

Reformation
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When we lack the peace *of* God, we should turn to our peace *with* God.

Robert Horn

God does not justify us because we are worthy, but justifying us makes us worthy.

Thomas Watson

Nobody has understood Christianity who does not understand . . . the word “justified.”

John R. W. Stott

Justification: The Status of the Christian

Steven A. Hein

If the call of God can be seen as a journey to our final heavenly home, it ought also be seen as a journey that continually traverses the agony and the ecstasy of the cross of Christ. Our sojourn through life involves a continual tension between what we experience in daily living about who and what we are, and what we understand by faith. It is the tension between the dual realities of sin and grace: between living as a sin-corrupted citizen of this fallen creation, yet a righteous member of the kingdom of God. Faith requires a vision by which we might become reconciled to the experiences of living in a fallen creation. And in the cross of Christ, that vision can be found.

Our vision of the manner in which God is redemptively at work in the world and in our life can be helpfully described by the idea of “salvific worldliness” as best seen and climaxed in the cross of Christ. The world of our experience takes in the shame, agony and seeming abandonment of God in the cross. We see evil openly at work producing its fruit of injustice and suffering in the One who hangs between two thieves. Yet, to faith is given a vision of the merciful Creator who turns the tables on the powers of evil to accomplish His saving purpose. Oddly, we notice, however, that He does not banish evil. Rather, He uses it to accomplish its own defeat. An incredible exchange is made. God places the world’s evil on the righteous Jesus, and His righteousness is imputed to us. A sham atonement for trumped-up sins becomes a real atonement for the sins of the world. Through the world’s greatest injustice, God justifies the world.

God’s Word provides for us a saving picture of the cross, and faith receives it. It also bestows the righteousness of the cross—and faith receives that as well. Our sense experience of the cross tells us one thing, our faith another. Our vision

of the cross embraces the tension of both. And what corresponds to tension for us, is method for God. Salvific worldliness is not simply the mystery of an infinite God at work with finite means, it is the tension of a holy and gracious God accomplishing His saving purposes in a fallen creation enlisting even corrupted means.

As God's supreme call of His Son to the cross presents us a vision with a tension between what is open to experience and what must be held by faith, so also does living in God's call as His adopted sons and daughters. Christian life in the old creation is God's call to the full range of possible experiences one can encounter from being in the world together with the full inheritance of God's salvation. But neither our old world experiences of our fallen existence nor the blessings of Christ given to faith cancel the other out. Perhaps Luther's "in, with and under" language may be appropriate here. We hold our divine citizenship and all of God's blessings of salvation in, with and under our temporal citizenship and all that its fallen character can bring us. What flows from our temporal citizenship is fully given to our senses, but what flows from our divine citizenship is given to faith. The life of Christ climaxed in the cross is the ultimate expression of this tension. As we have been called to live in Christ, that tension which is penultimate frames out the big picture of Christian life.

Two things must be clarified, however, about our vision of Christian life in the cross of Christ. First, we must keep in mind that the life we are describing is temporary and provisional. Life in the cross is lived with an Easter faith in the One who suffered and died, rose again and ascended to the glory of the Father. The suffering servant is not the exalted Lord who is poised to crash our experience with the full splendor of our inheritance. The empty tomb anchors our faith with confidence about a better day that is coming when the inheritance of faith becomes the life of experience.

Salvation for God's children who are living in the cross is now, and not yet. Second, the tension between the life of worldly experience and the truth of faith is encountered in the daily living of the believer by oscillating back and forth between them. Sometimes we are captivated by the impact of living as citizens of this fallen world, only then to be thrown back onto the promises of faith.

Christian Self-Identity

How do the contours of salvific worldliness in the cross of Christ reveal who and what we are in Christ? Each of us is a unique person, created in the image of God, yet corrupted by sin inherited from the fall of Adam. To inquire about Christian self-identity is to explore that self that Christ has recreated by His death and resurrection through our baptism. Christ has carried out saving work for us, to us and in us—saving work that has profoundly affected our identity.

There are two basic questions that anyone can ask about self-identity, and most people begin asking them during adolescence, that time of increased self-awareness. Nevertheless, they continually press for satisfactory answers throughout life. Our sense of self-identity is tied to our answers of these questions: (1) Who am I? and (2) What am I?

