The Doctrine of Justification in the Theology of Martin Luther: A Sample of Theological Ethics for Romanian Evangelicals

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Introduction

This essay is like thousands of others. Western theology has been flooded with all sorts of scholarly written research articles on Martin Luther’s theology of justification. From this perspective, this one is definitely neither a novelty nor a contribution to the development of academic research in the field of Lutheran studies. For Romanian theology, however, it is not a commonplace. It is unfortunately a sad reality that the Romanian theology of the 21st century has been barely acquainted to classical Protestant thought and to Luther’s theology in particular. Thus, the purpose of this essay is to present in a simple fashion the fundamental tenets of Luther’s doctrine of justification. Whether this is a coincidence or not, it so happens that nowadays Romanian evangelicals are extremely concerned with the moral decay of the Romanian society. More or less subtle voices even whisper informally that we may have run out of solutions for the desired moral renewal. It is as if the appeal to the Holy Scriptures as normative for our daily living were outdated and ineffective. To those who have nurtured such a thought, Luther’s almost five hundred years old biblical theology may appear as a fresh insight into their approach of personal morality and everyday life.

In the Lutheran theology of the early Protestant Reformation, the doctrine of justification became an extremely important and urgent matter. Justification proved to be of utter significance not only for the whole doctrine of salvation, but also for the doctrine and practice of the church. For Luther, justification was the summary of the Christian doctrine. The nature of the entire Christian doctrine depends on justification and this is the article on which the church stands or falls. Luther also said that justification was like the sun, which illuminated God’s holy church. Justification became of such importance in Lutheran theology that any
misinterpretation of it would implicitly lead to an erroneous formulation of Christology and ecclesiology. The essential element of the Lutheran doctrine of justification is how can we stand before God (coram Deo). Justification is the very doctrine that makes a Christian sure of his salvation.\(^{69}\)

Lutheran theology is extremely careful with terms. The terminology of justification in Lutheran theology ranges from simple biblical definitions to elaborate theological formulations. For instance, justification may refer to one being declared righteous by God. However, it may also refer to an event, whereby man is acquitted, changed and renewed by virtue of divine promise and grace. Thus, justification is a process, which extend throughout the whole life of man and which reaches its climax only at the final resurrection of humanity. The first major aspect of the Lutheran doctrine of justification is the imputation of „alien righteousness“ (justitia aliena), which, unlike medieval soteriological formulations regarding the righteousness of justification, is not intrinsic to humanity, but totally external to it. The shift from anthropology to theology, from the righteousness of man to the righteousness of God, is of great importance for Lutheran theology. Justification is no longer a theological reality, which emerges from the qualities of the human being, but is utterly the work of God.\(^{70}\)

Consequently, the definition of fundamental theological terms like faith and grace underwent a significant change and their origin was placed in the realm of God. The preoccupation of Lutheran theologians was now to remove righteousness far away from the individual believer and the realm of his actions. It is not man who initiates justification and, ultimately, salvation, but God, who acts in a loving and gracious manner, manifested in the work of Christ at the cross.\(^{71}\)

1. The Work of God and the Work of Christ in Justification

It should be noted from the very beginning that the doctrine of justification in the theology of Luther has a strong Christological focus. For Luther, the work of

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\(^{70}\) Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther’s Theology. Its Historical and Systematic Development* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 258.

Christ and justification are one and the same. Justification by faith must be discussed in a close and immediate relationship with the doctrine of Christ. In matters of salvation generally and of justification particularly, man must not trust himself, but Christ only.\footnote{Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 225.} Justification must never be separated from faith in Christ. In the theology of Luther, justification is construed christologically. Ultimately, justification depends on the faith in Christ. In other words, faith in Christ is constitutive to justification. It is very important to notice that Luther used the terms “to justify” (*justificare*) and “justification” (*justificatio*) in more than just one sense. Justification often refers to the judgment of God, whereby he declares or he reckons man to be righteous:

> The other righteousness is that of faith and consists not in any works, but in the gracious favor and reckoning of God. See how Paul stresses the word reckoned; how he insists on it and repeats it and enforces it […] declares that righteousness is not reckoned to him that works, but is reckoned to him that works not, if only he believes.\footnote{Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1999), 296. As a result of his exegetical work on the writings of Paul, Luther reached the conclusion that we cannot be righteous through our own works. Only our faith in the God who justifies the godless is reckoned as righteousness. Within this context, the terms *reputare* and *imputare* are ultimately significant. Their first significance must be understood in the light of the Holy Scripture. The text in Romans 4:5 reads: „However, to the man that does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited (*logizestai*) as righteousness.” The Greek original *logizestai* was rendered in the Latin Vulgate by *reputatur*, the passive form of the verb *reputare*. Thus, *reputare* refers to the acquittal of the guilty one and to the promise of the grace of God. See Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther’s Theology. Its Historical and Systematic Development* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 258.} 

On the other hand, justification often refers to the entire even through which a man is essentially made righteous, namely both to the imputation of righteousness to man, and to the very process whereby man becomes righteous. In this sense, justification is incomplete on earth, but will be perfected in the Last Day. This complete justification or righteousness is an eschatological reality only. The most basic meaning of justification refers to God’s act of crediting, imputing or recognizing (*imputare, reputare*) as righteous, that is the act whereby God grants a man value in relationship to him.\footnote{For more details, see Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 226-227.}

As far as the gospel is concerned, justification is the act whereby God
Perichoresis considers and receives the sinner who is unrighteous before him as righteous. This implies that God does not impute sin, but he forgives sin. God deals with sin, as if it were not present. The forgiveness of sins or the non-imputation of sins is actually the very imputation of righteousness. The righteousness of Christ is imputed to the sinner. God sees the sinner through the righteousness of Christ, as if the sinner were one with Christ. God forgives sin and considers the sinner to be righteous for the sake of Christ (propter Christum). Accordingly, the righteousness imputed to the sinner is not produced by the sinner, but is an alien righteousness, which does not belong to him. This alien righteousness belongs to Christ. Righteousness is not a quality of man, but a quality of Christ; righteousness is a quality that is imputed to sinful man by the grace of God. The sinner cannot earn this righteousness for himself and by means devised in his mind. This alien righteousness of Christ is imputed, namely freely granted and given to him by the grace and mercy of God for the sake of Christ (propter Christum). Man is ultimately passive in justification. Something happens with the sinner and he can only let it happen. God is the one who is active in justification. The sinner only receives justification or the righteousness of Christ from God, who actively gives it to him. At this point, the doctrine of the union of Christ with the believer is very important. When Christ unites himself with man, when he becomes one with the sinner, his alien righteousness becomes the sinner’s and this makes the sinner righteous before God. This happens throughout the whole life of man. Luther argued that man, including the Christian man, remained a sinner for his whole life. The very life of a sinner, now a Christian, has worth before God only because of the alien righteousness of Christ, which becomes the sinner’s by its imputation realized by God.

2. The Importance of Faith

God’s mercy and grace are the ultimate source of Christ’s righteousness and of its imputation to the sinner. Righteousness and thus justification comes to man from outside himself and is not an intrinsic quality of the human heart. Nobody is justified by his own works. Should justification happen at all, it is only for the

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75 Luther is very careful to note that man is not justified on the account of his faith (propter fiden), but on account of Christ (propter Christum). Alister McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification from 1500 to the Present Day* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 14.
sake of Christ that it happens (propter Christum). God considers the sinner to be righteous, only for the sake of his Son, Jesus Christ. Justification is entirely the work of God, who is actively involved in granting it to sinners. But in order that justification should be effective, man has to receive it. Man receives justification only by faith, that is by believing in Jesus Christ:

He begins to teach the right way by which men must be justified and saved and says they are all sinners and without praise from God, but they must be justified, without merit, through faith in Christ, who has earned this for us by his blood, and has been made for us a mercy seat by God, who forgives us all former sins, proving thereby that we were aided only by his righteousness, which he gives in faith, which is revealed in this time through the gospel and „testified before by the law and the prophets.” Thus the law is set up by faith, through the works of the law are put down by it, together with the reputation that they give.77

Faith in Christ presupposes many aspects. For Luther, to believe in Christ means to recognize and grasp the love of God the Father in the history of Jesus Christ. The essence of justifying faith is that it is fides apprehensiva, the faith which seize Christ in order that his righteousness should be ours and our sin his. This exchange is termed by Luther by means of the phrase commercium admirabile, the wonderful exchange between our sins and the righteousness of Christ.78 From the perspective of the sinner, faith also entails the acceptance of God’s gracious judgment over him. When the sinner has faith in Christ it means that he believes justification and the whole work of Christ happened for the sinner’s sake. Faith is not merely historical, but fundamentally personal. The death of Christ on the cross in order to secure our salvation is a historical fact, which must be appropriated by the believer. Faith is not merely an intellectual fact; it also involves trust (fiducia) in God, trust in the mercy offered by God in Christ. The content of faith is Christ, so Christ and faith must be treated together, as two things which are not different from one another and which are not in opposition to each other. Faith is powerful only because of Christ and because is grounded on the righteousness of Christ. The promise of the grace of God is received by faith, which is

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77 Martin Luther, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1976), xix.
not a work of man, but merely a response to the divine word of forgiveness. The alien righteousness of Christ is the righteousness he earned by his death at the cross. Thus, justification is connected to the work of Christ. We receive this alien righteousness of Christ by faith.

When we do this, we are justified, because faith justifies as it takes possession of the righteousness of Christ, namely of Christ himself. Christ is present in our faith, which justifies. Justification is also firmly connected to the person of Christ. This is why justification has both an objective and a subjective aspect. The objective aspect of justification refers to the real forgiveness of the sinful world. The subjective aspect of justification is related to the appropriation by the individual of this forgiveness. By the work of Christ, the world was reconciled with God, regardless of the fact that anyone should acknowledge this or not. The judgment of God is pronounced on Christ first of all, in a complete manner, because Christ represents the new creation. The judgment of condemnation had been pronounced on Adam, as the representative of the old creation. Accordingly, the people who are justified are in Christ and the people who are condemned are on Adam. Thus it becomes clear that for Luther Christ himself is our justification, because he is our righteousness. Justification is not a sort of transaction between God in heaven and the individual on earth, which requires that the individual should do something prerequisite in order to be given the righteousness of Christ, with the purpose of being justified before God. Commercium admirabile is a wonderful exchange because of the person of Christ, which is seized by the believer through faith. Christ himself is our righteousness, he is our justification; we do nothing for our salvation, because only God can do anything in this respect. Christ is not a means of justification. Christ is justification itself.\(^\text{79}\)

Faith makes man righteous only because it grasps Christ. Christ is present in faith and this is why we are justified. In Luther’s theology, the doctrine of justification is relevant in the light of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. In this respect, faith is a human attitude worked by the Holy Spirit. Such an attitude presupposes that the believer is no longer satisfied and pleased with himself. Thus, he expects nothing from God, because he cannot do anything to please God. He entirely trusts God for his salvation and is ready to receive the righteousness of

Christ from God. One can easily notice the active involvement of God in this entire process, because it is the Holy Spirit who works the meek attitude of faith within the sinner, who passively receives the active imputation of Christ’s righteousness by God. Faith is not a work in relation to justification, but it is the source of all good works. Faith is the beginning of a new righteousness, which man possesses because he is really righteous. Faith justifies through Christ and brings Christ in the heart of the believer, which is an active work done by the Holy Spirit. The divine nature of God is revealed to us through faith. Accordingly, our heart becomes righteous not only because of the imputation of the righteousness of Christ, but also because of the very fact that the Holy Spirit of God was poured into our hearts. Christ, who is brought within our heart by faith, is not only our alien righteousness, but also the power of God himself, working within our heart in order to bring into his own life and being.

