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The Doctrine of Justification According to Bernard of Clairvaux

Bernard of Clairvaux (1090—1153) was the most influential man of his day. He was the counselor and adviser of Popes, princes, and the common man; he was an eloquent preacher (his sermons are strikingly Scriptural and remarkably free from quotations from the Church Fathers); he was the composer of beautiful hymns (the best-known hymns of his school are "O Bleeding Head and Wounded," "Jesus, the Very Thought of Thee," and "O Jesus, King Most Wonderful"); but above all he was a sincerely pious and truly humble Christian. Luther has well said: "If there ever lived a God-fearing and holy monk, it was Bernard of Clairvaux." It is true, Bernard championed the Papacy as the highest authority in the Church, exalted monasticism as the highest ideal of Christianity, and often wandered into an enthusiastic mysticism; and yet, he, as few others of his time, gloried in the crucified Christ. "This is my philosophy, and it is the loftiest in the world—to know Jesus, and Him crucified." ¹⁾ In another sermon we read: "Dry and tasteless is every kind of spiritual food if this sweet oil be not poured into it; and insipid, if it be not seasoned with this salt. A book or writing has no single point of goodness for me if I do not read therein the name of Jesus, nor has a conference any interest for me unless the name of Jesus be heard in it. As honey to the mouth, as melody in the ear, as a song of gladness to the heart, is the name of Jesus." ²⁾ Therefore Luther said: "When Bernard is speaking of Christ, it is a great pleasure to listen to him; but when he leaves that subject and discourses on rules and works, it is no longer St. Bernard."

In the sermons which he preached almost daily to his monks at Clairvaux, Bernard often sang the praises of monastic life. He warned the novice against returning to the worldly life. "Such a person yields himself to the last degree of shamefulness; he makes that leap which is rashness itself, that fall, most disgraceful, shameful, and full of confusion and ignominy, from the sky into the abyss, from the pavement of a palace into a dunghill, from a throne into the gutter, from heaven into a swamp of mire, from the cloister into the outer world, yes, from paradise into hell." ³⁾

Towards the end of his life Bernard traveled through France and Germany in order to arouse the people to take part in the Second Crusade. He addressed a letter to the German nation, and with fiery language he appealed to the Christians to take up arms

1) In *Cant.*, serm. XLIII, 4.

3) *Op. cit.*, serm. LXIII, 6.

2) *Op. cit.*, serm. XV, 6.

in order to wrest the Holy City from the Turks. In this appeal we read: "God would be your debtor and give to His servants their reward, the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. . . . Accept the sign of the cross, and you will receive the forgiveness of all those sins which you have confessed with a contrite heart. The cloth of which it is made costs but little, but if worn on pious shoulders, it is worthy of the kingdom of God." 4)

Bernard still labored under the Catholic idea of merit. Man must make himself worthy of the merits of Christ and must add to these merits. "Even infants, when regenerated in Baptism, are not wholly wanting in merits, but have the merits of Christ, of which nevertheless they render themselves unworthy if not through inability but through neglect they join to them no merits of their own; and this is indeed the peril of those who have reached the age of discretion. Make it, then, your care to have merits; but, having them, know that they have been given to you; hope for the fruit of them from the mercy of God, and you will escape the danger whether of poverty, of ingratitude, or of presumption. A total want of merits is injurious poverty, but a mistaken belief in one's wealth of merits is spiritual presumption." 5) As a good Roman Catholic, Bernard recommends fasting as a means of averting eternal punishment. "It not only obtains forgiveness, but also earns grace; it does not only blot out sin which we have committed, but also repels future sins, which we could commit." 6) Bernard also speaks of humility as a merit. "Unwise and insane is he who relies on other merits of life, whoever trusts in another religion or wisdom except that of humility." 7) But when he thus speaks of merit, it is not the real St. Bernard that is speaking.

The real Bernard says that man should in no wise trust in his own merits or righteousness. "I believe that the Spirit testifies of these three things: Above all, that it is necessary to believe that you can have forgiveness of sins only by His pardon; secondly, that you cannot at all do a good work except also this be given by Him; finally, that you cannot earn eternal life by any work, but that also this is given to you by grace." 8) "Even the saints need to entreat pardon for their sins that they may be saved by the mercy of God and must not trust in their own righteousness; for all have sinned, and all need mercy." 9)

Man must humbly confess his sins and trust in the mercy of God. "Be not afraid if you cannot reach that perfection which you are desiring; but what your imperfect conduct is lacking a humble confession may supply, and the eyes of God will graciously look

4) *Ep.*, 363.

5) In *Cant.*, serm. LXVIII, 6.

6) In *Quad.*, serm. IV.

7) *De Div.*, serm. XXVI, 1.

8) In *Fest. Annun. Mar.*, serm. I, 1.

