



# Salvation – Not for Sale



THE  
LUTHERAN  
WORLD  
FEDERATION



# SALVATION—NOT FOR SALE

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# INTRODUCTION

*Anne Burghardt*

This booklet is part of a small collection published by the Lutheran World Federation on the occasion of the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Reformation in 2017. “Salvation—Not For Sale” is one of the three sub-themes of the Anniversary’s main theme, “Liberated by God’s Grace.” The popular essays in this booklet were written by authors from all regions of the Lutheran World Federation; the ecumenical voice is here represented by a Roman Catholic theologian.

The essays included here question practices and theological concepts that could be described as attempts to commodify salvation. Endeavors to commodify salvation differ widely, ranging from prosperity gospel to attempts to “guarantee” salvation by following certain practices, rituals, etc. Today, one of the crucial aspects in many contexts is the intense pressure to respond to the requirements of a certain social or professional status in society. This leads to the questions from where human beings expect their salvation today and before which “institution” they feel the need to justify themselves.

The essays in this booklet address different topics, ranging from whether Luther’s search for a “gracious God” is still current today, to the issues related to prosperity gospel, identifying oneself with one’s work, expecting salvation from consuming etc. The list of the topics discussed in this volume is far from being exhaustive yet it hopefully offers some impulses for further discussions.





# HOW DO I FIND A GRACIOUS GOD?

*Bernd Oberdorfer*

## **PARADISE REDISCOVERED: LUTHER'S DISCOVERY OF THE FREE GIFT OF RIGHTEOUSNESS**

In 1545, the year before his death, Martin Luther returned to past events that had turned him into the Reformer that he had become. Reading his report, we can sense the strong emotions that continued to move him, even after thirty years had passed. He wrote how repeatedly he came across the term “God’s righteousness,” and how he “hated” it. He had thought that it meant the righteousness with which God judged and punished. Luther became a monk because he took God’s commandments particularly seriously, which meant that he felt that he could never do everything right for God. Despite all his efforts, he continued to feel like a sinner and feared God’s wrath. He saw Christ not as a savior but a severe judge, who convicted him for good reason. However, soon he came to understand the phrase “God’s righteousness” in an entirely new way, namely, as the righteousness that God grants us, although we do not deserve it, the righteousness that God allows us to share in freely, i.e., by grace alone and without us having to do anything for it. “I had the feeling,” he would write later, “that I was born again and entered into paradise through opened doors.”<sup>1</sup> This joyous experience is the very core of Luther’s theology, and would become the driving impulse for the entire Reformation. Luther’s desperate question, How can I find a gracious God?—what can and must I do for my salvation?—was answered with the promise of redemption: We cannot and do not have to do anything for our salvation as God has already given us everything that we need in Christ. Christ took the deadly consequences of our sin upon himself on the cross so that we no longer need to bear it ourselves, and grants us new

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<sup>1</sup> WA 54,186.

life. Luther used the image of an unequal marriage to illustrate this: A rich man marries a poor, indebted woman and does not only take on her debt but allows her to have a share in his entire wealth.

## **SALVATION FOR SALE? LUTHER'S CRITIQUE OF THE SALE OF INDULGENCES**

It is no wonder that Luther's conflict with the church of his time was ignited by the practice of indulgences which brought economic thinking into the realm of faith. It was of course (at least theoretically) plain to see that it was not salvation itself that was "for sale" with the indulgences. They only provided believers, whose sins had already been forgiven through their confession, with the opportunity to purchase "letters of indulgence" as a means of reducing the amount of time they would have to spend being cleansed of sin in purgatory. It was also emphasized that God would only reward this payment by grace. Nevertheless this doctrine allowed it to appear as if it were the path to salvation itself that was on sale. Moreover, it created the impression that the church could arbitrarily place the gift of salvation through Christ on the market. Luther protested against this on 31 October 1517 with his Ninety-Five Theses, in which he stated that, with his call to repentance, Christ did not mean a particular church ritual but, rather, an attitude that should permeate every Christian's life. The church, Luther added, did not have the right to intervene in how believers fared after death. It would, furthermore, contradict God's goodness, if the church were only to pass on part of God's gifts of grace to its flock if they were to pay. God grants salvation completely and unconditionally. Luther also criticized that the sale of indulgences was being used to finance St Peter's Basilica, and thought the pope should have used his own fortune instead.

The Ninety-Five Theses demonstrate how the theological understanding of freely granted righteousness became, for Luther, a standard to gauge and position church doctrine and practice. Luther further developed and defined this understanding in the course of subsequent disputes. This would lead to what is now described as the Reformation doctrine of "justification by faith alone," an outline of which will be presented in the following.

## **JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH ALONE**

Already medieval theology shared the conviction that we cannot actually earn our own salvation. It, too, regarded salvation as a gift of grace. The idea that God expected a least an initial step on our part was, however,

popular during Luther's lifetime. If we did the little that was in our own meager power, the idea went, God, in God's pure grace, would reward us with something infinitely greater, namely eternal salvation. This may sound very good at first. The Reformers recognized, however, that we ultimately turn our gaze inward with a view to our own abilities. The question then remains, Have I done enough? Have I truly done the little that God expects of me? It then becomes unclear as to whether God will really reward us. Or it is just the other way around: We gaze inward and believe ourselves to be leading good religious and moral lives and conclude that we have done enough. Proud of ourselves, we expect that God will reward us with eternal life because we have deserved it. This inward looking can consequently lead either to desperation or to pride, desperation in the sense of not even living up to God's modest expectations, or pride in having fulfilled them. This pride, however, can give way to desperation at any time, whenever doubts arise, about whether we have actually deserved our salvation.

When people look only at themselves it results in this vacillation between pride and desperation. For Luther the way out of this hopeless situation was to turn one's gaze from oneself to look solely toward God. God is not waiting for us to approach God; God does not link our salvation to the condition that we first do something to achieve it. "Justification by faith alone" means not trusting in our own abilities but solely in God. Faith means trusting that God has already done all that is necessary for our salvation when Christ took everything upon himself that we ourselves have to answer for.

The reason why God views us as righteous does not lie within ourselves. Righteousness "before God" derives entirely "from God." The Reformers expressed this with the expression *iustitia externa*, i.e., our righteousness comes from outside of us, or *iustitia aliena*, "alien righteousness." This does not come thanks to a quality or achievement that we find within ourselves, but instead by God imputing Christ's righteousness to us. This means that God, as it were, "views" Christ "into us." When God looks at us, God sees Christ in us, or, more specifically, God sees the sinless Christ in us sinners. With his "creative" vision, God "views" the salvation into us that Christ has won for us.

Distinctions were made later between an "effective" and an "imputative" justification, and between "making" people righteous and "speaking" them righteous. It was often claimed that only "speaking" people righteous was appropriate for the Lutheran understanding of justification. This could be meant either positively or critically. On the positive side, one could say that "alien righteousness," according to Lutheran doctrine, could never truly become a quality of one's own, never a property of people themselves. We "are" righteous only in the eyes of God, and we "experience" ourselves to be

righteous only by allowing ourselves to be spoken so by God's Word and by trusting in this Word. The criticism was lodged, however, that nothing in fact happened when people are spoken righteous, as they are not changed in the process. Is being spoken righteous not then in fact ineffective?

The Reformers would have thought this distinction to be artificial and inappropriate. They were indeed convinced that God's Word was always creative. When God "speaks" someone righteous, God also "makes" them righteous. If we trust and believe in God's Word, we can be assured that we are also judged to be righteous by God. This assurance that God's judgment is valid and true without any limitations is, at its core, what the Reformers ultimately understood as "faith." It was not mere chance that Luther, in his Small Catechism, translated the word "amen" as: "This is most certainly true."

The Reformers, however, also maintained that the gift of righteousness can never be established objectively. We cannot "prove" that we are righteous. That is and remains an act of faith that cannot simply be translated into demonstrable knowledge. This applies even more with regard to others: There are no empirical traits that allow us to know, without a doubt, whether someone is in a state of grace—or not.

This is indeed the meaning of the famous Lutheran phrase *simul iustus et peccator*, "simultaneously just and sinner." While this is often understood as if justification does not change anything in our status as sinners, it is not meant that way. It is in fact meant to express that we are only righteous when we look at ourselves, as it were, through God's eyes. We are truly and fully righteous in God's eyes. If we look directly at ourselves, however, we will recognize that we are sinners and that we do not live our lives in accordance with our Creator's will. The phrase makes it again clear that our salvation comes entirely thanks to God; justification does not give us possession of anything either that we could bring before God, if need be. Salvation is and remains unearned.

## JUSTIFICATION AND ETHICS

Luther's doctrine of justification by faith alone was, from the very beginning, vulnerable to the critique that it meant that human action does not matter. If God grants us salvation "for free," if we cannot and need not do anything for it, do we not lose an important reason to do good and avoid evil? Why should we help our neighbor if we no longer need to fear God's wrath? From the early days of the Reformation, Luther grappled with this objection and explained the significance of "good works." He maintained without reservation, however, that we cannot earn salvation through our

actions. This does not make “good works” unnecessary or unimportant, though. On the contrary, they are important, but they are not a precondition but a consequence of salvation.

Luther expanded on this particularly eloquently in his writing “On the Freedom of a Christian.” Because God has already given us everything we need for our eternal salvation through Christ and in Christ, we are freed from worrying about ourselves. We no longer need to work hard to secure our own lives and to grab ahold of what we think we need to this end. Fear is the strongest reason for the greed in which the Apostle Paul already recognized the nature of sin (cf. Rom 7). Relieved of this fear for our own well-being, we can be there selflessly for others and look out for their well-being instead. Luther explained that it was precisely because we were free in Christ that we could act in service to others. And because we do this now freely, we no longer understand the commandments as being an external compulsion; we do them gladly and of our own accord. Justification is therefore the source of our love for our neighbors. We essentially pass on the joy to our neighbors that we receive by being accepted by God in Christ. Luther was thus able to say that we ourselves become “Christ” to our neighbors.<sup>2</sup>

Luther was enough of a realist to see that this does not always work out. He often spoke of our earthly lives being a series of new beginnings. We are often our own worst enemies and need to come to terms with a still incomplete world. Selflessness must therefore be relearned time and again. Luther was even able to derive a good reason for asceticism from this. He no longer, however, meant the particular self-denial of monks, but also and especially the “every-day service,” i.e., the dutiful fulfillment of tasks in our social lives, as when parents bring up their children, farmers till their fields, or public servants carry out their various duties. In doing so, they do not focus on their own interests but use their energies for others. The Lutheran work ethic is thus an expression of fulfilled selflessness and love for one’s neighbor put into practice.

This does, however, involve one particular danger: If the “freedom of a Christian” is translated into the selfless fulfillment of duties, it can also get lost in that context. The “freedom from ...” threatens to be suffocated by the “freedom to ...” Justification must not be reduced to a mere initial step toward action (freed only to serve) as the liberating gospel could then again become a restrictive law.

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<sup>2</sup> WA 7,35.

## **CHURCH DIVIDING NO MORE? THE JOINT DECLARATION ON THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION**

In the sixteenth century, justification by faith alone marked a distinction between the Reformation doctrine and that of the Roman Catholic Church. While religious dialogue did lead to some degree of rapprochement (e.g., Regensburg in 1541), Lutherans would continue to perceive Catholics as seeking justification through works. At the Council of Trent, the Roman Catholic Church, for its part, expressly rejected the doctrine of justification by faith alone. This appeared to them to deny human responsibility. The two positions thus distinguished themselves from one another. The twentieth century would, however, see a great variety of new experiences of ecumenical community. This has cast doubt on the continuation of the old state of mutual rejection and led to new dialogues. One question that arose in the process was whether the mutual doctrinal condemnations of the Reformation era were really based on a proper understanding of the other side, or whether positions were in fact being rejected that they did not even hold. Another question was whether essentially the same objectives were perhaps being pursued, but using different manners of thinking, speaking and nuance. Following several decades of intensive research and dialogue, the Lutheran World Federation and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity signed the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification in Augsburg in 1999. While the declaration does not pretend that there do not continue to be serious differences between the confessions in their understanding of justification, it attests to a consensus in basic truths on the doctrine of justification, which, in turn, permits us to view any differences as no longer posing a strict division between the churches. Even the Roman Catholic Church now emphasizes that nobody can “earn” salvation, while Lutherans are clear about faith becoming palpable and manifesting itself through how we live our lives. This allows for a common description of the basic fundamentals of the process of justification.

### **JUSTIFICATION TODAY**

It has been asked, time and again, whether the Lutheran doctrine of justification can still have meaning for us today. Unlike the sixteenth century, not many people today live their lives in fear of God’s severe and final judgment. The question of God’s grace, which Luther grappled with so extensively, has often lost its ability to torment us, or does not even come up in the first place. The idea that we are held accountable by God and therefore need to confess our failure, and that we can only place our

hopes in God's unfounded forgiveness, now appears to many to be a dark shadow that darkens our lives and prevents us from having a basic positive attitude. Viewed from this perspective, it is that type of pessimism that itself leads to the dire situation and the need for Christ as a redeemer in the first place, while what humanity actually needs is to be saved from the oppressive idea that it requires salvation. Many Christians even question whether God's creation is actually given enough appreciation when human sinfulness is emphasized so strongly. Others ask critically whether Luther's rejection of active human participation in their salvation does not in fact disregard human freedom, the very freedom, however, in which human dignity is itself rooted. Neither Luther's questions nor his answers would thus appear to remain applicable to us today.

But people of course still live in fear for themselves, even today. They yearn to be accepted unconditionally just as they are confronted by demands and fear not being able to meet them. They experience pressure, both in their work and in their domestic and family lives, and although they try hard and do everything they can, they are still often left with the feeling of not having met expectations. Other people sense that their gifts and abilities are not recognized or put to proper use when they cannot find work or are seen by society as "unproductive" due to their age, illness, or weakness. Still others suffer as poverty robs them of the opportunity to participate actively in society or to train their skills to put to use there. And there are those who feel marginalized due to their ethnic background, their gender, or their lifestyle. The yearning to be accepted and dignified as a person is in no way less strong than it was in Luther's times. This applies to guilt as well. People today also live with a sense of guilt, are ashamed of their behavior and are plagued by self-chastisement. They know that they cannot undo what is done or make it better, and yearn for forgiveness and a new beginning, even as they know that they have not deserved it.

One often hears that "justification by faith alone" focuses too strongly on the negative experience of failure and guilt, is too one-sided, and no longer meshes with the way modern people feel about life. Even Christians today can feel more open than in earlier times to a yearning for earthly happiness, and recognize in it a reflection of eternal salvation. This needs not, however, contradict justification by faith alone. The experience of happiness also includes the understanding that success and fulfillment remain beyond our control, despite all of our efforts, and thus remain an unearned gift, giving us reason for joyous thanks.

