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*The Criteriological Meaning  
of the Lutheran Doctrine  
of Justification  
and its Ontological Underpinnings*

ABSTRACT

Lutheran authors throughout the XX century have attempted to apply the Pauline doctrine of “justification by faith alone” to the whole of Christian theology, life and spirituality, as a unique determinative, criteriological or hermeneutical principle. Justification would point to the action of God who in Christ saves sinful humans, thus going to the very core of Christian life and identity. However, the fundamental principle needs to go beyond a purely existential reading of the human situation which considers man primordially as a sinner, and God only as his Saviour. It needs to be ontologically founded, on the basis of God’s good creation. It needs to take into account the fact that man, alongside the experience of sinfulness and pardon, truly encounters the goodness of God both through the reality of creation and on account of personal filiation in Christ’s Spirit.

KEYWORDS

justification, Catholic-Lutheran dialogue, criteriological function

## INTRODUCTION

Christians, taking their cue from the teaching of Paul, understand “justification” as the passage from sin to grace through the power of God. Doubtless it is a central element of Christian soteriology, of theological anthropology and of other systematic disciplines. It goes to the very heart of the Christian vision of the world and human destiny. Yet while speaking of the common understanding Lutherans and Catholics have of justification, the 1999 *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* has the following important observation to make:

The doctrine of justification... is more than just one part of Christian doctrine. It stands in an essential relation to all truths of faith, which are to be seen as internally related to each other. It is an indispensable criterion which constantly serves to orient all the teaching and practice of our churches to Christ. When Lutherans emphasize the unique significance of this criterion, they do not deny the interrelation and significance of all truths of faith. When Catholics see themselves as bound by several criteria, they do not deny the special function of the message of justification. Lutherans and Catholics share the goal of confessing Christ in all things, who alone is to be trusted above all things as the one Mediator (1 Tim 2:5f) through whom God in the Holy Spirit gives himself and pours out his renewing gifts.<sup>1</sup>

Justification therefore is not just a doctrine, a description of what happens in the Christian context, but a criterion, a hermeneutic, that decisively determines our understanding of the entire Christian vision. This position is familiar to Lutherans, but less so, perhaps, to Catholics. Let us look back a little over the origins of the formula, which we shall consider in the period anteceding the *Joint Declaration*.

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1 Lutheran World Federation–Catholic Church, *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, Città del Vaticano 1999, n. 18.

## I. THE ORIGINS OF THE CRITERIOLOGICAL MEANING OF JUSTIFICATION

A key moment in the development of modern Lutheran doctrine on justification was the Helsinki meeting of the Lutheran World Federation held in 1963.<sup>2</sup> The final document produced, called *Justification today*,<sup>3</sup> is often considered unsatisfactory in that it did not come up with a single “reformed” doctrine on justification. But the discussions were relevant and far-reaching in that they concentrated on the problem of justification in the present-day context, that is, in a period when sin, guilt and redemption no longer seemed to be of particular relevance to Christian life and theological reflection. Alienations other than those of personal sin and guilt, it was said, needed to be addressed by the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*, for example poverty and oppression (political theologies), intellectual doubt (Tillich), etc. The *terminus a quo* of salvation and of God’s action in the world needed to be amplified and diversified in order to overcome the individualism rampant in some expressions of Christian life and give the doctrine of justification the centrality and scope it once enjoyed.

Taking advantage of advances made in Luther research, biblical studies, analytical and existentialist philosophies, psychology, the Federation’s principal intention was to express in clear terms the role of the doctrine of justification as a fundamental Christian principle for assessing and criticizing in a Christian manner the value of modern attempts at self-justification whether through scientific humanism, utopian socialism or totalitarian ideologies. In an address to the assembly Gerhard Gloege stated:

With the doctrine of justification we not only have one doctrine alongside other ones, but rather the very criterion which determines our every thought, every word and action before God.<sup>4</sup>

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2 Cf. C.E. Braaten, *Justification: the Article by which the Church Stands or Falls*, Minneapolis 1990, pp. 12–15.

3 Lutheran World Federation, *Justification today*, “Lutheran World” 12 (1965) 1, suppl., pp. 1–11.

4 G. Gloege, in: *Helsinki 1963: Beiträge zum theologischen Gespräch des Lutherischen Weltbundes. Im Auftrage des Deutschen Nationalkomitees des Lutherischen Weltbundes*, Hrsg. E. Wilkens, Berlin–Hamburg 1964, p. 327.

As things turned out, the assembly was unable to come up with a consistent, unitary statement on the justification of the sinner. The variety of positions taken can be attributed to a clear conflict in the interpretation of the doctrine of justification present at the meeting. Many Lutherans held on to a more traditional view of the doctrine, centered on a strictly forensic understanding of imputed righteousness, and on the wrath of God towards individual human sin.<sup>5</sup> However, a different vision of things, inspired by the writings of Karl Holl,<sup>6</sup> Gerhard Ebeling<sup>7</sup> and others, had for several decades been influencing Lutheran thought. It should be noted that all sides intended quite positively to establish and consolidate *Lutheran identity*, and to do so by returning to the *authentic* Luther. Two areas should be especially noted.

