

Alien Justice – Luther’s re-invention of God’s promise to redeem the sinner

By Markus Wriedt

1 The article of justification as center of Luther’s theology

The article of justification is the master and duke, lord, governor and judge over all kinds of doctrine; it bewares and rules all ecclesiastical doctrine and erects our conscience before God. Without this article the world becomes completely death and darkness.

With these words Luther concluded his understanding of justification as the center of his theology in the preface to the graduation-dispute of Palladius and Tilemann, June 1, 1537. The justification of the sinner for grace alone in true confidence in Christ’s alien justice is the center of reformation theology. But what is meant by that phrase?

I will try to explain my understanding of Luther’s – in fact, evangelical – message of the eternal redemption of the sinner in three parts. Part 1 treats the exceptional meaning of the article of justification for Luther. Part 2 explains the beginning of that theology of the young man Luther. Part 3 draws some outlines from that center of reformation theology. I will conclude with some summarizing theses.

1.1 The article of justification as measure for evangelical theology

Recalling the above mentioned quote of Luther we have to face the exceptional meaning of this reformation theologumenon/topos: The article of justification is not an article in combination with others just as a part of reformation theology only, it describes the truth and legitimacy of the Christian faith concentrated in one central sentence.

That means two consequences:

1.1.1 Firstly: Luther deals with the question of salvation as much as with the preaching of its consequences completely in light of his understanding of justification by faith alone. Even though this was not avoided in the previous theological tradition Luther got the impression that there was not enough emphasis on this particular aspect of theology and thus preaching, teaching and pastoral care were misled.

1.1.2 Secondly: With that background Luther's concentration on the article of justification gets an exceptionally controversial meaning. Because Luther focused very much on scripture and his Pauline-Augustinian – i.e., anti-pelagian – understanding of justification, the promise of the alien justice of God became the center of reformation theology and with it the birthmark of the “new” theology including some intensive critique on other current theological approaches.

1.2 Pastoral care as one of the most important dimensions of Luther's understanding of justification

Even though this was worked out as a doctrinal – systematic – approach by Luther he did not skip the pastoral dimension of his invention. On the contrary: he very much stressed the comforting aspects of his newly found interpretation of the gospel. The message of the justification of the sinner and the merciful God comforts the afflicted and tempted conscience of man. It allows one to face the negative report about life and its results in deep affliction but in the knowledge that God will accept even those who show up with empty hands and quite naked in the sense of merits and success. The message of justification by faith alone enlightens the darkness of our days and expels the threat of failure and death.

Thus theology – in the meaning of academic doctrinal reflections – and pastoral care – in the sense of Luther's understanding of comfort and love of neighbors – are linked very closely. There is no acceptable theology without consequences for pastoral care. There is no reliable pastoral care without a deep grounding within a certain theological reflection. But as you will experience daily both aspects tend to drive apart. This development is not in the sense of Luther. He had

developed his doctrine of justification in relation to the Apostles and the Church fathers from an essential question of pastoral care. His first approach to discuss the questions of scholastic theology derive from his search for a merciful God – and indeed his knowledge about the temptations, afflictions and tribulations of the people he met during confession and other interactions. Even though he lived within a monastery he knew very well what happened outside the thick walls of the Augustinian hermitage. When he finally came to his reformation understanding he turned his answers back into ecclesiastical practice. Most of his doctrinal sayings have to be picked up from his letters, treatises and sermons written or said within a certain historical context, always in situations in which he is asked for pastoral advice.

Because the message of justification is central for doctrine, teaching, preaching and pastoral care Luther does not need a concentrated expression of his understanding. On the contrary, Luther develops his understanding of justification by faith alone in different contexts with different motives and expressions. For example he can interpret justification as sun which enlightens and warms the people of God. Even though in danger from human reason and afflicted by error and heresy the gospel's message of justification is a "field sign" (sacramentum) to which Christians can orientate their lives and which the faithful will follow. The meaning of justification cannot be overestimated. Just because of that Satan has no other interest than to destroy and to irritate its meaning to the people of God and finally to end its knowledge.

1.3 The ecclesiological dimension of Luther's message of justification

Another dimension of Luther's understanding of justification has been underestimated in the last years of research. Even though his understanding was developed very much on personal – existential – groundings his relation to the church was never questioned. And with respect to Cajetan's famous phrase in Augsburg Lutherans have to learn that ecclesiology is still linked very close to the doctrine of justification. In 1532/33 Luther wrote his famous sentence:

If this article (sc. of justification by faith alone) is fixed, the church stands stable, moved, the church will move as well.

