Word & World 3/4 (1983)

The Catechism's *Simul*

JAMES ARNE NESTINGEN
Luther Northwestern Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota

Luther's expression of the *simul iustus et peccator* in the Small Catechism strikes such a strange impression that it is in danger of becoming hackneyed. It is seized upon by some as evidence of Luther's disregard for moral improvement, and taken by others as a watchword. Either way, the theological underpinnings of this great phrase at the beginning of the explanation of the third article—"I believe that I cannot by my own understanding or effort believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him"—are in need of some further consideration.

I. THE LORDSHIP OF THE CRUCIFIED

In order to see the force of this "I cannot," it is necessary to begin with Luther's explanation of the second article in the catechism. In both the Small and the Large, he sums up his declaration of the person and work of Christ in terms of lordship. In the Small Catechism, this summary is the lead phrase: "I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, son of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord."[1] In the Large Catechism, Luther is able to give a more developed presentation of how he is using this word.

> If you are asked, "What do you believe in the Second Article, concerning Jesus Christ?" answer briefly, "I believe that Jesus Christ, true Son of God, has become my Lord." What is it to "become a Lord?" It means that he has redeemed me from sin, from the devil, from death and from all evil. Before this I had no Lord and King but was captive under the power of the devil. I was condemned to death and entangled in sin and blindness.[2]

The word *Lord,* in Luther's usage as in the New Testament, is a power term. While the connection is generally lost in English, the Latin shows it clearly—the word for Lord is *dominus,* the root of our word to take dominion or dominate, to literally "lord it over" someone.

[1]*The Book of Concord: The Confessional Writings of the Evangelical Lutheran Church,* Theodore G. Tappert, ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959) 345.
[2]Ibid., 414.

Not surprisingly, then, Luther's discussion of Christ's lordship in the Large Catechism is full of language of conflict. To become our Lord, Christ took on the powers of bondage and death to overcome them.

> Those tyrants and jailers have been routed, and their place has been taken by Jesus Christ, the Lord of life and righteousness and every good and blessing. He has snatched us, poor lost creatures, from the jaws of hell, won us, made us free, and restored us to the Father's favor and grace. He has taken us as his own, under his protection, in order that he may rule us by his righteousness, wisdom, power, life and blessedness.[3]

Whatever might be said about Gustaf Aulén's methodology, here the "classical motif"—the *Christus Victor*—is unambiguously clear.[4]

It is the power of Christ's lordship that he transfers us from an alien field of force to his own, deposing the other powers which have held us to place us under his control. All the rest of the explanation of the second article is to be understood in these terms.

> Let this be the summary of this article, that the little word "Lord" simply means the same as Redeemer, that is, he who has brought us back from the devil to God, from death to life, from sin to righteousness, and now keeps us safe there. The remaining parts of this article simply serve to clarify and express how and by what means this redemption was accomplished—that is, how much it cost Christ and what he paid and risked in order to win us and bring us under his dominion.[5]

The force of this transfer of powers is evident in a seldom noticed but crucial transition in Luther's explanations of the first and second articles in the Small Catechism. The first article's explanation ends on an imperative: "All this he does out of pure, fatherly and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness on my part. For all of this I am *bound* [or in the contemporary version "I ought"] to thank, praise, serve and obey him."[6]

Luther uses this imperative in a double sense. At one level, it describes the actual conditions of daily life. In order to obtain food and clothing, for example, a person must do something worthwhile for the neighbor—either render some service or at minimum, pay the price. No matter how unwitting or begrudging, this benefit for the neighbor is a form of service to God.

But over and above the description level of the *ought,* there is a prescription. Gifted by God with the necessities of life, a person stands under obligation to be of service to God, the neighbor, and the earth. And this obligation holds for all, no matter what creed, or condition. The imperative is grounded in the creation itself, as a constitutive requirement of life.

This *ought* in both its senses is at the same time the basis of indictment. In parallel to the First Commandment, Luther always considered the First Article the most difficult in the creed to believe.

> Much could be said if we were to describe in detail how few people believe

[3]Ibid., 414.
[4]Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor* (London: SPCK, 1950).
[5]*BC* 414.
[6]Ibid., 345.