In relationship to us, Christ fulfils the law in two ways. Firstly, he fulfils the law outside of us (extra nos) through his alien righteousness, which is imputed to us. Secondly, Christ fulfils the law within us, through his Holy Spirit who enables us to become like God. Christ is for us and our faith does not only appropriate to us the alien righteousness of Christ, but faith is a powerful presence within us. Christ is not only within us, but also before God, lest we should be condemned.80

Faith gives us both the forgiveness of sins and the triumph over sin. In Luther’s theology, the primary aspect of justification is the forgiveness of sins. The individual or the subjective forgiveness of sins is totally based upon the objective reality of the complete forgiveness in Christ. Braaten wrote that „the actuality of forgiveness in Christ, who has objectively reconciled the world to God, is the presupposition for every individual apprehension of God, as the forgiver of sins.” This appropriation or apprehension is done by faith alone. In this respect, justification as forgiveness of sins is fundamentally a gift, not an achievement. Forgiveness of sins is an objectively realized event, worked out once and for all in Christ. The possibility of being subjectively forgiven is always dependent on the already realized objective justification. The objective forgiveness of sins is prior to the human act of faith, which comes as a gift from God. Justification is a divine act propter Christum, realized for the sake of Christ, and is

always prior to repentance. Although an objective reality, justification might be described as the forgiving heart of God, which reaches out itself in order to meet the predicament of sinful humanity by means of free grace.

3. The Relevance of Good Works

The subjective aspect of justification, namely the personal appropriation of the work of Christ and the inward reconciliation of our heart with God does not occur because we initiate the connection with Christ, but because Christ establishes a relationship with us. The priority of Christ in justification is the core of Luther’s soteriology. It is not man who makes the first move towards his own salvation, but God, who graciously works out our salvation by means of the death of Christ, which must be appropriated personally by every believer. Nobody can do it for somebody else. Confessing, believing and repenting must be faced personally like death itself. By faith, the sinner becomes a new man. Faith has an ethical dimension. Anyone who has faith is willing to serve God, by engaging himself in the battle against sin. Good works are the necessary sign that somebody has faith. Works are not important in justification. The essential fact that must be known is that justification is sola fide, by faith only, not by works. When man’s status before God is involved, works are not important. Justification by faith is against justification by „works righteousness“. Good works, however, must necessarily follow justification by faith. The faith in Christ must dwell in our hearts and this faith is not dead.

This kind of faith is necessarily accompanied by good works, which are the indicator of the presence of grace within us. Love, which is the spring of all good works, must be a witness to faith and should give us confidence. All these make us stand securely on the mercy of God. Good works do not justify, but they strengthen our calling. When works follow our justification, it is clear we have faith. If works are not present, it is clear our faith is lost. For Luther, justification is both sola fide and sola gratia, by faith only and by grace only. Works do not count for justification. They are important for our salvation, but not for our justification. The scope of Luther’s doctrine of justification was to direct the sinner towards Christ alone, who is the source of our justification.82

81 Carl Braaten, Justification. The Article by Which the Church Stands or Falls (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 24-25.
82 Bernhard Lohse, Martin Luther’s Theology. Its Historical and Systematic Development (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 264-166.
Thus, faith in Christ has two effects. Firstly, faith receives the forgiveness of sins and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness. An aspect which is not totally clarified in Luther is whether faith is a work or not. What is clear from Luther’s theology is that, in justification, faith is objectively prior to works. Faith itself is the subjective impact that God’s acceptance has upon the sinner. One may say that faith justifies only in the sense that it becomes aware of the forgiving love of God whereby he assured our justification based on the death of Christ. Justification precedes faith, but faith is the acknowledgement of justification as the free gift of God for the sinner. Faith is not the cause of forgiveness, but the very element which makes the sinner aware of the gracious act of God.