The answers to these questions form the basic or foundational features of our identity. If we have no answers, we may well develop an identity crisis. If we do not have satisfactory answers, we definitely have an identity problem that must be solved for life to have positive meaning. For the Christian, the question of self-identity is tied to God's address in His Word. His answers provide the meaning for what it means to be a child of God and a member of Christ's body, the church. Christian life revolves around God's work to integrate His redemptive work into our self-identity. He intends to weave the fabric of His saving purpose in Christ

into all of the individual characteristics that make each of us unique.

With this in mind, Luther combined the above two self-identity questions and paradoxically described the Christian self as a simultaneous sinner/saint. Thus “a Christian man is righteous and a sinner at the same time, holy and profane, an enemy of God and a child of God.”¹ In this article I want to probe the rich significance of this paradox and what it reveals about the kind of people we are as God’s children in Christ.

The “Who am I?” question addresses the issue of our status. It is an inquiry about our acceptability and place in community. Am I a person who counts? Do I have standing? Can I be loved and accepted just as I am? Are my places and acceptability secure or, if not, what does it take to make them secure? These questions are very important. Our God is a multipersonal God who in Himself exists in personal relationship. He created us as a reflection of Himself, personal beings designed to live in significant relationship and community with Himself and other similar created beings. As God is a community of love in Himself, He created us to be joyfully fulfilled by community in love relationships, dependent and grounded in His infinite love. Human beings are fundamentally relational creatures reflecting a relational God.

The person who sincerely asks, “Who am I?” knows on the gut-feeling level how important this question is. It addresses our deepest, most crucial, need to belong; to belong significantly and securely in relationships where we may be accepted as we are and have meaningful personal impact. To have such a status is truly to have life. Without such a status we just exist—fragmented, cut off and alone. As fallen image bearers in rebellion against our Maker, people are bent upon finding or achieving acceptable status in every quarter except where it may be found. None seek

after God, the One to whom we were made to belong. And, in a sense, no wonder! He is a holy and righteous God, and we are corrupted sinners who cannot stand or belong under the demands of His justice. Moreover, our sinful self wants nothing of a dependent community under His lordship. Amazingly, however, Christ has sought us out, made us His own, and we now bear His name.

So who am I, as a Christian? Luther said that we all have the status of saints. The word *saint* literally means “a holy or righteous one.” Luther’s point was that all who have been brought by the Spirit into a saving faith relationship with Christ have a righteous, blameless standing with God. Christians have become citizens of the kingdom of God, members of the body of Christ, adopted sons and daughters in the family of God. God has given us full standing in the economy of His redemptive community. We have secured status, for we now belong to God.

Justified Sainthood

This standing or status is ours because we have received God’s full and complete justification through faith in Christ. We are justified because Christ has fully paid for the guilt of our sin on the cross. Though our status was that of a guilty sinner, Christ canceled our debt and, therefore, God declared us to be holy, innocent and righteous for the sake of Christ’s atonement. God has declared us to be innocent. Christians have received this gift (grace) through a Spirit-wrought faith in baptism, or in the preaching of this Word of grace. We have a holy and just status: we are saints of God.

Perhaps God’s work of justification by which we have saintly status can be clarified in the following manner. The Scriptures address our justification from three important vantage points. First, and most importantly, justification is described from the perspective of its appropriation by God. In this context, the significance of Christ’s universal atone-

ment is the focus. God reconciled the whole world of sinners to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them (2 Cor. 5:19). He has declared all sinners to be innocent and righteous, forgiven for the sake of Christ's all-sufficient death for the penalty of sin. God has appropriated the status of sainthood, perfect righteousness and acceptability for the whole world in Christ's saving death and resurrection.

Second, we encounter God's justification in the context of its revelation and bestowal upon people. Justification—saintly status—is revealed and brought to specific individual sinners through the proclaimed gospel and the administered sacraments. We have no direct access by our own reasoning or perceptual capacities to the drama of the cross. The events of Calvary took place almost two thousand years ago, and we were not there. Moreover, even if we had personally witnessed them, all we would have seen was the shame and agony of One dying an ugly criminal's death, seemingly abandoned by God. With the powers of reason and perception, the cross seems like another pathetic picture of the silence and abandonment of God. The cross simply looks like another example of the stranglehold that evil has on the old fallen creation. The enormous battle with the powers of sin and death was hidden. The great exchange where Jesus took on our sin and we are reckoned with His righteousness took place on the other side of the interface with eternity. If we are to know anything about this event as the saving event that rescues our destiny from death and destruction, then God must crash our existence with such a disclosure. And in the gospel He has and He does.

