

The Legacy of Martin Luther's *Sola Fide*



Author:
Aleksandar S. Santrac^{1,2}

Affiliations:
¹Department of Dogmatics,
North-West University,
South Africa

²Department of Religion,
Washington Adventist
University, United States

Corresponding author:
Aleksandar Santrac,
alex.santrac@gmail.com

Dates:
Received: 26 May 2017
Accepted: 23 Aug. 2017
Published: 12 Oct. 2017

How to cite this article:
Santrac, A.S., 2017, 'The
Legacy of Martin Luther's
Sola Fide', *In die Skriflig* 51(1),
a2275. [https://doi.org/
10.4102/ids.v51i1.2275](https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v51i1.2275)

Copyright:
© 2017. The Authors.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work
is licensed under the
Creative Commons
Attribution License.

Read online:



Scan this QR
code with your
smart phone or
mobile device
to read online.

This article deals with the contemporary relevance of the Luther's *sola fide* principle in the fifth centennial of the Reformation. Is *sola fide* really an ecumenical principle or might it become one? Moreover, how useful and relevant is Luther's theology of faith in the midst of the 21st century Christian struggle for justice, goodness, beauty and truth? How significant and efficient is his faith-talk in our progressive combat against any form of discrimination or inequality? In order to answer these questions the article explores the nature and scope of the *sola fide* principle in its original historical-theological setting and through the contemporary theological debates.

Introduction

Gregorio Allegri's *Miserere Mei Deus* [Have Mercy on Me] (1630), a setting of the penitential Psalm 51, is one of the deepest musical expressions of Renaissance polyphony. Its text and music demonstrate mature mediaeval understanding and experience of confession and repentance, and it still captivates audiences today with its beauty and profundity. Although the piece belongs to the 17th century, it reflects the depth of piety common at the end of the 15th century. We can just imagine young Martin Luther in the cloister of Erfurt, immersed in the mediaeval liturgical practices, continually confessing his known and unknown sins, hoping that the mighty and wrathful God will show mercy to him, a notorious sinner. For medieval piety this present life was an anxious pilgrimage with unresolved tensions, fear of ultimate damnation, and hope for salvation through confessions, indulgences, consolations, disciplines, saintly intercessions and good works. Although the theological and liturgical system of salvation acknowledged both faith and grace, it was not an entirely gracious system (Waters 2016:125).

The young German monk, who would initiate 'the most important historical events that you associate with Germany' and who was 'placed fourth after Goethe, Chancellor Merkel, and Einstein on the list of the most important Germans' (Kolb, Dingel & Batka 2014:1), would epitomize humanity's inner spiritual struggle to please the almighty God and live out this struggle for faith in everyday moral choices. Luther's ethical thought was as important as his concentration on the relationship of God with sinful human beings. His search for authentic piety would become the powerful inspiration for every quest for genuine godliness and religiosity defined both by its causes and effects.

The ultimate goal of this article is to explore the legacy of Luther's *sola fide* principle in the 5th centennial of the Reformation. Where are we in ecumenical dialogue with regard to this pivotal teaching of the Christian corpus of doctrine? Is *sola fide* really an ecumenical principle or might it become one? Moreover, how useful and relevant is Luther's theology of faith in the midst of the 21st century Christian struggle for justice? How significant and efficient is his faith-talk in our progressive combat against any form of discrimination or inequality? In order to answer these and similar questions a close look will be taken first at the historical context of Luther's avowal of justification by faith, to the primitive and mature forms of this teaching as well as later interpretations, and also to the theological nature of the faith phenomenon in its complex relationship to good works and love. Some brief remarks will then be made on contemporary discussions about connections between the apostle Paul's original teaching of justification by faith and the reformer's understandings of this key doctrine.

Most scholars of the 'Luther Renaissance' would agree that Luther's doctrine of *sola gratia* [salvation by grace alone] definitely shifted his theological focus towards *sola fide* [by faith alone]. Luther inherited the Pauline principle that it is not because of anything in the individual that one becomes the object of God's saving grace. Rather, as Luther would write on his deathbed, 'we are beggars' (Kellerman 1999). Salvation therefore, if it is by grace alone, becomes

ours *through faith alone*. Rediscovery of the biblical teaching of justification by faith alone proved to be the Archimedean point of resistance to the medieval system of salvation. Luther (1965a) contends:

Formerly, when our hearts were blinded by errors in teachings from Rome, we imagined that God was a salesman who sold his grace in exchange for our works and achievements. Now, however, since the light of the gospel has dawned, we know that we are credited as righteous only by faith in Christ. (p. 140)

Most of the counter-arguments of the anti-Lutheran legacy, both in the counter-Reformation of medieval times and partially today, questioned the legitimacy and consistency of this teaching. Justification by faith has become the doctrine so closely associated with Martin Luther's legacy that we can freely affirm that this teaching has a pivotal role in his whole opus of theology and that it was the most influential in the denominations of the post-Reformation era. Again, in Luther's own words:

The article of justification and grace is the most delightful, and it alone makes a person a theologian and makes of a theologian a judge of the earth and of all affairs. Few there are, however, who have thought it through well and who teach it aright. (WA 25:375, quoted by Waters 2016:123)

For Luther, justification by faith is therefore the basic and chief article of faith with which the church stands or falls; it has become the 'summary of Christian doctrine', 'the sun that illuminates God's holy church' and the doctrine that distinguishes Christian religion from all others (Althaus 1966:224). In the *Smalcald Articles*, writing about the biblical teaching of justification by faith, the mature Luther (1989) clearly teaches:

On this article rests all that we teach and practice against the pope, the devil, and the world. Therefore we must be quite certain and *have no doubts* about it. Otherwise *all is lost*, and the pope, the devil and all our adversaries will gain the victory. (p. 503)

The key question is the following: How was the doctrine of justification by faith understood and shaped by Luther within the framework of his own times?

Historical-theological background and context

Luther did not think and write in a vacuum. His theology of justification is no exception. It was shaped in the midst of ecclesiastical, theological and liturgical controversies. Luther developed his theology of justification by faith within the fundamental frameworks of his own education, theology, monastery life, university life and through his writing and debates (Kolb et al. 2014:2). Almost all thinkers and theologians who were in conversation with the people of their own times are remembered by the wider public later on the basis of their interaction with those who disagreed and on positive or negative interpretations of their thought. Luther was no exception.

The most vital theological topic for young Luther was the *righteousness of God*, both active and passive. Unlike medieval traditional theology that spoke only about active righteousness as the self-development of one's potential to become God-like (Mattes 2014:268), Luther developed his theology of justification within the context of late medieval scholastic thought in which Gabriel Biel tried to strike a balance between God's initiative in salvation and human cooperation, insisting that 'out of purely natural powers' (*ex puris naturalibus*) sinners could do what is in them (*facere quod in se est*). The result would be a 'congruent merit' or merit that is not really worthy in God's eyes but is accepted by God as a basis for his grace (Kolb 2009:32). Unlike Biel, Luther discovered in Paul's letters and the Psalms a passive form of righteousness that is the impartation of new status, nature and the clean heart. This is 'alien righteousness'.

Therefore, the doctrine of justification by faith first represents a theological reaction to different forms of theological-humanistic anthropologies that were inspired by the supposed exercise of free will and the goodness of human nature. Gradual self-development of righteousness is impossible in Luther's view of human nature as *coram Deo* [before God]. Before the Creator we are rendered passive and suffer the death of the old being that God might redeem us in *Christ only* (*solus Christus*). Redemption is possible only through passive righteousness and not through gradual improvement of human nature (active righteousness). This does not undermine our duties and responsibilities to our fellow human beings in our life *coram mundo* [before the world]. Luther was serious about the daily ethical implementation of faith in personal, family or social settings. However, the foundation of Christian experience is always *coram Deo* – the state of nakedness of the human soul desperately in need of God's supernatural gifts of grace and faith.

In the context of the early disputes with powerful Roman Catholic leaders, prelates and theologians (e.g. Cajetan in Augsburg in 1518), Luther clearly affirmed the primacy of faith and God's righteousness. Luther denied the treasury of church indulgences that drew power from Christ's merits and merits of the saints. Even more importantly, he claimed that faith brings certainty of forgiveness *before* the penitent receives absolution from the priest (Hendrix 2015:74). In this early development of this theological thought, Luther always defended himself by appealing to Scripture. Therefore, in 1518 Luther already had in his theological arsenal a primitive form of the doctrine of righteousness by faith only.

Sola fide and the early Luther

Luther's so-called 'tower experience' and discovery of righteousness by faith in Romans 1:17 is probably a mythical explanation of how this monk came to a knowledge of this profound teaching. Insight into justification by faith was probably more the result of his continuing studies of Scripture and his openness to a new form of faith. As he himself stated, 'I did not learn my theology all at once, but had to search

deeper for it, where my temptations took me' (WATR 1:146, quoted in Waters 2016:216).

