



Justification in Its Reformation Context: Beyond Confessional Fundamentalism

CRAIG L. NESSAN

St. Mark Lutheran Church, Cape Girardeau, Missouri

The modern period in theology can be characterized by the erosion of Scripture as the unequivocal foundation for theological construction. Historical-critical interpretation of the Bible has in no small measure hastened this process of erosion. For all of its contributions to understanding the historicity of biblical texts, historical criticism has also led inexorably to the relativizing of scriptural statements, conditioned as they are by historical context, and thus to an undermining of biblical authority.

Fundamentalist literalism emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a strong reaction to this erosive process. Defending the infallibility of the Bible, fundamentalism asserts the truth of its propositions on the basis of the verbal inspiration of Scripture by God. If God has revealed certain propositions to be true, these are the trustworthy basis for building a theology.

Bereft of the fixed dogmatical points of fundamentalism, most modern theology finds itself inescapably adrift in a sea of pluralism. Unable to prove the verity of their starting points, modern theological trajectories multiply exponentially. One can begin anywhere and proceed in any direction when there are no fixed stars. Among those theologies which call themselves post-modern, several exhibit a trend to return to scriptural authority, albeit chastened by the lessons learned from immersion in modern pluralism.¹

¹One might here consider the “cultural-linguistic model” of George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), the canonical criticism of, among others, James A. Sanders, *Canon and Community: A Guide to Canonical Criticism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), or the turn to literary criticism, for example, Robert Altar and Frank Kermode, eds., *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1987).

Within a confessional tradition such as Lutheranism, there exists an additional compass by which one can orient theology. Central to the Lutheran confessional tradition is the fourth article of the Augsburg Confession, the article on Justification, which has been affirmed as the article upon which the church stands or falls. The Lutheran doctrine of justification insists that one is justified before God by the grace given in Jesus Christ and by this grace alone, without the performance of human works. Faith alone apprehends the saving grace of God given in Jesus Christ, faith itself being no work.

Given the centrality of this fundamental Lutheran proposal, how does one appropriate it into contemporary Lutheran theology? Three options might be characterized as follows: First,

one might affirm the legitimacy of the doctrine of justification within its reformation context but go on to argue that contemporary life differs so radically from the early sixteenth century as to severely limit the relevance of this doctrine for today. This way leads to theological relativism. Second, one might insist upon the doctrine of justification as a form of propositional revelation universally valid for every time and place with little regard for historical context. This is the way of “confessional fundamentalism.” Third, one might argue for an hermeneutic which both interprets the doctrine of justification in a thoroughly historical way yet also affirms its validity within the altered horizon of the contemporary world. This essay is a contribution toward the further development of this third option.

I. FROM THE NEW TESTAMENT TO THE EVE OF THE REFORMATION

As the earliest Christian community came to faith in the resurrected Jesus, they were confronted with the task of interpreting the scandalous cross. What does it mean that the resurrected Jesus died a horrible death by crucifixion? Within the New Testament a variety of images articulate the significance of Jesus’ dying work: reconciliation, salvation, sanctification, expiation, satisfaction, forgiveness of sin, healing, illumination, purification, divinization, atonement, redemption, regeneration, liberation, and freedom.² Among these varied images justification takes a prominent place.

The central New Testament passages employing the justification schema come from Paul, particularly in Galatians and Romans.³ Justification imagery derives from judicial usage, the language of the courtroom. One stands before God in violation of the law and fully worthy of conviction for one’s crimes. By the death of Jesus on the cross, however, God justifies the guilty and declares the accused innocent. This declaration takes place solely through God’s grace for the sake of Christ’s death. It is a gift of God to be received only in gratitude by faith. Justification is forensic, patterned after the legal process.

Paul’s key passages are Gal 2:15-21 and Rom 1:16-17. The Galatians text is located within an argument that the gospel to the gentiles was being undermined by the reintroduction of Jewish legal requirements (dietary laws, circumcision).

²Kenan B. Osborne, *Reconciliation and Justification: The Sacrament and Its Theology* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist, 1990) 5.

³Some argue the justification image is rooted in Jesus’ own preaching. See John Reumann, *“Righteousness” in the New Testament: “Justification” in the United States Lutheran—Roman Catholic Dialogue* (Philadelphia: Fortress; New York: Paulist, 1982) 22-26.

Paul insisted that both Jew and gentile are justified before God not by obedience to “works of law but through faith in Jesus Christ.” In Romans Paul elaborated on this same theme in a less polemical context. Rom 1:18-3:20 proceeds to develop how, apart from the gospel, there is no human righteousness before God, neither Jewish nor gentile. In Romans 3, Paul concluded that God is equally God of Jews and gentiles by virtue of their equally having been “justified by faith apart from works of law.” In Romans 4-8, Paul connected the meaning of justification as freedom from death, sin, and law to the life in the Spirit which begins in baptism.

