

# The Resistance of Self-Justification to God's Grace<sup>1</sup>

Ted Peters

*Professor Emeritus of Systematic Theology and Ethics  
Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary and  
the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California*

What is the question to which justification-by-faith is the answer? Here it is: how does our gracious God rescue us from the practice of self-justification?<sup>1</sup>

In the sixteenth-century the opposite of justification-by-faith was said by the Reformers to be justification by works or merit, for example, through indulgences and such. In our twenty-first century context, might we abstract from this five-century old debate to identify a more universal human propensity? If justification-by-faith is a genuine product of the New Testament gospel, then we expect it to illuminate theological anthropology in its broad and inclusive scope. My hypothesis: *we human beings are prone to justify ourselves constantly, and this practice of self-justification blocks us from appreciating God's grace. Being a sinner includes self-justification as a resistance to God's gracious justification.*

Does the realization that one is justified by God's grace in faith overcome our resistance? Does divine justification make a difference in daily life? Does it affect Christian spirituality? I believe it does. I believe that living daily by faith makes one's life better. I believe that trusting in the God who has justified us by grace softens the impact of anxiety and relieves us of the onerous burden of making ourselves look good. Once relieved of the burden of self-justification, we can live the life of freedom. Martin Luther touted: "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all" in love.<sup>2</sup>

Methodist theologian, Thomas Oden, helps us grasp the tension between God's grace and our resistance: "We in our self-assertiveness would much prefer to justify ourselves rather than receive God's free gift.... The message of justification is difficult to accept because it seems too good to be true. It says: Stop trying to justify yourself. You do not need to."<sup>3</sup> If we wake up one day and

If we wake up one day and realize—"Hey! I don't need to justify myself!"—then shackles will fall like a melted icicle, and our inner soul will feel an exhilarating liberation.

realize—"Hey! I don't need to justify myself!"—then shackles will fall like a melted icicle, and our inner soul will feel an exhilarating liberation. This is the spiritual value of the truth theologians try to express with *justification-by-faith*.

There is an additional benefit to the person of faith who realizes he or she is justified by God's grace. In addition to a new burst of freedom, this realization will greatly reduce human violence. Why? Because the pursuit of justice—the pursuit of self-justification—reaps violence through the mechanism of scapegoating. The cold and hard fact is this: the pursuit of justice is equally as violent as the pursuit of injustice. What happens in faith is that the Holy Spirit makes present Jesus Christ—the paradigmatic victim of unjust scapegoating—in our very faith. This presence of Jesus Christ disqualifies all our efforts at self-justification and substitutes God's eternal justice as a divine gift.

## What is self-justification?

Just what is entailed in the phenomenon of self-justification? In brief, self-justification consists of drawing an imaginary line between good and evil and then placing oneself on the good side of the line. In some cases, this means placing someone else on the evil side of that line. The one we place on the evil side we call

through and through, and humans can neither contribute nor add to what God has done in Jesus Christ. All that is left is the joyful response by the believer, and the life of love, inspired by faith." Kristin Johnston Lagen, *Finding God Among Our Neighbors: An Interfaith Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 212.

1. This article is a revised transcript of the Inaugural Tuomo Mannermaa Lecture at the University of Helsinki, November 27, 2017.

2. Martin Luther, "Freedom of a Christian," *Luther's Works*, American Edition, Vols. 1–30, edited by Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing Company, 1955–1967); Vols. 31–55, edited by Helmut T. Lehmann (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1955–1986) 31:344.

3. Thomas C. Oden, *The Justification Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 51. "Justification is the work of God

the *scapegoat* or, more precisely, the *visible scapegoat*.<sup>4</sup> We justify ourselves in committing violence against the visible scapegoat because we are standing for what is good, right, true, and just.

Why do we *homo sapiens* engage in this pattern of self-justification? Why do we wish to draw a line between good and evil, and then place ourselves on the good side of the line? Here is the answer: we are naturally inclined to self-justify because we intuitively think—rightly or wrongly—that the good is eternal. Self-justification is, phenomenologically speaking, our own farcical attempt at self-eternalization.

As ephemeral beings, we are naturally inclined to embrace what appears to be eternal. Justice (*dike, dikaiosune*) appears to be eternal. To be just is to make a claim on what is eternal. Philosophers such as Plato and theologians such as Augustine tell us the good is eternal. Were they right? They had better be!<sup>5</sup>

Which is better: to appear to be just or to actually be just? It may appear on the surface that we justify ourselves only because we want others to think highly of us. In Plato's *Republic*, Glaucon goes so far as to assert that it is more important to appear to be a just person than actually to be a just person. We "ought to seem only, and not to be, just."<sup>6</sup> We might nickname this the *Glaucon principle*.<sup>7</sup>

Although the Glaucon principle accounts for a significant amount of our behavior, I believe our motive for self-justification is rooted in something deeper. It is rooted in what we deem immortal, perhaps even eternal. We declare ourselves just by identifying ourselves with eternal justice. It would be intolerable for us to think of ourselves as unjust, as immoral and hence temporal or passing. The good justifies us. The good eternalizes us. Well, at

least we *homo sapiens* think so.

In explicating how self-justification works, I want to dwell less on the eternity of the good and emphasize more the magnetic draw the good places on our psyche. We daily draw a line between good and evil, and we place ourselves on the good side of the line. This is the essence of self-justification. Whether we call it *rationalization*, *making excuses*, or *self-justification*, it consists of making a wilted flower to look like a freshly picked rose.

We discover this about ourselves when we look in the mirror, the mirror provided by justification-by-faith. "Thus the knowledge of God in the crucified Christ takes seriously the situation of man in pursuit of his own interests, man who in reality is inhuman, because he is under the compulsion of self-justification, domination, self-assertion and illusionary self-deification," writes Jürgen Moltmann.<sup>8</sup> Self-justification does not rid us of evil when making us look good; rather, self-justification actually spawns heartless dispositions and violent actions toward others. It spawns scapegoating, violence, and sometimes genocide.<sup>9</sup>

### Self-justification in everyday conversation

Our everyday gossip seems so innocent. Gossip tickles, observes Luther: "everyone enjoys hearing and telling the worst about his neighbor and it tickles him to see a fault in someone else."<sup>10</sup> But, let us examine gossip a bit more closely. Gossip is a form of curse, a form of verbal assassination. Verbal assassination can lead to actual assassination.

To illustrate, we look briefly at an incident in Fyodor Dostoevsky's 1866 Russian novel, *Crime and Punishment*. The cursing phase of self-justification leads indirectly to murder. Imagine the novel's protagonist, Rodion Raskolnikov, sitting alone in a tavern in St. Petersburg, Russia. His ear is directed toward a conversation at the next table. At the next table sits a university student and a military officer, gossiping about a local pawn broker, a woman named Alyona Ivanovna.

"She is first rate," he [the student] said. "You can always get money from her...she can give you five thousand rubles at a time...But she is an awful old harpy."

