

# The Understanding of Luther's "Union with Christ" Teaching in Early 20th-Century American Lutheranism, Compared to the Understanding of This Teaching in the "New Finnish Interpretation"

David Jay Webber

The "New Finnish Interpretation" has been making a significant impact on Luther studies for the past couple decades. This movement – led by Tuomo Mannermaa, Emeritus Professor of History at the University of Helsinki – is taking note of certain aspects of Martin Luther's theology that were minimized or ignored by many influential Luther scholars in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In particular, the Finns are noticing, and commenting on, the "union with Christ" themes in Luther's writings, and are pointing out the deficiencies of those interpretations of Luther – especially in German circles – that had not properly taken this "participatory" component of Luther's theology into account.

Mannermaa and his colleagues blame this weakness on the influence of certain neo-Kantian assumptions that had come to be embraced by many if not most German theologians by the mid- to late-nineteenth century. Simo Peura, a colleague of Mannermaa, observes:

Characteristic of neo-Kantian theology is the radical separation of God's being (*esse*) and his effects (*Wirkungen*) from each other. This means either that only certain effects (of God) exist or that God is in no way present in the effects he produces. Because of this separation, such theological ideas as the union of God and the Christian (*unio cum Deo*) become impossible. The neo-Kantian theological school has had a wide and comprehensive influence on Luther research until now.<sup>1</sup>

On this point the Finns are correct, especially in regard to the state of European Luther studies over the past several generations. For example, while the influential nineteenth-century theologian Albrecht Ritschl did acknowledge that the Lutheran dogmatists of the seventeenth century taught a mystical union of God with the believer, he rejected the legitimacy of this doctrine. Adolf Hoenecke, in epitomizing Ritschl's position, notes that, according to Ritschl,

This doctrine entered the Lutheran theology of the 17th century by means of false mysticism and neoplatonic metaphysics as a worthless and unhealthy construct. It did not come from Luther. ... The mystical thoughts one finds in Luther are pre-Reformation, and all members of the Lutheran church who cling to a mystical union of the believers with God for that reason do not belong to the followers of Luther but, rather, to the followers of Zinzendorf.<sup>2</sup>

The seventeenth-century teaching that Ritschl and others like him so disdained is summarized well by Abraham Calov when he explains that "The mystical union of Christ with the believer is a true and real and most intimate conjunction of the divine and human nature of

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<sup>1</sup> Simo Peura, "Christ as Favor and Gift," in *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther* (edited by Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson) (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 46.

<sup>2</sup> Adolf Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics* III (translated by James Langebartels) (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2003), 388.

the theanthropic Christ with a regenerated man, which is effected by the virtue of the merit of Christ through the Word and Sacraments; so that Christ constitutes a spiritual unit with the regenerated person, and operates in and through him, and those things which the believer does and suffers he appropriates to himself, so that the man does not live, as to his spiritual and divine life, of himself, but by the faith of the Son of God, until he is taken to heaven.”<sup>3</sup>

The Finns likewise acknowledge that in the pre-Kantian era, Lutheran theology in general did acknowledge a “participatory” union of Christ and the believer. Contrary to Ritschl’s assertion that a theology of mystical union was brought into Lutheranism only in the seventeenth century, the Formula of Concord of 1577 teaches that “God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who is the eternal and essential righteousness, dwells through faith in the elect, who have become righteous through Christ and are reconciled with God. (For all Christians are temples of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who moves them to act properly.)”<sup>4</sup> The Formula immediately goes on to say, however, that “this indwelling of God is not the righteousness of faith, which St. Paul treats and calls *iustitia Dei* (that is, the righteousness of God), for the sake of which we are pronounced righteous before God. Rather, this indwelling is a result of the righteousness of faith which precedes it, and this righteousness [of faith] is nothing else than the forgiveness of sins and the acceptance of poor sinners by grace, only because of Christ’s obedience and merit.”<sup>5</sup> The Formula explains that the Christian’s righteousness before God is not rooted fundamentally in the *indwelling* of the divine-human Christ, but instead is rooted fundamentally in the *obedience* of the divine-human Christ. We are pronounced righteous, and the righteousness of Christ is imputed to us, because of the perfect life that Jesus led on our behalf; because of the innocent suffering and death that he endured for our sake; and because of the victory over death that Jesus won for us in his glorious resurrection.<sup>6</sup>

But according to the Finns, these clarifications in the Formula are actually distortions – or at least they are distortions of what Luther himself had taught in regard to the indwelling of God, and the relationship between this indwelling and the justification of the Christian. Peura argues that in Luther’s actual teaching,

the righteousness that stands in front of God is based on the indwelling of Christ. The indwelling Christ in the heart of the Christian is the necessary condition for God’s favor as well as for the renewing gift. The heart of the Christian is holy because of the indwelling of Christ.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast to this supposed position of Luther, Mannerman observes that

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<sup>3</sup>Abraham Calov, *Systema Locorum Theologicorum* (1655-77), X, 526; quoted in Heinrich Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (translated by Charles A. Hay and Henry E. Jacobs) (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1889), 487.