As Krister Stendahl and a growing consensus of Pauline interpreters contend, the correct hermeneutical lens for viewing Paul’s usage of the justification image is that of his defending and

articulating the Christian gospel to the gentiles.⁴ This means Paul's frame of reference was not that of "the introspective conscience of the West" which later came to dominate the interpretation of these texts.⁵ Whereas "law" for Paul meant the proscriptions of the Jewish law regarding diet, circumcision, etc., later interpreters, at least since Augustine, abstracted from Paul's usage a universal analysis of the human predicament and its solution. While justification remained primary for Paul among those images employed to interpret the significance of Jesus' death, the immediate problem to which Paul addressed himself was the inclusion of the gentiles into the people of God through the gospel of Jesus Christ apart from the Jewish law.

In the patristic period, Paul's emphasis on faith was consistently supplemented by the insistence that faith demonstrates itself in works. This tension already exhibits itself in the New Testament, most clearly in James (2:14-26). Among the church fathers a fear of antinomianism revived an avid defense of human freedom, the capacity of the free will to perform good works. At the same time as they agreed on the merciful grace of God for salvation, the apostolic fathers—Justin, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory of Nazianz, Origen, Cyprian, Basil, Ambrose—laid tremendous stress on the performance of good works.⁶ Generally speaking, among the fathers of the first three centuries, the "teaching on justification was inchoate and ill-defined."⁷ It is only with the advent of the Pelagian controversy that justification became more systematically thematized.

The younger Augustine shared much in common with these patristic views.⁸ Then through the controversy with Pelagianism, Augustine sharpened his understanding of the centrality of justification by God's grace. Concomitantly he elaborated his doctrine of predestination and insisted that faith itself is a gift of God's grace. Against Pelagius, Augustine argued that human freedom has been cor-

⁴Cf. Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 26. Cf. also E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 441-442, and J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) 83.

⁵Cf. Stendahl, *Paul*, 85-88.

⁶Cf. Robert B. Eno, "Some Patristic Views on the Relationship of Faith and Works in Justification" in *Justification by Faith: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VII*, ed. H. George Anderson, T. Austin Murphy, and Joseph A. Burgess (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985) 121-130.

⁷A. E. McGrath, *Justitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification, From the Beginnings to 1500* (London: Cambridge, 1986) 23.

⁸Eno, "Some Patristic Views," 125.

rupted by sin, making it incapable of choosing God's way of justification.⁹ Justification occurs by the power of God's grace, which permeates the Christian life from beginning to end. Augustine linked justification by grace (versus Pelagius) to the grace operative in the Christian life (the concern of the fathers).

An issue which becomes of major importance for understanding medieval penitential practice involves the patristic understanding of the forgiveness of post-baptismal sin.¹⁰ Beginning with Hermas, there arose the belief that after baptism the Christian ought not sin. Furthermore, for sins committed after baptism there existed only a single opportunity for reconciliation, i.e., by participation in a *public* penitential ritual. The conditions imposed upon the penitent varied

according to local patterns. Private confession appears not to have been practiced at this time.

A totally different form of penitential practice derived from the churches of Wales, Ireland, Scotland, and England in the fifth to seventh centuries. Originating in the monastery where the abbot/abbess functioned as a spiritual director, this “Celtic form” of penance was both private and repeatable. This is in stark contrast to the “Roman form” wherein penance was public and to be undertaken, if at all, but once after baptism. The Celtic missionaries carried forth their penitential practice to the European continent where it eventually prevailed, officially endorsed by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. Basic to the Celtic form of penance was the private confession of sins which served as an essential historical antecedent for the penitential practice of the middle ages.

Medieval piety was permeated with the issues which relate to the practice of penance.

This increasing religiosity, principally touched off by the horrors of the Black Death and fear of the Turks, was evident in the growing number of shrines and pilgrimages, new prayers and increased use of candles, a renewed popularity of the rosary...and the appearance of the stations of the cross in churches.¹¹

Built upon the Celtic penitential model, justification came to be understood as a fourfold process which takes place within the life of the believer. Peter of Poitiers (1130-1205) first articulated the four elements of the *processus iustificationis* which became normative for the middle ages: contrition, confession, absolution, and satisfaction.¹² Noteworthy is the sequence of the four elements, with satisfaction (for example, fasting, almsgiving, or prayer) to be made *after* the declaration of forgiveness. The danger of this sequence was that absolution often was understood to be contingent upon the performance of one’s penitential obligations. Likewise, wherever the requirement prevailed that one totally enumerate all of one’s sins in confession, forgiveness might be understood as incomplete where one failed to recall and confess each and every sin. Such problems in medieval piety obscured the gratuity of God’s justification of sinners in Christ.

