

# THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD — JUSTIFICATION TODAY\*

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*Two preliminary remarks:*

1. *This presentation to the theme 'The Righteousness of God — Justification today' comes from a Lutheran background. But as I see it, in this point there is not and cannot be a confessional difference between Lutheran and Reformed theology.*

2. *By intent I do not refer to the situation, in which you are doing theology. This is not only because up to now I have spent only three days in this country and I am listening and learning, what is going on. But my opinion is, that the context never can have a normative function. The main task of a theologian is the responsibility for the identity of Christian faith in the changing and in the differences of time and situation. It is only through the Gospel, that the Church remains to be the Church. The Gospel, however, refers to what Christ is doing for us in clear distinction to what we are doing or what we fail to do.*

As a motto to the subject "The Righteousness of God — Justification Today", I would like to begin by quoting a part of Luther's opening speech to a graduation-dispute of the Dane Petrus Palladius and of Tilemann coming from Kleve, a small town in the lowlands of the Rhine river. Both graduates were to travel to Denmark together with Bugenhagen in order to start reformation in this country upon invitation of the Danish king. The dispute was held on July 1st, 1537. Luther said in his opening speech: "*Articulus iustificationis est magister et princeps, dominus, rector et iudex super omnia genera doctrinarum, qui conservat et gubernat omnem doctrinam ecclesiasticam et erigit conscientiam nostram coram Deo ..*". — "The article of justification is master and prince, lord, rector and judge upon every kind of doctrine. It reserves and governs all ecclesiastical doctrine and preaching and erects our conscience before God. Without this article, the World (!) is entirely death and darkness (*mors et tenebrae*). As there is no error, may it be that insignificant, foolish and absurd, which does not find great delight in human common-sense and which misleads us, if we do not take cognizance on this article and reflect upon it (*si sine cognitione et meditatione huius articuli sumus*). But because this world is as crammed and as dull-witted (*crassus et haebes*) this article has to be dealt with and

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reflected upon most frequently. Especially, if we care about the congregations, we will work on nothing less than to use all our energy, devotion and effort to teach this article. As he, who is solidly and firmly founded by the positive realization of this article, will stand all dangers. However, if we are not solidly founded in this article, we might fall into deep despair. It is not an meaningless bagatelle, which is at stake here, but it is a very important and serious matter, especially for those who want to withstand the fight with devil, sin and death, and who want to teach in the congregations and preach the gospel" (WA 39,1,205).

This quotation may draw our attention to two things which shall be adhered to from the beginning. First: general principles are meant; second: not only Christian inwardness is meant, but also the world, which seems death and darkness without this article. And here we are at the subject. I would like to proceed in dealing with the following:

1. God's righteousness and the sinner's justification — in principal.
2. Justification today — two examples.
3. The necessary though difficult distinction between heavenly and human righteousness — final conclusions.

#### **1. God's Righteousness and the Sinner's Justification — in principal**

In the wonderful gothic cathedral of Bamberg, a small but most famous town near Erlangen, where I am living, there is to be found the tomb of the Emperor Henry II and his wife Kunigunde. They lived during the time of the 11th century and were the two donors of the cathedral. The sarcophagus is cut in marble by the famous sculptor Tilman Riemenschneider (1460—1531). This fascinating work of art originates back to 1499—1513, which is relevant for our subject in so far as it is pre-reformatory. Various scenes from the emperor's life are shown.

One panel pictures the so-called soul weighing, a dream of the emperor: An angel with the sword of justice carries the balance of justice, on which the souls of the dead are weighed. Several devils are trying to pull the scale with the soul down to themselves. But in vain; because on the other scale is the communion cup which offsets the soul and has it raised despite of the pulling devils. Beneath this picture, the old snake is down, winding itself.

This is as impressive as clear, the sinner's justification only by the work of Jesus Christ from the Last Judgment, a justification which is received in the gift of the Lord's Supper. The blood of Christ offsets our sins and it effects our not being sentenced, but saved in judgment.

This picture is of basic meaning in various aspects. With entire completion, it contains the important elements of what we call "justification". The picture clearly states: justification in its fundamental meaning is the salvation from God's Final Judgment.

