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Miscellanea

J. T. Mueller

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

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Miscellanea

Faith Counted for Righteousness

In the following communication from a pastoral conference occur several questions on an important subject that might be of interest to our readers. We pass them on for further study by individual pastors and groups of pastors. The letter, quoted in part only, reads: "In Rom. 4:3 we are told that Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness. In our discussion of this chapter the question arose: 'Just *what* was counted unto Abraham for righteousness?' In your *Christian Dogmatics* you write: 'Faith does not justify and save either as a good quality (*nova qualitas*) or as a good work (*opus per se dignum*) or as a gift of God (*donum Spiritus Sancti*) or as a source of good works in us, but alone as the receiving means (*ὑργανον ληπτικόν*), by which man, who in himself is ungodly, appropriates to himself the grace of God and the merits of Christ through implicit trust in the promise of the Gospel. In short, faith justifies solely by virtue of its object, which is Jesus Christ, the Crucified, Gal. 2:16; 1 Cor. 2:2.' (Cf. *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 244.) We believe this to be true. It is the teaching of Luther and of our dogmaticians, including our sainted Dr. F. Pieper (*Christliche Dogmatik*, pp. 481 ff.), not to mention our Confessions, which speak very clearly and distinctly on this point. We realize, too, that right here we are fighting our main battle against Roman Catholic work-righteousness, so that there can be no other doctrine quite as important as this. Nevertheless, how can we Lutherans prove to Roman Catholics that Rom. 4:3 does not teach *their* doctrine, that is, that 'faith does save as an *opus per se dignum*'? Does not the text seem to support the papistic conception? Must not the ordinary student of the Bible who reads this passage understand it in this manner: 'By his very act of believing' (i. e., by this good work) 'Abraham so greatly pleased God that this *opus excellentissimum* was counted unto him for righteousness; in other words, that Abraham was counted righteous because of his *opus per se dignum*'? In your *Christian Dogmatics* you go on to say: 'This truth' (that faith saves only as the receiving means) 'Scripture teaches clearly by placing *faith* in opposition to *works* whenever it describes the way in which the sinner is justified, Rom. 4:5; Eph. 2:8, 9.' (*Ibid.*) But could not a Roman Catholic or a Romanizing Protestant reply: 'Even if these passages should exclude ordinary good works, they certainly do not exclude the good work of believing God?' In short, we are somewhat perplexed by the Biblical declaration that Abraham's faith was counted unto him for righteousness. Will you kindly give us the correct exegesis of this passage, and this in such a way that our Lutheran interpretation must convince a Romanist?" So far the request for an opinion on Rom. 4:3.

It is obvious that Rom. 4:3 only repeats Gen. 15:6, though it does not quote the Hebrew original literally but rather follows the LXX: Καὶ ἐπίστευσεν Ἀβραὰμ τῷ θεῷ, καὶ ἐλογίσθη αὐτῷ εἰς δικαιοσύνην. The

Hebrew text reads: "And he [Abram] put his trust (יִדְּוֶה) in Jehovah, and He [Jehovah] imputed it to him for righteousness." The Latin version renders the Hebrew accurately: "Credidit itaque ille in Iehovah, qui imputavit hoc ipsi iustitiam." Luther's translation is equally correct: "Abram glaubte dem HErrn, und das rechnet er ihm zur Gerechtigkeit." This greater directness of expression in the original, that is, in the Genesis passage, makes the fact of the imputation more emphatic. The imputing was not done in a general, indefinite way, but the same Lord who gave the promise to Abraham imputed Abraham's trust in His promise unto him for righteousness. Our Authorized Version, in Gen. 15:6, is as accurate as is Luther's: "And he believed in the Lord; and He counted it to him for righteousness." In Rom. 4:3, then, the sense is the same, but the personal directness of the original is lacking. This fact deserves notice.

The question, however, remains: "Just *what* did God count or impute to Abraham for righteousness?" The promise, recorded in Gen. 15:5, reads: "So shall thy seed be," i. e., as numerous as the stars in the heavens. To Abraham, complaining that the Lord had granted him no heir, the promise of innumerable descendants was given; and Abraham's faith in that promise was indeed amazing. In Rom. 4:18 St. Paul describes its superb greatness thus: "Who against hope in hope believed that he might become the father of many nations, according to that which was spoken, So shall thy seed be." Abraham believed in hope, when apparently there was nothing to hope for, since God seemingly did not care to fulfil His promise. Yet he believed the unbelievable upon the ground of the very promise.

