

# WHAT DID LUTHER REALLY WANT?

## A Contribution to Dialogue with Protestants

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The Directory concerning Ecumenism (14/5/1967) suggests that errors in that area will be avoided "as the faithful become more solidly and fully instructed in the teaching and authentic tradition both of the Catholic Church and the churches and communities separated from her."

This pamphlet is an important contribution to ecumenical dialogue of this kind as it expounds the extent of common ground existing between the Catholic Church and Lutheran teaching, and the improvement of relations resultant from II Vatican Council.

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-THE EDITOR.

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In a sense, the ecumenical movement could be said to have arrived at a stalemate. Whilst the extensive theological studies and discussions which have followed Vatican II have discovered much common ground between Catholics and at least some Protestants in areas which have traditionally divided us - the Eucharist and other sacraments, the nature of the Church and the ministry, for instance - it is becoming increasingly obvious that we have for many years now been divided on issues which at the time of the Reformation were, by and large, never seriously called in question by Christians of any denomination: the Virginal conception of Christ, his bodily resurrection and ascension, the reality of a future judgement, and, indeed, the divinity of Christ and the whole conception of Christianity as a system of objective knowledge concerning a personal, transcendent Deity and his revealed way of salvation from sin and eternal death.

#### **"Liberal" Ecumenism**

In the Protestant world, what might be called "establishment" ecumenism -- that highly organized and publicized movement that takes place under the aegis of the World Council of Churches - is dominated mainly by that constantly "progressing" liberal theology which, as one wit put it, has one foot in the Reformation and the other on a banana peel. Although there are considerable divergences between the various strands of modern Protestant thought, a fundamental common characteristic unites this movement, which in Australia is particularly strong in the large Presbyterian-Methodist-Congregational bloc (the Uniting Church of Australia): an all-pervasive mood of scepticism with regard to the historical, metaphysical, and moral affirmations of traditional Christianity. Dogma, especially that concerning the supernatural and the miraculous, is not so much flatly denied, in the manner of nineteenth-century positivism, as considered doubtful, and above all, irrelevant. "Salvation" comes to be seen in chiefly secular terms, as a liberation from psychological hang-ups, substandard economic conditions, and political and social oppression. Jesus is above all the "man for others", while God is to be encountered mainly, if not exclusively, as a vaguely transcendent element in man, and in "meaningful human relationships". In

the sphere of ethics, Christ's "law of love" is made the sole absolute in a way that refuses to acknowledge that love must be defined, at least to some extent, in terms of specific rules of conduct if it is not to degenerate into mere gratification of short-term desires.

### **The Ecumenical "Counter-Culture"**

At the present time, of course, there are various thinkers within the Catholic fold who have also been influenced strongly by these trends; and the publicity given in the media to their dissident views, as well as the key positions that some of them hold at national and diocesan level in most countries, have probably given them a prominence which is quite disproportionate to their actual numerical strength. One effect of this, over the last few years, has been to help crystallize or bring to the surface, amongst an increasing number of rank-and-file Catholics, a mood, or cast of mind, which has long existed within the Protestant Churches, and which is now beginning to express itself consciously in a much more articulate and highly organized way.

What we are witnessing is the development of an alternative form of inter-church sympathy and fellowship - an ecumenical counter-culture, so to speak - amongst Christians who are more or less suspicious of the "establishment's" secularist emphases, its doctrinal relativism and subjectivism, as well as its almost total insensitivity, in practice, to all social injustice and political oppression which occurs outside the context of right-wing regimes and power structures. The bond which is increasingly drawing together those of various Churches who are disenchanted with such trends is their common conviction that the doctrines of the Creed, understood basically in their original sense, with its emphasis on the supernatural and the transcendent, constitute the very foundation of the Christian faith. This move towards what might be loosely called a "traditionalist" ecumenism is now prompting many orthodox Catholics to think about their relationships with other Christians from quite a fresh angle. The writer hopes here to contribute something to this process of reassessment by considering, especially in relation to the present Australian situation, certain very important aspects of Protestant and Catholic belief which appear to have been rather neglected in most ecumenical dialogue up to date.

