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Luther and the Deliverance of God

Graham Tomlin

Doug Campbell's book *The Deliverance of God* promises to be a milestone in Pauline exegesis and interpretation. The conference from which the papers in this book emerged was a lively, fast-moving, and valuable opportunity to scrutinize, examine, and question it from a range of perspectives. The particular aspect this chapter brings to bear is that of historical theology, particularly from the Reformation period. As primarily a student of the Reformation, I do not consider myself qualified to comment on the exegetical case Campbell makes in drawing such a sharp contrast between Paul's apparent teaching in the early chapters of Romans, some of which—especially 1:18–32—it is suggested the apostle does not endorse, and chapters 5–8. However I will try to give an impression of how Campbell's case seems when viewed through the lens of Reformation theology, as naturally, that case impinges on themes from the Reformation period a great deal. Much as I enjoyed the book and found it very illuminating and positive, two questions began to grow in my mind as I read it.

The Accessibility of Scripture?

One of the core convictions of the magisterial reformers was on the accessibility of Scripture to the ordinary reader. As we were forcefully reminded in 2011, the year of the 400th anniversary celebrations of the King James Version, from William Tyndale to Martin Luther through to the Authorized Version itself, perhaps the main legacy of the Reformation was a stream of translations of the Bible into vernacular European languages. All this was founded on the principle that Scripture could be read with profit by anyone, regardless of their level of theological education.[1] It was of course a controversial position. A strong and convincing case could be made, as it was by Cardinal Cajetan, Thomas More, and others, that the delicate unity of Christendom would be broken by allowing anyone to read and interpret the Bible for themselves, and consequently it had to be held back for interpretation by ecclesiastical and theological experts. Yet Tyndale, Coverdale, Luther, and many others continued with their vernacular translations. Not only that, but the Reformers chose to write sometimes complex theological treatises, not in the Latin of the theological professionals, but in English, German, or French, appealing above the heads of the scholars to the "ordinary Christian." Behind this lay the principle of the clarity of Scripture, yet also the conviction that the Bible was the book of the church, and that the church consisted not just of the clergy or the scholars but the "ordinary Christian" too.

From all this comes my first question. I recently found myself reading through the book of Romans as the Church of England's lectionary readings for Morning Prayer. Conscious of Campbell's approach, I found myself at something of a loss in reading chapters 1–4. Was this the voice of Paul? If so, which parts? Or was I reading an approach he disavowed? I was no longer so sure. As a non-specialist in Pauline studies I did not feel able to adjudicate the question thoroughly, and as a result, the text of Scripture felt a little distant, opaque, not something I was sure I could read rightly or trust.

The crucial issue here is the nature of a book such as the letter to the Romans. On one level it is a first-century text, to be read as any other first-century text, with all the expectations and conventions one would expect from such a document. On the other hand, we read it as

1. Of course this position was nuanced by guidance on how lay people were to read Scripture—see Evans, *The Language and Logic of the Bible*, especially 33–36, for a helpful discussion of medieval and Reformation approaches to biblical interpretation.

Christian *Scripture*, the book of the church, a means of grace that any reader can gain benefit from reading. Christians will presumably need to read it as both, but this distinction sets up a tension. NT scholars may wish to emphasize Romans as a first-century text, but as part of Scripture, we expect of it a quality which makes it possible to be read for profit by any Christian regardless of how versed they are in contemporary NT exegesis and the nature of ancient textual conventions. From a dogmatic point of view, we must admit a little nervousness about any approach that makes the Scriptures incomprehensible to the "ordinary reader"—in other words, one relatively unversed in the nuances of contemporary NT scholarship—and privileges the specialist exegete as the only one capable of seeing the true meaning of the text. Scholars and children of the Reformation will be wary of returning to the days when ordinary non-specialist readers had to wait on the opinions of experts and were deemed liable to seriously misread if left to themselves. It may be that Paul has left significant clues to tell us that we are not to take parts of Romans 1–4 as his own views, but it must be said that if he has, these are now virtually imperceptible to the ordinary reader, and presumably have been since very early readings of the text. On this reading, the ordinary reader, incapable of recognizing the clues, is resigned to either misunderstanding Paul or seeing him as inconsistent and confused. My first question then is how this reading can avoid rendering the text of Scripture opaque to the ordinary reader, and, it must be said, to most exegetes of the book of Romans for the past 2,000 years?