Very early, even during his reading of humanist philosophy and study of grammar, rhetoric, mathematics and music, Luther was aware of the importance of faith and justification. Scott H. Hendrix, in his recent biography of Luther, claims that Luther was in the habit of making notes in the margins of books on logic or geometry in the period of 1505 to 1511. Such notes were discovered in 2013. 'The margin next to the word "faith" shows a phrase in Luther's hand from chapter one of Paul's Letter to the Romans: "The just shall live by faith"' (Hendrix 2015:30). This pillar of his theology was therefore well known to him even before his in-depth studies of the Holy Scriptures. His eager studies of the Bible prepared him for teaching his expositions of Psalms (1513–1514), Romans (1515–1516) and Galatians (1519). By the time he delivered his lectures on Galatians, his doctrine of justification by faith was already developed. It seems that he was already proposing the forensic form of righteousness or justification, namely that Christ's righteousness is imputed to sinners who are completely forgiven for Jesus' sake. The righteousness of God, argued Luther, from both Romans and Galatians, is an 'alien righteousness' that has to be instilled and imputed to a sinner *only* by faith. In his 'Two kinds of righteousness' Luther (1989) claims:

This alien righteousness instilled in us without our works by grace alone – while the Father, to be sure, inwardly draws us to Christ – is set opposite original sin, likewise alien, which we acquire without our works by birth alone. (p. 157)

Alien righteousness becomes the sinner's possession through faith in Christ and without any works of grace within us (our *proper* righteousness).¹ Luther usually understands justification as God's act of crediting, imputing, recognising (*imputare, reputare*) the sinner as righteous. Paul Althaus (1966:227), one of the major scholars of Luther, summarises as follows: 'In the case of the gospel, it is the act by which God considers and receives the sinner who is unrighteous before him as righteous.'

In his *Preface to the Letter of St. Paul to the Romans* Luther (2010) defined this process:

Now 'justice' is just such a faith. It is called God's justice or that justice which is valid in God's sight, because it is *God who gives it and reckons it as justice for the sake of Christ our Mediator*. In extensor clarification of this idea and the commentary on Romans 1:17 is offered in the *Commentary on Psalms*. (Luther 1826, on Ps 5:8 [*author's italics*])

By the righteousness of God (which we shall often have before us hereafter) we ought always to understand according to its canonical signification, not that righteousness whereby God himself is just, and whereby he condemns the wicked, which is the righteousness that is generally understood to be meant; but as Augustine has beautifully said in his work on the 'spirit and the letter', *we ought to understand it as signifying that righteousness wherewith God clothes man when he justifies*

1. Proper righteousness is the product of the alien righteousness (Luther 1519).

him; that is, that mercy itself, or that justifying grace, whereby we are accounted righteous before God: concerning which the apostle saith, Rom. i. 17, 'For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, the just shall live by faith'. [*author's italics*]

This experience is possible *by faith only*. Luther was so convinced that *only* faith can grasp and accept God's righteousness that he altered the text in his German translation of the New Testament. Romans 3:28 states, 'Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law' (New King James Version). In his German translation of the Bible, Luther specifically added the word *allein* [alone] to Romans 3:28 – a word that is not in the original Greek. According to Stoddard (1922) Luther reportedly said:

You tell me what a great fuss the Papists are making because the word alone is not in the text of Paul ... say right out to him: 'Dr. Martin Luther will have it so' ... I will have it so, and I order it to be so, and my will is reason enough. I know very well that the word 'alone' is not in the Latin or the Greek text. (pp. 101–102)

Before we judge Luther too soon, we need to be aware of the fact that Greek experts mostly agree that the Greek text carries with it the nuance of 'alone' without the word 'alone' (λογιζόμεθα γὰρ δικαιοῦσθαι πίστει ἄνθρωπον χωρὶς ἔργων νόμου – Rm 3:28, Nestle-Aland, 28th edn.). For the sake of bringing this clearly over into his *target* language he adds the word 'alone'.

Luther did not put his theology of justification in contrast to the written word of Scripture, which he adored and respected. He was well versed in the original biblical languages, but he was also aware of the fact that every translation is an interpretation, and his translation was in accordance with the overall biblical message that *only* faith justifies, saves and recommends us to God.