Anselm of Canterbury (c. 1033-1109) sought to reconcile the two attributes of God’s justice and holiness with the reality of human sinfulness. If sinful human

⁹Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (New York: Dorsett, 1967) 366.

¹⁰Cf. Osborne, *Reconciliation and Justification*, 53ff.

¹¹Lewis W. Spitz, *The Renaissance and Reformation Movements*, vol. 2, *The Reformation* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1971) 309.

¹²Osborne, *Reconciliation and Justification*, 110.

beings are to obtain eternal salvation, satisfaction must be made to the holy God. Because human beings are sinful, the satisfaction they themselves could provide could never suffice. Thus only God can make the necessary satisfaction. The incarnation of the God-man is God’s just solution to the problem of a debt owed by humanity and a payment sufficiently renderable only by God. By introducing the theme of “satisfaction” into his notion of justification, Anselm undergirded the medieval penitential system, which transacted in the currency of “merit.” Anselm’s theology translates into penitential practice: as Christ’s sacrifice on the cross earned merit and the performance of good works by the saints accumulated merit, so the penance performed by the

penitent earns merit.

Peter Lombard's (c. 1100-1160) *Sentences* served as the standard theological textbook of the middle ages. Lombard thoroughly systematized the topics pertinent to a discussion of the medieval sacrament of penance: frequency; the interrelationship of contrition, confession and satisfaction; the function of priestly absolution; length of penance; vestiges of sin after penance; penance at the hour of death; general confession; etc. In subsuming justification under the topic of sacramental penance, Lombard established the parameters for the medieval discussion of justification.¹³

Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225-1274) serves as an exemplary representative of the scholastic view of justification. In his *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas followed the established fourfold scheme. Justification is discussed in the section on grace. Justification is grace's first effect while merits are a concomitant effect. Like Augustine, Aquinas interpreted justification as a process of being transformed "from a state of guilt to a state of righteousness."¹⁴ This process involves the infusion of grace which transforms the human will away from sin and toward God. The human being is transformed by the *habitus* of grace which is received by a faith formed by love. Justifying grace not only restores what is lost but elevates human nature toward God.

In the medieval period, justification was conceptualized as a process, rather than in forensic terms. The abuses of the late middle ages proliferated as the earlier insistence upon the gratuity of God's grace shifted to emphasis on human preparation in the justification process. An exaggeration of the human contribution in the confession of sins, performance of penance, or obtaining of merit led to the reformation counter-insistence upon justification by faith for the sake of Christ alone.

II. FROM THE REFORMATION TO THE PRESENT

The church of the sixteenth century was ripe for a reformation of the abuses of its penitential piety. The sale of indulgences was but the most extreme example of how late medieval religiosity obscured salvation by grace. Throughout the ecclesiastical system, sacred power was brokered according to the performance of works to obtain merit: the sale of indulgences for the remission of sins of the living and dead, the sale of private masses, the understanding of the mass as a repetition of Christ's sacrifice, the elevated importance of the monastic vocation, the perfor-

¹³Cf. McGrath, *Justitia Dei*, 94.

¹⁴Quoted by Karlfried Froehlich, "Justification Language in the Middle Ages," in *Justification by Faith*, 159.

mance of penance to secure absolution, the requirement of an exhaustive confession of every sin to insure forgiveness, and the encouraging of pilgrimages and relics.¹⁵ Undergirding this vast ecclesiastical system were the claims made for the ultimate authority of the papacy.

Martin Luther was raised within the milieu of late medieval piety. By becoming a monk, he sought to excel in righteousness according to the established penitential practices. Still his heart found no peace. It was through his study of the Scriptures that Luther attained the insight which became the foundation for his reform proposals. Luther wrote of his insight into the meaning of Romans 1:17:

Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience....At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, "In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.'" There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live." Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.¹⁶

Supported by this fundamental insight into the nature of justification, Luther sought to reform the practical abuses of his time and the theological errors which supported them.

According to Luther, the doctrine of justification was not only the central teaching of Paul but "the universal teaching of all the Scriptures, both of the Old Testament and of the New."¹⁷ It is the doctrine of justification taught in its purity that insures that sins truly are forgiven. Luther, in controversy with the prevailing works-righteousness of the church of his time, broadened the scope of justification, making it the normative principle for evaluating all doctrine and practice.¹⁸ For Luther the doctrine of justification became "the article upon which the church stands or falls."¹⁹

Luther's reformatory impulse found a conciliatory spokesman in Philip Melancthon. Melancthon, who authored the Augsburg Confession (1530) and its Apology (1531), sought to reform the church on the basis of justification and yet worked earnestly to compose formulas which would preserve the unity of the church. Article IV of the Augsburg Confession reads:

It is also taught among us that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merits, works, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith, when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life given to us. For God will

¹⁵For an overview of the chief abuses addressed by the reformers see Articles 22-28 of The Augsburg Confession in Theodore G. Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959) 48-94.

