



The Viability of Luther Today ***A North American Perspective***

GERHARD O. FORDE

Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota

I do not particularly relish the prospect of writing a paper on the viability of Luther, or for that matter any great figure of the past, for today. Such a topic has the tendency to put its subject, and the writer (!), more or less on the defensive before the urgency and usually unquestioned priority of today's agenda. In many ways a paper on the viability of today from the perspective of Luther might be as much to the point! But perhaps in the end a paper of this sort is likely to involve a little bit of both. It is likely not possible to consider the viability of towering figures out of the past without eventually finding oneself and the present in the dock as well. In any case, the topic invites to what can only be a judgment and thus at the same time an interpretation which attempts to bring past and present into some kind of fruitful relationship. That being the case, I shall venture forth on the assignment, cognizant, I hope, of the risks and the provisionality of the conclusions drawn. The topic calls, it would seem, for interpretation and judgment rather than a scholarly research paper, so that is what shall be attempted, keeping notes and apparatus at a minimum.

The question of the viability of Luther might, of course, be discussed from several vantage points in the terrain of theology or the arts and sciences. Since, however, this is a conference on Justification and Justice, and what has come to be called the quest for liberation from oppression, I take it that the question of the viability of Luther's theology is to be considered from that vantage point, and I shall try to stay as closely as possible with those concerns. So for the purposes of this essay we can put the question about viability sharply and directly: *Does Luther's view of justification frustrate or enhance the quest for justice and liberation?* To answer the question we must first look at the kind of challenge Luther's view of justification and its corollaries presents and then try to make some judgments about its relationship to the quest for justice and liberation as it is conceived today.

I. JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH ALONE

Does justification as an absolutely free gift, justification by faith alone, frustrate the human quest for justice and liberation? The question is in some ways simply a variation on an old theme: Does justification by faith alone frustrate or do away with good works? The question was constantly hurled at Luther and his Reformation. The more I read the sources, however, the more it seems to me that Luther simply did not understand why the question should even be raised. He usually sputters and fumes and claims that the questioner just doesn't understand what justification by faith is all about. Faith cannot help but do good works. That is simply the natural

and spontaneous outcome of justification by faith alone. The good tree bears good fruit. If the tree is not good, there is no good fruit. Likewise, one can also say that if there is no good fruit, the tree is not good. The relation is natural, organic, and direct.

Yet the question persists, and has persisted down through the ages. The current question of whether justification frustrates justice or liberation is one of its latter-day offspring, even though one must no doubt add some more contemporary concerns, particularly, no doubt, the social dimension and the question of the concreteness of “good works.” Why the persistence of the question? The answer seems to lie on the level of presuppositions. Where it is presupposed that justification enters into a direct and positive synthesis with the given and present human quest for righteousness, good works, religious achievement, or even justice, then justification as an absolute and unconditional gift will be a threat to or will obviate the need for the human quest and striving. Why do justice if justification is free? Justification then appears as a cheap substitute for weakness, failure, or even indolence. Where the quest for justice and justification enters into a positive and complementary synthesis, one of them will be rendered useless if the other claims to be absolute and total. It is directly parallel to the attempt to make a positive synthesis between law and gospel. One or the other of them is bound to lose. And since the concerns of the law seem far more weighty for “today,” at least, it is generally the gospel that loses. Indeed, the gospel will be considered “viable” only to the extent that it makes the law work. Where the gospel does not do that, it will usually be slighted, tamed, or perhaps just quietly forgotten.

Does justification by faith alone frustrate the quest for justice and liberation? The first answer seems to be that, given a certain set of presuppositions, it does indeed. Where it is presupposed that justification is to enter into a simple, direct, and positive synthesis with the human quest for justice, justification *by faith alone* will at the very least enervate that quest. This must be clearly seen at the outset. Justification by faith alone becomes a substitute for or competitor of human attempts at justification, or a rescue for the failure or collapse of such attempts. It becomes identified with the much celebrated “pie in the sky, by and by” which frustrates the quest for “more real” pie here and now, and is thus usually discredited.

