Justification by faith alone means Christ unbound

Reference Texts: CA IV and Apology IV

I. Theology as we practice it... takes place in the pause between yesterday's and tomorrow's proclamation. Now we are preparing to step to the plate, and ask, what are we to say?

A. This reflection here, in this setting, on justification is second order, talking about what God has done in Jesus Christ, but the goal is first order, i.e., to really give it, and not just talk about it. [Remember, the Reformation meant to improve preaching].

B. That is, we are looking at the beating heart of our theology, our reason for being, but we are going to hold this beating heart in our hands like a surgeon and talk about it as if it were an object of study.

1. Talking about justification in cold analysis is [a] necessary [theological exercise], but it has been the bane of Lutheran existence from the very beginning. Talking about justification leads to fears and reprisals to tone down the message, rather than let it have its way with us, to bury Christ rather than to let Christ run free.

2. But I'm just going to let Jesus run today. When it comes time to speak Gospel, pure and plain, we must speak so that, *"Scripture imprisons all things under the power of sin,"* including everything, so that the, *"promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given."* [Gal. 3:22] By including everything under sin at the same time, Paul is excluding every false object of faith so that clinging to Christ alone happens, so Christ runs free in this old world.

II. So, "our cause," as Luther called it... in his letter to Melanchthon, June 27, 1530, is none other than God's cause, and this is why we begin with the the Fourth Article of the Augsburg Confession, that has variously been called *the hub of the wheel, the heart of the matter, the basic Lutheran proposal, the chief article by which the church stands or falls, the article we cannot give up,* or *the dynamite of the Gospel.* Every other article assumes it and refers back to it.

[If a person can tell what you believe in by what you are willing to die for, well, this is it.]

Justification is God in action, sending a preacher to do through him what comes naturally for God, what God wants to do, or what is proper for a justifying God. That is,

he justifies sinners while they are yet unclean. The article answers the central questions, *"What pleases God?"* What does a justifying God do to sinners to make them pleasing, right, in God's sight?

A. The first thing you may notice is that for all this, the article is amazingly short.

1. Before God, *coram Deo*, humans cannot, but God can [God reckons this faith as righteousness]. Where God is at work, there is no *"but,"* or *"and"* (work, merit, power, or anything we give or do). So in this work zone, God silences all and speaks alone. This is God's final declaration. In this act the end, your eschaton has come.

2. God is *"reckoning,"* in justification. His word is doing what only God's word does. It is making something so by the Spirit. He is making something *ex nihilo*, as he did with Abraham, who trusted God's promise even when it turned directly against him. God is giving. Humans here are receiving. They are perfectly passive.

3. As Paul put it [2 Cor. 5:18], *"All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself, and gave us the ministry of reconciliation."*

[All this refers to Article IV ... from God, article I, reconciled by water and Spirit, article II, through Christ, article III, by justification, article IV, through the ministry of reconciliation, article V]

4. And *"all this,"* is pointed to one end. To make trusters in his word of promise. That is, finally God declares that his new creation, made into faith by Christ's word of forgiveness beyond the law is *"right."*

B. Next, you can sense there is a struggle going on in Article IV. It has within it all the fighting words you could want between two ways of using similar words, one dominated by the law, and the other by Christ's promises (something Melanchthon recognized clearly in the Apology IV: *"the opponents single out the law* (7) *…through the law they seek forgiveness of sins and justification* (8)*" and finally, "thus they bury Christ."* (18)

1. Thus when we say justification by faith alone, we are distinguishing law and gospel.

2. Right away, we notice an amazing thing about the resourcefulness of sinners. Persons can read Article IV as if it were just one more description of what we are to do in order to be saved. In that case they stare at it, as Luther liked to say, like a cow staring at a new gate. They wonder if faith can do all these things... If a gift doesn't need to be

received before it is a gift... If forgiveness of sins, declared, really does anything or changes us.

