justification has been falsely accused of resulting in the error of universalism. The first antithesis in this section properly rejects the teaching that "Christ's work of atonement is of such a nature that even those who do not believe receive justification to life and salvation." The second disavows the belief "that without faith one is not under the wrath of God and eternally lost." The third denies "that it is proper to speak of saints in hell or to use similar expressions in describing justification." One suspects that this third antithesis originated as a direct result of the previously mentioned ramifications which the controversy in the LC-MS on objective justification had on our own WELS.

Let it be said once and for all that we do not teach nor has any theologian of our Synod ever taught that there are saints in hell. This allegation has arisen through a caricature of certain statements in Professor Joh. P. Meyer's commentary on 2 Corinthians entitled *Ministers of Christ* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1963).

On pages 103–104 Professor Meyer writes, "Objectively speaking, without any reference to an individual sinner's attitude toward Christ's sacrifice, purely on the basis of God's verdict, every sinner, whether he knows about it or not, whether he believes it or not, has received the status of a saint."

It should be rather obvious that this is an emphatic statement of the biblical truth that for Christ's sake God has forgiven the sins of all people. That everyone has received "the *status* of a saint" clearly means that in God's eyes he is holy and righteous. "Saint," as the phrase "whether he believes it or not" shows, is not used in the sense of "a believer, one who by faith has appropriated Christ's righteousness." It is used to reflect and paraphrase the thought expressed by the *Formula of Concord* when it says that "God forgives us our sins, accounts us *holy* and *righteous*" (FC, SD, III, 15; Tappert, p 541; Trig., p 921). To be a "saint" means to be "holy and righteous" in God's sight. The German text of the *Formula of Concord* uses the words "*fromm und gerecht*." "*Fromm*," like "saint," is a word that is generally used to describe believers, but, as the context shows, it is here used of sinners as God looks at them as a result of Christ's atonement *before* they have accepted

Christ's righteousness by faith. He regards them as *ἅγιοι*, holy, pure, sinless. The next sentence in the *Formula of Concord* goes on to say that "this righteousness is offered to us by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel and in the sacraments, and is applied, appropriated, and accepted by faith, so that thus believers have reconciliation with God, forgiveness of sins, the grace of God, adoption, and the inheritance of eternal life."

Expanding on his thought, Professor Meyer also writes in regard to Paul's use of the word *καταλλαγή*, "reconciliation," in 2 Corinthians 5:18–21, "We see thus that *καταλλαγή* does not denote a change in the nature of the sinner, in the attitude of his heart. That change will take place when he is led by the Spirit to accept in faith the offered *καταλλαγή*. The change occurred in the standing of the sinner before his Judge. Before Christ's intervention took place God regarded him as a guilt-laden, condemned culprit. After Christ's intervention and through Christ's intervention He regards him as a guilt-free saint. The *nature* of the sinner has not been changed. *God* did not undergo a change, did not experience a change of heart. The status of the sinner was changed" (pp 106–107, original emphasis).

Nowhere does one here read that there are saints in hell or anything similar. Judas and all the rest who are in hell are there because they have through their unbelief rejected Christ's righteousness. They have suffered the fate of which Jesus warned the Jews, "If you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins" (Jn 8:24).

The final antithesis in this section rejects the concept of "anonymous Christians," people who supposedly believe in Christ even though they have never heard of Him. This is an old error, resurrected and repeated in modern Catholic theology by such men as Karl Rahner and Edward Schillebeeckx and popular among ecumenists.

IX. The Gospel and Absolution

This lengthy part of the *Theses* presents a detailed discussion, both positively and negatively, of issues that have disturbed the Lutheran Church in the United States for well over a hundred years. Even before the founding of the Synodical Conference in 1872 a controversy erupted among Scandinavian Lutherans about absolution. Theologians of the Eielsen and Augustana Synods and later the Norwegian-Danish Conference objected to the practice of pronouncing an unconditional absolution on the congregation. They did not believe that absolution is a powerful impartation of the forgiveness of sins but considered it to be only an offer of forgiveness (cf. *Grace for Grace*, S.C. Ylvisaker, Chr. Anderson, G.O. Lillegard, eds., [Mankato: Lutheran Synod Book Co., 1943], pp 156–160).