Inconsistent Soteriologies?

My second question concerns the wider implications of this reading in historical theology. Some readers of Campbell's book may be troubled by the idea that Paul deliberately presents two quite incompatible soteriologies in Romans. What are we to make then of the suggestion that Augustine, Luther, and Calvin also contain incompatible and self-contradictory understandings of salvation?[2] Can it really be the case that none of these three theological giants realized the incompatibility of these two soteriologies in their own work?

I do not have space to look at all three, but I do want to examine Luther's role in all this. I must confess that having read the first few chapters

2. See Campbell, *Deliverance,* 250–77.

of *The Deliverance of God*, I expected Luther to be the villain of the piece, as he has often been in various versions of the New Perspective on Paul. I was glad, and somewhat impressed, to find a more nuanced reading of him in chapter 8, where Campbell argues that Luther is not a straightforward exponent of "Justification Theory," as he calls it, but that there are also traces of what Campbell sees as Paul's own alternative, participative understanding of salvation, especially in his later writings. Campbell refers to the Finnish school of Tuoma Mannermaa, which argues for "theosis" as a central idea in Luther, as evidence for this other reading. However, this may be something of a broken reed: the Finnish school has not gained much acceptance in wider Luther scholarship because most readers suspect they make too much of Luther's very occasional references to *Vergöttlichung* or divinization. Nonetheless, *The Deliverance of God* does present a Luther who is inconsistent in holding both Justification Theory and the alternative reading at the same time.[3]

I want to defend Luther against that charge of inconsistency, at least in this regard, by suggesting, not that he endorses "Justification Theory" as Campbell expounds it, but that his version of justification is significantly more nuanced and coherent than perhaps Campbell suggests. In fact, Luther's theology of justification has much more in common with Campbell's alternative, participative, non-contractual reading for a number of reasons.

As I understand, the presentation of Justification Theory in *DofG* focuses around at least four ideas:

1. That God's justice is essentially retributive justice.
2. That human beings are rational, ethical individuals, with a prior natural and objective knowledge of God as Judge.
3. That the answer to the dilemma of judgment is found in the death of Christ offered as atonement for sin.
4. That salvation is individual and conditional upon the prior exercise of faith.

I would suggest that Luther's move to a Reformation theology involves a questioning of much of this.

3. Ibid., 250–56 and 264–70.

1. God's Justice as Retributive Justice:

Our instinctive image of the early Luther is perhaps of the tormented, agonized personal soul, desperate to find forgiveness for his sins. Yet was this actually what troubled Luther? More recent Luther scholarship is not so sure. For example, David Yeago writes:

> There is a driving question in Luther's early theology, but it is not the question of the assurance of forgiveness. The troubling question that emerges from the preoccupations of the young Luther's thought is not "How can I get a gracious God?" but "Where can I find the real God?" All the evidence in the texts suggests that it was the threat of idolatry, not a craving for assurance of forgiveness that troubled Luther's conscience.[4]

In other words, it is a misunderstanding, fostered by later interpretations of Luther in Lutheran and pietistic circles (and perhaps some of Luther's own later reminiscences, shaped by his reading of Augustine), that focuses on his internal struggles of conscience. His writings at the time (between about 1510 and 1520) show little concern about assurance of forgiveness. Instead they are concerned with who the true God is.

We could describe Luther's move towards a Reformation theology as a move away from a juridical and retributive vision of God to a different fundamental understanding of God as a God of love and grace. Take the famous account of his Reformation discovery written in 1545. Here he describes his struggles with precisely the retributive God of judgment that Justification Theory presents: "I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners."[5]

The problem Luther struggles with here is not with his own conscience but with the God of retributive judgment, evident in much late medieval theology and spirituality, waiting to condemn his every thought, a God whom he could not love.