However, the promise of innumerable descendants must not be understood in an earthly manner of *bodily* descendants, but in a spiritual way. St. Paul argues this point when in another passage he writes: "Neither, because they are the [physical] seed of Abraham, are they all children; but, *In Isaac* shall thy seed be called. That is, they which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God; but *the children of the promise are counted for the seed,*" Rom. 9:7, 8. According to this divine and infallible interpretation of the promise (given by divine inspiration), when God promised Abraham descendants as innumerable as are the stars in the heavens, He had in mind, not the Ἰσραὴλ κατὰ σάρκα, but the uncounted spiritual children of Abraham, i. e., all true believers (the *communio sanctorum*), who trust in the divine Gospel-promise as Abraham (their type and pattern) trusted in the promise made to him. In Gal. 4:28 St. Paul says still more directly: "Now *we*, brethren (i. e., we believers in Christ), as Isaac was, are the [Abraham's] children of promise." The seed, then, are the Ἰσραὴλ κατὰ πνεῦμα, the *spiritual* Israel.

However, the promise made to Abraham according to Gen. 15:5 implied still more, because the "seed," which properly meant the *spiritual* Israel, were to have as their chief representative and head the "Seed of the Woman" (Gen. 3:15), or the Messiah. In Gen. 22:17 the promise of Gen. 15:5 is reiterated in an enlarged and more pointed way; for in that passage there is added to it the special promise: "And in thy Seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed," v. 18. That the Seed referred

to in this passage is Christ, St. Paul tells us in unmistakable terms in Gal. 3:16, where he writes: "Now, to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to *thy Seed*, which is Christ." Hence the Seed, *in sensu speciali*, in whom all nations of the earth were to be blessed, was the Savior Himself; and Abraham's faith was so very wondrous because he, against hope, in hope believed that from him should come the *promised Messiah*, despite the fact that even in his old age he had no son. Gal. 3:16 thus gives us the clue to the correct understanding of Gen. 15:5 and Rom. 4:3. How so?

When Abraham believed in Christ, he believed in the *blessing* which Christ was to bring to him and all his sinful descendants, as also, of course, to all the nations of the earth. As all the nations of the earth were to be *blessed* in the Messiah, so Abraham himself, the "father of all believers in Christ." As suggested before, the Messianic blessing, of course, was not to be earthly but spiritual; and as such it had a definite spiritual content. The Savior was to bring to the world (to speak in the words of Luther) forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. This is clear already from the protevangel, Gen. 3:15; and it becomes increasingly clear in the greater light of the ever more lucid Messianic predictions of the later prophets, especially of Isaiah (cf. chap. 53). Above all, it becomes clear as we study Rom. 4:6,7, a passage which tells us in so many undeniable words that the Messianic blessing is that of forgiveness of sins. The words read: "Even as David also describeth the blessedness of the man unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works, saying, Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven and whose sins are covered." Positively, the Lord imputes to the believer the righteousness of Christ; negatively, he covers, or forgives, his sins. But the imputation of righteousness and the covering, or forgiving, of sins are interchangeable terms. Both describe the same act of justification; both coincide. When God forgives sin through faith in Christ, He also imputes to the believer Christ's righteousness. This we say in passing. But what the passage just quoted proves beyond all doubt is that the spiritual blessing of the Messiah was forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation, or we may say, the imputation of Christ's righteousness, secured by His active and passive obedience. We are aware that we are here speaking in New Testament terms; but the terms are given us by the Holy Spirit Himself.

In what, then, did Abraham believe? We answer: "In the content of the promise, in the salvation, the righteousness of Christ." Abraham did not rely for salvation on the righteousness of his works; he trusted in the blessing of the Messiah, the righteousness of Christ, to save him. Not incipient righteousness, but the imputed righteousness of the Savior was the ground of his hope. This is the explanation which God Himself gives us of Abraham's faith and justification.

In the light of all this we can readily understand the statement that God counted Abraham's faith unto him for righteousness. From what we have learned above this statement involves a figure of speech, namely, a metonymy, the *thing acquiring* being used for the *thing acquired*, the cause for the effect; *faith* standing for *what faith obtains*, namely, for-