### **Modern Anglicanism**

Apart from the Eastern Orthodox, who in this country tend to operate in fairly secluded ethnic groups, and whose theological kinship with Catholics is often in practice still marred by strong Greek, Russian, and Yugoslav traditions of hostility towards the Latin Church, it is the "High Church" Anglicans who have usually been supposed to share the closest bonds with Catholics. To a considerable extent this generalization is still valid, but it is increasingly becoming less so, in Australia as elsewhere in the English-speaking world. The authentic Anglo-Catholicism of the nineteenth-century Oxford Movement, with its strict reverence for patristic teaching and the sanctity of revealed dogma, its emphasis on the Church as a visible, sacramental body, built on the apostolic succession, and its uncompromisingly Catholic attitude towards marriage and sex, seems to be a dying tradition.

What now goes by the name of "High" Anglicanism sometimes appears to be little more than a fondness for the sedate liturgical forms enshrined in the Book of Common Prayer, coupled with a doctrinal and moral relativism which is worlds apart from Catholicism. The writer has one "Anglo-Catholic" friend who revels in incense, genuflections, candles, robes, processions, and even such distinctively "Roman" observances as Benediction; yet he quite casually denies the Real Presence, and in fact, believes in a pantheistic brand of reincarnation.

No doubt this is not a typical case, but it is nevertheless symptomatic of the increasing erosion of faith in modern Anglicanism. Indeed, many Anglicans in Australia seem to see their own "High" churchmanship chiefly in terms of opposition to those "dreadful Sydney-diocese evangelicals", whose "low-church" outlook is spurned, ironically enough, largely because of its loyalty to what is in fact Catholic tradition: its emphasis on the miraculous, on sin and personal salvation, and on sexual purity.

## **AUSTRALIAN LUTHERANISM - OUR CLOSEST PROTESTANT ALLY?**

It would seem, in fact, that present-day trends in the churches should lead all loyal Catholics to a renewed appreciation for the considerable degree of common ground which they share with those Christians who, strangely enough, have traditionally shown them the most hostility - the conservative evangelicals. Amongst some of these groups in Australia, notably the Seventh Day Adventists, the Baptists, and several small independent Presbyterian groups, there seems little immediate prospect of friendly ecumenical relations, since these hardy souls still tend to see authentic Christianity as a battle on two fronts against the twin dragons of "Romanism" and "Modernism". Not without some justification, they have become increasingly alarmed that recent trends in Catholicism seem to indicate an unholy union between the two, resulting in that doubly monstrous offspring, "Modernistic Romanism". Consequently, such groups tend to greet the post-conciliar melodies of peace and good-will wafting from the Vatican with about the same degree of enthusiasm as they accord those which emanate from the Red Kremlin.

However, amongst other evangelicals (especially with the advent of the charismatic movement) the Pope is coming to be seen less and less as the Antichrist, and more and more as an ally (although still very much at arm's length) in the defence of many fundamental aspects of Christian faith and morals against unbelief both inside and outside the churches. Probably nowhere is this more true than amongst the Lutherans, who, considered as an entire Church, are probably closer to Catholicism than any other Protestant denomination in Australia today.

### **Lutheranism**

Catholics in the English-speaking world are frequently quite unfamiliar with Lutheranism, the original form of Protestant Christianity. In Australia this is especially true of the large centres of Catholic activity, Sydney and Melbourne, where Lutherans reside only in fairly small numbers. (The Lutheran Church is strongest in South Australia and southern Queensland, with other significant communities in western Victoria and southern New South Wales.)

Classical Lutheranism is to be distinguished from most other forms of evangelical Protestantism in that it retained, to a considerable degree, the fundamental Catholic principle that God has decided to convey his saving grace to us by means of material things - sacraments - especially Baptism and the Eucharist. To the more radical Protestants, especially those in the Calvinist and Baptist tradition which (apart from the High Anglican movement) has dominated Protestantism in the English-speaking world, this idea is basically superstitious: Baptism is simply a sign of spiritual regeneration, which is accomplished quite independently of it, while the Lord's Supper remains essentially an aid or auxiliary to increase faith, love and union with Christ - a spiritual "icing on the cake", as it were, rather than the very Bread of Life.

To Luther, however, the Eucharist remained a means of saving grace (which he tended to identify with the forgiveness of sins) because in it Christ himself is objectively present. When the Lutheran takes Holy Communion, he believes just as firmly as the Catholic that he is receiving the true Body of Christ. Luther did not accept transubstantiation - the doctrine that the bread *changes* into the Body of Christ - but he said that the Body of Christ was there "in, with, and under" the bread and wine, in the same way that "fire" is present in a piece of red-hot iron - a most expressive analogy, to be sure.

