

# Foreword

While this book is not only for those who are Christian or those who are not and may never be Lutheran, it would be a waste of your time and it would blur the theme if I did not introduce Martin Luther in this first paragraph.

Just as sunlight brightens the path through an otherwise dark forest, the thoughts of Martin Luther illuminate *Sin Boldly!* Luther informs every page, and with Ted Peters's deft guidance, he will jostle his way into much of the argument.

Introducing Martin Luther in a book on justification, as in the biblical context of "justification by grace through faith," is a natural move. After all, in the history of theology, Luther has a patent (but by no means a monopoly) on prime ways of speaking about justification. Perhaps we can even picture him waiting in the wings, readying himself to preach justification, here in print, to a new generation. Past, present, and future churches who bear his name, against his will, noisily announce that the teaching of justification by faith is the doctrine by which the church stands or falls. Back in Mao's China, where and when the churches were oppressed and their teaching repressed, the government had to yield enough to allow, grudgingly and guardedly to be sure, a slot for pushed-together Christian churches. The Lutheran contingent among them was called

“The Justification-by-Faith Church of Christ.” This suggests that even totalitarian labelers do not get everything totally wrong.

Ironically, the idea of the self is prominently and critically portrayed both in this book and in the situation of the Lutheran Church in China, which was forced by the government to adhere to the Three-Self Patriotic Movement after 1951. While the Red Chinese versions of the self were designed to imprison the soul, Peters helps us see, in a rich variety of ways, that the soul need not be imprisoned and that, under the gospel of Jesus Christ, it is made free. The freedom results from a particular activity of God that some Christians, influenced by the apostle Paul and, closer to our time, by Martin Luther, call “justification.”

Uh-oh! End a long word with -ation and you risk losing some members of the audience. Luther himself, the champion of the concept, thought so. He once said that he did not like to preach on justification because it put some people to sleep or led others to be restless and talkative. So what did he do? He said that he told stories about God’s actions toward humans. People were hungry for what these stories effected in them, but they were lost whenever abstract doctrines, which are more at home in the classroom than in the pulpit, were preached at them, or past them. Ted Peters must have been paying attention and must have observed the same, because he, too, makes his point by telling stories or pointing to concrete things and vivid events. Think of the cross or of water (as in baptism) and the like.

Many Lutheran theologians have debated justification to the point that sometimes their nuances have nuances and their footnotes need footnotes. In 1999, high-level Lutherans and highest-level Catholics announced an agreement on justification by faith, *The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*. They did not come to perfect agreement, and no doubt every Lutheran who cares about

these things regards the concord as an unfinished product, though its contents bury many old hatchets. But in the context of lived faith, we can read the declaration and find it liberating. I like to tell the story told by Winston Churchill about a man who risked his life to save eleven-year-old Johnny, who was thrashing around in deep water, drowning. After the desperate rescue, while both the rescuer and the rescued were still gasping for air, Johnny's mother came up and growled a question to the lifesaver: "Where's Johnny's cap?"

Peters cares about Johnny and all others overwhelmed by figurative deep waters who, concerned for their own selves, set out to justify themselves. In my reading, this book marvelously shows why that strategy is futile, even deadly. In an unforgettable coinage, the author speaks about the "fragile soul" that is at stake in the drama of life and death, good and evil. The fragile soul has no effective instruments to bring about rescue and lead that soul to wholeness, health, and—let me risk a word ending in -ation—salvation.

The justified person, daily made free of the limits of the old self, now experiences newness of life. Happily, the author concerns himself with the follow-up, which allows for new possibilities. Here, as elsewhere in his writings, Peters is eager to link the love of God, which one experiences through justification by God and not by the self, with the justice of God. In that context, he reminds us that the concern for justice must be urgent. Creatively, he points to the typical small child who, untutored in dogma or law, is likely to protest "That isn't fair!" when he or she experiences injustice. Building on such observations, Peters provokes thought about how the daily-justified believer lives a life open to justice.

Late in the book, the author ventures into what is still semi-explored territory in the contemporary church as he complements talk of "forensic" justification with the reality of Christ "indwelling" in the justified person. There is biblical warrant for both concepts.

The image for the “forensic” is taken from the court of law in which the person under indictment or found guilty discovers the case against himself has been wiped away. The image of the “indwelling” Christ points to an intimate bond between God in the flesh of Jesus Christ and the repentant human. After having written about the “fragile soul” and the “broken soul,” Peters writes that now “Christ’s real presence in the human soul makes all the difference. This divine indwelling rewrites the meaning of justification by faith. Jesus died as a just person. He is himself just; so he needs no self-justification. When the Holy Spirit places the just Jesus within our faith, Jesus’ justice becomes our justice. He has justified us, so to speak.”

Essayist Joseph Epstein, critiquing self-obsessed writers who write self-indulgent memoirs, advises that confessional writing “ought to be the same as that for confession in religion: be brief, be blunt, be gone.” Ted Peters is sufficiently brief and blunt about the self, but instead of being “gone,” he shows how the Christly justified person—one in whom the “indwelling Christ” is active—is daily given the opportunity to embody and express love and justice in the world.

Martin E. Marty  
Professor Emeritus  
The University of Chicago