The church, the “assembly of pious hearts in faith,” as Luther once put it against Emser, is grounded on the message of the justification of the sinner by faith alone. The promise of redemption and atonement lets them gather, develops communion, forms society and relates people to each other as much as to God. Interpreting Luther’s doctrine of justification has to respect its ecclesiological dimension.

1.4 The Christological foundation of justification by faith alone

Luther’s understanding of the gospel cannot be loosened from his interpretation of Christ’s work. The interpretation of justification has to be done as a thorough reading and understanding of Christ’s work of salvation. Luther relates his doctrine back to Christology in three most important pairs of terms: grace and gift (*gratia et donum*), sacrament and example (*sacramentum et exemplum*), and Christ’s ministry as the high priest and the king (*munus sacerdotale et munus regale*).

1.5 The article of justification in the horizon of the Last Judgment

Finally we have to face the fact that Luther interpreted the gospel in the context of an understanding of the last judgment which seems strange and partially non-theological to us. The New Testament deals in all its books with the certain knowledge that all people come into the world through God’s creation and that all people have to face a final judgment in the end of times. (2 Cor 5:10) Basing on this witness the medieval pastoral care and theology focused on this fact. In nearly any church and public buildings you could find symbols, sculptures and paintings with motifs from the last judgment. The sacrament of penance had become incredibly important for daily life and piety. The art of dying (*ars moriendi*) became an important part of pastoral care, book printing and art development. Lay people assembled in brotherhoods to avoid the quick and unexpected death and to work on their conscience to become aware how to meet God if it is neces-

sary in the last judgment. The Reformation did not stop this development – on the contrary: the reformation even enforced it. Luther, in his search for a merciful God was a striking example of the feelings and wishes of his time which Heiko Oberman once described as “a time in search for a new security”.

Thus Luther never lost linkage to the eschatological dimension of theology and pastoral care:

All that we teach, advise, establish acts oriented to the goal, that the pious await the arrival of their savior at the end of time.

1.6 Law and Gospel

Luther developed his theology in the tension between two parts of the gospel: the promise of the merciful and gracious God and the order of the law to which man has to be obedient. He develops the distinction in a wider sense than Augustin’s distinction of “spiritus et littera” (spirit and character) in his famous writing. As the Latin Church father began, Luther continues to use this distinction as a hermeneutical one. There are no specific chapters, books or phrases which contain either law or gospel. It is just the relation that the word establishes to the one who listens to the word. Thus a sentence can be Law and Gospel simultaneously. Let us take an example – the first commandment: I am your God. Thou shall not obey other Gods. The law means – you must not by eternal punishment look for other Gods. Don’t get out of our relationship. Each of your doings which is not related completely to my eternal will and command will be punished as sin by eternal fire and hell. The gospel says – you do not need to look for other Gods. I am around you at any time. You do not need to care for your salvation and life. I will do it for you. So – take my offer and be glad that I have found you. ...

Luther developed his understanding of Law and Gospel in the 1620s but never came to fulfill his plan to write a book on it. With this distinction he tried to overturn a double limitation of the understanding of the gospel: on the one hand the desperation and resignation facing both the law which accuses and the fact that all man does does not satisfy God the almighty for man never comes to the point where he loves God without fear and other thoughts concerning his salvation. On

the other hand Luther fought against what popular critics called the “cheap grace”, an unreflected confidence in the mercy of God which covers all deeds and needs of daily live.

1.7 The wide range of expressions for the new understanding of justification

When faced with the very different situations in which Luther explained his understanding of the gospel one has to be very careful to relate his understanding to a certain phrase or confessional formulation which will cover the whole. Luther’s theology cannot be fixed within a systematic framework, and it cannot be fixed in certain sentences as later orthodox theologians tried to do. Neither catechisms nor dogmatic treatises would cover the wide range of different, in some parts contradictory expressions of justification by faith alone.

Luther himself never tried to do so. He never planned to write a book “de iustificatione”. How much less he cared for a systematic doctrine his expressions in the Smalcaldic Articles clearly show. In the first and most important main article, that one about Christ and his work to redeem the sinner he writes in the end:

On this article everything is grounded that we teach and live against pope, devil and world.

