**The Chief Article: Justification by faith alone**

Reference Texts: CA IV and Apology IV

**I. We continue our subject by paying particular attention to the fourth article of the Augustana**... not the first, since the fourth is the chief article, the hub of the wheel and the epicenter of all controversies in the Church.

A. Talking about justification is like talking about sex -- fun, but not nearly as good as doing it.

B. Your job description as public preachers and the priesthood of all believers is simple, to defeat the final enemy of humankind and all creation by raising the dead.

[Now if you've ever tried that at home, you know it is harder than it sounds. Most of us shy away and try to do other things that seem more manageable (like having an uplifting church council meeting, or making your church a welcoming place for church shoppers). But I want you to at least know where the dynamite is and perhaps you'll decide to use it now and then.]

**II. The Augsburg Confession, Article IV was powerful enough to disturb the Roman Confutators**... who rejected the article on the basis that it did not provide any place for human merit before God. But the Reformers had not even led with their strongest suit in this article.

A. The **first thing** out of your mouth when you are raising the dead by the forgiveness of sins is Jesus Christ and him crucified. You will see Luther do this in the Smalcald Articles: *"Here is the first and chief article: That Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, 'was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification" [Rom. 4:25], and he alone is, "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29); and, "the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" [Isa. 53:6]…"* (SA II. 1-2, 301). This is upsetting to whatever plan or system you come with because it means, *"I am not as free as I supposed, and Christ is more free than I supposed."* Both of these are terrors to commonsense. It means my death is real and Christ alone holds the key to my resurrection, but here is my pickle: he is the very one I just finished murdering. Now what?

1. To think in terms of justification by faith alone is a logic that begins at the cross and thinks outward from it, it does not begin by thinking about the nature of God, the power of created beings and the imaginary fall into sin. God is at work in Christ. Christ is the subject of the verbs of the Gospel and we are perfectly passive. That is, dead in

ourselves *coram deo,* before God.

2. This is what CA IV means right in the middle of the article when it says: *"justified as a gift on account of Christ through faith"* (Latin) and *"for Christ's sake through faith."* (German). You've had your time, now God is going to do what a God does: work all-in-all.

B. The **second thing** out of your mouth when justifying is the announcement of the absolute end of human power: thinking, feeling, willing, you name it.

1. It is absolute and total, final and ultimate and marks a great and permanent end. For your hearers this means, *"human beings cannot be justified before God by their own powers, merits or works"* (Latin) and *"we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God..."* (German). CANNOT. End. *Fin*. Over. Terminated. This is what we mean by *eschatological*. It is also what we mean by death. If you say to me, *"But I'm still alive and kicking, what do you mean?"* I say, *"Dead Man Walking," "Bag of Worms playing the part of…"* [Like the Soap Opera's who occasionally break in with an announcer, *"The part of Donavon Riley is being played today by a bag of wormy maggots."*] The gavel has already come down. Do you not hear it?

2. This is exactly how Paul reasons when he says, *"...otherwise Christ died for no purpose."* (Gal 2:21). If I'm still alive and kicking, Christ dying is just a bit excessive, don't you think, at least premature?

[That is why I tell people who disclaim justification by faith alone as one unsavory metaphor among many found in the Bible that there are always two roots from which our language for justification come, one is the experience of courtrooms where a defendant stands before a tribunal and is judged as right or wrong, punishable or free, and another experience of a cemetery where we put someone in the ground and wonder if they'll ever get out of there again... Watch what happens to an elderly couple parted by the tomb…]

C. The **third thing** out of your mouth is the absolution. That is, *"On account of Christ I declare the entire forgiveness of all your sins."* This word makes faith where there was none, and so raises the dead. [As Luther remarks in the SC, *"...where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation"*].