The significance of Luther’s understanding of justification, however, lies in the fact that it is a radical break with such presuppositions. And the question of Luther’s “viability” today depends, I expect, on whether this can be under-

stood and made to “work.” Since justification is by faith alone it does not enter into a positive synthesis with given human quests for justice and liberation. Such justification brings a radical judgment on all human systems. It is, as one would say today, an eschatological reality. It means an end both to the “system” of law or justice and to the self which perdures under such systems. “Christ is the end of the law to those who have faith”; faith is the end of the old being and the beginning of the new. To be sure, the eschatological reality thus proclaimed is, again as one might say today, proleptic in nature. It is and remains for the time being, by faith alone. There is no other way to possess it. But it is, for all that, what Luther’s theology, at least, claims as ultimately *real*, the true end of all things.

Justification by faith alone as an eschatological reality of this sort involves in the first instance a judgment on all human schemes and quests for justice. God looked down and saw that

there was no justice, so his own right hand and his holy arm has gotten him the victory (Isa 63:4). God, you might say, has two problems with the human quest. The first and most obvious one is human injustice, that the human quest is always at someone else's expense. The second more subtle and hidden problem is human justice. Even where it succeeds relatively it becomes pious about and secure in its own success and becomes an affront to God, if not also to humans. If it absolutizes itself it usually becomes another form of tyranny. In other words, where there is no justification by faith, the quest for justice can only be self-serving both *coram hominibus* and *coram deo*. Just as good works in the true sense are possible only out of faith, so also true justice will be possible only where there is justification. The old being cannot finally do justice. The one who has been justified by faith alone, the one who has passed through death to life, the new being, is the one who will do *God's* justice.

The point is that justification and justice cannot be *put* together by us in any sort of positive or artificial synthesis. It is like trying to make a positive synthesis between law and gospel, or between the old and the new age. Thus if one is to follow Luther's lead the way ahead would seem to lie through *negation* rather than positive synthesis. Justification is end and new beginning at once, death and new life. Christ is the *end* of the law to those who have faith. The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus does not allow the old being simply to go on as usual and take up the cross into a neat and advantageous synthesis with one's striving for justice and liberation. The cross is the end, the death of the old, before it can bring anything new. But there is new life. This faith asserts, anticipates, and experiences proleptically. Luther's repeated insistence on the spontaneity of the good works done by faith indicates that this belongs to the very essence of his theological stance. The death of the old means the beginning of the new, the coming of the Rule of God among us. There *is* light at the end of the tunnel. Faith lives by that light. But the light is both absolute judgment and absolute grace.

The question of the viability of Luther's theology for today, and no doubt any day, hangs therefore on whether we can or will live, work, and pursue justice in that light. Is a theology that proceeds by negation rather than by a direct positive synthesis with given human agendas and quests viable today? It goes without saying that the very question puts today (and us with it) as much

in the dock, perhaps, as it does Luther. That, I believe, is as it should be. Luther, of course, would have recognized only one ultimate judge in such a discussion: Holy Scripture. The question for Luther would not have been whether his view is viable for this or that human venture or this or that day, but whether it is scriptural. While it is important to note that by way of reserve against our assignment, I presume it is not our immediate purpose to discuss the matter from that perspective. Under such caveat let us assume that Luther is in the dock. Is a theology of justification by faith alone, a theology that proceeds by negation rather than by positive synthesis with given human quests for justice and liberation viable today?

The problem with a theology of justification by faith alone that proceeds by way of negation on the one hand is that it propounds a judgment that is absolute and total. In the first instance, it does what many liberation theologians abhor: it universalizes. It places all human ventures universally under judgment. Nothing escapes. Since we are justified by faith alone, no one is righteous, not one. God has shut up all things under disobedience that he might have

mercy on all. Such universal judgment appears to take the wind out of the sails of just as well as unjust causes. We would always prefer, of course, that our more favored and just causes would escape the judgment at least relatively unscathed. How, after all, shall one be able to encourage and sustain enthusiasm for a cause which stands under judgment like all other human causes? A theology which proceeds from God's negative judgment on all human ventures raises the question of whether it is possible to foster and support a movement for justice, inevitably of a political nature, without the usual sustenance of myth and ideology. Is there a way back to the particular, a way back to the quest for concrete justice, once the mighty transcendent negation has been pronounced? For many, the viability of a theology like Luther's will depend on the answer to this question.