The gospel is God's power unto salvation (Rom. 1:16). Through this saving Word, God declares sinners forgiven, holy saints, loved and accepted just as they are, on account of Christ's atonement. The gospel brings us to the cross of Christ over time and eternity and we hear God's voice

speaking to us: "Sinner, I declare that you are forgiven, holy, innocent and righteous. I love you and accept you just as you are. You are totally secure in My unconditional love, now and forever for the sake of the perfect sacrifice of My Son. You belong to Me and My family as My child forever."

The gospel is always God's announcement of His *already existing* acceptance and forgiveness of the sinner. Justification is not presented in the gospel as a future possibility or bargain that can be ours if we will fulfill certain conditions. It is not mere information about some "exciting offer" that God has for us as if we can take advantage of it by acting fast and doing something to make it a reality. There is no "small print" connected with God's forgiveness in the cross of Christ which presents the "catch" about all the conditions we must first meet. It is His pronouncement of unconditional acceptance and righteousness from and on the basis of the atonement of Christ, coming to individual sinners in every age and place. Strictly speaking, the gospel does not present the offer or the possibility of forgiveness; it unconditionally proclaims it as an already given reality and bestows it on the sinner. God says, "You *are* forgiven!" Period! There are no "ifs," "ands" or "buts" that first require us to do something to make it so. We do not have to make a commitment, say a sincere prayer, give our heart to Jesus or clean up our lives. Nothing! "But, isn't this cheap grace?" some might ask. No, it is not cheap grace—it's absolutely, unconditionally free!

"Ah!" we may think. We get it now. We receive God's forgiveness and acceptance without conditions, but now that we have it, we must clean up our lives and bring forth good works to keep it. Is that it? No! The gospel presents God's forgiveness as an unconditional promise that He shall be gracious to us now and forever for the sake of Christ. He will never count our trespasses against us and will unconditionally accept us as His righteous and innocent child forever.

He *promises*. The gospel announces and applies the righteousness of Christ to us for eternity. There are no conditions attached to His forgiveness and acceptance—not now, not ever! The gospel is the end of all works of the law and conditional thinking about God.

Also of crucial importance, the Scriptures explain how we can receive God's saving gift of justification. In this context, the Scriptures proclaim that we are justified through faith apart from all works or human initiative (Rom. 3:28). Such a faith that merely trusts in the verdict of the cross is itself a gift, created and preserved by the Holy Spirit through the gospel (1 Cor. 12:3). Through faith we personally grasp and cling to our innocent forgiven standing and live in it. Faith does not create this status, it receives it. We should not look upon faith as a meritorious virtue that God has demanded in order to be forgiven—as if God were saying, "I have some forgiveness for those who can muster some good believing in me. Have you got what it takes?" Faith is not our side of a bargain that then will bring us forgiveness and a God who will be gracious to us. Moreover, saving faith is not the same thing as making a commitment. God is not demanding faith as if to say, "If you will commit yourself to Me, I will commit Myself and My forgiveness to you." Faith is not committing to Christ, it is receiving His gracious commitment to us. Moreover, faith itself is the product of God's work and commitment to us through His Word of the gospel.

The gospel is not potentially saving information that we can take advantage of if we make the right decision or commitment. "It is the power of God for salvation" (Rom. 1:16). "Faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17). The cross of Christ appropriated our righteousness before God; the gospel reveals and bestows it; and through a Spirit-wrought faith, we personally receive and make it our own. Moreover, all this saving work (appro-

priation, revelation and bestowal, and reception) is God's activity. We are merely the recipients.

The Paradox of Faith

Christians are sometimes confused about saving faith and how we come to possess it. The biblical record seems to confront the reader with a paradox. On the one hand, the Scriptures often treat the subject of faith from the standpoint of its necessity. In answer to his question, "What must I do to be saved?" Paul responded to the jailer at Philippi, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved. (Acts 16:31)." Here as elsewhere in Scripture, faith is commanded as something for us to do. On the other hand, when the question is how can we so believe and trust in the promises of the gospel, Paul explains that it is "by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8). How do we reconcile the biblical command to believe with the gift character of faith as a blessing from God?