<sup>4</sup>Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration III:54, in *The Book of Concord* (edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert) (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 571-72.

<sup>5</sup>FC SD III:54, Kolb/Wengert 572.

<sup>6</sup>FC SD III:14-17, Kolb/Wengert 564.

<sup>7</sup>Peura, “Christ as Favor and Gift,” 66.

justification and the indwelling of God in the believer are conceptually separated from each other in the Formula of Concord. Justification is only the forgiveness of sins. The indwelling of God follows in a logical sense after justification.<sup>8</sup>

In developing his thesis on the “disconnect” between Luther and the Formula of Concord, Mannermaa posits a Melancthonian intrusion into the theological life of the church as an explanation for this “disconnect.” He writes that

the FC’s definition concerning the relation between “justification” and “divine indwelling” is different from that found in Luther’s theology, at least as far as terminology is concerned. Thus, in the FC, “justification by faith” merely denotes the forgiveness of sins that is “imputed” to Christians on the basis of the perfect obedience and complete merit of Christ. At the same time the *inhabitatio Dei* is made a separate phenomenon, logically *subsequent* to justification. ... In its argument that the presence of the Trinity in faith is not the same phenomenon as the “righteousness of faith,” the FC draws on the later theology of [Philip] Melancthon, on which much of Lutheran theology after Luther has relied.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, while the mystical union was held by classic Lutheran theology to be *logically* subsequent to justification and forgiveness, it was in actual occurrence acknowledged to be *simultaneous* with justification and forgiveness. Johann Andreas Quenstedt explains that

Regeneration, justification, union, and renovation are simultaneous, and, being more closely united than the ingredients of an atom, so cohere that they cannot be separated or rent asunder. Yet, according to our mode of conceiving of them, justification and regeneration are prior in order to the mystical union.<sup>10</sup>

In the early twentieth century, the theology of the Lutheran churches in America was much more conservative than that of their European counterparts. Neo-Kantian ideas had little if any influence. The Americans were essentially reading Luther with “uncorrupted” eyes. What did they see? Were the American Lutherans aware of the “union with Christ” Luther passages? If so, how did they interpret these passages, especially in relation to the important question of the sinner’s justification before God?

Francis Pieper was a Professor at the Missouri Synod’s Concordia Seminary in Saint Louis, Missouri, from 1878 to his death in 1931, and was the President of the institution from 1887 to 1931. His reading of Luther’s views on justification was not the same as that of the Finnish scholars of our time. In Volume II of his *Christian Dogmatics*, first published in 1917, he states that

God’s method of justifying men by faith is indeed a wondrous one. We may easily lose

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<sup>8</sup>Tuomo Mannermaa, “Justification and Theosis in Lutheran-Orthodox Perspective,” in *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther*, 38.

<sup>9</sup>Tuomo Mannermaa, *Christ Present in Faith: Luther’s View of Justification* (edited by Kirsi Stjerna) (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 4.

<sup>10</sup>Johann Andreas Quenstedt, *Theologia Didactico-Polemica* (1685), III, 621; quoted in Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 486.

sight of its wonderful character, since it is so familiar to us. But Luther is right when he says: "It is a great thing to hold and believe in sincere faith that *all my sins are forgiven* and that through such faith *I am righteous before God*. That is certainly a wondrous justice and far different from the justice of all jurists, all learned and wise men of this world." (St.L. XIII:2495.)<sup>11</sup>

With reference also to other statements by Luther, Pieper claims that

The forgiveness of sins constitutes the entire justification, not merely a part of it. ... Luther...says time and again that the righteousness of the Christians before God consists in "the forgiveness of sins" (St.L. XI:1730 f.; V:594; XIII:771).<sup>12</sup>

One of these references (St.L. V:594) directs our attention to Luther's 1532 exposition of Psalm 51. In opposition to the scholastic notion that the "righteousness of God" is that by which God judges and condemns sinners, Luther points out here that it is necessary for a troubled conscience to remember instead

that the righteousness of God is *that by which we are justified, or the gift of the forgiveness of sins*. This righteousness in God is pleasant, because it makes of God not a righteous Judge but a forgiving Father, who wants to use His righteousness not to judge but *to justify and absolve sinners*.<sup>13</sup>