The origination date furthermore proves that this justification is, by no means, a new reformatory formation, or even a special confessional doctrine, but that it is content and criterion of all Christian faith. Then, it also shows that justification is not an isolated subject-matter, but has its place in life, for example, in link to the Lord's Supper as well as to baptism.

These are the fundamentals and connections, which have been forgotten to a very considerable extent, particularly in the churches of reformation. This was mainly caused by the fact that after all confessional controversies justification has turned out to be looked at in a narrow sense as a special mere reformatory doctrine.

Therefore, I would like to remind of some brief facts about the beginning of reformation:

The care of souls, not the theological controversy of teachings and between teachers, was the starting point for reformation and, in correlation with the sale of indulgences, this firstly concerned the administration of penance and confession. Practically-minded, this caused the following question for the care of souls: On which conditions can remission of sins be granted?

As the books of penance and confessional mirrors of the Middle Ages show, the praxis of penance and confession had been established very thoroughly for the pastors and congregations in that time: How to repent sin in the right manner (*attritio/contritio*), how to confess sin (*confessio*), mainly, however, how to make satisfaction hereof (*satisfactio*) were the bearing issues. In the Schmalkald Articles from 1535 (BSLK 438.8-449.4), Luther reminds people of a prayer which was common at that time: "Thereof, the word was heard from the pulpit, when pronouncing the common confession to the people (Offene Schuld, frank sin): 'Lord delay my life, until I repent my sins and lead a better life'." According to this predominant attitude in the medieval church, the basis for the hope to withstand God's judgment is the change for the better in one's life. This was not only meant for the living but for the dead in purgatory — the purifying fire — as well.

The immediate reform over against this type of pastoral care and preaching was the reformer's refusal of the satisfaction as third component at repentance and confession. This had two meanings: Firstly, that the absolution in the name of Jesus Christ and by the word of Christ, "your sins are forgiven", is forgiveness of sins effectively. The biblical

basis for this award of forgiveness is the healing of the palsied man (Mark 2). It shall be noted that this word has not only a declarative, i.e. indicating, but also an effective, i.e. powerful meaning, as what is said is going to happen. Secondly, this meant that repentance is not only limited to a certain accomplishment, but that it is affecting the lives. The first of Martin Luther's 95 theses clarifies this point directly: "When our Lord Jesus Christ says 'repent', then he wants the entire lives of his followers to be repentance". Thus, repentance is not being set off against but it is integrated in our lives.

For pastoral care, the following shall then apply as well: The uneasy conscience shall be calmed by the word of Christ. The "*cor contritum et conqussatum*", the "frightened and broken heart" of Psalm 51 is the cardinal point for the entire reformatory controversy. In CA XX, it is said under the headline "Vom Glauben und guten Werken" (faith and good deeds) that "all of this teaching shall be referred to the struggle of the deeply-shocked conscience, without this fight, it remains incomprehensible". On the other hand, pastoral care should also awake the self-confident conscience with the indication that some satisfactions and our good deeds, indulgences, cannot buy ourselves out, but that the change into the new life was the essential part for the Christian man. This new life, however, is based on baptism and consists of the return to baptism again and again (*reditus ad baptismum*). The new, reborn man is living and growing through baptism. In baptism it is fundamentally and permanently appropriated what the sinner's justification is and what it effects.

Luther never submitted a doctrine of justification. An attempt of a systematic presentation "*Rhapsodia seu concepta in librum de loco iustificationis*" (1530/WA 30,II,657 ff) has remained to be a fragment. Certainly, this does not only have external reasons, but it might be caused by the subject-matter itself, as justification is not only part, but basis and norm for everything that is happening in the church and in Christian life.

What this means can be seized very well or even, it can be summarized in the solid connection of justification and prayer. This is a connection, which was again pointed out by Rudolf Hermann in recent time in his study on "The correlation of justification and prayer according to Luther's interpretation of Romans 3 in his lectures on the Romans' letter" (1925). Hermann's fundamental thesis is as follows: "... that without prayer, we shall neither comprehend the matter in itself, i.e. justification, nor our own selves. More precisely: it can neither be stated what justification is, nor who is the sinful and who is the justified person without addressing to prayer at the same time. The term justification

cannot be defined without the term of prayer."<sup>1</sup> In short: what justification is, is given not in an abstract doctrine, but in the reality of prayer.