¹⁶Martin Luther, "Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings" (1545), in *Luther's Works*, vol. 34, *Career of the Reformer IV*, ed. Lewis W. Spitz (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1960) 336-337.

¹⁷Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition. A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 4, *Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300-1700)* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984) 148.

¹⁸Cf. The Smalcald Articles (Part II, Art. I), *The Book of Concord*, 292.

¹⁹For background regarding this slogan, see *Justification by Faith*, 320, n. 51.

regard and reckon this faith as righteousness, as Paul says in Romans 3:21-26 and 4:5.²⁰

Justification is totally a divine gift, given for the sake of Christ's death on the cross, received by faith, for the forgiveness of sins. This article critiques all doctrine or practice which obscures the gratuity of what God has done in Christ. Melancthon defended justification by faith alone at every point in order to reform the abuses in Roman teaching and practice.²¹

In spite of the central importance given to justification by Luther and Melancthon, a number of controversies soon erupted within the reformation movement, a clear indication of the precariousness of a theology and practice founded on justification alone. Whereas in the middle ages the standard concept of justification as a fourfold process led to consternation over the role played by the fourth element, "satisfaction," a parallel problem faced the theologies of the mid-sixteenth-century reformers: What is the relationship between the doctrine of justification and the Christian life? Even Luther himself could not maintain a consensus on the nature of justification among his followers. Reformation theologians met with Roman Catholic theologians at Regensburg (1541) and appeared to reach a compromise by articulating a two-fold notion of justification: the imputation of righteousness occurs by faith while an inherent righteousness brings forth good works.²² This proposal ran aground on other themes—church, communion, and penance—rather than directly on the issue of justification. Dissatisfaction with the compromise over justification, however, was expressed by many Lutherans, particularly by Luther himself.

The Augsburg Interim (1548), a provisional decree which sought to temporarily mediate reformation disputes, launched another controversy between contrasting interpretations of justification.²³ Once again at issue was the transition from justification by faith to the renewal of the Christian life, where the Holy Spirit leads one to good works. While this interim agreement was upheld by reformation theologians such as Melancthon and John Agricola (c. 1494-1566), it was bitterly opposed by Mathias Flacius (1520-1575) and others. Had Melancthon and Agricola not surrendered the *sola fide* by consenting to the Interim? Many theologians and pastors joined this fray, which precipitated a split within Lutheran theology between "Gnesio-Lutherans" and "Philippists." Whereas the Gnesio-Lutherans championed without compromise the gospel of justification, the Philippists sought not only to defend the article of justification but also to reach understanding with both Rome and the Swiss reformers.

Similar conflicts about the relationship of faith and works arose over the writings of Georg Major (1502-1574) and Andreas Osiander (1498-1552) and in the antinomian and synergistic controversies.²⁴ The Formula of Concord (1580) was written with the purpose of bringing unity among the competing Lutheran parties.

²⁰*The Book of Concord*, 30.

²¹Cf. the reforming concern of Melancthon's "fourteen points," quoted in Clyde L. Manschreck, *Melancthon: The Quiet Reformer* (New York: Abingdon, 1958) 203.

²²Cf. Bernhard Lohse, "Dogma and Bekenntnis in der Reformation: Von Luther bis zum Konkordienbuch," in *Handbuch der Dogmen- und Theologiegeschichte*, vol. 2, *Die Lehrentwicklung im Rahmen der Konfessionalität*, ed. Carl Andresen (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1980) 102-106.

²³*Ibid.*, 106-108.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 113-129.

The Formula seeks to provide exact definitions as the means for re-establishing harmony.²⁵ Justification in the Formula tends to be reduced to a momentary occurrence, clearly demarcated from what precedes and follows it. In its concern for "linguistic precision" the Formula paved the

way for Lutheran orthodoxy.

Luther's more dynamic understanding of justification, when rationalized by his subsequent interpreters, led to formalized sequences of elements, ironically analogous to the medieval schema of a fourfold process. While the accent shifted to the centrality of justification, the problem of good works in the post-reformation period parallels the question of satisfaction in the middle ages. This led to the articulation of a formal *ordo salutis* in seventeenth-century Lutheran orthodoxy.²⁶ Justification was clearly divided into an ordered sequence of components, such as call, illumination, regeneration and conversion, mutual union, and renovation. This analytical method found its counterpoint in the experiential approach of Lutheran pietism. Where orthodoxy pursued the path of a rational formalism, pietism nurtured a faith felt in the heart and demonstrated in personal conduct.