There is an ecumenical dimension to the work that the Finnish researchers are doing, since they believe that they are finding in Luther a teaching on justification that is more broadly catholic than the position of the Formula of Concord.<sup>14</sup> But Luther himself, as Pieper cites him, turns this ecumenical agenda on its head. Pieper quotes Luther to say that in the final analysis, all true Christians in the history of the church actually believed – implicitly if not explicitly – that their righteousness before God consisted in the forgiveness of their sins for Christ's sake, and not in anything else:

That all Christians of all ages and all lands are one in the article of justification is thus set forth by Luther: "The faith that *we obtain the forgiveness of sins solely for Christ's sake by faith* has been the faith of the Fathers and prophets and all saints from the beginning of the world; and it has been the doctrine and teaching of Christ and the Apostles, who were commissioned to spread it in all the world. And it is to this day, and will be to the end, the unanimous understanding and voice of the whole Christian Church, which always in one mind and with one accord has confessed and fought for this article, that only in the name of the Lord Jesus forgiveness of sins is obtained and received. *And in this faith they have been justified before God and saved*." (St.L. XII:494 f.)<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* II (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1951), 505. Emphases added.

<sup>12</sup>Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, II, 537-38.

<sup>13</sup>Martin Luther, "Psalm 51," *Luther's Works* 12 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955), 392. Emphases added. For another highly illustrative statement from Luther on this point, see his 1535 "Lectures on Galatians," *Luther's Works* 26 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), 231-32.

<sup>14</sup>Peura, "Christ as Favor and Gift," 68.

In his *Dogmatics*, Pieper does not include any Luther quotes in his discussion of the mystical union – which basically recapitulates the teaching of the Formula of Concord and the seventeenth-century dogmaticians. But Hoenecke does include such material in his *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, published posthumously in 1909. From 1878 until his death in 1908 Hoenecke was the Director and Professor of Dogmatics in the seminary of the Wisconsin Synod – a sister-church of the Missouri Synod.

Before dealing with the topic of the indwelling of Christ, Hoenecke states, in regard to justification as such, that

the imputation of the obedience or righteousness of Jesus is correctly called the essence of justification. But Scripture also says that we are justified by the remission of sins (Ro 3:24,25), by the acquittal from sins in Christ (Ac 13:38,39), or by the nonimputation of sins (Ro 4:6-8). Thus according to these passages we must say that justification is complete if sins are forgiven to a person, or not imputed to him, or the essence of justification is the forgiveness or nonimputation of sins.<sup>16</sup>

When he comes to his discussion of the mystical union, Hoenecke quotes Quenstedt to say that

The moment of this union is altogether the same as the moment of regeneration, justification, and renewal. For all these *apotelesmata* occur at the same time.<sup>17</sup>

Things can exist together without thereby becoming the same thing. The justification of the sinner for the sake of Christ's obedience, and the mystical union of Christ with the justified believer, do indeed exist together. And they *always* exist together in the faith and life of a Christian – never one without the other. They are never separated. But they *are distinct*. Justification strictly speaking, and the mystical union strictly speaking, are not the same thing. And according to Hoenecke, the forgiveness of sins through Christ is always *logically* the source and basis of the union of Christ with the forgiven sinner.

When Hoenecke examines Luther's various pronouncements on justification and the mystical union, he does not see any evidence of a blending-together or homogenizing of these categories, in such a way that the forensic "edge" of justification would be dulled or softened. But in Luther's writings, Hoenecke does see some helpful testimonies to, and explications of, the mystical union in its own right. These are the statements by Luther that Hoenecke marshals as evidence of Luther's – and Lutheranism's – properly-ordered "union with Christ" teaching:

The third incomparable benefit of faith is that it unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom. By this mystery, as the apostle teaches, Christ and the soul become one flesh ["The Freedom of a Christian," LW 31:351].

Thus the true Spirit dwells in the believers not merely according to his gifts, but according to his own substance ["Psalm 51," LW 12:377].

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<sup>15</sup>Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* II, 517-18. Emphases added.

<sup>16</sup>Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics* III, 330.

<sup>17</sup>Quenstedt, *Theologia Didactico-Polemica*, obj. dial. I, 3, 629; quoted in Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics* III, 391.

Faith takes hold of Christ and has him present, enclosing him as the ring encloses the gem ["Lectures on Galatians" (1535), LW 26:132].

"Not I, but Christ lives in me." Christ is my "form," which adorns my faith as color or light adorns a wall. (This fact has to be expounded in this crude way, for there is no spiritual way for us to grasp the idea that Christ clings and dwells in us as closely and intimately as light or whiteness clings to a wall.) ... This attachment to him causes me to be liberated from the terror of the law and of sin ["Lectures on Galatians" (1535), LW 26:167].

