Luther on the Two Kinds of Righteousness; Reflections on His Two-Dimensional Definition of Humanity at the Heart of His Theology
by Robert Kolb

"Our theology," Martin Luther claimed as he wrote the preface to his commentary on Galatians in 1535, consisted of the distinction between two kinds of righteousness:

This is our theology, by which we teach a precise distinction between these two kinds of righteousness, the active and the passive, so that morality and faith, works and grace, secular society and religion may not be confused. Both are necessary, but both must be kept within their limits.¹

In making this observation Luther was referring to two kinds of human righteousness, both necessary for the whole and good human life that God had made human creatures to live.

Two Kinds of Divine Righteousness

Luther's theology also rested on a presupposition that there were two definitions for the term "the righteousness of God" as it referred to God's essence. But the Reformer believed that only one of those definitions corresponded to Paul's usage and to that of the Old Testament in general. Luther dismissed the predominant medieval understanding of what makes God righteous, or what makes God God, as he had learned it.² God's righteousness has usually been understood as distributive justice, according to the model of a Greek judge, who makes the system work by executing the law and executing human beings—when necessary (or just)—in order to preserve law and order. Luther indeed had grown up with this image of God, often depicted in altar pieces which displayed Christ
as judge, with sword in hand. This vision of God's righteousness is alien to God's true nature and terrified Luther until he discovered that what makes God God—his most fundamental characteristic—is not his justice or wrath but rather his steadfast love and mercy. "To know God aright is to recognize that with him there is nothing but kindness and mercy. But those who feel that God is angry and unmerciful do not know him aright." God's righteousness is that which bestows righteousness upon fallen human creatures. In his exposition of Psalm 51:14, delivered in Wittenberg in 1532, Luther commented:

This term "righteousness" really caused me much trouble. They [the scholastic theologians whose works Luther had read as a student] generally explained that righteousness is the truth by which God deservedly condemns or judges those who have merited evil. In opposition to righteousness they set mercy by which believers are saved. This explanation is most dangerous, besides being vain, because it arouses a secret hate against God and his righteousness. Who can love him if he wants to deal with sinners according to righteousness? Therefore remember 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 wonderful 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.

This discovery, that God's righteousness or essence is steadfast love and mercy, played a key role in the formation of Luther's understanding of the biblical message.

Two Kinds of Human Righteousness

Also central to Luther's "evangelical breakthrough" was his discovery of what makes the human creature "righteous" or right, that is, truly human. This involves the distinction emphasized in the preface to the 1535 Galatians commentary cited above. In recalling how he came to understand the entire biblical message Luther focused on his finding a new definition for human righteousness.

This distinction was not a new development in the reformer's thought at this time. A decade later he would reflect on his coming
to an understanding of the gospel in the 1510s. At that time his attempt to please God by living the holiest way of life the medieval church knew, the monastic way, had failed. It left him only with “an extremely disturbed conscience.” He had come to hate the righteous God who punishes sinners; a secret, perhaps blasphemous anger against God possessed him, and he “raged with a fierce and troubled conscience.”

At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, “In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live.’” There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith. . . . Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me. Thereupon I ran through the Scriptures from memory. I also found in other terms an analogy, as the work of God, that is, what God does in us, the power of God, with which he makes us strong, the wisdom of God, with which he makes us wise, the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God. And I treasured the word that had become the sweetest of all words for me with a love as great as the hatred with which I had previously hated the word “righteousness of God.” Thus that passage in Paul was for me truly the gate to paradise.

Luther realized, however, that what made him genuinely right in God’s sight had to be distinguished from what made him truly human—genuinely right—in relationship to other creatures of God. This distinction is what he labeled “our theology” in 1535.