4. The visible scapegoat is the person or group we declare to be our enemy, the outsider, the one against whom we exact justice. The invisible scapegoat is a member of the in-group, one who becomes sacrificed for group unity. Jesus functioned as the scapegoat in both senses. In this analysis, we will look only at the visible scapegoat mechanism.

5. For an atheistic nihilist, cosmic justice does not objectively exist. "There are no gods in the universe, no nations, no money, no human rights, no laws, and no justice outside the common imagination of human beings." Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (New York: Harper, 2015), 28. The task of the theologian might include affirmation of God's law in both its first and second use as a support for the modern human intuition that justice is eternal.

6. Plato, *Republic*, Book II, S362.

7. The Glaucon principle exerts a powerful force on individual self-understanding. Reputation can be more important than death, suggesting that we assume justice is immortal. In a recent study, 53 percent of respondents said they would prefer immediate death over a long and happy life, if that long life would be plagued with rumors of child molestation. 40 percent indicated they would choose a year in jail and a clean reputation over no jail and a criminal reputation. 63 percent endured physical pain to prevent dissemination of information suggesting that they were racist. Conclusion: "a moral reputation is one of people's most important values." Andrew J. Vonasch, Tania Reynolds, Bo M. Winegard, et al., "Death Before Dishonor: Incurring Costs to Protect Moral Reputation," *Social Psychological and Personality Science* (July 21, 2017) <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1948550617720271> (accessed 10/25/2017); see also Matthew Hutson, "Bad Reputation," *Scientific American* 317 (November 2017): 15.

8. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (San Francisco: Harper, 1974), 69.

9. In the neo-orthodox theological tradition following Søren Kierkegaard into Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr, human anxiety over the threat of non-being provides the garden within which sin—especially self-justification and scapegoating—grows and flowers. For more detail see: Ted Peters, *Sin: Radical Evil in Soul and Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994); *Sin Boldly! Justifying Faith for Fragile and Broken Souls* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015); and Ted Peters, "The Spirituality of Justification," *Dialog* 53 (Spring 2014): 58–68. Not everyone agrees with me. For example, I make the claim that the pursuit of justice becomes a serial killer. "What?" exclaims Klaus Nürnberger. "Is it not rather injustice that is a serial killer?" "Justification by faith—a lifeless concept or the power of divine healing?" *Theologische Rundschau* 82 (June 2017): 163–173, at 169. What I mean by the pursuit of justice here is the pursuit of self-justification through revenge, not genuine justice.

10. Martin Luther, "Sermon on the Mount," LW 21:41.

He began describing how spiteful and uncertain she was, how if you were only a day late with your interest the pledge was lost; how she gave a quarter of the value of an article and took five and even seven percent a month on it and so on...

"I'll tell you what. I could kill that damned old woman and make off with her money, I assure you, without the faintest conscience-prick," the student added with warmth. The officer laughed again while Raskolnikov shuddered. How strange it was!

The student continued: "On one side we have a stupid, senseless, worthless, spiteful, ailing, horrid old woman, not simply useless but doing actual mischief, who has not an idea why she is living for herself, and who will die in a day or two in any case. You understand? You understand?"

"Yes, yes, I understand," answered the officer, watching his excited companion attentively.

"Well, listen, then. On the other side, fresh young lives thrown away for want of help and by thousands on every side! A hundred thousand good deeds could be done and helped on that old woman's money...dozens of families saved from destitution, from ruin, from vice, from the Lock hospitals—and all with her money. Kill her, take her money and with the help of it devote oneself to the service of humanity and the good of all. What do you think, would not one tiny crime be wiped out by thousands of good deeds? ...It's simple arithmetic! Besides, what value has the life of that sickly, stupid, ill-natured old woman in the balance of existence! No more than the life of a louse, of a black-beetle, less in fact because the old woman is doing harm..."

"Of course she does not deserve to live," remarked the officer...would you kill the old woman yourself?"

"Of course not! I was only arguing the justice of it."

The student and his officer friend were drawing a line between good and evil and placing Alyona Ivanovna on the evil side. Allegedly, the pawn broker belongs on the evil side of the line, because she is spiteful, stupid, ailing, and fiscally ruthless in her business dealings. Listing her evil traits constitutes a form of cursing, of describing her as disposable. Murder of such a person becomes justifiable. The "justice of it" is that the old woman should die, so that other people threatened with destitution might be saved. This is the structure of gossip. It is also the structure of murder.

The anonymous student said he would not actually go through with the murder. But, after hearing this conversation and this justification, Raskolnikov took an axe and brutally ended the life of pawn broker, Alyona Ivanovna. After a line was drawn between good and evil with Raskolnikov on the good side, the killer believed he was justified in murdering Alyona Ivanovna. Doing justice can be deadly.

---

Regardless of the political system, leaders know they need to look good for their constituencies and to the wider world.

---

### Self-justification and scapegoating in political parlance

"The world stubbornly insists upon being right," observes Luther.<sup>11</sup> We see this stubbornness in both democratic and fascist societies, where leaders want to look right, just, and good. Every leader has learned the Glaucon principle. In democratic societies, candidates for office must publicly identify with whatever goods the electorate identifies. In autocratic societies, despots similarly identify themselves with some form of higher good in order to sugar-coat their repression. Regardless of the political system, leaders know they need to look good for their constituencies and to the wider world.

Let us look first at self-justifying rhetoric in a democratic setting. During the presidential campaign in the U.S. in 2016, Republican Donald Trump ran against Democratic Party candidate Hilary Clinton. Candidate Trump attacked the media for failing to show on television the size of his audiences. "CNN is terrible...They're very dishonest people.... They never show the crowds...."<sup>12</sup> In one televised debate, Trump said the following to his Democratic opponent. "If I win, I am going to instruct my Attorney General get a special prosecutor to look into your situation. Because there has never been so many lies, so much deception. There has never been anything like it...You get a subpoena and then you delete thirty-three thousand emails...a very expensive process.... It's a disgrace and, honestly, you should be ashamed of yourself."<sup>13</sup> Trump's rhetorical logic goes like this. By drawing a line between good and evil, he places both CNN and Hilary Clinton on the evil side and, by implication, himself on the good side. He justifies his own rude insult aimed at his opponent because he stands for the opposite of "lies" or "deceit" and especially "dishonest people." He stands for what is just, and he looks just in public. Regardless of his deeper motives, candidate Trump mastered the Glaucon principle.

Let us recall, secondly, the fascism of the 1930s. Whereas President Trump is brash and infantile, Adolph Hitler was comparatively subtle. Hitler is more illustrative of the harm that self-justification can inflict on a visible scapegoat. When advocating socialism to replace capitalism, Hitler described *laissez faire* capitalism as cruel to the Aryan people, *das Volk*. In order to rid the nation of such cruelty, Hitler established National Socialism,

---

11. Luther, *The Sermon on the Mount*, LW 26:16.

12. Donald Trump's speeches, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dDmb4pd3VNQ> (accessed 9/14/2017).

13. "Donald Trump's Most Savage Moments," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XCebOfRrnvI> (accessed 9/14/2017).

what we have come to know as Nazism. Because the Christian religion teaches compassion for the weak, Hitler invoked a higher religious power to strengthen his nation. We see how this supra-religious self-justification is invoked in a speech he delivered on September 6, 1938, in Nuremberg.

