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MODULE 2

Luther, Lutheranism, and Justification

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This story of justification begins in late mediaeval Germany. There was a merry student at the University of Erfurt called Martin Luther. He was interested in philosophy, loved music, and enjoyed the company of humanist students who gathered to read the ancient poets such as Virgil. The humanists were eager to study the ancient Roman and Greek culture, which they saw as a forgotten foundation of the medieval Western culture. Their motto was: back to the sources.

Erfurt was at that time a city that had a particularly vivid fellowship of humanists. Otherwise, it was a wealthy city and was ruled by the city council under the jurisdiction of the Archbishop of Mainz. Erfurt's wealth did not consist of earthly goods only. It was also called the city of towers according to the great number of its churches and it also hosted a variety of religious orders.

Its earthly and spiritual wealth did not protect the city from adversity. During Luther's years at the university, the city was struck by a plague, which spread the horror of death among the students as well. All this had an impact on young Martin Luther, who graduated as Master of Arts in 1505 and began to study law as he had planned.

A degree in law would have provided a brilliant young student like Luther safe prospects for a successful career in society or even in the service of the Church. However, during the first year of his study of law, something drastic happened. Something, which was to change his life, destroy the former career plans, and eventually make him a Reformer whose core message was a renewed understanding of the justification of a sinner.

One day, as Luther was travelling on foot from his hometown to Erfurt, he was met by a sudden thunderstorm. Frightened of death by being struck by lightning, he did what he had been taught: asked for help from a saint, who was in this case St. Anne, the patron saint of the trade of his father, the miners.

During the prayer, he promised to join a religious order, and so in a way offered his whole life to the service of God. After some days, he found himself outside the door of the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt and soon he began the life of a monk. So, he had "left the world", as he would call it, and devoted himself to a life where he would serve God in poverty and prayer.

This could have been the end of the story, as it was for thousands of others of the religious at that time. But not for Luther. His talents as a successful student were soon noticed by his superiors. Luther's order, the Augustinian Hermits, valued learning highly, and so he was encouraged to prepare himself for a priestly office and then study theology, which he did up to the doctor's degree.

The studies led him from a simple life of prayer to more active service for his order and the surrounding society. His duties increased to include pastoral care, teaching at the university, and administration. The duties were only increased as he was appointed as a professor in the recently founded University of Wittenberg. All this led him to neglect the prayers that were, after all, at the core of the religious way of life he had chosen.

The study of theology also provided him an explanation of what this all counts for towards his own salvation. He felt obliged to all these duties by the oath he had given in joining the order, but he also thought that as a Christian he should fulfil his part in order to be worthy of receiving God's saving grace. Yet time after time he felt he had not done enough and in particular that his sins were so great and his repentance so shallow that he was not sure if God would grant him the remission of sins.

Again, we see in Luther a worried young man, like the one he was before joining the Augustinians. But this time he had not only a thorough knowledge of liberal arts and classical poetry, but of the Bible and Christian theology. His studies in theology, which were marked by a keen interest in the Bible and in the patron saint of his order, St. Augustine, provided a firm basis for another major change of direction. At the same time, the change provided a solution to the worries for his own salvation, and all this revolved around a new understanding of God's grace and justification.

If he had as a student joined the humanists in searching for sources in the classical literature, he now went to the sources of the Western theology of grace: Augustine and the Pauline letters. Reflecting on these sources he developed an understanding of justification that was radically different from the teaching of grace he had learned. Through a gradual process he ended up at an understanding that was centred on Christ's atoning work, based solely on God's grace, and excluded all human works and merits, except for sole faith in the Gospel.

It took years for Luther to formulate the doctrine of justification by faith in its final form, and researchers have been able to trace several phases in the process, but no clear turning point. Strangely enough, this is not how Luther himself saw it. In various writings Luther describes a sudden turning point, which has led later readers to assume something that has been called a "reformation discovery". This experience would then have changed Luther's understanding of justification once and for all.