Arguably at the same time Luther suggests within those articles the question how man can become righteous before God and about good works can be dealt in controversial talks. Obviously Luther was willing to talk about a common understanding of justification and grace of God.

That might be the reason why he finally used a broad formulation to express his understanding of justification:

That we receive through faith ... another, new, pure heart for God and Christ’s sake, our mediator, that he will take us now and for ever as completely righteous and holy.

2 Breakthrough of the reformation and Luther's exploration of the alien righteousness of God

What did happen? How did Luther come to his overwhelming and groundbreaking formulations that he thought would just relate back to ecclesiastical tradition of the very first years of the church? In the preface to the edition of his Latin writings in 1545 he remembers:

I had conceived a most unusual, burning desire to understand Paul in his letter to the Romans; thus far there had stood in my way not a cold heart but one single word that is written in the first chapter: 'In it the justice of God is revealed.' (Rom 1:17) because I hated that word 'justice of God'. By the use and custom of all my teachers I had been taught to understand it philosophically as referring to so-called formal or active justice, that is, justice by which God is just and by which he punishes sinners and the unjust. – But I, impeccable monk that I was, stood before God as a sinner with an extremely troubled conscience and I could not be sure that my merit would assuage him. I did not love, no, rather I hated the just God who punishes sinners. In silence if I did not blaspheme against God, then certainly I grumbled with vehement anger against him. As if it isn't enough that we miserable sinners, lost for all eternity because of original sin, are oppressed by every kind of calamity through the Ten Commandments. Why does God heap sorrow upon sorrow through the gospel and through the gospel threatens us with his justice and wrath? This was how I was raging with wild and disturbed conscience. Thus I continued badgering Paul about that spot in Romans 1 seeking anxiously to know what it meant."

2.1 The affliction

At first Luther had experienced Christ as the angry judge who would judge him according to his deeds. The fear of the Last Judgment was at the same time connected with an extreme fear of hell's punishment and eternal fire. For the young monk the presence of the judging Christ became especially acute during mass. In his early sermons Luther conveys a very impressive image of the pious supplicant who is very well aware of this judge. Equally clear is that Christians are not subject to arbitrary judgment. Therefore the late medieval practice of de-

votion sometimes is aimed at bringing about a predictable judgment and at attracting a more favorable decision with the help of pious works.

The central term, on which Luther's deep spiritual trials focused, was the "justice of God" that Luther understood as an active pursuit: the just God pursues the lawbreaker with wrath and punishment. The tested monk becomes more and more tangled in a vicious circle of exaggerated fear of sin and of works of repentance, which become perceived of as futile. This culminated in the question as to whether salvation was at all possible or if Luther had not already been forgotten by God's grace, being condemned to all eternity. The study of the core tenets of the doctrine of grace, that is, the teachings about God's eternal preordination and predestination, flings Luther into deepest despair. Small wonder then that in retrospect Luther accused his monastic teachers and ecclesiastical theologians of the exclusiveness, with which they would speak of Christ as the judge to whom account had to be given and good works had to be shown. Christ was not shown to his advantage as a comforter, savior and redeemer but as a tyrant.

2.2 John of Staupitz

Luther received a decisively new direction for his devotion from his fatherly friend and vicar general of the order, Johannes von Staupitz. The Saxon noble did not exactly distinguish himself by systematically outlining a theological system of his own, but he certainly knew how to provide outstanding pastoral counsel guided by the language of the Bible and moved by the individual sorrows of the tested believer. He referred Luther to the merciful God and the representative atonement gained through Christ in his suffering and dying. It must have been Staupitz who untangled Luther from his spiritual knots to be completely obedient to God out of one's own power, love him perfectly out of one's own heart. He points to the suffering Christ revealing the love and mercy of God, in whose light the question of our eternal selection or condemnation loses its meaning. We can be certain that Staupitz counseled Luther mainly along the lines of late medieval devotional practices strongly influenced by mysticism and a meditation on Christ's wounds by someone like Bernhard von Clairvaux. The deeply humane exhorta-

tion by the vicar general not to become lost in the examination of one's own sinful nature, but to put confidence in God's love and mercy certainly touched Luther so deeply that he came to interpret numerous, until then dark passages of Scripture anew in the light of these sentences. This talk with Staupitz, which defies precise dating, impressed Luther so deeply that later he could claim that it had been his fellow friar who started the new teaching. Looking back on it, the light of the gospel lit by Staupitz shines especially brightly in the term that at first had landed Luther in such deep spiritual despair:

“Night and day I meditated on those words until at last, by the mercy of God, I paid attention to their context: ‘The justice of God is revealed in it, as it is written: The just person lives by faith.’ Then I began to understand the justice of God by which the just person lives by a gift of God that is by faith. The meaning of this verse started to open up to me: The justice of God is revealed through the gospel but it is a passive justice by which the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written: ‘The just person lives by faith.’ All at once I had the feeling of being born again and entering into paradise itself through open gates. Immediately the whole of Scripture shone in a different light. I ran through the Scriptures from memory and found that other terms also had analogous meanings: e.g. the work of God, that is, what God works in us; the power of God, by which God makes us powerful; the wisdom of God, by which he makes us wise; the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God. – I would exalt this sweetest word of mine “justice of God” with as much love as before I had hated it with hate. Thus this phrase of Paul was for me the true gate to paradise.”

2.3 The alien righteousness of God

The discovery of God's passive justice, that justice, with which sinners are clothed and justified, turned for Luther into the opening key to the complete revelation of Holy Scripture. The insight that God acts “for me – for us (pro me – pro nobis)” turns Luther's past religious experience and theological thinking upside down, though he would call it being “back on his feet”. In view of God's free and necessarily given gift of grace, Luther's striving for perfection, for pure love to God, for justification and holiness proves to be absolutely wrong, even blasphemous.

mous. It appeared that he had rejected the caring love of the merciful God in favor of overconfidence in his own power to find happiness, that is, to acquire eternal salvation.

In 1518 when Luther had to preach over 2 Phil. 2,5f. he explains a little more precisely what he understood:

The one righteousness is an alien one and is poured inside from outside. That is the one, through which Christ is righteous with which he justifies, as St. Paul says (1 Kor 1,30): "Who is made for us by God as wisdom and as righteousness and for sanctification and salvation." Christ himself says (John 11,25): "I am the resurrection and the eternal life, who has faith in me will not die forever."

This righteousness man receives through baptism. Always when man exercises true penance, that man can confidently claim and say: I know for sure that Christ has lived, worked, talked and suffered, and that he died; that means nothing as I have experienced even this living, acting, talking suffering and dying ...

This grace and inexpressible blessing was promised to Abraham (Genesis 12,3; 22,18) ... and Jesaja (9,5) long before all times: "For us a child is born, a son is given to us." Not without understanding he says "us", for he is ours with all his gifts, if we have faith in him; as it is said by the Apostle in his letter to the Romans (8,23): He did not protect his son, but he gave him for all of us; how can it be that he would not give everything with him?" Thus all is ours, what Christ owned, given to us unworthy beings for mercy alone, although we would have merited anger and wrath and the hell. Therefore even Christ himself, who says that he came to do the will of the Father and to be obedient to him, and that he did what he did for us and that he wanted it to become ours ...

For that reason the righteousness of Christ becomes our righteousness through faith and all what he did – yes, he himself, becomes ours. Thus St. Paul names it in his letter to the Romans (1,17) Righteousness of God. This Righteousness will be revealed in the gospel as mentioned: "the just will live for his faith" (Hab 2,4; Hebrews 10,38). Finally such a faith has been called righteousness of God in the Apostle's letter to the Romans (3,28) where he writes: "Thus we would like to plead that man will be righteous by faith alone." That means justice, a justice which has no end and which eats up all sin immediately; for it is impossible that only one sin stays within Christ

This is the first justice, the basis, the reason and the source for all our own or active justice. It will be given truly for the one and only original righteousness, which was lost by Adam; and it will cause much more than ever the original justice could have been initiated.

This alien righteousness, which is poured into us by grace alone – when we are pulled by our heavenly father from inside to Christ – is opposite to original sin. It is alien to us too, comes to us without activity by birth generated and activated. With this Christ expels Adam day by day more and more how much our faith will grow and with it the knowledge about Christ. For he will not be poured in at once but more and more and will be perfect until our death.