By differentiating the two dimensions in which human creatures were created to be human, or righteous, Luther was establishing as his fundamental hermeneutical principle what Jesus was referring to when he divided the law into two parts: loving the Lord our God with all heart, soul, and mind, and loving our neighbors as ourselves (Matthew 22:37, 39.) When the reformer introduced his readers to comments he had made on the Epistle to the Galatians in 1531 (as he edited them four years later), he began by sketching the “argument,” that is, the central concerns, of the apostle Paul in writing to the Galatians. According to Luther, Paul’s
fundamental consideration in the letter was establishing God's message regarding "faith, grace, the forgiveness of sins or Christian righteousness." He noted that there are a variety of definitions for the word righteousness: "righteousness is of many kinds." Luther listed political righteousness, ceremonial righteousness, the moral righteousness of the decalogue, all of which, he pointed out, are genuine forms of righteousness. "Over and above there is the righteousness of faith." Luther defined "this most excellent righteousness, the righteousness of faith, which God imputes to us through Christ without works" as a "merely passive righteousness." "For here we work nothing, render nothing to God; we only receive and permit someone else to work in us, namely, God. Therefore it is appropriate to call the righteousness of faith or Christian righteousness 'passive.' This is the righteousness hidden in a mystery, which the world does not understand. In fact, Christians themselves do not adequately understand it or grasp it in the midst of their temptations." \(^7\)

*Righteousness in the Two Dimensions or Relationships of Human Life*

In developing this contrast between passive righteousness—which expresses itself in faith—and active righteousness—which expresses itself in performing the deeds of God's plan for human life—Luther was bringing to light a fundamental distinction that had escaped articulation by most theologians since the time of the apostles. This distinction recognizes and rests upon Christ's observation that human life consists of two kinds of relationship, one with the author and creator of life, the other with all other creatures (Matt. 22:37–39).

Just as the relationship of child to parents differs from the relationship between children and all else that belongs to the family, so the relationship between Creator and creatures is fundamentally not the same kind of relationship as that among his creatures. Parents establish the essential identity of their children; God has made them "responsible" for these children in ways that no sibling or
other caretaker—by definition—can be. Parents give the gift of life and determine the genetic identity of their progeny. They shape and form the life of these offspring through their loving care in ways that psychologists perceive to be unique. Siblings, friends, and acquaintances relate to each other in quite different ways than children relate to their parents. These two different spheres of relationship issue from—and express themselves in—God's design for our humanity. Likewise, as our Creator he alone is responsible for our identity. From that identity as his creatures and children proceeds the performance of activities which reflect that identity. Human creatures identify themselves as God's creatures when they live according to that identity which God has given them.

This means that human life exists on two planes of dependence and interdependence, in two spheres of relationship. They may be described as vertical and horizontal so long as the vertical relationship is delineated with God both above us (because he is lord and author of the life of his children) and beneath us (because he is the loving Father who lifts us up and cuddles us to himself in Christ). The horizontal relationship has bound us to the rest of creation as people who are held accountable for exercising God-given responsibilities in an adult manner toward other creatures, human but also animal, mineral, and vegetable. God's human creatures are right—really human—in their vertical relationship because their faith embraces the God who loves them through Jesus Christ with the reckless trust of total dependence and reliance on him which constitutes their identity. They are right—really human—in their horizontal relationship with God's other creatures when they live a life which is active in reflecting his love through the deeds that deliver his care and concern. Two spheres and kinds of relationship demand two different ways of being right or righteous.

**The Righteousness of Identity and the Righteousness of Performance**

Thus, Luther's theology found its orientation in this distinction between the identity which God as creator gives to his creatures
and the performance or activities with which that identity expresses itself within the relationships God has fashioned for human life. Luther compared the righteousness of our identity to the earth as it receives the blessing of rain.

As the earth itself does not produce rain and is unable to acquire it by its own strength, worship, and power but receives it only by a heavenly gift from above, so this heavenly righteousness is given to us by God without our work or merit. As much as the dry earth of itself is able to accomplish and obtain the right and blessed rain, that much can we human creatures accomplish by our own strength and works to obtain that divine, heavenly, and eternal righteousness. Thus we can obtain it only through the free imputation and indescribable gift of God.9