A related question is that of the feeling of self-worth in the subjects under such radical judgment. Does not a theology of negation foster just that low self-image which keeps the down-trodden subdued? Does it not play into the hands of oppressors who can consciously or unconsciously exploit it for their own purposes? Do we not need a theology which offers more encouragement to the oppressed in supporting their cause and fostering their sense of self-worth?

But the negation is only the first movement of the story. Thus on the other hand, all-embracing liberation, the freedom of the Christian, is the *telos* of the matter. After the cross comes resurrection. Out of death comes life. After the bondage to sin comes spontaneity, the *hilaritas*, of faith and its good works. But now it is curious (though quite consequent!) that this second movement is just as troublesome and questionable as the first from the standpoint of our human quests. Rather than being too pessimistic, Luther's theology in this move is usually regarded as too naive and optimistic. Though he grants no freedom at all to the sinner, he gives away entirely too much to the believer! The liberation is total. The Christian is free lord of all, subject to none. But such total liberation is no doubt fully as dangerous to our human agendas as the total negation and judgment of the first movement. What, after all, is to prevent the believer from being so liberated as even to spurn our call to the agendas of human liberation?

Frustrating to the preacher and the reformer is that we are left without levers—at least from the human point of view. The move is a move to freedom, and to betray this is to betray the whole. It is to fall back again into a yoke of bondage. It is to return to the presuppositions and the practice of the positive synthesis. But then we shall have to choose *between* justification and justice. We will be back to square one.

II. JUSTIFICATION AND JUSTICE

Do we then by this faith abolish the law? Does justification by faith alone spell the end to the human quest for justice? By no means! We establish the law! But if justification proceeds by way of negation it demands a *distinction* for the time being between what can be seen as God's two ways of fostering justice: the way of the law and the way of the gospel. The question of the viability of Luther's theology today in the quest for justice will hinge to a large extent on how this distinction can be conceived and used. Here the controversial and variously interpreted "Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms" comes into view. A paper of this sort is not the place to enter into the intricacies of that debate, but it seems that at least a couple of basic points should be made to get at the question of viability. First, the distinction is necessary because of the nature of

the gospel as unconditional gift and freedom. If there can be no direct and positive synthesis between justification and justice, then there must be a distinction. Any view which holds at all to the eschatological nature of the Christian faith will have to make some such distinction. Where the distinction is not made, the gospel loses its character as gospel, and the church loses its character as harbinger of the Kingdom of God. When, in order supposedly to facilitate the quest for justice, the distinction is not made, it is not the world that suddenly becomes more churchly, but inevitably the church that simply becomes more worldly. In order to carry out its claim to establish divine justice, the church must seek either to dominate the world, thus becoming an oppressor, or it will separate itself from the world and become sectarian. In either case the church opposes the world and its strategies.

Second, since the justification is by faith alone, the distinction must remain for the time being a distinction made by faith. Such faith realizes that attempts to make a separation between this age and the next in any way would be premature. The Kingdom, the new age, can be participated in by faith alone. Furthermore, since it is total and unconditional gift, it comes by God's will and power alone. Christ is the end of the law to those who have faith. The viability question does not hang upon whether such a distinction is to be made, but whether it is made absolutely enough to establish a viable relationship with the quest for justice in this age for the time being. Where the negation and the gift to faith is total there it will be seen that there *is* nothing to do but to seek justice for the neighbor concretely in *this* age. Since one participates in the Kingdom only by faith, one is turned back into the world of the neighbor for the time being to care and to seek justice. There is, so to speak, nowhere else to go. There is nothing left to prove vis-à-vis God. There is only the world of the neighbor for the time being. The old self with its impetuous demands and desires—however pious or worldly or ideologically justified—is simply put to death, that the new being might arise and live for others.