Firstly, Karl Holl, considered by many as the founder of modern *Lutherforschung*, or Lutheran research, distinguished in a Kantian way between justification in an “analytical” sense, and justification in a “synthetical” sense.<sup>8</sup> *Synthetical justification* may be defined as a declarative divine judgement whereby the sinner is justified solely on the basis of Christ’s work; here, justification is taken in a purely ‘forensic’ way, as a kind of legal fiction. According to Holl, this view was not shared by Luther; it was Melancthon who understood and expressed it as such, and later on popularized it, making it the prevalent hallmark of classical Lutheranism. Luther’s understanding of justification, conversely, was *analytic*, according to Holl, in the sense that God *really makes the sinner righteous*, in such a way that justification is a *reale Rechtmachung* of the sinner. Luther in his earliest writings does not hold to a doctrine of double justice, nor does he juxtapose *Rechtfertigung* and

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5 Their principal point of reference was probably the 1862 work of T. Harnack, *Luthers Theologie mit besonderer Beziehung auf seine Versöhnungs- und Erlösungslehre*, 2 vols, Blaesing, Erlangen 1862–1885, reissued in 1927.

6 Cf. K. Holl, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte*, 3 vols, especially vol. 1: *Luther*, Tübingen 1927.

7 Cf. P. O’Callaghan, *Fides Christi. The Justification Debate*, Dublin 1997, pp. 161–168.

8 Cf. K. Holl, *Die Rechtfertigungslehre in Luthers Vorlesung über den Römerbrief mit besonderer Rücksicht auf die Frage der Heilsgewißheit*, in: *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte*, vol. 1: *Luther*, op. cit., pp. 111–154; and K. Holl, *Luthers Bedeutung für den Fortschritt der Auslegungskunst*, in: *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte*, vol. 1: *Luther*, op. cit., pp. 544–582.

*Gerechtmachung* (justification and “making just”), but retains an integrative combination of the two based on the Patristic doctrine of *admirabile commercium*.<sup>9</sup> Were God not to really make the sinner righteous, he would be untrue to himself, in treating the sinner as righteous when in fact he is not so. In a sense, this places regeneration logically *prior* to justification: God declares us righteous because he has made us righteous; in that sense justification *follows* regeneration, not the other way around. I consider Holl’s analysis to be substantially valid.

Secondly, perhaps the most novel and enduring aspect of the reformulation of justification doctrine by these authors, is their insistence on the strictly hermeneutical and interpretative rôle of the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*.<sup>10</sup> This is especially the case in the writings of Gerhard Ebeling. Let us examine this position.

## 2. THE CENTRALITY OF JUSTIFICATION AS A CRITICAL OR HERMENEUTICAL PRINCIPLE

Karl Barth was quite right of course in saying that the doctrine of justification has had a lot of ups and downs throughout the history of the Church.<sup>11</sup> Historically speaking, he says, even Lutheranism “has refused to centre its theology upon the one article of justification.”<sup>12</sup> This article has not always, everywhere and for everyone (*semper, ubique et ab omnibus*) been the centre and norm of Christian faith and doctrine.<sup>13</sup> In fact, the very opposite is the case. And taking the side of the main sweep of Church tradition he says that “we need a rather greater freedom than that which is allowed us if we move only within the framework of the Reformation doctrine of justification.”<sup>14</sup>

9 Cf. P. O’Callaghan, *God and Mediation. A Retrospective Appraisal of Luther the Reformer*, Minnesota 2017, pp. 30–31.

10 The 1984 USA ecumenical document *Justification by Faith*, n. 88 (in *Justification by Faith. Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue, VII*, eds. H.G. Anderson *et al.*, Minneapolis 1985, pp. 8–74), explains that though this aspect of the doctrine of justification was “of little direct importance at Helsinki... [it] has since become increasingly influential.”