The solution lies in the power of God's saving word. Here God speaks to the sinner His gracious word of forgiveness and acceptance and exhorts us to believe. Indeed, He *commands it*, as if to say, "Let there be faith!" And through His word and command, God creates what He commands when, where, and as He chooses. The Holy Spirit engenders our faith through the power of His word of forgiveness. God's love and forgiveness, which are bestowed upon us in the gospel, create the trust, the faith by which we receive and live in them.

"So faith comes from the hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17). No one comes to Christ and embraces His gift of righteousness but by God's drawing power.

Some Christians erroneously conclude that since God commands us to believe, that implies some ability on our

part to respond accordingly. Such reasoning does not accord with the biblical witness. In Genesis we read that God created human beings by His word and command. This did not imply that somehow lifeless dust of the ground had an ability to become a human child of God. God did not come up to some piece of ground and ask if it would like to become a human being, nor did He present lifeless clay with all the exciting possibilities of what life could be like as a personal being and then extend an invitation for a commitment or decision to actualize the possibility. He simply said, "Let us make man. . ." and it was so (Gen. 1:26). As it was with the old creation, so also with new life in Christ. The spiritually-lifeless sinner has no more ability to self-transform into a new creation in Christ than the dust had in the beginning to become a human being. Both instances provide examples of the awesome creative power of God's word when it is sent forth to accomplish His life-giving purposes.

In the very same way, He continually nourishes and builds up our trusting faith through the gospel in the word and sacrament as we feed on them. As with God's old creation, so also with new life in Christ. God creates and preserves through His Word. That Word is both the eternal Son of God and His creative command—"Let there be . . ." or "Believe!" As with all gifts of God, they flow from His will and work, not ours. What God commands, He creates, and what He demands, He gives. He demands perfect righteousness to be His child and He freely gives that status in His gospel; and He commands faith in this promise and then creates it through His saving word.

Perhaps we can focus the genesis of faith in another way. The gospel can be thought of as the message of God's dying love and acceptance in the cross of Christ. Through His saving word He courts rebellious sinners who are alienated from Him and His love. It's something like the old story of John and Marsha. John loves Marsha and he is determined

to have her as his wife. She, however, thinks he is an absolute nerd and will have nothing to do with him. This does not faze John in the least, and he continues to shower her with loving actions and words. Then something mysterious happens in the story as it often does in real life; she "falls in love" with him. She did not plan on this happening. Moreover, no conscious decision was made on her part. Indeed, her discovery that she now does in fact love John comes as an incredible surprise to her. She is totally dumbfounded by the whole turn of events! We are not.

We, of course, know what happened to Marsha. It was the power of love at work that transformed her. It happens every day. In the magic of interpersonal relations, love has the power to beget love. No coercion or compulsion was present, but certainly no decision was involved either. Marsha's love was nurtured and brought forth by John. Moreover, it was no surprise to him; he intended that to happen right from the beginning. In the same way our Creator God, the gracious Lover of sinners, comes to rebellious humans through the gospel and woos them with His saving work and words of dying love and forgiveness. By the mysterious power of His Spirit through His loving Word, sinners "fall in trust" with their Creator/Redeemer, a trusting faith that then blossoms into a returning love. Marsha became John's wife in the story, and we rebellious sinners who have fallen into faith with the gracious God have become the bride of Christ. And as with John, our loving God intended it all from the beginning—yes, even before the beginning. Before the foundation of the world, he chose us to be blameless in His sight and by His predestining love He adopted us to be His children in Christ (Eph. 1:4-5).

Personal Security in Justification

The gospel proclaims God's fulfillment of the sinner's need for status through the saving work of Christ. At its

essential core, the gospel proclaims our justification. This reality comprises the foundation for all aspects of Christian life and Christian living. It is the saving reality that defines who we are as the people of God. Nothing is more crucial to a confident and growing Christian walk than an ever deepening and trusted awareness of its foundation for what we are and do as the people of God. The justified life of the believer comprises the continual zenith of our fellowship with God in this life. The essence of the Christian's walk with God is simply to grow and live more completely in the reality that we are His holy, forgiven and loved children just as we are for the sake of the cross of Christ. Christian life is the call to express it, grow in it and get used to it. The core of life with God in the old creation is getting used to being holy and righteous saints as the unconditional gift of the gracious God. With this vision for now, we await the resurrected life in the world to come.

