

I have long had the impression that even Luther himself was not entirely of one mind about justification by grace alone through faith alone. This impression seems to me confirmed by the following passages, all cited from his *Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians*, but not all by any means expressing the same understanding. In fact, different passages seem to me to express at least two understandings so different as to be contradictory.

One such understanding is well expressed by the following passage.

Take thou the work of the law [Gal 2:16] . . . generally for that which is contrary to grace. Whatsoever is not grace, is the law, whether it be judicial, ceremonial, or the Ten Commandments. Wherefore if thou couldest do the work of the law according to this commandment: 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart,' &c. (not to say here that no man yet ever did or could do so), yet thou shouldest not be justified before God; for a man is not justified by the works of the law[, but, as Luther puts it some pages earlier, by 'grace only and alone'](128, 102).

Significantly, Luther makes the same point even over against the doctrine that, although a human being is able to do what the law requires and thereby to be justified, this is so thanks only to the love of God poured into her or his heart, i.e., *caritas infusa / fides infusa*.

Wherefore, when Paul saith (as he oftentimes doth) that a man is not justified by the law, or by the works of the law (which are both one) he speaketh generally of the whole law, setting the righteousness of faith against the righteousness of the whole law, or all that can be done, whether by divine power or by man's own strength, according to the law. For by the righteousness of the law, saith he, a man is not pronounced righteous before God: but the righteousness of faith imputeth freely through grace, for Christ's sake. The law, no doubt, is holy, righteous and good, and consequently the works of the law are holy, righteous and good: yet notwithstanding a man is not justified thereby before God (128).

. . . to do no murder, not to commit adultery, &c., whether it be done according to nature, or the strength of man, or free will, or according to the gift and power of God, yet it justifieth not (129).

Elsewhere, however, Luther expresses no less clearly another very different, indeed contradictory understanding. Thus he says, for example:

True it is that we ought to fulfill the law, and to be justified through the fulfilling thereof; but sin hindereth us. . . . Faith therefore is our righteousness in this life. But in the life to come, when we shall be

thoroughly cleansed and delivered from all sins and concupiscences, we shall have no more need of faith and hope, but we shall then love perfectly (495; cf. also 382).

Whereas, according to the first passages cited, we are not justified by fulfilling the law even in principle, even if we fulfill it perfectly, we are told here that we are indeed justified by fulfilling the law in principle, because we ought to be so justified, but that we are hindered in this by sin and so are justified in fact by faith instead—at any rate, “in this life.” But, clearly, if the question is how we are justified *in principle*, Luther gives different, contradictory answers in the two sets of passages. Either we are justified in principle by God’s grace alone through faith alone, or else we are justified in principle by God’s law and fulfilling the demands thereof.

As for me, I’m clear that only the first option is appropriate to the apostolic witness, if not also to Luther’s own deepest intention. We are justified, if at all, only by God’s grace; and this would be true even if we were perfectly to fulfill God’s law. Thus the radical limit to our human freedom is that, with or without our having sinned, we would remain ever dependent on God’s grace alone not only for our being but also for our meaning—for the final justification of our being, for its ultimately amounting to something, making a difference, and so on. Given the fact of our sin, of course, we are *a fortiori* dependent solely on God’s grace, because nothing can possibly free us from our sin, from its power as well as its guilt, except that very grace—the marvel of which, and *the* truth of the gospel, is that it embraces even our sin within its scope. But utterly dependent on God’s grace we would be and ever remain even without our sin, because it is by grace alone that we either are at all or have any abiding significance—and that not only in this life, but in any other. Thus not only is Maurice right in what he (rightly or wrongly) learns from Augustine, that even Adam before the fall was righteous solely by grace through faith, but Bultmann is also right in what he (rightly or wrongly) learns from Paul, that even when that which is perfect has come, the openness of Christian existence knows no end—in faith and hope as well as in love

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