

How do Christians Live with God?

In Freedom through Faith: Christological Foundation

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Introduction

Martin Luther's treatise on Christian liberty is a joy to read. As I was discussing this conference with Pastor Strawn a couple of months ago, he told me that one of its purposes was to get people to read this wonderful piece of work. I hope so. Pastor Strawn has provided us with an easy to read translation published in the form of a handy paper back book. I encourage all of you to read this book.

I encourage you all to read it first of all because Luther remains an excellent teacher. God doesn't preach to us through angels. He chooses men. In the case of Luther, God chose a man who had been through the spiritual mill. Self-justification is ultimately impossible, but that doesn't mean that we won't try. Luther's story is, to a certain degree, the story of us all. It is as he tries and fails to find peace with God through his own efforts that Luther is rendered weak, helpless, and utterly defeated. In his defeat he discovers the gospel. He doesn't discover it within himself. He discovers it in the Bible. It was there all along, but he couldn't see it. While one man's experience can hardly serve as the norm for anyone else, in Luther's case, his struggles prepared him to listen to God. In listening he learned. He has much to teach us today.

I encourage you to read this treatise secondly because it treats so well that topic of Christian teaching that is more important to you than any other topic. I am talking about how God justifies you so that you can live with Him. The life we live with God is the life that God gives us to live as He justifies us.

How do Christians live with God? First, let us review what Luther says in this little book in chapters two through seven. Then we'll talk some more about faith.

Part One: Review of Chapters Two through Seven

Chapter Two is titled, “Living in Faith.” In this chapter we learn that nothing the body can do and nothing that is done to the body can help or hurt the soul. The only thing that is of benefit to the soul is the word of God. For this reason, the greatest expression of God’s anger is a famine of His word. By word of God Luther means specifically the gospel of God concerning his Son Jesus Christ. The word of God is “life, truth, light, peace, justification, salvation, joy, freedom, wisdom, virtue, grace, glory and everything good.” (p 15) Since God’s word alone benefits the soul, it must be by faith alone that we are justified because faith alone receives the word of God. Everything in us is guilty, sinful, and damnable. We need Christ. We are justified and forgiven by Christ’s works, not our own. The first concern of every Christian is that we do not rely to any degree on our works.

Chapter Three is titled, “Law and Promise.” In this chapter we see what the primary purpose of God’s law is. Simply put, it is to show us that we cannot fulfill it. We find in ourselves no reason for God to justify us. This is what God’s law shows us. Yet the law must be fulfilled. God’s promise tells us that the law is fulfilled in Christ, that is, in the promise, that is, through faith. Luther writes, “The promises of God give what the law demands and fulfill what the law commands.” (p 23) Whoever has faith has everything and whoever does not have faith has nothing. Faith, God’s promises, and Christ go together. The promises of God saturate and penetrate the soul. These promises are words that bring to us “holiness, truth, righteousness, liberty, and peace.” (p 23) The soul receives from God all that God’s word possesses.

Chapter Four is the heart of this section. It is titled, “Characteristics of Faith.” Faith alone justifies the Christian. Therefore, faith does not need the law. This makes faith the freedom of the Christian. We don’t need the law or works for our justification and salvation. Faith honors Christ by believing what He says to be true. In this way faith holds God in high esteem. Faith says that God possesses truth, righteousness, and goodness. It is an insult to God not to believe what He says. Indeed, it is defiance and impiety. God honors the faith that honors Him. God gives to faith what faith ascribes to Him. Luther writes:

Faith itself is true and righteous when it ascribes to God what is His. In return, God glorifies our righteousness. It simply is true and righteous that God is true and righteous. To confess this fact and ascribe to God these attributes is to be true and righteous ourselves. (p 28)

Faith unites the soul of the Christian to Christ. The soul and Christ are one flesh. What belongs to the one belongs to the other. Listen to Luther:

This means that whatever belongs to Christ becomes the possession of the Christian soul and it can boast about it as if it were his own! Whatever is the possession of the Christian soul Christ takes to be His own.