The doctrine of justification by faith alone can thus continue to have a meaning for us today that liberates us, provides us relief and gives us courage. The doctrine can raise our awareness for how God affirms us unconditionally. God has already accepted us before we can do anything

for it. God respects us even when we are not able to find any respect for ourselves. God offers dignity even when people degrade and despise others. God opens up new horizons when situations seem hopeless. God frees us to take new action when we are otherwise paralyzed. “By faith alone” can mean that this affirmation, this acceptance, this dignity, this encouragement, this new hope—all of this is a gift. And like every true gift, it is voluntary, beyond our control, and cannot be coerced or sold. “By faith alone” is a message that remains important today: Salvation, a new and authentic life in faith is “not for sale,” we do not need continually to recalculate whether we have enough of our own “capital” to purchase it.

Filled with fear, Luther asked, How can I find a gracious God? And he wrestled long and hard with the question. The answer that ultimately emerged is simple and continues to hold great significance today: We do not need to find this God—we already have this God.

## QUESTIONS

*What does it mean to you, to be “justified by faith alone”? How does this impact your understanding of life?*

*Where do you experience “gifts of grace” in your life?*

*How do you see the role of “good works”?*

*What would you describe as your “everyday worship”?*



# HUMAN WILL—FREE OR ENSLAVED?

*Jaan Lahe*

For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do (Rom 7: 18-19).

Discussions on free will, on the freedom of a human being to choose and to decide, and on the question to what extent human beings are able, of their own volition, to shape their own lives have lasted for as long as the human being has reflected on the meaning and purpose of life and its possibilities. The freedom of the will has been a subject of debate in the history of philosophy as well as of theology and, to an even greater extent, in the history of religion.

## **THE BONDAGE OF DESTINY**

Already the Greeks believed that there is a force that even the immortal gods had to obey, namely destiny. Faith in the power of destiny deepened during the Hellenistic period (4-1 BC). During the period of the Roman Empire (1-5 AD) destiny or inevitability (Greek: *ananke*, *heimarmene*) became a “cosmic power” governing the entire universe. It was commonly held that every person’s life was predetermined from birth until death by destiny and governed by seven planets or seven “governors,” whose government or disposition was called Fate or Destiny. According to Origen (ca. 185-253/254) and Augustine (354-430) these planets were feared by both Christians and heathens. Astrology, which according to various sociological studies remains very popular among many people, is also based on the belief that we are governed by celestial objects. It has become detached

from its original attachment to religion (planets were considered to be divine or demonic beings) or, at least, modern mass culture has forgotten the religious roots of astrology.

In philosophical terms, the faith in destiny was founded by the Stoics, according to whom destiny or fate represents a general law determining the world, a fact which a wise person would not ignore. The perception of a human being as a puppet in the hands of almighty destiny is widespread, even beyond Antiquity. The Persian mathematician, astronomer, philosopher and poet Omar Khayyám (1048–1131) got to the heart of the matter by equating fate with infinite time:

We men are puppets, whose steps God ordains;  
The time is short in which we dally there,  
Then in death's casket one by one we fall,  
The game is played and earth must cover all.<sup>1</sup>

The poet suggests that the rotating firmament which is governed by the planets is a visible manifestation of destiny or infinite time. Time creates beings, including human beings, gives them the opportunity for a brief moment to appear as marionettes on the stage of the “great world theatre,” and brings them back to the dust they were made of. Thereafter time would use the very same matter to create new beings and it would repeat itself time and again, forever.

It is not easy to live with the knowledge that one cannot change anything. Khayyám's reaction to the realization that everything is predestined is a hedonistic one: drink wine and enjoy the company of your beloved one. The Epic of Gilgamesh, an epic poem from ancient Mesopotamia, “Harper's Song” (or Song of the Harper) from Ancient Egypt, several Greek and Roman poets and the unknown author of the Book of Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament from the Hellenistic era—they all express a similar reaction. However, this has never been a satisfactory solution for profound thinkers. Ever since Antiquity there have been attempts to refute the belief in predestination by using rational arguments. Carneades (214/3–129/8 BC), an Academic skeptic (so called because this was the type of skepticism taught in Plato's Academy in Athens), proved astrology's arguments to be wrong by stating that the fate of twins born under the same constellation of planets can be different, whereas two people having at their birth a different constellation of planets may share the same fate (e.g., in the case of

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<sup>1</sup> *The Ruba'iyat of Omar Khayam*, trans. H.M. Cadell (London, New York: John Lane The Bodley Head, 1899), at [www.omarkhayyamederland.com/vertalingen/engels/cadell/index.html](http://www.omarkhayyamederland.com/vertalingen/engels/cadell/index.html)

a shipwreck). The ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus (ca. 342–270 BC) argued that the basis of free will lies in the freedom of atoms falling into an empty space—they do not fall in a straight course as previously believed, but deviate from it. According to Epicurus, the bearer of the human will, the soul, consists of atoms too. This means that human beings are free to make their own decisions.

Not everyone can be convinced by rational arguments; hence their eyes will be turned to supernatural forces in the quest to find a remedy against fate. Papyrus manuscripts dating back to the Roman Empire contain magic spells to break the power of the fate. Some gods were also believed to be able to save from the chains of fate. One of these gods was the Egyptian goddess Isis, who was popular in the Greco–Roman world, and who promised her devotees liberation from the power of fate and a prosperous afterlife. Many Christian teachers of the first centuries believed that Baptism can set a person free from the power of fate—that anyone who is baptized belongs to Christ (Christ owns them) and not to fate (fate no longer owns them), and the planets do not have any impact on them. However, this faith has not proved to be a satisfactory solution to many Christian thinkers who have tried to find an answer to the question about freedom of the will.

## **FREE WILL?**

Paul confesses that “I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do” (Rom 7:19) (the “I” here does not mean specifically Paul, but may refer to the humankind in general) and explains it by the fact that sin rules over human beings. The “sin” Paul talks about has many similarities with the “fate” of the Greeks and Romans. He describes it as a “cosmic force” that has ruled humankind since Adam (e.g., Rom 5:12ff.). A few centuries later, it was adopted in a similar way by the church father Augustine, who shared Paul’s conviction that only God’s grace can save us from sin. Almost 1000 years later, the Reformer Martin Luther (1483–1546) drew the same conclusion as Augustine. His discussions with the humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam, (1466 or 1469–1536) like Augustine’s with the British-born ascetic moralist Pelagius (ca. 390–418), focused on the role that human beings will play in the process of salvation. Augustine’s and Luther’s views largely coincide in this matter; human will cannot save a human being and even the human ability to believe, considered to be the only way to salvation, is a gift of God and therefore, out of the reach of human will. According to Luther, human will is enslaved by sin, and when the Augsburg Confession of 1530 touches upon the issue of free will, it says that human will “has some freedom for producing civil righteousness and for choosing things

subject to reason.”<sup>2</sup> As a witness to this teaching, Book III of Augustine’s *Hypognosticon* is quoted here.

We confess that all human beings have a free will that possesses the judgment of reason. It does not enable them, without God, to being—much less complete—anything that pertains to God, but only to perform the good or evil deeds of this life. By “good deeds” I mean those that arise from the good in nature, that is, the will to labor in the field, to eat and drink, to have a friend, to wear clothes, to build a house, to marry, to raise cattle, to learn various useful skills, or to do whatever good pertains to this life.<sup>3</sup>

Whereas the Reformers were more occupied with thinking about freedom of the will and predestination regarding the relations between God and human beings, the question about free will in relation to the way in which human beings act and decide in their everyday life has been extensively discussed by psychologists and neurologists. For example, Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), the father of psychoanalysis, claimed that the behavior of human beings and their decisions are not free and thus free will exists in the imagination only. In reality, a human being’s behavior and decisions are controlled by the part of the human psyche that Freud describes as “the unconscious” (German: *das Unbewusste*). In this layer of the human mind, according to Freud, lie sexual desires and traumatic childhood experiences, repressed by our consciousness, that affect day to day human behavior. In behaviorist psychology there is little scope for free will as it states that human behavior can be analyzed only on the basis of objectively measurable mental processes, which, according to behaviorists, do not include free will. However, some psychologists are convinced that the will as many other mental functions can be developed. They argue that this is why a human being is never determined always to behave in the same situation in one and the same way—they have the freedom of choice. No matter how the freedom of will is conceptualized, from the perspective of psychology the will is not something supernatural (“divine origin in the human being”), but a mental function psychophysically based on the activity of the frontal lobe and on the functional connections between the speech centers and the frontal lobe of the brain. As such the will is subject to experimental research that has led to remarkable results. The pioneering American scientist Benjamin Libet (1916–2007) has researched the activity of the

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<sup>2</sup> “The Augsburg Confession—Latin Text—Article XVIII: Free Will,” in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (eds), *The Book of Concord. The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2000), 51.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

brain cortex during volitional acts and concluded that the changes in the cortex that indicate the start of a volitional act occur an instant before the human being acknowledges their volitional act. Hence, the will precedes consciousness (being conscious) of the volitional act, meaning that the brain determines volitional acts and only a little later it becomes conscious of the volitional decision. The results of Libet's research seem to provide evidence against freedom of the will, but one should not forget that the experiments concentrated only on the most basic volitional decisions (i.e., to move the hand or leg). Are these results transferable to more complex decisions that influence our whole existence such as the choice of profession or life partner?

We see today an ever increasing demand for and popularity of so-called self-help books that emphasize the boundlessness of human will—if you truly want something and convince yourself of it, you can achieve wealth and fame; find an ideal life partner, your dream job etc. These books attribute to human will almost supernatural powers that can bring about the fulfillment of every human desire (provided that the person concerned is committed to influence their own will)—a concept where one can almost recognize the pattern of magical thinking.

## **BETWEEN FREEDOM AND PREDESTINATION**

Nonetheless, there are a great number of things in this world that do not depend on us nor on our will, and we have to accept them as a given. We do not choose the moment we are born and even the healthiest lifestyle and greatest cautiousness does not allow us to choose the moment and the way of dying. In his book, *Immortality. The Quest to Live Forever and How it Drives Civilization*,<sup>4</sup> Stephen Cave demonstrates that throughout history, humankind has constantly been devising strategies to remove death from the picture, but none of these strategies seem to have fulfilled this dream. Similarly, we are not able to choose our parents, our place of birth, nor the environment that we are born into. At the same time, these factors have the strongest impact on the shaping of our personalities and our volitional decisions.

Today we know that the factors impacting the shaping of our individual personalities do not start with the home and environment, but are already present at the moment of conception. We inherit from our biological ancestors the genes that influence our mental, psychological and physical health

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<sup>4</sup> Stephen Cave, *Immortality. The The Quest to Live Forever and How it Drives Civilization* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2012).

as well as the development of our characters. It is probably impossible to define the exact proportion of the role that our genetic constitution plays vis à vis the environment and education. Depending on the prevailing ideological mindset, attitudes and values in society the one or other may be more strongly emphasized. This then actually leads to the greater impact of either genetic constitution or environment and education on the human being in the particular context as it influences the concepts of anthropology, education, training, etc. Thus the role of the prevailing ideas in a particular society may never be underestimated in the discussion about free will and predestination. This is true even there where the ideas and values do not reflect the mainstream of society but a subculture. A person can be considered as a human being only in relationship to fellow human beings. Whether willing or not, being in an “I and Thou” relationship (Martin Buber, 1878–1965) obliges us to take into consideration the other “I-s” and “Thou-s” since otherwise there could not be any coexistence. Even choosing the life of a hermit and severing all ties with other people would not set us free of our personality that is shaped by earlier relationships with other people. The hermit would take along memories from the life before and ideas acquired in a previous environment. Even in a state of mind achieved through certain mental techniques (i.e., meditation, fasting, prayer) where a person experiences complete liberation, these ideas may reemerge at a certain point. Might these be the demons that according to early Christian tradition attacked the ascetics in the desert?

In today’s globalized and commercialized world, we are coactors in larger economic schemes that we are often not even aware of. The notion of collective sin pertinently describes the way in which we are caught into the global network of unjust structures without often actually realizing it. We ourselves consider our decisions to buy, sell and consume to be made freely whereas they are actually frequently shaped by clever commercial manipulations and standards set by companies who try to sell their products and by groups who set the standards for living.

Unfreedom which is not perceived as such is most dangerous, and therefore critical thinking is crucial in order to increase our actual freedom of choice there where it is possible, for instance in regard to our consumer habits, the environment, etc. And, indeed, almost all of us, even if to different degrees, do have the possibility to choose between different options in our everyday lives. And these decisions can change the world we live in. Without this option to choose it would also be rather cynical to make human beings morally and legally responsible for the consequences of their volitional decisions, i.e., their actions.

We can therefore conclude that while human beings have free will with regard to their everyday decisions the scope seems to be rather more

limited than was previously assumed. In view of our relationship to God, Luther's conviction that it is not our conduct or performance, but God's grace that moves God to save us, is still valid. We are not saved by God's grace plus our good works or anything we do. We cannot so to speak "buy our way to heaven."<sup>5</sup> We are saved by God's grace alone.

## QUESTIONS

*Why is the question about the existence of the freedom of the will important for us? What depends on the answer to this question? Which impact does it have on our lives?*

*Why is the question about the freedom of the will so complicated that until now different thinkers have not been able to agree on this? Is there a chance that this might change one day?*

*Does the existence or non-existence of the freedom of the will have an impact on the relationship between human beings and God and if yes, then how?*

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<sup>5</sup> See also Luther's argumentation in his famous Ninety-Five Theses, e. g., thesis 27 in regard to buying the indulgences: "They preach only human doctrines who say that as soon as the money clinks into the money chest, the soul flies out of purgatory": Martin Luther, "Ninety-Five Theses," in Helmut T. Lehmann (ed.), *Luther's Works*, vol. 31 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 27-28.





# GOD'S PROMISES AND HUMAN PROSPERITY

*Sarah Hinlicky Wilson*

America has made quite a number of significant contributions to world culture, for good and for ill, from cornflakes to modern democracy to the nuclear bomb. Fitting right into this legacy of ambiguously important contributions is the prosperity gospel. Though it has since gone viral around the planet, its origins are in America. Some historical background will make its theological claims a little easier to grasp—and to reject.

## **THE AMERICAN BACKGROUND**

Nineteenth-century America started out optimistic. It saw a chance to create a new Christian civilization in a continent considered to be “empty” without all the baggage of the bloody European past. No longer saddled with state churches, the “revival” became the new locus of Christian life: large public meetings dominated by powerful preaching and equally powerful emotions. At the same time, newly developing industry and the colonization of the West gave American Christians the sense of being a new Israel, establishing a righteous society, one that was getting bigger and better all the time. Success and victory were signs of God’s favor.

But it was not enough to conquer the earth and the passions of the body. There was a longing to conquer the realm of the spirit, indeed to say that spirit alone was real while the body and the earth were mere illusions. In this environment, marginally Christian movements emerged, such as Christian Science (a sect that denied the reality of the body and believed that all illness could be cured by pure mental effort), Transcendentalism (a Unitarian philosophy that believed in the inherent goodness of human beings as opposed to corrupt society), and New Thought (a form of pantheism that claimed people were divine and could

overcome all difficulties by right thinking). All of these believed in mind over matter. But by their account, mind and spirit were as mechanistic as body and machine: they operated according to immutable laws. Crack the code behind the spiritual laws, and you could tame everything else according to your desires.