**III. The law and the promises: the new rule...**

A. With this logic of the cross we have an entirely different playing field for theology.

In the article of justification Lutherans finally broke through to God's own eschatological distinction between the law and the Gospel. Better yet, a free and resurrected Christ broke through to raise the dead in the earthly announcement by a preacher out forgiving sins, and it worked! Sins were actually forgiven on earth as in heaven, the unjust are justified, the dead are raised by Christ through the preacher's words.

B. Here is where Melanchthon's *Apology* is so powerful. He discovered, to his horror, that the collapse of negotiations at Augsburg was a hermeneutical matter between Lutherans and Roman Catholics, hermeneutics meaning not how a scholar interprets the Bible, but how God interprets us, and these are simply not on the same page.

Hermeneutics, after all, is to consider what are the conditions for the possibility of something, in this case of justification before God. That is, *"...our opponents single out the law... and through the law they seek forgiveness of sins and justification."* (Ap IV: 7, 121).

[The condition for the possibility of me hearing something is that I have a functioning ear, for example. Before something is even possible, something else already has to be there. For example, one night during my *using* days the house I had passed out in was in the middle of another drunken Saturnalian reverie, when I hollered at the party-goers, *"Shut the... up, I'm trying to sleep!"* It quieted for a moment, then my friend's voice shouts, *"The condition for the possibility of my behavior is that I'm stoned."* One of my best friends. So of course I said, *"Carry on."*]

C. If you single out the law and can think only according to it, justification is a minor matter of fulfilling the smallest possible requirement for God's mercy to go into effect according to the legal system. To put it most bluntly, if the law justifies, then at the very minimum the person must be alive to do it or get it. The conditions for the possibility of being made right by God is that you are alive, and to be alive is most often reduced to a shard of free will remaining. This hard, stone wall is what Melanchthon crashed into [at Augsburg], and it was greater than a misunderstanding.

1. Reading Scripture and preaching when you are able to think only according to the law is like a monotone singer who knows only one note, but thinks he is Pavorotti. Melanchthon says, they don't know what they are reading in Scripture. For, *"Finally, it [the law] requires obedience to God in death."*

Obedience while I am alive is hard enough, but when I'm dead? You expect me to obey the demands of the law without my second favorite organ, my free will? Of course what happens to Christ when you think only according to the law... *"Thus they bury Christ so*

*that people do not use him as a mediator and on account of him believe that they freely receive the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation."* (Ap. IV: 18, 123).

D. Instead here is the Lutheran rule that was learned from thinking out from the cross: *"All Scripture should be divided into these two main topics: the law and the promises."* (Ap IV: 5, 121) Two words, not one. Justification by faith alone makes no sense to those who have singled out the law.

1. These two words are not a distinction on a page or two different books, but what Melanchthon calls *"communicating." "In some places it communicates the law. In other places it communicates the promise concerning Christ..."* (Ap. IV: 121, 5) That is the relational language of what happens to you when Christ catches you, and it is also eschatological language that distinguishes what you cannot do (the old man in Adam) and what God can do (the new man in Christ).

2. You cannot overcome death. God can, but most importantly has. When you talk about justification you must distinguish law and the Gospel. When justifying you are killing and making alive.

[Herein lies the great secret of why preaching is so bad. Some preachers don't like to kill. Others don't like to make alive]

E. Because of this difference between the monotone, law-preaching, Johnny one-notes and the Lutheran way of hearing Scripture, the law and the promises, there is a struggle going on in CA 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. Immediately, we notice an amazing thing about the resourcefulness of monotone sinners. Persons can read Augustana 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?

1. But what AC IV is about is what God is doing after your death. It is new, it is therefore Gospel, not law. But that means that preaching Christ and him crucified reveals both the depth of our problem (Was I really that bad off?), and then the depth of God's desire to overcome it (Would he really do that for me?). When you hear what God is up to with his enemies and opponents, it is breathtaking. He literally kills and then raises anew. 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." The means by which the old sinner is killed and the new saint raised.

a) The law is not God's final plan or way of making us right. 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!