11 Cf. O’Callaghan, *Fides Christi*, op. cit., pp. 195–197.

12 K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics 4/1*, Edinburgh 1957, p. 527.

13 Cf. K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics 4/1*, op. cit., p. 524.

14 K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics 4/1*, op. cit., p. 527.

To some degree, the chorus of voices that nowadays reclaim the centrality of the *articulus stantis et cadentis* would seem to justify Barth's protest.<sup>15</sup> Martin Kähler claimed that he constructed his entire dogmatics on this principle.<sup>16</sup> His disciple Paul Tillich's affirmation of structural centrality of the "Protestant principle" moves in the same direction.<sup>17</sup> Rudolf Bultmann declared that his demythologization programme is theologically underpinned by the doctrine of justification by faith alone.<sup>18</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg claimed that one of his major works, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, is implicitly guided by the article of justification by faith alone.<sup>19</sup>

It is important to clarify what exactly Lutherans mean when they say that the doctrine of justification is central to the whole of Christian life and theology. Specifically it is said that we may not be *conscious* of the doctrine of justification acting as a kind of hermeneutical or critical principle over Christian life and theology. In fact we may not apply it intentionally, but, whatever denomination it receives, it is present and active nonetheless in all genuine Christian life and theological

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15 Gerhard O. Forde is a champion of hermeneutical use of the article as a *Richtschnur* (plumbline) by which theology and Church teaching is to be assessed and criticized. He has termed this article "a matter of life and death" (cf. his *Justification by Faith*, Philadelphia 1990; reprinted by Wipf & Stock, 2012) and has occasionally expressed frustration upon seeing it spoken of as only *one* criterion among others. "Justification by faith alone is thus seen as the 'article by which the church stands or falls' because it directs and drives towards speaking that word which calls forth faith and to which faith alone is the possible answer. It insists that where the church no longer speaks this word it has lost its reason for being" (G.O. Forde, *Justification by faith alone*, "Dialog" 27 (1988), pp. 260–267). Likewise, R.W. Bertram stakes everything on justification as a hermeneutical principle (cf. R.W. Bertram, *Faith alone justifies. Luther on "Iustitia fidei"*, in: *Justification by Faith*, op. cit., pp. 172–184).

16 M. Kähler (*Zur Lehre von der Versöhnung*, Gütersloh 1937, orig. 1898) constructed his soteriology over against Ritschl's, systematically situating the doctrine of justification at the centre.

17 Cf. O'Callaghan, *Fides Christi*, op. cit., pp. 158–161.

18 "Demythologizing is the radical application of the doctrine of justification by faith to the sphere of knowledge and thought" (R. Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, London 1960, p. 84).

19 Cf. Braaten, *Justification*, op. cit., p. 72. Cf. W. Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, Philadelphia 1985.

reflection, in that the action of Christ's Spirit, whether we realize it or not, is always active and effective in the life of the Church. This way of understanding has generally come to be appreciated by Catholic theologians.<sup>20</sup> In other words, it is not just a hermeneutical question, but truly an ontological one, based on the priority of divine grace.

The following words of Robert W. Jenson explain that the doctrine of justification is central to Christian reflection though not always, perhaps, at an explicit level.

This dogma [justification by faith alone] is not a particular proposed content of the Church's proclamation along with other contents. It is rather a metalinguistic stipulation of what kind of talking—whatever about contents—can properly be proclamation and word of the Church. It does not say: "Talk about justification and faith." It is perfectly possible to talk about these subjects, even mimicking the Reformers, and proclaim the purest works-righteousness. Rather, it says, "Whatever you talk about, do so in such a way that the justification your words open to your hearers is the justification that faith apprehends rather than the justification that works apprehend." It is this metalinguistic character of the proposed "justification by faith" dogma that makes it a doctrine by which the Church stands or falls.<sup>21</sup>

Henry E.W. Turner points out that justification by faith is the hidden heart of all Christian life and spirituality, whose consequences "positively... include a relationship to God which includes commitment and surrender as an indispensable ingredient, the understanding of the Christian life (which includes Christian conduct) as a response to God's saving initiative in Christ, with the marks of gratitude, dependence, and responsive love. Negatively it stands as a beacon light against any attempt by the Church to absolutize itself, to turn itself

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20 W. Kasper (*Grundkonsens und Kirchengemeinschaft*, "Theologische Quartalschrift" 167 (1987), pp. 161–181) has the following to say: "The doctrine of justification is no longer Church-dividing. The central question is how the justification event acts as a hermeneutical principle and critical standard of the entire Christian faith." Cf. also G. Tavard, *The Contemporary Relevance of Justification by Faith*, "One in Christ" 21 (1985), pp. 131–138; *Justification in Dialogue*, "One in Christ" 25 (1989), pp. 299–310.

21 E.W. Gritsch, R.W. Jenson, *Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and its Confessional Writings*, Augsburg–Philadelphia 1976, pp. 42–43.

from a penultimate into an ultimate, to forget that it is still *in via* and not yet *in gloria*, the pilgrim people of God.”<sup>22</sup>

And even more explicitly, Gerhard Ebeling has it that “the idea that justifying faith be identified with faith in the doctrine of justification must be rejected with utmost decisiveness. To say it even more pointedly: nobody has any need of having the slightest premonition of the so-called doctrine of justification in order to partake of justifying faith. Or the other way around, an exact theological knowledge of the doctrine of justification on no account assures partaking of the faith that justifies.”<sup>23</sup>

### 3. EVALUATING THE ROLE OF JUSTIFICATION AS A HERMENEUTICAL PRINCIPLE

Three observations should be made in respect of the foregoing reflections. In the first place, the fact is, as Barth noted, that genuine Christianity has been lived by countless Christians throughout extended periods in which “justification” was by no means recognized as the predominant article of faith, whether on a hermeneutical level or on the level of content. In that sense, justification as a critical principle may only be regarded *as one among several equivalent principles* in a position to gauge and determine genuine Christianity, whatever they may be.