This connection of which Rudolf Hermann reminds us, is the following in Luther's lecture on Romans 3,1 f. We shortly recall the first and second chapter of Romans. The first chapter, Rom. 1, 18 ff, refers to the gentiles. They trespass against the first table of the decalogue, and this has its consequences in trespassing against the commandments of the second table. "They boast of their wisdom, but they have made fools of themselves, exchanging the splendour of immortal God for an image shaped like mortal man, even for images like birds, beasts, and creeping things. For this reason God has given them up ..." (Rom. 1,22—24). The second chapter refers to the Jews. To them it is said: "You rely upon the law and are proud of your God; you know his will" (Rom. 2, 17—18). But as they trespass against the commandments of the second table, they also trespass against the commandments of the first table in spite of their knowledge of the true God. This leads to the conclusion, that "the whole world may be exposed to the judgement of God" (Rom. 3,19). But this touches at the covenant of God with his chosen people, and thus the question arises: "Will their faithlessness cancel the faithfulness of God? Certainly not! God must be true though every man living were a liar; for we read in Scripture (Ps. 51,6), 'When thou speakest thou shalt be vindicated, and win the verdict when thou art on trial' " (Rom. 3,3—4). To this Luther remarks: "Thereof we conclude that God cannot be wise, fair, true, strong, good, etc., if we do not admit by trusting him and budging him (*credendo et cedendo*) that we are unwise, unfair, deceitful, weak and evil".

The perception basis for sin is thus not the human fallibility as we experience it, but the word of God, which reveals the sin of man in its entire reality and depth, however, in testifying God's righteousness at the same time. The procedure is that man acknowledges God's righteousness by taking up God's accusation through the word of Scriptures against him: I am the sinner for whom God's son had to die on the cross. And from that I will only be saved by Christ alone.

Justification — in this correlation — is a reference solemnizing in prayer and confession. Luther expresses it in Latin: "justificare" which means being made just. This is done as follows: "*Per hoc autem iustificari Deum nos iustificamur. Et iustificatio illa Dei passiva, qua a nobis iustificatur, est ipsa iustificatio activa a Deo.*" — "In agreeing with God (i.e. whom, who claims by his word that we are sinners), we will be made just. And that passive justification of God (by ourselves) is our justification from God in active manner." What may seem to be a little complicated, is real simple in Christian life. Let us remember the tax col-

lector in Luke 18,9–14: “God be merciful to me, a sinner.” In execution, this is confession and prayer at the same time: I am the sinner, not only for one single deed which as shown in the pharisee’s case, might be charged, but I am the sinner to the entireness of my character. I am standing in front of God with empty hands and I am here to receive everything from him, nothing from me. In comparison to the Pharisee, who talks very much about himself and before God, the tax-collector is doing nothing but praying and confessing. The Pharisee had done many things, but had nothing to confess. He does not seem to need anything, and that is why he receives nothing, whereas the other “went home acquitted of his sins” (Luke 18,14).

Another every-day correlation between justification and prayer appears in the fifth petition in the Lord’s Prayer: “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us ...” This passage makes clear how justification is received from God and how it is passed on among mankind by forgiveness.

The concrete effects of justification of sinners and among sinners are, that communion is restored by forgiveness of sin where it has been broken down by sin.

## **2. Justification today – two examples**

From fundamentals, we now point our attention towards the problems which are combined in the question “justification today and how to understand and interpret it in our time?”.

As a date for a historic misunderstanding with several consequences up to today I at first refer to the Fourth Plenary Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation, which dealt with the subject in Helsinki in 1963, and it broke down on the meeting’s subject. As no decision could be taken, the draft was passed to a theological commission for terminating action and a revised edition was submitted one year later. One has got to think about what it means that a congregation of Lutheran churches did not succeed in passing a document on justification.

Even if this event is more than 20 years back now, it remains to be a symptom for certain difficulties Reformation churches in general may have with justification on one hand; on the other hand, it is also an experience and the best experience of all is the one from which one can learn what has been done in the wrong manner. Hereto, I would like to introduce the following example concerning at least one important point for our reflections. The result beforehand: The question about “justification today?” is without any doubt a question which is frequently discussed by many people. But the Plenary Assembly of Helsinki once again

proved that this question was — and still is — a wrong question, although this could, perhaps, not be realized at that time.