In comparison then, it is obvious that the Christian soul, through this marriage, has experienced an incalculable gain of possessions. Christ is full of grace, life, and salvation. The soul is full of sin, death and condemnation.

Through faith, sin, death and hell become possessions of Christ. Through faith grace, life, and salvation become possessions of the soul. Being the Husband, Christ must take responsibility for what belongs to the wife. At the same time, He gives to the wife what is His. If He gives to His wife His own body and Himself, how can Christ *not* give her all that He possesses? If He takes to Himself the body of His wife, how can Christ not also take to Himself all that is hers as well? (p 29)

Clearly, when sin, death, and hell become Christ's, Christ is paying to the penal justice of God what God's law requires of us all. Christ is suffering the curse of the law in order to remove that curse from us. This is often called Anselm's theory of the atonement because it was systematically set forth by Anselm of Canterbury in his book, Why God Became Man. Ever since the publication of Gustav Aulen's Christus Victor, it has been fashionable in certain Lutheran circles to criticize the assumption that Luther shared Anselm's view of the atonement. It is argued that Luther rather accepted the Christus Victor view of the atonement, which, as the term suggests, sees the atonement as Christ's victory over the powers of hell. Luther himself would have been surprised at the notion that there is any conflict at all between teaching that Christ, as the sin-bearer, pays to God the ransom to set us free and teaching that Christ is the Victor over sin, death and hell. For Luther, the vicarious atonement of Christ and Christ as Conqueror of hell are one and the same thing. Listen to how he puts it:

When I say that Christ is a Person who through the wedding ring of faith becomes a part of the sin, death, and hell of His wife – no, even better, He makes them His possession what I mean is that Christ deals with them in no other way than if they actually were His and He Himself had sinned. When Christ suffered, died, and descended into hell, He did so to overcome all things. Sin, death, and hell, could not swallow Christ up. In a stupendous conflict, Christ swallowed up sin, death, and hell. After all, Christ's righteousness rises above the sins of every man. Christ's life is

more powerful than death. Christ's salvation is unconquerable by hell. (p 30)

And what does this mean to faith? Luther goes on:

Obviously then, the believing soul, through faith in Christ, becomes free of all sin, unafraid of death, and safe from hell. (p30)

It is because faith receives what is Christ's that faith alone can fulfill the law. Luther says: "Faith alone is the righteousness of the Christian and the fulfilling of all the commandments." By this Luther is not ascribing a quality to faith by which faith as faith becomes the Christian's righteousness. Here is what the believing soul does, according to Luther.

Having in her husband, Christ, a righteousness which now she can claim as her own and can erect opposite all her sins, death and hell, she can claim: "Even if I have sinned, my husband, Christ, in whom I believe, has not sinned. Everything that belongs to me has become His possession. All His possessions have become mine." (p 31)

Chapter Five is titled, "Christ the Firstborn: Priest and King." Christ both intercedes for us in heaven and sends to us on earth His Spirit who teaches us inwardly in our spirits.

Chapter Six is titled, "The Christian: Priest and King." Luther argues that by faith Christians are exalted above everything in this world. As far as spiritual matters are concerned, the Christian is lord over everything that is earthly. In fact, all things are compelled to serve the Christian for his salvation. He cites St. Paul's words in Romans 8:28 that everything works together for good to those who love God, whom God calls according to His purpose. This reign of the Christian is especially apparent and powerful in moments of distress and weakness. Here is how Luther describes it:

It is a reign which arranges all things for the benefit of my salvation. Even the cross and death are compelled to serve me and to work for my salvation. The reign of the Christian is lofty and eminent in dignity, and a true and almighty dominion. It is a spiritual empire in which there is nothing so good, and nothing so bad, that it will not work together for my good – if only I believe. (p 41)

The Christian as priest has the right to come before God, to pray, and to teach others about God. It all depends on faith. Luther makes it crystal clear that only Christians can pray to God. He writes:

An unbeliever is in no way a priest but an unholy person whose prayers are sin. The unbeliever never appears in the presence of God simply because God does not hear sinners. (p 42)

Prayers offered to the god of Muhammad, who neither begets nor is begotten, are not offered to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. All such prayers must be identified as sinful idolatry.