Luther's christocentric epistemology emphasizes this very point: we know God only through Christ, and we are not to look for him anywhere else. As he writes in "The Three Symbols or Creeds of the Christian Faith" of 1538, "in Jesus Christ the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily or personally, in such manner that whoever does not find or receive God in

4. Yeago, "The Catholic Luther," 17.

5. Luther, Martin et al., *Luther's Works*, Vol. 34, 336 (Henceforth referred to as LW).

Christ shall nevermore and nowhere have or find God outside of Christ, even though he should go beyond heaven, below hell, or outside of the world. For here I will dwell (says God), in this humanity, born of Mary the virgin, etc."[6] If we seek God outside of Christ he appears to us as condemnatory, wrathful, and our enemy. As Gerhard Forde points out: "Luther could even say that apart from Jesus, God is indistinguishable from the devil."[7] In Christ, he is a God of mercy, love, and grace. The God Luther finds is a new God altogether, a God of goodness, grace, and love, whose love elicits his own love and faith.

2. Humans with a Prior Natural Knowledge of God as Judge

Luther rejects the idea that we have a prior natural understanding of God that provides the framework for all further epistemology and soteriology. As Hans Schwarz puts it: "Because the natural knowledge of God is prone to so many misunderstandings, it cannot serve as the starting point of faith for Luther."[8] The rational, ethical, objective individual posited by Justification Theory simply cannot be found in Luther's understanding of the unredeemed self. Instead he explicitly describes the unredeemed state as "bondage." It was Erasmus, whom Luther took on in 1525, who posited the rational, ethical individual capable of both recognizing his or her own sin and responding with contrition and renewal of life. This was the humanist vision of the human soul, not that of the Reformers. And it was for that reason Luther insisted on the bondage of the will without Christ, and the unconditional nature of God's gift of Christ, received by faith.

The Deliverance of God mentions a number of passages in Luther, particularly in his early writings, where he stresses a knowledge of sin as an early stage of the journey to faith.[9] This is hardly surprising as it is a staple of late medieval theology—countless works of late fifteenth-century and early sixteenth-century writing did the same—Luther is not being particularly original here. If there is originality, it is in his idea that this is not a natural knowledge of sin, but something worked by God. It

6. LW 34:207.
7. Forde, *The Captivation of the Will*, 45
8. Schwarz, *True Faith in the True God*, 43.
9. Campbell, *Deliverance*, 250–56.

is a divine work, not a human one, to recognize how deeply sin entangles and binds.

Justification Theory, as Campbell explains it, suggests that outside of Christ, from our own natural powers, we have a prior ability to recognize God as Judge and ourselves as sinful. For Luther this is nonsense, even from his early days. The recognition of our bound, sinful, broken state is not something we can arrive at on our own. His early theology of the cross is an affirmation that contrition is God's work not ours. It also means we must re-think our natural understandings of God. If God is revealed in such an unlikely place as the cross, then that must question all our prior judgments ("prejudices") about God (our "theologies of glory") and start again at the cross of Christ. The recognition of our participation in an enslaved, broken humanity is something God alone can work by the Holy Spirit through the law (which of course is God's law, not a human construct). This is part of the work of redemption, not a prelude to it. Luther would have agreed with Stanley Hauerwas's observation, that "to be able to confess one's sin is a theological achievement."[10]

Luther insists that the law bringing about an awareness of sin is God's "alien," rather than his "proper" work (*opus alienum*, not *opus proprium*). The law is his work, and yet God's true purpose and nature is to bless out of his abundant goodness. However, in order to do that, he has to break our natural self-understanding, which is not so much a knowledge of sin and failure, an awareness that we are under the judgment of God, but a self-confidence that we are free to make our own way, that we are self-sufficient without God.

Law and gospel in Luther's thought are tightly bound together, not entirely separated entities. True, the work of God is twofold: the work of the law, which reveals our bound and helpless state outside of Christ, and the gospel, which announces our liberation through Christ. The point is not, however, that an awareness of sin always precedes a knowledge of the gospel. Law and gospel are not to be considered as inevitably sequential but dialectical in Luther's thought. The tension is an ongoing one in the entire Christian life, in that we are tempted to believe (law) that we are still under the bondage of sin, and refuse to believe (gospel) the word that says that Christ has brought freedom to those who are united with him by faith.