> this article. We all pass over it, hear and recite it, but we neither see nor consider what the words enjoin on us. For if we believed it with our whole heart, we would also act accordingly, and not swagger about and brag and boast as if we had life, riches, power, honor, and such things of ourselves, as if we ourselves were to be feared and served. This is the way the wretched and perverse world acts, drowned in its blindness, misusing all the blessings and gifts of God solely for its own pride and greed, pleasure and enjoyment, and never once turning to God to thank him or acknowledge him as Lord and Creator.[7]

It is so difficult because in the First Article as in the First Commandment, the godness of God is at stake—God's disposal of our lives and our futures, the control God exercises. God approaches us in the demands made upon us by our neighbors, in the conditions which shape each day, as well as in the overarching summons to service. Doing so, God exposes the rebellion against him at all levels—in the conviction that the neighbor's demands are baseless or exorbitant, in the desire to take control ourselves and reshape each day according to some personal standard, finally in the attempt to have the self on the self's own terms.

But as Luther turns from the first to the explanation of the second article, the ought—with both its demands and its accusations—disappears. For Luther as for Paul, "Christ is the end of the law, that everyone who has faith may be justified" (Rom 10:4):

> when Paul says that through Christ we have been set free from the curse of the law (Gal. 3:13), he is certainly speaking about the entire law, and especially about the moral law. It alone actually accuses, curses and condemns consciences....
> Therefore we say that the law of the decalog has no right to accuse and terrify the conscience in which Christ reigns through grace, for Christ has made this right obsolete.[8]

The law is one of the spoils of Christ's victory. Becoming our Lord, he is the law's *terminus,* its stopping point! To put an ought at the end of the explanation of the second article would be to deny not only the purpose of his death and resurrection, but ultimately his eschatological lordship over all things. If the ought is left, he literally died for nothing (Gal 2:21).

The ought does not simply evaporate, however. In Luther's explanation of the second article, it is transformed into something entirely different, a *may.* Jesus underwent his death and resurrection "in order that I *may* be his, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness, even as he is risen from the dead and lives and reigns to all eternity."[9]

The English word *may* carries connotations of capability, permission or probability. Luther's German construction, a passive imperfect subjunctive, is more forceful. The subjunctive indicates purpose or result, the passive imperfect describing a new reality which has been created as the result of action completed by someone else in the past. The force of the *may* in the explanation of the sec-

[7]Ibid., 413.
[8]Martin Luther, "Lectures on Galatians (1535)," *Luther's Works* (55 vols.; St. Louis: Concordia;

Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-76) 26.413.

[9]*BC* 345.

ond article, then, is to say that Christ died to make me his, to create a new situation in which I will be his, live under him in his kingdom and actually serve him.

This is the effect of the transfer undertaken by Christ. In Luther's terms, Christ has broken into the realm ruled by sin, death, and the devil to recapture the rebels held there, thus reclaiming his own. In the cross and the resurrection, Jesus has taken the rebellion upon himself to put it to its end and establish his own rule.

For Luther, unlike some of his heirs, this is no mere theoretical transfer. It is a down-to-earth reality taking place in everyday life. Though the language and even the concept of justification by faith is completely missing in both the Small Catechism and the Large,[10] this is what is at stake in the doctrine of justification and this explanation: the work of Christ in the life of the believer and his creation.

The structure of Luther's thought at this point is evident in a set of theses written some years after the catechisms, the Antinomian Disputations. Arguing with Johann Agricola, a friend who had become an adversary, Luther speaks of a double effect of the transfer accomplished in Christ:

> For the law as it was before Christ, certainly accusing us, under Christ is placated through the remission of sins and therefore is to be fulfilled in the Spirit.
> Thus after Christ, in the future life, will then be fulfilled even that new creature which [the law] in the meantime demanded.
> Therefore the law in all eternity will never be abolished but will remain either to be fulfilled in the damned or already fulfilled in the blessed.[11]

The transfer occurs as a down-to-earth event in the forgiveness of sin. This is the fundamental force of the transfer. Christ reveals himself as Lord in the particular, by taking upon himself the consequences of our own rebellion and canceling out the accusation, the guilt engendered. He breaks into the *incurvatus in se*—the self-enclosed circle where guilt and fear preside—to turn it open. The accusing voice of the law which attacks in the conscience is silenced through the forgiveness he unconditionally grants. The law is then placated, not in some cosmological exchange or abstract compensation, but here and now, in the conscience. No matter how well based or just the accusation sounded by the law might be, the one against whom the rebellion is ultimately directed meets it in the word of release.