National Socialism is not a cult-movement—a movement for worship; it is exclusively a *volkic* political doctrine based upon racial principles. In its purpose there is no mystic cult, only the care and leadership of a people defined by a common blood-relationship. Therefore we have no rooms for worship, but only halls for the people—no open spaces for worship, but spaces for assemblies and parades. We have no religious retreats, but arenas for sports and playing-fields, and the characteristic feature of our places of assembly is not the mystical gloom of a cathedral, but the brightness and light of a room or hall which combines beauty with fitness for its purpose... Our worship is exclusively the cultivation of the natural, and for that reason, because natural, therefore God-willed. Our humility is the unconditional submission before the divine laws of existence so far as they are known to us men.

The Führer drew a line between good and evil; then he invoked what is good. The sunlight of the open playing-field is good, whereas the worshipful gloom of the cathedral is bad. Aryan blood-relationship is good, whereas mystical contemplation is bad. Brightly lit halls and open arenas belong to everybody and are good, while church buildings attempt to privatize the divine exclusively for their members. Humility in obeying our natural inclinations is good, in contrast to the artificial doctrines of church religion. And, most importantly, the divine laws of existence are eternal. National Socialism, in short, is a faithful embodiment of the eternal divine laws of existence.

The earlier aspiring Hitler wrote in his book, *Mein Kampf*, “I believe that I am acting in accordance with the will of the Almighty Creator: by *defending myself against the Jews, I am fighting for the work of the Lord.*”<sup>14</sup> Appeal to the divine is the ultimate appeal in the act of self-justification.

The self-justified Hitler was heartless. Most of the world today views Hitler as an incarnation of evil. Intolerable and reprehensible were not only the devastations of World War II but especially the attempted genocide of Jews, mentally challenged, physically disabled, homosexuals, gypsies, and communists. The nature with which Hitler identified his Nazism was the blood red in tooth and claw, the natural world of Social Darwinism and Eugenics. So horrendous was the global destruction he precipitated that the symbols of Satan and Hitler have become conflated in our imaginations.

In sum, political rhetoric in both democratic and fascist societies may include self-justifying speech that makes the speaker appear

**Political rhetoric in both democratic and fascist societies may include self-justifying speech that makes the speaker appear to represent justice, while his or her enemies represent injustice.**

to represent justice, while his or her enemies represent injustice. When listeners believe what the political speaker says, they too may be motivated to stand on the just side of the line that defines others as unjust. Invisibly, speaker and listener believe they are affirming their own immortal ground. Visibly, those declared to be unjust become ripe for scapegoating.

The theological import of this observation is this: self-justification belongs inherently to the universal human condition. It belongs to the Old Adam. When the Old Adam becomes the New Adam, what happens to our temptation to self-justify?

### Pharisaic hypocrisy

*Hypocrisy* is the New Testament term frequently applied to self-justification. Local Pharisees provided Jesus with opportunities to illustrate the problem belonging to the entire human condition: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth” (Matt 23:27). Jesus contrasted the outside with the inside, accusing his contemporaries of the Glaucon principle. The outside looks moral and just and enviable. The inside, by contrast, wreaks of death.

Might the metaphor of the mask depict the Glaucon principle applied to the Pharisee or even to ourselves? There is a “Pharisee in each of us,” says John Sanford. Like an actor, the hypocrite wears a mask. “The mask is the person we pretend to be—the false outer personality that we turn to the world, but that is contradicted from within....The destructive aspect of the mask is our tendency to identify with it, to think that *we are* the person we pretend to be, and thereby to remain unconscious of our real self.” We lie, and then we believe the lie. “The result is spiritual and psychological stagnation.”<sup>15</sup> On the one hand, we wear a mask of justice to justify our violence against the scapegoat. On the other hand, we want to believe we really are just. We want to conform to our mask. We might even try to fool ourselves.

How can we get to the truth behind the mask? Through judgment? Jesus shocks the Pharisees, as he does us, with judgment. He calls us hypocrites. Such judgment usually backfires because

14. Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1943), 65, italics in original.

15. The quotes are from John A. Sanford, *The Kingdom Within: The Inner Meaning of Jesus' Sayings* (New York: Harper, 1970), 70.

we deny our hypocrisy. Jesus' own contemporaries felt justified in condemning the Nazarene to death, thereby silencing Jesus' judgment.

But the voice of the New Testament announces more than mere judgment. It announces divine grace. By announcing God's grace in the bestowal of forgiveness, the logic of justification-by-faith is that we do not need to wear the mask any more. "If we would belong to the kingdom, this false outer front must go.... We must dare to be ourselves and must no longer hide behind a facade."<sup>16</sup> God's justification of us in faith liberates the soul from its felt need to pretend, its need to put on a mask colored by self-justification.

Even those of us who trust in God's grace to justify us need to be careful. The temptation to self-justify never goes away, even for forgiven sinners. We can all too easily listen to Jesus' denunciation of the hypocrites and identify ourselves with the humble anti-hypocrites. We can claim that justifying faith is a virtue we possess; we can become proud that it is our faith alone that saves. We can turn faith itself into a form of self-justification, one more mask that hides the truth. When this temptation to self-justify in the name of faith knocks at our door, we need to turn to the mirror and laugh at our farcical selves.

Humility adheres to justification-by-faith like a tattoo to skin. Humility forms our soul. "For a person to have a soul," says Sanford, "he or she must relinquish egocentric identification with the outer mask and must be willing to face what is within."<sup>17</sup> If we realize that we are held in the loving arms of a gracious God, then we can face the truth about who we are. This truth-facing, while being held in the arms of grace, is what creates an eternal soul ready for life with God.

Saint Paul and his Reformation followers swat at hypocrisy along with all human attempts at self-justification like a hockey player swats the puck. Here is Saint Paul's hockey stick—Rom 3:24: "they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." The Reformation hockey stick, according to Risto Saarinen, is "the central and genuine Pauline thought that salvation, or justification, is not by our works, but by God's grace."<sup>18</sup> Self-justification may be the mother of all sins because it most directly rejects the saving gift of God. Is this particular sin successful at rejecting gracious justification in the justified sinner, in the New Adam? We hope not.

### Self-justification makes scapegoats

If self-justification consists of drawing a line between good and evil and then placing oneself on the good side of the line, what lies on the evil side of the line? The scapegoat.