The American Civil War (1861–1865), and subsequent military conflicts at home and abroad, put a dent in American optimism but did not squash it completely. As long as the economic system rewarded those who worked hard, optimism kept a firm hold on American culture. Those who failed to thrive did not disprove the promise of success: they only proved that they had failed to live by its laws. And that is where Essek William Kenyon came in.

## **E. W. KENYON AND THE “WORD OF FAITH”**

Kenyon was well acquainted with New Thought and other forms of metaphysical mastery popular in the nineteenth century. His only objection to them was that they were not tied closely enough to the Christian faith. So he simply borrowed their reasoning and added some extra Jesus. For example, Kenyon argued that Jesus’ death overcame all negative things in this life, including poverty and sickness. Thus, “faith” means taking advantage of the new spiritual law of victory in Christ. You could not just hope for something from God; you could not just **ask** for something from God; no, you had to name it and then you had to claim it—and, as a result, it would be so. God was guaranteed to give it to you. That was real faith.

A corollary of Kenyon’s teaching was that physical signs are deceitful, distractions from Satan to lead you astray. Thus, true believers suffering from illness simply assert their victory over illness, and from then on disregard the symptoms, which are temptations, not truth. True believers confess that they will be rich, and in due course they will indeed be rich. In fact, according to Kenyon, true believers avoid even mentioning negative things, because talking about bad things might make them come true. Done right, though, “the word of faith” always gives you what you want—and what you want is, of course, good. Obviously, God does not want anybody to be sick or poor. So name your health, claim your wealth, and God will automatically grant it to you. If you do not get what you want, the problem is on your end, not God’s. You probably did not believe hard enough.

Kenyon did not become a widespread influence in his own time. He operated at the margins of church life; many people have mistakenly thought him to be a Pentecostal, though he was not. It was not until the second half of the twentieth century that Kenyon was rediscovered by another American evangelist, Kenneth Hagin, who started popularizing Kenyon’s thought through preaching tours and TV programs. Matching a

new burst of postwar optimism, other evangelists picked up on his message and started preaching their own variations on the theme of prosperity.

## **VARIATIONS ON THE PROSPERITY THEME**

By and large, non-denominational preachers have promoted the “word of faith” movement, with some Evangelical and Pentecostal participants. But because prosperity has always worked through networks of influence rather than formally structured denominations, it has reached every corner of the church and every nation of the world. Members of churches that formally renounce prosperity will read books or listen to radio programs by prosperity preachers without recognizing the conflict in the teaching. There are even Roman Catholic variations on the theme, as in the El Shaddai movement in the Philippines. Prosperity earns the unfortunate honor of being the most widespread and successful heresy of the twenty-first century.

There is much to criticize about the prosperity gospel, but one word of caution must be spoken. Prosperity has a very different impact depending on where it is preached. It is obviously repulsive when uttered by rich American preachers who extract life savings from naïve believers and then use the proceeds to buy a \$23000 toilet seat (as evangelist Joyce Meyer did). It is positively criminal when such preachers dissuade parents from giving their sick children the medicine necessary for survival, leading to an early and completely preventable death—as has happened far too often.

But prosperity is a popular message also in places that are not at all prosperous. It has a different texture when it is preached by and to people who are destitute, starving and denied access to any medical care at all. In such situations, there is often a fine line between legitimate divine healing and illegitimate promises of believer-induced healing. Likewise, the message of prosperity can have the effect of pulling a marginalized community together to support each other in creating the stable economic and social relationships that allow the entire group to rise out of its poverty. Finally, most people who preach and practice the prosperity gospel are not even aware of it as a distinct Christian movement with serious problems: it is simply the Christian faith as they have heard it and continue to proclaim it. Discerning critics need to separate out the real flaws from the real benefits that have come to people through such preaching.

## **A TRINITARIAN CRITIQUE OF PROSPERITY**

Here we will begin with a Trinitarian approach to countering the claims of the prosperity gospel. As you can see at the origins of Kenyon’s teaching,

there is a very faulty understanding of “spirit” at work. “Spirit” is made to be the enemy and the opposite of “matter,” which is low, misleading and unimportant. Such attitudes are very ancient; Christians have been fighting them in various forms since the earliest days of the church, whether in the form of Neo-Platonism or Gnosticism or Manichaeism. By contrast, in the Nicene Creed we profess our faith in “the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life.” This same Spirit hovered over the waters at creation and called matter, earth, and living creatures into being (Gen1:2). This same Spirit raised up the crucified body of Jesus to new life (Rom 8:11): risen, transformed, but still a body, still matter, still something that could eat and drink and speak and even bear wounds. To be spiritual is not to be an enemy of the material.

And that therefore also means that we who live by the Spirit are called to be stewards of the material, not exploiters of it. The prosperity gospel proclaims infinite greed to be rewarded with infinite accumulation, for the material world is purely an object to be used. But the Holy Spirit created and sustained the world for the glory of God and for the flourishing of all, not for humans at the expense of the earth or for some people at the expense of others.

The mention of our crucified and risen Savior leads us to another aspect of prosperity’s false message. Prosperity preachers often assert that Christ already did all the suffering for us, thus believers should expect nothing but success and wholeness. This is an extreme misreading of the whole testimony of Scripture, both of whose Testaments witness to the reality of suffering in the lives of the faithful. The Book of Job is the most sustained biblical protest against the idea that those who suffer must be unrighteous—and equally against the idea that righteousness is a guarantee of happiness. Jesus was a shocking savior precisely because of his suffering on the cross, and his earliest disciples and apostles shared the good news about this savior at great personal cost, even death. Martyrdoms have followed the faithful in all ages—and the last century has seen more Christian martyrdoms than any other period—but we understand them as testimonies to the faithfulness, not the failure, of God. The Epistles also commend churches to be strong amidst persecution and trials, poverty and illness.

The most destructive thing the prosperity message does is convince people that, if they have not received the healing or wealth they have claimed, it is their fault. In such cases, there is no comfort for the bereaved: they can only assume that their loved ones failed and that is why the illness won. Prosperity preaching destroys the community: the wealthy are assumed to be the true believers while the poor must be doubters, so the strong are encouraged to cast off the weak in the name of holiness. Prosperity cannot endure the scandal of the cross. It cannot abide Jesus, the crucified savior of the world.

To reject the crucified Son is also to reject the Father who sent him. Wrong as it is, it is perfectly understandable: human beings have always raged against their weakness and dependence, their vulnerability to suffering and death. Much religion now and throughout history is simply magic, an attempt to figure out the secret laws of the universe and exploit them for our own gain. Prosperity is twenty-first-century Christian magic. It wants control. It does not want a God who is Lord over all, who may call us to suffering for the sake of the gospel, who cannot be explained or predicted or bribed. Prosperity wants a God who can be bought off with “faith” or with generous giving in hope of an even bigger return. But God is not for sale any more than salvation!

The Christian message does not take away the agony, frustration, or unanswered questions of human life. It does not promise victory or success now. Instead, it declares that “the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Rom 8:18). Jesus’ vindication came after his death on the cross, when he was raised from the dead by the Father: so shall it be for us. To be a Christian is to share in the death and resurrection of Christ, not to avoid death or to disdain the flesh that will be raised. In life and death and new life, the Father can be trusted to bring all things right.

## **A LAW-AND-GOSPEL CRITIQUE OF PROSPERITY**

What does the gospel promise? Not health, not wealth, not a successful career or a solid marriage or a just government or happiness. All of these things are good, and they have their place—but in the law. The holy law of God is what governs our this-worldly life, directs us toward justice, curbs our sin and reminds us of our constant need for God’s mercy and forgiveness to get us back on track. The law teaches us to make good use of the gifts of creation and community.

Here in the realm of the law, prosperity misleads by being a half-truth. It is true that sin can lead to suffering. But God hardly needs to punish sins directly in this life: they tend to be their own punishment. To be an idolater is to be enslaved to a mute, dead, unresponsive thing, instead of being in a life-giving relationship with the life-giving God. Likewise, as Jesus said on the night of his arrest, “all who take the sword will perish by the sword” (Mt 26:52): violence begets more violence. The Proverbs in particular warn that greed, abuse of the poor, laziness and general unrighteousness will have severe consequences. God’s law is against sin not least of all because it is destructive of people and the whole creation.

However, we are not allowed to reverse this logic. Bad things, suffering and disasters are not therefore always caused by sin. People tend to

assume that suffering is always a result of evildoing, as a punishment, but Jesus forbids us to make that leap. He clearly stated that those who died in the collapse of the tower of Siloam were no worse than anyone else, thus their death was not caused by their particular sins (Lk 13:4). Likewise, the man was born blind not because he sinned or because his parents sinned; Jesus cut off that interpretation entirely (Jn 9:3). Nor is abuse at the hands of other human beings due payment for sin: for Jesus the sinless one was handed over to death on the cross. Quite often it is righteousness, not unrighteousness, that leads to suffering. Thus the prosperity interpretation of suffering blasphemously distorts the law's good purpose of warning against evil deeds, and its interpretation of success ignores the wrongdoing that often leads to wealth.

But we still need to go one step further in our critique of the prosperity gospel. The gospel is neither the created gifts of God nor the law that protects them. And the gospel is not conditioned on our doing anything right, whether in obedience to God's law or mastery of supposed spiritual laws. The gospel is nothing other than God's self-giving for us and for our salvation, purely gracious, purely entirely on account of who God is—a friend of sinners and lover of enemies. As Martin Luther put it in his summary of the Creed in the Large Catechism:

in all three articles God himself has revealed and opened to us the most profound depths of his fatherly heart and his pure, unutterable love. For this very purpose he created us, so that he might redeem us and make us holy, and, moreover, having granted and bestowed upon us everything in heaven and on earth, he has also given us his Son and his Holy Spirit, through whom he brings us to himself.<sup>6</sup>

The gospel is God for us, with us and in us: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This is a gospel by which we can live in strength and die in hope. It sustains us through doubt, persecution, failure and suffering. It is a promise that does not mislead but fortifies and enlivens. Such is the testimony of Tsehay Tolessa, an Ethiopian Lutheran woman tortured and imprisoned for ten years under a violent regime on account of her faith:

God's hand is great; it reaches so far. It is there even where no friends can reach, no neighbors, no family. But He still comes in. In the midst of filth, He is there, in humiliation, in blood, in stench. Through everything He went along with me, so close by me. I felt His nearness the whole way.

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<sup>6</sup> Martin Luther, "The Large Catechism," in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (eds), *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 439.

With such a God, we are so rich that there is no need to chase after the false promises of prosperity!

## QUESTIONS

*All Christian believers ask God for blessings of all kinds, both physical and spiritual. What is the right way to ask? What is the right way to receive? What is the right way to respond when we do not receive what we ask for?*

*Think about how you and the people in your society and church respond to the rich and successful, and to the poor and struggling. Do these attitudes reflect Jesus' teaching and example?*

*Imagine how you might respond to another Christian who perceives God as a means to this-worldly success. How might you articulate the truth that the gospel is enough, that God is enough, even in the midst of struggle and suffering?*





# YOUR WILL BE DONE

*Chiropafadzo Moyo*

Prayer is not only a phenomenon of Christianity; it is also practiced in most other religions such as Islam, Judaism, African Traditional Religions and many more. The term generally refers to addressing a divinity for different purposes. Christians also use prayer as a means to communicate with God. According to the Christian faith, it is also one of the ways in which God communicates with human beings. For the purpose of this paper I shall confine my discussion to Christian prayer.

Prayer is meant to be intimate and to establish a reciprocal relationship between God and humankind, for we are commanded to love God with all our hearts. This means that prayer should come from the heart as we read in Deuteronomy 6:5, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” God commands us to pray. Prayer can be performed either verbally or non-verbally—for example through sacrifice<sup>1</sup> or dance. In Genesis 3, we read that God came down to walk on earth and command God’s creation. After they had sinned, Adam and Eve hid from God; they did not want to see or communicate with God. God took the initiative to continue to communicate with God’s creation as God wants to be and stay in communication with us.

An example of God’s direct communication with human beings is Abraham’s call (Gen 12). That encounter demonstrates a two-way communication. God called and Abraham answered the call. God made a promise to Abraham and this promise was an incentive to continue the dialogue.

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<sup>1</sup> Watson E. Mills (ed.), *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible* (Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1990), 706. Sacrifice in Christianity is only understandable as a means of thanksgiving. It is never performed by sacrificing living beings in order to achieve God’s benevolence. It is the answer to the granted benevolence of God.

God initiated the dialogue but, increasingly, it became reciprocal and was sustained by God's promise. God promises humankind God's ear and response. According to the Christian faith, God's ear and response have become a human being—Jesus Christ.

There are three reasons why we should pray:

- Already in the Old Testament we are instructed to pray as we are by Jesus who tells us to “Be alert at all times, praying” (Lk 21:36). Christians pray for God's sake. We pray because God promises to hear us (Ps 50:15) and seeks to communicate with us. Christians pray for their own sake.
- We pray for God to grant us power over evil and to heal the world. Christians pray for the sake of the world.

All this is not undertaken from a deep human resource of spirituality, from a mere human desire to achieve some things and avoid others. The author and sustainer of Christian prayer is not the Christian him or herself, but according to the Christian understanding, it is the Holy Spirit who drives us and helps us to pray.<sup>2</sup>

Since there are different reasons for Christian prayer, there is also a formal freedom in how to pray. However, prayer is to be undertaken with humility and a repentant heart. Prayer must be constant. How can this be achieved? It is achieved through a lifestyle, a constant communication with God that often expresses itself nonverbally. It could be described as living in the conscious knowledge of God's presence. This would be a prayerful life. Such a prayer carries its “reward” in itself: it is the faithfulness in God's certain presence that strengthens us and helps us to overcome evil within and around ourselves.

The New Testament tells us that we can pray everywhere (Mt 6:6; 1 Cor 1:2); the temple is one possible place of prayer (Lk 24:53; Acts 3:1; 22:17). The character of prayer can be personal or communal; prayers can be offered in private or in the community of faith. There is need for fellowship in prayer since praying with others enriches spiritually and praying together as the church unites all Christians in their individual search for God's presence. It is important to notice that the New Testament clearly invites everybody to pray, regardless of social status and gender (cf. 1 Sam 1:10) and that there is no need for an external mediator between God and

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. “The Large Catechism,” Third Part: The Lord's Prayer, in Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (eds), *The Book of Concord. Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 440ff.

human beings, be it a priest or a person with special charisma. Both in a Jewish and a Christian prayer the barriers caused by gender and hierarchy are rendered invalid (cf. Lk 2:37f; 18:13; 1: 46–55).

In Philippians 4:6 we learn that we may pray for everything that concerns us on earth and in heaven. There are different ways to perform a prayer and different kinds of prayers. God wishes us to express our needs and to lament, if we are in trouble. God wishes us to carry our needs and sorrows before God. But God also wishes us to express our gratitude and praise for the liberation from death and for giving us a sense and purpose in our lives.