The Christian's kingly priesthood has royal power to rule over life, death, and sin. But if a Christian were even to pretend that he is justified, set free, and saved by any work of his own, he would lose both his faith and all the benefits that faith receives. Luther compares such a person to the dog in Aesop's fable who crossing over a bridge with a piece of meat in his mouth saw his reflection in the water and in his attempt to get that dog's meat lost his own. (p 42)

Chapter Seven is titled, "Pastors and Preaching." Luther's emphasis here is predictable from what has gone before. He despises all of the exalted titles given to pastors and suggests that they simply be called ministers, servants, and stewards. It is what they administer that is critical. They must promote faith in Christ. They must preach not just that Jesus is the Christ but that He is *for us*. They must preach Christian liberty; that Christians are lords, priests, and kings over all things, and that everything we Christians do in the presence of God is pleasing to Him. This is a radical thought that permeates Luther's theology. But if my sin is Christ's and Christ's righteousness is mine, then clearly I am pleasing to God and have no fear of death or hell or the devil himself.

Part Two: Talking about Faith

There is a notion popular among confessional Lutheran preachers that it is not necessary to talk about faith as long as we talk about Jesus. On the surface this is entirely true. Faith is not to be had by commands to believe. Faith receives Jesus and what faith receives must be proclaimed clearly and repeatedly in order that faith may receive it. This is the work of God. Faith is the new birth. Luther called it a living and daring confidence in the grace of God. This faith cannot produce, create, or strengthen itself. The gospel must be preached. An unhealthy fixation on our own faith will direct our faith in on itself and as we seek out our faith we will find our sin and not the righteousness that avails before God. But it is precisely this righteousness of Christ – His obedience and fulfillment of God's law – to which faith clings. Therefore faith must not be directed to itself, but to the gospel in which the righteousness of God is revealed.

But this doesn't mean that we should not talk about faith. We should. The gospel in which God's righteousness is revealed is *from faith to faith*. (Romans

1:17) As you know, this was the text that brought Luther to his understanding of justification by faith alone. Luther learned of the nature of the righteousness by which we are justified when he finally saw – from the plain words of St. Paul – that this righteousness was to be had by faith and by faith alone. The gospel is never merely a proposition to debate or a theological formula to recite. The gospel is divine proclamation that offers what only faith can receive. For this reason it is appropriate that we talk about faith, even as we must insist that faith doesn't exist except in receiving the gospel.

There are three things about faith to which this portion of Luther's treatise on Christian freedom directs us. First, faith is inextricably joined to the word of God. Second, faith receives everything that Christ has to give. Third, faith is the Christian's life with God.

First, faith is inextricably joined to the word of God. The very concept of faith apart from God's word is idolatrous. To trust as divine what is not from God is idolatry. How can we talk about "people of faith" without knowing what it is that the people believe? We cannot, unless faith comes from within. If it does, it is not the Christian faith. Faith is not only subordinate to the word of God; it has no existence apart from it.

By word of God we are talking most specifically about the gospel that promises: "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes." (Romans 10:4) Where did Luther find this righteousness? What, specifically, what was he doing when this gospel penetrated his soul, brought him to faith, and bestowed upon him Christ's righteousness? He was reading the Bible. The Bible is the word of God. You can depend upon what it says. It cannot err. It cannot deceive you. Its purpose is to bring you to faith and keep you in the true faith. This is implicit throughout Luther's writings. He does not pit the Bible against the gospel or the gospel against the Bible so as to argue that the one is God's word on account of the other. Rather, he finds the gospel in the Bible. For him the normative authority of the Holy Scriptures cannot be disjoined from the causative authority of the Bible as a means of grace. Systematic theologians may do well to make such distinctions, but for faith the authority of the word and the efficacy of the word must be tightly bound together. The promise is true. The promise is powerful. It is true. Faith may rely upon it. It is powerful. Faith is born by it.