I find the scapegoat theory of René Girard helpful in illuminating the phenomenon of self-justification. The term *scapegoat*, Girard contends,

"designates (1) the victim of the ritual described in Leviticus, (2) all the victims of similar rituals that exist in archaic societies and that are called rituals of expulsion, and finally (3) all the phenomena of nonritualized collective transference that we observe or believe we observe around us.... We cry 'scapegoat' to stigmatize all the phenomena of discrimination—political, ethnic, religious, social, racial, etc.—that we observe about us. We are right. We easily see now that scapegoats multiply wherever human groups seek to lock themselves into a given identity—communal, local, national, ideological, racial, religious, and so on."<sup>19</sup>

Like the prophets in ancient Israel, we need to cry "scapegoat!" so that lies might be exposed as lies, so that blind eyes can see again. Or, to employ Lutheran conceptuality, we need the divine law in its second use to judge self-justifying scapegoating and expose the lie. The gospel of justification functions as the law in its second use when it renders judgment and invites the sinner to dine at the table of divine grace.

Included within Girardian theory is an especially helpful insight, namely, the scapegoat lie establishes and maintains communal unity. The sacrifice of the scapegoat is the glue that creates or maintains community. "The purpose of the sacrifice is to restore harmony to the community, to reinforce the social fabric. Everything else derives from that."<sup>20</sup> Human community yearns for in-group unity; scapegoating those outside the community strengthens in-group solidarity. The human cost of self-justification can be the sacrifice of the enemy through war or genocide. Even deicide.

"Christ the son of God is the ultimate scapegoat—precisely because he is the son of God, and since he is innocent, he exposes all the myths of scapegoating and shows the victims were innocent and the community guilty."<sup>21</sup> The plot to sacrifice Jesus led to communal solidarity between local Jews and Romans: "That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies" (Luke 23:12).

That's what was visible. What was invisible was the deicide.

19. René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, tr. James G. Williams (Maryknoll New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 160.

20. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, tr. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972, 1977), 8. When it comes to the salvific efficacy of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, Girard emphasizes the cross's revelatory power to make God known as well as human sin known. Jesus' sacrifice does not trigger any expiatory mechanism. Girard's "view goes against the Anselmian theology of satisfaction. Girard replaces this view with a more theocentric perspective in which God's act of offering or sending Jesus can only be called sacrifice in a secondary sense." Risto Saarinen, *God and the Gift: An Ecumenical Theology of Giving* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2005), 94.

21. René Girard, in "Violence and the Lamb Slain: An Interview with René Girard," by Brian McDonald, *An Eerdmans Reader in Contemporary Political Theology*, eds., William T. Cavanaugh, Jeffrey W. Bailey, and Craig Hovey (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 345–353 (350).

16. Ibid., 71.

17. Ibid., 123.

18. Risto Saarinen, *The Pastoral Epistles with Philemon and Jude* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008), 191–192.

The pursuit of justice by the self-justifiers of Jerusalem led to deicide and, paradoxically, to their own justification by the slain God's grace. The justice of the victim became the justice of the self-justifiers; the innocence of the scapegoat became the innocence of the scapegoaters.

I find Girardian scapegoat theory a healthy augment to the Reformation *Theology of the Cross*. The theology of the cross already emits three levels of meaning. At the first level, the level of Luther's original insight, we find God revealed under the opposite. The eternity of God is revealed within the historical death of Jesus. "Fundamental to the theology of the cross is the paradoxical character of God's revelation in hiddenness," writes Winston Persaud.<sup>22</sup> This is the Theology of the Cross embedded in atonement.

At the second level, augmenting Luther somewhat, we perceive that God experiences what we creatures experience. In the incarnation God takes into the divine life the finitude of physical life. The suffering and death of Jesus take place within the trinitarian life of God. "The Theology of the Cross is intrinsically trinitarian," adds Persaud.<sup>23</sup> This also is the Theology of the Cross embedded in the historical atonement.

The third level of meaning turns our attention from the historical atonement toward today's life of faith. The Holy Spirit places the crucified Christ along with the resurrected Christ in the person of faith. The very presence of Christ as scapegoat and redeemer inspire self-giving love from within the believer. The result is a cruciform life. "The cross of Christ and the cross of the Christian belong together," asserts Persaud.<sup>24</sup>

Theologian James Allison draws out one implication I wish to add to our inherited Theology of the Cross. "Girard has made alive the work of the cross—how Jesus gave himself up to a typical human lynching so as to undo the world of violence and sacrifice forever."<sup>25</sup> The implication for modern social analysis is clear. "The danger of 'wars and rumors of wars' of whatever sort is that they give us cheap meaning to hold onto, a quick shot of identity, a false sense of belonging, of togetherness, of virtue, of innocence and so on. That cheap meaning is always derived by positioning oneself over against some 'other' considered to be wicked."<sup>26</sup> What today's world situation calls for is a New Testament prophet to

---

## What Luther learns from the Adam and Eve story is that we human beings are so intent on self-justification that we are willing to scapegoat God.

---

make clear to contemporary society that we live in a delusion of our own making.

Because we lie even to ourselves, it becomes a challenge to see ourselves as we truly are. We need a mirror. Might the Garden of Eden provide that mirror? Perhaps we can see behind Glaucon's mask and penetrate the hypocritical lies we tell ourselves if we return briefly to Adam and Eve. We will interpret the Adam and Eve story just as Luther did: through the lenses of self-justification and scapegoating.

### Self-justification scapegoats even God

What Luther learns from the Adam and Eve story is that we human beings are so intent on self-justification that we are willing to scapegoat God. Adam and Eve demonstrate that *we each try to draw a line between good and evil and place ourselves on the good side of the line, even if we feel we must place God on the evil side of that line*. Here is the key text:

Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves. They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" He said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate." Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent tricked me, and I ate." (Gen 3:7–13)

The chain of self-justification is startling. Adam basically says, "It's not my fault. Blame the woman you gave me." Eve follows, "It's not my fault. Blame the serpent who beguiled me. And God, while we are at it, who made the serpent?" Well, God, of course. God is guilty for creating a serpent who talks and lives in the Garden of Eden. It is God's fault for denying the man and woman the awareness of good and evil, therefore, God is designated as the guilty party. Adam and Eve draw a line between good and evil,

---

22. Winston D. Persaud, "Theology of the Cross as Christian Witness: A Theological Essay," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 41 (February 2014): 11–16, at 12.

23. Ibid. See also Ted Peters, *God as Trinity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993) and Ted Peters, "Religious Sacrifice, Social Scapegoating, and Self-Justification," *Mimetic Theory and World Religions*, eds., Wolfgang Palaver and Richard Schenk (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 2018), 367–384.

24. Persaud, "Theology of the Cross," 13. "Seeing the world in light of the cross" also contributes to an expansion of Luther's original notion of the Theology of the Cross, at least according to George L. Murphy, "Science-Technology Dialogue and Tillich's Second Form of Anxiety," *Currents in Theology and Mission*, 41 (February 2014): 29–34, at 31.

25. James Allison in "Violence Undone," *Christian Century* 123 (September 5, 2006): 30–35, at 30.

26. Ibid., 33.

and they put each other, the serpent, and even God on the evil side. In short, God has become the scapegoat to maintain the innocence of Adam and Eve.