Modern evaluations of Luther's mature teaching of justification by faith

Although some critiques of the later Luther stress his bipolar approach to justification, an artificial distinction between forensic (imputed) and effective justification in Luther simply does not exist. Luther's *Small Catechism* clearly articulates: 'Where there is forgiveness of sins [*forensic justification*] there is also life and salvation [*effective justification*]' (Mattes 2014:265). In one of the contemporary discussions of alternative Lutheran understandings of justification, Tuomo Mannermaa in his *Der im Glauben gegenwärtige Christus* accentuates a *participatory* or *ontic* view of justification. In this view, justification would be a 'happy exchange' – the human being becoming a partaker of God's nature. The ontic or real presence of Christ is in the faith that justifies, with Christ and the Christian becoming one (Mannermaa 1989, cited by Saarinen 2014:254). This Western sacramental view of justification, probably shaped by the Eastern theology of *theosis*, was unknown in the early scholarship of Luther. Only

recently scholars have realised that the forensic view is insufficient and misleading. Modern scholarship believes that Luther's theory of justification needs modifications based on the original intention of the reformer.

Speaking about Luther's mature understanding of faith and justification, Oswald Bayer (2008:42–43) recently recognised that Luther's life of faith is primarily *vita passiva* – a passive form of life. Faith is divine work in us that brings us to new birth.

Faith is, thus, the work of God, through and through, with nothing accomplished by the human being; rather, it can only be received and suffered. The righteousness of Christ is set in complete opposition to the righteousness of works; *it is passive*. We can only receive it. (Bayer 2008:43)

Bayer (2008:42–43), furthermore, believes that Luther's theology of *vita passiva* makes him a theologian influenced by the German mystical tradition (John Tauler) because, for mystics, faith is not knowledge, nor action, nor metaphysical or moral; it is neither *vita activa* nor *vita contemplativa*, but *vita passiva*. Hendrix (2015:52) further explains that God's justice was passive – not because it was inactive, but because it was a divine gift (God's grace), not earned by human strength or performance. Hendrix (2015:52) also reminds us that at the moment of discovery of the true meaning of Romans 1:17, Luther felt he was born again and was entering Heaven through open gates! Passive justice or the 'alien' righteousness of God therefore provided everything that human religious pride and achievement could not provide: grace, love, peace and true good works.

At the core of anthropological-theological discussion of justification by faith, is *faith itself*. What is the reality of faith? How does it relate to good works and active forms of righteousness? How does the faith-love relation function in the economy of salvation?

Faith, works, and love

It is very easy to misunderstand Luther's use of the word *faith*. The German word *Glaube* can be translated as both 'faith' and 'belief'. When Luther used the expression *Glaube* he assumed both of these meanings. For this reason, one of the major scholars on Luther, H.H. Kramm (1947:49), recognised that the Protestant churches make a distinction between *fides historica* [belief or historical faith] and *fides salvifica* [salvific faith]. Luther did accept all the tenets of the basic orthodox Christian faith and tradition from the Early Church fathers to the 16th century. However, salvific faith takes precedence over historic faith, because I have to believe that Christ died for *me* and that *my* sins are forgiven (Kramm 1947:51). In his *Commentary on Galatians* (on Gl 3:6), Luther (1535) restores the apostolic meaning of faith:

Faith in God constitutes the highest worship, the prime duty, *the first obedience*, and the foremost sacrifice. Without faith God forfeits His glory, wisdom, truth, and mercy in us. The first duty of man is to believe in God and to honor Him with his faith. Faith is truly the

height of wisdom, *the right kind of righteousness*, the only real religion. This will give us an idea of the excellence of faith.

In other words, faith is everything we need for salvation. It is 'the right kind of righteousness' and 'the first obedience'. Faith internalises the passive and alien form of God's righteousness and makes it its own. The result is a pure and unadulterated form of religion 'once entrusted to God's holy people' (Jude 3). Faith curbs the self-centered incurvation (*incurvatio* – Luther's definition of sin) and restores the image of God. It produces ontological union with Christ (sacramental view) and finally makes us one with God in goodness or good works and love.

