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Justification and the Spirit: A Pentecostal Reflection on the Doctrine by which the Church Stands or Falls

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Justification by grace through faith alone was for many of the Reformation period the articulus stantis et condentis ecclesiae, or the article by which the church stands or falls. Luther’s quest was for a gracious God. He sought for assurance in the face of judgment in the word of pardon through Christ alone. There would be nothing in himself that could account for this word of pardon because he is a sinner. We are justified “extra nos,” apart from ourselves, through the alien righteousness of Christ alone. Steven Ozment noted that Luther understood Christians as homo viator, on the way to judgment as sinners. Yet the sure condemnation that Christians face and deserve is overcome in the word of pardon through Christ alone.1 We thus have Luther’s unique contribution to the history of theology, namely, simul justus et peccator (simultaneously just and sinner). One searches in vain for this doctrine in the postapostolic church prior to the sixteenth century.

The idea that justification was a forensic or legal declaration has its basis in Luther. It is important to note that Luther’s doctrine of justification was complex, being rooted in a living faith relationship with Jesus Christ that was life-transforming. Justification for him was both forensic and transformative.2 It was Melanchthon who stressed the

2 “So Christ, living and abiding in me, takes away and swallows up all evils which vex and afflict me. This union or conjunction, then, is the cause that I am delivered from the terror of the law and sin, am separate from myself, and translated into Christ and his kingdom.” Martin Luther, A Commentary on St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians (Philadelphia, PA: Quaker City Publishers, 1874), 267. The Finnish view of Luther’s doctrine focuses on this aspect of Luther’s teaching. See Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, “Deification and a Pneumatological Concept of Grace: Unprecedented
forensic aspect of justification to the point of eclipsing the transformative dimension of the doctrine. Under the influence of Roman distributive justice, this forensic understanding of justification was connected with a satisfaction theory of atonement and an understanding of righteousness as meritorious deeds. But not all of the Reformers were equally influenced by such theological developments. There was a variety of viewpoints among the Reformers on the doctrine of justification. The Swiss Reformers and, later, the Pietists viewed justification as regenerative, thus placing limits on the forensic model and related ideas. And not all of the Reformers gave the doctrine of justification equal importance. But this doctrine was at least a central element in the Protestant understanding of the Gospel.

Yet, I as a Pentecostal do not recall using the term as part of our language of faith in the Pentecostal church of my upbringing. We would use terms like “delivered” or “set free” even in relation to those texts that used the term “justification.” Like other Pietistic traditions, grace was always something liberating for us. And, so, terms like “set free by the blood of the Lamb” seemed to say it all. I first learned of the Reformation doctrine of justification in college from American evangelical theological textbooks. With a passion that would have made Melanchthon proud, these books taught me that justification was a forensic declaration. The metaphor used went something like this: God, as an impartial judge, is about to exact punitive justice against humanity, when Jesus, our advocate, offers his own meritorious righteousness on our behalf. Since his righteousness has satisfied God’s righteous requirements, it is enough to change our verdict from condemned to acquitted.

I was enlightened. I thought immediately, “Why had I not heard this explanation of justification before?” I was rather surprised that my forebearers at my Pentecostal church had missed it in their reading of Scripture. At first, I thought they were simply theologicaally uninformed or legalistic. But as the years wore on I began to realize that, despite their shortcomings, they had wisdom after all. I gradually became ill-at-ease with the forensic model of justification, despite its element of truth. Basically, it seemed empty and bankrupt theologically. Where in this doctrine was the God of Scripture who is far from impartial but who pursues us relentlessly in love? Where is the biblical sense of

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