What an incredibly wonderful and liberating thing our saintly status is! One of the most crucial human needs we have as sinful beings is the need for personal security. We need to have status or standing as people who are loved and accepted, just as we are. We need someone who will always be there for us and not forsake us. We ache for a place among others to belong, really belong as a part of a community. Community and acceptability are simply necessary for life to have fulfillment and meaning. Think of all of the ways that we insecure, sinful humans are trying to achieve, bargain for, or manipulate others with power, wealth and our own affection to acquire such a secure status. And it all ends in frustrating, bitter failure. Sooner or later we come to the painful realization that other humans are just as frail and needy as we are and thus are not up to delivering such security and unconditional love. Rather, they are simply looking for the same thing for themselves. We rest secure and unconditionally loved in the cross of Christ, or there is no

rest or security for us at all.

When God created Adam and Eve, our first parents, community, acceptability and real security were attributes of their very existence. They had no relational needs, as God created them holy and righteous in nature and they lived in a community of total harmony with Himself at the center of their existence. If someone could have met Adam in the garden ("pre-apple") and told him about the crucial human needs of security and significance for personal well-being, he probably would have replied with a baffled "Huh?" Total well-being was simply a nonreflected given to human existence. Before the Fall, Adam and Eve had no needs. But, as sin destroyed their righteous nature and brought alienation to the core of human existence, what was once a given has now become a lack. As sons and daughters of Adam, dead in our trespasses, we desperately need now what we lack. The presence of needs always signals a deficit, a void that ultimately only God's saving work in all of its fullness can permanently fill. Sin has rendered us very needy persons. We need self-worth and a sense of well-being for life to be worth living. God has demonstrated our inestimable self-worth in that "while we were sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). His saving work brings the only true well-being that is now and forever. The need for security so crucial for well-being is met eternally in our justified status as saints through Christ's saving work; it is seen on the cross, revealed and bestowed in the gospel and received by faith.

Sinfulness: The Character of the Christian

Often non-Christians become quite confused about what believers mean when they witness about being saved and receiving salvation from Christ. Our post-Christian culture has brought with it a general ignorance not only about Christianity but also about the meaning of many of the terms and concepts by which the faith has been communi-

cated in Scripture and in the history of the church. How might we effectively communicate what we mean by salvation to the nonbeliever when we try to explain that only God in Christ can truly deliver it? One Christian thinker has expressed it this way. “Salvation is complete personal well-being, now and forever. And that is only possible with a restored relationship with our Creator through His Son, Jesus Christ.”

Working with this understanding, can we Christians claim that we have already been saved? Perhaps we must best answer with a definite “yes” and “no.” From the standpoint of a secure status of being forgiven and thus loved and accepted just as we are—a crucial need for personal well-being—we can definitely say, “Yes, we are already saved through faith in Christ.” We can say, “I *am* justified; I am now a child of God, a full-status saint in His kingdom, now and forever.” But must we not also admit that sometimes we don’t think, act or feel very secure in God’s love? We cling to our saintly status by faith and we trust God’s promise that it shall be forever. All the while we are worthy subjects each day to pray, “Lord, I believe; help Thou my unbelief.” We claim our justification in this life by faith, not by sight—and it is often a fragile faith that is in the “needs improvement” category. And is it not true that much of our sinful and selfish behavior is in the service of attempting to acquire status and security from people and the things of this world?

Much to our own dismay and embarrassment, we Christians must admit that we do not act very secure in God’s love nor do we return that love very easily. Our often weak, impoverished faith and love serve well to remind us that although our status in Christ is holy and righteous, our character is not. And this brings us to the other half of Luther’s Christian identity paradox. Who am I? I am a saint. But what am I? I am a sinner in my character. The corrupt sinful condition that we inherited from Adam’s fall is still

ours in the Christian life. We groan with the rest of creation awaiting the final deliverance from all the devastating effects of evil in the world and in our own lives. In this sense, salvation, the realization of full and complete well-being, is still yet to come.

The word *sin* is a technical term that the Scriptures use to describe the problem of evil that afflicts all of humanity. Literally, it means “missing the mark.” To be sinful is to miss the mark of God’s creative purpose and design. Both believers and nonbelievers are quite aware of the problem of evil as it afflicts the body. It is plagued by all forms of pathological conditions—disease, degeneration and eventually death. Modern medicine has done much to postpone these, but is powerless to overcome them. Our hope as Christians lies in the fullness of salvation and the resurrection of the body, a certain inheritance that we see and celebrate in the resurrection of Christ. But what of the effects of sin upon the spiritual or personal dimensions of human nature—what we might call the functioning capacities of personhood? Perhaps we can get a good picture by observing Eve’s demise in the Garden as she yields to Satan’s temptation in Genesis three. First, let’s briefly sketch what these capacities of personhood entail.