That leads the Christian conscience to say,

I do not seek active righteousness. I ought to have and perform it; but I declare that even if I did have and perform it, I cannot trust in it or stand up before the judgment of God on the basis of it. Thus I put myself beyond all active righteousness, all righteousness of my own or of the divine law, and I embrace only the passive righteousness which is the righteousness of grace, mercy, and the forgiveness of sins.10

A simple theological parable may clarify the point. Although by the definition of his own theology Thomas Aquinas had sufficient merit to proceed directly to heaven, without having to work off temporal punishment in purgatory, the Dominican saint dallied along the way, visiting old friends and doing research among those who still had purgatorial satisfactions to discharge there. He arrived at Saint Peter's gate some 272 years after his death, on February 18, 1546. After ascertaining his name, Saint Peter asked Thomas, “Why should I let you into my heaven?” “Because of the grace of God,” Thomas answered, ready to explain the concept of prevenient grace should it be necessary. Peter asked instead, “How do I know you have God’s grace?” Thomas, who had brought a sack of his good deeds with him, was ready with the proof. “Here are the good works of a lifetime,” he explained. “I could have done none of them without God’s grace, but in my worship and observation of monastic rules, in my obedience to parents, governors, and superiors, in my concern for the physical well-being and prop-
erty of others, in my chastity and continence, you can see my righteousness—grace-assisted as it may be.” Since a line was forming behind Thomas, Peter waved him in, certain that Thomas would soon receive a clearer understanding of his own righteousness. The next person in line stepped up. “Name?” “Martin Luther.” “Why should I let you into my heaven?” “Because of the grace of God.” Peter was in a playful mood, so he went on, “How do I know you have God’s grace? Thomas had his works to prove his righteousness, but I don’t see that you have brought any proof along that you are righteous.” “Works?” Luther exclaimed. “Works? I didn’t know I was supposed to bring my works with me! I thought they belonged on earth, with my neighbors. I left them down there.” “Well,” said Gatekeeper Peter, “how then am I supposed to know that you really have God’s grace?” Luther pulled a little, well-worn, oft-read scrap of paper out of his pocket and showed it to Peter. On it were the words, “Martin Luther, baptized, November 11, in the year of our Lord 1483.” “You check with Jesus,” Luther said. “He will tell you that he has given me the gift of righteousness through his own blood and his own resurrection.”

Martin Luther knew how he was righteous where; he knew where he was truly human in what manner. That is, he recognized that being human in God’s sight means receiving the unconditional love of God. It means child-like dependence, expressed in the absolute trust of complete love. Furthermore, Luther recognized that being human in relationship to the creatures of God meant the exercise of adult responsibility as God designed it for human creatures, expressed in the care and concern of deeds of complete love for others.

Two Kinds of Righteousness: Inseparable but Distinct

Luther did see these two kinds of righteousness as inseparable. Human life is of one piece, not divided into separate or separable spheres of sacred and profane. Human life is cruciform—eyes lifted to focus on God, feet firmly planted on his earth, arms stretched
out in mutual support of those God has placed around us. Having the focus of our lives directed toward Christ inevitably extends our arms to our neighbors. Human beings are truly human, that is, right or functioning properly (according to the design for human righteousness that God made) when their identity does express itself in the activities that flow from that identity. Luther gave his students a critical word of caution:

The weak, who are not malicious or slanderous but good, are offended when they hear that the law and good works do not have to be done for justification. One must go to their aid and explain to them how it is that works do not justify, how works should be done, and how they should not be done. They should be done as fruits of righteousness, not in order to bring righteousness into being. Having been made righteous, we must do them; but it is not the other way around: that when we are unrighteous, we become righteous by doing them. The tree produces fruit; the fruit does not produce the tree.\(^{11}\)

For, as Luther never tried of pointing out, our identity determines the validity of the activities it produces.