The Old Testament Psalms, which were also the prayers of Jesus, offer wonderful examples of both praise and of lament. And those Psalms still talk to people; Christians lament and praise God also today, creating new hymns and new “psalms” that can be spoken or sung. Some Christians praise God with a very poetic language. God needs to be praised for what God has done for God’s people. Some people prefer to praise God before they put forward their petitions. Prayers of praise also follow a general pattern in which the heart of the prayer gives reasons for the praise. Good examples for this kind of praise from the classical Psalms can be found in Psalms 8 and 33.

## **LEARNING HOW TO PRAY—THE LORD’S PRAYER**

Jesus Christ commands us to pray in his name. For a Christian it is not possible to pray in any way other than in Jesus’ name, because Jesus taught us to call God “Our Father in heaven” and it is his spirit that makes us pray. So, whether or not we mention his name, any honest Christian prayer will always be in the name of Jesus.

The third article of Martin Luther’s “Large Catechism” explains the meaning of the Lord’s Prayer, the prayer Jesus taught his disciples who had asked him to teach them how to pray (Lk 11:1). This is the most central of all Christian prayers; it is the very essence of Christian prayer. We can observe in it the reciprocity, the will of God, our needs and the deliverance from evil: The Lord’s Prayer takes our hearts to God, praising God for God’s holiness, God’s realm that is among us and the fulfillment of God’s will both on earth and in heaven. Then the prayer takes God to us, lets God meet our needs—both the physical and the spiritual ones. Forgiveness and salvation are asked for the whole of humankind.

The way God is addressed in the Lord’s Prayer: “Our Father who art in heaven,” is significant. Jesus teaches us that we are invited to relate to God in the closest possible form of human address. The “Large Catechism”

identifies seven petitions in the Lord's Prayer that help to identify the core characters of Christian prayer.<sup>3</sup> The first petition, "May your name be hallowed," relates to what God demands in the Second Commandment: God's name should not be taken in vain by swearing, cursing, deceiving, etc., but used to the praise and glory of God. God's name must thus not be misused for purposes that are actually driven by ideological, political, economic and private interests, which are falsely legitimized by using God's name. The second petition, "May your kingdom come," calls us to accept God's grace given in Jesus Christ, and asks for the realization of God's Word within us and our fellow human beings. Explaining the second petition, Luther writes,

[W]e must [...] let the kingdom of God be the first thing for which we pray. Then, surely, we shall have all the other things in abundance, as Christ teaches, "Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."<sup>4</sup>

The third petition, "May your will come about on earth as in heaven" continues to ask for the realization and actualization of God's will within us. Luther adds the following prayer into his explanation of the third petition in Lord's Prayer:

Dear Father, your will be done and not the will of the devil or of our enemies, nor of those who would persecute and suppress your holy Word or prevent your kingdom from coming; and grant that we may bear patiently and overcome whatever we must suffer on its account, so that our poor flesh may not yield or fall away through weakness or sloth.<sup>5</sup>

The following petitions: "Give us our daily bread," "And remit our debt, as we remit what our debtors owe," "And lead us not into temptation," are requests that relate to human needs. "Daily bread" refers to human needs in the broadest sense, including life on earth. "Remit our debt" refers to the importance of the central Christian message, of forgiveness, in our daily lives. "As we forgive our debtors" expresses the need to be gracious and merciful to our neighbors just as God has been to us. The petition not to lead us into temptation calls us to think about the various forms of temptations that we experience in our daily lives, from "fondness for

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 445ff.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 448.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 449.

luxury, honor, fame, and power” to “unbelief, false security, stubbornness,”<sup>6</sup> etc. The “Large Catechism” explains: “This, then, is what ‘leading us not into temptation’ means: when God gives us power and strength to resist, even though the attack is not removed or ended”.<sup>7</sup> The last, the seventh petition, is a petition for deliverance from all the evil, ending with Amen: “But deliver us from the evil. Amen.” “Amen” is the affirmation of faith, meaning that we have no doubt that our prayers are heard. It is a sign of the personal affirmation of our trust in God.

With the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus asks us not to fall into the misunderstanding of prayer: there are the prose prayers which are made up of petitions. Most people are caught up in these kinds of prayers as they think that to pray means constantly to request something. Some petitions are presented with lengthy elaborations and in colorful language, which is meant to persuade God. The elaboration is meant to provide an incentive to God. Yet Jesus teaches us that long prayers may suggest hypocrisy. These long prayers are usually meant for blessing, healing or remembrance. When people want something from God they use long prayers that plead with God. However, we must bear in mind that God is aware of what we want, even before we say it and that our prayer could be quite selfish if it restricts itself to the mentioned topics. It may turn God into being a servant to our needs.

## **ANSWERED PRAYERS—MAGIC AND PRAYER**

Christians believe that God hears and answers all their prayers. Jesus promises that also pleading prayers will be heard by God, like by a loving father. God gives us what is good for us. Petitions are sometimes fulfilled differently than the praying person thought. How God hears our prayers and how God fulfills them remains a miracle. Jesus’ saying, “Ask, and it will be given you” (Mt 7:7) is frequently heard in a very simplified way, creating an expectation for immediate answers to our prayers. Some try to make God hear their prayers by forcefully exerting lots of energy. Others make commands that can provoke admonishment, when they “speak” as if they were God. In such cases, we can often see that they forgot to call upon the name of Jesus while praying. It is not a prayer that Jesus would pray.

In the Lord’s Prayer we are taught to ask for the will of God. It is God’s will that should be done on earth as it is in heaven. Christians may wish for things to happen in a certain way, but the will of God might be different. We may ask for healing, but God may have a different answer altogether. If

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 454.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

death results after praying for healing, has God not answered our prayer? The Bible instructs us to pray and ask with faith and trust and wait for God to answer in the best possible way. The prayer is not about dictating to God what to do. Often the answers to our prayers are very different from what we actually asked for. And it may be extremely difficult to believe in an answered prayer when one is faced with strong expressions of evil.

Those who practice magic make things happen immediately, and because we live in a world full of magic and magical answers to life, people expect also religion to respond magically. People experience many pressures in their lives and, as a result, they want immediate answers to everything. As a consequence, some Christians, in Africa for instance, use elements such as water and stones to “hold” their prayers. In some cases, a true “prayer business” has started, where holy oil, water, etc. are being sold with the promise that by using these material means prayer will become more effective and more or less “guarantee” being heard. External signs or material elements that accompany prayer may sometimes be useful yet one must be extremely careful not to cross the line to idolatry. Salvation as well as prayers cannot be for sale because what is essential to Christian prayer are not the magic elements but faith and the readiness to entrust your life into God’s hands. Christians are advised to seek the Lord with all their heart and to do everything in faith: “Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart” (Jer 29:12-13). God knows what is good for each one of us at a given point in time “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord” (Isa 55:8).

Jesus says that everything that you will ask the Father in my name will be granted to you (Jn 15:7, 16:13). At the same time, the reference to the name of Jesus is a critical remark on what we pray: is it really something Jesus would pray for as well? Christians should not only pray in Jesus’ name but also trust in him. One needs to have faith in Jesus when praying so that one’s prayers might be answered.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Christian prayer cultivates the relationship between God and the Christian. Hence, Christians cannot experience spiritual growth without prayer. Also nonverbal forms of prayer such as silence, music and dance help us to explore and express our emotional and physical dimensions as people before God. God wants to be loved and adored for God’s sake and for our sake and for the sake of the world. God leads us in prayer to Godself and comes to us, accompanies us in our needs and troubles, but also in our

joys. God has called us to pray always, as a lifestyle of faith in God. We pray to God and God answers; we do not pray to ourselves, thus we should not prescribe answers to our prayers, but await everything from God, who is present in Jesus Christ and is praying in us through God's Holy Spirit. We have learnt from Jesus to address God as "Father." That means we are invited to relate to God in the closest possible form of human address. This address is a sign of intimacy of the relationship to which we are called.<sup>8</sup> If we take this intimacy seriously, we will not dictate to God in prayer and will not try to "buy" the responses to our prayers, but we will trust God, just as Jesus did.

## QUESTIONS

*In which ways have you experienced prayer as empowering and transformative?*

*What would you think of as being the most frequent misuses of prayer?*

*Why should Christians pray and why is communal prayer important?*

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<sup>8</sup> Werner G. Jeanrond, *Call and Response: The Challenge of Christian Life* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, New York: Continuum, 1995), 120.





# “I AM BECAUSE I WORK”—IDENTIFYING ONESELF THROUGH WORK

*Busi Suneel Bhanu*

## INTRODUCTION

The popular Sanskrit saying *Udyōgampurushalakshanam* [work is the identity/characteristic of human beings] is a popular, reflective statement on the Indian perspective on work, irrespective of caste, creed and gender. According to the Indian understanding, work is a human necessity, a religious expression, a reflection of human existence and integral to one’s identity. For the average person, work, within the Indian religio-cultural framework, also denotes human relations based on power and authority as well as submissiveness and subjugation. One may understand work as a positive and progressive channel that offers glimpses into the purpose and meaning of life, thereby becoming an enriching experience. Or, one may come to the negative conclusion that work is a dehumanizing and life-negating instrument that shatters the hope and aspirations of life itself. As such, this reflection tries to understand the dignity, identity and ability of a human being through work from an Indian socio-religious perspective, namely the perspective and way of life of those who are popularly known as untouchables/*harijans*/Dalits. In the search for identity through work, the following experience of a Dalit highlights the struggle.

## SELFIE I. A MONOCHROME VIEW: “WORK AS DHARMA”

Since I became a Christian I have been reflecting on the meaning and purpose of human life in general and my life in particular. In fact, I am the

first person in my family to receive and accept the gospel of Jesus Christ and begin to experience God's faithfulness in Jesus. My parents gave me the name Raja (king). Their wish and desire, I learnt later, was that I should lead the dignified and comfortable life of a king. However, in terms of my work, I realized that I am nothing but a physical and psychological wreck. In our national language, Hindi, the designation for my work is *safaikarmachari*, manual scavenger or sanitary worker. The term and title look so grand as if it were an ennobling work without any dehumanizing connotations.

As a child, I was sent to the mission (Christian) primary school, situated where we lived along with the rest of the *safaikarmachari* community. After completing my primary education, on the insistence of some of my teachers, my parents reluctantly enrolled me in the secondary school, run by the same Christian organization and located in the center of the town where we had lived for generations.

When it was time to go to college, I vividly remember that in spite of my varied tactics of protest, my parents emphasized the need and *dharma* (duty) to follow the family occupation. They invoked two compelling reasons. First, even if I were to graduate from the university with distinction, it would not be easy for me with my family background to secure employment in the highly competitive Indian society. Therefore, in order to avoid the unnecessary frustration of being unemployed, it would be wise to follow and continue the family occupation (something like a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush). Second, and most important, in order to attain *mukti* (salvation/liberation)] from *karma-samsara* (the cycle of births and deaths based on the fruit of one's actions in life) one needs to perform the work assigned to one. Further, we are born as "untouchables" in the present birth and the only way to be born as upper caste in the next birth is to perform our assigned duty as *safaikarmachari* without complaint or protest and complete submissiveness. To dispel my frustration and displeasure at this turn of events and to shatter my ignorance of the social structures, sustained by religious philosophies, they patiently explained the Vedic creation narrative that justifies our plight as "ritually impure" people and hence as "untouchables." For my parents, who remain Hindus, the possibility of climbing the hierarchical social ladder, achieving an honorable identity and ultimately securing release from the bondage of *karma* and *samsara* is attainable only through following the assigned work (*dharma*).

While the saying, *udyogampurushalakshanam* has become a reality in my life, the despicable scavenger shattered my dreams of life. The work I am assigned to is obnoxious. We have a twofold responsibility: we are the guardians and protectors of environmental cleanliness within our own villages and towns. Our communities are responsible for cleaning the dry lavatories of hundreds and thousands of households and toil day and night

to keep the crisscrossing sewage lines of the villages, towns and cities of our country clean. In my traditional caste assigned work, I have to collect in a bamboo-basket the night-soil (human excreta/feces). I carry it on my head, deposit it in the bullock cart waiting at the roadside and empty it away from the village or town. Moreover, I have to climb into the man-holes and with my naked hands clear away the filthy obstacles in order to allow the sewage to flow freely so that it will not dirty the surroundings and thereby cause and spread disease (vector control). But in the process, the sewage water drenches my whole body and, as a consequence, stench emanates from me, driving onlookers and passersby away from me with their scornful looks. Moreover, I often fall prey to illness. I am indeed, an untouchable with work as my *dharma*.

Manual scavengers are one of the living symbols of the dehumanizing reality of caste and untouchability. Because of the obnoxious work they are forced to perform they are the most exploited, rejected and marginalized community in Indian society. In spite of provisions under article 17 of the constitution (abolition of the practice of untouchability), and several acts of legislation such as the Protection of Civil Rights Act 1955, Prevention of Atrocities Act 1989 and the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act 1993, the practice of manual scavenging continues unabated. It is an undeniable fact that "I am because I work." *Udyoga* in its popular understanding means work and something worth doing. However, according to the Hindu religious philosophical understanding, it also means *ud* (higher) and *yoga* (spiritual discipline) oriented towards the realization of the goal of life, namely liberation. For my illiterate and gullible parents, entrenched in such a religious view and conviction, if not today, then one day, maybe one birth later or after several births, one will achieve that unique identity as the "perfect human being." In the words of our very own Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore, "What harm is there if thy clothes become tattered and stained? Meet him and stand by him in toil and in sweat of thy brow."<sup>1</sup> This untouchable scavenger identity is only temporary and not permanent. For them, work is not simply for the sake of work, but something unique that brings out passion and offers meaning to life. I, on the other hand, have found a new tomorrow here and now in Jesus, and wish not to let this life pass by without this new understanding of work that has become worship and offered me an authentic and liberative human identity. Today, I am slowly and steadily coming out of my stigmatized "untouchable" identity and the appended "work ethic" and have begun to feel proud of my Dalitness and cherish my Dalit Christian identity.

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<sup>1</sup> S. K. Paul, *The Complete Poems of Rabindranath Tagore's Gitanjali. Text and Critical Evaluation* (New Dehli: Sarup & Sons, 2006), 58.

## SELFIE 2. A SEPIA VIEW: “I AM A DALIT”

In Indian society, certain categories of people who were not included in the *catur-varna*, the four-fold caste system, are historically known as the *asprisyā* (untouchables). There are different theories and views about the origin of the caste system in India, the most popular being the arrival of the fair complexioned āryans on the Indo-Gangetic plains, which marked the beginning of the practice of *varnā* or caste. The āryan settlers not only devised and implemented the four main divisions of people—*brāhmin* (priest), *kshatriya/rājanya* (king/ruler/warrior), *vaiśya* (trader) and *sūdra* (artisan/servant)—but also gave the system strong religious moorings with the introduction of a creation story in the *ṛigveda*, which today is one of the revealed scriptures of Hinduism. According to this narrative, when divine beings sacrificed the *purusa* (the primal being) diverse categories of people emerged from different parts of this divine being: from his mouth the *brāhmin*; his two arms the *rājanya*; his two thighs the *vaiśya* (trader and agriculturist); and from his feet the *sūdra* (servile category). Further, the three upper castes—the *brāhmins*, *kshatriyas* and *vaiśyas*, known as *dvija* (the twice-born)—physical as well as spiritual birth enjoyed the privilege of being adorned with the sacred thread, a religious sign of superior birth and a qualification to learn the sacred *vedas*. The last in the caste hierarchy was the *sūdra*, the servile caste, whose only duty is to serve the above mentioned three upper castes.