Here is Luther's interpretation: "Adam wanted to appear innocent, he passed on his guilt from himself to God, who had given him his wife. Eve also tries to excuse herself and accuses the serpent, which was also a creature of God." Luther universalizes what we learn from Genesis: "Here Adam is presented as a typical instance of all sinners and of such despair because of their sin. They cannot do otherwise than accuse God and excuse themselves."<sup>27</sup> Adam and Eve have drawn a line between good and evil, placing God on the evil side of that line.

What becomes indelible to the gospel of Jesus Christ is this: God voluntarily accepts our placing God on the evil side of the line. In Christ, God accepts the role of scapegoat: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness (*dikaioisune*) of God" (2 Cor 5:21). In Christ, God becomes the victim of deicide. In Christ, God absorbs the curse we human beings place on all scapegoats. In Christ, God becomes unjust in order to justify the self-justifier.

### How does justification by God's grace work?

How does the atoning event on Calvary become appropriated to the individual sinner? How does this saving gift from God work to counter human self-justification today? On the one hand, Reformation theologians emphasize that our eternal justice and, hence, our justification come to each of us as a gift, *extra nos*. On the other hand, these same Reformers emphasize the indwelling presence of Christ, *intra nos*. "Christ is not outside us but dwells within us," writes John Calvin.<sup>28</sup> Can we affirm both? Yes! The *extra nos* justice is a gift the Holy Spirit places within us, *intra nos*.<sup>29</sup> It is the justice of Jesus Christ, the one scapegoated for the sake of somebody else's self-justification, that is made present by God's grace in our faith.

In answer to the question—how does faith justify?—many in the Reformation tradition contend that God "imputes" righteousness to sinners, a righteousness that we sinners do not deserve. Known as the forensic model of justification, this model appeals to legal metaphors wherein we, who are guilty, are declared by God to be innocent.<sup>30</sup> This imputation of righteousness is an act

27. Martin Luther, "Lectures on Genesis," in LW 1:178–79. "Neither Eve nor Adam would take responsibility for their unbelief and consequent misdeeds." Sarah Hinlicky Wilson, "Original Sin," *Dictionary of Luther and the Lutheran Traditions*, ed., Timothy J. Wengert (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 563–566, at 564.

28. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 3.2.24.

29. "This 'alien faith' separates Luther not only from Zwingli and his followers but also from his own heirs. Modern Protestantism sees faith as individual fulfillment, and the idea of an 'alien faith' outside the individual is foreign to it." Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* (New York: Doubleday, 1982), 242. Because of *unio cum Christo*, this alien faith still dwells within us, *intra nos*.

30. "The word 'forensic'...was used only in a restricted sense to

In answer to the question—how does faith justify?—many in the Reformation tradition contend that God "imputes" righteousness to sinners, a righteousness that we sinners do not deserve. . . . We, who are guilty, are declared by God to be innocent.

of divine grace, to be sure. Yet, the forensic concept of imputation does not provide a sufficiently complete explanation. It applies divine justice *extra nos* to the unjust sinner, but the forensic model deletes from the event of justification the real presence, *intra nos*.

The forensic interpretation rightly assesses the importance of the *pro se* ("for you") declaration of forgiveness in the absolution. But the forensic emphasis is based solely on what happens externally, not internally. The external (*extra nos*) declaration liberates the sinner from beyond the sinner's own resources. So far, so good. What is *extra nos* becomes *pro se*, or *pro me*. Again, so far, so good. The forensicist adds that this declaration does not depend on the prior presence of the living Christ in the person of faith. The divine word alone justifies, an analogy to the verdict of a judge which declares the defendant innocent. The real presence of the living Christ is not exactly disavowed by the forensicist, to be sure. Rather, the presence of Christ is given to faith as a product of the forgiving word, *extra nos*, separate from the real presence. Justification is strictly a divine act external to the sinful person of faith; Christ's presence does not become internalized until the declaration is completed. The reason for this insistence on the externality of the divine word is to ensure against all compromises that justification is an act of divine grace and not in any way, shape, or form the result of human achievement. So far, so good.

Even so, there is a weakness in the forensic model. This model falls short of capturing the heart of Luther's Pauline insight. To find the heart of the Reformation understanding of faith, I recommend we turn to Luther and then to the New School of Luther research in Finland, especially the pioneering work of Tuomo Mannermaa and his colleagues.

Here is a key statement by Luther: "It [faith] takes hold of Christ in such a way that Christ is the object of faith, or rather not the object but, so to speak, the One who is present in the faith

indicate that God's righteousness was fully credited to man's account and to exclude the notion of an inherent or infused righteousness deserving of God's acknowledgement. The Reformers and their successors made a distinction between *declaring* that a man is righteous and *making* him righteous.... this 'justification' is called a legal fiction." Marcus Barth, *Justification*, tr. A.M. Woodruff III (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 11–12.

itself" (*sic ut Christus sit obiectum fidei, imo nonn obiectum, sed, ut ita dicam, in ipsa fide Christus adest*).<sup>31</sup> This indwelling presence of Christ in the person of faith is the work of the Holy Spirit, adds Calvin. "The Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ effectually unites us to himself."<sup>32</sup>

Luther's version has been nicknamed the *happy exchange*, referring to the presence of Christ in the human soul. It is the presence of Christ in the human soul that makes possible a substitutionary event, the exchange of unrighteousness for righteousness, injustice for justice. The qualities of Christ become the qualities of the person of faith; we become just because we borrow—or better, are given—the attributes of Christ. Luther uses the metaphor of the perfect marriage to illustrate this point.

Faith "unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom. By this mystery, as the Apostle teaches, Christ and the soul become one flesh [Eph 5:31–32] ....It follows that everything they have they hold in common, the good as well as the evil....Christ is full of grace, life, and salvation. The soul is full of sins, death, and damnation. Now let faith come between them and sins, death, and damnation will be Christ's, while grace, life, and salvation will be the soul's."<sup>33</sup>

For Reformers, such as Luther and Calvin, Jesus Christ is actually present within faith, within justifying faith. We have no alternative than to describe this presence as, at least in some sense, mystical. Your and my justice is personally, if not mystically, placed within us as a gift from God, present in faith.<sup>34</sup>

Tuomo Mannermaa states this theme clearly. "According to Luther, Christ (in both his person and his work) is present in faith

and is through this presence identical with the righteousness of faith....The idea of a divine life in Christ who is really present in faith lies at the very center of the theology of the Reformer."<sup>35</sup> Christ, and the righteousness of Christ, are both present in the faith of the believer. Reformation scholars, such as Brian A. Gerrish, observe that "for Luther, as for Calvin, faith culminates in the thought of union with Christ."<sup>36</sup>