3. But what AC IV is about is what God is doing. It is new, it is therefore Gospel, not law. To preach this rightly, therefore, this article teaches us to follow four basic patterns of the grammar of justification, of Gospel as distinction from Law:

a) ...declares what God is doing, [God the subject of your verbs]
b) ...what we are receiving, [Sinners the object of the verbs]
c) ...without condition, [no *"ands,"* or *"buts"*]
d) ...and in the present! [*"for you,"* the right application of the pronoun]

4. When the hearers of this preaching hear what God is up to with the likes of them, it is breathtaking. God's word, *"Scripture,"* as Paul put it in Galatians 3:22, *"has imprisoned all things under the power of sin, so that what was promised* [by] *faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe."* Everything we preach must be tuned to this middle "C" of our faith.

a) The law is not God's final plan or way of making us right. The law is the penultimate accent on God's word. In fact, the law wants nothing more than its own cessation, since what even the law wants, is for you to do the law without the law! Even law wants freedom from the law! But it can only stipulate, point, signal, it cannot give it. So, even it is finally drawn into God's work of imprisoning all things under the power of sin, like a great black hole, sucking everything in. Now, to revisit something I said earlier, because it bears repeating...

(1) Everything? Yes, everything.

[If you notice, the speaking of the law will finally involve a *particula inclusiva* e.g., *"all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God..."* or, *"the world did not know him."*]

(2) To what end does God go about piling up everything under sin? To make faith in you, in which this gift is actually given. And what is the gift? God's own self, wholly and completely without holding anything back: Father, Son and Holy Spirit [Augustana, Article I, III], in the almost unbelievable form of a promise given, freely, through public declaration [article V], and the administration of his sacraments.

(3) Here we find the *particula exclusiva* when the New Testament comes out into the open: *"for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we may be saved."* (Acts 4) This is expressed in our doctrine of justification: God justifies a sinner by

faith alone apart from works of the law, *solus Christus, sola fide*.

b) Now if you are listening to this word and waiting for a *"but,"* or *"conditional,"* or a *"now this is your part in the deal,"* it never comes. Justification is a short word. It stops breathtakingly short of demanding anything from you. It is a declaration from on high of sins forgiven. We call this the *actus forensis*, the forensic decree. *"Sinner, on account of Christ, I pronounce you just."* Then the name calling begins: *"extrinsic,"* says Rome, *"ineffective,"* and *"insincere,"* say Pietists, *"irresponsible"* say the humanists, *"cheap,"* say the Calvinists, and so of course we become from the perspective of the law, the *"do-nothing's"* and, *"know-nothings,"* and here I simply want to claim those names proudly.

C. So, there is a fight here between hearing justification by faith alone apart from works of the law as an old law, or a new Gospel. Lets follow each key phrase of Article IV, noticing that it begins with the fighting negative:

1. *"We cannot obtain,"* (German) *"cannot be justified"* (Latin) [setting the eschatological limit] *"We"* as subject of justification ends. We are/have reached our limit.

2. The article then moves to the passive, *"we receive,"* (German), or Latin *"as a gift"* [God alone acts beyond our limit]. We as the object of justification begin.

3. What we receive is, *"forgiveness of sin,"* [not reward, merit, help, grace for *"doing what is within you,"* etc]. This moves us, snatches us away from being shut up under sin in ourselves, to being made into a receiver of all Christ's benefits, on account of Christ.

4. This is a new way of making just that is a way we are not used to under the law. In fact, one that we did not know could exist before God made it by promising it into existence. [Ap. IV: 135,85]: *"Thus Paul's chief argument, which he often repeats, is based upon the nature of a promise."*] That is, we assert that there are two kinds of righteousness: according to the law and according to promise, the first we call *coram hominibus*, and the second, *coram deo*. Sometimes we just say, the kingdom of Christ or heaven, and the kingdom of earth or death.

5. Grace has nothing to do with what we have, bring, or are, but is *"for Christ's sake,"* (German) *"on account of Christ"* (Latin). [*Propter Christum*] It de-centers us as improving beings under the law, and puts Christ at the center. This is the Copernican revolution infinitely greater than that underway in astronomy at this time.

6. All this comes to us, *"by his death,"* by which Christ, *"made satisfaction for our sins."* (Latin). The specific thing this article zooms in on regarding Christ is his death.

So we preach Christ and him crucified. The promise you are trained to give in your sermons is made on the ground of Christ having died for our sins and been raised victorious over the penalty for those sins: death. [God is making you theologians of the cross]

7. Christ's death becomes something for us *"through faith"* (*durch den Glauben, per fidem*). This makes of faith everything in the Christian life, not a start or finish or a movement. God has a purpose or mission in mind, and that is to make faith. Faith alone finally pleases God, because in it Christ has arrived as Lord of his sinners.