While all these four categories fall within the framework of caste in the majority of Hindu religious traditions, there is a large percentage of people who are not only differentiated from the other four castes but whose social status as the lowest of all is underlined. Their segregation and their ritual pollution gradually resulted in their untouchability. Further, Manu, the *brāhmin* law-giver, through the strict imposition of certain rules and regulations, dehumanized the people known as *candālās*. Accordingly, their dwellings were to be located only outside the village proper, they must be made *apapātrās* (ineligible) in every respect, and entitled to own only dogs and donkeys. Their dress should be the garments of the dead and they should only use broken vessels to eat their food. Only ornaments made from black iron are for them and they must continuously wander from place to place. Moreover, they are expected to entertain relationships and transactions only among themselves and marry their equals. If a member of one of the casts wishes to offer them food, then it should be in a broken dish; at night they are prohibited from walking around the villages and towns. However, during the day they may enter the village/town for the purpose of their work. In an attempt to commit psychological genocide, the religiously and numerically dominant upper castes continue

to use several derogatory and degrading terms to describe them including: *amānusa* (no-people/non-human); *antyaja* (last caste/interior castes); *asprisya/achūta* ((untouchable); *asura/rākshasa* (demon); *avarna* (casteless); *chandāla* (uncivilized); *dāsa/dāsyu* (servant); *mleccha* (locals/natives); *nisāda* (primitive hunting/food-gathering people); *panchama* (fifth caste); *svapāka* (one who cooks the meat of dead animals); etc., and some other modern terms such as scheduled castes (de-notified groups–British Colonial Government); depressed classes (*babasahebambedkar*); *harijan* (children of God–Mahatma Gandhi); and Dalit (the untouchable masses).

In this context the untouchables have chosen an identity for themselves by consciously choosing the term Dalit. Etymologically, the root of Dalit, *dal*, means things or persons that are cut, split, broken or torn asunder, scattered or crushed and destroyed. The term, Dalit reflects the existential reality and never-ending plight of those communities who suffer from caste (social and religious) oppression and the resulting (economic and political) poverty while also signifying the need to revolt against the double oppression of ritual degradation and socioeconomic and political deprivation. For the Dalit Panthers, who popularized the concept of Dalitness, the term Dalit has become symbol of assertive pride and resistance to, as well as the rejection of, the unending oppression perpetrated by caste. Furthermore, it implies change and revolution, rather than remaining perpetually subjugated to caste and its bondage. The term chosen by the Dalits themselves has become a reality reflective identity and, as such, the hallmark of self-respect, self-identity and self-assertion of the untouchable communities and their fighting slogan against the dehumanizing caste oppression. In other words, the term Dalit, identifies upper caste oppressors, who are the cause of dehumanization, and reflects the consciousness of the Dalits’ own unfree existence and outcaste experience, which form the basis for a new cultural unity and Dalit ideology as well as a certain militancy. The name Dalit is a symbol of change, confrontation and revolution. However, in spite of this self-respecting chosen identity, they are to a large extent forced to follow and accept the work assigned by the evil caste system.

Three millennia of submissiveness and acceptance of discrimination and dehumanization without raising their voices in protest are the hallmark of Dalits’ characteristic behavior. This silent surrender of selfhood resulted in Dalits voluntarily sacrificing their very lives on the altar of their self-respect, self-dignity and self-identity for the benefit of the upper castes, thereby becoming a “non-people.” In other words, one can observe the internalization of low self-esteem, confusion of self-identity, self-hate in the very psyche of Dalits that can be summed up in the phrase “wounded psyche.” Therefore, the Dalits strongly felt the need to regain their genuine identity that they are robbed and deprived of by the so-called upper castes

under the complex and sacrosanct garb of religious teachings, dogmas and doctrines of ritual purity vis-à-vis ritual impurity and the avoidance of ritually impure people to maintain the moral cosmic order.

### **SELFIE 3. A PANORAMIC VIEW: “I AM A CHRISTIAN AND A LUTHERAN”**

For a majority of Dalits, Hinduism through its multifaceted shades and dimensions—its philosophical nuances, mythical mysteries, reflections of art and architecture and culture conundrums—conveys an irrevocable message of “accept caste or perish.” Thus, the imposed perennial identity of the very existential reality of Dalits as a ritually impure people, the forced acceptance of victimization through unrelenting religious discourse and the determination to seek a spirituality to wriggle out of such hopeless life situations marked the beginning of the Dalits’ search for an alternate religion that offers a liberative transformation and a self-emancipating identity that spells out humanization. A majority of Dalits found liberating streams in other religious traditions such as Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and Sikhism. Unlike Hinduism, these religious traditions, with an egalitarian vision reflected in their religious teachings and practices, offered the potential to break down the oppressive structures in society and root out caste distinctions and inequalities.

Today those untouchables, who take pride in calling themselves Dalits and follow religious traditions other than Hinduism, constitute about 16.6 percent of the total Indian population of 1.22 billion. There is no agreement with regard to the actual total population of untouchables as public and private estimates vary between 225 and 250 million. For the present purpose, it might be useful to consider a conservative estimate of 225 million. The figures would be substantially higher if Dalits who embraced non-Hindu religions such as Buddhism, Sikhism, Islam and Christianity were taken into account. The Indian government however considers only those Dalits within the Hindu fold in the population census and ignores all those who embrace other religious traditions. Although estimates vary, of the 2.34 percent of the total Indian population who are Christian, between fifty to eighty percent are of Dalit background.

The gospel of Jesus Christ when planted in the crucible of Indian socio-cultural soil has taken strong roots and blossomed to offer an identity *par excellence* to Dalits. The gospel offered two powerful liberating messages. First, human beings are created in the image of God and hence divine nature is an integral part of their very being; no human being can be declared and treated as ritually impure and thereby untouchable and outcaste. Second,

being created in the image of God, all human beings are equal without any hierarchical or horizontal differences. This powerful and double-edged message of the gospel penetrated deeply into the wounded psyche of some of the Dalits who have been looking for a religion that would help and support them in their quest and effort to regain their robbed identity, deprived of self-respect and spiritual enlightenment. As a result, India witnessed mass conversions to Christianity of some groups of the untouchables in search of a new identity and liberation from the oppressive structures of caste. In fact, as it is often said, the history of the Dalit liberation movement is interwoven with the history of the church in India. While Christianity in general offered people the enviable status as the children of God, created in the image of God, Lutheran teachings and doctrines opened up a new understanding of life, through work, witness and worship.

The first Lutheran missionaries to India, whether they were from Halle in Germany or Pennsylvania in the United States, brought with them the life transforming message of the gospel, replete with pietistic undercurrents. Pietism was a reform movement within the Lutheran confessional heritage that engulfed the Lutheran church in Germany and emphasized the need for a practical Christian view and way of life reflecting faith in Jesus Christ. These Lutheran missionaries with a pietistic background gradually led Indian Lutherans not only to strive for spiritual enrichment and religious renewal but also to endeavor becoming aware of social and educational issues. This kind of socioeconomic and religio-spiritual renewal was introduced through the Lutheran teachings of *sola gratia, sola fide, sola scriptura, solus Christus, soli deo gloria, theologia crucis, deus absconditus, coram deo* and the priesthood of all believers, bondage of the will, two kingdoms, etc. This unique, down-to-earth preaching of the gospel offered a transforming identity not only to those who embraced Christianity spread by the Lutheran missionaries and, later, gospel workers. Even today the same transforming identity is reflected in the work and witness of the members of the Lutheran communion in India. This continuously reformatory transforming identity is evident and being experienced in the teachings of the Lutheran church in India.

### **GOD’S WORK: “NOT MY MERIT, BUT BY GOD’S GRACE”**

The church in India exists amidst the plurality of religious philosophies and ideologies and social, cultural, economic and political complexities. As a result of the teachings and doctrines of the majority religion, Hinduism, with its claim of *caturvedas* as *apaurusēyas* (not authored by human beings but were of divine creation and revelation) the masses believe the evil practice of caste to be divinely ordained. Thus, the only way of attaining

*moksa* (liberation from the unending cycle of births and deaths) from this ritually impure status is in the next birth either through *jnānamārga* (path of knowledge/wisdom) or *bhaktimārga* (path of devotion) or *karmamārga* (path of duty). Following one of these *mārgas* for liberation depends on the religio-spiritual temperament and capability of a person. Since Dalits are ritually impure by birth and not competent enough to choose either the *jnānamārga* or the *bhaktimārga*, the only *mārga* available to them is *karmamārga*, that is performing one's assigned *dharma* in utter obedience and without questioning or complaining. In other words, liberation is only possible through the human effort of performing one's assigned work.

In this context of descent based discrimination, Christianity in general and Lutheranism in particular offered the *triratnās*, the three jewels, *sola gratia*, *sola scriptura*, and *sola fide*. That is, liberation from every life threatening force is possible through the life sustaining grace of the Creator God alone, through the life giving eternal Word of God alone and through life enriching faith in Jesus Christ rather than through one's own merit and actions. This radically vibrant and dynamic reforming identity of seeking God's friendship and fellowship through work and witness as a practicing Christian rather than depending on one's own assigned work is further infused with a priestly identity to Dalit Christians which hitherto had been considered the sole privilege and prerogative of the *brāhmin*. Dalits seeking that status was anathema to the caste people and a pie in the sky to Dalits themselves.

### **PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS: "I AM PRIVILEGED TO WORK AS A PUJĀRI"**

In the caste hierarchy and on its scale of purity/pollution of the four castes, the *brāhmins* not only declared themselves as *bhūdevās* (gods on earth) but also placed themselves at the helm of both the temporal and religious affairs of society, with access to learning and disposition of knowledge as their birth right. Further, to impart the acquired knowledge to deserving pupils from the three upper castes was their privilege. They monopolized the right to command and demand respect, as well as to enjoy unquestioning loyalty, support and service from anyone and everyone. Even the kings were to rule and could only rule by obeying and accepting the guidance of the *brāhmin* priests. Thus the *brāhmins* elevated themselves to the top status in the social and religious hierarchy, both as temporal and spiritual leaders. The ritually impure and polluting people, the Dalits, were denied learning and realizing their religious aspirations by being forbidden to enter temples and holy places as well as the curtailment of seeking religious services from the priests.

Into such a life-context of Dalits, Lutheranism offered a radically new doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, hitherto an unthinkable and unimaginable teaching and concept for Indians in general and Dalits in



particular. In "On the Freedom of a Christian," Martin Luther expressed the hope that the term priest would become popular because he believed justified by the grace of God through faith to mean that every Christian believer is a priest. For Luther, God called every human being, irrespective of profession or vocation, according to their gifts to minister unto others—whether one is an untouchable cobbler who works with the skin of dead animals or a woman who periodically becomes polluted with her menstruation or an upper caste intellectual who boast of dispelling the darkness of ignorance of others through their gift of knowledge and wisdom. Every person's vocation is nothing but a call to priesthood, ministering unto others. In this radically new *pujāri* (priestly) work identity, identity, the differences between man and woman, sacred and secular, ritually pure and ritually polluting, caste people and outcaste masses—all these are nailed to the cross of Jesus. As God's child the human being's *pujāri* status and every individual's human dignity are restored. For Christian Dalits this major step has become an anchor in their moving away from the institutionalized caste suffering. Dignity of labor rather than division of laborers has indeed become a gift for the Dalits.

The Dalit context and the hope and aspirations of the community are reflected in Dalit theology. Martin Luther's theology of the cross offers a powerful vision of God identifying with the cry of the suffering masses and thus Lutheranism stands in solidarity with the Dalits in their quest for humanhood in the midst of their suffering.

### **THE THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS**

Dalit theology is a counter theology that challenges the classical Indian Christian theology that employed the philosophical categories of Hinduism. The metaphysical articulations that are rampant in classical Indian Christian theology failed to offer any relief to Dalits. For Dalits, the gospel message of Jesus Christ, with its dynamic and ever flowing liberative streams has become an authentic channel to quench their spiritual thirst. God in Jesus Christ is ever present in the pathos and pain of Dalits, offering them liberation from caste bondage and the accompanied dehumanization. Thus, Dalit theology, a contextual theology from below, is a theology of the Dalits, by the Dalits and for the Dalits. It seeks to be relevant to Dalits based on their existential reality of dalitness, and strives to empower them in their struggle for the restoration of their human dignity, self-respect, equality and liberation, all of which have been denied and robbed by the religiously sanctioned caste discrimination.

Before the emergence of Indian contextual Dalit theology, the Lutheran congregations were exposed to Martin Luther's theology of the cross. Whether acknowledged or not, Luther's theology of the cross provided the

much needed impetus to the Dalits' view and way of understanding their new found faith in God and their hope and aspiration of a new tomorrow—not an eschatological idea but a here and now reality and that God is a suffering and liberating God. God in his lowliness, through Jesus Christ on the cross, hears the cries of the suffering and identifies with them. In the theology of cross, the believer understands the church as the people of God, nurturing themselves on the faithfulness of God and sharing their gifts with their neighbor thereby moving into a wider, ecumenical community.

## CONCLUSION: SALVATION NOT FOR SALE

For Indians in general and Dalits in particular religion is a vibrant force and for an average religiously oriented Indian, *dharma* is everything—the very basis of social and cultural traditions; the life-regulating spring of ethical values and the provider and sustainer of life-enriching spirituality. With such an understanding, Dalits in India, who have been denied a life-fulfilling religion, have been actively searching for a metaphysical force that can provide authentic human dignity, spiritual potential and moral strength, a force that could empower them effectively to fight caste-infused oppression and the resultant discrimination as well as achieving a holistic liberation and a new and enriching human identity.

The preamble to the Indian constitution declares,

We, the people of India, having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a Sovereign, Socialist, Secular, Democratic Republic and to secure to all its citizens Justice—social, economic and political; liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; equality of status and of opportunity; and to promote among them all fraternity assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity and integrity of the Nation.<sup>2</sup>

But the secular credentials of this ancient civilization seem to be a fragile myth. In a culturally and religiously plural country laying firm secular foundations does not happen overnight. It is in the process of development, however, often in faltering steps, during which compromises are being made with religious institutions or beliefs. As a consequence, the practice of caste remains popular and appears to be a never ending story.

Christianity came to India with its gospel of universal love and egalitarian message. Dalits who have embraced Christianity never find a reason to

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<sup>2</sup> M. V. Pylee, *India's Constitution* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House Ltd., rev. ed., 1967), 51.

renounce this life offering faith, because it firmly remains as a liberating channel to achieve self-dignity and self-esteem by offering various avenues to fight against cast invoked humiliation. Conversion to Christianity has indeed become a boon for Dalits to fulfill their long neglected and deliberately denied human rights, hope and aspirations. Christianity is helping them in their struggle to liberate themselves from the inherited disadvantages of a psychologically ingrained inferiority complex, forcefully imposed economic backwardness, political powerlessness and life-negating religious stigma of ritual pollution.