The righteousness of the law is earthly and deals with earthly things; by it we perform good works. But as the earth does not bring forth fruit unless it has been first watered and made fruitful from above—for the earth cannot judge, renew, and rule the heavens, but the heavens judge, renew, rule, and fortify the earth, so that it may do what the earth has commanded—so also by the righteousness of the law we do nothing even when we do much; we do not fulfill the law even when we fulfill it. Without any merit or any work of our own, we must first become righteous by Christian righteousness, which has nothing to do with the righteousness of the law or with earthly and active righteousness. This righteousness is heavenly and passive. We do not have it of ourselves; we receive it from heaven. We do not perform it; we accept it by faith through which we ascend beyond all laws and works . . . for this righteousness means to do nothing, to share nothing, and to know nothing about the law or about works but to know and believe only this: that Christ has gone to the Father and is now invisible; . . . that he is our high priest, interceding for us and reigning over us and in us through grace.\(^{12}\)

Shortly after he presented such ideas in lectures before his students in 1531, Luther proclaimed them to the congregation in Wittenberg. In treating John 6:37 from the pulpit of the town church in 1532, he reminded his hearers that
In order to retain the purity of the doctrine of justification by faith it is necessary to distinguish clearly between justification by faith and justification by good works. The performance of good works is not forbidden here. If I live according to the law, do good works, keep the commandments of the second table of the Ten Commandments, honor my government, abstain from theft, murder, and adultery, I am conducting myself properly; and such works are not condemned here. It is work-righteousness, however, when the papists propose to do good works before acknowledging the Lord Christ and believing in him. They lay claim to their salvation by virtue of their good works, and they abandon the article of faith in Christ. But those who come to faith and know that Christ is not a taskmaster, and then begin to lead a good life and do acceptable and upright works, do not call these works, performed either before or after accepting Christ, holy or righteous, as is the wont of the papists. Only faith in Christ is our righteousness...

In the end this more fundamental righteousness grasped by faith, God’s gift of our identity as his children, reveals itself as that upon which human existence depends:

When this life ends and death is at hand, the rules of earthly justice [righteousness] also expire. Christ declares here: This earth’s justice does not apply here; it does not endure. You must rise above what you have done and come before God with a different righteousness; you must despair of your own works and rely on, and believe in, Christ’s words: “Truly, truly, your food is indeed my flesh given for you and my blood shed for you” [John 6:55]. Then you hear that your sins and mine cannot be atoned and paid for by you or by me, but solely by him who shed his blood for me.

The Roots of the Distinction

Luther’s insight into the distinct dimensions of what it means to be human was an idea that was born in the struggle for his evangelical breakthrough in 1518 and 1519. After having composed a tract on three kinds of righteousness in 1518, he went on to preach a sermon at the end of that year or early in 1519 on two kinds of righteousness. “There are two kinds of Christian righteousness, just as human sin is of two kinds. The first is alien righteousness, that is the righteousness of another, instilled from
without. This is the righteousness of Christ by which he justifies through faith.”16 This alien righteousness [from the Latin, “belonging to another”], which is bestowed from outside the human creature, belongs to the Christian “through faith in Christ; therefore, Christ’s righteousness becomes our righteousness and all that he has becomes ours . . . this righteousness is primary; it is the basis, the cause, the source of all our own actual righteousness. For this is the righteousness given in place of the original righteousness lost in Adam. It accomplishes the same as that original righteousness would accomplish; rather it accomplishes more.”17

Although Luther would continue to refine his definition of this alien righteousness, already in 1519 its basic elements were in place. This alien righteousness “instilled in us without our works by grace alone—while the Father, to be sure, inwardly draws us to Christ—is set opposite original sin, likewise alien, which we acquire without our works by birth alone.” Luther went on to describe the active righteousness or “proper” [from the Latin “one’s own”] righteousness as “the product of the righteousness of the first type, actually it is fruit and consequence.” Luther continued, “Therefore through the first righteousness arises the voice of the bridegroom who says to the soul ‘I am yours,’ but through the second comes the voice of the bride who answers, ‘I am yours.’” God gives us the identity as his bride by choosing us and bringing us to himself. The active righteousness of response takes form in the things we do which respond to his goodness.18