Another effect of the transfer can be distinguished, though it is inseparable from the event of forgiveness. The law which has been placated by Christ in the conscience is "to be fulfilled by the Spirit." In another section of the Antinomian Disputations, Luther speaks of how this happens:

> But in truth, faith in Christ justifies, alone fulfills the law, alone does good works, without the law.

[10]This absence is noted by Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966) 226.

[11]*D. Martin Luthers Werke* (Weimar: Herman Bohlaus Nachfolger, 1883) 39/1.349f.; hereafter cited as *WA*. As important as they are, the Antinomian Disputations have never been translated into English.

> It alone accepts the remission of sin and spontaneously does good works through love.
> Truly, it is after justification [that] good works follow spontaneously without the law, that is, without the help and coercion [of the law].
> In sum, the law is neither useful. nor necessary, not for justification or for good works, much less salvation. But on the other hand, justification, good works and wholeness are necessary to the fulfillment of the law. For Christ came to save that which was lost and to restore all things, as Peter says. Therefore, the law is not destroyed by Christ, but restored, so that Adam might be just as he was, and even better.[12]

The force of forgiveness follows through. As Christ attacks the power of sin by forgiving it, he also takes on the sinner. He silences the accusation to create a new person, a person who in the freedom of release spontaneously serves. It is the only obedience that is genuine, the obedience of freedom.

Thus Luther sets out these words—"that I may be his own, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness"—as a literal description of what happens in Christ. The transfer of powers is as real as sin and death, as forgiveness, as the love and gratitude of those who have been taken on by a Lord who refuses to accept the rebellion of his creatures as ultimately definitive of his creation's future.

II. TOTALLY, TOTALLY

This proclamation of the transfer effected by Christ which is realized in forgiveness and the spontaneous service which follows exposes another reality as well: the sheer intransigence of the old Adam or the Old Eve in. either believing or serving. As Lennart Pinomaa writes in his classical introduction to Luther, as long as the word of Christ's work remains external, it is an attack upon the conscience.[13] The declaration of Christ's work stands in such conspicuous contrast to the shape of a person's life that he or she is brought to say, "Yes, but my life isn't like that." In this way, that statement, "I believe that I cannot by my own understanding or effort believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him," is a direct response to the announcement of Christ's work which has been set out in the explanation of the second article. It is the acknowledgement of the other reality, the continuing force of sin and death.

Though it is not commonly recognized as such among Lutherans, this is a basic feature of Luther's understanding of law and gospel. The gospel has a cutting edge, a back-flow or back-english which draws it back in such a way that the sinner is exposed as sinner and so confesses the power which sin continues to hold.

There are a couple of biblical examples which illustrate this movement of the gospel: Peter's miraculous draught of fishes (Luke 5:1-11) and the story of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-9). In neither case does Jesus proclaim what would be considered according to traditional Lutheran reckoning a word of law. He tells Peter

[12]*WA* 39/1.354.

[13]Lennart Pinomaa, *Faith Victorious: An Introduction to Luther's Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963) 66.

to cast his nets on the other side; Peter does so and brings in a tremendous haul. Jesus informs Zacchaeus in his sovereign way that he will be dining at Zacchaeus' house; he goes there and they dine. In both cases, however, the result is the same: a confession of sin. "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord," Peter says. "Behold, Lord, half of my goods 1 give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold."

In the casual and frequently self-serving cataloging which takes place in theological communities, references to this back-movement of the gospel are often considered evidence of a Barthianizing of Luther. For Luther, in fact, the confession of sin is a virtual trademark of the gospel—the closest one can come to *prima facie* evidence of the gospel's presence. This understanding is evident both early and late in his theological writings. Recent research into Luther's relationship with his father-confessor indicates, for example, that John Staupitz was Luther's teacher early on, showing him that repentance flows out of the gospel.[14] But a more systematic expression of this movement is found in the Antinomian Disputations, written late in the 1530s.

In his public dispute with Agricola, Luther discusses the relationship of the law and the gospel in repentance. He defines repentance briefly as "grief concerning sin joined with a resolve to abetter life."[15] Whatever social and political value it may also have, it is the peculiar function of the law to bring about the grief. But it cannot bring about the acknowledgement of sin or create the good resolve. In fact, it endangers such a confession and the hope that goes with it.