The gospel message overwhelmingly reflects Jesus' love, healing and compassionate ministries, and his care and concern for the poor, oppressed and outcasts of society, as well as his sacrificial death for the people on the margins. Some groups of Dalits readily identified themselves as subjects and objects of this liberating, life renewing and identity offering message. Along with opening avenues to learn religious truths and to nurture their faith, through the opening and establishing of educational and other allied institutions, technical training schools as well as health care centers and social projects in and around Dalit localities, Christianity has become a force to reckon with. It offers a holistic liberation to the untouchables and a channel to infuse new courage and confidence to challenge and to fight against the caste oriented assigning of dehumanizing and polluting work thereby creating new opportunities to work a giving new meaning of dignity of labor. In other words, the gospel message helps and encourages Dalits to raise their voices in protest and fight against the injustice being perpetrated by the caste system.

In addition, the teachings of the Lutheran church enrich and enhance the identity as well as the work and witness of Dalit Christians. For Dalit Christians Lutheranism has without a doubt offered a new and solid hope of the possibility of change for a new way of life endowed with freedom, self-respect, human dignity and a life renewing and transforming identity. The Lutheran teaching of the three *solas*, especially salvation/liberation through the grace of God, revealed in the Scriptures and offered through faith in Christ Jesus, has also been reflected in a new identity. The priesthood of all believers helps Christianized Dalits to overcome their wounded psyche, ritually-polluted personality and the humiliating experience of being the lowest of the low as untouchables in the socio-religious hierarchy and thus to reach new heights of a healed psyche of their work and witness as priests of God. The ascriptions and appellations of the ritually polluted and untouchables that have been forcefully handed down for over three millennia are now being eroded with the powerful gospel message and the Lutheran teachings of salvation/liberation through the grace of God. Egalitarianism that advocates and emphasizes that every person is created

in the image of God is equal and thereby endowed with divine nature and precious in the sight of God. Further, in the theology of the cross Dalits experience a new *ekklesia* and with their interiorization of *koinonia*, new relations of friendship and fellowship are emerging in a visible ecumenism. This new and transformed view and way of life is a result of their understanding of the existential reality of their lives. As a consequence of their recognition of the liberating presence of God in Jesus Christ in their very lives, they are no more “no-people” but God’s people.

With Jesus Christ as their anchor, the gospel message as their firm foundation and the teachings of the Lutheran church as channels refining and continuously redefining and reforming their self-understanding of work and witness, Dalit Lutherans have begun to rewrite their own history and to enjoy and take pride in a transformed and transforming identity as children of God. Christianity and the Lutheran perspective offer this new and unique identity. Thus Dalit Christians in general and Dalit Lutherans in particular are no longer ritually polluted untouchables whose touch and even shadow would pollute others. Rather, they are human beings created in the image of God and hence, ritually pure. Like any other human being Dalits are liberated through the grace of God and called to minister unto others as priests and to initiate a new ecclesia, *koinonia* and a wider ecumenism. Salvation/liberation does not need to be earned through identity tarnishing pre-assigned work. It is God’s gift. In other words, salvation/liberation is “not for sale” but offered by God who identifies with the Dalits, suffers with them and nails their suffering to the cross, thus offering a spirituality of humanhood through God’s resurrection.

## QUESTIONS

*For an average person, “work” denotes human relations based on power and authority as well as submissiveness and subjugation. Is it true in your local context?*

*Do you believe that “religion” offers liberative transformation and a self-emancipating identity to those who, because of their traditional occupations, are denied of their self-respect and human dignity?*

*Do you agree that Luther’s Theology of the Cross offers not only an eschatological hope, but also the here and now reality that God hears the cries of the suffering, identifies with the discriminated against and offers a holistic liberation to them?*

# FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT AND THE REALITY OF MIGRANTS, DISPLACED PERSONS AND REFUGEES—A THEOLOGICAL DIALOGUE BASED ON ACTS 27

*Elaine Neuenfeldt*

Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights reads:

- (1) Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state.
- (2) Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.<sup>1</sup>

In many parts of the world, migration and the forced displacement of people and refugees are components of everyday reality. While these are not new phenomena, people involved in these movements are facing increased vulnerability. The lives of migrants who are seeking a better place to live and of refugees or displaced people fleeing their own countries due to war, conflicts and environmental degradation among other causes are increasingly at risk. The world is shocked by daily news about the tragedies to which these people fall victim:

In the space of a week, at least 750 migrants are feared to have died crossing the Mediterranean Sea. Many thousands of others have risked their lives this year, fleeing conflict and instability in Africa and the Middle East, in small, often decrepit vessels in an attempt to reach European territories. But the number of

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<sup>1</sup> [www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/](http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/)

fatalities has risen dramatically in a matter of months. More than 2,200 lives have been lost since June, the UN refugee agency UNHCR believes. That is because of the big increase in numbers crossing the Mediterranean. While some 60,000 reached European shores in 2013, so far more than 130,000 have arrived in 2014.<sup>2</sup>

In April 2015, at least five boats carrying almost two thousand migrants to Europe sank in the Mediterranean Sea, with a combined death toll estimated at more than 1,200 people.<sup>3</sup>

In general, poverty, armed conflicts, social and political turmoil and situations related to climate change and/or natural disasters are among the root causes of migration and the forced displacement of people.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, it is crucial that we differentiate forced displacement and migration from other international waves of migration that originate “in the social, economic, and political transformation that accompany the expansion of capitalist markets into non-market or pre-market societies.”<sup>5</sup> In a global economy,

[...] international migrants do not come from poor, isolated places that are disconnected from world markets, but from regions and nations that are undergoing rapid changes as a result of their incorporation into global trade, information and production networks.<sup>6</sup>

The reality of the mass movement of people, either forced or freely seeking other places to live, is highly complex. It cannot be analyzed simplistically or by looking at the phenomenon as if it were only a matter of people from poor and so-called less developed countries seeking better life conditions in the so-called more highly developed countries. A critical approach to migration must question the model of society and economic development that produces vulnerability for those who are in movement. What are the dynamics in a society that exposes migrants and people on the move, especially those in forced displacement, to danger?

It is not only leaving home that makes migrants and refugees vulnerable. Arriving at another place also presents a huge challenge. Being a migrant is synonymous with being a stranger.

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<sup>2</sup> *Mapping Mediterranean Migration*, 15/09/2014, at [www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-24521614](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-24521614)

<sup>3</sup> *Mediterranean Sea Migrant Shipwrecks*, April 2015, at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/April\\_2015\\_Mediterranean\\_Sea\\_migrant\\_shipwrecks](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/April_2015_Mediterranean_Sea_migrant_shipwrecks)

<sup>4</sup> *Root Causes of Migration—Fact Sheet—An Age of Migration: Globalization and the Root Causes of Migration*, at <https://www.weareoneamerica.org/root-causes-migration-fact-sheet>

<sup>5</sup> Douglas Massey, *The Political Economy of Migration in an Era of Globalization*, at [www.ucpress.edu/content/chapters/11307.ch01.pdf](http://www.ucpress.edu/content/chapters/11307.ch01.pdf), 26.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

The presence of strangers interferes with the dichotomy between inside and outside; friends and enemies. Enemies stay on the other side of the battle line, but strangers do not maintain the distance. No one knows if they are friends or foes.<sup>7</sup>

## **WOMEN, GENDER AND MIGRATION**

When using a gender justice perspective to address the reality of migration and forced displacement, the question of how being on the move affects women and men according to gender roles and cultural expectations must be unfolded.

According to United Nations data, in 2009 there were 213 million international migrants worldwide, corresponding to 3.1 per cent of the global population. Half of the international stock of migrants is women. The migration of women is gradually shifting from a family reunification trend to a more economically motivated strategy, in which more and more women migrate autonomously to work abroad.<sup>8</sup>

The reality of migration affects women according to the gender roles attributed to them—in the country of origin as well as in the receiving country. On the whole and globally, women are less educated than men, have less access to skills training and, therefore, obtain work that is less qualified and lower salaried. As a result, women are more exposed to vulnerable situations when migrating, which increases the possibility that they may suffer violence and fall prey to human trafficking.

People's experiences of gender are central to the patterns, causes and impacts of migration. Gender roles, relations and inequalities affect who migrates, how, why, and where they end up. Migration can lead to a greater degree of economic and/or social autonomy for women, and the opportunity to challenge traditional or restrictive gender roles.<sup>9</sup>

Women are normally the caretakers in their families; they assume responsibility for the elderly, children and the sick, which increases their burden in refugee camps and puts them at a disadvantage in relation to men migrants.

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<sup>7</sup> Alessia Passarelli, "Reflecting on Migration in Europe," in *Migration—Migration— Migración*, Student World 07, WSCF (2008), 98.

<sup>8</sup> [www.un.org/womenwatch/feature/trade/Labour-Mobility-and-Gender-Equality-Migration-and-Trade-in-Services.html](http://www.un.org/womenwatch/feature/trade/Labour-Mobility-and-Gender-Equality-Migration-and-Trade-in-Services.html)

<sup>9</sup> [www.bridge.ids.ac.uk/bridge-publications/cutting-edge-packs/gender-and-migration](http://www.bridge.ids.ac.uk/bridge-publications/cutting-edge-packs/gender-and-migration)

## **ABOUT HOPES AND BOATS: ACT 27, A BIBLE TEXT IN DIALOGUE WITH THE REALITY OF MIGRANTS SEEKING ASYLUM/REFUGE IN EUROPE**

A boat: This is the place where our dialogue between Bible text and migrants seeking refuge in Europe takes place. The boat is an image that symbolizes migration, especially the current flow of migration to Europe. In every boat, there are dreams, there is hope. Boats full of migrants attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea, carrying people who are seeking a better life, fleeing from conflict, pursuing that tiny glimmer of hope on the horizon.

The biblical narrative of Paul sailing to Rome as a prisoner and the many events in his voyage, described in Act 27–28 will be our text in dialogue with the experiences of migration today.

### **ROUTES AND GEOGRAPHIES**

As we “sail” through the biblical text, we can easily identify elements that connect with the realities of migrants and refugees, especially those who even now are attempting to cross the Mediterranean. An itinerary of fear and danger in troubled waters is described in the story. When you are trapped in a boat in the middle of a vast ocean, facing storms and harsh winds, risk and vulnerability are the only reality.

The text describes how Paul and the other persons in his boat reacted to these moments. There are conflictual situations that need to be addressed; each of the characters in the story reacts in a different way according to their own understanding and context. The narrative uses geographically detailed information to describe the journey. Yet places and cities seem to be not only physical spaces where the boat is anchoring, but also geopolitical places with a crucial role in the story.

#### *The conflict—in the middle of the storm (Acts 27:13-26)*

When a moderate south wind began to blow, they thought they could achieve their purpose; so they weighed anchor and began to sail past Crete, close to the shore. But soon a violent wind, called the northeaster, rushed down from Crete. Since the ship was caught and could not be turned head-on into the wind, we gave way to it and were driven. By running under the lee of a small island called Cauda we were scarcely able to get the ship's boat under control. After hoisting it up they took measures to undergird the ship; then, fearing that they would run on the Syrtis, they lowered the sea anchor and so were driven. We were being pounded by the storm so violently that on the next day they began to throw the cargo overboard, and on the third day with their own hands they threw the ship's tackle overboard. When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest raged, all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned.



Since they had been without food for a long time, Paul then stood up among them and said, “Men, you should have listened to me and not have set sail from Crete and thereby avoided this damage and loss. I urge you now to keep up your courage, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. For last night there stood by me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, and he said, “Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before the emperor; and indeed, God has granted safety to all those who are sailing with you.’ So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told. But we will have to run aground on some island.”

Being a refugee or a migrant normally implies a condition of vulnerability and instability due to the rootlessness of the person in that situation. Today, the normative framework of moral obligations is still based on a fixed and limited notion of territory and borders. It is governed by an institutional and exclusionary notion of sovereignty constructed and at the same time shaping a political discourse of “insiders” and “outsiders.” Solidarity and hospitality are hardly part of this political vocabulary.<sup>10</sup>

Theology as well as churches’ and Faith-based Organizations’ practices and discourse can therefore play a key role in changing this concept of sovereignty. The churches’ diaconal work is based on the notion of hospitality and solidarity.<sup>11</sup>

Engaging in a journey where one is liberated by God’s grace, and affirming that salvation, human beings or creation are not for sale, the narrative of Acts 27 gives us a scenario in a boat that reproduces the larger context of the Roman Empire.

The empire’s whole reality is reproduced in this boat: there are soldiers and the centurion, prisoners, sailors, workers and wheat.

What is the wheat doing in this boat? Where is it coming from? The text does not tell us, but as the boat is carrying prisoners and heading to Rome, the wheat supplying the city, was probably collected as tax in kind from the provinces and is the product of an oppressive system of taxation.

I would like to propose that in the context of a journey where life is not for sale, we learn from the biblical narrative how conflicts can provoke

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<sup>10</sup> Edward Newman, “Refugees, International Security and Human Vulnerability: Introduction and survey,” in Edward Newman and Joanne van Selms (eds.), *Refugees and Forced Displacement. International Security, Human Vulnerability, and the State* (Tokyo/New York/Paris, United Nations University Press, 2003), 9 (sample chapter at <http://unu.edu/publications/books/refugees-and-forced-displacement-international-security-human-vulnerability-and-the-state.html#overview>).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *Welcoming the Stranger: Affirmations for Faith Leaders* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2013), at <https://www.lutheranworld.org/content/resource-welcoming-stranger>; Kjell Nordstokke (ed.), *Diakonia in Context | Transformation, Reconciliation, Empowerment* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2009), at <https://www.lutheranworld.org/content/resource-diakonia-context-transformation-reconciliation-empowerment>

different reactions. It is possible to deal with conflictual moments in different ways; the approach will depend a lot on where you stand. Where your feet are will provide the direction for dealing with such situations.

*What are the alternatives? What are the possible actions? (Acts 27: 21-22)*

As they had been long without food, Paul then came forward among them and said, “Men, you should have listened to me, and should not have set sail from Crete and incurred this injury and loss. I now bid you take heart; for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship.

It seems that the boat is pursuing its journey in a particular but normal life situation until the storm breaks down this normality. The storm is like a button that switches on the conflict. The storm is not the conflict in itself, but a crisis that opens up the problem and requires that all in the boat take some action.

A closer look at the action taken by each person or group in this moment of crisis gives us some elements with which to analyze their different conflict resolution approaches.