2.4 Pro me – pro nobis

Beside the notion of God's alien justice Luther accentuated more and more God's acting "for me" or "for us." With that he turned the whole medieval system up side down or as he would see it: from head to feet. In one of his ripest explanations of St. Paul, in his commentary on the Apostle's letter to the Galatians Luther wrote 1531:

The full accent lies on the word "for us". Christ is with regard to his person without guilt. Thus there is no reason to hang him unto the cross. But because any criminal/thief has to be hanged to the cross following the law of Moses Christ had to be nailed to the wood for he became the person of a sinner and a thief not as a single one but for all. For we are sinners and thieves. Thus we are guilty to the penalty of eternal death and condemnation. But Christ took all this sin on him and died for it on the cross. ... To sum up: Christ is the one, who had and carried on his shoulders all the sin of mankind. Not at his body or to pay with his blood for it. But accused by the common law of Moses it found him who was personally without guilt in the middle of sinners and thieves.

This cognition of Christ and this most sweet comfort, that Christ took the curse of the law to free us from its accusation is taken away by those Sophists, if they distinguish Christ and sin and sinner and understand him just as an example we should follow. With that teaching they make Christ unnecessary and form him as a judge and tyrant, who is angry about our sin and condemns the sinner. But we have to intermingle with Christ to understand that he contains flesh and blood, that he carries real sin, curse and death together with all evil we have produced.

Whatever you or I did how many sins however we did and will do in the near future belongs to Christ as if he would have done these. All together: our sin become that of Christ or we are lost eternally.

Luther's desire to become perfect, to love God without hesitation or implication, to be just and holy reveals in the light of the gospel's message of the free and notwithstanding unpredicted grace as sin: Luther in fact rejected the free gift of God and tried instead to place his own merits, power, understanding and self-confidence before God. He will cause his salvation and he will not leave it up to God.

3 Conclusions

This fundamental conviction lasts through all controversies with and about Luther: He lays emphasis on the free, absolute sovereignty of God and his merciful acts of grace towards creatures full of sin and separated from him. Theological dispute always crops up when one of these two fundamental statements are narrowed down or leveled out. And Luther is certainly not after a rendition of a precisely stated doctrine or even the repetition of certain doctrinal formulations, such as would soon become the case with the claims made by early orthodoxy, but he was after the theological path of knowledge behind it. Luther's Reformation discovery was first of all a hermeneutic insight, which he had gained from the (re)discovery of Paul's message on justification through the analysis of the term "justice of God". The term itself actually does not play such an important role. Rather more important is the "new method" used to grasp its meaning in the light of Holy Scripture. This is all about a new or as Luther would say different way of reading Scripture through the gospel, which remains uninfluenced by human influence or to put it in modern words: free from pre-understanding and anticipated results being read into the text.

During the following years Luther unfolds his new line of thought within the rather sheltered world of the monastery and university. The writings of the young Luther up to about 1521, sometimes even much longer through to 1530, show clearly how much the young monk struggles with the consequences of his (re)discovery

of the gospel's message of God's righteousness, which he perceived as liberating. Small wonder then that the systematically matured reflections of later years cannot be found in his early writings neither with regards to the terminology nor the contents. As an example we refer to the justification of sinners and what a marginal mention it received in his lecture on Romans in 1515/16. The relevant passages bear no hint of Luther's Reformation discovery. However, the exposition of other topics is worked very meticulously following patterns of contemporary devotion and this only makes sense if seen against the backdrop of a Reformation discovery already having taken place.

Themes in some kind of systematic order which are related to Luther's understanding of justification – but which are not the key or the center of his doctrine:

3.1 Righteousness of man and righteousness of God

This distinction is developed in Luther's commentary on the Apostles letter to the Romans. In his scholion to Romans 1,17 he writes:

In human doctrines righteousness of man is revealed and taught in the way that it explains who and how someone for himself and in the view of other people can become righteous. But the gospel reveals the righteousness of God in a way that we learn how someone can become righteous in God's eyes: by faith alone which trusts in God's word only.

Righteousness, salvation, mercy etc. do not describe God's properties and virtues alone far away from any human reality. They much more describe in Luther's usage of the terms how God is related to his creation; how he is dealing with his creation. Thus Luther continues:

The righteousness of God is the reason of our salvation. But do not understand righteousness of God again as the one which makes God righteous in himself but the one through which we will be justified through him.

3.2 Justification as eschatological happening of declaring the sinner righteous

Especially in ecumenical talks people concentrated much on Luther's forensic understanding of justification. A lot of quotations seem to prove his somewhat one-sided approach:

Not because someone is righteous will he be seen as just by God, but because God sees one as righteous he will become just.

