

## Foreword

### *Lutheran Quarterly* Jubilee 2012

by OSWALD BAYER

Gerhard O. Forde's "radical Lutheranism" (1987) is and remains the journal's charter. Undoubtedly, one of the main marks of this radical Lutheranism is reflected in the expression "Justification is for Preaching." That is the title of this jubilee volume and also Forde's thesis. It presents a decisive moment of Lutheran identity which has been a special highlight of *Lutheran Quarterly* over the past twenty-five years, and the articles that have been selected for this anniversary edition are no exception. They exhibit in a multifaceted way something that must not be concealed but taught publicly—within the walls of the church as well as outside, such as in a publication like *Lutheran Quarterly*. In its own way and for its part, this journal wants to carry out the enormously broad commission that our Lord gave his church (Mark 16:15) and to be accountable to everyone for what the church preaches, namely, justification by grace alone, by Christ alone, by faith alone, by the word alone. In what follows, I would like to emphasize the points that I consider especially important in view of the title and the thematic content of this volume.

Lutheran identity is bound up with an understanding of the righteousness of God which can never be isolated from the manner in which it is preached. "God's righteousness" cannot be abstracted from the mode and medium of its self-communication in the reliable word that promises and gives salvation, the *promissio* that creates certainty, as distinct from the law. This promise does not refer primarily to the future but to the present; it is a legally valid promise with an immediate effect.

Salvation is not a basic anthropological structure that could only be expressed in the proclamation of the church and that could only be represented by it. The preaching of the church is no secondary

information about previously given facts, nor is it an expression of an underlying religious vitality. It is promise and gift, pledge and presentation, encouragement and communication, bestowal and distribution. Luther makes an immensely helpful distinction between two related moments of salvation: The salvation “acquired” on the cross *sub Pontio Pilato* once and for all, and that “distributed” in the word of the cross from the beginning to the end of the world. Neither of these two moments is without the other. The christological and trinitarian competence is manifest in the sacramental performance of the preached word; without that competence, together with its historical moorings *sub Pontio Pilato*, this would become myth (*mythos*). The once-for-all death of Jesus Christ makes his eternally valid testament—the *new* testament—legally valid; by virtue of his resurrection, he opens it and distributes the inheritance himself. Thus Good Friday and Easter form a differentiated unity of death and life, God and man: “A testator is the same as a promiser who is going to die, while a promiser ... is a testator who is going to live” (*testator idem est quod moriturus promissor, promissor autem victurus ... testator* (WA 6:513.37—514.1 = LW 36:38 (alt.); cf. WA 2:521.35–7 = LW 27:268; on Gal. 3:18). The one who is really present in baptism, absolution, and the Lord’s Supper is not represented as absent but presents himself as present.

If justification needs to be preached, its forensic character must be taken seriously. That can only happen if the forensic aspect is not isolated or limited to a special world but is identified as a fundamental and all-embracing structure of reality, such as we have, for example, in Psalms 96 and 98. Therefore, the fundamental anthropological significance of “justification,” as well as its ontological importance, must be highlighted. This means that the preaching of justification must always show an awareness of its link with the theology of creation. That finally is the only way to overcome the unfortunate polarization between the “forensic” and “effective” aspects of justification. For God’s bodily promise and verdict of acquittal by means of an earthly human mouth *does* exactly what it says. Conversely, it is also true that he *says* and imputes exactly what he does in effecting the new creation through the forgiveness of sins. God’s communication of his mercy and our participation in it, and

thus in God's essence itself, does not happen anonymously or in a vague impersonal way. Christ rather is present in the special faith in the particular word of promise. The real union of the sinful human with the God who justifies is, according to Luther, "not to be thought of in terms of the category of substance but only in terms of the category of relation" (WA 40/II:354.3f.; on Ps. 51:4; cf. LW 12:329; on Ps. 51:2). Being and essence consist in right relations—just as, on the other hand, sin consists in the reversal of our original relation to God and to all our fellow creatures, where humans are now curved in on themselves in an empty and unproductive life of total self-reflection and self-referentiality.

The self-communication of Jesus Christ, and with him of the triune God, comes to me from outside in the promise and gift; faith is *fides adventitia* (Gal. 3:23 and 25), adventitious faith., Christ encounters me in the external, bodily word and yet, even as a word that is given to me and received in faith, it remains the word of another and in this sense remains "alien"; *my* righteousness will always remain *his* righteousness: *iustitia aliena*.