Secondly, as Karl Kertelge points out, the doctrine of justification and divine righteousness, as a clear expression of the *dynamis* of the Gospel (Rom 1:16), is central to Paul’s thought and to Christianity itself *as a message or kerygma*, and not so much from the standpoint of its content. The point he makes is that the *kerygma*, or preaching of the Church, is always “the truth insofar as it is communicated to man perceiving what is true (*wahr-nehmend*).”<sup>24</sup>

Thirdly, any fundamental interpretative principle that gauges and corroborates practical manifestations of personal and ecclesial

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22 H.E.W. Turner, *Justification by Faith in Modern Theology*, in: M.E. Glasswell, E.W. Fasholé-Luke, *New Testament Christianity for Africa and the World*, London 1974, p. 100, III.

23 G. Ebeling, *Das Wesen des christlichen Glaubens*, Tübingen 1959, pp. 119–120.

24 K. Kertelge, “*Rechtfertigung*” bei Paulus: *Studien zur Struktur und zur Bedeutung des paulinischen Rechtfertigungsbegriffes*, Münster 1967, p. 286.



Christian life, must needs be properly situated in respect of the foundation of such a principle (*Christ*)<sup>25</sup> and of its living context (the Church's *universal mission*).<sup>26</sup> According to Kertelge, the message or doctrine of "justification" fulfills this very function:

It develops as a movement of thought following on from the demands of the situation of the moment which the preaching of the gospel brings with it. Yet it is not only the result of the missionary situation, but also its movement that follows on from the primary commencement founded on the "revelation of Jesus Christ" (cfr. Gal 1:12).<sup>27</sup>

In spite of the fact that Albert Schweitzer, William Wrede and others accorded centrality to the Pauline doctrine of our mystical incorporation into Christ through Baptism,<sup>28</sup> and not to the doctrine of justification, which was considered simply as an element of Paul's anti-Jewish polemic,<sup>29</sup> Kertelge has it that the doctrine of justification can be considered as a key expression of the very heart of Pauline theology,<sup>30</sup> because (1) the fact that this teaching is "polemic" does not mean it is

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25 O. Kuss has it that "the unity of Pauline theology does not reside principally in the perfect concatenation of different elements... but rather, above all, from the perception of the reality that is in Jesus Christ; this is the object which the theology of the Apostle strives, in close communion with tradition, to understand ever anew, using terminology and ideas which are in constant flux" (O. Kuss, *Der Römerbrief*, F. Pustet, Regensburg 1957, p. 131).

26 Cf. A. Oepke, *Die Missionspredigt des Apostels Paulus. Eine biblisch-theologische und religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung*, Leipzig 1920, pp. 40–76.

27 K. Kertelge, "Rechtfertigung" bei Paulus, op. cit., p. 289.

28 This is especially so for A. Schweitzer, *Geschichte der paulinischen Forschung von der Reformation bis auf die Gegenwart*, Tübingen 1911, pp. 130–134, followed by F. Buri (*Die Bedeutung der ntl. Eschatologie für die neuere protestantische Theologie*, Zürich 1935, 155f) and H.J. Schoeps, *Paulus. Die Theologie des Paulus im Lichte der jüdischen Religionsgeschichte*, Tübingen 1959, p. 206, 216. See also my study *The Mysticism of Paul of Tarsus*, in: *In Dialogue with God: Mystics in World Religions*, eds. K. Acharya, U. Vaidya, L. Namjoshi, M. Iturbe, Mumbai–New Delhi 2009, pp. 161–182.

29 Sic. especially W. Wrede, *Paulus*, Tübingen 1907, p. 72.

30 He does so drawing on the works of H.D. Wendland, A. Schlatter, G. Schrenk, M. Dibelius, W.G. Kümmel, E. Käsemann, and also Catholics such as O. Kuss, *Der Römerbrief*, op. cit., pp. 129–131; R. Schnackenburg, *Die paulinische Theologie*, in: *Lexikon*

transitory;<sup>31</sup> (2), given that “the essential content of the gospel is that salvation is unconditionally a gift of grace,”<sup>32</sup> which “justification” expresses; and (3) that “Paul is not interested so much in the truth of the gospel as such, or in overcoming the law, but in the effectiveness of the saving message of the gospel”<sup>33</sup> in which “Jesus is preached as the Christ, that is, as the salvation of mankind.”<sup>34</sup> And in doing so Kertelge makes it clear that the central rôle of the *message* of justification is not the same thing as its would-be absoluteness. In brief terms, Paul’s doctrine of “justification of the sinner by faith alone” is meant to offer a succinct summary of his understanding of Christ, man and salvation at the very heart of the Christian dynamic. A similar understanding is to be found in the writings of Jack Reumann.<sup>35</sup> We will now examine several issues related to justification with a view to clarifying its criteriological role, relating respectively to anthropology, creation and the dynamics of divine pardon, all of which link to the ontological aspects of justification.