But why? I am going to quote some parts from the first sections of the document in its revised version of 1964, in which the attempt is made to develop the theological problem starting from the contemporary questions. It seems to me to be an analysis of the time and contemporary theological endeavours still valid today, as it shows, that the context becomes a kind of normative presupposition for understanding:

“1/1. The reformatory testimony of justification by faith alone was the answer to the existential question: ‘How do I get a propitious God?’ In the world in which we are living today, the question has almost ceased to be heard. The following question remains: ‘How can my life become meaningful?’ When somebody searches for the meaning of his life, he is forced to justify his own existence in view of himself and his fellow people.

He judges his fellow people according to the rules he established for himself. People are therefore filled with trust in the own capacity. They are filled with the desire for recognition and praise, and they are also filled with accusation and condemnation. Isn’t everybody living with the constraint to pursue future visions from which they expect confirmation of their lives?

2. Thus, all human beings are filled with manifold attempts to find their own ‘justification’. However, the question for justification of human life, does no longer include the question for justification in front of God. More than ever before, we now encounter a different type of godlessness.

In earlier times, people had been faced with similar problems. The messenger of the gospel also hit a God-estranged and Godless world, especially in the early-Christianity, but in the so-called “religious” Middle Ages and at the time of reformation as well. The message of justification still brought a renewal of the church in the reformation time and it inspired spiritual powers, which could free men to a new life in the community with God.

3. Today, however, the church is in a particular difficulty when preaching the Gospel, whether words like “sinner”, “grace” and “justification” are used or whether different terms are applied. The difficulty, with which the church is encountered here, is not only the offence people take during the proclamation of the Gospel among the people. Today’s people do not realize that it is God who

talks to them. The question whether God is and why man is God's creature turns out to be a question which might be a contestation for us. Justification requires encountering between God and man. Can man in today's overall spiritual situation be brought to the reality of God by proclamation of the church that he is led to God for the question for justification of his existence?"<sup>2)</sup>

The quotation of these three sections show the intent of the entire document: Decisive is the question how justification can be understood today and how it can be made understandable to today's people. Such is the hermeneutic problem. And this concerns understanding on one side; on the other side, it is leading to reflections how this faith can be converted and proved in reality of our time. So it is said, for example, in paragraph 16 of the document mentioned: "It is a first question to our church of today, why her faith is this poor in visible results opposed to the great times in its history". This concerns the ethical or the social-ethical problem as well. Or, let's say, the theological task is not the identity of faith, but the step from past to presence, from theory to practice.

As we consider these reflections to a theoretical and a practical hermeneutic today mostly as basic feature of our theology, it is not at all easy to recognize the error in its roots and to make it clear. The best thing will probably be to really recall Luther and the way how he not only understood the question for the propitious God, but how he also passed with the spiritual support of his superior and spiritual father Staupitz. Remember the torture of conscience of the monk who was reversed by the terror of Christ's judgment. And it is Staupitz who tells him: "It is not Christ terrifying you, because Christ never is terrifying, but consoling."<sup>3)</sup> Or in modern terms: It is not God who turns himself away from men, but it is men who turn themselves away from God.

On several later occasions, Luther recalled this time and herewith the question for the propitious God appears. I am quoting a part of one of Luther's sermons on Matthew 3, the baptism of Jesus, of the year 1534<sup>4)</sup>:

Luther reports from his own course: "Oh, when do you want to become pious and do enough so that you receive a propitious God? Thoughts like these drove me to monkery and have tormented me with agony, fasting, freezing and strict life. Still I did not accomplish anything with it than to lose the dear baptism, yes, even to help deny it.

In order to not being misled by such, let us keep pure this doctrine like we see and grasp here, that baptism is neither our work nor doing and let us keep a large, wide difference between God's works and ours. As many works done to us by the Godly majesty, that he created



our body and soul and gives us everything on heaven and earth, these are his general works to all men on earth, and all is very exquisite and good. Beyond these works, he is doing others to those who become Christians and His children, as after we fell and spoilt by sin, he gives us His word and the baptism, washing and cleansing us from sin ... These works ought to be praised when willing to talk about great heavenly works. As he is the right work master who eradicates sin with his fingers, strangles death, defeats the devils, destroys hell ...”.