Paragraph 39 points out that justification is both Christ's work (viz., justification in the objective sense) and the Spirit's work (viz., justification in the subjective sense), and neither militates against the other. Paragraph 40 states that God has instituted definite means through which alone he both offers and distributes forgiveness and salvation and creates in sinners the faith through which these treasures are appropriated. The antitheses reject the claim that God does not convert people and maintain them in faith through these means, that God has promised to save people apart from these means, and that these means do not actually offer and convey the blessings that result from Christ's atonement.

The *Theses* then define the Gospel as "the specific good news of everything that God in Christ has done and is doing for our salvation" (par. 41). The view that the Gospel, strictly speaking, includes laws of God, or an individual's confidence that he really believes that Gospel is rejected. The belief that the Word and sacraments only inform people of the blessing won for them long ago is likewise identified as unscriptural.

These points are elaborated in the following paragraphs, special emphasis being given to the fact that when Christ died for sinners, he died for each one individually. Therefore forgiveness and justification in Christ are to be announced to every sinner personally. It is unscriptural to hold that "the contrite sinner's lack of faith makes it impossible for him to be told he is forgiven and justified" (par. 43).

In view of such pervasive contemporary perversions of the Gospel as faith healing, the social gospel, and liberation theology, it is heart-warming to read the clear rejection of the teaching "that the Gospel promises

and grants not only forgiveness and salvation but also physical healing, material prosperity, political liberation, or other temporal benefits” (par. 44).

The work of the Holy Spirit, as paragraph 45 correctly states, is “not to reconcile God to the sinner,” that is, by his work in the sinner, but “the sinner to God.”

Noteworthy in view of the current controversy in the LC-MS is the statement: “When one speaks of faith or justification through faith, this must be done in such a way that it is clear that faith is logically subsequent, not prior, to the Gospel of objective justification” (par. 46).

Paragraphs 47 and 48 emphasize that both Law and Gospel must be proclaimed in the church and to the world. The antinomian view that people do not need the law to expose their sin is disavowed.

Of special significance is the antithesis in paragraph 48: “It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach: That people can have saving faith in God even though they have not heard the definite Word which tells them that God for Christ’s sake is no longer angry with them.” This antithesis is significant because the Church of Rome, the World Council of Churches, and many others in the visible Christian church do not teach that Jesus is the only name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved (Ac 4:12).

Paragraph 49 asserts that the Gospel or the forgiveness of sins, that is, complete absolution, is to be preached to all and that the distinction between law and Gospel must always be observed, “lest the penitent be further afflicted with the law, or the impenitent be comforted with the Gospel.”

Paragraphs 50–53 are clearly based on Pastor Theo. J. Brohm’s essay on the connection between the doctrine of absolution and the doctrine of justification. This essay was read at the 1860 convention of the Missouri Synod. A Norwegian translation was presented to the Norwegian Synod by Professor Laur. Larsen in 1861 (*Grace for Grace*, pp 156f.). The *Theses* include the critical—and scriptural!—words which became the center of a storm of controversy: “It [i.e., the absolution] powerfully imparts forgiveness and salvation” (par. 52). The antitheses include disapproval of the claim that “the absolution is not a true forgiveness...but merely an offer of forgiveness to those who believe” and that “since we cannot be certain of the true contrition and faith of anyone, we cannot pronounce an unconditional absolution.”

The final paragraph in this section points out that the efficacy of the proclamation or absolution does not depend on man’s worthiness, confession, or faith, but rather, “absolution solicits faith and, like Baptism, creates and sustains the very faith it solicits.” The belief that the proper object of faith is an “inner assurance,” the “indwelling Christ,” or some other inner experience or feeling of forgiveness instead of the external means of grace is properly rejected. Since the days of Schleiermacher this mistaken belief that the assurance of salvation is to be found in an emotional experience of some kind has in various forms infected the church like a cancer and robbed Christians of the objective basis for their faith.