That Luther employed a double focus on human righteousness can be seen in his understanding that the righteousness which God gives “is not instilled all at once, but it begins, makes progress, and is finally perfected at the end through death.”19 This “partly righteous, partly sinful” view of the believer remained a part of Luther’s discussion of the struggle of the Christian life for at least another decade. It describes the progress (or lack of it) experienced in the practice of actual righteousness, in the performance of God’s will within the horizontal sphere of life. However, the logic of the distinction between the two kinds of righteousness, combined with his belief that God’s Word creates reality, had already led him to
define the situation of believers in another, clearer fashion. He recognized that God's children are also completely righteous and completely sinful at the same time. His mature understanding of the righteousness of God's chosen children, reflected in the later Galatians commentary, could label them righteous "in fact"—in God's sight—in spite of their experience of sinfulness because they had been re-created in Christ through faith by the power of the Word. For the Word has worked the forgiveness—the abolition—of sin by bringing the benefits of Christ's death and resurrection to believers. God removes the sinners from their sin.

For believers in Christ are not sinners and are not sentenced to death but are altogether holy and righteous, lords over sin and death who live eternally. Only faith can discern that, but the trust believers place in Christ diverts their eyes and ears away from their own sins. According to the theology of Paul, there is no more sin, no more death, and no more curse in the world, but only in Christ, who is the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world and who became a curse in order to set us free from the curse. . . . True theology teaches that there is no more sin in the world, because Christ, on whom, according to Isaiah 53:6, the Father has laid the sins of the entire world, has conquered, destroyed and killed it in his own body. Having died to sin once, he has truly been raised from the dead and will not die any more (Rom. 6:9). Therefore wherever there is faith in Christ, there sin has in fact been abolished, put to death, and buried.

Luther's ontology recognized that reality springs from and rests upon what God says. This ontology of the Word convinced him that when God declares, "forgiven," he restores the original humanity of his chosen children.

Original Righteousness and Original Sin

The Word of forgiveness and life—fashioned through Christ's death and resurrection—has restored the original relationship between God and the human creature. In lecturing on Genesis 2 Luther revealed his presupposition that human creatures are totally dependent upon their Creator, products of his hand and breath, given their human identity purely out of his sovereign grace and favor.
Adam and Eve had no time of probation in which to perform deeds which would make them eligible for and worthy of their humanity. They were created truly human.

We are vessels of God, formed by God himself, and he himself is our potter, but we his clay, as Isaiah 64 [:8] says. And this holds good not only for our origin but throughout our whole life; until our death and in the grave we remain the clay of this potter... in a state of merely passive potentiality, not active potentiality. For there we do not choose, we do not do anything; but we are chosen, we are equipped, we are born again, we accept, as Isaiah says: “Thou art the potter, we thy clay.”

The Wittenberg professor rejected the scholastic traditions which interpreted the original righteousness of Adam and Eve as a quality implanted in them. God had created them as his children, made them “righteous, truthful, and upright not only in body but especially in soul.” They knew God and obeyed him with the utmost joy and understood the works of God even without prompting. The peace of Eden was God's gift to his human creatures. “It is part of this original righteousness that Adam loved God and his works with an outstanding and very pure attachment, that he lived among the creatures of God in peace, without fear of death and without any fear of sickness, and that he had a very obedient body, without evil inclinations and the hideous lust which we now experience.” The gift of human life had established Adam's and Eve's existence and identity. The activities which flowed from that identity expressed who they were. At the center of their beings was their knowledge and trust of their Creator.

Luther formulated the negative side of this definition of the original human righteousness by defining original sin:

... human nature has completely fallen; ... the intellect has become darkened, so that we no longer know God and his will and no longer perceive the works of God; furthermore, the will is extraordinarily depraved, so that we do not trust the mercy of God and do not fear God but are unconcerned, disregard the Word and will of God, and follow the desire and the impulses of the flesh, likewise, our conscience is no longer quiet but, when it thinks of God's judgment despairs and adopts illicit defenses and remedies. ... the knowledge of God has been lost; we do not everywhere and always give thanks to him; we do not
delight in his works and deeds; we do not trust him; when he inflicts deserved punishments, we begin to hate God and blaspheme him.