This means, and we have to clarify it especially today, that the question for the propitious God and similar questions: How do I find, understand him, are wrong questions, because in these questions grace is not appreciated. Or to put it more precisely: Man is concerned with his own experiences, questions and doings, but he neglects what has been done by God in Christ and what he has received as grace. Thus, right here in the beginning, it is decisive, whether our realization of faith sets in at our own positive or negative experiences of the angry God, at a senselessness of life or at a contemporary distance to God or to Christ in the problems of our time and society. It is neither the tie nor the opposition, because the point is not understanding but conversion.

A different, actual example for the wrong question after “justification today” is shown in the “*Evangelischer Erwachsenenkatechismus*” (Evangelical Adult Catechism), edited by the VELKD<sup>5</sup> which is now spread with more than 200,000 copies. In different points, this work is an example how the “*articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*” is no longer clear in Lutheran theology and church.

Seen as a whole, these facts are proved in the length of the individual subject-matters and their noticeable intention to give instructions to deal with general questions on life conduct. The eye-catching point about it is the total lack of explicit instructions to God’s commandments. Instead, we find the antinomism, widely-spread today, which replaces material commandments by a commandment of love superseding any contents of the commandments, whereas love does not eradicate the contents of the commandments, but is their fulfillment.

A doctrine of law is absent, in consequence unavoidably the proclamation of the judgment over all the world according to the works must be missing, just like the wrath of God. However, this concerns only the farther frame and the total conception of this book, in which I personally see a negative report in our today’s theology, particularly because very many theologians of our time worked on it.

In the center, the theological problem is perceptible in the chapter on justification. I may express my criticism on it with good reasons, because the objections are such which I already presented to a

preliminary draft of this section without success. In the first part, justification appears under the title with the question "How does Jesus set free?". Further statements are in the so called correlation-scheme, according to which the proclamation of the Christian congregation is pointed to questions of modern man, and such questions then appear in the introduction to the chapter like, for example: "Who accepts me as what I am? — Do I have a right to exist even if I fail, or do I first have to prove how much I am worth? — Where do I find a community that welcomes me, gives me shelter and accepts me ...?". These are questions that certainly move all men to more or less extent, and these questions can now be seen in analogy to Luther's question after the propitious God. Justification then appears as doctrine or theory, for which Pauline theology is a pointed pre-condition for Western christianity for answering such questions and to find a solution to the problems involved. This means in the further tendency: justification is being reduced to an offer for human well-being in self-confirmation and social life.

This means, to define sharply, nothing less and nothing more than that justification is subject to the requirements and criteria of an affluent society, to which the Christian church is trying to suggest herself with all possible and the most attractive means to eliminate deficiency symptoms.

In wording, the question "How does Jesus set free?", is characteristic for the role of the on-looker and the principle of consumption and success of advertising, for which the customer is king.

The correct way to word it, however, if one knows what is being dealt with here, would be: "From what does Jesus set free?". The answer may then only be the following: Not from my uneasiness or from my feelings of unworthiness or contact-difficulties, when dealing with people, or in depressive moods, which might come over oneself, although we have to consider that there is not only the person in conflict with himself, but also the person that is satisfied with himself and his life, which might be the most frequent type.

Now, if I am asking: "from what?", the answer may only be: from my sin. Furthermore, it should not read: "Jesus" but "Jesus Christ, the crucified and resurrected Lord". But from what are we freed? Not from our uneasiness as such, but from the wrath of God which is being executed in his righteousness on mankind under sin.

*We summarize:* Proclamation and affection of God's righteousness in Jesus Christ do not mean the elimination of imperfections on affluence and well-being but singularly that we are saved from God's judgment on all world by Jesus Christ, which is another reason that there is no tie but only conversion.

The question after "Justification today" at the Plenary Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation of Helsinki in 1963 as well as the "Evangelical Adult Catechism" of the VELKD are two striking examples how the doctrine of justification has wrong decisions already in the beginning, which can only lead to wrong solutions. The important, decisive point, I would like to sharply word as follows: For Luther, the question after the propitious God was answered by coming back to what he received in baptism: God is gracious, he forgives your sins.