[Just like my Mother, who wants a phone call on her birthday, but doesn't want to have to remind me to call.]

Even law wants freedom from the law! But spiritual only, not incarnate, it can only curb, mirror, instruct, it cannot give you what it demands from you. So, even the good, pure and holy law is finally drawn into God's work of imprisoning all things under the power of sin, like a great black hole, sucking everything in.

b) Everything? Everything.

[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."* This *"everything"* is preached absolutely, flat out, even concerning your very best works and virtues. One can learn this idiom anywhere God is acting in Scripture. In Hannah's Song, God's kills and makes alive. In Isaiah, *"Truly Thou art a God who hidest thyself."* But nowhere with such explosive precision and massive destruction as Paul in Romans 3: *"…all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin, as it is written: "There is no one who is righteous, not even one... All have turned aside... there is no one who shows kindness, there is not even one... open graves... vipers... feet swift to shed blood... [and finally] no fear of God."* Nada. Zero, Zilch. [Psalm 14, 53:5,140:10; Isa. 59, and Psalm 36—the stuff people know by heart!]

c) A sinner always wants to slip the knot, and you will have to hold it tight by saying, *"I didn't write it, don't blame me."* That is why you preach from Scripture, and not your own imagination.

[My Uncle Ken showed me how to set trap for mink, muskrat, ermine, and other critters, and to this day my first instinct when they are gnawing at their foot in an animal's panic is to let them go limping away].

2. To what end does God go about piling up everything under sin, and then revealing his law so as to seal the deal? Well, not to kill for the pleasure of it, but to make faith where there is none and never will be any. To create anew, in the almost unbelievable form of a promise given, freely, through public declaration [AC V].

a) Here we find the second bit of dynamite in the Reformers witness to the world regarding justification by faith alone. The *particula exclusiva*: *"...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*. The Father and the Holy Spirit each want to make so much of Jesus Christ that he really is all-in all, and at this throne every knew will bow.

b) Now if you are listening to these two absolute words of law and promise, 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, like a judge announcing a final verdict to a defendant, like Jesus going about and raising little girls from the dead. Like the preacher declaring, *"Sinner, on account of Christ, I pronounce you just."*

[I can hear the name calling already from our little Johnny one notes: *"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]

I do nothing for my justification because I know nothing but Christ and him crucified for my sake. I am a do-nothing, know-nothing, receive-everything kind of baptized sinner.

F. The Apostle Paul presupposed the Old Testament witness concerning righteousness, especially that God is faithful to promises, then sharpened his preaching according to the extraordinary Gospel he received, according to the distinction of law and the Gospel. That makes God's righteousness an entirely new and surprising matter. The Reformers noted the Gospel's sharpening in the *particulae exclusivae*. They are:

1. Under the law, *"none is righteous, all have sinned."*
2. *"Apart from the law,"* the righteousness of God has been manifested.
3. *"The one man Jesus Christ"* (Romans 5:15) is righteousness.
4. *"Through faith alone,"* apart from works of the law.
5. And the means by which faith comes: "How are they to hear without a preacher?" (Romans 10:14).

G. Put together they read this way... Under the law, none is righteous. Apart from the law, and so through faith alone, only because of Christ, God rightly makes us right

while in ourselves ungodly, that is, by faith alone. And how does faith come? Only by the Word and the Spirit, that is, by hearing. You need a preacher, and when you've got one what do you say? *"How beautiful are the feet..."* (Rom. 10:14-15) This is because, *"God and the law are mutually exclusive in the matter of righteousness"* (Eberhard Jungel, "Justification: The Heart of the Christian Faith.") This makes no sense to those who single out the law and think only according to it.

**IV. So now to our systematic analysis of its parts**...

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

[Melancthon has a whole section of Apology IV that deals with the distinction of faith and love pp. 140-9)]

God's gifts (Baptism, Lord's Supper, Absolution) are fine, but what about accepting? Christ's cross is nice, but what am I going to do with it? I'm eventually meant for the resurrection, but what about the Christian life right now?