35. Tuomo Mannermaa, "Why is Luther So Fascinating? Modern Finnish Luther Research," in *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 2. "Christ himself is not only an object of faith, but also the subject of faith." Olli-Pekka Vainio, "Faith," *Engaging Luther: A New Theological Assessment*, ed., Olli-Pekka Vainio (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2010), 138–154, at 143. The Finnish interpretation of Mannermaa and Saarinen has drawn its share of critics. "Contrary to Mannermaa, however, it is not the incarnation but rather the distinction between law and gospel that is the actual starting point for Luther's 1535 Lectures on Galatians, as is clearly set forth in his preface." Javier Garcia, "A Critique of Mannermaa on Luther on Galatians," *Lutheran Quarterly*, 27 (Spring 2013): 33–55, at 36. On this I will defend Mannermaa. The law-gospel dialectic does not in itself require a forensic model of justification; it fits quite well with the indwelling model. Garcia's critique fails, in my judgment. Garcia also criticizes the dovetail of the indwelling model with Orthodox deification, because Garcia wants to preserve *simul iustus et peccator* and avoid any hint of progressive sanctification. "Mannermaa's understanding of participatory justification in the present Christ violates the anthropology of the *simul* and the purposes of the law/gospel distinction in 'Lectures on Galatians' because it presupposes not only that believers undergo an ontological transformation in faith, but also that they experience differing degrees of definite progress in the Christian life. Mannermaa's interpretation cannot stand before the textual evidence in the commentary and the systematic argument concerning Luther's *simul*." Ibid., 42. Despite Garcia's claim that he is explicating Luther's text, this is in fact a systematic argument. Even so, it sticks. Insofar as Mannermaa insists that the indwelling Christ counts in favor of "effective" sanctification, Garcia may have a valid point. Even a justified sinner still engages occasionally in sin, even in self-justification. Robert Kolb weighs in here: "To speak of human salvation as 'divinization' does not properly convey Luther's understanding of what it means to be human. The term carries baggage from a Platonic or Neo-platonic way of thinking that is not present in Luther's mature thought. The distinction of the Creator from his created order is fundamental to his theology." Robert Kolb, "Review of Mannermaa," *Christ Present in Faith*, in *Interpretation* 61 (January 2007): 103–104, at 104. Such critiques of the Finnish School attempt to maintain: "Gott ist Gott und Mensch ist Mensch. Menschen sollen wir werden, nicht Gott." Martin Hailer, "Rechtfertigung als Vergottung? Eine Auseinandersetzung mit der finnischen Luther-Deutung und ihrer systematisch-theologischen Adaption," *Lutherjahrbuch* 77 (2010): 239–267, at 239–240. Because baptized and justified Christians sometimes yield to the temptation to self-justify, I grant some credence to the critics who doubt that the presence of Christ effects sanctification and who insist on *simul iustus et peccator*.

36. B.A. Gerrish, *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1982), 80. Real presence goes two directions. The worldly experience of Jesus becomes the divine experience too. Jane Strohl, commenting on Anselmian atonement, writes: "The way of the cross is not something that God inflicts

31. Luther, "Commentary on Galatians 2:16 of 1535," LW 26:129. In Karl Barth's interpretation of Luther, *unio cum Christo* is the decisive factor (*entscheidender Faktor*) in justification. "In causa iustificationis ist—das ist Luthers im Galaterbriefkommentar klar hervorstehends Grundthese—die *unio cum Christo* der entscheidende Faktor." Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, I/1–IV/4 (Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1932–1970), 4.3: 632. See: Risto Saarinen, *Gottes Wirken Auf Uns* (Stuttgart: Franzensteiner Verlag Wiesbaden GMBH, 1989), 202.

32. Calvin *Institutes*, 3.2.24.

33. Luther, LW 31:351. On the one hand, the exchange of attributes (*communicatio ideomatum*) takes place objectively on Calvary in the Atonement. On the other hand, we see Luther here exchanging attributes in the subjectivity of contemporary faith. The universal atonement is applied to each of us individually as a personal event, *pro me*. Could this be what Oswald Bayer is saying? "God's presence in the Spirit does not surpass what happened under Pontius Pilate, but reminds us of it (see John 14:26), recalls it, brings it into the present, distributes it, and promises it." Oswald Bayer, "Preaching the Word," *Lutheran Quarterly* 23 (Autumn 2009): 249–269, at 257.

34. "Ultimately this view is quite mystical, for it recognizes Christ as being personally present in the believer, rather than merely his benefits. Faith in this view is more than an abstract virtue. It is a reality-changing instrument that unites the divine and the human, ontologically." Kirsi Stjerna, "Luther, Lutherans, and Spirituality," *Spirituality: Toward a 21st Century Lutheran Understanding*, ed. Kirsi Stjerna and Brooks Schramm (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2004), 32–49, at 40–41.

The *Mannermaa School* is repairing what was broken by the strictly forensic interpreters of justification-by-faith. The forensicists contend that the believer's righteousness or justice is first imputed—legally imputed or declared—and then, secondly and subsequently, the Holy Spirit makes Christ present (*inhabitatio Dei*). Even if later Lutherans developed this strict forensic position independent of indwelling, it does not fit Luther himself. As early as the Heidelberg Disputation in 1518 and its “proofs,” Luther emphasized that “Christ lives in us through faith.”<sup>37</sup>

For Luther, contends Mannermaa, the presence of Christ is what effects justification and at the same time changes the ontological status [“ontic”] of the sinful person.<sup>38</sup> The presence of Christ is not an extra gift added to justification. Rather, the gift (*donum*) itself effects justification. Luther “does not separate the person (*persona*) of Christ and his work (*officium*) from each other. Instead, *Christ himself*, both his person and his work, is the Christian righteousness, that is, the ‘righteousness of faith’. Christ—and therefore also *his entire person and work*—is really and truly present in the faith itself (*in ipsa fide Christus adest*).<sup>39</sup> In short, it is the appeal to the presence of Christ (*unio cum Christo*) that makes the forensic model of justification-by-faith work, at least according to the indwelling model.

The forensic school fights back against the indwelling school. Today's forensicists add to sixteenth-century forensicists the con-

cept of performative utterance, according to which enunciation is itself a speech act. Here is an example.

Luther's forensic approach conveys a specific effect since the justifying word is a verdict that simultaneously kills sinners and makes them alive. The justifying verdict is a performative word that does what it says and says what it does....[Luther] believed that words, especially God's Word, actually alter and create reality, that is, words can make the hearers, even *ex nihilo* (out of nothing), similar to God's creative Word that originated and sustains the world.<sup>40</sup>

Holding this position becomes a critique of the Mannermaa position.

