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Faith Alone: Lutheran-Roman Catholic Convergence?

BY PATRICK KEIFERT

DOES THE SEVENTH DIALOGUE of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue in the U.S. converge on the question of justification by faith alone? Yes and no. In more than superficial ways, the dialogue partners converge. Rather than simply trying to create uniformity of doctrine, the theologians clarify the differences between the two traditions and uncover the underlying assumptions that create these differences. They seem either satisfied with clarifying differences or unable to do more than that, since they make little headway in fruitfully developing them.

To say that they made little headway is not to say that they foreclose a productive future conversation. On the contrary, they opened new subject matter and ways of viewing the nature of the differences. They also left open the possibility of practical moves toward unity by declaring that these differences are not church-dividing.

Lutherans can delight in the real convergences achieved in this Dialogue. We should thank the participants for the careful historical, biblical, and systematic work done on our behalf. Because of their efforts, we more clearly understand our differences. When we more clearly understand our differences, we open doors to further dialogue. In the third section below, I mention one topic for further dialogue.

Convergence? It seems so.

The convergence in this Dialogue depends upon historical consciousness and the historical critical method. They dominate the mutual attending to the Scriptures and subsequent tradition. The result of this mutual attending to the Scriptures is refreshing and a step beyond previous historical attempts at reconciliation. Despite earlier generations of Lutherans and Roman Catholics attempts to agree on the scriptural witness regarding justification, they did not meet with the degree of success this dialogue has. This Dialogue marks real gains.

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Much of the development of medieval theology is precisely an ever more sophisticated differentiation of Augustinian language about grace and how it works in the Christian's journey from sin to righteousness.

These gains, listed in the "Common Statement," number eight. They grow out of a serious study of "righteousness" by biblical scholars on the team.¹ They are a rich mixture of balanced Catholic recognition of the centrality of righteousness and justification in the Scriptures, and the Lutheran recognition of the nuances and limits of these images.

These gains move beyond simplistic understandings of the unity of the scriptural witness to justification by faith alone. They move beyond the typical cartooning of the Lutheran "canon within the canon" as a placing of the New Testament against the Old Testament, or Paul against the rest of the New Testament.

The discussion of James argues that James probably is not a polemic against Paul. Nor, the study concludes, is James the grounds for a contemporary polemic against the Lutheran doctrine of justification by faith alone. These arguments regarding James have contemporary significance for in-house Lutheran conversation. James is regularly used by some Lutherans as a polemic against the *Confessions'* position

The Lutheran confessors proposed a new set of questions complete with a new set of answers. The discontinuity is profound. The difference is so great that the person who experiences this hermeneutical shift experiences a greater change than the change ushered in by the rise of contemporary historical consciousness.

on faith and good works. Too often this reading of James as a polemic against Paul is used to foster a contemporary polemic with the Lutheran doctrine of justification that claims Lutherans are not interested in justice because of this doctrine. This polemic pervades the published materials, for example, from the Conference of International Black Lutherans held in Harare at the University of Zimbabwe in September 1986.² The Dialogue discussion of James could help Lutherans understand their own confession.

Historical-critical method furthers the convergence in the mutual attention to the history of dogma. The partners mutually recognize the different senses of justification as it is used in Paul, in the medieval-transformationist tradition, and in the Lutheran Confessional heritage. Paul uses justice and righteousness as his favorite theological descriptions of the content of the gospel. Justification in the medieval-transformationist tradition describes the soul's progress from the state of sin to the state of holiness. The Reformation uses justification by faith as a hermeneutic, a way of interpreting both Scripture and experience, and a meta-linguistic principle for preaching the gospel.

Convergence? It seems not.

When the dialogue partners distinguish these three senses of justification in their conversations, they also reveal the limits of the convergence that they have achieved. What they describe is less a convergence bordering on consensus and more a continuing tension amounting to perhaps irreconcilable difference. The convergence is more a description of differences than a consensus on the place of justification in Christian faith and practice.

Once again, the role of historical consciousness as a set of shared assumptions makes possible this part of the Dialogue's gains. Through historical analysis, the theologians trace the development of the medieval doctrine of

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justification. They underline how justification, in this tradition, is a small portion of a massive theological system. The doctrine of justification in this tradition is more the consequence of the system than in any sense a major generator of it.

Some commonly deride the liturgy, preaching and the sacraments. They regularly note how the liturgy is touched by sin; and, so it is. But they seldom evidence a sense of awe and thanksgiving regarding God's presence.