> For a man, terrified by the form of sin, cannot intend the good by his own powers, since he can be neither quieted nor secured.
> But confused and ruined by the power of sin he falls into despair and hatred of God or he descends into hell, as Scripture says.[16]

Repentance produced by the law alone is a "half way" repentance, the penitence of Cain, Saul or Judas.[17]

But as the gospel is proclaimed, it takes hold of the grief produced by the law and completes it by turning it to confession and a new resolve. Through the gospel, the Holy Spirit becomes the agent of the law, putting it to work as a teacher. In the course of his discussion with Agricola, Luther digressed to address the law directly, as though it were another person present in the discussion. As he did so, he made this point:

> Although, moreover, we say that despair is useful, it is not so by virtue of the law, but of the Holy Spirit who does not make a robber or devil of the law, but a teacher. Thus whenever the law is dealt with, the nature and power and effect of the law is dealt with—that which it is able to do by itself. But when the law pretends that it follows or penetrates the gospel: Hear, quiet down, a Law, see lest you jump your fences. You ought to be a teacher, not a robber, you can terrify, but beware, you may not entirely

[14]David C. Steinmetz, *Luther and Staupitz: An Essay in the Intellectual Origins of the Protestant Reformation* (Durham: Duke University, 1980) 124.

[15]*WA* 39/1.345.

[16]Ibid.

[17]Ibid., 346.

> crush, as once you did to Cain, Saul, Judas; remember that you are a teacher. Here is your office, not of a devil or robber, but of a teacher. But these things are not by virtue of the law, but of the gospel and the Holy Spirit as interpreter of the law.[18]

Wielded by the Spirit, the gospel enters into the grief and confusion brought about by the law to bring the law to its end in Christ. It names what the law has exposed as sin by declaring the sin forgiven.

Taken together, then, the explanation of the second article and the opening "I cannot" of the third identify two realities—the reality of the transfer effected by Christ and the reality of the powers of sin and death. Christ's fidelity to the first commandment shows my infidelity; his love of his enemies exposes my self protection; his self-giving illumines my desperate attempts to have myself.

This is the *simul.* It is a confession elicited by the gospel itself, a confession which acknowledges two apparently mutually exclusive realities—*iustus* or just and *peccator* or sinful—as totally co-existing in the believer. Theologically, it is reflection upon the declaration that Jesus loves sinners, not in the past tense but in the present, thus not sinners who have transcended themselves or resolved to transcend themselves but sinners—straight out, warm blooded, garden variety sinners.

Theologically, the assertion of the *simul* can be kind of messy just because of the "totally"—how can a person be totally justified and totally sinful at the same time? Luther doesn't attempt to resolve the question. But as Kjell Ove Nilsson's researches indicate, already in the Romans commentary of 1515-16 Luther was using the Christological doctrine of the *communicatio idiomatum* to speak of how such opposites can hold together.[19] Through the sharing of the attributes, what characterizes the justified can be attributed to the sinner; what characterizes the sinner can be attributed to the justified.

III. PARTLY, PARTLY

Having spoken of the reality of both Christ's work and the force of sin and death, Luther continues his explanation of the third article: "But the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, and sanctified and preserved me in true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth and preserves it in union with Jesus Christ in the one true faith."

In one sense, Luther is simply carrying over into the third article the *totally* that has already been established in the explanation of the second with his discussion of the transfer. His text appears to be the farewell discourses in the Gospel of John, which speak of the Spirit as carrying the work of Christ on into the present, "And when he comes, he will convince the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgement" (John 16:8). That the transfer happens here and now and to me is the work of the Spirit of the risen Christ.

[18]*WA* 39/1.445.

[19]Kjell Ove Nilsson, *Simul: Das Miteinander van Göttlichem und Menschlichem in Luthers Theologie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966) 315.

But there is something else in the rest of the explanation of the third article. Implicit in the Small Catechism, it becomes explicit in the Large-a notion of growth or development, of progress in holiness.

> Meanwhile, since holiness has begun and is growing daily, we await the time when our flesh will be put to death, will be buried with all its uncleanness, and will come forth gloriously and arise to complete and perfect holiness in a new, eternal life. Now we are only halfway pure and holy. The Holy Spirit must continue to work in us through the Word, daily granting forgiveness until we attain to that life where there will be no more forgiveness. In that life are only perfectly pure and holy people, full of goodness and righteousness, completely freed from sin, death, and all evil, living in new, immortal and glorified bodies.[20]

If a set of paradoxes isn't enough, Luther will satisfy the desires of any theological bureaucrat by turning them out in triplicate—not only *iustus* and *peccator* at one in the same time but totally *iustus,* totally *peccator* and now partially *iustus* and partially *peccator* as well!