X. Justification and Renewal

This section of the *Theses* deals with the relationship between justification and sanctification or renewal. Sanctification, it is correctly said, always follows justification. “Although the term justification may be used interchangeably with regeneration,...the term must never be confused or used interchangeably with renewal” (par. 54). Neither must faith, which is worked through the Gospel, be confused with contrition, which is worked through the law (par. 55). Sanctification is a fruit of faith (par. 56). Good works “are pleasing to God only because of faith in Christ” (par. 57). Among the passages cited for this scriptural truth is Romans 14:23, “Everything that does not come from faith is sin.” Although this passage is also frequently cited in the Confessions in support of this truth, a more appropriate one is Hebrews 11:6, “Without faith it is impossible to please God.” According to its context, Romans 14:23 does not speak about saving faith but about the confidence and assurance of a good conscience. Rather surprising is the absence of any reference to James 2:14–26, especially in connection with the rejection of the view “that good works are not a necessary result of an individual’s justification” (par. 56). Also rather surprising, in view of the over-all completeness of the treatment, is the omission of any reference to the third use of the law.

The emphasis on the *sola fide* in paragraph 57, which in the antithesis denies that a man is saved by faith and works, deserves to be highlighted in these days when an accord has allegedly been reached between Lutheran and Catholic theologians on the doctrine of justification. Significantly, however, the Council of Trent's anathema on the doctrine of *sola fide* (Session VI, Canon XII) has not been revoked. One can draw one's own conclusions.

XI. Certainty of Salvation

This section is short but weighty. "Every justified and regenerated sinner can and should be certain of his salvation" (par. 58). This certainty rests "only in the once and for all obedience of Christ's life and death and resurrection" (par. 59). It "is mediated only by the Gospel" (par. 60). The claim of charismatics that no one can be certain of his justification unless he perceives in his life such spiritual gifts as speaking in tongues is properly rejected, as is also the teaching that Christians can be assured of their justification before God only if they can recognize the presence of good works in their life. Again, Rome still insists that without a direct revelation from God no one can be certain of his salvation (Council of Trent, Session VI, Canon XVI).

In Conclusion

The CICR recognizes that these *Theses on Justification* have been presented to the LC-MS, as the Introduction states, "for synodwide study and discussion." Although they were not submitted to us for our consideration, nor did we expect this, our study was undertaken on our own initiative because we still have a deep interest in the church body with which we enjoyed a treasured fellowship for nearly a century. In a limited way, as has been noted, its problems concerning this doctrine have also spilled over into our midst.

It may well be that synod-wide study and discussion by the LC-MS will result in some revision and refinement of the *Theses*. An area about which the CICR feels rather strongly is that it would have been well if the concept of reconciliation (*καταλλαγή*) had been more fully treated on the basis of an exegesis of the pertinent passages.

Nevertheless, let it be said that the CICR is extremely well pleased with the document. The weaknesses noted in our analysis do not involve the substance of the doctrine but merely the manner of presentation.

The doctrine of objective justification was the watchword, so to speak, of the Synodical Conference. It was a principal subject of discussion in the organizing convention of the Conference in 1872. It is heartening to discover that on this vital doctrine we and our former brethren in the LC-MS speak with one voice. It is to be hoped that this strong and clear statement will enable them to come to grips with the error that has reared its head in their midst on this doctrine.

As has been noted in the *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, "The matter of interchurch relations...is the real issue separating the Wisconsin and Missouri Synods" (Vol., 45, Numbers 1-2, January-April 1981, p 88). It is our fervent hope and prayer that the LC-MS trumpet will some day soon again give as clear and certain a sound on the doctrine of fellowship as it has given on the doctrine of justification.