1. When justification is talked about in a classroom or preached from the pulpit, the offended first agree, and then proceed to undo do it. This is the typical Christian response to justification, and so the article pushes its opponents underground to become *semi-Pelagians*.

2. We, on the other hand, have to speak to such Johnny one-notes that promises are not just another law. To do that we are going to have to have three *"elements,"* as Melanchthon calls them. (Ap IV: 53, 128)

a) *"The promise itself,"* the forgiveness of your sins.
b) The fact that the promise is free, by faith alone.
c) And, by the merits of Christ only. That is, we refuse to bury Christ anymore under a pile of religious manure.

[There is a hidden problem here that comes out in AC IV and will be the undoing of the Lutheran church time and again. You can find it in two words regarding *"assents"* to the promise (Ap IV: 50, 128), that can take on a life of its own and create an opposite anthropology to our pure doctrine of God's work in justifying. But the reason this word is erratic lies deeper, in that Christ merit's alone come to be described by Melanchthon more and more exclusively as *"payment."* This tends to make Christ inactive, bound to a moment in history at the cross, and leave open the question about how his one-time sacrifice is applied to individuals in the present. Though death as sacrifice is not incorrect to say, it carries within it a time bomb ready to go off that is found in its greatest practitioner, Anselm. That is, a sinner cannot save a sinner. The antidote for this in Lutheranism is always good old Luther and preaching that just lets Jesus run wild in our midst raising dead people, because that is what he likes to do.]

**V. The doctrine of justification by faith alone is to get you to do the justification...** this way: *"I declare unto you the entire forgiveness of all your sins for Jesus' sake."*

A. Now what just happened when I said this?

Let me anticipate the questions:

1. *"He just said, 'I declare unto you,' as if he were speaking directly to me and announcing something. But reason clearly shows this is not a church. I am a hearer, he is a speaker, here we talk about things, we are not doing church things."*

2. Further, you say, *"He couldn't have meant that, since it wasn't the appropriate time or place: he has no alb and stole."*

3. And, *"Who does he mean by this 'I,' who declares? After all, he is only teaching, he's not God. I suspected from the first his ego was large, but who knew?"*

4. And who is this *"you,"* he referred to. He doesn't know me. How could he know if I were a sinner? A lucky guess perhaps, or more likely haughty judgmentalism.

5. Most of all, I didn't do anything. He caught me off guard. I wasn't in the mood. I had no time to make confession. Beside that, there was nothing I was asked to do. It felt like he treated me like a piece of meat, like an [passive] object...

6. And did he say, *"entire forgiveness,"* past, present and future? But I haven't even gotten around to some of my best sins, and as Augustine used to pray, *"Lord, give me chastity, but not yet."* (The Confessions, Book 8, chapter 11.)

7. And he said, *"on account of Christ,"* but that would mean the forgiveness came not because of me, but because of another, even Christ my Lord whom I betrayed? How does that transfer occur? Especially when I didn't feel anything. My heart wasn't warmed by it. I look at my hands and feet and they all look the same. Nothing has changed. Ah, perhaps he has a secret plan, perhaps it was said so that I might be roused to action in the future? But what if I show him to be a fool by running out and sinning just for spite? Doesn't that disprove his little theory?

B. This is the inner voice of a dying person before the *sola fide*. It is full of confusion and fear, precipitated by a very brief few words that are *gratis*, a free gift. *"If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ."*(Romans 5:17)

1. *Why do the nations rage...* (Psalm 2) They hate the Gospel!

2. So what is the Church's big cannon that she can turn on them? Its Jesus Christ alone, unbound! Free! Beyond the law, Death behind him! The very one who has come to get you while you were betraying him, and to raise the dead, we simply give the free gift gratis so that, *"as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too can walk in newness of life."* (Romans 6:4)