givenness of sins, life, and salvation, or, to express it in our accustomed way, for *Christ's imputed righteousness*. What was counted unto Abraham for righteousness was the Messiah's *spiritual blessing*, which Abraham's faith secured as the *medium ληρωτικόν* — the σωτηρία, Christ's free and full salvation. Abraham's faith, therefore, did not justify him as a *good work* but merely as the *hand* which he reached out to receive the blessing of the Gospel-promise which God offered and conveyed to him in Christ Jesus. His was truly an *actio passiva*, a passive act, a receiving by God's grace of what divine grace proffered him in the Messianic promise. Hence, to contend that Rom. 4:4,5 excludes ordinary good works but not the "good work" of believing God, means to ignore the very *punctum saliens* of the apostle's whole argumentation, namely, that Abraham's believing was not a working in the Semi-Pelagian, or Arminian, sense, not a meritorious act *per se*, but merely the *acceptio seu apprehensio meriti Christi*. Abraham's faith, of course, was a good work inasmuch as it was engendered in him by the Holy Ghost. It was a most praiseworthy obedience to the Gospel, and as such acknowledged by God Himself in Gen. 22:18 ("Because thou hast obeyed My voice"). But it did not save Abraham as a good work or as an act of obedience on his part, but only because it (as a hand reached out) received the blessing of the promise. Roman Catholic exegetes, who insist that Abraham's faith justified him *qua bona qualitas*, violate the clear words of the text and, besides, ignore the very core of this precious Gospel-message, just as they always commingle Law and Gospel in the interest of their work-righteousness. If St. Paul in Rom. 4:3 would have meant to teach that faith saves as a good work, he could not have written Rom. 3:20-28. The sequence of his argumentation proves that he quotes Rom. 4:3 ff. only in support of Rom. 3:20 ff., or to show that God always saves *sola fide, sine operibus*, in the Old Testament no less than in the New.

That orthodox Lutheran and other Protestant theologians have always understood Abraham's faith as a mere receiving of the blessing ("*ein blosses Hinnehmen der angebotenen Gnade*") really requires no further proof. According to them, Abraham was justified not *propter fidem* but *per fidem*, not because of his faith but *by faith*, though he was justified *propter Christum* and not merely *per Christum*, which also papistic theologians are willing to accept. In other words, Abraham was justified not by the *vis operativa* of faith (i. e., faith's renewing power; this against the papistic doctrine of *fides formata caritate*), but by its *vis receptiva*, by which faith is an *organon mendici, quo meritum Christi apprehenditur*. Luthardt, who, under two heads ("*Glaube*," "*Rechtfertigung*"; cf. *Kompendium der Dogmatik*, 13th edition, by Jelke, pp. 394 ff.), quotes our Lutheran dogmaticians very copiously on the nature of justifying faith, writes among other pertinent things on this point: "Scripture never says: faith justifies, but only: by faith (*πίστεως*) we are justified (therefore *per fidem*). Therefore the expression *Fides iustificat* is used only *quia eius intuitu Deus nos iustos reputat, sive quia fides (non sua quidem sed meriti Christi dignitate) Deum movet, ut nos iustificet* ("faith justifies only because, in view of it, God declares us righteous or because faith moves God to justify us, yet not indeed

by the dignity of its own merit, but by that of Christ"). Then follows his striking verdict on Rom. 4:3: "Und wenn es heisst: der Glaube wird zur Gerechtigkeit gerechnet, so ist das wegen seines Inhalts gemeint, den er sich aneignet (and if it is said that faith is counted unto righteousness, that is to be understood in view of its content [its blessing], which it appropriates unto itself)." (Cf. *Kompendium*, p. 414.)

Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown's *Critical and Explanatory Commentary* offers the following fine explanation on Rom. 4:3: "Romish expositors and Arminian Protestants make this to mean that God accepted Abraham's act of believing as a substitute for complete obedience. But this is at variance with the whole spirit and letter of the apostle's teaching. Throughout this whole argument, faith is set in direct opposition to works in the matter of justification—and even in the next two verses. The meaning, therefore, cannot possibly be that the mere act of believing—which is as much a work as any other piece of commanded duty (John 6:29; 1 John 3:23)*—was counted to Abraham for all-obedience. The meaning plainly is that Abraham believed in the promises which embraced Christ (Gen. 12:3; 15:5, etc.), as we believe in Christ Himself; and in both cases *faith is merely the instrument that puts us in possession of the blessing gratuitously bestowed.*" (Italics our own.)