8. This faith in his promised and promising Son, then, God *"reckons"* (or *"regards and reckons"* (German)) as righteousness. In what begins to be called forensic reckoning later [Ap. IV: 159, 252]: *"to be pronounced righteous in a forensic sense,"* i.e., a unilateral declaration of forgiveness apart from law that is possible only from God's freedom to do whatever God wants. And it turns out he wants sinners! While we were yet ungodly God *godded* us.

III. So now to our systematic analysis of its parts...

A. As I noted previously, all of God's work (and so all of Scripture) is made up of these two *"things."*

1. Law, by which God is finally shutting up everything under sin,
2. and *"promises"* by which God makes faith in Christ alone.

B. And, if you simply look at justification as a form of law, you will say something like, *"Justification is fine as far as it goes, but what about merit? Faith is great, but what about love or works? "*

1. The Confutation (The B-squad of Catholic theologians assembled to give the Emperor a semi-official response to the AC), affirms the article insofar as it is anti-Pelagian, since no one wants to be a Pelagian, it being condemned by the Synod of Orange and all (and no one wants to somehow object to justification by faith, since Paul and all Scripture seems to assume it).

The Confutation however replies to Augustana IV with a, *"Yes, but"* [Ap IV: they are only masquerading lest they appear to be outright Pelagians]. So, the Confutators defended merit, and anyone who would not speak of merit before God they said, was a Manichaean, an unbeliever that what God creates is good. They became afraid that if God really creates faith in sinners, humans would be suspected of being evil by nature

and liable to fate, having no free will. So in the end this article was rejected by the Catholics who made themselves opponents of justification because it did not give merit a proper place in the theology of justification. Of course it was not given place! There is no room in there for anything but Christ.

a) At the Council of Trent, the Roman Council of the Church that reacted to and largely against the Lutheran confession also rejected Pelagianism and affirmed grace, and then promptly reduced justification to a starting point, followed by a movement from vice to virtue by means of cooperation between God's grace and human free will.

b) Likewise, those who saw themselves as Reformers, like Martin Bucer, also began to break with Lutherans on this matter, *"objecting that we cannot merely be reckoned godly or holy, but that we must also become so."* God can't simply say, *"Forgiven!,"* and have the sinner go his merry way sinning to beat the band. God's word of promise is not enough, something must happen really, they say, not promisingly. But *"really."* Really here means *"according to the standard of the law."* That is, I must improve in relation to the law, not just according to a sermon.

C. Now the fourth article in the AC assumes that you are reading all the articles of the Augustana, and so it can be very brief. It is also the case that article four of the AC is formulated in such a way that Melanchthon hoped that Rome and the Empire wouldn't disagree. How could they, and remain Christian? So it awaits the long response to the Confutation by Melanchthon on article four to let the dogs out, and say clearly, *"faith alone,"* is what we mean in Article IV. Luther does this so well in the SA, *"I wish all preachers would emphasize this article,"* what article? Christ himself, and him alone, is our righteousness and this (and here lies the explosive center of the Lutheran cause), *sola fide* (301.1-2) (our shorthand is this: *justification by faith alone*)

1. This article is to lead to a proclamation that indeed ends the old sinful life of clinging to righteousness according to the law, and begins the new creation that trusts Christ alone as our righteousness. It is to be proclaimed to the kind of people who actually need justification. Sinners. And here is the word the article is going to try to get out of its sourpuss preachers. This is justification: *"I declare unto you the entire forgiveness of all your sins for Jesus' sake."*

2. This has become our cause, our theology, our deepest desire. To give the free gift and let the dying begin, so that, *"as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too can walk in newness of life."* (Romans 6:4) Here again is our big cannon. It's Jesus Christ alone, and *"this faith alone justifies us,"* so let's go down the basic message or preaching we bring to the unsuspecting world. Christ unbound! Free! Death behind

him!

IV. Why is this (Justification by faith alone apart from works of the law on account of Christ) so hard to preach and hear?