But faith must be taught correctly, namely, that by it you are so cemented to Christ that he and you are as one person, which cannot be separated but remains attached to him forever. ... Thus Eph. 5:30 says: "We are members of the body of Christ, of His flesh and of His bones," in such a way that this faith couples Christ and me more intimately than a husband is coupled to his wife ["Lectures on Galatians" (1535), LW 26:168].<sup>18</sup>

Both Pieper and Hoenecke taught and wrote in German,<sup>19</sup> and served predominantly German-speaking Lutheran constituencies. But the mystical union was also a topic of theological reflection among the English-speaking Lutherans in early twentieth-century America. During his long tenure as Professor and later President of the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, Henry Eyster Jacobs was the most influential leader in the English-speaking Lutheran Church. In 1905 his theological *magnum opus*, *A Summary of the Christian Faith*, was published.

In this work, which is arranged in a catechetical question-and-answer format, Jacobs begins his chapter on "The Mystical Union" in this way:

Besides the righteousness of Christ and the gifts which it has purchased what else does faith receive?

Christ Himself who dwells in a peculiar way in every regenerate and justified soul.

Gal. 2:20—"It is no longer I that live, but Christ liveth in me." John 15:5—"I am the vine, ye are the branches; he that abideth in me and I in him, the same beareth much fruit." John 14:23—"My Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him." Eph. 3:17—"That Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith." 1 Cor. 6:17—"He that is joined unto the Lord is one spirit."<sup>20</sup>

And how does Luther treat the mystical union? Jacobs answers that question as follows, with these words from the Reformer's 1535 Lectures on Galatians:

"Christ thus inhering and bound up with me" (literally, "glued to me," *conglutinus mihi*), "and abiding in me, lives in me the life which I am living; yea, the life by which I thus

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<sup>18</sup>Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics* III, 389-90.

<sup>19</sup>Their respective Dogmatics works have been quoted in the present essay from English translations.

<sup>20</sup>Henry Eyster Jacobs, *A Summary of the Christian Faith* (Philadelphia: The United Lutheran Publication House, 1905), 244.

love, is Christ Himself. ... This inherence frees me from the terrors of the law and sin, takes me out of my own skin, and transfers me into Christ and His Kingdom, which is a kingdom of Grace, righteousness, peace, joy, life, salvation and eternal glory. ... Because He lives in me, whatever grace, righteousness, life, peace, salvation is in me is that of Christ Himself, and, nevertheless, it is mine through that union (*conglutinationem*) and inherence which is by faith, and whereby Christ and I are made as it were one body in spirit." ... "You are so bound up with Christ, that from you and Him there is made but one person, which cannot be separated, but so perpetually adheres to Him, that you can say with confidence: 'I am Christ,' i.e., Christ's righteousness, victory, life, etc., are mine; and Christ, in turn, says, 'I am that sinner,' i.e., his sins, death, etc., are mine, because he adheres to me, and I to him; for by faith we are joined into one body and one bone (Eph. 5:30). This faith joins Christ and me more closely than the husband is joined to the wife" (On Gal. 2:20).<sup>21</sup>

Jacobs does not think that these statements by Luther are statements about the sinner's justification before God, strictly speaking. They are statements about the justified Christian's intimate and gracious union with Christ. The forgiveness of sins, and the Christian's mystical union with the Lord, are nevertheless both received in and by faith. The assurance of faith is therefore of great importance in any consideration of either topic.

Elsewhere in his book, Jacobs asks and answers this pertinent historical and theological question:

What was Luther's advice to [Johannes] Brenz when [Brenz was] troubled by doubts concerning the assurance of faith?

"I am accustomed, for the better understanding of this point, to conceive this idea, that there is no quality in my heart at all, call it either faith or charity; but instead of these I set Christ Himself, and I say, '*There is my righteousness.*'"

The highest achievement of faith is to be so absorbed in looking to Christ as to forget itself. The children of Israel, who were bitten by serpents in the wilderness (Num. 21:6-9), were healed upon the condition of looking upon the brazen serpent. Their attention was occupied, not with an analysis of the act of looking, but with the object of their gaze itself. So, important as self-examination is, Luther warns against its abuse, and seeks to turn morbid habits of introspection away from their ordinary channel to the righteousness outside of and above man in the merits of his Redeemer.<sup>22</sup>

This 1531 letter from Luther to Brenz was cited by Jacobs in at least three of his writings. The section of the letter that he cites here focuses on the forensic aspect of justification, and on the fact that it is the alien righteousness of Christ, coming to the Christian from outside of himself, that justifies him. But in a lengthier excerpt from the letter that Jacobs had included in an earlier book, *Elements of Religion*, the intimate connection that exists in Luther's theology between forensic justification and the mystical union is clearly evident. As quoted more fully in that earlier work, Luther writes:

I am accustomed, my Brentius, for the better understanding of this point, to conceive this idea, that there is no quality in my heart at all, call it either faith or charity; but instead of

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<sup>21</sup>Jacobs, *A Summary of the Christian Faith*, 245-46.