Luther calls back on Augustine as a witness for his understanding of "imutare" and "reputare". Again – there is much discussion on this field we people construct some kind of alternative between the more forensic – i.e. the Lutheran – and a more effective – i.e. the catholic – understanding of justification. To my impression this is a misleading alternative. Luther does not deny the effects of justification but he takes the whole process as a interrelation based on communication items (the word). Thus he cares less on the substantial change in the life and work of the sinner as in its grounding even though he expects some changes through the promise of God's work. Thus it is not a question of forensic against effective justification but a question of what is the foundation and what are the symptoma of a development: works, changes, merits and whatever people may call a holy life are symptoma. The word of God initiates these. Thus it is not man who works on it by own power and potentials but God who works through mans life and power into his creation.

3.3 Justification as a lifelong process

This will not happen at once and for all. Justification is a lifelong process in which God and man are involved all day long. Thus justification of the sinner is the end of a process which had begun long before the sinner was born and which will end with the end of time in the last judgment.

To describe man's position within this process Luther uses Augustin again and his metaphor of a doctor meeting an ill person:

It is like when an ill person, who has faith in the doctor who promised healing the patient will follow his advise and takes his medication properly. He is ill and healthy in one. Ill in reality (in rei veritate) healthy because of the certain promise of the doctor, to whom he is related in confidence and who holds him for healthy for he knows who his medication and diet will work out. The doctor is certain that he will heal his patient. For he started to heal him knowing that this illness will not cause the death of the patient. Like the merciful Samaritan brought the slain and wounded victim of robbery into the hotel, starts to heal him and went off for he knew for the complete healing and promised it to his client. Thus Christ is our Samaritan: he does not count our sins, he knows they will not cause the death, he gives instead hope and promise of a full recovery. Is the sinner just as the patient healthy? No – he is sinner and righteous simultaneously. Sinner in realty but just basically because of God's promise that he well free him from all sin and redeem him up to the day when he is healed completely.

3.4 Simul iustus et peccator

In the foregoing paragraph you found the famous “simul iustus et peccator” - sinner and righteous simultaneously. This phrase probably is one of the few new upbringings of Luther. Man lives within the tension of the Word – the word of promise which God said to him through the gospel and which touched him intensively beginning to change his life – and the ongoing affliction within his circumstances through sin, death and damnation. Luther regrets any kind of secure knowledge about the standard of grace someone has already taken. Man is completely and totally sinner as he is in the eyes of God completely and totally just. Again we touch the model of relation in which Luther's theology has to be understood: Being a sinner or a righteous is not a question of static and for all times fixed behavior but a question of how I am related to God and my neighbor. Thus we have no clear line on which we could mark the status of progress but we are in a multidimensional progress in which we change every minute our relations as much as our status.

3.5 Promise

Very much depends within this understanding on the word of promise: The word changes completely the situation of the sinner as much as his relation to God. But this happens not because of its future dimension but because eschatology even though related to the future happens right now.

3.6 Particula exclusive: sola fide, sola gratia, solus Christus – sola Scriptura

Reformation theology often has been described with the four “sola” – sola fide, sola gratia, solus Christus, sola Scriptura – as somewhat exclusive and closed up, not to say elitarian. We have to see that none of these can be used isolated from the other and without close connection to the whole of evangelical theology. Thus I would like to look fairly quickly at all four of them:

3.6.1 Sola scriptura: No theologian within the medieval times would have denied the central meaning of Scripture and the exceptional status of scripture within the process of doctrinal decisions. Not without a certain reason Thomas Aquinas the father of scholastic theology is described by Marie Dominique Chenu as a biblical theologian. And even Luther would not have denied this ... But Luther formed this medieval phrase – sola scriptura – into a polemic formula focusing on the fact that there is no alternative, no addition, no substitution of scripture by other authorities like philosophy, reason, human mind etc. Scripture is the last and only authority for Luther. Therefore he accentuates his sola scriptura against the scholastic theology which – in his understanding – used additional knowledge and authority to build up the last authority of scripture. That seems to Luther a bad architecture: to use additional help to build up a column which should stand on its own ...