Martin Luther never supported an artificial distinction between faith and works as some believe. These misleading and incomplete interpretations would quote something like the following:

By the grace of God we know that we are justified through faith in Christ alone. We do not mingle law and grace, faith and works. *We keep them far apart*. Let every true Christian mark the distinction between law and grace, and mark it well. (Luther 1535, on Gl 2:18, [author's italics])

However, this idea should be read in its proper context. If we continue reading, we will find the following explanation:

There are two classes of doers of the Law, true doers and hypocritical doers. *The true doers of the Law are those who are moved by faith in Christ to do the Law*. The hypocritical doers of the Law are those who seek to obtain righteousness by a mechanical performance of good works while their hearts are far removed from God. They act like the foolish carpenter who starts with the roof when he builds a house. (Luther 1535, on Gl 3:10)

Luther is clear on the point that the righteous or those justified by faith as *true doers of the Law* are moved by Christ, who lives in them, to perform good works of the Law. Sacramental union with Christ transforms a believer by faith to perform God's works. This approach of Luther to faith and good works – partially provoked by 'inconsistencies' in the 'Epistle of Straw', the letter of James – singles out faith as the primary good work and the cause of all good works.

Faith is not that human illusion and dream that some people think it is. When they hear and talk a lot about faith and yet see that no moral improvement and no good works result from it, they fall into error and say, 'Faith is not enough. You must do works if you want to be virtuous and get to heaven'. ... *It is impossible that faith ever stop doing good. Faith doesn't ask whether good works are to be done, but, before it is asked, it has done them*. It is always active. Whoever doesn't do such works is without faith; he gropes and searches about him for faith and good works but doesn't know what faith or good works are. Even so, he chatters on with a great many words about faith and good works. (Luther 2010 [author's italics])

This famous citation from his *Preface to the Letter of St Paul to the Romans* (Luther 2010) is strong evidence that Luther never

believed in the artificial distinction between faith and works. When he equated faith with passive righteousness, according to Scripture (Rm 4:3), he also affirmed that faith, properly understood and lived, always leads to good works and, in itself, is the greatest work. In the *Commentary to Psalms* (Luther 1826) he aptly summarises: 'Faith is the first principle of all good works: and this is so hidden and unknown, that all reason utterly shrinks from it.' Good works or 'works of grace' are necessary, but not for salvation. They are necessary only as *witness of faith*, to give glory to the heavenly Father and to serve the neighbour (WA 391, 224, 254, cited in Althaus 1966:249). The primacy of faith in Luther's theology does not negate the need for good works, but sees them only as outcomes or practical expressions of living faith.

Speaking about righteousness and good works, the ultimate expression of goodness is the perfection of love. Luther, in his *Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* (1535, on Gl 5:6) does include love as an outcome and purpose of faith:

Faith must of course be sincere. It must be a *faith that performs good works through love*. If faith lacks love it is not true faith. Thus the Apostle bars the way of hypocrites to the kingdom of Christ on all sides. He declares on the one hand, 'In Christ Jesus circumcision availeth nothing', i.e., works avail nothing, but faith alone, and that without any merit whatever, avails before God. On the other hand, the Apostle declares that without fruits faith serves no purpose. To think, 'If faith justifies without works, let us work nothing', is to despise the grace of God. *Idle faith is not justifying faith*. In this terse manner Paul presents the whole life of a Christian. *Inwardly it consists in faith towards God, outwardly in love towards our fellow-men.* [author's italics]

Love should be performed happily and willingly. Again, in the *Preface to the Letter of St. Paul to the Romans*, the cause of this Christian well-being is *faith*:

Faith is a living, unshakeable confidence in God's grace; it is so certain, that someone would die a thousand times for it. This kind of trust in and knowledge of God's grace makes a person joyful, confident, and happy with regard to God and all creatures. This is what the Holy Spirit does by faith. Through faith, a person will do good to everyone without coercion, willingly and happily; he will serve everyone, suffer everything for the love and praise of God, who has shown him such grace. (Luther 2010)

From this brief theological analysis of Luther's original contribution to the development of the virtues of faith, works, love and their interrelationships, we can conclude that faith is a kind of *meta-experience* or *meta-doctrine*. Justification by faith and the reality of faith, transformed into goodness and experience of love, cannot be singled out as separate doctrines. Faith *positions* all other doctrines and gives them purpose and meaning. Outcomes of faith (goodness, love, joy, confidence) also represent the overall nature of the flourishing life of every believer.