After years of study, scholars have concluded that Luther's diverse descriptions cannot be harmonized into the description of a single event, and, moreover, they cannot be applied to any single point of Luther's career at which such a change in Luther's thinking could be shown. In any case, Luther's descriptions of such an event show us how he experienced the breakthrough of the new idea for his personal life and theological work.

At the core of various descriptions is an encounter with the gracious God, which Luther describes as if the gates of heaven had been opened for him. He saw himself entering Paradise and tells us that his heart was filled with sweet awareness of God's grace. This was accompanied by a new understanding of the Scriptures.

The exact content of the renewed understanding varies from focus on the nature of true repentance in the earlier texts to the discovery of justification by faith alone in the late

writings. On the whole, the accounts depict for us a person who felt himself freed from demands to please God by his own strivings and was led to trust in Christ's saving work and God's promises to a sinner. The task for Luther the theologian was to find a proper verbal formulation of the doctrine of salvation, which took its time and remained a constant challenge for the generations of theologians after him.

About 450 years later, Lutheran churches all around the world gathered in the city of Helsinki, the capital of Finland, to discuss the doctrine of justification. The gathering in 1963 was the fourth general assembly of the Lutheran World Federation. Justification by faith alone had by that time become the unquestioned core of Lutheran tradition and, at the same time, the major point of disagreement with the Catholic Church. There was, nonetheless, a spirit of ecumenism in the air, as the Catholic Church had sent ecumenical visitors to the assembly.

Unfortunately, the assembly was not able to formulate a clear and unanimous statement concerning justification. Given the importance of the doctrine for Lutheran identity, this certainly posed a challenge that the churches of the LWF felt obliged to meet during the following years. For some years after, the LWF conducted official dialogues with the Catholic Church. In the course of the dialogues the two churches eventually took up the question of justification, despite the challenges it posed for both parties. Later, after 30 years of dialogue, the process produced a Joint Declaration of the Doctrine of Justification. Both the Catholic Church and the individual churches of the LWF accepted the declaration.

In the document, Lutheran churches were able to do what they failed to accomplish in the Helsinki assembly: they formulated the Lutheran understanding of the doctrine of justification. But not only that. They also formulated with the Catholic Church the common understanding of justification, together with an open account on the remaining differences between the traditions. Whether justification takes place by faith alone, remained among the disagreements. Still, the churches considered the common ground more important than the differences, and they stated, in the words of the document, that "a consensus in basic truths of the doctrine of justification exists between Lutherans and Catholics."

So today, 500 years after Luther's discoveries, the circle has closed. If not to a comprehensive understanding about what justification is, at least to a breakthrough in searching for ways for deepening the understanding of this core Christian doctrine. During Luther's lifetime, and immediately after it, justification became the major stumbling block between Catholics and Protestants. Today it appears more than ever a common treasure of the churches.

Further reading:

- Martin Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian", 1520, in *Luther's Works*, vol. 31, ed. by Harold J. Grimm, Muhlenberg Press/Philadelphia, 1957.
- Confessio Augustana art. 1-4 in *The Book of Concord. The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, R. Kolb, T. J. Wengert (eds.), Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2000.

- “Justification Today. Final Version of Document 75”. *Proceedings of the Fourth Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation, Helsinki 1963*. Lutherisches Verlagshaus, Berlin 1965. Pp. 476-482.
- “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification”, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Michigan/Cambridge, 2000: <https://www.lutheranworld.org/content/resource-joint-declaration-doctrine-justification>.
- Olli-Pekka Vainio, “Martin Luther and Justification”, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*. <http://religion.oxfordre.com>.
- Mark Mattes, “Luther on Justification as Forensic and Effective”, *Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther’s Theology*. <http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com>.
- “Biblical foundations of the doctrine of justification.”
- Walter Altmann, *Luther and Liberation: A Latin American Perspective*, 2nd edition, 2016 (Ch. “Conversion, Liberation, and Justification”)

Questions for reflection:

- 1) How the world has changed, that is, what is common and what different in the renewal experiences of Luther and our time?
- 2) How would you describe three main themes, where dialogue between Lutherans and Catholics about justification has advanced?