But this is, of course, precisely the fulfillment of the law. Christ is indeed the end of the law to those who have faith, but the end of the law is not as such its abolishment, but precisely at the same time its establishment. Where there is no end to the law it becomes an insatiable tyrant. We must take steps to curtail it, to water it down, to make it manageable by casuistry and what not. Its proper use is something of a riddle. Is it a way of salvation, an absolute standard for meting out "justice," a useful guide? Can it be changed, contextualized, revised? It is not established. As with all tyrants we resent it and plot its demise. Where the law has its end in Christ for faith, however, the law is established. The believer returns to the world under the law to serve the neighbor. As Luther could put it, God saw that if he wanted the law to be fulfilled he would be obligated to forgive sins!¹ Where there is no forgiveness of sins the law cannot be fulfilled. One will be too much wrapped up in one's own quest either for holiness or for self-gratification of other sorts. Justice, in this light, will be done where there is justification by faith alone, not elsewhere. The absolutely free lord of all, subject to none, is at the same time quite spontaneously the perfectly dutiful servant, subject to all.

The gospel of justification by faith alone thus opens up the view of a life in this age under the law for the time being where justice is to be done, and where one is set free to do so. It opens up a view of God's other way of fostering justice, God's other "realm." It makes possible a view of the proper use of the law in that realm, a purely *political* use, for the care of the neighbor and

the world rather than a soteriological or perhaps even ideological use of the law. It opens up a vision of what the law is for in this world. It is for taking care of people, for fostering justice, in as concrete and practical a manner as possible, not for protecting privilege. It is important to see that the gospel, precisely because it is the end of the law, opens up this view of God's other realm under the law. To be sure, this realm and the law was always there, but it did not know its end and thus was and is constantly under temptation and subject to the wiles of the devil who constantly perverts it and seeks to bring it to ruin. The gospel, precisely because it is unconditional, defeats the devil in both righteous and unrighteous, establishes the end, and thus opens up the possibility for the proper use of the law, a political use, for the time being. This political use of the law, opened to view and established by the gospel of justification by faith alone is, I believe, one of the most significant and at the same time neglected aspects of Luther's theology in confronting the quest for justice. Proper development of this feature will have much to say to the viability question.

III. VIABILITY?

As I have hinted here and there, I find arguments for such things as viability and relevance always rather questionable, if not distasteful. Viable for whom? Before whose court is Luther's gospel supposed to be standing? There is a very real sense in which that gospel will never be viable for us. It is not viable for the old

¹Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will in Luther's Works*, ed. J. Pelikan and H. T. Lehmann (56 vols.; St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-76) 33.268.

age and its self-serving schemes. It is not viable for the old Adam. Arguments for viability which do not take that into account will end either by capitulation to the *Zeitgeist* or by outright failure.

With that caveat perhaps we can go ahead and attempt some judgments about viability nevertheless, since that is our assignment. Viability could no doubt be approached from many different angles, but for the purposes of this discussion I shall try to do this under three headings: the question of the proclamation of the gospel; the question of concreteness; and the question of ideology and the political use of the law.

First, to the question of the proclamation of the gospel. The viability for today of the gospel Luther advocated will depend more than ever on the degree to which the church is prepared to become more radical in its preaching of that gospel. Where the eschatological gospel is compromised by entering into cozy syntheses with the aspirations and projects of this age, however religious or just, it is either domesticated or lost altogether at the same time as those projects themselves are enervated. The church faces a situation where it must either become more radical about the gospel and preach it as a real negation and new beginning, or forget it altogether. The world would be better served if we were to abandon the message altogether and join secular groups for the betterment of human conditions than by a false gospel. The gospel ought to be preached so that it puts the old to death and raises up the new in faith. Especially in North America, the "right" to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness tends to run off into the sands of self-indulgence.² "Rights" expand endlessly and are exported in the form of oppression and tyranny. Unless the gospel is preached as the negation which puts the old self to death in order to call the new into being it will simply continue to be absorbed into the morass of

“affirmation” and decadent modernity. A word must be preached which “puts down the mighty from their seats.”