The Council of Trent (1545-1563) formulated its decree on justification in clear antithesis to the position of Luther and the reformation. This polemical thrust is evidenced most obviously in the 33 canons attached to the decree which detail positions anathematized.²⁷ In the decree itself, the contested issues are set within the broader context of the Catholic teaching on grace. Faith is elaborated as a "disposition" or "preparation" which precedes justification (chapter 6). Justification takes place as a process which is explained according to scholastic distinctions between final, efficient, meritorious, instrumental, and formal causes (chapter 7). Growth in the justification which has been received by grace leads to good works (chapter 10). Faith alone without good works does not suffice (chapter 11). In expressing its position, the Council of Trent not only seeks to refute the errors of the reformers but also to reassert the authority of the church's teaching office.

In spite of the deep differences which separate the position of Trent from that of the reformers, two affirmations were made at Trent which work to close the gap: (1) the insistence on the absolute gratuity of God's grace, and (2) the stress on the complete adequacy of Jesus' redemptive act.²⁸ Building upon the intent of such affirmation instead of the condemnations of the sixteenth century, ecumenical rapprochement has been hastened.²⁹ The definitive position of the Roman Catholic Church on the issue of justification remains that of Trent insofar as Vatican II failed to address justification in any substantial way. This does not mean, however, Catholic theologians have neglected to address the salient issues.³⁰

Among those modern Protestant theologians who have thematized the doc-

²⁵Cf. John F. Johnson, "Justification According to the Apology of the Augsburg Confession and the Formula of Concord," in *Justification by Faith*, 195.

²⁶Cf. R. Buick Knox, "The History of Doctrine in the Seventeenth Century," in *A History of Christian Doctrine*, ed. Hubert Cunliffe-Jones, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) 431-433.

²⁷Henricus Denzinger and Adolfus Schoenmetzer, eds., *Enchiridion Symbolorum: Definitionum et Declarationum de Rebus Fidei et Morum*, 36th ed. (Freiburg: Herder, 1976) 378-381.

²⁸Cf. Osborne, *Reconciliation and Justification*, 188-190.

²⁹Cf. Karl Lehmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg, eds., *Lehrverurteilungen—kirchentrennend?* vol. 1, *Rechtfertigung, Sakramente und Amt im Zeitalter der Reformation und heute* (Freiburg: Herder, 1987).

³⁰Cf. Avery Dulles, "Justification in Contemporary Catholic Theology," in *Justification by Faith*, 256-277.

trine of justification, prominence can be given to Albrecht Ritschl and Karl Barth.³¹ For all the distinctiveness of their positions, both Ritschl and Barth would clearly ground the doctrine of

justification in christology and orient it toward its consequences for the Christian life (sanctification). The Luther renaissance of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also gave renewed attention to the importance of justification. North American Lutheran theologians who recently have given serious consideration to the doctrine of justification include Carl E. Braaten, Gerhard O. Forde, Eric W. Gritsch, and Robert W. Jenson.³²

III. THE USE OF JUSTIFICATION IN CONTEMPORARY LUTHERAN THEOLOGY

1. *Justification as a Critical Principle.* Study of the history of doctrine reveals that justification has emerged as an issue of particular importance at three moments in Christian history. Paul, Augustine, and Luther are the three major figures who articulated justification according to the particularities of their historical contexts.

It is important to note the distinctiveness of the three situations in which justification became the central issue. For Paul and the earliest church, justification was the metaphor chosen to argue for the incorporation of gentiles into the Christian church apart from obedience to the Jewish law. For Augustine, at issue was the Pelagian over-estimation of the role of the human will in attaining salvation. To counter Pelagius, Augustine developed his teaching not only about justification but also about predestination and original sin. For Luther and the reformers, justification by faith became the basis for criticizing the works-righteousness of late medieval theology and practice, especially the practice of penance. Due to the particularity of context, justification found varied expressions at these three moments.

In each of these three historical periods, however, justification emerged as a necessary corrective to prevailing Christian doctrine by insisting that salvation is God's work alone through the mercy shown to humanity in Jesus Christ. By functioning as a critical principle, the doctrine of justification helped preserve the gospel character of the Christian message.

It is also important to recognize there have been extended periods of Christian history wherein the doctrine of justification was neither at issue nor explicitly thematized. Other images descriptive of the Christian salvific message have seemed more appropriate and convincing at a given moment in history. The concept of liberation appears to be such an image in the contemporary world. At the same time, the doctrine of justification stands ready to correct formulations which obscure the gratuity of God's accomplishment in Christ. Since the time of the reformation, Lutheran theology has acted as a guardian of this critical principle.

2. *Justification and Sacramental Presence.* Granting the importance of justifica-

³¹Cf. Albrecht Ritschl, *The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation: The Positive Development of the Doctrine* (Clifton, NJ: Reference Book Publishers, 1966) and Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 4/1, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956) 514-642.