For that reason Luther changed the methods of interpretation: he did not reach out for additional information to understand so called dark passages of the word but he tried to explain the dark passages by light passages of the word. Thus he created the method of *sacra scriptura sui ipsius interpres* / scripture has to be in-

terpreted by itself. That was what he had explored in his darkest moments in the monastery. That was what he later described as his reformation breakthrough. That is what I call a hermeneutic birthplace of the reformation. Luther did not care for individual dogmas or sentences of tradition. Much more he was concerned about their grounding in scripture and their theological proof: how were they proved by scripture, by philosophy, by reason, by tradition ..

I don't need to explain this exceptional meaning of Luther's reformation approach for today. Don't I? As he wrote in the great catechism: On what your heart depends that is your God. Where do our hearts and minds belong to?

3.6.2 Solus Christus – For scripture shows there is no other way to salvation than to Christ. This internal argument is based on Luther's theological conviction: if there would be another way to salvation Christ's suffering and death could not be interpreted any longer. Salvation became an arbitrary act ... (Galatians 2)

3.6.3 The same is expressed by sola gratia. There is no other way to salvation than through the grace of God alone.

3.6.4 Finally sola fide is the human answer to sola gratia. Faith is the only appropriate reaction to God's gift of grace. It is not an act or a being, it is a lively relation in communication. God promises salvation, man reacts through confidence and faith.

In all cases the sola excludes any other initiative than God's and with it any other cause of salvation than God's.

3.7 Faith and Works

With this Luther's polemics against Works become clear. He did not want to avoid good works. Luther did not want to hinder people from following their conscience and their moral beliefs. He did want to correct its meanings: works are symptoma but not initiatives for God's grace. They don't force God to redeem the sinner. But they are caused by God's gift of grace and the promise of eternal salvation.

To the argument “Our obedience is necessary for salvation, thus it is part of our justification” I would like to answer: Many is necessary what still is not the cause of something and thus does not justify. For example is the earth necessary but it does not justify. If the sinner wants to be redeemed it is necessary that he is. .. Thus it is true if Augustine argues: “He who had created you without you will not rescue you without you.” Thus good works are necessary for salvation even though they do not cause it. Faith alone will bring eternal live.

Faith alone justifies. That excludes any necessity of works. Even though Luther accentuates good works as fruits of faith:

If works do not follow you may take it for certain that the faith of Christ does not habituate in our hearts but a dead belief ...

During the inter-Protestant struggle for the right relation of faith and works Luther accentuates:

Love in the meaning of charity is the witness of faith and makes, that we all are confident and know for certain about God’s mercy. For we do have the order to makes our election stabile through good works. Then everybody can see that we do have faith. If there are no good works we might have lost our faith as the fruits are the witness of the tree.

3.8 Before God and Man – double justification?

Scripture knows about a double justification: one by faith before God, one by works in the world.

The hermeneutical distinction of two aspects in which human relation to God – and backwards – can be described causes some challenging consequences. Are there two ways of justification? Does he while commenting on one of those deny the other? What is the relation between both understandings? A certain complication occurred when Girolamo Seripando and some other Augustinian theologians during the council of Trent tried to reconcile the confessions by using the phrase of a double justification. Nevertheless – they did not succeed and for that reason the term became an augout of being heterodox.

Back to Luther. He does not put an alternative to both ways. As I explained previously the distinction is the result of his hermeneutical distinction. There are not

two ways but human justification can be understood in two ways. Again we touch the very principles of Luther's theology. His usage of paradoxical sayings and phrases, his provoking polemic, his systematic outlines are misleading if one takes them out of their original context. As much as all items of Luther's Theology are related as much we have to look to the whole of Luther's interpretation of the Gospel before dealing with one or two of his issues.

As I have explained in the beginning his theology is contextual. And with that it has a certain relational and holistic tone. You can't take one sentence and have it all – as much as you understand the one sentence you come into the whole of Luther's theology. That's why I do not want to present a Theology of Martin Luther even though we have in dealing with his understanding of justification a center of his thought and somehow a point from which his reformation theology can be developed. As he once outlined in his lecture on the Apostle's letter to the Galatians. It is not he who made theology. It is the gospel that he preaches:

That is what makes our theology certain and sure: it stands outside ourselves. I am not grounded on my personal conscience, but on God's promise, a truth which never fails.