Is such a gospel viable also for the downtrodden and defeated who have lost a sense of self-worth? Does such a gospel also “exalt them of low degree”? It does, but the manner in which it does so may be more difficult to see and subtle to apply. No doubt that lies in the nature of the case. A sense of self-worth is always a subtle matter. It doesn’t grow on trees, not even theological ones! From the perspective of the gospel, however, a sense of self-worth is lost because the self is in bondage to the causes and projects of this age which it cannot manage or surmount. The self is told that it ought to succeed, ought to find happiness, perhaps even deserves to make it, but cannot. Preachers of optimism attempt to buoy up the self in its attempts to make it according to the given systems but thereby simply leave the self in bondage and so end by just adding to the problem. The despair only goes underground. The self is like an addict who tries to save self-esteem by telling himself he can quit any time. Meanwhile he can’t. He hides his habit under the cover of the “official” optimism. But despair and loss of self-worth only become more secret. To regain a sense of self-worth one

²See the insightful paper by Joseph Cropsey presented at the 1975 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association in San Francisco, “The United States as Regime and the Sources of the American Way of Life,” published as an Introduction to his *Political Philosophy and the Issues of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1977).

must be delivered from bondage. Theologically speaking presumption and despair are manifestations of the same disease. The gospel which declares the death of the old and the rebirth of the new through faith by its very nature at once puts down the mighty from their seats and exalts them of low degree. It brings a new creation. The proclamation must be radical enough to do that. It will be “viable” to the extent that is done.

Now this brings us to the second heading under which the viability needs to be discussed, especially with reference to the problem of relating justification and justice, the question of concreteness. The question is raised particularly by liberation theologians. Does not a view of justification which proceeds by way of universal negation, universal judgment of all human projects, relativize all causes to the extent that enthusiasm and concern for *concrete* praxis and social reform, perhaps even revolution, is undercut? Everything is relativized by the eschatological judgment. Will this not end in a politically neutral and therefore conservative or even reactionary theology, so that nothing concrete is in fact enthusiastically espoused or done? If there is to be a concrete praxis, must not something escape such relativization? If not, how can such theology be “viable” today? The question needs more careful and extended attention than can be given here, but perhaps a few things can be said to foster further discussion. First of all, if justification proceeds by way of negation, then the judgment is indeed universal and all causes are relativized. This flows from the very nature of the gospel and cannot be compromised. The history of the modern world certainly bears tragic witness to the fact that where someone or some cause or other escapes such negation and judgment tyranny and bloodshed result. Where one cause escapes, it becomes a Moloch which devours all others.

Secondly, for Luther’s theology, it seems to me that the only way from such universal negation back to the concrete is the way of freedom. The way from death to life is the way of

freedom, the spontaneity of faith itself. The Kingdom of God indeed comes by God's power alone, and thus one is turned back into the world for the time being to serve the neighbor. But such turning takes place only to the degree that one believes in the eschatological Kingdom of God, and is thus freed to do so. If we are to remain true to the gospel, we must realize that there are no levers here. If the movement is not one of freedom, all is lost. Moralists, social reformers, ideologues, revolutionaries, and even just plain zealous religious people may no doubt find this frustrating and maddening, but it is of the very essence of the matter. Whenever a cause is exempted from the negation, so as to exert a pressure which destroys this freedom, we come to a serious parting of the ways. At this crossroads the church has seriously to ask itself what it is here for. Is it here to ratify the world's causes or to foster the freedom and spontaneity of faith? That, of course, is not an absolute either/or since the freedom of faith can only exercise itself in worldly causes for the time being. But at the very least it does raise the question of priority and order. When such causes are espoused, it cannot be at the *expense* of freedom, but rather the means through which freedom expresses itself.