Other Protestants, again, have usually considered this almost as "superstitious" or "magical" as the Catholic doctrine, and hold that "eating the Body of Christ" must be understood "after a spiritual and heavenly manner only", as the Anglican article puts it - meaning in fact that while the communicant eats what is in itself only bread he is united to Christ in a special, sacramental way.

### **Australian Lutherans**

Lutherans in Europe and America have sometimes compromised on this issue, and have been prepared to tolerate, if not accept, the more typical Protestant view, but the distinctive history and genius of Australian Lutheranism is such that Luther's tendency towards Catholic doctrine in sacramental theology has always received a strong emphasis. The original Lutherans in this country were in fact Australia's "Pilgrim Fathers" - the only major group who migrated here in search of freedom from religious persecution. They were all strict adherents of the Lutheran sacramental position, who refused to acquiesce in the Prussian Union of 1830, by which the Reformed (Calvinist) and Lutheran Churches in that country were amalgamated by royal decree, in a way that, from the orthodox Lutheran point of view, watered down the Church's holy sacraments.

The strong Eucharistic emphasis resulting from this can readily be discerned by the visitor to Luther Seminary at North Adelaide (the sole Lutheran theological college for Australia and New Zealand) where he will find the refectory wall adorned within by an attractive wheat-and-grape motif, and without by the inscription, *Ego Sum Panis Vitae*. A strong liturgical tradition is also encouraged, since Luther, like the Anglican reformers and unlike the more radical puritans, did not cast out the basic structure of the Mass, crucifixes and vestments, the seasons of the Church year, and liturgical offices such as compline, vespers and matins. Those who did so, in favour of "free, spiritual" worship were in fact vilified by Luther as "mad enthusiasts" with no respect for tradition.

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#### RECENT CHANGES IN ATTITUDE

In spite of these affinities with Catholicism, it remains true that until fairly recently, Australian Lutherans retained a very negative attitude towards the Catholic Church, which was usually seen, in the light of Luther's own violent emotional reaction to the mediaeval Church, as a dreadful perversion of the essence of Christianity. Amongst some of the older and more conservative laity in Australia, this suspicion probably remains, but the younger breed of pastors and theological students are generally much more open and sympathetic towards Rome, and their influence will probably mollify this residual grass-roots anti-Catholic sentiment in the forthcoming years.

What grounds are there, then, for this change of heart? Partly it is due to post-Vatican II emphases in Catholic thinking: Lutherans have been heartened by the advent of a vernacular liturgy, a stronger emphasis on the preaching of the Word, on the "priesthood" or apostolate of the laity, on the study of Scripture, and perhaps above all, by the decline of that triumphalistic polemical spirit, that lofty contempt for all non-Catholic forms of religion, which too often characterized the pre-conciliar Church. Australian Lutherans, too, are being led by the above-mentioned erosion of dogma in most of the churches into an appreciation of authentic Catholicism; an appreciation which, without denying Luther's doctrines, is nevertheless sharply at variance with the Reformer's own perspective and emotional outlook. Luther was so preoccupied with the doctrine of justification that he and his followers often tended to talk rather slightly of the doctrines of the Creed as "mere historical knowledge". This was not at all because they were considered unimportant by the Reformers, but because, as we noted at the outset, they were seldom seriously disputed by anyone in 16th century Europe (apart from the Jews). One simply took them for granted.

#### **The Central Controversy - Justification**

The writer knows some Australian Lutherans who are so conscious of the sacramental and liturgical similarities between Lutheranism and Catholicism that they would want to class their Church along with Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and the Anglo-Catholic tradition as standing over against the Reformed and "pietistic" forms of evangelicalism.

However there is one fundamental difference above all which still divides the above three traditions - and indeed the whole of Christendom until the 16th century - from Lutherans and all other evangelicals. This

difference is what the latter group would call *the* doctrine of justification by faith, and what the Catholic tradition would call the novel 16th century interpretation of the orthodox Biblical doctrine of justification by faith. It was not simply the doctrine of the mediaeval Church that Luther rejected, but that of the first thousand years of Christendom as well. Indeed, to be an evangelical more or less commits one to the somewhat unlikely-sounding position that virtually the whole Christian Church lost sight of the central message of the Gospel almost immediately after New Testament times, and did not recover it until the Reformation (and even then, it was only parts of the Christian Church that regained this insight).