Secondly, faith establishes a new being and makes the sinner righteous in himself. Justification consists of both these effects of faith. It has been shown that in Luther’s theology, justification has primarily a christological dimension, whereby the alien righteousness of Christ is imputed to the sinner. Then, justification has an ethical dimension, whereby the imputation of Christ’s alien righteousness by faith must necessarily produce a new life in the believer, who will produce good works out of his obedience to God.

There is also a third dimension of justification, which relates to the final judgment of God. The eschatological dimension of justification is the perfection of the previous two dimensions. The believer does not rest securely on the forgiveness of his sins, although he knows this is real and true, but he is actively involved in the everyday battle against sin, with the settled goal of doing this until the end of his life. Present righteousness is a promise of the righteousness that will come in future. Present righteousness is both complete and partial, depending on the viewpoint from which it is approached. It is complete when seen as acceptance by God and as participation in Christ’s righteousness. It is partial in regard to man’s new being and new obedience. The completion of our new being and obedience will come future. It is in this context that Luther’s famous formula *simul iustus et peccator* becomes clear:

Hereby now we may see how faith justifies without works and yet how imputation of righteousness is also necessary. Sins do remain in us, which God

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utterly hates. Therefore, it is necessary that we should have imputation of righteousness, which we obtain through Christ and for Christ’s sake, which is given unto us and received of us by faith. In the meanwhile, as long as we live here, we are carried and nourished in the bosom of the mercy and long sufferance of God, until the body of sin is abolished and we raise up as new creatures in that great day. Then shall there be new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness shall dwell. In the meanwhile, under this heaven, sin and wicked men do dwell and the godly also have sin dwelling in them. 

This double character remains throughout the entire life of the Christian. *Simul iustus et peccator* reveals the double condition of Christian life: from the standpoint of God and of his divine nature, the Christian is righteous, but from the standpoint of his human nature, the Christian is still a sinner. This duality of justification is true in regard to the inner movement of the Christian life. On one hand, the Christian must be involved in a daily renewed surrender of himself in faith to the merciful judgment of God, whereby he gives to the Christian his justification, which must be appropriated by faith. On the other hand, this constant renewal of the Christian’s surrender to God works the progressive death of the old man and the resurrection of the new man within the Christian believer.

**Conclusion**

Luther was a teacher of human self-awareness. It has been the case that too often Romanian Evangelicals promoted the necessity of spotless daily living, which

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85 Martin Luther, *Commentary on Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1979), 133. It is very important to notice that, for Luther, justification implies both the forgiveness of sins and acquittal, and the renewal of the individual. Although genuine, the renewal is not complete. Sin remains in man for as long as he lives, so the believer is, in the same time, righteous and sinner. Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther’s Theology. Its Historical and Systematic Development* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 262.

though desirable proved to be impossible. Luther is very real about how the believer should look at himself in the light of the Gospel. Christianity has no room for perfectionism but it has all the room in the world for spiritual growth. As in the rest of the world, Romanian Evangelicals face the difficult task of calling sinful people to a life of faith, purity and good works. In doing this, they should always stress that doing something does not trigger God’s favor. It is human nature to attempt an immediate recovery from sin and set up towards the performance of good works hoping that God will appease his wrath towards us. This is a burdensome challenge but also vital to the life of the church. Following Luther, Romanian Evangelicals should realize that preaching faith and good works as proof of faith will influence people who come to their churches. Nothing has been achieved if anybody comes to church to earn God’s favor. People must be taught from Scriptures that God has already done everything for their salvation in the death of Christ. They must, however, place their faith as trust in God as he is the only one capable of justifying them in Christ. Thus, Romanian Evangelicals should learn to preach realistically and urgently about the reality of God’s justification in Christ and about the life of faith as means of the moral recovery of all Romanians.