The trouble with statements such as this citation from the Large Catechism, and they are to be found scattered throughout Luther's writings,[21] is that they seem to break down everything that has so far been established. Images of growth and development do not fit with a metaphor of transfer—growth and development take place over time, as a process, while transfer is a completed action, a moving or being moved from one situation to another. What's worse, totally and partially are another pair of mutually exclusive terms—something can't be complete and incomplete at the same time.

But the logical problems aren't nearly as troublesome as the pastoral. Such statements make it appear that Luther has dropped back to the old notion of justification and sanctification as a moral rehabilitation process which measures its effectiveness in the ethical earnestness of its products. Then the law instead of ending is ratified in Christ, becoming the final test of whether sanctification is genuine. And the effectiveness of Christ's work as well as a person's certainty of the promise hinges on visible evidence of moral progress. It would be the late medieval "doing what it is within you to do," now empowered with a little more grace.

Whatever the language might imply, Luther has an entirely different purpose in speaking of this "partially." Once again, it is the down-to-earthness—the daily reality—of the gospel that is being contended for, the actual effectiveness of the Spirit's work.

The key to the combinations—*simul iustus et peccator*, both totally and partially—is eschatological. It is the hope expressed in Luther's statement in the Antinomian Disputations that since "Christ came to save what is lost and to restore all things," he will make "Adam [and Eve] such as [they were] and even better."[22] The same hope is set out in the statement from the Large Catechism, which speaks of the eschatological victory—the new day.

[20]*BC* 418.

[21]Wilfried Joest, *Gesetz und Freiheit* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1951) 60ff.
[22]*WA* 39/1.354.

This is not a moralistic vision, but a Christological assertion of hope—the confidence that as Christ has effected the transfer, the Spirit is even now reshaping the lives of Christ's own according to what was originally intended and thus extending Christ's lordship over his creatures. As in Paul's letters, the restoration of the individual is then of a piece with the restoration of the whole creation, when Christ will be revealed as Lord of all. The believer is partially just, partially sinful, because the Spirit's work is not yet complete—the ultimate restoration of all things is still a hope.

It is Wilfried Joest who has done the basic analysis of this "partially." Understanding it eschatologically, as Luther does, in effect turns all notions of development and progress on their head.[23] It is not the movement of an individual toward a pre-determined goal which has been set by the law; rather it is the movement of the Spirit of the risen Christ to the creature and the creation to recreate and restore, both now and in the future.

So in the explanation of third article of the creed, the Spirit has all the verbs. The Spirit has called, enlightened, sanctified, and preserved, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, sanctifies, and preserves the whole church. The *ought* of the first article which is anchored in the creation itself and becomes a *may* through the work of Christ described in the second article is here, in the third, spoken of as an accomplished fact, a *has*—the Spirit *has* enlightened, *has* sanctified. Sanctification is not a summons tacked on to the end—it is the work of the Spirit of the one who justifies the godless, thus the work of the Holy Spirit who will not rest until its mission is accomplished.

But now just as the declaration of Christ's work in the second article elicits the confession that opens the explanation of the third, this declaration of the Spirit's work brings a matching acknowledgement of the necessity of forgiveness. As the remaining portion of the explanation declares, the fact that the Spirit has sanctified does not eliminate the need for forgiveness. Rather, it identifies the pronouncement of forgiveness as the continuing work of the Spirit in a community that lives in the hiddenness of eschatological hope. Therefore "in this Christian church he daily and abundantly forgives all my sins, and the sins of all believers, and on the last day he will raise me and all the dead and grant eternal life to me and all who believe in Christ."[24]

In the Small Catechism, then, *simul iustus et peccator* is first of all a confession of faith in the one who loves sinners; theologically, it is a reflection on the faith that the ones he loves are genuinely sinners; eschatologically, it is a statement of hope that one day this friend of sinners will be manifest as Lord of all by putting sin itself to flight.

[23]W. Joest, *Gesetz und Freiheit,* 93. See also Gerhard Forde, "The Exodus from Virtue to Grace: Justification by Faith Today," *Interpretation* 34 (1980) 38ff.
[24]*BC* 345.