The very fearful moment of the shipwreck provokes some—expected or unexpected—actions by the boat’s passengers. Let us analyze these:

*Paul implored them all to take food (Acts 27: 33-34)*

As day was about to dawn, Paul urged them all to take some food, saying, “Today is the fourteenth day that you have continued in suspense and without food, having taken nothing. Therefore I urge you to take some food; it will give you strength, since not a hair is to perish from the head of any of you.” And when he had said this, he took bread, and giving thanks to God in the presence of all he broke it and began to eat

What does an invitation to eat together at this very inopportune moment mean? Who would want to eat when their boat is struggling to stay afloat, battered by powerful waves? What kind of proposal is this? “I urge you to take some food; it will give you strength, since not a hair is to perish from the head of any of you”—as if he were foreseeing more trouble.

*Then, they were all encouraged (Acts 27: 36)*

Then they all were encouraged and ate some food themselves

The text develops similarities with the gospel narrative of feeding the multitude (Mt 14.13-21; 15.32-39); the ritual of breaking the bread, giving thanks and eating it is very similar to what happens at the institution of the Lord’s Supper (1 Co 11.23).

But still, why eat in such a situation? The storm was still a danger and the boat was still being tossed about. Eating could make the passengers sick. Why the insistence on eating together?

Looking at the social relations between those who share bread, who eat together, might help to provide an answer to this question. The ritual created around food creates community, communion. The word “companion” carries in its Latin root the notion of “eating bread with”—con-pan. In other words, those who eat bread together become partners. Bread creates connectivity, relations, commitment. Sitting together, sharing bread or food creates alliances, connections. Would it be this connectivity that produces the solidarity that Paul is trying to provoke?

Can we not see the action of eating food together as giving the boat passengers the strength to decide on the next step? Indeed it was a dangerous action: they took a decision on what needs to be saved. Their action represents in practice what we affirm today: that human beings, human lives, are more important than material goods or wealth. Human beings are not for sale.

This biblical narrative provides the foundation on which to build what from a Latin American theological perspective is described as the collective memory of the passion and resurrection—the memory of God’s solidarity with humankind. It is sharing bread and wine in friendship.

Only the celebration of life and justice as a gift for all can bring one into a communion of equals. At the communion table, there is no place for the logic of exclusion. [...] It is possible to celebrate the festival of Communion even if one’s life is in danger, because in justification, the place of sorrow and lament gives way to confidence in God as a friend with whom one lives in solidarity.<sup>12</sup>

Eating bread in the midst of sorrow and fear has the symbolic power to bind those sharing the circle of bread and solidarity together. They are in the same boat. They need to seek solutions for their problems together. The solution will come as a collective act of survival. But not all bring the same experience to the situation. Their reactions to fear and their survival needs are connected to their own life experiences. Their decisions on what to value and what to preserve are very much associated with the context from which they come and are related.

*What to carry? What to throw away? Not for sale (Acts 27:38)*

And when they had eaten enough, they lightened the ship, throwing out the wheat into the sea

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<sup>12</sup> Elsa Tamez, *The Amnesty of Grace. Justification by Faith from a Latin American Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 139.

Throwing food away? Why? What was the economic, social, symbolic value of this wheat? Considering that the boat was carrying prisoners and products to Rome, the wheat was probably a feature of the Roman tax collection system. It was food, but not for people's consumption. It was not intended to ensure food sovereignty; it was not an autonomous and collective system of food for all with justice. Rather, it served to guarantee the food security system of the Empire. The food that satisfied hunger was already shared. This wheat was not meant to satisfy the people's hunger but the greed of the Empire. Therefore, in evaluating what was to be saved in the midst of the storm after having shared bread together, they could throw away the wheat.

*Acts 27: 42*

The soldiers' plan was to kill the prisoners, lest any should swim away and escape.

It is difficult to overthrow a system that creates privileges and instills in some groups the belief that they must uphold the system by keeping order. The soldiers' solution for saving the boat comes from their world vision in which the lives of prisoners do not count, have no value, can be thrown away.

*Acts 27:43*

[...] but the centurion, wishing to save Paul, kept them from carrying out their purpose. He ordered those who could swim to throw themselves overboard first and make for the land.

At the beginning of the story, we learned that the centurion was kind to Paul. Some kind of solidarity was already established. For the centurion, the solution was that each passenger would take responsibility for themselves, because everyone is capable of ensuring their own survival.

*Acts 28:1*

After we had escaped, we then learned that the island was called Malta.

It could also have been Lampedusa, and so many other islands in the Mediterranean where migrants seek refuge today.

*Acts 28:2*

And the natives showed us unusual kindness, for they kindled a fire and welcomed us all, because it had begun to rain and was cold.

## MOVEMENTS IN THE GLOBALIZED MARKET ECONOMY— SHARING AS COUNTERACTING A “FOR SALE” CULTURE

A society that is based on a capitalist market economy produces a radical rupture between humanity and nature. This has tremendous consequences for human relations, that are fragmented and transformed into commodities. People are not important because they are human beings with dignity, but because they are consumers; they have value due to their power to buy and possess. The most sacred principle of the market is that the biggest buyers are the winners.<sup>13</sup>

According to the perceptions that this system creates, the ones who buy and possess more are “worth” more. An economic system that is regulated by a capitalist and globalized market thus has an impact on people’s values. Material status symbols have special importance not only in wealthy countries, but also in countries with little economic power.

This market economy model is oriented and moved by and through the desire—this is the “spirit” of capitalism—to consume and, especially, to ostentatiously show what is consumed; the power to consume is often equated with divine blessing; prosperity is understood as a sign of “salvation.” To understand and critique this idolatrous construct<sup>14</sup>—the neoliberal market-oriented economic system—we need to bring in religious grammar. In a setting where buying and consumerism are highly valued, it is difficult to agree to live with less. Yet, as long as there is no readiness among the wealthy<sup>15</sup> at an individual as well as a collective level<sup>16</sup> to live with less, it will be hard to bring about a peaceful and more just coexistence in today’s world.

Faith, religion and spiritual practices are fundamental territories to be taken into account in a critique of an economic system built on exclusion and oppression. In a system characterized by displacement or mobility and individualism, a faith that provides a feeling of belonging, recognition and participation is highly relevant.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> B. Herry-Priyono, “Re-embedding the Economy for the Common Good,” in Martin L. Sinaga (ed.), *A Common Word. Buddhists and Christians Engage Structural Greed* (Geneva/Minneapolis: The Lutheran World Federation (Lutheran University Press, 2012), 53, and available at [www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/DTS-Studies-201201-A\\_Common\\_Word\\_sm.pdf](http://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/DTS-Studies-201201-A_Common_Word_sm.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> Jung Mo Sung, “Ethical Indignation and Economic Injustice,” text presented at the seminar “Redeeming the Market: Theological Contributions to an Alternative Economics,” John Knox Centre, Geneva, 31 May–1 June 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Harvey Cox, *The Market as God*, at [www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1999/03/the-market-as-god/306397/](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1999/03/the-market-as-god/306397/)

Another important point that theology can and must contribute to the discussion of economic injustice is to show and strengthen the spiritual dimension of ethical indignation. Christian theology should be a critical reflection of the spiritual experience of finding and following the crucified and risen Jesus in the world today. The spirituality that the world needs today is a spirituality that is born of and lived in conjunction with ethical indignation against injustice. Therefore, it is a spirituality that leads people to be concerned with economic and social issues and to fight within their means for a fairer society.<sup>18</sup>

## JUSTIFICATION, JUSTICE AND HUMAN DIGNITY

As a communion on the move, on a pilgrimage, we journey together toward life in all its fullness. We pray for God's guidance and inspiration so that our pilgrimage will open us to one another through dynamic and creative interaction for justice.

Justification by faith alone radicalizes respect for human dignity by attributing it to God's free will and not to a market of meritocracy that all too frequently drives society. Justification, in that sense, means liberation from anxieties and self-condemnation.

The revelation of the justice of God and its realization in justification proclaim and bring about the good news of the right to life for all people. The life granted in justification is recognized as an inalienable gift, because it proceeds from the solidarity of God, in Jesus Christ, with those who are excluded. Such a life of dignity makes human beings subjects of their own history. God "justifies" (make and declares just) the human being in order to transform the unjust world that excludes, kills, and dehumanizes that same human being.<sup>19</sup>

## QUESTIONS

*How can the biblical narratives be a light in our journey that affirms that salvation is not for sale?*

*What do we learn from the biblical story?*

*What do we learn about solidarity and welcoming migrants and refugees?*

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<sup>18</sup> Sung, *op. cit.* (note 14).

<sup>19</sup> Tamez, *op. cit.* (note 12), 14.

# THE CATHOLIC DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION IN THE ECUMENICAL CONTEXT

*Wolfgang Thönissen*

After centuries of theological disputes, the middle of the twentieth century was marked by the beginning of a search for an ecumenical understanding in disputes dating back to the Reformation. At the center of these common efforts lay the core concern of the Reformation itself: the doctrine of justification. With his book on Karl Barth, published in the early 1950s, the Swiss Catholic theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar, already made a contribution to a common understanding of the doctrine of grace. Efforts to bring about ecumenical agreement were advanced even further by Hans Küng's book on "Justification," which dealt with Karl Barth's justification theology. The work of Otto Hermann Pesch, a Catholic researcher, on the justification theology of Martin Luther and Thomas Aquinas has been of particular importance to the ecumenical dialogue on the issue of justification. The bilateral Lutheran-Catholic dialogue on justification since the late 1960s has also contributed greatly to a common understanding. One particular German study with the title *The Condemnations of the Reformation Era: Do They Still Divide?*,<sup>1</sup> which delves into the traditional doctrinal differences, deserves particular mention in this regard. The *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ)* of 31 October 1999,<sup>2</sup> together adopted by the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church, can therefore rightly be viewed as the product of decades of theological work on the doctrine of justification. These

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Lehmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg (eds), *The Condemnations of the Reformation Era: Do They Still Divide?* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000).

ecumenical understandings would not, however, have been possible without the renewal and deepening of the Catholic doctrine of grace and justification that was encouraged by the Second Vatican Council. This doctrine upholds the proprium of Catholic theology within an ecumenical understanding.

## **DEALING WITH THE CONTROVERSIES OF THE REFORMATION ERA**

From very early on, the dispute over Martin Luther's theology focused on the understanding of justification. This began with Luther's new view on the sacrament of penance. Today, we are better able to see how Luther's objection did not aim at doing away with the sacrament. Luther's main issue was instead: How are we able to have our sins forgiven? From the theology of his time, Luther would have heard that God forgives people their sins when they repent of their sins in a sincere act of love. It was the task of the priests to declare and to indicate through absolution the forgiveness of sins, a forgiveness that had already occurred through full repentance. The forgiveness of sins was therefore an effect of repentance. Here we can identify the nominalist theory that God does not deny God's grace to those who do what they are capable of doing. The justification of sinners would thus appear to be a consequence of people's repentance, which, itself indeed a gift of God, is already performed in the forgiveness of sins. In his intensive work on late medieval repentance doctrine, Luther began to understand that repentance, conversely, is anchored in a promise of God that people take on and embrace in their faith. Luther was influenced considerably in this by Bernhard of Clairvaux, and through him, by Augustine. Faith is the sole suitable response to God's promise in God's Word. Justification occurs only through grace in faith in the saving acts of Jesus Christ.

While the Lutheran and Catholic views did in fact converge significantly in the sixteenth century, Catholic theologians found Luther's views to be unsettling, criticizing him for denying the personal responsibility of people for their actions. The Council of Trent (1545–1563) therefore stressed the responsibility of individuals and people's ability to participate in God's grace. Those who are justified are to be involved in the unfolding of grace in their lives.<sup>3</sup> The Council of Trent expressed clearly that people cannot be justified through their works or due to their own nature without God's

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<sup>3</sup> *From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017*, Report of the Lutheran–Roman Catholic Commission on Unity (Leipzig/Paderborn: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt GmbH/Bonifatius GmbH Druck–Buch–Verlag, 2013).



grace. The only source of our justification is God’s righteousness, through which he makes us righteous. The Council also stressed, however, that while neither faith nor works could earn anyone their justification, people do participate through their free will and consent to prepare themselves to receive the grace of justification and to multiply this grace through good works. With the forgiveness of sin, people receive virtues that are poured out through grace: faith, love and hope.

The dispute over these issues escalated once and for all when Luther and the other Reformers began to declare the justification doctrine to be the “first and chief article” and “guide and judge over all parts of Christian doctrine.” “That is why a division on this point was so grave and the work to overcome this division became a matter of highest priority for Catholic-Lutheran relations.”<sup>4</sup> This controversy would become the object of extensive research on the part of individual theologians and numerous national and international Lutheran-Catholic dialogues in the second half of the twentieth century. The results of these studies and dialogues were ultimately taken into account in the *JDDJ* by the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation.

### **JUSTIFICATION—THE CENTRAL SALVATION EVENT IN THE FAITH OF THE CHURCH**

The understanding of faith and justification has developed considerably with Catholic theology in the course of the past decades. The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) constituted a major demarcation point in this development. The Council made it possible to embark on a new direction in the classical doctrine of grace and justification, which had been shaped by the Council of Trent for several centuries. The central concern of Catholic theology can subsequently be seen in terms of forms of grace doctrine tied to salvation history and to personal dialogue. Justification appears here as the center and pinnacle of the event of grace. The decisive statement on Catholic justification doctrine can be found in the following passage of the church constitution *Lumen Gentium* (LG):

The followers of Christ are called by God, not because of their works, but according to His own purpose and grace. They are justified in the Lord Jesus, because in the baptism of faith they truly become sons of God and sharers in the divine nature.

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, para 122.

In this way they are really made holy. Then too, by God's gift, they must hold on to and complete in their lives this holiness they have received.<sup>5</sup>

While the Second Vatican Council did not present a revised doctrine of justification in contrast to the Council of Trent, the new orientation with regard to the central event of justification is easily recognizable. This central message can be broken down into a number of parts:

### **CHRIST ALONE IS HOLY**

This central Christological point unfolds within the context of ecclesiology, and particularly here in connection with the chapter on the universal call to holiness in the church. The main point of this section is that Christ is the one who sanctifies the church as a whole and who calls it to holiness. Christ delivered himself up for his people in order to sanctify them. Christ is the only way to salvation. In this context, the universal call to holiness means that it is not a matter of moral perfection or ethical heroism, and that people do not attain sanctification in such a way, but the ground for sanctification is the holiness, which is God, that is granted to the saved without their having earned it. God's will for reconciliation forms the basis for the grace of sanctification that Christ grants in his death and resurrection. The fullness of grace is Christ himself. Grace is unconditionally connected to Christ's act of reconciliation. The *JDDJ* therefore has it right in that: "Through Christ alone are we justified, when we receive this salvation in faith."<sup>6</sup> All assertions on the doctrine of grace and justification hinge upon this clear central Christological point.

### **GRACE IS GOD'S ETERNAL DESIGN, GOD'S UNIVERSAL WILL FOR SALVATION THAT GOD EXTENDS TO THE INDIVIDUAL**

As we read in the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum* (*DV*),<sup>7</sup> the invisible God speaks to the people out of the abundance of God's love. God wishes for people's salvation, the forgiveness of sins and people's renewal. God alone is the gracious source of the will for salvation. Grace is God in God's will for salvation, which God communicates to the people. Grace is the merciful and loving leaning toward sinful people of God in

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<sup>5</sup> *Lumen Gentium* at [www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html), para. 40.