We speak of the object of faith, but when speaking in terms of subject and object we might assume a theoretical separation of the two. There is no possible separation between faith and God's word. Why is that? It is because the Word of God justifies. It speaks to faith what faith alone can receive and which by that receiving becomes true faith. Luther writes:

If the touch of Christ healed, how much more would His tender spiritual touch – the Word truly absorbed – give to the soul all that His Word possesses? It is in this way, therefore, that the soul, alone through faith, without works, is justified from the Word of God. It is justified, sanctified, clothed with truth, peace, and liberty, filled completely with every good thing, and truly made a child of God. (p 23)

Faith is inextricably bound to the word of God. Faith is the reason the Bible was written. Faith is the reason the preaching office was instituted. While Luther doesn't speak directly to all of the many current debates on the ministry, there are certain applications that we should make. First, there is no authority of the preaching office except the authority of the word of God. By word of God I mean that which is clearly taught in the Holy Scriptures. Second, the sole duties of the preaching office are to proclaim the word of God and to administer the sacraments of Christ. Third, the only purpose of the preaching office is that we may obtain and possess that faith through which we are justified by God. No earthly power may supplant the sole authority of God's word. No ecclesiastical entity may form another office whose duties diverge from that which Christ commissioned His first ministers to do. No other purpose of this office can exist than that purpose for which Christ instituted it: the justification of sinners through faith.

It is false doctrine to teach a divine call to an office that claims an authority other than the authority of the clear Scriptures. There is no divine call to carry out the instructions of men. There is only a divine call to carry out instructions from God. It is false doctrine to teach the divine institution of an office that does anything but what Christ personally gave the office to do when He told His apostles to do it. It is false doctrine to teach that the purpose of the ministry of the word is to enable or equip others to do the work of the ministry or to do any other work, for that matter. The sole purpose of the ministry of the word is faith. (AC V)

Whatever comes between faith and the word of God destroys faith.

Second, faith receives everything that Christ has to give. When the later Lutherans defined justifying faith as pure receptivity they confessed the doctrine already taught by Luther in 1520 when he wrote the treatise we are discussing today. Luther was a confessional Lutheran already in 1520 long before the Confessions were written. His doctrine of justification is the same doctrine confessed in the Apology ten years later, in the Formula of Concord 57 years later, and by the Lutheran dogmatists throughout the Seventeenth Century. It is perfectly true that Luther did not use all of the theological formulations with which we are familiar today. But it is not true that the Lutheran Confessions parted from Luther's doctrine of justification.

When Luther speaks of faith he may describe it as being active rather than passive. But this can be misunderstood. For example, Luther writes:

It should be obvious why so much importance is attributed to faith. Faith alone can fulfill the law and justify with works. The First Commandment, "You shall have no other Gods," is fulfilled alone by faith. (p 31)

But faith does not justify with its own works. It justifies with Christ's works, as we have seen. Luther points out that in a marriage "whatever each possesses becomes the common property of both." (p 31) Faith justifies, therefore, by receiving the property of Christ.

God does not justify the believer on account of a presence of Christ in faith, as if justification occurs by means of Christ indwelling the believer (Tuomo Mannermaa). Nor does God justify the believer proleptically, that is, in view of the good that God will bring to perfection in the believer in the future (Karl Holl). Nor is the justification of the believer accomplished by means of a sacramental presence of Christ that brings about a recreation of the believer that restores him to the image of God. All of these ways of describing justification are designed to avoid the very heart of the matter, which is this: God justifies the believer by reckoning to him the righteousness of Jesus, that is to say, by forgiving him his sins. There is no forgiveness of sins or righteousness apart from Christ, and this means that there is no forgiveness of sins apart from God's word, and this means that there is no forgiveness of sins except by faith alone in the word of Christ that tells us our sins are forgiven.