<sup>22</sup>Jacobs, *A Summary of the Christian Faith*, 204-05. Emphasis in original.

these I set Christ Himself, and I say, *There is my righteousness*. He is my quality and my formal righteousness, as they call it, so as to free me from looking into Law or works; nay, from looking at Christ Himself as a teacher or a giver. But I look at Him as gift and as doctrine to me, in Himself, so that in Him I have all things. He says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life"; He says not, "I give thee the way and the truth and the life," as if He were working on me from without. All these things *He* must be *in me*; abiding, living and speaking *in me*, not through me or to me; that we may be "the righteousness of God *in Him*" (2 Cor. 5:21); not in love, nor in the gifts and graces which follow.<sup>23</sup>

A Christian is justified by faith in Christ, and not by the working of an infused grace that is *detached from* Christ. And the faith that justifies is a faith that is filled with the life of Christ himself. It is not a sterile and merely intellectual thing. But the reason why such a faith justifies is not to be found in the faith itself, but is to be found in the *object* of faith. Faith justifies, because it embraces Christ, and receives the extrinsic righteousness of Christ. In yet another place where Jacobs cites, and comments on, the letter to Brenz, this important aspect of the letter is teased out and emphasized:

"I am accustomed to conceive this idea," wrote Luther to Brenz, "that there is no quality in my heart at all, call it either faith or charity, but, instead of these, I set Christ himself before me, and say: There is my righteousness." In thus doing, he was simply performing an act of faith, for faith is simply saying: "There," i.e. outside of myself, "is my righteousness."<sup>24</sup>

Jacobs clearly knew that in the lines that followed these quoted lines, this letter went on to speak of Christ as living and abiding in the believing Christian. Jacobs never denied or minimized the mystical union. But the righteousness of Christ that justifies me is not a righteousness for which I am to look by means of introspection or inner contemplation. For justification, my faith always looks to a righteousness that is "outside of myself," in Christ, and in the message of his cross. Jacobs would not, therefore, have had much sympathy with *this* reading of Luther, from within the "New Finnish Interpretation," by Peura:

Christ is completely holy and pure in the eyes of God. Where Christ is, there God directs his favor. Moreover, Christ indwells in the Christian's heart through faith. So, according to Luther, *the righteousness that stands in front of God is based on the indwelling of Christ. The indwelling Christ in the heart of the Christian is the necessary condition for God's favor* as well as for the renewing gift. The heart of the Christian is holy because of the indwelling of Christ.<sup>25</sup>

There are a few places in Luther's writings where he uses the term "justification" in a less precise fashion, when he is not really seeking to make an important point about justification as such. The Finnish scholars are drawn to these places in the Reformer's writings, and make

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<sup>23</sup>Martin Luther, Letter to Johannes Brenz (1531), quoted in Henry Eyster Jacobs, *Elements of Religion* (Philadelphia: The United Lutheran Publication House, 1894), 285. Emphasis in original.

<sup>24</sup>Henry Eyster Jacobs, "Justification," *Lutheran Cyclopedia* (edited by John A. W. Haas and Henry Eyster Jacobs) (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1899), 258. It will be noticed that Jacobs tweaks his translation of this letter, to one degree or another, each time he quotes from it.

<sup>25</sup>Peura, "Christ as Favor and Gift," 66. Emphasis added.



liberal use of this material. An example of this broader usage of the term can be seen in Luther's 1535 Lectures on Galatians, where, in commenting on St. Paul's statement that "Christ lives in me" (Galatians 2:21), Luther says that

my old man (Eph. 4:22) remains outside and is subject to the Law. *But so far as justification is concerned, Christ and I must be so closely attached that He lives in me and I in Him.* What a marvelous way of speaking! Because He lives in me, whatever grace, righteousness, life, peace, and salvation there is in me is all Christ's; nevertheless, it is mine as well, by the cementing and attachment that are through faith, by which we become as one body in the Spirit. Since Christ lives in me, grace, righteousness, life, and eternal salvation must be present with Him; and the Law, sin, and death must be absent. ...Paul seeks to withdraw us completely from ourselves, from the Law, and from works, and to transplant us into Christ and faith in Christ, so that *in the area of justification* we look only at grace, and separate it far from the Law and from works, which belong far away. ... *When it comes to justification, therefore, if you divide Christ's Person from your own, you are in the Law; you remain in it and live in yourself, which means that you are dead in the sight of God and damned by the Law.*<sup>26</sup>