#### 4. SITUATING ANTHROPOLOGY BETWEEN SOTERIOLOGY AND HAMARTOLOGY

Kertelge points out that the “message” of justification, no matter how central it may be, inevitably carries “theological presuppositions” of its own. In particular, it takes for granted that man’s true and common situation is that of *being a sinner*, in other words, “under the law,” powerless to free himself, enslaved to sin. “Paul’s doctrine on justification is located theologically by the human situation before Christ and without Christ, therefore by his anthropology.”<sup>36</sup> Besides, “*the very Christ-event is already presented in an interpreted form...*” Paul interprets the

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für *Theologie und Kirche*, 2nd ed., vol. 8, Freiburg–Basel–Rom–Wien 1963, pp. 220–228 and L. Cerfaux, *Le chrétien dans la théologie de saint Paul*, Paris 1954, pp. 343–428.

31 K. Kertelge, “*Rechtfertigung*” bei Paulus, op. cit., p. 295.

32 K. Kertelge, “*Rechtfertigung*” bei Paulus, op. cit., p. 295.

33 K. Kertelge, “*Rechtfertigung*” bei Paulus, op. cit., p. 296.

34 K. Kertelge, “*Rechtfertigung*” bei Paulus, op. cit., p. 294.

35 Cf. especially J. Reumann, “*Righteousness*” in *the New Testament*, Philadelphia–New York 1982.

36 K. Kertelge, “*Rechtfertigung*” bei Paulus, op. cit., p. 300.

Christ-event in function of man, and finds in this way a new theological self-understanding of man.”<sup>37</sup>

The core of the entire debate lies on this very point: man for Luther *is* a sinner; God, in Christ, *is* his Saviour. In other words justification remains as the interpretative centre of Scripture and *the only* hermeneutical principle for criticizing every aspect of the Church’s life and Christian spirituality only *as long as* man is *exclusively* a sinner and God *is nothing else* but his Saviour. The question must be asked, in the light of Scripture: is that *all* that can be said about man in his relationship to God? Is that all that can be said of God and his saving action over man? Or, to put it slightly differently, is *man being a sinner* and *God being a Saviour* all that *we* are in a position to say, as Christians, of ourselves and God?

The latter would seem to be Luther’s own position. In his commentary on Romans (1515) he said that the ultimate purpose of the whole of Scripture is to bring a person to “becoming a sinner” in their own estimation. Such a “conversion,” he says, is “the purpose of *every* word of Scripture and *every* divine operation.”<sup>38</sup> And in a famous 1538 text he said that “the jurist speaks of man as an owner and master of property, and a physician speaks of man as healthy or sick. But the theologian discusses *man as a sinner*. In theology, this is the essence of man. The theologian is concerned that man become aware of this nature of his, corrupted by sins.”<sup>39</sup>

Gerhard Ebeling’s expresses the core of Luther’s intuition as follows:

Luther does not take the theme of *justificatio* as a optional theological topic alongside others; it is, rather, as it were, *the* ‘place’ for speaking theologically in general, that is, the place where man is situated when talking about God, before God (*coram Deo*). And conforming to reality surely means to allow the *situation* of the word become the criterion of verification for the word, especially since it is God’s

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37 K. Kertelge, “*Rechtfertigung*” bei Paulus, op. cit., p. 302. Emphasis added.

38 M. Luther, *Die Vorlesung über den Römerbrief*, in: *D. Martin Luthers Werke: kritische Gesamtausgabe*, Weimar 1938, 233 (Weimarer Ausgabe 56 [= WA]). Emphasis added.