Not one father of the early Church taught Luther's doctrine of justification, and Luther himself was well aware of this, although he felt that some of the earlier doctors of the Church - Ambrose, Bernard, Bonaventure, and above all Augustine - came closer to the truth than others. On the whole, he did not find the fathers profitable on what he saw as the essence of the Gospel:

"Jerome may be read for historical reasons, for on faith and the doctrine of the true religion he does not have a word. Origen I have already banned. Neither does Chrysostom rate with me. He is a mere prattler. Basil is worthless; he is quite the monk; I should not give a nickel for him. The Apology of Philip [Melancthon - Luther's fellow-reformer] is better than all the doctors of the church, also Augustine himself." (Plass 1959, I: 313-14). [E. M. Plass (ed.) "What Luther Says: an Anthology." 3 vols. St Louis, Missouri, 1959.]

What, then, was the central Reformation doctrine concerning the teaching of St. Paul, which the Reformers found so sadly absent from the writings of previous theologians?

### **Possible Areas of Misunderstanding**

A common view amongst many Catholic theologians is the idea that the Reformers so exaggerated the effects of original sin that they denied that human nature was capable of being restored to its innate goodness, even by the power of God's grace and the Holy Spirit. Luther and Calvin, we are told, believed that the only kind of 'righteousness' of which man was now capable was the 'imputed' righteousness of Christ - that is, a state wherein God, for Christ's sake, calls him righteous even though he is really just as bad and unrighteous as ever.

To this criticism, Lutherans reply that it fails to take into account the Reformers' teaching on sanctification, which (unlike Catholics) they distinguish very sharply from justification. It is quite true that Luther and Calvin regarded justification as a purely 'extrinsic' thing - God's declaration that an inherently guilty man is nonetheless pronounced innocent and acquitted. But they also said that *after* this occurs, the Christian is gradually renewed inwardly by the Holy Spirit - that is, sanctified - although this process is never completed this side of the grave.

Another widespread school of thought holds that the fundamental difference between Catholicism and the Reformation is that the latter denies that salvation comes to us through sacraments. Certainly it is true that most non-Lutheran theologians (Catholic and non-Catholic) have argued that Luther's understanding of justification by faith is ultimately incompatible with his own insistence on the efficacy of Baptism and the Eucharist as means of saving grace. This is a difficult and complex question, but to do justice to the Lutheran position, it should be noted that Luther did not mean to be taken quite literally when he insisted on 'faith *alone*'. Understood in context, he (like St. Paul) invariably signified by this phrase, 'faith apart from *human works*', not 'faith apart from *sacraments*', which he regarded as God's works, not man's.

### **Another Basic Issue**

One more basic issue concerns the effects of original sin on the free will of man. The Reformers generally denied that fallen man is capable of co-operating even in the tiniest degree with God's grace in the process of his own salvation. God does absolutely everything in salvation, they said, while man does absolutely nothing. Even when prompted and aided by the Holy Spirit, they claimed, the sinner is incapable of turning to God. The logical conclusion of this would seem to be Calvin's notorious doctrine of double

predestination and irresistible grace, according to which we have no say at all as to whether we will spend eternity in Heaven or Hell. However, Luther could never bring himself to make such a terrible assertion, and seems to have held (with questionable logic, perhaps) that although fallen man is not free to co-operate with grace, he is free to resist it.

Taking note of this, a modern Catholic scholar, Rev. Harry McSorley, has recently published an exhaustive study (*Luther: Right or Wrong?*) of this controversy, and concludes optimistically that there need be no ultimate conflict between Lutherans and Catholics on this point. He argues that Luther, in his customary polemical manner, exaggerated what he really wanted to say in reaction to Erasmus, who, it now appears, seemed to hold a heretical, 'semi-Pelagian', view of free will which unfortunately was widely accepted in the early sixteenth century as the authentic Catholic doctrine.

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### THE REAL DIFFERENCE - WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?