9) In *Cant.*, serm. LXXIII, 4.

upon your imperfections. Because for this purpose He has severely ordered His commands, that we, when we see that our perfection is coming short and cannot fulfil what is due, we might seek refuge in His mercy; and since we cannot appear in a dress of innocence or righteousness, we may appear clothed in confession. For confession is a beauty in the eyes of the Lord; only that it be not merely of the mouth but also of the whole man, so that all our bones may say, 'Lord, who is like unto Thee?' and that one may look at the throne of peace with the desire to be reconciled to God."¹⁰ Man ought sincerely to repent of his sins, but he must not despair. "Sorrow for sin is indeed necessary, but it ought not to be continual; and there should be mingled with it the more joyful remembrance of the divine goodness lest the heart be burdened because of the sorrow it feels and despair bring about the actual loss of it."¹¹ Confession should therefore be made "in faith, that is to say, it must be filled with hope, free from distrust of obtaining pardon for our offenses, or from fear, lest by making it, you should be rather condemning than justifying yourself. Judas, who betrayed our Lord, and Cain, who slew his brother, confessed their crime, but each despaired of God's mercy."¹² The Christian has nothing to fear at the coming of Christ. "What must I do when I hear that the Lord is coming? Must I flee like Adam? Must I not despair, hearing that He comes whose Law I have so greatly transgressed, whose patience I have abused, for whose blessing I have been found so ungrateful? But what greater consolation could there be than that in the sweet Word, in the comforting name! Therefore also He Himself says that the Son is not come to judge the world, but that the world by Him might be saved. Now I come near confidently; now I pray full of confidence. For what should I fear if the Savior enters my house? Against Him alone have I sinned; it will be forgiven, whatever He forgives. It is God who justifies; who is it that may condemn? Or who will accuse God's elect? Therefore we ought to rejoice that He will come to us; for now He will be inclined to pardon."¹³

Since the days of Augustine it was universally taught that man is justified by being made righteous. Grace is infused into the heart of the sinner, and thereby his free will is drawn to God in faith and drawn away from sin. When this is consummated, man has the forgiveness of sins and is thus completely justified. Now, after all these centuries Bernard was the first who clearly taught that man is justified, *i. e.*, declared righteous, by faith alone.

In his *Tract against Abaelard*, Bernard writes: "What could

10) In *Vig. Nat. Dom.*, serm. II, 4.

11) In *Cant.*, serm. XI, 2.

12) In *Cant.*, serm. XVI, 12.

13) In *Eph. Dom.*, serm. I, 1.

man, the slave of sin, fast bound by the devil, do of himself to recover that righteousness which he had formerly lost? Therefore he who lacked righteousness had Another's imputed to him. . . . It was man who owed the debt; it was Man who paid it. For if One, says Paul, died for all, then were all dead, so that, as One bore the sins of all, the satisfaction of One is imputed to all." ¹⁴⁾ Bernard continues: "Faithful is the saying and worthy of all acceptance that, while we were yet sinners, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son. Where there is reconciliation, there is also remission of sins. For if, as the Scripture says, our sins separate between us and God, there is no reconciliation while sin remains. In what, then, is remission of sins? This cup, He says, is the New Testament in My blood, which shall be shed for you for the remission of sins. Therefore, where there is reconciliation, there is remission of sins. And what is that but justification? Whether therefore we call it reconciliation, or remission of sins, or justification, or again redemption, or liberation from the chains of the devil, by whom we were taken captive at his will, at all events by the death of the Only-begotten we obtain that we have been justified freely by His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace." ¹⁵⁾ Again we read in one of his sermons: "Oh, truly blessed and indeed the only blessed one is he unto whom the Lord will not impute iniquity. For there is none without sin, no, not one; for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. But who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is sufficient for all righteousness to me to have Him upon my side against whom alone I have offended. Everything which He decreed not to impute unto me is as though it had not been. Not to sin is the righteousness of God, but the forgiveness of God is the righteousness of man." ¹⁶⁾ Here Bernard clearly teaches an objective justification, though, sorry to say, he, as an Augustinian, denied universal grace.

Bernard also taught that the subjective justification was by faith alone. "The great fragrance of Thy righteousness is spread abroad upon every side, inasmuch as Thou art not only righteous, but also Righteousness itself, — yes, a Righteousness which renders righteous him who is unrighteous. And as powerful as Thou art to justify, so bountiful art Thou also to forgive. Wherefore let whosoever is touched with sincere sorrow for his sins, who hungers and thirsts after righteousness, believe without hesitation in Thee, who justifies the ungodly; and being justified by faith alone, he shall have peace with God." ¹⁷⁾

14) *Tract. de Err. Abael.*, VI, 15.

15) *Ibid.*, VIII, 20.

16) *In Cant.*, serm. XXIII, 15.

17) *In Cant.*, serm. XXII, 8.