Dr. F. Pieper's exposition on this point is so well known and so easily accessible to all that we need not quote him here. But Dr. George Stoeckhardt, whose excellent *Roemerbrief* is not used as much as it should be, deserves particular mention on this point, since he fairly exhausts the subject from an exegetical point of view. After having quoted Cremer as saying: "It is substantially the same whether Scripture says that Abraham's faith was counted unto him for righteousness or that Abraham was justified by faith," he continues in his impressive, clear-cut *modus scribendi* thus: "What we remarked above concerning the verdict of justification [namely] that this is not a mere fiction, not a vain imagination, but that it has a *fundamentum in re* (faith rests upon a foundation), we must remember also at this point. It was not an arbitrary act of God, when He counted Abraham's faith for righteousness. It [therefore] remains for us to discuss the question *why* and *in what respect* faith was counted unto Abraham for righteousness. Tholuck, Olshausen, Neander, and others find the reason for this in the ethical value, the moral qualification of Abraham's faith. His attitude, so pleasing to God, his implicit trust in the Lord, God [according to their opinion] received as a perfect fulfilling of the Law. It is their meaning that Abraham's faith is similar to that of Christians, not with respect to its content, but only as regards its [ethical] qualification. So also Weiss, and even Keil, who remarks, relative to Gen. 15:6: 'This righteousness Abraham obtained through his unqualified trust in the Lord, his undoubting faith in His promise, and his willing obedience to God's Word.' [Italics our own, to show where Keil is wrong.] Against this view Philippi rightly protests with great vehemence: 'If faith had justified Abraham, in Paul's opinion, as such a subjective sentiment, as such

* This is true only if rightly understood; for faith, properly speaking, is not obedience to the Law but to the Gospel.

a spiritual good conduct, as such a God-pleasing virtue, the apostle would have dealt his doctrine of justification [by faith] a death-blow; for, as we have learned, faith, according to his doctrine, does not justify a person before God by reason of its subjective qualification (which statement must be regarded as a relapse into legalism), but faith justifies a person because of its *object and content* [italics our own], which is none other than Christ, or God's sin-forgiving grace in Christ. Also Abraham knew, and embraced by faith, the promise of this grace, and faith as such was counted unto him for righteousness.' Delitzsch is in substantial agreement with this [for he writes]: 'Not any external legal work but faith justified Abraham (then still uncircumcised) before God—[and this is] a pre-Christian testimony of Scripture that a person does not secure righteousness, valid before God, by way of the Law, but by way of the divine promise which offers him salvation, and that this righteousness is not at all self-wrought, but is substantially righteousness imputed by faith, which apprehends the salvation that is proffered in Christ. Also the promise which was here proclaimed to Abraham had Christ for its object (as Hunnius remarks: *sub innumerabili illa posteritate latebat Christus*; "among that innumerable posterity [of Abraham] Christ was latent"); and the faith by which he received the promise was faith in the promised Seed; and Jehovah, in whom Abraham believed, was God, the Savior.' Also Meyer emphasizes the fact that the justifying power and efficacy of Abraham's faith depended not on its subjective [ethical] qualification but on its content [object]. This is not a 'dogmatic' exposition or eisegesis. The text itself declares this. In Gen. 15:6 the emphasis rests upon the fact that Abraham trusted God for that very thing which God had spoken to him, had promised him. The meaning is not that Abraham believed in God in general, or that he believed in, and obeyed, the Word of God, but that he believed the promise [made to him], that was counted to him for righteousness. Luther remarks on Gen. 15:6: 'Here we are told clearly and distinctly what faith does and accomplishes by itself alone and not with what virtues or works it is encompassed and adorned. Faith by itself alone apprehends the promise, believes the promise of God, and whenever God offers and gives to it anything, it reaches out its hand for it and receives it. Such is solely faith's proper work.' But the content of the promise which Abraham had heard was *Christ*. The remark that 'among that innumerable posterity Christ was latent' is true. By the one Seed—Christ—Abraham was to have innumerable seed out of all nations. By the one Seed—Christ—the blessing should come upon all nations. And this blessing, according to the protevangel, Gen. 3:15, was to consist essentially in the redemption from the power of the devil, from sin and death. In and with this promise Abraham apprehended by faith the coming Christ and salvation in Christ. And just this faith, which had this content, was counted to him for righteousness. The freedom from sin, which was to be procured by Christ, the righteousness [of Christ], which he appropriated unto himself by faith, was counted unto him by God for his own righteousness." (Stoekhardt, *Roemerbrief*, pp. 179—181.)

Whether or not this clear and convincing testimony of "so great a cloud of witnesses" (cf. Heb. 12:1) will persuade a Roman Catholic to