39 M. Luther, *Enarratio Psalmi LI* (WA 40/II, 327). On this text, cf. J. Wicks, *Living and Praying as “Simul Iustus et Peccator,” “Gregorianum”* 70 (1989), pp. 521–548 (especially p. 526ff).

own word... This is not whatever situation, but *the* situation of man... The relationship between *homo reus et perditus* and *deus iustificans vel salvator* belongs to fundamental theology.<sup>40</sup>

However, it has been argued that Ebeling's establishment of justification as *the* hermeneutical or critical principle of Christian life and spirituality is faulty insofar as it intends to be self-standing, exclusively theological and non-ontological: man face to face with the Word of God *experiences himself* as a sinner, and *God* as his saviour, and little more need be said. In the words of Mikka Ruokanen "The greatest problem of Ebeling's hermeneutical method is that of pre-understanding... Unlike Bultmann, Ebeling pays no attention to the criticism of pre-understanding (*Vorverständnis*). For him the problem of the hermeneutical method is solved through the self-efficiency of the word. Ebeling says '... the content and object of hermeneutics is the word event as such.'<sup>41</sup> In this his dependence on Heidegger is clear.<sup>42</sup> Ebeling's concept of word functions in the service of an existentialized theology of creation, not an ontological one.<sup>43</sup> It would seem that his thinking is marked by the effort to provide an *existentially understood conception of the theology of creation*, in which each one experiences their dependence on God in the order of salvation. "God as Creator of man is the main definition of revelation," he says.<sup>44</sup>

40 G. Ebeling, *Lutherstudien*, Bd. 1, Tübingen 1971, p. 266.

41 M. Ruokanen, *Hermeneutics as an Ecumenical Method in the Theology of Gerhard Ebeling*, Helsinki 1982, p. 137, which cites Ebeling's *Wort und Glaube I*, Tübingen 1960, p. 334f. "Because the subject matter under interpretation is verified on the basis of its existential function," writes Ruokanen, "the truth of the matter cannot be concluded by means of a formula. Verification takes place in 'the blink of an eye' as man experiences the encounter with the secret of reality. A biblical text cannot have a permanent, generally valid significance; the essence of the Christian faith is perceived by an existential *affectus* in a concealed, sacramental event in which the word underlying all reality addresses man..." (M. Ruokanen, *Hermeneutics*, op. cit., p. 137).

42 M. Heidegger (*Sein und Zeit I*, Halle 1927, p. 153) defines the hermeneutical circle as "die Vorstruktur des Daseins selbst." In his later works (for example *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, Frankfurt a. M. 1985, p. 254) Heidegger understood that man's *Vorverständnis* consists of the linguistic conditions of understanding.

43 Cf. M. Ruokanen, *Hermeneutics*, op. cit., p. 205f.

44 G. Ebeling, *Wort und Glaube I*, op. cit., p. 368.

In sum, for Ebeling, the “message” of justification, insistence upon this article as the fundamental Christian criteriological or hermeneutical principle, would act as a day-to-day existential reminder of who God is and who man is, in other words, the reality that man is a sinner and God his merciful Saviour. But the point is that the Christian is not *only* a sinner, and God not *only* his Saviour, that the Christian is not only a “sinner loved by Jesus Christ,” a sinner who remains as such, but besides, a “sinner who loves Jesus Christ,”<sup>45</sup> that is, a sinner loved by God and made into a lover of God by grace. Augustine says that *Deus facit nos dilectores suos*, “God makes us his lovers.”<sup>46</sup> If this is the case, if God is not only Saviour but also Father, and if not only sinner but also son, would the “message” of justification of the sinner by faith alone, though unique in Christian life and thought, not have to be adapted to some degree, going beyond the existential and including the ontological?

Two elements of adaptation or amplification could be suggested, the first related to creation as God’s own work, and the second to the divine filiation of Christians.

## 5. GLORIFYING GOD IN HIS WORKS: CREATION AND ECCLESIOLOGY

In a preparatory study for the 1984 USA statement *Justification by Faith*, the Catholic theologian Carl J. Peter spoke of the need for “another critical principle” to be applied to the theology and life of the Church *alongside* that of justification, in order to account *theologically* for what Tillich called “the Catholic substance,” and not only “the Protestant principle.”<sup>47</sup> He said that

The criterion of justification by faith alone is an imperative to keep the churches free from idolatry. But that is not the only temptation the

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45 The expression was often used by St Josemaría Escrivá.

46 Augustine, *De spiritu et littera*, in: *S. Aurelii Augustini opera omnia*, tomus decimus, pars prior, ed. J.-P. Migne, Parisiis 1865 (Patrologiae Cursus Completus. Series Latinae 44), 32:56.

47 Cf. C.J. Peter, *Justification by faith and the need of another critical principle*, in: *Justification by Faith*, op. cit., pp. 304–315.

churches face. They need another critical principle to warn them that they may run the risk of blasphemy... To fail to recognize the divine where it is in fact being mediated or embodied because the mediating agency or embodying symbols are touched by sin may well involve both insolence and arrogance with regard to the divine.<sup>48</sup>

Speaking of the “ultimate trust” all Christians must place in God, Peter asks the question: “is 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?”<sup>49</sup> The point is made on several occasions throughout the 1984 USA dialogue statement *Justification by faith*, especially when it makes reference to the central place in Christian spirituality of praising God “for his transformative indwelling.”<sup>50</sup> It involves the question of the *mediation* of God’s saving power and word.<sup>51</sup>