Because from the perspective of the law, i.e., of those dying, this means you are a *"do-nothing,"* and a *"know-nothing,"* (of course, the flip-side of a do-nothing in relation to Christ is a, *"receive everything,"* which is truly great to be.)

A. The problem then is the inclination of a sinner like you who is fighting for life under the demand of the law, refusing to be closed up yourself under sin, and who does not want to hear the promise of what Jesus Christ has done because its first results in putting the final nail in your casket.

1. Lets listen to the dying words of a sinner again, using the law as righteousness before God from Luther' s introduction to Galatians lectures: *"Then do we do nothing and work nothing in order to obtain this righteousness?"* Luther replies, *"Nothing at all. For this righteousness means to do nothing, to hear nothing, and to know nothing about the Law or about works..."*

2. What is so fearful, and unsettling about this *"do nothing"*?

a) Some people think it would not be bad, if it applied only to them, they can handle it, but if it creeps out to others, real sinners, who know what havoc they will create? They might say, *"shall we sin the more, that grace may abound."*

b) For others, the fear is that it would rob them of their most precious asset, the motivation to do good works, free will.

c) But finally all this comes down to the realization that if this were true, then not only would my sinning come to an end, but *"I"* would be over as I have come to know and love myself. My days as doer before the judgment seat of God would be over, my dreams of improvement, of pleasing God, of establishing righteousness in myself would be behind me now. Faith alone leaves nothing to humans. That is what is intolerable.

d) How could a good and loving God who is merciful, slow to anger, and nothing but sheer grace do this to me? Cut me off, make me passive, say, *"there is nothing more 'to do,' you've done quite enough already"*? Well, since he sent his field supervisors, one after the other, each one gotten rid of, and finally sent his own Son, whom we *"doers"* of the law finally hoisted on a cross, the heavenly Father said, *"you've done quite enough,"* now

you will see me in action, and since I am the creator of new life, I will set about doing what comes naturally to me, raising the dead, starting with my Son and working to his own sinners whom I have placed in his hand.

B. So, now we see the language of justification has two sources, not one. The courtroom and the cemetery.

1. We are used to the courtroom as the place where we make defense of our selves and actions. But regarding our entire life, God has the last say,

a) ...first as prosecuter, *"all have sinned,"*

b) then as defender, *"Jesus Christ was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification."*

c) And as judge: God alone is righteous and justifies the one who has faith in Jesus. (Romans 3 and 4).

d) Finally, as what God wanted to be all along, as purveyor of mercy, publicly declaring us righteous, and as he declares (as if in a court), so we are. *"For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness in his sight, as St. Paul says in Romans 3 and 4."* (AC IV p. 40.3, German).

2. But the other language follows right on the heels of the first, for if you think this sounds like some cosmic bookkeeping that hovers over your head while you stand there in stunned silence, unaffected by the circus going on around you, the other setting for the language of our preaching and theology is the cemetery. This affects you in no less a way than to put you to death as sinner in order to raise you as a *"do nothing." "We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is free from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him."* (Romans 6:6).

3. What happens to you in the preaching of Christ on your behalf is a real, not merely *"metaphorical,"* burial. It is also a real and certain hope of resurrection. Can the dead rise? The whole world wants to know.

a) Well, what are you going to say? *"If you try hard enough?"*

b) Our declaration is: not by *"doing,"* nut only by faith. And that means, by Christ finding the way to make his righteousness a gift, a promise, by which he ends us as

doer's and begins us as trusters.

V. Finally, this must not remain an article... Christ must be publicly specifically declared to the proper people: that is to real, actual, historical sinners.

A. Wherever you find them, even unto the ends of the earth, you must pronounce, *"I forgive you apart from works, for the sake of Christ,"* and when questioned and attacked for it, remain a proud and patient *"do-nothing,"* and, *"know-nothing,"* so that others too can be a, *"receive-everything."*

B. The Fourth article of the AC, is then a declaration about Christ. Christ is unbound, he is free, he is loose, and has entered our world in pursuit of sinners, who are running as fast as they can from the truth, especially in their religion and in their church, but I tell you the truth, I do not lie. Sinners, run for your life, Jesus Christ is out to get you, and thank God, he runs faster than you! What pleases God, after all, is to watch his Son run free as a lawless man in the world, reeking the havoc of mercy everywhere he goes.