Bernard could well have sung "Rock of Ages, cleft for me"; for in a similar vein he says: "Another writer has thus expounded this passage (Cant. 2, 14), interpreting the clefts of the rocks as the wounds of Christ. And rightly so, for that rock was Christ. Precious are those clefts to us; for they establish the faith of the resurrection and the divinity of Christ. My Lord and my God, said the apostle. Whence came that assured conviction if not from the clefts of the Rock? In these the sparrow has found a house and the turtle a nest for herself where she may lay her young; in these the dove finds safety and regards without fear the hawk that flies around. . . . And where, in truth, is there a firm and safe refuge for us who are weak except in the wounds of our Savior? There I dwell with safety so much the greater as He is so powerful to save. The world rages around me, the body weighs upon me, the devil lays snares for me; but I do not fall, for I am founded upon a firm Rock. Perhaps I have committed some great sin, my conscience is troubled; but I do not despair because I remember the wounds of my Lord; for He was wounded for our iniquities. What sin is there so deadly that it may not be remitted through the death of Christ? If, then, I keep in remembrance a remedy so powerful and efficacious, I cannot be terrified by any disease, however virulent it be."¹⁸ Christ's merits are imputed to the sinner. "The pitying mercy of the Lord is, then, all my merit. I am not altogether destitute of merits as long as He deigns to have compassion upon me; and they will be increased just in proportion to the greatness of His mercy. What if I feel myself guilty of many offenses? Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound. And if the mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting, I also will sing of the mercies of the Lord forever. Shall it be my own righteousness that I celebrate? Nay, of the Lord. I will make mention of Thy righteousness, even of Thine only. For that is mine also, since Thou Thyself hast become my Righteousness. . . . Thy righteousness is eternal and so ample as amply to cover me equally with Thyself. In me it shall cover a multitude of sins; but in Thee, O Lord, what does it cover but the treasures of Thy loving-kindness, the riches of Thy goodness to us? These are the treasures which are laid up for me in the clefts of the Rock."¹⁹

Saving faith must be a personal faith. "If thou believest that thy sins cannot be abolished except by Him, against whom alone thou hast sinned and upon whom sin cannot fall, thou doest well; but add to it also that thou shalt believe this, that thy sins have been forgiven to thee through Him. This is the testimony which

18) In *Cant.*, serm. LXI, 3.

19) In *Cant.*, serm. LXI, 5.

the Holy Spirit utters in thy heart, saying: Thy sins are forgiven thee." 20)

Justification is to be followed by sanctification. "We may call faith the root of the vine; the various virtues, the branches; good works, the bunch, or cluster, of grapes which it bears; and devotion, the wine they yield. For as there can be no branch without the root, so without faith there is no virtue." 21) Such faith shows itself by works. "As long as faith lives in us, Christ lives in us. When faith dies, there is, as it were, a dead Christ in the soul. As we discern the life of the body in its movements, so the life of faith is shown by good works. As the soul is the life of the body, so love is the life of faith; and as the body dies when the soul leaves it, so faith expires when love grows cold." 22)

Bernard of Clairvaux at times reached truly evangelical heights, and his sermons clearly show that even in the darkest days of Popery there were still seven thousand who did not worship Baal. How different is his theology from that of the great Thomas Aquinas, the "Prince of Scholastics," who lived a century later. In Aquinas all emphasis is placed on what man must do in order to merit eternal life; in Bernard it is to know Christ, and Him crucified. Man must humbly confess his sin and trust solely in the mercy of God in Christ Jesus. Surely there can be no doubt that Bernard of Clairvaux was, on the whole, an evangelical Christian.

Morrison, Ill.

THEO. DIERKS

Das Verhältnis der Schmalkaldischen Artikel zur Augsburgerischen Konfession

Als im Februar 1537 der Konvent von Schmalkalden zusammentrat, sah er sich vor die Aufgabe gestellt, den Römlingen gegenüber ein neues Glaubensbekenntnis aufzustellen. In Betracht kommen konnten nur die Sätze Luthers, die er für den Konvent geschrieben hatte. Diese Artikel gefielen ja dem Kurfürsten Johann Friedrich so sehr, daß er unter allen Umständen ihre Annahme seitens des Konvents wünschte. Aber es kam nicht dazu. Ursache war Melancthons ablehnende Haltung. Luther hatte seinen Sätzen die Schlußworte hinzugefügt: „Dies sind die Artikel, darauf ich stehen muß und stehen will bis in meinen Tod, ob Gott will, und weiß darinne nichts zu ändern noch nachzugeben; will aber jemand etwas nachgeben, der tue es auf sein Gewissen.“ Damit war auch das gemeint, was er über den Papst geschrieben hatte. Melancthon aber stand anders. Er unterschrieb die Sätze Luthers mit

20) In *Annun. Mar.*, serm. I.22) In *Temp. Res.*, serm. II.21) In *Cant.*, serm. XXX, 6.