The 1993 Lutheran-Catholic document *Church and Justification* moves in the same direction. It “is structured, implicitly at least, on the basis of a kind of ‘elliptical (two-poled) hermeneutic,’ based that is on two criteriological principles: the ‘justification principle’ (expressing the gratuitous salvation of mankind by faith in the mercy of God in Christ: the individual aspect of justification), and the ‘ecclesiological principle’ (expressing the need of the Church for salvation, the need to belong to a saved community in order to be saved: the social aspect of justification)... One might suggest that the criteriological role of the ‘justification principle’ is applicable above all as a theoretical point of reference for the *practical living-out* of Christians; while the ‘ecclesiological principle’ is applicable as a practical – visible, tangible – criterion of verification of the theoretical principle of justification. In a sense one could say that the *doctrine of justification taken in a double perspective is the single criterion* for validating the entire reality of Christian life: looking at the matter from a Protestant

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48 C.J. Peter, *Justification by faith and the need of another critical principle*, op. cit., p. 309.

49 C.J. Peter, *Justification by faith and the need of another critical principle*, op. cit., p. 310.

50 Cf. *Justification by Faith*, op. cit., nn. 101, 103.

51 Cf. my work *God and Mediation*, Minneapolis 2017.

perspective, the principle could be applied to ensure that *the existence of ecclesial mediating structures* would not condition the magnanimity of the divine promise of salvation and justification, that human sinfulness and meanness would not block out, or distort, divine holiness and bounty; looking at it from a Catholic standpoint, that the *systematic calling into question of ecclesial structures* would not have exactly the same effect, in straining the link between the saving power of God and created reality.”<sup>52</sup>

## 6. DIVINE PARDON AND DIVINE FILIATION

Luther pointed out, quite rightly, that many of the saints considered themselves at one and the same time both sinners *and* justified by God. “While the saints keep their sin ever in mind and implore righteousness from God according to his mercy, thereby they are considered righteous by God.”<sup>53</sup> The question however comes to this: do the saints consider themselves *sinner loved by God in Christ*, or rather sinners who have *really been made children of God*, and are thus *no longer sinners*, strictly speaking, but rather redeemed brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ and thus prodigal children of God?

Antonio Pitta, in a study of the letter to the Galatians,<sup>54</sup> has argued cogently that the fundamental theological thrust of this critical Pauline epistle does not lie so much in *justification and the law*, but rather in *divine filiation*, the new dignity in which justified Christians are constituted by their “new creation” as sons and daughters of God. On the basis of a rhetorical-literary analysis of the epistle, he concludes that the principal thesis of the gospel is progressively explained by Paul in terms of Abrahamitic filiation and life according to the Spirit, with their relative implications. Thus, he argues, the centrality of the Pauline gospel dethrones the question of the relationship between faith and the

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<sup>52</sup> P. O’Callaghan, *The Mediation of Justification and the Justification of Mediation*, “*Annales Theologici*” 10 (1996), pp. 147–211, 151, 210f.

<sup>53</sup> M. Luther, *Die Vorlesung über den Römerbrief* (WA 56, 269). This theme is developed by J. Wicks, *Living and praying*, who brings to bear testimonies of several saints.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. A. Pitta, *Disposizione e messaggio della Lettera ai Galati: analisi retorico-letteraria*, Roma 1992.

law which, while not to be ignored, is seen to be functional in respect of divine filiation, realized in Christ, by the gift of the Spirit.<sup>55</sup>

Of course the theological context in which Christians do consider themselves sinners is one of divine pardon, justification, which in turn can only be understood and fully appreciated in the context of God being Father and Christians in Christ becoming his adopted children. God, in other words, reveals his paternity in pardoning his children. But the opposite is not always true. For God to be Father and for Christians to be his children, it is not *necessary* for God to be their Saviour and his children be sinners,<sup>56</sup> that is unless the human being is to

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55 Cf. A. Pitta, *Disposizione e messaggio della Lettera ai Galati*, op. cit., p. 212–214. On the divine filiation of Christians, cf. my work *Children of God in the World. An Introduction to Theological Anthropology*, Washington D.C. 2016, pp. 247–277.