Thus, it seems that even in the matter of free will, we may not have found the distinguishing characteristic of evangelical theology. The Jansenists held similar views to the Calvinists on that point, but they were certainly not evangelicals in their general theological position. Conversely, the Arminians, the Wesleyans, and many other conservative Protestants, have adopted a frankly Catholic position on free will, and yet their overall religious outlook marks them very clearly as evangelicals.

The writer's view is that what makes evangelicalism evangelical, and divides it from those forms of Christianity which retain a basically Catholic understanding of the Christian's relationship to God is not a uniform doctrine on free will, on original sin, on what grace is, or even on what justification is, but its implicit acceptance of Martin Luther's underlying assumption that, as Newman put it (whilst still an Anglican) :

"the great end of the gospel is to give peace to the troubled conscience, to take from it the fear of eternal death, and to assure it of pardon and acceptance with God . . . [that] without the certainty of salvation, at least so far as to know that, were we to die at the present moment we should be secure of heaven, . . . the gospel has hardly done its work." (Newman 1900: 26-27). [J. H. Newman, "Lectures on the Doctrine of Justification" 3rd edn. London 1900.]

This assumption lies at the basis of Luther's radically new definition of what faith is; or more precisely, his understanding of what 'justifying faith' is, since Luther drew a sharp distinction between what he called 'general faith' or 'historical knowledge' - that is, acceptance of the doctrines of the Creed - and 'justifying faith', by which he meant something personal and existential, a firm and trusting confidence that one's own sins are here and now forgiven, and that one stands acquitted for Christ's sake before the Almighty Judge. The former, said Luther, was necessary, but by no means sufficient, for salvation; it is the latter that makes the vital difference between whether a man is saved or damned.

Catholic tradition, on the other hand, has, from the beginning of the Church, understood 'justifying faith' in the New Testament to mean acceptance of the basic truths about God and Christ, as preached by the Apostles (i.e. Luther's 'historical' or 'general' faith) in a spirit of love and repentance which involves the sincere intention to turn from sin and try to keep Christ's commandments. The standard expression in Catholic theology to describe the faith by which sinners are reconciled to God is *fides caritate formata* - 'faith formed (permeated) by love'. Catholic doctrine makes personal forgiveness the *consequence* of such a faith, whilst evangelical theology makes it the *object* of faith - a faith, moreover, which the Reformers emphatically denied was necessarily "formed" by love, or penitence, or the will to avoid sin. Quite mistakenly (Catholics would say) they believed that these dispositions fell into the Pauline category of 'works'. Equally unfounded was their assumption that the moment you make any human action (love or repentance) a *prerequisite* for justification, you are saying that it (and not the blood of Christ) 'merits', 'earns', or 'purchases' justification - an inference with no foundation in Scripture. They did not say, as

Catholics have often supposed, that love of God, a turning from sin, and good works, were unnecessary; but insisted that they were possible only *after* a man was forgiven. In fact, Luther's downgrading of free-will led him to the very un-Catholic conclusion that holiness of life is simply *inevitable* in a justified person. Some Catholics have the mistaken idea that by "faith *alone*," Luther meant that, as long as we believe in Christ, we can commit as much mortal sin as we like, and still get to Heaven. But what he really held was that as long as we have "true faith" (i.e., firm confidence that all our own guilt has been washed away by Christ) we are actually *incapable* of committing grave sins at all!

## **Luther and the Confessional**

To understand this rather complicated doctrine, it is essential to appreciate the extent to which young Brother Martin's religious outlook was determined by his tortured experiences in the confessional. The Catholic position is based on the entirely scriptural (and indeed, common sense) principle that although God forgives sins freely for Christ's sake, he cannot forgive until there is first repentance, and the determination to try and avoid the sin in future. Therefore, Catholics take it for granted that the priest's absolution is not an *unconditional* declaration of God; its effectiveness depends on whether the confession was a 'good' one or not. But Luther, unfortunately, was one of those people with whom most priests are familiar, the devout Christian who is over-scrupulous and obsessed by guilt feelings. This of course is nothing to sneer at; some of the great Catholic saints were, like Luther, subject to attacks of torment over their scruples. But in the last resort, this tendency is due to an excessive preoccupation with oneself, with delving into and agonizing over the depths of one's own sinful heart, instead of looking outside of oneself to Christ and our neighbour. Evangelical theology replies that it is simply impossible for a man to love God and his neighbour until he has an unconditional assurance that he is 'saved', that is, in a state of grace which is no longer endangered by the sins he continues to commit. This is an argument not from Scripture, but from the personal experience of Luther. However, it is not the experience of ordinary Catholics, who certainly need no assurance that they are 'saved' in that sense before they can begin to have any sincere love and devotion for Christ.