For people of today, of any resolute type, the question after justification can never be answered in a respective manner by pointing suggestingly to meaningful feeling for life, being accepted and the like, but only by coming back to the word and work of Jesus Christ, through whom a sinner becomes justified. Otherwise, justification becomes a *doctrine* of justification or, even worse, justification develops to be an ideology which can be made serviceable for various, different purposes and requirements, if reflecting, in which inner and outer areas we may need righteousness.

### **3. The necessary but difficult distinction between heavenly and human righteousness – final conclusions**

The question after the practical consequences of justification from faith alone for the Christian life and the action of the church, is as commonly-known, an old problem, which again and again bursts into the open. We remember Paul who had to defend himself against reproaches like the following: "Let us do evil so that the good may come". – "Shall we continue in sin that grace may be abound?" (Romans 3,8; 6,1). Or let us remember the objections in the justification decree of the Trient Council, where the concern is expressed that from faith alone (*sola fide*) the piety in life style (*pietas*) could be neglected. Or, I recall the continuously-repeated objections and questions from theologians of our days, how justification of faith is related to righteousness in life. To quote one without mentioning the name: "The gospel becomes the religious justification base for today's society and the mystification of the miserable reality, in which one seizes the promises of liberty only in faith (in Latin, this would be *sola fide!*), but in which one does not face the real demands of liberty in an unfree world."

I do not need to explain how explosive these reflections and the involved problems are. All the same, it can be seen that one will unavoidably return to these subjects with an uneasy and frightened conscience, which are on our minds from the task to bring through righteousness and liberty in this world, or even save this world from self-destruction.

On the other hand, there is the permanent reproach, not only between groups, but also in our hearts, that we could fail to realize what the reality of our faith is. Each of us knows that opinions do not only clash at this point, but that very often, communication among Christians becomes impossible, because forgiveness seems to be impossible and a "*status confessionis*" is proclaimed. For this reason, I do not want to make lengthy statements, instead I want to stress the necessary difference between heavenly and human righteousness as well as — connected to it and developing from it — the difference between the work of Christ and the works of Christians.

A text of Luther's commentary on Galatians of 1531/35 may prove quicker clarity and understanding than all comments on the correlation between faith and works: "*Ideo diligenter discernenda Christiana (scil. iustitia) ab illis omnibus, sunt enim prorsus contrariae, quia iusticiae peiores sunt ex legibus, praeceptis, traditionibus, operibus. Est iusticia quam nos facimus, sive fiat ex puris naturalibus sive etiam ex dono dei, ut omnia opera. Sed iusticia quae ex nobis fit, non est Christiana iusticia, non fimus per eam probi. Christiana iusticia est mere contraria, passiva, quam tantum recipimus, ubi nihil operamur sed patimur alium operari in nobis scilicet deum. Haec non intelligitur a mundo: 'In mysterio abscondita' (1 Corinthians 1,7). Imo Christiani difficulter comprehendunt et non comprehendunt quomodo etc. Illa distinctio bene consideranda. Ego nondum scio.*"<sup>61</sup>

This means in interpreted translation:

"The righteousness given in Christ has to be carefully differentiated from other types of righteousness in the area of politics, philosophy, society, morality, education etc. There is a fundamental difference, because the perceptions and types of righteousness, contained in laws, regulations, traditions and actions are of worse nature. There are two types of righteousness. One of which is what we do ourselves — be it that we understand them as natural abilities and talent, be it that we understand them as gifts of God. As one absolutely ought to consider that the righteous way of acting also is one of God's gifts. However, this righteousness is our righteousness, and not Christ's righteousness; we do not become righteous by it (the Latin word sense might also be rendered as follows: If I am doing something in the right manner, I am not yet righteous. Or: Righteousness of Christians is not yet righteousness of Christ). Christ's righteousness stands in radical opposition to it: it is purely passive, we receive it only, if we do nothing by ourselves but if we let somebody else, namely God, work in us. For this world, this is incomprehensible: 'hidden in mystery' (1 Corinthians 2,7). Even Christians have difficulties in understanding and do not com-

prehend how this happens. However, this difference has to be clinged to. **EGO NONDUM SCIO**. — I do not yet understand it either myself”.