Luther and Paul

Some contemporary scholars (such as E.P. Sanders, N.T. Wright, James D.G. Dunn or Alistair McGrath) recently claimed that Luther profoundly misunderstood Paul's

original teaching about justification by faith. The so-called 'new perspective' emerged, arguing that the apostle Paul cannot be properly understood outside of his 1st-century Jewish context. Paul was immersed in the debate with Judaizers, opponents that cared about works of the law (Torah) and circumcision much more than about how the individual sinner is to be saved or accounted righteous. Therefore, to be justified by faith does not mean to be forgiven and accounted righteous by imputation of Christ's righteousness, but rather to be declared as one who has become a member of God's people, as one who has experienced a shift of identity (see the discussion in Waters 2016:137–139). For the 'new perspective' the problem in Romans and Galatians is not one of soteriology, but rather of ecclesiology and sociology. The 'new perspective' school naturally confirms that part of this shift is the question of how the individual may be right with God.

Martin Luther never denied that justification by faith has some implications for the way in which the believer gains *new identity* or relates to other believers. There is no doubt that Luther's teaching is biblical, for he recognised in the Scriptures both forensic and relational aspects of justification. The 'new perspective' gives us an additional insight which we cannot overlook after centuries of scholarship on the apostle Paul. However, I wish to emphasise that Luther never really taught one extreme individualistic position at the expense of another. His original writings clearly demonstrate the quest for a balanced approach to the reality of faith. Contemporary scholarship on Paul and Luther also confirms this. The recent study of Stephen J. Chester, Professor of New Testament at North Park Theological Seminary in Chicago, entitled *Reading Paul with the reformers: Reconciling the old and new* (2017), by careful and nuanced reading of the reformers' Pauline exegesis, came to the conclusion that the 'old perspective' of the Reformation with its emphasis on personal salvation and the 'new perspective' of contemporary Pauline scholarship with its emphasis on shift of identity are not, after all, contradictory. Justification by faith is therefore both a profoundly personal experience of salvation and a shift of communal identity as it relates to the body of Christ and the community of faith.

Ecumenical dimensions

Phillip D.W. Krey from the Lutheran Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, and Peter D.S. Krey who got his PhD from Graduate Theological Union, in their new reflection on *The Catholic Luther* (2016), claim that some scholars erroneously believe that Luther made a complete break with Catholicism and started a new denomination. They believe Luther sought to purge the church from the abuses of the time. *The Catholic Luther* (Krey & Krey 2016) represents Luther as demonstrating his Catholicity. Needless to say, the volume focuses on Luther's early writings only, and that might be both the strength and the weakness of the project.

Walter Kasper, in his recent book *Martin Luther: An Ecumenical Perspective* (2016), writes that, for Catholics,

Luther unfortunately was viewed for a long time as the great heretic responsible for the split of the church. Kasper believes this one-sided position has largely been corrected after 500 years of Luther's legacy. Now, with more equitable judgement, Luther has been recognised by the Catholic Church for his insights. Kasper makes Luther evangelical and ecumenical in the real sense of the words. The rediscovery of Luther's catholicity and ecumenical spirit of charity is what Kasper is interested in.

Hans Küng, a notable ecumenical theologian, observes that, while scholars in the 20th century made significant progress in their understanding of Luther's personality and theology, the Catholic hierarchy has failed to keep in step with this progress (Bell 2014:591). Following Vatican II, of course, Martin Luther has been redefined as a witness to the gospel, a herald of renewal, a teacher of faith, and a profound religious personality (Joint Lutheran/Roman Catholic Study Commission 1983:1. 4). Does this change of language of Catholic Luther research with its non-uniform content (Bell 2014:593) (from heretic to the herald of the gospel and *doctor communis*) overlaps with the actual shift towards acknowledgment of the value of the Lutheran Luther's ecclesiastical and theological contributions? It is not quite clear. Contemporary Catholic scholarship tries to view Luther as part of the common heritage. With the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, Luther is definitely again in the spotlight. A new volume, *From conflict to communion: Lutheran-Catholic common commemoration of the Reformation in 2017*, views the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation as a unique opportunity for deeper communion between two communities of faith in celebration of the common witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ (Report of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity 2013).