We would note, however, that Luther says explicitly that he is speaking here of what obtains "in the *area of justification*" (*in ratione iustificande*). It is not too much of a stretch in logic to think that what is included "in the *area of justification*" are justification itself – that is, the imputation of righteousness and the non-imputation of sin – as well as those things that necessarily accompany, and flow out of, justification strictly speaking, such as the believer's union with Christ and all that this entails.

Luther even goes so far as to say that there is a sense in which *all* the doctrines of the Christian faith are "included" in the doctrine of justification. He states, in the Galatians Lectures, that

the doctrine of justification must be learned diligently. *For in it are included all the other doctrines of our faith;* and if it is sound, all the others are sound as well. Therefore when we teach that men are justified through Christ and that Christ is the Victor over sin, death, and the eternal curse, we are testifying at the same time that He is God by nature.<sup>27</sup>

This comprehensive *inclusion* does not mean that all other distinct articles of faith, besides that of justification, cease to exist. Each of them still deals legitimately with its own proper *locus* of Biblical revelation. But what this *does* mean is that all the articles of faith find their proper, organic relationship to each other – as far as human salvation is concerned – when they are understood according to their connection to the "chief article."

Instances of Luther's broader and less precise usage of the term "justification" need to

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<sup>26</sup>Luther, "Lectures on Galatians" (1535), 167-68. Emphases added. In his *Christ Present in Faith: Luther's View of Justification*, Mannermaa does in fact cite these words of Luther as a definitive summary of the Reformer's actual but previously misunderstood teaching (40-42). According to Mannermaa, this section of Luther's Lectures on Galatians shows that "the believer's real participation in Christ is an essential part of Luther's theology of justification" (41).

<sup>27</sup>Luther, "Lectures on Galatians" (1535), 283. Emphasis added.

be read in light of those places in his writings where he speaks clearly and carefully on the specific meaning of justification itself, narrowly defined. And there is such an axiomatic statement in these selfsame Lectures on Galatians:

But the doctrine of justification is this, that we are *pronounced righteous* and are saved solely by faith in Christ, and without works. *If this is the true meaning of justification – as it certainly is*, or it will be necessary to get rid of all Scripture – then it immediately follows that *we are pronounced righteous* neither through monasticism nor through vows nor through Masses nor through any other works.<sup>28</sup>

Elsewhere in these Lectures, Luther as it were paraphrases God’s justifying message to humanity, and puts these words in God’s mouth:

“If you wish to placate Me, do not offer Me your works and merits. But believe in Jesus Christ, My only Son, who was born, who suffered, who was crucified, and who died for your sins. *Then I will accept you and pronounce you righteous. And whatever of your sin still remains in you, I will not impute to you.*”<sup>29</sup>

And in a very telling discussion of faith and the object of faith – also in these Galatians Lectures – Luther lays out a logical sequence of salvific realities that puts justification first and foremost, and that then goes on to mention the indwelling of Christ as something that is “also” in effect:

We must turn our eyes completely to that bronze serpent, Christ nailed to the cross (John 3:14). *With our gaze fastened firmly to Him we must declare with assurance that He is our Righteousness and Life* and care nothing about the threats and terrors of the Law, sin, death, wrath, and the judgment of God. For the Christ on whom our gaze is fixed, in whom we exist, and *who also lives in us*, is the Victor and the Lord over the Law, sin, death, and every evil.<sup>30</sup>

Of the American Lutheran theologians in the first half of the twentieth century whose writings on the theology of “union with Christ” we have examined, Joseph Stump is the most thorough in his treatment. Stump served as Professor at the Chicago Lutheran Theological Seminary in Maywood, Illinois, from 1915 to 1920, and then as Professor and President of Northwestern Lutheran Theological Seminary in Minneapolis from 1920 to his death in 1935.

In his book on *The Christian Faith*, when he discusses the doctrine of the sinner’s justification by faith as Luther confessed it, Stump states that in Luther justification is indeed equated with the forgiveness of sins. But he also acknowledges that the faith which justifies is a lively and Christ-filled faith. Several statements from Luther’s 1535 Lectures on Galatians are presented to illustrate this vibrant doctrine of justifying faith:

In opposition to the Roman doctrine that justification is an infusion of righteousness, he [Luther] taught that it is nothing else than the forgiveness of sins. To apprehend Christ by faith and to have him in our hearts is righteousness. “Faith apprehends Christ and

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<sup>28</sup>Luther, “Lectures on Galatians” (1535), 223. Emphases added.