³²Cf. Carl E. Braaten, *Justification: The Article by Which the Church Stands or Falls* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), Gerhard O. Forde, *Justification by Faith: A Matter of Death and Life* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), and Eric W. Gritsch and Robert W. Jenson, *Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and Its Confessional Writings* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976).

tion by faith alone as the critical principle of Christian doctrine, Carl J. Peter has argued for a second principle to ensure the affirmation of God's real presence where it manifests itself within history. Peter calls this the "Principle of Respect for the Divine in its Concrete Realizations."³³ This formulation follows the distinction made famous by Paul Tillich between the Protestant

principle and Catholic substance.

It should be regarded as the Protestant principle that, in relation to God, God alone can act and that no human claim, especially no religious claim, no intellectual or moral or devotional “work,” can reunite us with him.³⁴

The Protestant principle, which Tillich derives from the doctrine of justification, prevents “profanation” and “demonization” from destroying the church.³⁵ Tillich proceeds to argue, however, that the Protestant principle, in order to function critically, must act in relation to what he calls “Catholic substance.” Catholic substance refers to the affirmation of a real spiritual presence in culture and history.

Luther and Lutheranism have historically affirmed, in contrast to other reformed churches, that the finite can be the bearer of the infinite (*finitum capax infiniti*). This principle refers directly to the sacramental character of baptism and the Lord’s supper as earthly means of grace in which the divine manifests real presence. The prototype for all Christian affirmations of sacramental presence is the incarnation of the divine in the flesh of Jesus of Nazareth.

Further, the Scriptures indicate the “sacramental presence” of the divine in a variety of expressions. The Old Testament witnesses to the revelation of God within history—in creation, the exodus from Egypt, at Sinai, through the prophets, etc. The New Testament images of the church as the body of Christ, with Christ as the head of the body and the body manifesting spiritual gifts, indicates a real sacramental presence of the divine through the church (1 Cor 12). The canonical Scriptures “are the written Word of God. Inspired by God’s Spirit speaking through their authors they record and announce God’s revelation centering in Jesus Christ.”³⁶

A “sacramental presence” of God’s Spirit is also mediated through the ministry of the church. Proclamation by a preacher in a congregation manifests the presence of God’s living word today. In the Smalcald Articles (IV), Luther speaks of “the mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren” as well as absolution as expressions of the gospel. Christians are to act as “little Christs” to one another, according to Luther. Jesus himself states that those who minister to “the least of these” minister to him (Matt 25:31-46).

An affirmation of the real sacramental presence of God in history is the necessary thesis to which the critical principle reacts. Sacramental presence may manifest itself in the church, in nature, in art, in community, in liberation movements, in all the various historical means at God’s disposal. That any single affirmation of sacramental presence may become demonic or idolatrous demonstrates the necessity of the critical principle of justification. This does not,

³³Carl J. Peter, “Justification by Faith and the Need of Another Critical Principle,” in *Justification by Faith*, 310.

³⁴Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, *Life and the Spirit; History and the Kingdom of God* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1963) 224.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 245.

³⁶Constitution of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America 2.02c.

however, negate the real sacramental presence of the divine through earthly vehicles. The critical principle functions to insist human salvation takes place by the grace of God given in Jesus

Christ received by faith alone. When earthly means usurp the place of God in Christ as guarantor of human salvation—be they the Jewish law, the human will, penitential piety, bishops, liberation movements, or the Bible itself—the critical principle functions to return the focus to grace alone by faith alone for the sake of Christ alone. Where, however, history acts as a proper vehicle for the sacramental presence of God leading to salvation in Christ, the critical principle must accede to affirmation.

3. *Justification and Confessional Fundamentalism.* Even a doctrine as central to the Christian faith as justification, if applied as the single and exclusive criterion of orthodoxy, can lead to sectarianism. It has been argued that justification functions properly as a critical principle testing the adequacy of claims to the sacramental presence of God's Spirit in the world. The rhetoric of justification has gained special prominence at three particular junctures within history.

The recent proposal that the doctrine of justification possesses a "metalinguistic character" therefore needs to be examined very carefully.³⁷ This explanation of the character of justification appears as an innovation from historic usage. Insofar as it means justification functions as a critical principle within a given historical moment, to speak of justification as bearing "metalinguistic character" is but an original way of explaining its traditional significance. There is a danger, however, if "metalinguistic" means that justification exists as a metaphysical truth, transcendent from the historical plane. If this is what is meant by justification—a higher level truth, separated from history, having a priority in the divine hierarchy of truths—and if this usage is defended on the basis of the Lutheran confessions, then the stage is set for justification to become a new form of fundamentalism, a confessional fundamentalism. Similarly the championing of justification as "the article by which the church stands or falls," devoid of a serious consideration of the historical context of this sixteenth-century slogan, can lead to a dangerous absolutizing of its meaning.