Nevertheless, he who comes to me in the word of promise, the promise of salvation—*pro vobis*—comes to his own (John 1:11) and dwells in us (John 14:23). For the God who comes to me together with all creatures in the word is the same God who has always already come to me and to all creatures in the word, and is with us and in us, in fact is closer to us than we are to ourselves. Thus the "*pro nobis*" is never without the "*in nobis*," never without God's inhabitation in his creatures.

Just how critical the motto "Justification is for Preaching!" is can be seen from the theology and practice of the Lord's Supper. Is it, as a whole, a "Eucharist"? Are the words of institution to be subordinated to the prayer of thanksgiving by the congregation, so that the downwards character of these gift-giving words becomes unclear? Or do we follow Luther's theology, with its sharp distinction between "*sacramentum*" and "*sacrificium*" (De captivitate; WA 6:526.13-17 = LW 36:56), and see the highpoint and climax of the Lord's Supper in the double gift-giving word of the narrative of institution ("This is ..."), perceived as the *promissio* to the assembled congregation? Here the word, in, with, and under the eating of the

bread and the drinking of the wine, grants a share in the body and blood of Christ and thus a share in the new covenant, God's eternal kingdom. Here Christ's body and blood are taken and received with thanks, in the sacrifice of praise, so that the Eucharist answers to the gift and in that way—as an answer to the word—is indeed a principal moment of the Lord's Supper even though it does not constitute it as a whole?

The controversy over these alternatives is therefore of enormous importance because what is at stake here is the criteriological significance of the doctrine of justification. Is justification preached in a celebration of the Lord's Supper that is basically understood, upwards, as the church's act of thanksgiving? Again, if the high point of the Lord's Supper is the gracious action of God that precedes the human sacrifice of praise, is justification still preached if God's gift-giving word, taken up in the prayer, is thus no longer addressed to the congregation and so no longer really confronts it as the external word that first creates faith?

Constitutive for the preaching of justification is the distinction between law and gospel. It is not that the gospel can only be understood in the light of the experience of sinner with the law—hence *ex negativo*. The gospel has, positively, a surplus of that experience; otherwise it would be no more powerful than the law. Nevertheless, if the gospel is not understood as undeserved liberation from the accusing and condemning power of the law, if it is not understood as unconditional acquittal in spite of evident guilt, it loses its incredibly miraculous nature, and ends up being eviscerated and reduced to a self-evident truth that basically appeals to the free will of the listener to do good. The gospel, and therefore God's love, is trivialized whenever his judgment is silenced. The church's preaching is seriously flawed if it speaks of peace with God without making clear that this peace is preceded by enmity and strife (Rom. 5:10). God's love is not something self-evident. For in his compassionate love, God speaks against himself: against the God who speaks completely *against* me in the law and in his judgment. In the gospel, however, God speaks completely *for* me. The gospel is based on a revolution in God himself, where God's own will is overturned in himself (Hosea 11:8); the New Testament expresses

this with the difference between Father and Son, between God's life and Jesus' death. Only if we perceive the radical distinction between law and gospel will we grasp the saving significance of the death of Jesus Christ; he redeemed us on the stake of the cross "from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us" (Gal. 3:13; see 2 Cor. 5:21). With his Son, God himself pleads our cause, he sacrifices himself for us. Our freedom, "acquired" for us on the cross, is "distributed" in the proclamation—paradigmatically in the Lord's Supper: given for you. The basic gesture involved in preaching the gospel are the opened hands that give and bestow the gift of freedom on those who hear through the Holy Spirit in faith, so that they themselves are empowered to open up their own hands, otherwise tightly clenched in self-reference to thank God and give to the neighbor.

It is my hope that *Lutheran Quarterly* continues in the way it has been going, struggling for the sacramental word and the word-bound sacrament and that in this way it also serves in the future to promote the preaching of justification, the preaching of the *libertas Christiana*. For the charisma of Lutheranism—the gift entrusted to it historically—is clarity of doctrine with its focus on the God who justifies the sinner. As with every charisma, so this one too is not meant for grandstanding but for service. When this is grasped, the Lutheran Confession can never be an end in itself but must be seen as a service to the ecumene.

*Translated by Jeffrey Silcock*