For Luther, salvation is based not on the indwelling Christ who deifies, but forensically on Christ who died for us. Indeed, Mannermaa's view leads to an unnecessary dilemma: *favor* is construed as objective while *donum* is somehow subjective. Instead...critics argue, the truth is that this is a twofold objectivity. A spoken external word—which is God's *favor* in the form of a gift, grounded both in the objectivity of the cross and also in the proclamation to sinners as a benefit that requires such distribution—imparts both death and life to its hearers. Just as God's will is an active Word ordering creation in Genesis, God's favor here is not God's own possession or essence but is precisely God's gift.... the gift (*donum*) of the present Christ preached and so given—not to the old creature as old, but to the new creature the act of new creation itself. Undoubtedly, Luther affirmed that the believer is united with Christ in faith. But it is equally clear that for Luther the Christian is justified on the basis of nothing else but Christ's imputed righteousness.<sup>41</sup>

Like predecessor forensicists, this performative-utterance variant of forensic justification still retains the two-step process: (1) declarative imputation of Christ's innocence or righteousness followed by (2) Christ's indwelling. The divine justifying act of imputing righteousness to the sinner comes first, followed later by a visit from Jesus Christ. But I ask: why separate Christ's innocence or righteousness from Christ himself? Christ's innocence and justice inhabit his person. There is no warrant for separating

---

upon Jesus. It is the defining passage in God's own being, experienced through Jesus.” “The Satisfaction Theory and Kingship Ties,” *Lutheran Partners*, 19 (September/October, 2004): 31.

37. Martin Luther, “Proofs of the Thesis Debated in the Chapter at Heidelberg, May 1518,” *The Roots of Reform*, Volume 1 of *The Annotated Luther*, ed., Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 88–105, at 103.

38. Risto Saarinen believes that the Mannermaa school's grasp of ontology lacks precision. It falls short of spelling out what *ontology* means for what is physical, personal, relational, ecumenical, phenomenal, and theological. Nevertheless, the Mannermaa ontology is suggestive, heuristic. “Der Erklärungswert des Ausdrucks ‘real ontisch’ liegt nicht in seiner philosophischen Präzision, sondern in der pointieren Aufzeigung der heuristischen Alternativen.” Risto Saarinen, “Im Überschuss. Zur Theologie des Gebens,” *Word—Gift—Being*, ed., Bo Kristian Holm and Peter Widman (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 73–85, at 85.

39. Tuomo Mannermaa, *Christ Present in Faith: Luther's View of Justification* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 5. Wolfhart Pannenberg argues that faith as trust and faith as mystical presence belong together: “In Luther's own doctrine, to be sure, justification by faith was based on a real—and in some sense ‘mystical’—participation of the believer in Christ *extra nos*, outside ourselves. Luther thought that this takes place by the very act of faith as trust, since in entrusting ourselves *entirely* to someone we literally ‘leave’ ourselves to that person. Our future, our life, is in the other's hands and depends on the kind of person the other is.” Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Christian Spirituality* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1983), 21. In this interpretation of Luther, Pannenberg describes trust as a human activity wherein we place ourselves in the hands of God who is outside us, *extra nos*. Yet, this is not quite the element of faith that makes it justificatory. The reason faith justifies is that Christ is inside us. Because Christ is just, and because Christ is inside us, then we are just.

---

40. Mark C. Mattes, “Justification,” *Dictionary of Luther and the Lutheran Traditions*, ed., Timothy J. Wengert (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 385–389, at 386–387. It is my judgment that it is the indwelling of Christ which makes the forensic model work. Indwelling is the imputation, the incarnation *pro me*.

41. Mattes, “Justification,” 388–389. Contemporary forensicists distinguish between God's performative Word and the presence of Christ, ignoring that Christ can be understood as the *incarnate Word* (John 1:1–16). It seems to me that one could support the Finnish indwelling model by designating the *unio cum Christo* as the Word incarnate *pro me*.

the person of Christ from the righteousness (*dike, dikaiosune*) of Christ.

Of these two distinct models, it is my judgment that the indwelling position is more faithful to St. Paul and to Luther. Moreover, it provides a rather precise divine response to the human predicament. Because the Holy Spirit makes present in the person of faith the scapegoated Jesus Christ, the gift quality of Christ's presence better conveys the transfer of justice from the scapegoated one to the self-justifier.

Faith marks the *Anknüpfungspunkt*, so to speak, where divine grace becomes present to the human soul. "Faith means the presence of Christ and thus participation in the divine life," writes Mannermaa. "Christ 'is in us' and 'remains in us.' The life that the Christian now lives is, in an ontologically real manner, Christ himself."<sup>42</sup> Our heart invites the living Christ into our soul; and, curiously, we then discover Christ has already been there. Where Christ is present, so also is forgiveness, righteousness, and justice.<sup>43</sup> Further, Christ becomes the very agent of our love for the neighbor, our pursuit of authentic justice. The presence of God's justice turns our paltry human attempts at self-justification into folly.

"We do have a program but we also have to work it out in more detail," writes Risto Saarinen about the progressing frontier of the Mannermaa school.<sup>44</sup> I commend to this school of Luther interpretation the following: consider that *the Christ present in faith is the scapegoated Christ, the one whom we forgiven sinners continue to victimize in each act of self-justification.*

### *Simul iustus et peccator*

This leaves the theologian with a hurdle to overcome. Self-justification is the very sin which *de facto* rejects the grace of God offered in the gospel.<sup>45</sup> Yet, observation makes it clear that

42. Mannermaa, *Christ Present in Faith*, 39. At least one critic says "the key problem in the Finnish interpretation...is that of being and act, or essence and attributes." Duncan Reid, "Luther's *Finnlandisierung*: A Recent Debate about Salvation in Reformation Thought," *Sin and Salvation*, ed. by Duncan Reid and Mark Worthing (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2003), 200. For the Finnish position on real presence to succeed, says Reid, the essence of God must be isomorphic with the Trinity, because Christ is present to the person of faith by the Holy Spirit. There must be an "identity of God's inner Trinitarian being with God's Trinitarian actions *ad extra*," 201.

43. Because justification is God's gift, the receiver's faith is passively justified (*iustitia passiva, iustitia fidei*). See: Tuomo Mannermaa, *Two Kinds of Love: Martin Luther's Religious World*, trans. Kirsi I. Stjerna (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 77.

44. Risto Saarinen, *Luther and the Gift* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 182.

45. "The good news is that God justifies precisely the ungodly. Undeceived about the true misery of our condition, we sinners may nonetheless rely entirely on Jesus Christ for salvation. No way of thinking about justification can be allowed that requires us to suppose that the cross of Christ is not enough to assure us of God's saving mercy toward us, and so bids us to look elsewhere—perhaps into the ambiguous depths of our struggling Christian lives—for the righteousness that secures our salvation." Bruce Marshall, "After Augsburg: The Ecumenical Future of Justification," *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 2.1 (2002): 23; <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14742250208574001> (accessed 10/20/2017).

## Christ becomes the very agent of our love for the neighbor, our pursuit of authentic justice.

already justified Christians are susceptible to this grace-denying habit. Adolf Hitler and Donald Trump were baptized. Even if the forgiven sinner—*simul iustus et peccator*—may be unaware of his or her self-justifying habit, this is a form of sinful resistance to grace.