Viewed in the light of tradition and of development of doctrine, the doctrine of justification required clarification by reference to historical position and theological context....To call it "the doctrine by which the church stands or falls" apart from this historical position and theological context was to misinterpret the place of the Reformation in the ecumenical history of the church, to which it continued to pledge its allegiance.³⁸

The use of the historical-critical method for biblical interpretation has protected most of Lutheran theology from biblical fundamentalism. Neglecting to apply the same historical-critical method to the categories of confessional Lutheranism can, however, open the door to a uniquely Lutheran form of fundamentalism, one based on its confessions. Much of the nascent polemic within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America mimics the conventional arguments of biblical fundamentalists, this time from a confessional foundation.³⁹ Fundamental-

³⁷See for example, Gritsch and Jenson, *Lutheranism*, 42-44.

³⁸Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Melody of Theology: A Philosophical Dictionary* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1988) 146.

³⁹For the following, see James Barr, *Fundamentalism* (London: SCM, 1977) 11-39.

ism prides itself in its exclusive possession of the truth. Fundamentalists are the "true Christians"

(cf. “true Lutherans”) in combat against “nominal Christians.” They defend the true gospel against those taken captive by liberal or modernist ideas. Denominations are populated mostly by those who are nominal, among whom the “true Christians” are but a remnant. They are the preservers of the “true tradition” within their denomination. Parachurch organizations are formed to carry out the task of purifying the church of false gospels. The foundation of fundamentalist theology rests upon the conviction that the Bible is the source of propositional truths, truths which transcend their historical rootedness, truths which derive directly from the mind of God. To make a parallel claim for the metaphysical character of justification is to succumb to a fundamentalism based on the sixteenth-century confessional writings.

It would be caricature to accuse any contemporary Lutheran theologian of explicitly adhering to the views presented in this form. There is a tendency toward such a position, however, and it is most frequently buttressed with reference to the doctrine of justification.⁴⁰ Wherever the doctrine of justification is elevated to the level of metaphysical truth, it becomes itself in need of critique: one is not saved by pure doctrine but only by the grace of God given in Jesus Christ received by faith. Christ’s own justifying work on the cross precludes a sectarianism deriving from an exaggerated and transhistorical application of the doctrine of justification.

4. *The Task of Contemporary Lutheran Theology.* A contemporary Lutheran theology, if it is truly to be both evangelical and catholic, is faced with a twofold task. Certainly it needs to carry out its critical work of examining all claims for a sacramental presence of the divine according to its *evangelical* principle, justification by grace through faith alone. But an *evangelical-catholic* theology must also undertake the constructive task of articulating its catholic substance, where it affirms the spirit of God to be manifesting itself within the world today. It is to this constructive task that Lutheran theologians must increasingly turn if they are to avoid being confined to the debates of the sixteenth century, no matter how instructive these might be. Merely to shout louder the slogans of the reformation makes everyone deaf (and eventually mute).

Wolfhart Pannenberg has argued that Protestant theology has become anachronistic in its continued insistence that the most urgent problem in contemporary life is “guilt consciousness.”⁴¹ A moralizing approach to the problem of guilt misreads the contemporary mind and offers the answer of “justification” to a question few people are asking. Today the preacher must first manufacture for people that sense of guilt consciousness, and then week after week resolve it by proclaiming recycled images of justification. Pannenberg writes:

Such a negative judgment, finally, does not mean we must reject the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith. In late medieval penitential piety this doctrine effectively expressed Christian freedom from the power of sin and death, as well as from all human authority, through acceptance of the divine promise. We must realize, however, that this concept of Christian freedom was couched in the language of penitential piety and therefore remained bound by its limitations....If

⁴⁰Cf. the editorial position of *Lutheran Forum*; for example, Paul R. Hinlicky, “The Crisis in American Lutheranism Today,” *Lutheran Forum* 22 (Aug., 1988) 8-12.

⁴¹Wolfhart Pannenberg, “Protestant Piety and Guilt Consciousness,” in *Christian Spirituality* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983) 13-30.

there is to be a new manifestation of the spirit of liberation and the joy of being redeemed from an inauthentic life (things whose absence Nietzsche so sarcastically noted in Christian attitudes), a break with the traditional penitential mentality is as inevitable as a quest for new forms of Christian piety and life.⁴²

Pannenberg's own constructive proposal is for a revitalized eucharistic piety. He encourages a renewed recognition of real sacramental presence in the eucharist. A church invigorated by a new eucharistic awareness can recover communal and eschatological dimensions lost in the individualistic approach to justification given with the penitential mentality.