56 St Josemaría Escrivá, as a result of his profound experience of the fatherly, pardoning power of God, stated pithily that “sólo los padres saben perdonar”: only parents know how to forgive. He expresses the relationship between divine pardon and the divine filiation of Christians in graphic terms. “Our Lord... is not a tyrannical master or a rigid and implacable judge: he is our Father. He speaks to us about our lack of generosity, our sins, our mistakes; but he does so in order to free us from them, to promise us his friendship and his love. Awareness that God is our Father brings joy to our conversion: it tells us that we are returning to our Father’s house... This divine filiation is the basis of the spirit of Opus Dei. All men are children of God... A child of God treats the Lord as his Father. He is not obsequious and servile, he is not merely formal and well-mannered: he is completely sincere and trusting. Men do not scandalize God. He can put up with all our infidelities. Our Father in heaven pardons any offence when his child returns to him, when he repents and asks for pardon... Human life is in some way a constant returning to our Father’s house. We return through contrition, through the conversion of heart which means a desire to change, a firm decision to improve our life and which, therefore, is expressed in sacrifice and self-giving. We return to our Father’s house by means of that sacrament of pardon in which, by confessing our sins, we put on Jesus Christ again and become his brothers, members of God’s family” (J. Escrivá, *Christ is Passing By*, Four Courts, Dublin 1984, n. 64); cf. also J. Escrivá, *Furrow*, Dublin 1988, n. 65; *The Forge*, Dublin 1988, n. 332. On the non-mutual though clarifying relationship between divine filiation and divine pardon, cf. my study “*That everything may be for his glory*”: *the Paternity of God, Christ’s own perspective*, in: *Preparing for the year 2000*, ed. R. Fisichella, Rome 1996, pp. 207–218.



be considered *constitutionally* a sinner, such as might involve an unwarranted confusion between creation and fall/sinfulness.<sup>57</sup>

Certainly Christ, in living out his eternal and constitutional filiation, especially on the Cross, should not be linked with or dialectically identified with sinfulness, as Luther<sup>58</sup> (to some degree) and Calvin<sup>59</sup> and Barth<sup>60</sup> tend to hold.<sup>61</sup> Christ is always the Father's beloved Son, in whom he is well pleased (cfr. Mt 3:17) and Christians, "in Christ," become not only nor principally reconciled sinners, but rather "children

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57 A certain tendency towards confusing man's creaturely condition with his fallen or sinful state may be detected among some Evangelical authors, for example, P. Althaus, *Die christliche Wahrheit*, Gütersloh 1952, 383ff; K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics 4/1*, op. cit., pp. 478–513; E. Brunner, *Der Mensch im Widerspruch*, Zurich 1941, pp. 105–143; E. Brunner, *Die christliche Lehre von Schöpfung und Erlösung*, Zurich 1950, pp. 101–131; P. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, Chicago 1957, pp. 29–44. On the theology of creation, cf. P. O'Callaghan, *God's Gift of Creation. An Introduction to Creation Theology*, Washington D.C. 2021.

58 Cf. especially Luther's 1531–35 commentary on Galatians, in particular on Gal 3:13 (WA 40/I, 437f).

59 J. Calvin: "The Creed sets forth what Christ suffered in the sight of men, and appositely speaks of the invisible and incomprehensible judgement which he underwent in the sight of God in order that we might know not only that Christ's body was given as the price of our redemption, but that he paid a greater and more excellent price in suffering in his soul the terrible torments of a condemned and forsaken man... Yet we do not suggest that God was ever inimical or angry toward him... This is what we are saying: he bore the weight of divine severity, since he was stricken and afflicted (Is 53:5) by God's hand and experienced all the signs of a wrathful and avenging God. Therefore by his wrestling hand to hand with the devil's power, with the dread of death, with the pains of hell, he was victorious and triumphed over them, that in death we may not now fear those things which our Prince has swallowed up (cf. 1 Pet 3:22 Vulg.)" (*Institutiones Christianae II*, 16, pp. 10–11; English translation, *Institutes of the Christian religion*, 2 vols, Grand Rapids 1979 f., vol. 1, p. 516f). For further texts, cf. J. Rivière, *Le dogme de la Rédemption. Étude théologique*, Paris 1914, pp. 389–393.

60 K. Barth: "He (Christ) stands before the Father at Golgotha burdened with the actual sin and guilt of man and of each individual man, and is treated in accordance with the desserts of man as the transgressor of the divine command" (*Church Dogmatics*, vol. 2/2, Edinburgh 1956, p. 58).

61 Cf. A. Aranda, *Dio ha assunto in Cristo il peccato dell'uomo*, in: *La giustificazione in Cristo*, a cura di J.M. Galván, Roma 1997, pp. 217–232.

in the Son."<sup>62</sup> The *analogatum princeps* of Christian life and spirituality is not the reconciled sinner but the son or daughter of God.

## 7. CONCLUSION

It should now be quite clear that doctrine of justification by faith alone, if it is to be successfully applied to Christian life and spirituality as a determinative, critical and hermeneutical principle, needs to go beyond the purely existential reading of the human situation which considers man primordially as a sinner, and God only as his Saviour. It needs to be ontologically founded. It needs to take into account the fact that man, alongside the experience of sinfulness and pardon, truly encounters the goodness of God both through the reality of creation and of personal filiation in Christ's Spirit.

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62 Cf. F. Ocariz, *Hijos de Dios en Cristo: introducción a una teología de la participación sobrenatural*, Pamplona 1972.

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