3.9 Concluding theses

Let me conclude with some summarizing theses:

1. Luther's interpretation of the evangelical understanding of justification is exceptionally shaped by its respect to all kinds of questions concerning human existence. That what some researchers forced to call it existential. In its wide range of questions and answers Luther's understanding in its focus on St. Paul and Augustine corresponds to the biblical expression.
2. Justification describes the very moment in which the sinner will be accepted by God through God's gracious will and verbal approach. In God's word he comes himself to redeem the sinner. This word has two dimensions: firstly the promise not to count the sins and failures, the being far away from God, within the last judgment, secondly the effect on our worldly existence right now through the consequences of the effectiveness

- of this promising word by a certain reframing and reshaping of the live and orientation of the redeemed sinner.
3. Justification marks the act in which God's redemption and atonement reaches the individual human being electing it to the church as the society of people who are called by God's word. This act has been done by God through Christ whose ministry as high priest, king and prophet is still in the background of this doctrine. His word has to be interpreted in the tension between Law and Gospel. Thus the message of the justification by faith alone is grounded in Christology and oriented eschatological.
 4. Righteousness through justification by faith alone has two dimensions: the justice before God (*coram Deo*) and justice before other humans (*coram hominibus, coram mundo*). Justice in the eyes of God – to use another phrase of Luther – embraces and makes justice in the eyes of man possible. The distinction does not have an alternative or an opposition but implies a hermeneutical view on one gift that man received through the gracious hands of a merciful God in faith.
 5. Luther argues against two misleadings or misinterpretations of the gospel: the one that caused an abuse of indulgence and its disposition in a complete misunderstanding of penance and the sacrament of confession. Luther claims that man has no influence on God's free gift of grace and with it no influence on his eternal salvation (justice by works). The other that takes the message of the free gift of grace as an excuse for personal failure and illegal (in its true meaning) behavior (cheap grace) as it was provocatively expressed by some theologians called anti-nomians who denied the being of a sinner even after baptism and reception of the sacraments.
 6. Luther's interpretation of the gospel focuses on man as seen in the tension between the accusing law and the liberating gospel. A more (salvation-)historical view between a merely eschatological "not yet" and the dimension of "almost there" in our worldly being Luther changes into the ex-

istential understand of “simul iustus et peccator”: the sinner is righteous in the eyes of God with regard to his promise as he still is a sinner in the light of the accusation of the Law.

7. The most important point for Luther's contemporaries was the individual understanding of salvation for me/for us. With regard to more ecumenical and/or controversial dispute we have to remember the ecclesiastical dimension: Even though the individual has to be comforted and to be seen in the focus of God's eternal salvation the sinner is called within a community, the church of the children of God, in which grace effects more gifts than redemption only.

Are we allowed to call Luther's understanding of justification by faith alone a doctrine. As you – I hope – have seen Luther's teaching has no systematic approach. He did not want to write a handbook of dogmatics, ethics, not even a book on justification. He refused to write a summa as much as to found a system. On the contrary: he answered questions with regard to its historical, sociological, ideological or whatever setting. He was successful because his sermons, his advice, his letters and tracts touched the needs, temptations, afflictions and questions of his times and his contemporaries. Because of that his historical background cannot be denied in interpreting Luther for today

This is especially necessary by interpreting his understanding of justification. The center is without doubt the word of God. But this is spoken in a very concrete situation to certain people in a certain surrounding. As multiform and colourful the word of God had been in the past as differentiated in its effects it has to be seen in the time of Luther – and today. Teaching and preaching the justification by faith alone merely means to describe the powerful effects of the word of God in our time. Thus justification is not a doctrine fixed in certain sentences of the symbols or later doctrinal documents. Justification is a lifelong experience of God the almighty and his gracious will. Teaching and preaching has to report this, theology might reflect this – but the message has its first proof in its theological use.

As much as God is the Lord in redeeming the sinner without regard to his merits and deeds as much has the theologian to respect that God will not accept to be put in certain understandings of his will and to be measured within this reasonable understanding. That is a sin against the first commandment; a sin which occurs in every theological department day by day.

Thus being a true heir of Luther in modern surroundings means to teach and to preach the truth of the gospel and its promise that man whatever he has done can be redeemed by God through the eternal gift of grace and Christ's work of salvation. How this has to be done, how justification can be understood in the beginning of the 21st century is part of systematic theology. The historian has to watch out that Luther becomes not a label of modern minded theology without regard to the lively word of God and his eternal will to bring his children back. Thank you.