## **Venial Sin**

Luther seems to have been unable to believe the Church's teaching that small (venial) sins do not cut the Christian off from his state of grace, and do not have to be enumerated in Confession. He 'experienced' all sin as mortal sin, and found himself actually hating God, because he could never feel free of the divine condemnation. He also seemed strangely unaware of the Church's teaching that while perfect contrition is of course most desirable, forgiveness does not depend on the *degree* of sorrow that we *feel* for our sins.

The essential thing in making a good confession is the disposition of the will, not the emotions. If you are sincerely determined in future to try and avoid the sin you are confessing, then you can know that the priest's absolution is effective, and that you are forgiven.

Thus, Luther's anguish continued until he made a startling 'discovery' which finally brought him relief. He came to believe that the words of absolution heard by the sinner must be regarded as an *unconditional* declaration and promise of God, an article of revealed truth just as unqualified as, say, the Trinity or the Resurrection. It followed from this premise that the sinner not only may, but must, believe that he is forgiven and justified. Thus, instead of the Catholic understanding of the gospel - the 'good news' to the sinner that through Christ he *can* be saved - Luther substituted a radically new one - the 'good news' that he is saved! To believe this supposedly unconditional declaration of personal forgiveness was now treated as the very core of Christian faith.

To doubt one's own state of forgiveness became a horrible, and indeed, a damnable sin - the essence of unbelief. Luther explains:

"To this day this is the way to obtain the forgiveness of sins. A servant of the church or some other Christian tells you: God is not angry with you: only see to it that you are not angry with Him. For the sake of His Son, Jesus Christ, He has forgiven you all your sins. When you hear this promise, you should

believe it with all your might and should rather let yourself be torn apart than doubt it. For if you doubt, the absolution will not help you at all..... For where faith is lacking, our Lord God is called a liar." (Plass 1959, 1: 7). [op.cit.]

Penitence, which the Church naturally taught was the condition attached to God's promise of forgiveness, was now thrown in together with the human works or merits which St. Paul taught could never earn forgiveness:

"Remember that the keys or the forgiveness of sins do not depend on our penitence or worthiness ... for this view is entirely Pelagian, Turkish, heathenish, Jewish, Anabaptistical, enthusiastic, and Antichristian." (ibid.)

His doctrine was summed up most bluntly in his theses of 1518 "on the remission of guilt and punishment", which included the following:

"14 However uncertain the priest as well as the sinner may be about the contrition, the absolution is valid if the man believes that he is absolved.

15 Therefore it is certain that sins are forgiven if you believe that they are forgiven, for the promise of Christ the Saviour is certain ...

18 Those who build forgiveness on contrition are building the faith of God on sand, that is, on the work of man . . ." (ibid., III: 1212).

This version of the gospel - "If you're sure Christ has forgiven you, he has; if not, he hasn't" - seems to defy all logical analysis. The Catholic cannot help wondering how a God of truth can be said to make a solemn declaration ("You are forgiven") which in fact is untrue until it is believed to be true.

The Catholic must ask the Lutheran to try to appreciate Pope Leo X's point of view. A young monk had begun preaching all over Germany the astounding doctrine that if we want to be forgiven our sins, we do not first have to see to it that we are truly repentant! We are forgiven provided only that we trust firmly and confidently that we are forgiven. Was this not tantamount to an open invitation to complacency and sin?

The Lutheran reply to this charge has always been that the Roman Church failed to appreciate Luther's insistence on preaching the "Law" as well as the "Gospel". The Reformers were just as well aware as the Pope that it is all too easy for some people to assume smugly that they are accepted and "O.K." with God, whilst continuing to lead an apathetic or immoral life; but they were most emphatic that this was not the sort of "faith" which justifies anyone. True faith, they said, is possible only after someone has been awakened to a deep sense of anguish over his hopeless condition by the preaching of God's wrath and judgement on sin. Or, as a typical Lutheran writer puts it, justifying faith is that which, "reaching up out of a heart that mourns over and hates sin, lays hold of Christ" (Gerberding 1919: 166). [G. H. Gerberding, "The Way of Salvation in the Lutheran Church", Minneapolis 1919.]