The only question that can be asked in regard to this subject is for me always the following:

Why does a professor, who is supposed to teach his students reliably, why does the reformer, about whom it is said that he brought to light the “*articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*” — in its fundamental and, above all, relieving effect, why does he say: “*Ego nondum scio* — I do not know this yet myself”?

In the table talks and other documents of Luther, similar comments, or better, confessions can be found. They refer to the differentiation between law and gospel, respectively, between spirit and letter. There Luther says: “*Solus spiritus sanctus scit*” — “only the Holy Ghost knows/understands this.” Luther even goes as far as to say, that during the struggle in the garden of Gethsemane, the difference between law and gospel became unclear to Christ himself so that an angel had to come to strengthen and calm the Lord.

I believe that the confession or profession of ignorance, if a professor can be understood in the original sense of his occupational description as confessor, is the admission: Out of our natural humanity, we are constantly in temptation to obtain righteousness by our works, we are even trying to come to play our righteous dealing in front of God and mankind in a definitive manner like the Pharisee. Although, there is no doubt, according to Luther, that human righteousness follows its heavenly standards and has heavenly grace. However, in such, they still remain human and are therefore under the reign of sin. Christ’s righteousness, however, is the only one that can save over all the world from judgment and its proclamation is the task of the Christian congregation, which shall not proclaim the own works of Christians but the work of Christ.

It is true that human righteousness is a general need and he who stands up for it, will certainly meet with approval. Christ’s righteousness, however, has to reveal our neediness, i.e. our unescapable enslavement under sin. Thus, people do not only have to comprehend what justification might mean for them or in society and politics today. They must be lead to the confession: “God be merciful to me, a sinner.”

It is finally clear at this point, that people’s needs for this life, which might be absolutely justified and required, are entirely different from this neediness which reveals itself where in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the power of sin is recognized, confessed and forgiven. As here, the old Adam becomes a new man. It is this distinction between the works of Christians and the work of Christ where the truth of the

Christian proclamation and the unity among Christians and churches is at stake — not only today.

The endeavour for justice and liberty among men is certainly a serious responsibility — not only for Christians. But justification by Christ through faith is the only specific content of Christian proclamation to the world. Thus it is an essential, though sometimes painful question, whether we loose ourselves in the everyday struggle for justice among men and at the same time are loosing what is the only means for justification through Christ and before God.

Pastors and teachers have to take difficult decisions concerning the question whether they want to be applauded by their listeners in responding to the very often depressing problems of their world or whether they want to urge them to conversion and reception of the renewal by the Gospel to be saved at the end of this world. In one of his table talks, Luther described this matter rather appropriately under the topic "which preacher pleases the crowd?"<sup>7)</sup>

"At table it was thought of many preachers, who in a great number were preferred even to Dr. Luther; there the doctor said: I like to honor them and don't grudge them it, but this is the reason why the rabble also judges, when they hear telling stories and examples, so they are amazed at them as it is the case with D. Nicolaus (Vicepleban Nicolaus Fabri von Grünberg), who preached about the books of Joshua and of the Kings by playing with many allegories and spiritual interpretation, which the people and the mass like very much. In this I want also to be a master. But if one preaches about the article of justification, that one becomes only justified and blessed by the faith in Christ, the ordinary man considers nobody as eloquent, even they don't like to listen at him. And take this for a certain sign: if one preaches about the article of justification, people sleep and cough; but if one starts to tell stories and examples, the people raise both ears, get quiet and listen carefully. I believe that there are many of such orators among us who preach an endless overpowering sermon, they preach me under the bench and back again".

## Notes

1. R. Hermann, *Gesammelte Studien zur Theologie Luthers und der Reformation*, Göttingen 1960, 11—43; cf. especially 12.
2. "Rechtfertigung heute. Studien und Berichte," herausgegeben von der Theologischen Kommission und Abteilung des Lutherischen Weltkundes, Stuttgart-Berlin 1965, 7 f.
3. *WA Tr 2*, 417 no 2318 a + b.
4. *WA 37*, 611, 23 ff.
5. First edition 1975/fourth edition 1982.
6. *WA 40*, 1, 41, 7 ff.
7. *WA Tr2*, 454, 23—455 no 2408b.