The "Common Statement" describes this system as the medieval-transformationist model that develops Augustine's attempts to secure the doctrine of the grace of God against the perceived threat of the Pelagian doctrine of free will. The model further incorporates subsequent theologians' speculations on the role of the will in the soul's salvation. These speculations describe salvation as a journey of a soul from sin to justification. This journey is one of regular and gradual transformation from sin to righteousness, all achieved by the grace of God.

The language of justification and righteousness is not central to this transformationist model of the order of salvation. The language of grace is. Much of the development of medieval theology is precisely an ever more sophisticated differentiation of Augustinian language about grace and how it works in the Christian's journey from sin to righteousness.

The Lutheran Confessors' focus on justification by faith is continuous with this medieval tradition in that it uses many of the traditional words: it is concerned about the justification of the sinner. However, any careful reading of the Lutheran language of justification and righteousness by faith shows that this language no longer functions in the same way for the Confessors as it did for their medieval predecessors. It is a different model; it does not try to describe the order of salvation, but leaves this question behind for a more direct word about God's justification of a sinner.

The "Common Statement" characterizes this different model as a Lutheran hermeneutical principle. I find the Dialogue's use of "hermeneutical principle" most appropriate. What happens in the *Lutheran Confessions* is a different way of interpreting not only Scripture and tradition, but all experience. Hermeneutic, in this case, is used in at least two senses: first, it refers to a set of rules for interpreting Scripture: the distinguishing of law from promise; second, it refers to a set of rules for interpreting human experience in general.

Rather than proposing a new solution to the Augustinian dilemma over the role of the human will in the gracious justification of the sinner, the Lutheran confessors proposed a new set of questions complete with a new set of answers. The discontinuity is profound. The difference is so great that the person who experiences this hermeneutical shift experiences a greater change than the change ushered in by the rise of contemporary historical consciousness.

The unconditionality of God's grace through faith is essential to the Lutheran hermeneutic.

The partners note this hermeneutical shift in a section of the "Common Statement" entitled the "Lutheran Hermeneutical Principle." Unfortunately, this section is not integrated into the other sections. This failure to integrate this insight into the rest of the "Common Statement" raises several questions. Were only some of the participants able to recognize the difference between the two models? Perhaps only those who wrote the section on the Lutheran hermeneutic understood its significance. To what extent did the Lutheran partners fail to render explicit the significance of the hermeneutical shift?

Dialogue dependence upon the historical-critical method perhaps hampered this integration. The dominance of historical consciousness without a sufficient integration of linguistic and hermeneutical consciousness could have prevented a full integration of the insight that the Lutheran sense of justification is a hermeneutic. What would happen to the interpretation of Scripture and the tradition in this Dialogue, if the power of language, symbols and

metaphors were explored with the same depth and care as the effects of history were?

Maybe all the participants understood the differences but were unable to move beyond them. It could be that the Dialogue is the quiet admission that the two models are irreconcilable.

Future Issues

Whatever the answers to those questions, both sides agree that these differences need not be church-dividing. I agree. Furthermore, I believe they ought not keep us from coming together at the table of the Lord. They are, however, critical enough to contemporary issues of faith and practice, both inside and between both traditions, that they merit further discussion.

Carl Peter's article published with the "Common Statement" points in one fruitful direction.³ He accepts the Lutheran hermeneutical principle, as he understands it, but challenges Lutherans to accept another in addition. In his challenge, he develops an analogy between Paul Tillich's much used distinction between Protestant principle and Catholic substance. He believes the Lutheran hermeneutic of justification by faith is the appropriate Protestant principle of the Church catholic. It requires, in addition, a principle of catholic substance.

At root, this insolence and arrogance doubts that such finite things as bread, wine, water, and preaching are capable of God.

Peter rightly understands justification by faith to be what George Lindbeck prefers to call a "metatheological rule." It is a rule for articulating the gospel and administering the sacraments. This rule holds that for the sinner to be made righteous, the sinner cannot trust anything "... except God's unconditional promises in Jesus Christ."⁴ Peter further rightly understands the importance of the language of unconditionality in this understanding of justification by faith. The unconditionality of God's grace through faith is essential to the Lutheran hermeneutic.

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Convergence?

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Peter further argues that this Protestant principle needs the Catholic substance. In particular, he points to the general commitment among Lutherans to "the church's ancient creeds, the administration of baptism, the regular celebration of the Lord's Supper, the encouragement of the practice of private absolution, and the office of ministry" (308). This is the Catholic substance of which he speaks.