Functioning Capacities of Personhood

To be a human person means to be begotten by the sovereign Creator, born of human parents and addressed by God. Our personhood derives from our Maker and is sealed and guaranteed by Him, not by some capacities that we are able to develop or exercise. Moreover, humans are persons, not because we can address God or others, but that He addresses us and calls us into fellowship and life with Him. In both creation and redemption, God’s initiative establishes our dignity and anchors our self-worth. As we address functioning capacities of personhood, we must recognize

that these and our individual personalities *express and disclose* human personhood; they do not, however, establish or define it.² The fetus, infant, and severely impaired person may have no (or diminished) functioning of these human capacities, but nevertheless are still fully human persons. This must not be forgotten in the following discussion. We are entering into a consideration of how we express our personhood ultimately for interpersonal relationships (knowing and being known) according to God's creative design, not what makes us human persons.

God has endowed human beings with a mind that is continually active, supplying meaning and evaluating the significance of the events and experiences of everyday life. We are rational beings. With the mind, we make sense out of the data of experience with broad interpretive beliefs that provide intelligible focus and understanding. All humans have an assumptive system of basic beliefs about the nature of reality that are used to classify, evaluate and render intelligible what the mind receives from experience. We could call this assumptive set of basic beliefs about the nature of reality a "world view" or "web" of beliefs by which we capture or view meaning and understanding of the data of experience. Experiential data do not come to us with meaning attached to them—our God-given minds perform this duty.

Without entering into the debate as to what extent our interpretive beliefs are inherited or acquired by our contact with others as we grow and mature, it is safe to say that our "world views" or interpretive beliefs are not coerced, determined or merely instinctual. God created us as volitional beings. We can develop and change our beliefs by willful choice. In the final analysis, our convictions and assumptions about the meaning and value of things are chosen. We believe what we choose to believe.

The human mind is continually active in other ways beyond interpreting and evaluating. It also can engage in

imaginative and creative thought. We also acquire attitude and desires. And some of these on the heart level may be quite deep-seated and subconscious. For example, with our minds we know that it is an orange that we see, and we may believe that it is good to eat. We might even have a deep craving for oranges. Quite consciously, we want the orange and desire to eat it. The desire is willed, but very much influenced by what we believe. If we thought the orange poisonous or if we believed that we are allergic to oranges, we probably would not desire it at all. However, with the belief that oranges are good tasting and good for our health, the orange is desired for eating and we are motivated to eat it.

Our behavior follows from our chosen motive, highly influenced by our beliefs and attitudes (wants and desires). The human character is continually active with willful internal behavior that is conscious and subconscious. It involves a complex interplay of our beliefs, attitudes and motives which receive outward expression in what we do and say. And involuntarily flowing from our experiences impacted by our beliefs, attitudes, motives and behavior, emotional reactions and responses involuntarily come forth. We feel quite content and happy eating the orange.

But now, what effect has sin had upon this dynamic functioning of the human person that God originally created in His own image? Perhaps we can best see the devastating effects of sin and how the human character can indeed change, by examining the sinful corruption of Eve described in Genesis three. Prior to her demise under Satan's influence, Eve had a functioning set of beliefs and attitudes that were good and righteous—fully in accord with God's creative will. Her motives were pure and her behavior and emotional life were accented with goodness, contentment and joy. Total well-being permeated her character and existence.

The Fall Revisited

Eve began her encounter with Satan with a faulty belief about God's will for her life. She believed that God prohibited her from touching the forbidden fruit, in addition to not eating it. God, however, did not forbid her from touching (see Gen. 2:17), only partaking of the fruit. Eve had a legalistic understanding of God's will for her life in the Garden. She chose to take the matter of her security into her own hands and "improve" on God's security provision over against the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. She doubted God's word and was determined to trust in her own measures rather than her Creator. Now Satan had his toe-hold in her mind and heart, and he would press for further corruption. He would see if her lack of trust could be turned into a thoroughgoing rebellion. At his suggestion, Eve chose to believe that she could further improve her well-being by becoming a fully independent person like God. Like God, she could be in control of her own life and destiny. She believed that this was within her power, and partaking of the forbidden fruit was seen as good for food and able to give wisdom that would elevate her to the stature of God (Gen. 3:5-6a). She believed that she would not die. Believing now as she did, deep personal desires in her heart became depraved. She longed to be independent like God, and the forbidden fruit was desired to that end. And motivated to accomplish her rebellious and perverted goal, she behaved accordingly, partaking of the forbidden fruit. As Adam partakes with her, together their emotional life becomes corrupted by the feelings of guilt and shame.