From the broken relationship with God come broken relationships with others. Luther continued his definition of sinfulness with a focus on the actual sins that flow from original sin, the doubt and defiance of God: “when we must deal with our neighbor we yield to our desires and are robbers, thieves, adulterers, murderers, cruel, inhuman, merciless, etc. The passion of lust is indeed some part of original sin. But greater are the defects of the soul: unbelief, ignorance of God, despair, hate, blasphemy.” The root of sin is this doubt of the Word of God which created and shaped the relationship of love and trust between God and his human creatures. Breaking the contact, going deaf on God, destroyed the relationship that stood at the heart of what it meant to be human.

**Righteousness in and through Christ**

Luther knew that his definition of righteousness deviated from the commonly understood meaning of the word. In preaching on John 16:10 in 1537 he observed to his hearers that the righteousness which Christ bestows upon believers, “the righteousness which abolishes sin and unrighteousness and makes human creatures righteous and acceptable before God,” is “completely concealed, not only from the world but also from the saints. It is not a thought, a word, or a work in ourselves, as the scholastics fantasized about grace when they said that it is something poured into our hearts. No, it is entirely outside and above us; it is Christ’s going to the Father, that is, his suffering, resurrection, and ascension.” Luther further commented,

This is a peculiar righteousness; it is strange indeed that we are to be called righteous or to possess a righteousness which is really no work, no thought, in short, nothing whatever in us but is entirely outside us in Christ and yet becomes truly ours by reason of his grace and gift, and becomes our very own, as though we ourselves had achieved and earned it. Reason, of course, cannot comprehend this way of speaking, which says that our righteousness is something which
involves nothing active or passive on our part, yes, something in which I do not participate with my thoughts, perception, and senses; that nothing at all in me makes me so pleasing to God and saves me; but that I leave myself and all human thoughts and ability out of account and cling to Christ. . . .

Luther could not speak of restored human righteousness in God's sight apart from Christ. For sin had indeed destroyed that righteousness which consisted in trust in the Creator. Christ took sin into himself and substituted himself for sinners before the law's tribunal. Christ took the punishment for sin, its wage of death, into himself and satisfied the law's condemnation of human creatures who fail to be and behave like the creatures they were designed to be. No cheap atonement was possible from Luther's point of view. The Lamb had to die. Luther employed the Pauline baptismal model of dying and rising in Romans 6:3-11 and Colossians 2:11-15 to speak not only of God's saving action in baptism but also of his action of justifying. The sinner's sin kills Christ. Christ buries the sinner's sin. Christ raises the sinner to new life—to a new identity and a new way of practicing that identity.

Therefore Luther can state quite simply, "The work of Christ, properly speaking, is this: to embrace the one whom the law has made a sinner and pronounced guilty, and to absolve that person from his sins if he believes the gospel. 'For Christ is the end of the law, that everyone who has faith may be justified' (Rom. 10:4); he is 'the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world' (John 1:29)."

We cannot deny that Christ died for our sins in order that we might be justified. For he did not die to make the righteous righteous; he died to make sinners into righteous people, the friends and children of God, and heirs of all heavenly gifts. Therefore since I feel and confess that I am a sinner on account of the transgression of Adam, why should I not say that I am righteous on account of the righteousness of Christ, especially when I hear that he loved me and gave himself for me?

Luther followed the apostolic dictum regarding the source of that new life in righteousness, as Paul expressed it in Romans 4:25. Paul "refers to the resurrection of Christ, who rose again for our justification. His victory is a victory over the law, sin, our flesh, the
world, the devil, death, hell, and all evils; and this victory of his life he has given to us. Even though these tyrants, our enemies, accuse us and terrify us, they cannot drive us into despair or condemn us. For Christ, whom God the Father raised from the dead, is the Victor over them, and he is our righteousness."

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. In him a sure comfort has been set forth for us, and the victory has been granted.

For “he alone makes us paupers rich with his superabundance, expunges our sins with his righteousness, devours our death with his life, and transforms us from children of wrath, tainted with in, hypocrisy, lies, and deceit, into children of grace and truth.”

