

Learning Justification by Faith Alone in Madagascar

Lutherans have been in Madagascar for a hundred and forty years. Since 1866 when Norwegian missionaries landed on the shores of this African island nation, the name Lutheran has been synonymous with the clear preaching of Christ Jesus and compassionate care extended to people living in poverty and disease. Those early Norwegian Lutherans planted churches, established schools and maintained clinics. Acts of mercy were kept in close proximity to the confession of Jesus as the only Savior from sin, death and hell. The proclamation of Jesus crucified and risen illumined multiple diaconal efforts in education including schools for the deaf and the blind, hospitals for people whose bodies were ravaged by tropical diseases and whose minds were tormented by the forces of darkness, and orphanages for homeless children. It was all done in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ who came into the world to redeem lost sinners in body and soul. By the end of the nineteenth century strong revival movements within the Malagasy Lutheran Church would lead to the establishment of tobys (literally encampments of mercy) where the destitute, sick, poor and dying could be cared in community centered in God's Word and dedicated to works of mercy freely given as to Christ Himself.

Lutherans in Madagascar – now some three million strong – love the theology of the Reformation. They glory in the good news of the God who justifies the ungodly by faith alone apart from works of the law. It is this theology that fuels a vigorous corporate life of mercy in their midst and it is a wonder to behold!

This past Spring I was in Madagascar with six of mine students from Concordia Theological Seminary. At the seminary, I lecture on theological ethics. We spend a lot of time in Luther and the Confessions, looking at the connection between faith and good works. I have often lectured on the German theologian Eberhard Juengel's statement that there is no more liberating basis for ethics than the doctrine of justification. My students were now able to see the truth of Juengel's statement both articulated and embodied by these marvelous Lutheran folks. As we drove over dusty and unpaved roads into one of the oldest tobys in Madagascar, isolated and out in the bush, we were greeted by eager band of its inhabitants all clothed in white robes. The rich sound of their voices blending together in hymns of praise and thanksgiving welcome our party. They led us to faucet surrounded by benches where they washed our feet as the local pastor read from the Scriptures and prayed.

Touring the toby, our host explained to us that the residents where white garments as a reminder of the imputed righteousness that we are given through faith in Christ. Clothed with His righteousness, cleansed with His blood, we are set free to live lives of righteousness in the presence of our neighbors. We are little Christ, as Luther put it, one to another. Faith alone justifies. Justifying faith gives birth to works of love which serve the needs of the neighbor. We serve one another as God in Christ has served us. As Dr. Joseph Randrianasolo, the president of the Malagasy Lutheran Church's graduate seminary in Fianarantsoa put it "as Christ freely gives to us through His suffering, death, and resurrection so we freely give to others." Talk about the liberating power of

justification by faith alone! There you have it! Christ gives. We receive and as we have received from Him all that we have so we give freely.

Since returning from Madagascar last March, I have had ample opportunity to ponder and reflect on what my students and I heard and saw there. We witnessed a church that is stricken with poverty when it comes to worldly wealth. Many people live in squalid conditions, menaced by hunger and stalked by disease. We saw shacks built on muddy rice fields where their inhabitants live with the ever-present threat of flooding. The faces of the children who came to the Good Samaritan Center for the Poor for a weekly hot mea of rice, soup and boiled fish have left an indelible print on my mind. They are as Luther would put it are the masks behind which our Lord Jesus hides to receive our service of love: “Thus the world is full of God. In every alley, at your door you find Christ; stare not at heaven”¹

Our time with our Malagasy Lutheran brothers and sisters reminded us of the vitality of confessional Lutheran for works of mercy precisely because it takes justification by faith alone so seriously. Luther scholar Carter Lindberg observes that in the medieval period, the rich used the poor both for labor and spirituality. The poor were seen as destined to serve the economic needs of the wealthy and as objects of charity and almsgiving the poor provided the rich the occasion to do good works that were seen to advance the cause of their own salvation. Lindberg writes “Luther’s doctrine of justification cut the nerve of this medieval ideology of poverty. Since salvation is a gift of God apart from human works, both poverty and almsgiving lose saving significance. By despiritualizing poverty, the Reformers could recognize poverty in every form as a personal and social evil to be combated. . . . The poor are no longer the objects of meritorious charity, but neighbors to be served through justice and equity.”² Justification by faith alone frees us from attempting to use the needy as building blocks in futile attempts to secure salvation. Christ alone has purchased and won us to be His own. Salvation is not achieved by any work of the law, including works of mercy. Salvation is freely given by Christ to be received by faith alone. Freed by faith to live in Christ, we can direct our attention to giving of all that we have to serve the neighbor simply because he or she is in need.

When many member churches of the Lutheran World Federation signed on to the *Joint Document on the Doctrine of Justification* with the Roman Catholics in 1999, the Malagasy Lutheran Church declined. Could it be that it is precisely the Malagasy Lutherans’ firm grasp of the central doctrine that enlivens them in works of mercy? My students and I were blessed to be with these dear Lutheran saints in Madagascar. The students who went with me to Madagascar are pastors now in places as diverse as Hawaii and Iowa, Alabama and Togo, West Africa. They learned a lot about human care and works of mercy in hospitals, a school for the blind, and in the Malagasy Lutheran Church’s HIV/AIDS project supported by LCMS World Relief and Human Care. They

¹ Martin Luther as quoted by Vitor Westhelle, “The Word and the Mask: Revisiting the Two-Kingdoms Doctrine” in *The Gift of Grace: The Future of Lutheran Theology* edited by Neils Henrik Gregersen et al (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 178.

² Carter Lindberg, “Luther on Poverty” in *Harvesting Martin Luther’s Reflections on Theology, Ethics, and the Church* edited by Timothy Wengert (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 140-141

saw Christ's people active as His hands and feet in the center for the poor and in churches both in crowded urban settings and out in the Madagascar bush. I don't doubt that they will be more caring and compassionate shepherds for the experience. But I'm most pleased that they learned something about the source of it all – God's justification of the ungodly by faith alone. That act of God in Christ makes human mercy a reality.

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