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### **Luther's "Law" and "Gospel" - Contradictory?**

Perhaps it is true that Catholics have usually failed to do justice to the totality of evangelical teaching. However, evangelicals might in turn ask themselves whether Luther's teaching on "Law" does not really contradict his doctrine concerning "Gospel". After all the passionate insistence on "faith *alone*" - that is, *without* love or penitence - we discover at length that it is not just simple confidence that your sins are freely forgiven that is said to justify. Rather, it is the confidence of one who has experienced the depths of soul-searing guilt-consciousness over the Law's accusations. It is this prior experience that allegedly makes the vital difference between a true, living faith and a shallow, dead faith. If Catholicism teaches "justification by love", as the Reformers complained, then Lutheranism teaches something like "justification by anguish", since these two dispositions fill precisely parallel roles in the two theological systems. As Newman observed shrewdly "whereas [Luther] preached against reliance on self, he

introduced it in a more subtle shape" (1900: 340). [op.cit.] For Catholicism's alleged reliance on one's own sense of goodness or merit, Luther's theology as a whole (as distinct from that half of it concerned with "Gospel" rather than "Law") really substitutes reliance on one's own sense of sin and unworthiness. It is not that this reliance occupies a prominent position in the evangelical's day-to-day religious consciousness, in which confidence and trust is always directed outwards towards Christ: rather, it is tucked away as a latent first principle, which is brought to light when one asks him how he knows that his faith is not the "dead" faith which he deplures in so many professing Christians.

The usual answer is an earnest confession of how *concerned* he is about his sins, how *deep* and *utter* is his sense of unworthiness, how *absolute* his dependence on Christ. In short, the evangelical's "certainty" that he is a true (i.e. "saved") Christian seems to rest on what he sees as his own deep humility and sin-consciousness, even though, of course, he regards these very qualities as the gift of God, and not his own achievements.

### **A Starting-Point for Discussion**

At a time of renewed mutual appreciation between Catholics and Lutherans, these are some of the issues that might be discussed with the greatest degree of profit. There are, of course, many other issues separating Catholics from the evangelical tradition; yet none is more important than this central question of justification, the original point of dispute. And because the issues here are concerned with the deep and somewhat intangible workings of the human heart and conscience, there is perhaps more scope for misunderstanding here than in the more "impersonal" doctrines concerning the papacy, Mary, the Mass, and so on. Some Lutheran reader may feel that the evangelical position has not been presented adequately in this paper; if so then it will only be of benefit to all concerned if this stimulates clarification and further discussion.

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### **QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION**

1. What is faith? Are there any New Testament passages which seem to define it in the evangelical sense, as "to want and to accept the promised offer of forgiveness of sins"? (Apology of the Augsburg Confession, IV: 48).

Does traditional Catholic theology underrate the importance of trust and confidence - emphasized so strongly by the Reformers?

2. Catholics believe that a Christian's works in this life "merit" various degrees of reward in heaven - a view commonly rejected by Protestants. However, is not the same doctrine taught in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession (IV: 194)?

3. Catholic theology associates justification with "imparted", not merely "imputed" righteousness. That is, a penitent sinner is (a) *declared* good and (b) simultaneously *made* good by the renewal of the Holy Spirit. Does this substantiate the Reformers' criticism that Catholicism denies the *gratuitous* forgiveness of sins,

and makes justification a reward for human merit?

4. Both Catholic and Calvinist theologians have argued that if anyone is justified who trusts firmly that Christ has freely forgiven him, then justification cannot come through sacraments. Is Lutheranism, then, inconsistent?

5. Does the Catholic doctrine that perseverance in trying to keep God's commandments is necessary in order to *remain* (not *become*) justified imply, as evangelicals claim, that the Catholic's "faith" is not directed wholeheartedly to Christ, but largely to his own works?

6. Does not Luther's claim that the man of faith *inevitably* leads a good and holy life (he denied that it is possible for a Christian to commit, say, murder or adultery) implicitly contradict his insistence that all sin is equally serious? (It implies that there are some sins which are evidence for the absence of faith, and others which are not.)

Doesn't everyone really, in practice, make the Catholic distinction between mortal and venial sin?