<sup>6</sup> *Op. cit.* (note 2), 16.

<sup>7</sup> *Dei Verbum* at [www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651118\\_dei-verbum\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html), 2.

Christ. While a distinction does emerge here between grace and justification, it must be mentioned that grace, in accordance with classical Catholic doctrine, is always to be understood as a gift. This gift can, however, never be separated from the giver: Grace can never be separated and made independent of God. God acts from grace for the sake of human salvation. This inclination of God toward people is focused on the individual, whom God speaks to as God's addressee. Fully within the context of this Catholic understanding, the *JDDJ* states:

This new personal relation to God is grounded totally on God's graciousness and remains constantly dependent on the salvific and creative working of this gracious God [...]. Thus justifying grace never becomes a human possession to which one could appeal over against God.<sup>8</sup>

### **JUSTIFICATION TAKES PLACE THROUGH FAITH IN BAPTISM**

In the classical language of Catholic theology, this is a matter of justifying grace, which acts to sanctify people. This revolves around the event of justification itself, i.e., the forgiveness of sins that occurs in Christ's act of redemption, and the ensuing transportation into a state of salvific grace, which is more simply called here—in contrast to the classical language of grace doctrine—simple sanctification. What is meant here is that sanctification is a gift. It aims at participation in God's nature and essence. Faith and baptism are instrumental causes to this end. Baptism is clearly the sacrament of faith and not a human achievement. Faith and baptism refer back to God's word: "those who believe in Christ [...] are reborn [...] through the word of the living God (cf. 1 Pet. 1:23) [...] from water and the Holy Spirit."<sup>9</sup> Baptism is a confession of faith. Baptism is indeed geared toward growth in faith. Catholic theology, in this vein, speaks of an increase of grace in faith, which is to say to keep God's grace and allow it to unfold in our lives. In the context of a Catholic understanding, the *JDDJ* states: "Persons are justified through baptism as hearers of the word and believers in it."<sup>10</sup>

### **FAITH IS A PERSONAL DECISION**

The *DV* has as its central statement here: "The obedience of faith is to be given to God who reveals."<sup>11</sup> This is a matter of emphasizing the holistic character

<sup>8</sup> Op. cit. (note 3), 27.

<sup>9</sup> Op. cit. (note 5), 9.

<sup>10</sup> Op. cit. (note 2), 5.

<sup>11</sup> Op. cit. (note 7), 5.

of faith. The text itself points here to the biblical idea of bringing about the “obedience of faith” (Rom 16:26; 1:5). Obedience is a term from the language of the early mission, describing conversion as submission to the gospel. Obedience and faith run parallel to one another, and it is not the message of faith but the performance of faith that is primary here. Obedience of faith refers to Christ’s revelation and entails the reception of the message of salvation. The short text in *DV* is, of course, part of the tradition of church doctrine, in which faith represents agreement with the truths of faith set down by the church. The connection cannot be dismantled here:

But the Catholic Church professes that this faith, [...] is a supernatural virtue by which we, with the aid and inspiration of the grace of God, believe that the things revealed by Him are true.<sup>12</sup>

*Dei Verbum* then applies this understanding to the new understanding of revelation, placing the main focus on the performance of faith, without eliminating tradition. The response of faith to God’s revelation of Godself is thus not chiefly or solely an agreement with the articles of faith, but an opening up to God himself.

To make this act of faith, the grace of God and the interior help of the Holy Spirit must precede and assist, moving the heart and turning it to God, opening the eyes of the mind and giving “joy and ease to everyone in assenting to the truth and believing it.”<sup>13</sup>

Faith is thus a matter of personal dedication, carried out in love. Faith is our personal “yes” to God. In the *JDDJ* we read to this end that “to have faith is to entrust oneself totally to God.”<sup>14</sup> The acceptance of the truths of revelation is incorporated into this faith. Again, we see here the newly established relationship between God’s Word and faith: The Word of God is God’s power for the salvation of all who believe. The proclamation of the gospel is geared toward the sparking of faith in Jesus, the Christ. Faith in Christ is nourished by the Word.

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<sup>12</sup> First Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith, Dei Filius*, at <http://inters.org/Vatican-Council-I-Dei-Filius>, chapter 3.

<sup>13</sup> Op. cit. (note 7), 5.

<sup>14</sup> Op. cit. (note 2), 36.

**FAITH BECOMES EFFECTIVE THROUGH LOVE**

“Thus it is evident to everyone, that all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity.”<sup>15</sup> Faith precedes love, and only in love does faith become effective. “Every person must walk unhesitatingly according to his own personal gifts and duties in the path of living faith, which arouses hope and works through charity.”<sup>16</sup> Love is thus not a human contribution to the work of redemption but a form of God’s justifying grace itself. In the interplay between divine grace and human participation, God’s grace is always given primacy. Love is itself a gift of God that takes on form in human beings. If people “receive all things with faith from the hand of their heavenly Father,”<sup>17</sup> they proclaim their love in this way. Understood this way, Catholic theology can speak of cooperation with God’s will. But the relationship between cause and effect remains preserved here: God is love, God pours out God’s love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. Every person of faith must be willing to hear God’s Word so that love can grow like a seed. Love is closely connected to justification in faith. The *JDDJ* explains the Catholic distinction in terms of the forgiving grace of God always being connected to the gift of a new life that is evidenced in active love with the involvement of the Holy Spirit. Love is received and realized through faith. This is why each person of faith must be willing to hear God’s Word. Faith therefore comes first and provides the foundations. Love is then a subsequent way of expressing faith. It is through this gift of love that people can themselves live as justified and redeemed. God’s love enables them to love God more than everything and to love their neighbors. As we read in the *JDDJ*:

According to Catholic understanding, good works, made possible by grace and the working of the Holy Spirit, contribute to growth in grace, so that the righteousness that comes from God is preserved and communion with Christ is deepened.<sup>18</sup>

How can we speak here of cooperation? From a Catholic understanding, faith is an act of surrender and of faith, which also incorporates human reason and will. Faith results from God’s grace. The human response, even as a gift of God itself, remains a movement toward God and personal consent, while not, however, constituting human action by means of one’s

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<sup>15</sup> Op. cit (note 5), 40.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>18</sup> Op. cit. (note 4), 38.

own powers. The cited council texts speak in clear terms of personal consent. This is an act of the Holy Spirit that moves people's hearts to turn to God, and which opens the eyes of the mind: "God constantly brings faith to completion by His gifts."<sup>19</sup>

#### **THE COMMUNION THAT COMES INTO BEING THROUGH PARTICIPATION IN GOD IS THE CONSEQUENCE OF GOD'S JUSTIFYING ACTION**

This is the goal of the event of justification, and this is why the church constitution places the topic of justification in the realm of ecclesiology. People's personal beliefs can only be completed in the community, as the justified are incorporated into the body of Christ. The basic idea that community arises through participation in Jesus Christ only unfolds of course in the context of the sacrament of the Eucharist. Through the Eucharist, the justified faithful gather together in communion with Christ and with each other. An ecclesiology of communion needs to be developed in this connection. Church is the community of justified sinners. The *JDDJ* puts it as follows: "Our consensus in basic truths of the doctrine of justification must come to influence the life and teachings of our churches."<sup>20</sup>

#### **A SHORT SUMMARY OF CATHOLIC JUSTIFICATION THEOLOGY**

The theology of justification represents a key to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Righteousness is a term central to Holy Scripture, and as such it aims at a salvific relationship of God with people. God's love realizes God's all-encompassing will for salvation through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. The message of justification lends expression to the unconditional acceptance of people through God's grace. It is faith in Christ that brings about and forms the basis of full participation in God's act of revelation. This message is universal and is addressed to all, as all are called to communion with God. Faith in Christ's act of salvation can, however, only truly be lived in the communion of the church. The full need for God's grace and justification can be seen in people's inability to reestablish their broken communion with God. The church is thus a sign and instrument in Jesus Christ's work of salvation, and leads people to the kingdom of God. As a standard and measure of Christian faith, the doctrine of justification brings to the fore the gift nature of the Christian faith. This has consequences for the proclamation, doctrine and pastoral work of the church. While people

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<sup>19</sup> Op. cit. (note 7), 5.

<sup>20</sup> Op. cit. (note 2), 43.

are justified without the works of the law, faith always involves human activity as well. Faith in Christ encourages and enables us to perform good works, carried out in love and hope.

## **A CONSENSUS IN THE BASIC TRUTHS OF THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION**

The *JDDJ*'s consensus in basic truths of the doctrine of justification is expressed thus: "By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works."<sup>21</sup> The expression "by grace alone" is, moreover, explained in that "the message of justification [...] tells us that as sinners our new life is solely due to the forgiving and renewing mercy that God imparts as a gift and we receive in faith, and never can merit in any way."<sup>22</sup> Only within this framework can the limits and dignity of human freedom be established. The expression "by grace alone" is interpreted to mean that people "depend completely on the saving grace of God for their salvation. The freedom they possess in relation to persons and the things of this world is no freedom in relation to salvation."<sup>23</sup> With regard to salvation, the relationship of cause and effect between righteousness and God's grace, justification and sanctification, are therefore clearly established. It is only within this God-given order that the freedom and participation of people can be suitably determined. The basic consensus established here includes the understanding that the denunciations once leveled at the doctrines of other confessions have lost their validity. This is a consensus in basic truths that allows for different concerns and accentuations. The sixteenth-century dispute has thus come to an end. The reasons to denounce one another are no more.

## **QUESTIONS**

*What in Luther's theology of justification do Catholic theologians find somewhat confusing and irritating?*

*How does Catholic theology comprehend the faith in justification that has already taken place in God?*

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

*Wherein lies the basic consensus between Lutheran and Catholic teaching on the doctrine of justification?*



# BIBLE STUDY: EPHESIANS 2:4-10

*Cristina Grenholm*

Martin Luther firmly believed that the liberating message of the gospel cannot be delivered only once but, rather, that it needs to be repeated. There are two reasons for this.

First, it can never be fully grasped. The dominating logic of life seems to be that one needs to work, strive and make constant efforts. Life has a tendency to hide the profound insights of the gospel. Life is always a gift that nobody can earn by working hard. Life is not the result of how much energy you put into it. This is not to say that our efforts cannot make the world a better place—that is indeed our calling. However, at the end of the day, whatever has been achieved has nevertheless not been done by us. It may have been developed by us and we may have helped people and plants to flourish but everything is actually given to us. This is a constant surprise and a great consolation. It is God who makes our days. Life is given to us and to the whole of creation by grace.

The second reason is that we not only strive, but we also constantly fail. We do not achieve what we intended to achieve, or what we sensed we were urged to do. Sometimes this is due to our own failures, and sometimes it is due to the structures that rule our world. We need to be forgiven over and over again. We need to be lifted up from a state of resignation when we are faced with all the things we cannot change.

Salvation is not for sale. Thus, we cannot buy it with any kind of currency—be it money or blood, sweat and tears. Salvation is not achieved through physical or spiritual effort, by observing strategic priorities, or attending inspiring conferences. Salvation is not for sale. Cost-benefit models do not apply. The give-and-take mechanism is irrelevant. It is based on a give-and-receive model, and we are always at the receiving end. Salvation is not for sale. It is given away.

The message needs to be repeated, but how should this be done? Should we always try to remember the words? No, the message of the gift of salvation itself needs to be given as a gift from one person to another. It is not the type of information that needs to be kept in mind. It is a reply to a need, an answer to a question, a whisper to someone who is unable to express their need. The gospel always comes as a surprise—it is always unexpected. Therefore, the need might not yet have been articulated, the question may not yet have been posed and those who cannot express their need may not yet have begun to long for a whisper from somebody else.

It is part of our calling as baptized disciples of Christ, of our shared priesthood, that we look for the moments when the gospel needs to be articulated. Salvation is not for sale—it is part of a constant flow of God's love that cannot be stopped, not even by death. There is hope, light and a new beginning for everyone in need and we are sent to one another as preachers of this liberating grace. We need to study the biblical texts that give us this message and pray that it will help us to become instruments of God's grace. The good news cannot be bought or sold—it needs to be expressed and shared.

Let us therefore turn to one of the central texts of grace: Ephesians 2:4-10

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which He loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with Him and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come He might show the immeasurable riches of His grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what He has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

## **A BIBLE STUDY IN THREE STEPS**

This text is filled with words that are cherished in our tradition: mercy, love, life, grace, gift. In this Bible study we shall take as one of our starting points the conviction of the Reformers: that God speaks to each and every one of us. We are all approached by God. God does not direct Godself to experts only. We each have something to share with others. We are constant receivers of mercy, love, life and grace. Each and every one of us has been struck by this insight at crucial moments, although we may not have reflected on it in this way. Each and every one of us has been in desperate need of God's gifts, but may have been unable to express that

need. Everybody can recall some occasion when the light returned or the burden was lifted off. We may also remember who or what the instrument was by means of which this happened. Let us make the word become flesh by sharing this with one another.

Start by reading the text aloud together. You may sit in a circle and read one verse each. Let the word circulate several times and listen to the text two or three times. Or let different voices read it once. Then take a few minutes to allow everybody to choose their key word with which to open the text. Let each person be guided by their inner self. There is no “correct” key word. One person may choose a word that has been important to them for a long time. Another may choose a word that stood out in the readings. Yet somebody else may just pick a word at random.

When everybody has identified their key word, share them with one another. If you are a small group, the whole group can listen to the individual choices and get a brief description of why each person chose that particular word. Be careful not to judge the choices. Listen to one another. If you are a larger group, you may want to share in groups of four or five. You may experience that the biblical text is expanded and broadened in your group. There are so many different words with which to open a text—it can be approached from many different angles.

Go back to silence and let your own key word guide you through the text. What does this key word open up? What is it that becomes problematic or difficult? Those who prefer to write something down may do so. You need to allow for an atmosphere of reflective tranquility but you should not make the time for contemplation demanding or stressful. Three minutes will be enough in most cases.

Now, let everybody talk to the person next to them and relate their findings to one another in pairs. If you have time, share what the story that you were told by the other person made you see or think.

Finally, it is time to approach the big issues of the day. Try Google search, look for international news, or find another way of bringing the world to your Bible study. Agree on something that challenges, provokes or calls you to action. The world is not only a market where things are bought and sold. Salvation in all its dimensions of liberation, forgiveness and empowerment is constantly given away, but there is also much in this world that prevents grace from flowing. Equally, that is precisely why salvation is needed.

Add the big issue of the day that you agreed upon to the key word and the text. It is possible that going back to individual reflection is not the easiest and most fruitful way of doing this. Instead, return to the pairings whereby people guided each other through the text by means of their individually chosen key words. Now, let everybody share what the triangle of text, key word and pressing issue of the day that the other person raised revealed.

Close your Bible study by sharing some of the things you discovered with the whole group. Just one phrase from the participants will provide you with a rich range of expressions of God's salvation that is never for sale, but constantly resonates in our lives.

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