When Luther talks about faith as an activity that sets Christ and His righteousness against the judgment of the law, he is not thereby defining faith as active rather than passive. He is saying that the essence of faith is confidence or trust in what it has received. Faith receives Christ and all that belongs to Christ. It boasts in Christ and in all that Christ has to give. Faith isn't the victory over sin, death, and hell because of how it actively participates in this or that virtue that belongs to Christ. No, faith is the victory over sin, death, and hell because it is through faith that all of our sin becomes Christ's and all of Christ's righteousness becomes ours. But how can all of our sin become Christ's through our faith? Didn't our sin become Christ's by imputation when He died for us? Yes, but faith sees this, knows this, and rests secure in this because the promise of God's word says it is so and, as we have seen, faith and the word of God are inextricably entwined. Luther frequently uses the word faith as a synecdoche referring to the word of God to which it is attached and by which it is defined. The word is never an inert proposition, but it is always God Himself speaking and binding Himself to the promises He speaks. So then, faith, the word, Christ, and

our justification are all bound together and inseparable. The confidence of faith is Christ and His righteousness given to us in the promise of the gospel.

And this is our life with God.

Third, faith is the Christian's life with God. "The just shall live by faith." That is, he shall live with God by faith. We don't live with God by works. That's the error of those who live to justify themselves. That's a life of insulting God and calling Him a liar. The life of faith is the life of honoring God by affirming that His promises are true. Faith does not demand from God what God has not promised, but faith takes what God has promised and holds on to it for dear life because the promises of God are our life.

The life of faith is lived under the cross. The cross we bear is the contradiction between what we believe and what we experience. We believe that we are righteous and we experience sin. Our cross is relieved by Christ's cross. The contradiction between our faith, which is our life hidden with God in Christ, and the life we see and feel in our bodies cannot be resolved except in the suffering of Jesus. No other resolution will do and any other attempt to resolve it will undermine our faith.

The only way that faith can be our life with God is if any consideration of our works – even those done as the fruit of faith – is entirely discarded. We may not even think of them. They are irrelevant. As Luther put it, "Faith cannot coexist with works." (p 16) Whenever you hear the words, "merely forensic" as a criticism of the traditional Lutheran doctrine of justification you know that it is your own personal faith and thus your own personal life with God that is being attacked. When we say that justification is purely forensic we are merely saying that God says we are righteous and His saying it makes it so. God justifies sinners by what He says to them. Whether we use terms like reckon, impute, the blessed exchange, or whatever, we are talking about God rendering upon us a verdict that is revealed in His word and that verdict is that Christ's righteousness is ours even as our sin became His and so for Christ's sake we stand before God as righteous saints without any charge against us. It is God who justifies! Who is he that condemns?

Faith is born in weakness because God puts down the mighty from their seats and exalts them of low degree. Weakness comes from seeing the contradiction between what we believe and what we see. We see sin, sickness, doubt, pain, and finally death. But God teaches us that what we see is not so. He teaches us that in Christ, that is, for Christ's sake, we are pure, holy, and righteous and that we shall never die or face death. So when we confess our sins to God we are always rejecting every attempt at self-justification. The source and strength of all religious efforts at self-justification is our own sinful heart. Faith stubbornly

insists upon the verbal assurance of our justification and salvation. In other words: God said it and that settles it.

And as far as our life with God is concerned, there is nothing more to be said. We cannot begin to live with one another and with our neighbor until our life with God is established. This life is faith and it is faith alone. Therefore it must exclude all works we do or will ever do. Faith is quite stubborn in this regard. It won't permit anyone to change to subject. "Yes, but you must do . . ." "NO!" Faith replies. Don't tell me what I must do to receive the life that God has given me to live. He has given me this life. I didn't choose it for myself. He has prepared this life for me. I didn't prepare it myself. The righteousness and holiness and virtue and beauty of this life are wholly His gracious doing in the person and work of His dear Son, and there is nothing I can do to supplement, improve, refine, or perfect what my Savior has done for me. So do not tell me about what I must do to live with God. Point me instead to the Son in whom His Father is well pleased. Tell me of what He did it and how He did it all for me. Bring Him to me as I confess to God that my works have failed so that through faith I might be found in Christ, having his righteousness alone. This faith is my life with God.

When God tells us that we are lords over everything for Christ's sake, we take Him at His word. All that exists in heaven and earth serves the cause of maintaining this lordship to which God has called us. All creation exists to serve us. God has said so. That makes it so. And only from this exalted position given to us by God in Christ may we learn to humble ourselves to serve our neighbor.

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