However, for the sake of "the health and well-being of the church," (308) another principle is necessary to guarantee the Catholic substance, because the Catholic substance is regularly "in danger of being mutilated, be it out of fear of demonization or of works-righteousness" (309). His point is well taken. It is regularly demeaned by insolence and arrogance. At root, this insolence and arrogance doubts that such finite things as bread, wine, water, and preaching are capable of God.

Where I teach, some commonly deride the liturgy, preaching and the sacraments. They regularly note how the liturgy is touched by sin; and, so it is. But they seldom evidence a sense of awe and thanksgiving regarding God's presence. It is not only in academic centers where Lutheran treatment of worship borders on the blasphemous, where, by our demeanor both in planning and practice, we deny that God is truly present. Wherever it takes place, our derisive demeanor leads to blasphemy. "Out of our desire to avoid confusing the creaturely with the Creator and to realize that no work of a sinful creature can win God's forgiveness, we may regard the sacred as something religiously indifferent or even sinful."

Carl Peter speaks the truth when he notes how easily we can use our fear of sin and abuse of the Catholic substance to fail to recognize God's grace where it is at work. Our preaching, teaching, and worship must always be tested by the unconditional promise of life in Jesus Christ. Similarly, must we not ask ourselves, "[i]s a desire to trust and hope *ultimately* in God *alone* leading people to refuse to trust or even disdain ecclesial institutions where God has promised through Jesus Christ to be present and operative with His Spirit and grace?" (310). One ought not to call the holy profane; what God has made clean one ought not to regard as un-

clean. Peter summarizes his question to Lutherans as a "Principle of Respect for the Divine in its Concrete Realizations" (310).

Carl Peter's argument is already taken into account by the *Lutheran Confessions* when they apply the Lutheran hermeneutic to the doctrine of the church. In particular, when the *Augustana* says that the Church is created by the power of the Spirit through Word and Sacrament, it incorporates Peter's principle into the Lutheran hermeneutic.

Still, an examination of contemporary Lutheran practice makes Peter's question most appropriate. How many contemporary Lutherans understand how close their theology and practice of Word and Sacraments comes to blasphemy? Indeed, if the recent consternation by Western Christians regarding the seriousness of Salman Rushdie's alleged blasphemy is any indication, we are not a people even given to thinking about blasphemy, much less recognizing it in our failure to trust God's prom-

ise to be present in the finite and concrete orderings of creation.

Be that as it may, without a high sense of the means of grace, the doctrine of justification by faith becomes nothing but a disembodied idea, safely tucked away in our hearts and minds, leaving our wills and bodies free from Divine righteousness. Any further dialogue between Lutherans and Catholics needs to take up Peter's question, if not his principle. ✧

¹John Reumann, "Righteousness" in the *New Testament: "Justification" in Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982).

²Albert Pero and Ambrose Moyo (eds.), *Theology and the Black Experience: The Lutheran Heritage Interpreted by African and African-American Theologians*. (Augsburg, 1988).

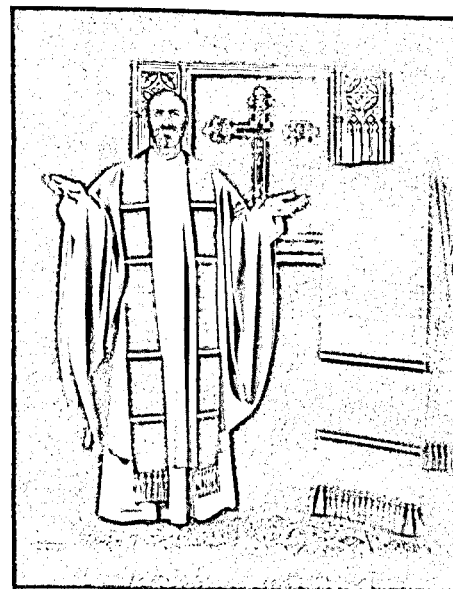
³Carl J. Peter, "Justification by Faith and the Need of Another Critical Principle," 304-315; hereafter, Peter, "Another Principle."

⁴George Lindbeck, "Article IV and Lutheran/Roman Catholic Dialogue: The Limits of Diversity in the Understanding of Justification," *Lutheran Theological Seminary Bulletin*, Gettysburg, P.A., 61 (1981) 6.

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