believe that justifying faith is no more than a *recipere Christum* is, of course, another matter. Pharaoh was not convinced of the divine truth, even though Egypt was smitten by the Lord with ten plagues. Nor did the rich and varied testimony of the Reformers convince the Roman Catholic Church which, *qua ecclesia*, hardened itself against the clearly attested Gospel truth when in the Canons of the Council of Trent it once for all decreed: "*Si quis dixerit, sola fide impium iustificari . . . anathema sit. Si quis dixerit, fidem iustificantem nihil aliud esse quam fiduciam divinae misericordiae, peccata remittentis propter Christum, vel eam fiduciam solam esse, qua iustificamur, anathema sit.*" (Sess. VI., Can. IX, XII.) Wherever the Gospel is being preached, the mystery is perceived of which the Formula of Concord speaks, namely, "that one is hardened, blinded, given over to a reprobate mind, while another, who is indeed in the same guilt, is converted again." (Art. XI, 57; *Triglot*, p. 1081.) But no matter what course men may take, it is ours to proclaim the Gospel in its full truth and sweet purity, and to this belongs also that we preserve the pure Scripture conception of faith and justification and that we warn men against commingling at this point divine grace and human merit. Certainly, God's elect always speak the same language of *sola gratia*, as did Anselm of Canterbury in his famous pastoral advice to the dying: "*Age ergo, dum superest in te anima [ei semper gratias]; in hac sola morte totam fiduciam tuam constitue, in nulla alia re fiduciam habens. Huic morte te totum committe, hac sola te totum contege, hac morte te totum involve.*" Or as did Catherine of Sienna, whose dying prayer was: "Lord, Thou callest me, and I come, not upon my merit but solely by Thy mercy, which I adore in Thy blood. . . . Thy blood . . . Thy blood!" (Cf. Luthardt, *Kompendium*, p. 408.) She desired to be saved "*per sola grazia e misericordia.*" Both Anselm and Catherine lived when the Reformation with its reviving, illuminating Gospel witness was not yet; and still they definitely perceived the *sola fide* teaching of St. Paul.

J. THEODORE MUELLER

Origin of the Church of England

The *Living Church*, the mouthpiece for the conservative branch of the Protestant Episcopal Church in our country, takes cognizance of a little newspaper tilt on the question how the Church of England came into being. We herewith reprint the editorial:

"*Hearst versus History.* Many readers have urged us to reply to the letter from Dudley Field Malone to William Randolph Hearst, published in Mr. Hearst's column 'In the News' in his chain of papers from coast to coast early this month. In that letter Mr. Malone discusses what he terms 'the well-known fact that the Church of England was founded in order to secure for Henry VIII the divorce from Catharine of Aragon, which the Catholic Church refused him.' To bolster up his case, Mr. Malone quotes what he terms 'the cold, colorless account of Henry VIII's reign' from the *International Encyclopedia*, together with a very carefully picked paragraph from the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

"To try to counter the influence of the Hearst press, which reaches millions of readers, with an editorial in a church-paper having a circula-

tion of 12,000 seems rather futile, particularly as both Mr. Hearst and Mr. Malone are recognized as controversialists rather than historians. The historical record is clear for those who are not blinded by invincible ignorance, and there would be no value in rehashing the controversy in our editorial columns.

"We categorically deny that the Church of England was founded by Henry VIII or by any of the other English monarchs to which its foundation is variously ascribed by Roman Catholic controversialists. We further deny that the thoroughly reprehensible Henry's 'divorce' was the cause of the Reformation in England. Those canards have been disproved so often and so conclusively that even Mr. Hearst and Mr. Malone must be aware that they have worn pretty thin even for controversial purposes.

"The Rev. Henry E. Olivier, honorary canon of Canterbury and examining chaplain to the Bishop of Ely, has thus evaluated the oft-repeated slander now given new circulation by Mr. Malone and Mr. Hearst:

"It is natural that those who want to discredit the Reformation should endeavor to describe it as the result of bedchamber intrigues in the royal palace. But the student of history knows that all revolutions, whether civil or ecclesiastical, are brought about by a long-drawn-out succession of insurrectionary impulses. No one would be such a fool as to say that the cause of the French Revolution was Marie Antoinette's "diamond necklace" incident; but it was that scandal which brought the antidynastic feeling in France to boiling point. And the historian regards Henry VIII's matrimonial irregularities in much the same light, as the immediate occasion of the repudiation of papal authority; but the real cause was something of much deeper significance: it was the assertion of a claim to independence on the part of the Church of England, which had been a fundamental note of her Catholicism from the first." (*What Happened at the Reformation*, by Henry E. Olivier, Morehouse Publishing Co., 1928, page 13.)

"Mr. Hearst has been subjecting his long-suffering readers to a great deal of more or less accurate history in his column, all of it taken over uncritically from secondary sources. No one questions his right to use the front pages of the papers that he owns for that purpose, but it is reasonable to expect him to use some care in permitting his columns to be used for attack on the Church of two million Americans, many of whom are subscribers to, and advertisers in, his publications."

To us it is evident that through the work of Tyndale and other noble witnesses of Christ the old Gospel had been brought to the English people before Henry VIII divorced his lawful wife. It cannot be denied, however, that this monarch used the antagonism which had arisen in his kingdom against Rome to further his unscriptural matrimonial ventures.

A.