Christ is our righteousness not in his obedience to the law but rather in his obedience to the Father, not merely in his death or solely in his resurrection. What makes Christ the righteousness given to sinners which makes them human once again? “It is Christ's going to the Father, that is, his suffering, resurrection, and ascension.”

Adam and Eve, Luther believed, had also possessed only this passive righteousness. They were human in God's sight not because they had proved their humanity through specific activities which had won God's favor. Instead, they had been created by his breath and hand because he wanted them as his children. His love and mercy expressed themselves by forming his creatures as right and righteous in his sight. He formed them with the expectation that they would perform as his children in relationship to the rest of his creation as they trusted in him and showed him their love.

“Faith” or “trust” is the operative word. Trust defines the new creature's identity as child of God. Passive righteousness is the trust which embraces the loving Father and throws itself upon him. Just as that was true in the Garden, until doubt broke in and broke down the relationship of trust in God, so it becomes true as Christ's
word of love draws trust back to God in the human creatures that
word re-creates.

For fallen sinners the gift of this passive righteousness, which
expresses itself first of all in trust toward the loving Father, comes
through Christ's obedience to the Father as he took the sinfulness
of fallen creatures into death with himself and as he reclaimed life
for them in his resurrection. Christ promises forgiveness and life
through his death and resurrection, and thus he elicits trust from
those sinners whom the Holy Spirit has turned back to himself.
That trust, directed toward the Crucified and Risen God, is the
righteousness of Eden, restored and revivified, ready to advertise
its identity in the performance of activities suitable for God's
children.

Conclusion

The concept of the two kinds of human righteousness had
sprung upon Luther as he was engaged in the study of the biblical
text. In his exegetical studies, as he ran through the passages of
Scripture, he found this concept to be a true and accurate descrip­
tion of what it means to be human. The concept also rang true in
the midst of his own struggles against doubt about his own identity
in God's sight and as he helped others with the pastoral care he
was called to give them. He believed that the biblical message was
given to the church for pastoral purposes, and this connection of
biblical confession and pastoral practice stands at the heart of the
Lutheran enterprise.

In the midst of societies around the world, in which new tech­
nologies, new economic forces, new political constellations, and
new social structures join with the age-old sinfulness of individuals
to unsettle life and deprive human beings of their humanity, Lu­
theran churches need to witness to Christ using the distinction of
identity and performance, the distinction of passive and active righ­
teousness. This insight into humanity enriches our ability to make
the gospel of Jesus Christ meet individual human needs as we draw
those outside the faith into the company of Christ's people. It also
is one of the chief gifts Lutherans have to offer within the ecumenical conversation about how best to express the biblical message. For the distinction of the two dimensions in which we relate to God and his world, the two aspects which constitute our humanity, is "our theology," and it is impossible to understand the Lutheran tradition without recognizing and employing it.

NOTES


3. Comments on Psalm 130:7, 1525 (1517), WA 18:520.27—30; LW 14:193—194.


7. WA 40,1:40.16—27; LW 26:4.

8. WA 40,1:41.15—26; LW 26:4—5.


12. WA 40,1:46.20—47,21; LW 26:8.


15. WA 2:41.43—47.

16. WA 2:145.7—10; LW 31:297.

17. WA 2:146.12—19; LW 31:298—299.

18. WA 2:147.7—18; LW 31:300.

19. WA 2:146.32—35; LW 31:299.


21. WA 42:64.22—26; LW 1:84.
22. WA 42:86.11–16; LW 1:113.
23. WA 42:86.17–41; LW 1:114.
25. WA 46:44.34–45.3; LW 24:347.
26. See Robert Kolb, "God Kills to Make Alive: Romans 6 and Luther's Understanding of Justification (1535)," Lutheran Quarterly 12 (1998): 33–56, on the use of the baptismal enactment of the death of the sinner and the resurrection of the believer in Christ, as Luther developed the idea in the Galatians commentary of 1535.
27. WA 40,1:250.10–13; LW 26:143.
28. WA 40,1:300.15–22; LW 26:179.
32. WA 46:44.26–27; LW 24:347.
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