AWWOP Thursday

Thursday

Justification by Faith Today

Where theology meets daily life

By Hans Heinz

Whenever Christians remind themselves of the biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone, people experience an awakening, revival, and reformation. This was the case when Martin Luther reached back to the apostle Paul (“Paul, my Paul”) across a church tradition of more than a thousand years, and with this “supreme thesis”1 set the Reformation of the sixteenth century in motion.

On May 24, 1738,, after John Wesley in Aldersgate Street, London, listened to Luther’s *Preface to Romans*, he started a revival movement in England, which became “a ruling epoch of English history.”2

This was also the case when in 1888 at the General Conference session in Minneapolis a new Christocentric chapter of Adventist church history began with the contemplation of Christ’s righteousness. The fruit of that turnaround were a number of Ellen White’s Christ-centered books: *Steps to Christ*, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, and *The Desire of Ages*.

On the other hand, times during which Christians focused on their own achievements and merits were always periods of decline. As early as the second century A.D., Paul’s focus on righteousness by faith alone had no longer been properly understood. During the Middle Ages his followers were a minority, and on the eve of the Reformation the opinion prevailed that “if a man does what is in his own might, then God will add His grace.” This sentence appalled Luther and drove him to exclaim in his lecture on Romans: “Oh, you fools!”3

Justification of Sinners or Justification of God?

If one considers these circumstances in the context of the present religious situation, they seem to have little significance for today:

In modern theology the doctrine of justification plays only a subordinate role. It is considered a time-limited polemic against Judaizing legalism during apostolic times. After all, it occurs only in two of the Pauline epistles, and thus is only of “secondary importance” for the Christian doctrine of redemption. It is a disappearing doctrine because, so it is said, the historical situation for which it was formulated has no relevancetoday.

An exception to the current lack of interest is registered only in the area of ​​ecumenical church policy, where the “Joint Declaration” of 1999 between the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the Lutheran World Federation claimed a “principal consensus” on the doctrine of justification, which Pope Benedict XVI rated as a “milestone on the road to Christian unity.”4 But since that time it has gotten very quiet regarding this document, as it, in the opinion of many commentators, says only with similar words what continues to be understood differently.

Finally, most people, often secular people, no longer search for a “merciful God” as Luther did, but ask whether this God really exists. If so, then He should justify Himself for all the suffering and evil in the world!

Of course, most secular-minded people are not aggressive atheists. The prevailing attitude among them is one of “practical atheism,” an outlook in which one is not fighting against God, but simply ignores Him, because one lives pretty well without Him.

Our Challenge

How can we Christians approach people like this and raise an awareness for the gospel? Most do not know what sin is, let alone that it is primarily an offense against God (Ps. 51:5-11). They also do not know how sin can be forgiven (1 John 2:2) and that part of a fulfilled life consists in a peace (Rom. 5:1) and a hope (Titus 2:11-14) that are not found in this world.

While people don’t seem to have space for God, they do suffer from guilt on the horizontal level: interpersonal conflict, social and political injustice, wars among nations, and the destruction of nature—the very foundation of our existence.

Christian-Adventist preaching can connect to this self-awareness of people in several ways:

We recognize that the alienation from ourselves and from our environment lies in the alienation from the Life-giver and Creator. The apostle’s verdict is clear: “There is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away” (Rom. 3:11, 12, NIV).

Our experience testifies to the truthfulness of Scripture’s claim: “Can an Ethiopian change his skin or a leopard its spots? Neither can you do good who are accustomed to doing evil” (Jer. 13:23, NIV).

The problem lies not so much in the circumstances but in humanity itself that is unable to control itself and to find a solution for this world. It is, as Jesus says and Paul affirms: “For out of the heart come evil thoughts” (Matt. 15:19, NIV) and we are “sold as a slave to sin” (Rom. 7:14, NIV). Sin (in the singular, as a condition) is ultimately turning away from God and turning toward creation: we think we can master our lives. This attitude leads to sins (plural, actions of sin).

What Then Shall We Do?

The only solution to this dilemma can be found in Jesus of Nazareth, the “absolute man,” whose life, death, and resurrection guarantees present and future salvation. He lived among us “in the world” but was not “of the world.” He is the way back to God, because, as the Son of God, He Himself is the “revelation of God” (see John 14:6, 9).

If we are honest, we recognize that human aspiration to achieve the “brave new world” is really utopian. Despite great technological advances—think nuclear power, space exploration, the digital realm of bits and bytes—this “perfect world” remains elusive. Sinners are not able to create something sinless! The “new earth, where righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3:13, NIV), can be promised and given only by God; then it can be hoped for and expected by Christ’s followers.

All this turns the Christian doctrine of salvation into a timeless and indispensable option for our helpless and hopeless fellow humans. Advent people are called to preach this message for our time to the world: Only “in Christ” can we make peace with God and one another; only His love gives meaning to life and hope for a world in which righteousness reigns! As Ellen White wrote: “Of all professing Christians, Seventh-day Adventists should be foremost in uplifting Christ before the world.”5

PULLQUOTE:

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QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND SHARING:

1. Why have people around us so little appreciation for the doctrine of justification of sinners?

2. What does the Seventh-day Adventist Church need to experience a revival? What’s our task in these times?

3. What gives you confidence and hope in a world that believes that it can save itself, yet finds itself on the edge of a bottomless pit?

1 Martin Luther, *Luthers Schriften: Weimar Edition* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2004), vol. 21, p. 219.

2 William Lecky, quoted in Julius Roessle, *Johannes Wesley*, 2nd ed. (Giessen: Brunnen, 1954), p. 24.

3 Martin Luther, *Luthers Schriften: Weimar Edition* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2007), vol. 56, p. 274.

4 *ideaSpektrum* 46 (November 2005): 12.

5 Ellen G. White, *Evangelism* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1946), p. 188.