Justification by faith has naturally become the ecumenical subject. If Luther's background, personality and theology have been redefined in ecumenical terms as explained above, justification by faith is part of this process of ecumenical rediscovery and reinterpretation. Luther clearly taught that maintaining the purity of the justification doctrine contributes to the purity of the whole of Christendom, undivided and inseparable (WA 31.255, 5–8, cited in Mattes 2014:270). The Joint declaration on the doctrine of justification (2000) between the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation declares that:

the doctrine of justification ... is more than just one part of Christian doctrine. It stands in an essential relation to all truths of faith, which are to be seen as internally related to each other. (p. 16)

Some scholars believe that this statement is not radical enough in Lutheran terms, that is, it does not make justification by faith *the doctrine by which the church stands or falls*. On the other hand, the Bible presents the economy of salvation in many different terms, and forensic justification, if emphasised too much, does not reflect the complete biblical standpoint on salvation.

The legacy of *sola fide* today

There is no doubt that Luther's teaching on justification by faith only, rediscovered in the biblical imagery of salvation, has become the most influential *meta-doctrine* of the reformer's legacy. It has given life to the Reformation movement and become the strongest impetus in the midst of fierce ecclesiastical and theological struggles. Mystical union with Christ through justifying faith is explained in Luther as nothing short of a miracle of God:

For it is faith in Christ that makes me live in him, and move in him, and act in him, in the same way as a healing ointment acts upon a sick body; and I am hereby not only made one flesh and one body with Christ, but have an all-intimate, ineffable, exchanging of my sin for his righteousness. (Luther 1826, on Ps 9:14)

Luther says that justification by faith is one of these doctrines we think we learned long ago. For him, this doctrine will keep the church united, pure and free from decay. For this reason, we cannot claim we already know what it means to be justified through God's grace and not by works. Luther (1965b) was certain that:

we can never learn this truth completely or brag that we understand it fully. *Learning this truth is an art*. We will always remain students of it, and it will always be our teacher. (p. 36)

First, the legacy of *sola fide* is that it is not just an intellectual philosophical-theological doctrine, but a form of experience lived artistically and beautifully. It is a constant inspiration to live according to grace and love. One of Luther's favourite books in the Bible was the book of Psalms, because it presents the spiritual beauty of a blend of joy and pain, lament and praise that characterises theology paradoxically built on faith as art and not only as definable theological reality. Faith makes us beautiful and holistic human beings willing to suffer, love, practice piety and serve indiscriminately. Faith prompts us to worship the truth, beauty and goodness of the almighty Creator. Faith is the result of this beautiful living encounter that leads to genuine piety, culminating in love, and eclipsing a scientific and theological comprehension of the biblical revelation that all too often ends up in 'bibliolatry' and theological isolationism. Justification by faith is therefore a *holistic meta-doctrine*. It gives meaning to all Christian theory and practice only if it is properly understood.

Second, the legacy of *sola fide* prompts us to think about the role and power of faith today in our struggles for justice against any form of discrimination in the Christian church or in society, no matter how much it is supported by policies and bylaws. The structural edifice of the church, as Luther correctly noticed, might sometimes smother the living Christ-like experience of faith that leads to true piety. Worshiping the organisation instead of the living God leads to endless frustrations and difficulties in expressing the riches of the spiritual life. Life should be a vehicle for glorifying God, for Lutheran spirituality teaches us that all aspects of life are subject to the spiritual dimension (Lindberg 2014:415). One of these aspects is the individual and collective cry for justice,

equality, and a non-discriminatory approach to inclusivity that promotes the beauty of embrace, peace, flourishing and well-being. This goal can be achieved *only* by faith. Luther recognised this: 'People must first have righteous principles, and then they will not fail to perform virtuous actions' (BrainyQuote 2017a). The first righteous principle is always *faith*. Therefore, without true faith there is no justice. The living and justifying faith primarily defends the interests of the living God, and these scriptural interests almost all the time coincide with the interests of the vulnerable, oppressed and disadvantaged. The battle continues in the 21st century and we do not know where it is leading us. We cannot predict the future, or to what extent our battle for faith and justice will have salvific and moral significance for the future generations mesmerised by technology or paralysed by indifference. Trusting God is essential for extolling these fundamental values of what it means to be human and transmitting them to the next generation. Let us boldly take the first step now. Another Martin Luther, this time Martin Luther King Jr., taught us about the nature of justice: 'Every man must decide whether he will walk in the light of creative altruism or in the darkness of destructive selfishness' (BrainyQuote 2017b). And then he reminded us how to get there: 'Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase' (BrainyQuote 2017c).