<sup>29</sup>Luther, “Lectures on Galatians” (1535), 230-31. Emphasis added.

<sup>30</sup>Luther, “Lectures on Galatians” (1535), 166-67. Emphases added.

has Him present and holds Him enclosed, like the ring the gem; and whoever is found with this faith apprehending Christ in the heart, him God counts righteous." Erl. Ed. Com. Gal. I, 195. "Hence there is only this one way of avoiding condemnation, namely, to believe and say with certain confidence, 'Thou, Christ, art my sinful and cursed one, or rather, I am Thy sin, Thy curse, Thy death, Thy wrath of God, Thy hell; Thou on the other hand are my righteousness, blessing, life, favor of God, heaven.'" *Ibid.*, II, 37. "With faith thou are able to say, 'I am Christ, that is, Christ's righteousness, victory, life, etc. are mine'; and again Christ may say, 'I am that sinner, that is, his sins, death, etc. are mine, because he adheres to me and I to him, for we are joined through faith in one flesh and bone.'" *Ibid.*, I, 247. "We do not acquire that divine righteousness except through gratuitous imputation." *Ibid.*, I, 16.<sup>31</sup>

The differences between Luther's more exuberant and colorful form of teaching about this, and Melancthon's more staid and systematic approach, is not seen as a substantial difference. According to Stump, "Melancthon's statements are similar, but are set forth in a more didactic manner."<sup>32</sup>

Mannermaa states at one point that, "At least on the level of terminology, the distinction, drawn in later Lutheranism, between justification as forgiveness and sanctification as divine indwelling, is alien to the Reformer."<sup>33</sup> Elsewhere Mannermaa opines that in the Formula of Concord – contrary to Luther's understanding – "justification is defined only as the imputation of the forgiveness of sins, whereas *inhabitatio Dei* is defined as a separate phenomenon and part of sanctification or renewal."<sup>34</sup>

It is seriously to be questioned, however, whether it is in fact an accurate reflection of classic Lutheran teaching to speak without qualification of "sanctification as divine indwelling," or to say that the divine indwelling is simply "part of sanctification or renewal." Stump delineates the relationship between sanctification and the mystical union of Christ with the justified believer in a much more nuanced and careful way when he writes that

There is a mystical union of God and the believer, which is taught in the Scriptures and experienced by the Christian, but which is difficult to describe. Chronologically its beginning coincides with regeneration and justification; logically it follows upon them, and forms the next stage in the order of salvation. It is not to be interpreted simply as an activity of God in us, but possesses the nature of a personal fellowship (1 John 1:3). God lives in the believer, and the believer in God. *It is the starting point and living source of that progressive sanctification which begins in the justified man and continues to the end of his earthly life.*<sup>35</sup>

Stump also notes that

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<sup>31</sup>Joseph Stump, *The Christian Faith* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1932), 234.

<sup>32</sup>Stump, *The Christian Faith*, 234.

<sup>33</sup>Mannermaa, "Justification and Theosis in Lutheran-Orthodox Perspective," 38.

<sup>34</sup>Mannermaa, *Christ Present in Faith: Luther's View of Justification*, 42.

<sup>35</sup>Stump, *The Christian Faith*, 272. Emphasis added.

*The union is established when the sinner comes to faith and is justified, and grows more close, intimate and strength-giving as his sanctification increases. The spiritual life which he leads has its source and vitality in Christ. Believers live in Christ, and He in them, and His life flows into and through them. Without Him they can do nothing (John 15:5).<sup>36</sup>*

The mystical union, then, is more like a “bridge” between justification and sanctification – conceptually considered – and is not simply to be equated with, or subsumed under, sanctification. The faith that receives God’s pardon in Christ also receives Christ himself – and with Christ the whole Trinity. And since the Triune God is the living God, his presence invariably brings life and renewal to the believing Christian who is indwelt by the Lord.<sup>37</sup> When the Finns imply, therefore, that the believer’s union with Christ must be conceived of either as a species of justification or as a species of sanctification, they have veered into the logical fallacy of a false alternative. Strictly speaking, the mystical union is neither justification nor sanctification. Conceptually, it flows out of the former, and into the latter. But again, in actual experience, the mystical union is simultaneous with justification, and is likewise simultaneous with the inauguration of the Christian’s new life of holiness.