The hurdle gets higher when a Christian theologian begins to self-justify. When this happens, Luther labels it a *Theology of Glory*. Theologians of glory make kataphatic superlatives of their own achieved insights, identifying their speculations with Godself, and indirectly identifying themselves as participating in the divine. The theologian of the cross, by contrast, humbles himself or herself before the mystery of the cross. In the cross God is revealed yet remains mysterious even in the revelation.

"A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls a thing what it actually is," asserts Luther smugly in thesis 21 of the Heidelberg Disputation.<sup>46</sup> Luther's objection to theologians of glory falls short of objecting specifically to self-justification in the moral domain. Rather, Luther objects to scholastics who follow the *via positive* from what is observed in the creation to conclusions about God the creator. Luther objects obliquely to this form of self-justification in the epistemological domain. What the theologian of the cross experiences, in contrast to the theologian of glory, is the shock of responding to what God reveals of the divine reality through suffering and death. The net outcome is a theologian of the cross who is humbled before God's special revelation and, of course, open to receiving the gift of God's grace in both knowledge and salvation.

Knowledge of God in the cross ceases to be an achievement of human inquiry and becomes a response to God's gift of special revelation. Whereas the theology of glory is produced by pride, the theology of the cross derives from humility. Yet, we must ask, how do we deal with the prevalence of the theology of glory in the history of our own Christian tradition? Does this acknowledgment of the theology of glory only raise the hurdle of self-justification still higher? How can divine grace jump this hurdle?

Perhaps the hurdle gets jumped by the divine initiative in faith. Justification-by-faith includes God's faith in us as much as

[abs/10.1080/14742250208574001](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14742250208574001) (accessed 10/20/2017).

46. Martin Luther, "Heidelberg Disputation," *Roots of Reform*, 80-88, at 84. "With his paradoxical theses Luther rejects all patterns of thinking or acting which follow the principle of *amor hominis* (the doctrine of *facere quod in se est*, merits, the idea of free will [*Liberum arbitrium*]), the theology of glory, Pelagianism and Aristotelian philosophy) and emphasizes God's love and deeds in accordance with the principle of *amor Dei*...God is hidden—not only from this world, but remains hidden also in his revelation." Kari Kopperi, "Theology of the Cross," in *Engaging Luther*, 155-172, at 172.

our faith in God. "Christ himself believes in us," writes Mannermaa. "The Christian participates in Christ in God's self-donating love, and receives the new light of understanding, the new skill of judgment."<sup>47</sup> There is hope for the self-justifier, maybe even for the theologian of glory.

## Conclusion

In this article my hypothesis has been: *we human beings are prone to justify ourselves constantly, and this practice of self-justification blocks us from appreciating God's grace. What it means to be a sinner includes self-justification as a resistance to God's gracious justification in faith.* Declaring ourselves just is the default position taken by the human psyche, and this practice of self-justification is precisely the human disposition to reject divine grace. Our spirituality—whether a religious or non-religious spirituality—consists in forming our soul according to the standards we believe justice requires. We naturally conscript our conscience into providing standards we can attain; and this provides us with the self-satisfaction that comes with our moral embodiments and achievements.

Regrettably, this applies to the forgiven sinner in this life, to the New Adam as well as the Old. Given the paradox of *simul iustus et peccator*, even a person who treasures his or her justification-by-faith may still yield to the temptation to self-justify. Recognizing this suggests that one could support the Finnish indwelling model while withdrawing support from the idea of deification as progressive sanctification.<sup>48</sup> Divine justification must daily trump and override human self-justification even in the life of a forgiven sinner.

This theological analysis should help illuminate the phenomenon of unstoppable violence engaged in by otherwise good people in civilized societies. When we draw a line between good and evil, placing ourselves on the good side of the line, we risk

scapegoating those on the evil side of that line. We risk performing acts of evil against those we have judged to be evil, all in the service of our own self-justification. We may even sacrifice God unaware, because we are so intent on claiming justice to be our own in-group possession. This is a universal human propensity to which the Reformers alerted us when taking a stand against works-righteousness in the sixteenth century.

Part of the contribution of the gospel is to mitigate the violent repercussions of self-justification combined with scapegoating. Once we have heard the gospel message that we are justified by Christ's innocence and not our own justice, our motive for self-justification should disappear. So also, our felt need to curse others as evil.

I define the gospel as the story of Jesus told with its significance. Part of the significance of the story of Jesus is his crucifixion, his death due to being scapegoated by local people who felt quite justified in executing him. Another part of the significance of the story of Jesus is the doctrine of justification-by-faith. "The message of justification and the doctrine of justification are *explications of the gospel.*"<sup>49</sup>

The theology of Christ's real presence goes like this. Jesus died as a just person. He is in himself just; he needs no Glaucon-like self-justification. When the Holy Spirit places the just-yet-scapegoated Jesus within our faith, Jesus' justice becomes our justice. He has justified us. If in our faith we are justified by Christ, we have no need to self-justify and, hence, no need to scapegoat others. Our justification is a divine gift, not the product of our self-deception.

More could be said. The Christ present in our faith is the crucified one and the resurrected one. The eternity of the resurrected one is present within us, an eternity which transcends even our most sublime vision of a just universe.

47. Tuomo Mannermaa, "Luther as a Reader of Holy Scripture," *Engaging Luther*, 223–231, at 227. Here is the Lutheran *ordo salutis* as spelled out by Antti Rauino. Before the fall, our human ancestors did not self-justify, even if we do. "Participation in the divine life and righteousness belonged to humans' original substance....[But] with the fall into sin human beings lost the image of God and their theological substance almost completely....The only way to retrieve the lost image of God and righteousness is to receive these gifts in faith through the Gospel of Christ....Yet, even though the believer's old form is annihilated, this retrieval is not to be understood substantially, but relationally. This means that the Christian is not righteous in the self or in substance, but in relation to Christ." In "The Human Being," *ibid.*, 27–58, at 58. This implies, I believe, not an "effective" sanctification but rather a "relational" justification. This means the living Christ placed by the Holy Spirit into the daily life of *simul iustus et peccator* must endure repeated denials by the self-justifying sinner. Shall we offer condolences to the living Christ within us?

48. "The real anthropological meaning of deification is Christification." Panayiotis Nellas, *Deification in Christ: The Nature of the Human Person*, trans., Norman Russell (Crestwood New York: St. Vladimir Seminary Press, 1997), 39. My problem is not with Christification. Rather, it is the assumption that sanctification in this life is progressive. This risks inaccurate self-perception due to the lies we tell ourselves when self-justifying, something *simul iustus et peccator* does even when Christ is present in faith.

49. Harding Meyer, "The Text 'The Justification of the Sinner' in the Context of Previous Ecumenical Dialogues on Justification," *Justification by Faith: Do the Sixteenth-Century Condemnations Still Apply?* eds. Karl Lehmann, Michael Root, and William G. Rusch (New York: Continuum, 1997), 69–98, at 75.