Thirdly, I believe it can be argued that justification by faith alone itself and the freedom it creates, drives to utter concreteness in praxis. Luther's view of

the concrete vocation of the Christian proposes just such concreteness. If the negation is complete, one is in the first instance set free from the tyranny of all universalisms and absolutisms and placed back in time to become a truly historical being, to wait and hope for the coming of the promised Kingdom. One is saved by such waiting and hoping for the Lord of time. One wonders whether those who strive for concreteness by seeking ideological privilege for their own particular causes are not, in fact, striving after the lost power of the universal.

But now, if justification by faith alone drives to utter concreteness, how do those so justified arrive at concrete practice, arrive at one concrete course of action over against another? Here we arrive at the third and last question about viability, the question of ideology and the political use of the law. Luther's understanding of the distinction between the two realms, or God's two ways of ruling implies—if it does not explicitly demand—what can be called a non-ideological use of the law. This, it seems to me, is what is meant by the *political* use of the law in the "Kingdom on the left." By this distinction Luther accomplished two things at once. On the one hand, he prevented the ecclesiastical hierarchies from the possibility of using law for earthly tyranny, and on the other he prevented political hierarchies from using law for "heavenly" purposes. Law is to be used for political purposes, i.e., for taking care of people here on earth in as good, loving, and just a manner as can be managed. Reason, i.e., critical investigation using the best available wisdom and analysis of the concrete human situation in given instances, is to be the arbiter in the political use of the law.

Such a view, as I say, seems to propose a non-ideological use of law as the answer to the question about the quest for justice in the concrete. The claim that it is non-ideological depends, of course, on how one understands ideology and the way it functions. For the purposes of sharpening this discussion I am taking ideology and its functioning as the kind of thought and practice exposed in Kenneth Minogue's recent book, *Alien Powers*.³ In Minogue's view, ideology destroys politics. Politics depends upon free and open rational discussion, debate, and compromise in a society where the future is open and not fully known. Ideology rejects such

political procedures. The ideologue claims to know (usually by means of “science”) the secret of human existence and progress in such a way as to be able to brand all critics of such secret knowledge as unwitting dupes of “the oppressive system.” Ideology in this sense places itself beyond all criticism, doubt, and debate. It demands unquestioned allegiance. Anyone who criticizes or even tries to adopt a neutral stance is *eo ipso* deceived. Ideology is secularized sectarianism. It is something akin to a “revelation”:

An ideology is the revelation of the grand secret that everything in our culture is designed to obscure the truth of that very revelation. The rhetorical explosiveness of this belief is not difficult to see: it means that anyone who denies the revelation can hardly escape the imputation of being a dupe of the structure. Rhetorically construed, then, ideology is an engine of dogmatism which systematically subverts the real intellectual issue which

³Kenneth Minogue, *Alien Powers: The Pure Theory of Ideology* (New York: St. Martin's, 1985).

page 31

it raises. That issue is simply the question of what the truth of the matter is, as it may be discussed rationally, between people having equal possibility of understanding the truth.⁴

The appeal of such ideology is the appeal of the absolute, now parading in the guise of a “true” science which is supposed to issue in correct “praxis.” The revelation is supposed to fire and justify the practice.

If ideology is taken in that sense, then it would seem that Luther's call for a political use of the law is an appeal for a non-ideological use of law. Reason, not ideology, is to determine what that political use might be. A truly political use is based on critical, rational debate and compromise. That is the way, it would seem, to a concrete praxis. In Luther's view, the Christian ought preeminently be one who is set free for such concrete questing for justice.

Is this viable today? On the practical level perhaps the matter boils down to the question of “enthusiasm.” Will there be a quest for justice if it is not fired by ideology of some sort, or mythology, or perhaps utopian vision? Is a political use of law likely to generate much enthusiasm? The answer to that question too, I expect, lies in the proclamation and ethical teaching office of the church. The enthusiasm of the Christian, it would seem, should stem from other than ideological or even mythological sources. Luther, for one, was convinced that if the gospel of justification by faith was preached in all its unconditional radicality, we would actually begin, at least, to love God for God's sake alone and love the neighbor as ourselves. The New Testament, after all, does offer a vision and a promise of that. One would hope that might generate some enthusiasm.

⁴Ibid., 128-9.