Stump’s conviction that the mystical union as such should not be confused with justification as such does not in any way mean that, in his thinking, the mystical union is not an essential aspect of the gift of salvation that God bestows on us in Christ. In finding the proper place for the Bible’s “union with Christ” teaching in the larger scheme of Christian theology, Stump would not say – as do the Finns – that justification includes more than the forgiveness of sins and the imputation of righteousness. But he *would* say that the Lord’s *salvation for sinners* includes *more than justification*. He describes the profound importance of the mystical union for the Christian’s salvation in this way:

The source of all spiritual life is in God through Christ. By faith the believer is reunited with God from whom he was separated and cut off by sin. Thus he who was spiritually dead is now made spiritually alive. As the severed branch which is grafted back into the tree lives again because of its new union with the tree, so the believer lives again because of his union with God through Christ. The branch grows and puts forth leaves and fruit; but it does so only because and as long as it is vitally united with the tree from which its life comes. The believer lives and bears fruit in holy living; but he does so only because and as long as he is united with God by faith. Through this mystical union life comes to him from God. Only by virtue of this union does he live spiritually. What this union meant to Paul he tells us when he says, “Nevertheless I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh, I live by faith of the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me” (Gal. 2:20).<sup>38</sup>

According to Stump,

The indwelling of God in the believer...is a close personal union in which the believer rests in Christ and draws strength from Him. ... The personality of man...is united in a

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<sup>36</sup>Stump, *The Christian Faith*, 273. Emphasis added.

<sup>37</sup>In *The Christian Faith*, 272-73, Stump cites and summarizes various passages of Scripture that form the basis for this teaching.

<sup>38</sup>Stump, *The Christian Faith*, 273-74.

mystical and indescribable yet real and comforting way with Christ, or with God in Christ, so that Christ lives in him and he in Christ. The mystery of this union finds its explanation in the faith which grasps Christ and makes Him its very own, and in the love which flows from that faith and binds the soul and Christ together in the most intimate and loving fellowship.<sup>39</sup>

All of these insights are seen by Stump to be in keeping with the teaching of Luther – especially as that teaching is found in Luther’s oft-quoted Lectures on Galatians. Stump writes:

Luther has many mystical elements in his writings. He says in his commentary on Galatians, 2:20: “Christ therefore, joined and united unto me and abiding in me, liveth this life in me which I now live. Yes, Christ Himself is this life which now I live. Wherefore Christ and I in this behalf are both one. ... So Christ, living and abiding in me, taketh away and swalloweth up all evils which vex and afflict me. ... Because Christ liveth in me, therefore look what grace, righteousness, life, peace and salvation is in me; it is His, and yet notwithstanding the same is mine also by that inseparable union and conjunction which is through faith; by the which I and Christ are made as it were one spirit. ... Thou art so entirely and nearly joined unto Christ, that He and thou are made as it were one person; so that thou mayest boldly say, I am now one with Christ, that is to say, Christ’s righteousness, victory and life are mine. And again Christ may say, I am that sinner, that is, his sins and death are mine, because he is united and joined unto me and I unto him. For by faith we are so joined together that we are become one flesh and one bone [Eph. 5:31], we are members of the body of Christ, flesh of His flesh and bone of His bone; so that this faith doth couple Christ and me more near together than the husband is coupled with the wife.” – Engl. Transl. Publ. By S. S. Miles, 1840.<sup>40</sup>

Tuomo Mannermaa and his Finnish colleagues, in their European context, have rediscovered a highly significant aspect of Luther’s theology, which had indeed been lost to the post-critical and post-Kantian mainstream theological tradition of their continent. Commendably, the Finns have attempted to reintroduce to the larger world of Christendom the important teaching of the great Reformer on the believer’s real and intimate union with the Divine Savior himself. But we are not persuaded that the Finns have correctly grasped how this important truth meshes and coordinates with the other aspects of Luther’s – *and Scripture’s* – doctrine of salvation. In fact, we are persuaded that they have not yet properly grasped this.

In the American tradition of Lutheran theology, an awareness of this important component of Luther’s theology was never really lost. American Lutherans in the first half of the twentieth century were spared the amnesiac effects of neo-Kantian thinking, which then reigned in Europe, since they had not allowed themselves to be infected by that thinking. They preserved what the Europeans lost. They preserved what the Finns are now trying to reclaim.

But what the American church also preserved was an acute awareness of, and commitment to, the central focus of Luther’s Pauline doctrine of justification by faith. They knew that before they could give thought to the Christian’s union with Christ, they needed to give thought to what it is that makes a Christian to *be* a Christian, and what it is that soothes, with *divine forgiveness*, the conscience of a penitent sinner.

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<sup>39</sup>Stump, *The Christian Faith*, 274.

<sup>40</sup>Stump, *The Christian Faith*, 274-75.

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