Notice how Genesis three portrays the fall into sin as a progressive, corruptive process of Eve's functioning personal capacities, beginning with her beliefs, values and goals, and proceeding then to her attitudes and desires. As these become false and perverted by her own volition, she becomes motivated to rebel against God in her behavior

and suffers the emotional consequences of guilt and shame. The fall into sin and the loss of the image of God did not begin with external behavior. It flowed progressively through the inner self, the mind and heart, through chosen sinful beliefs, attitudes and motives. Sinful external behavior then followed from the corruption of the functioning inner character. Sin as rebellion against God flows from a lack of trust in the inner being to the external self. The account of the Fall gives us a glimpse, albeit a tragic negative one, of how effective change in the human person can take place.

We have seen Satan use some quite effective strategies to bring about dramatic and profound change in Eve's character and behavior. Satan understood the human person well as God created it, and he understood its potential for change. The change that he orchestrated tarnished the image of God in us terribly and, morally speaking, destroyed it.

The Root of the Problem

Luther continually observed that the root of sin is a rebellion against the First Commandment. At its core, it is a rebellion against positioning the self and its existence around a trust in the Creator God for self well-being. From the fall of Adam and Eve, all of humanity has been brought into the world with a compulsive rebellion against trust in God. We would have any other ultimate concern in life but Him for our own well-being. Our alienation from Him has created the crucial need for the status of unconditional acceptance and the drive to find meaningful significant impact in living. The consequences of sin have alienated us from both secure status and significance as the people of God, and we are separated from the center and source of all that we need, our Creator God. It has brought us death—a death of alienation, loneliness, moral and spiritual bankruptcy, loss of identity

and meaningless existence. It has imprisoned us within a slavish all-consuming love of ourselves as our greatest concern and object of trust. Our sinful condition does not mean that we cannot love or do anything right. Rather it means that we are incapable of ordering our life and loves around an all-embracing fear, love and trust in God. Our loves have become disordered and now flow from selfish human pride that places the self at the center of reality. As Eve desired, we would be like God, but know we are not. Sinfully bent love and pride have us in their prison of death.

All sons and daughters of Adam seek personal well-being and deliverance from the problems that evil creates for existence, but with the rebellious commitment and determination to work these out for oneself independent from a fear, love and trust in God. What we are suggesting is that everyone has a plan or hoped-for plan for personal salvation and a god, even if oneself, to secure it. Like Eve, today's sinners are committed to the belief that well-being (salvation) is needed desperately, but it is a desire divorced from a trust and dependence on God. We would be like Him, as Eve thought she could be, beings who on the fundamental levels of existence can autonomously take care of ourselves and secure the good life and a happy forever. In this sense there are no atheists in the world and everyone is dying for salvation. The only options are to die to sin and self in the cross of Christ and live as a new creation in His righteousness and resurrection, or to struggle through existence curved in on the self and remain damned to prison of self-centered, lonely love—dead forever!

The gospel proclaims that only our Creator has a plan that can truly deliver us from all aspects of evil that would otherwise overwhelm us. It also proclaims that in the cross and resurrection of Christ, He has. Christians have received salvation and well-being in the righteousness of Christ given to faith. Our saintly secure status as adopted children of

God and His Kingdom is held in faith. About us and within us is still the corruption of the old fallen sinful order of paradise lost. We are saints by pronouncement and gift—a holy standing that shall be ours for eternity. But for now, we are still sinful in all aspects of our physical and personal dimensions of self. All of this corruption is fully evident to all our senses and reasoning. Simultaneously sinners and saints! We hold the reality of both in tension until the final transformation in the resurrected life when our Lord returns in the fullness of His glory.

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Endnotes

- 1 Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, eds., Martin Luther, "Lectures on Galatians—1535," *Luther's Works* (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress Press, 1955-72), 232.
- 2 Gilbert Meilaender, *Faith and Faithfulness* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1991), 44-46.