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships which may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

References

- Althaus, P., 1966, *The theology of Martin Luther*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN.
- Bayer, O., 2008, *Martin Luther's theology: A contemporary interpretation*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Bell, T., 2014, 'Roman Catholic Luther research in the twentieth century: From rejection to rehabilitation', in R. Kolb, I. Dingel & L. Batka (eds.), *The Oxford handbook of Martin Luther's theology*, pp. 584–597, Oxford University Press, Oxford. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199604708.013.007>
- BrainyQuote.com, 2017a, viewed 17 August 2017, from <https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/m/martinluth151426.html>
- BrainyQuote.com, 2017b, viewed 17 August 2017, from <https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/m/martinluth132188.html>
- BrainyQuote.com, 2017c, viewed 17 August 2017, from <https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/m/martinluth105087.html>
- Chester, S.J., 2017, *Reading Paul with the reformers: reconciling old and new perspectives*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Hendrix, S.H., 2015, *Martin Luther: Visionary reformer*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT.
- Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, 2000, *The Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI.
- Joint Lutheran/Roman Catholic Study Commission, 1983, *Martin Luther: Witness to Jesus Christ*, viewed 13 Sept 2017, from http://www.prounione.urbe.it/dia-int/l-rc/doc/e_l-rc_luther.html
- Kasper, W., 2016, *Martin Luther: An Ecumenical Perspective*, Paulist Press, Mahwah, NJ.
- Kellerman, J.A. (transl.), 1999, 'The last written words of Luther', viewed 15 May 2017, from <https://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/luther/beggars.txt>
- Kolb, R., 2009, *Martin Luther: Confessor of the faith*, Christian Theology in Context, Oxford University Press, Oxford. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199208937.001.0001>
- Kolb, R., Dingel, I. & Batka, L. (eds.), 2014, *The Oxford handbook of Martin Luther's theology*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Kramm, H.H., 1947, *The theology of Martin Luther*, Clarke, London.
- Krey, P.D.W. & Krey, P.D.S., 2016, *The Catholic Luther: his early writings*, Paulist Press, Mahwah, NJ.
- Lindberg, C., 2014, 'Piety, prayer and worship in Luther's view of daily life', in R. Kolb, I. Dingel & L. Batka (eds.), *The Oxford handbook of Martin Luther's theology*, pp. 414–426, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Luther, M., 1519, *Sermon on two kinds of righteousness*, viewed 17 August 2017, from http://www.augsburgfortress.org/media/downloads/9781451462708_sample_chapter.pdf
- Luther, M., 1535, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians*, transl. T. Graebner, viewed 17 August 2017, from <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/1535Luther-galat.asp>
- Luther, M., [1519] 1826, *Martin Luther's complete commentary on the first twenty-two psalms*, transl. H. Cole, vol. 1, London, W. Simpkin & R. Marshall.
- Luther, M., 1965a, *Lectures on Galatians*, 5–6, Luther's Works vol. 27, American edn, ed. J. Pelikan & H.T. Lehmann, Fortress, Philadelphia, PA.
- Luther, M., 1965b, *Selected Psalms III*, Luther's Works, vol. 14, American edn, ed. J. Pelikan & H.T. Lehmann, Fortress, Philadelphia, PA.
- Luther, M., 1989, *Martin Luther's basic theological writings*, ed. T. Lull, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN.
- Luther, M., 2010, *Preface to the letter of St Paul to the Romans*, transl. A. Thornton OSB, Kindle edn, viewed 13 September 2017, from <https://www.amazon.com/Preface-Letter-St-Paul-Romans-ebook/dp/B003NX70UO>
- Mannermaa, T., 1989, *Der im Glauben gegenwärtige Christus*, Lutherisches Verlagshaus, Hanover.
- Mattes, M., 2014, 'Luther on justification as forensic and effective', in R. Kolb, I. Dingel & L. Batka (eds.), *The Oxford handbook of Martin Luther's theology*, pp. 264–273, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Report of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity, 2013, viewed 15 May 2017, from http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/lutheran-fed-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_2013_da1-conflitto-alla-comunione_en.html
- Saarinen, R., 2014, 'Justification by faith: The view of the Mannermaa School', in R. Kolb, I. Dingel & L. Batka (eds.), *The Oxford handbook of Martin Luther's theology*, pp. 254–263, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Stoddard, J.L., 1922, *Rebuilding a lost faith*, Kennedy, New York.
- Waters, G.P., 2016, 'By faith alone: Luther and the doctrine of justification', in R.C. Sproul & S.J. Nichols (eds.), *The Legacy of Luther*, pp. 123–140, Reformation Trust Publishing, Sanford, FL.