Pannenberg's encouragement of eucharistic piety is a positive contribution to constructing a theology which is catholic in its affirmation of sacramental presence. While justification conceptuality is to be valued and applied, other images can prove particularly helpful in expressing the Christian salvific message on the contemporary scene. For example, the disparity between rich and poor in the contemporary world and the acute problem of hunger require that a contemporary theology pay attention to the issue of social justice in a way the sixteenth century reformers did not.⁴³ Thus the image of "liberation" is extremely valuable in communicating the Christian gospel in the contemporary world. Similarly, to articulate the relationship between justification and justice becomes essential in a world marked by extreme forms of political and economic oppression. While preserving its critical principle, contemporary Lutheran theology becomes not only evangelical but also catholic as it discovers appropriate images for expressing the real sacramental presence of God in history today.

5. *Toward a Historical Hermeneutic of Justification.* Doctrines do not originate apart from a particular historical context. There are no metaphysical truths to which we have access apart from the ambiguity and contingency of history. To study any doctrine, including the doctrine of justification, is to become entangled in a complex web of historical causes and consequences. The doctrine of justification, for example, was uniquely shaped by the particular configuration of issues at work during each of the three moments when it arose to prominence.

Thus when theology calls upon the history of doctrine to argue for its constructive proposals, as it must do, it also must proceed by employing an hermeneutic appropriate to its historically conditioned subject matter. In relation to Scripture, theology has greatly benefited from the historical-critical study of the Bible, relentless in its pursuit of the historicity of the text and its setting. Doctrines likewise are embedded within history. They are intelligible and cogent because of (not in spite of) the historical factors which shaped their development. Theology violates the integrity of doctrine when it rips doctrine out of context in order to absolutize it.

The contemporary theologian is also immersed within the particularity of a given time and place. The task of theology today is not only to read the traditions of the past in a thoroughly historical way but also to interpret the dynamics of the present with as much acumen as time and skill allow. Theology must devote itself with equal passion to understanding the needs of the present world and to recovering the tradition of the past.

⁴²Ibid., 29-30.

⁴³See the critique of Luther's position on the peasant revolt by Jens Glebe-Moeller, *Jesus and Theology: Critique of a Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) 117-132.

Tradition becomes an idol, accordingly, when it makes the preservation and the repetition of the past an end in itself; it claims to have the transcendent reality and truth captive and encapsulated in that past, and it requires an idolatrous submission to the authority of tradition, since truth would not dare to appear outside it.⁴⁴

An adequate theological hermeneutic seeks to be attentive both to God's revelation in past history and to the traces of God in the present world.

In Germany, the Ecumenical Working Group of Evangelical and Catholic Theologians has rendered a major contribution toward the development of a thoroughly historical hermeneutic of the doctrine of justification.⁴⁵ In interpreting the central issues—such as the effects of original sin, the meaning of concupiscence, the passivity of the human over against God's justifying action, or the relationship between forensic justification and subjective appropriation—the condemnations of the sixteenth century prove themselves no longer able to bear the church-dividing weight they once did. Within the shared horizon of the present, one can better see the polemic of the past—often directed against the extreme position of the opponent, often couched in mutually contradictory conceptual categories, often so intent on defending its own truth that it could not listen to the other viewpoint. Instead one seeks today to understand the intention of the opposing argument and, wherever possible, to see conflicting standpoints as representing complementary insights, not mutually exclusive ones.

Does such a thoroughly historical hermeneutic not succumb to a relativism which permits no normative assertions? Jaroslav Pelikan poses the question this way:

How, then, may we acknowledge the human, all-too-human nature of the traditions that are our intellectual, moral, political, and spiritual heritage, and nevertheless (or perhaps even therefore?) affirm those traditions as normative and binding, and go so far as to call them, in some meaningful sense, sacred?⁴⁶

An answer to this question rests with the conviction that the God who was alive in the past—revealed in the history related in the holy Scriptures, disclosed within the contingencies of church history, manifested in creation and culture in various ways—is still alive and acting in the contemporary world.

The critical principle of justification assists the Christian theologian in determining whether claims for God's sacramental presence are consistent with what has been revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The critical principle of justification guards against the idolatry of false claims to the Spirit's presence. The critical principle insists salvation comes by grace alone, on account of Christ alone, through faith alone. But the God who creates, redeems, and sanctifies works to bring that grace, to bring Christ, to bring faith through a host of historical means. To some of these, like preaching, baptism, and holy communion, is attached a particular promise. But the God who is sovereign over history is forever active in history to accomplish salvation. "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us" (2 Cor 4:7).

⁴⁴Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven: Yale, 1984) 55.

⁴⁵For the following, see Lehmann and Pannenberg, eds., *Lehrverurteilungen—kirchentrennend?*, esp. pp. 48-63.

⁴⁶Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition*, 51.