CHAPTER 3

The Doctrine of Justification as an Object for Contextualization

3.1 Introduction

Christian theology cannot avoid answering the question of how the fallen human person can be brought into a reconciled relationship with God. The core of the Christian teaching is that a reconciliation has been made possible between God and the sinful human through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The doctrine of justification is concerned with the question of how the saving acts of Christ can be appropriated to the individual.

We may distinguish between the doctrine of justification, and the term and concept of justification. The doctrine is about the appropriation of salvation, involving many concepts such as faith, baptism, regeneration, sanctification, assurance of salvation, and predestination. The terms and concepts of righteousness/righteous and justification/justify cannot exhaust the richness of the doctrine. However, in biblical language these terms are attempts at denoting the attaining of a right relationship with God. Through a tradition of interpretation and translation – from Hebrew into Greek, and then into Latin – the term “iustificatio” came to refer to the process of achieving a right relationship with God with all which this involves.

It was particularly in the Latin-speaking Roman church that justification was focused as the central notion. Hence, it is particularly Western theology that names the teaching on how salvation is appropriated the “doctrine of justification”. In Orthodox theology it is “deification”, or “partaking in divine nature”, that are employed as the key terms.

That it is “justification”, rather than some other soteriological metaphor, that has been singled out in this manner in Western theology may be linked to several factors. Alister E. McGrath distinguishes the following:1 (1) The generally high interest and regard for classical Roman jurisprudence characteristic of the early theologians of the Latin West was probably the primary factor. (2) The rise in Pauline scholarship during the theological renaissance of the twelfth century. (3) The emphasis placed upon the concept of justification by

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Luther’s theological difficulties concerning how the statement “God is just” could be understood as gospel. (4) The discussion of the reconciliation of the human person to God denoted as the doctrine of justification by the Council of Trent.

The Orthodox emphasis on the concept of deification (θεοπόιησις or θέωσις) rather than on justification may be explained primarily by the following three factors: (1) The Orthodox stress upon the direct encounter of the human person with the Holy Spirit. (2) The concept of deification is particularly suited to a marriage with Neo-Platonism. (3) The Eastern church never developed an interest in Roman law as did the early theologians of the Latin West. However, theologians today generally agree that the concept of justification was of central concern in the Christian teaching on the appropriation of salvation from the very beginning.

The doctrine of justification belongs to the core of Christian theology. Without the recognition of the necessity and possibility of a reconciliation with God, there can be no church. In this sense the articulus iustificationis is the articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae.

As presented in Chapter 1, I will delimit my presentation of the doctrine of justification primarily to the edition of the doctrine which we find expressed in the most broadly accepted Lutheran confessions, Luther’s Small Cathechism and the CA (Augsburg Confession), including the explanation the doctrine is given in the Apology (Apologia confessionis Augustanae). However, attention is also given to new perspectives on justification in biblical exegesis today, and to recent developments in ecumenical dialogues, particularly as these are expressed in the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JD).

As stated in Chapter 1, I intend to present the doctrine of justification according to the following outline: (1) An introduction to the biblical core concepts of righteousness and justification, and a brief introduction to Luther’s Reformational reorientation. (2) A broader interpretation of the doctrine of justification in the CA and the Apology with an introduction to Luther’s understanding of each of the elements presented. (3) A brief outline of some trends

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2 See ibid., 3.
3 See Karlfried Froehlich, “Justification Language in the Middle Ages,” in Justification by Faith: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue V, eds. H. George Anderson et al. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985), 143.
5 Cf. 1.3.2.1.