10. Hauerwas and Willimon, *Where Resident Aliens Live,* 77.

After Luther's death, the issue of the relationships between law and gospel was hotly debated between followers of Philipp Melanchthon, who broadly said that the law needed to be preached before the gospel, and Johann Agricola, who argued that the gospel alone is necessary and there is no place for the law in the Christian life.[11] Luther himself had written statements that could be quoted on each side of this debate, which explains much of why the "correct" Lutheran understanding was ambiguous. Luther could be claimed by both sides, but that is not so much because he is inconsistent, but that he sees the relationships between law and gospel as dialectical and not sequential. Although experientially at times law precedes gospel and at other times gospel precedes law, theologically they are correlative to each other: each needs the other for a true understanding. Suffice to say that for Luther, it is not that the preaching of the law produces repentance. As Bernhard Lohse puts it: "True repentance is effected not by the preaching of the law, but only by the preaching of the gospel. If only the law were preached, it would lead to despair, not to conversion."[12] It is ultimately only in the light of Christ and the gospel that true repentance (the kind that leads to faith) becomes possible.

3. Atonement through the Death of Christ

Reading Campbell's description of the apocalyptic, participative understanding of justification reminds this reader, at least, more of Luther's theology than does Campbell's description of Justification Theory. If Justification Theory places the emphasis on Christ's death, and the "participative" reading emphasizes the whole of the life and work of Christ, then Luther sides with participation. For Luther, justification is not an external, contractual transaction whereby we escape the consequences of divine judgment, it is the gift of the very righteousness of Christ that justifies us. Hence Luther's emphasis on Christ as gift. This is also why he insists on the real presence in the Eucharist. Christ in his full incarnate self—not just his death—must become ours if we are to participate in him. Campbell rightly draws attention positively to Luther's seminal work "The Freedom of a Christian" of 1520. However, this is not in conflict with a Justification Theory found elsewhere in Luther, but fully in harmony with his wider thought. "The Freedom of a Christian" is a work

11. See Wengert, *Law and Gospel*, for an account of this debate.
12. Lohse, *Martin Luther*, 182.

that describes the unredeemed state as bondage and the Christian state as freedom. Faith has three powers: the first is to lay hold of the Word of God that declares the promise of Christ. The second is to recognize God as he truly is and therefore to fulfill the first commandment. The third is to unite the soul with Christ, in which salvation consists. This is a fully participative understanding of salvation that focuses on the incarnation as the gift of Christ our righteousness—the death of Christ as atonement is hardly touched on in the treatise.

In this work Luther makes it clear that he has altogether left behind what Campbell describes as Justification Theory. The latter suggests we are unable to fulfill the "covenant of nature" (as Alan Torrance describes it in the previous chapter), and so God has introduced a "covenant of grace" that works around it. For Luther, this is not the way salvation works: "Though you were nothing but good works from the soles of your feet to the crown of your head, you would still not be righteous or worship God or fulfill the first commandment, since God cannot be worshipped unless you ascribe to him the glory of truthfulness and all goodness which is due to him." In other words, we were never meant to be justified by works, but instead are to be drawn into a relationship of trust, elicited by the good news of a God who is trustworthy.

If there is a culprit here in the exclusive focus on Christ's death as atonement, rather than a wider theology of salvation that includes incarnation, I would suggest it is Anselm and not Luther. It is Anselm's theology of atonement that explicitly assumes a feudal, contractual understanding of God's honor and the demands due to it. It is Anselm's not Luther's soteriology that focuses exclusively on the death of Christ. These however are ideas seldom found in Luther himself.

4. Salvation Conditional upon the Prior Exercise of Faith

Similarly, faith for Luther is emphatically not something we exercise in order to acquire the gift of salvation. It is not an independent prior capacity we have to fulfill our part of the contract of salvation. That is precisely the idea he is trying with all his might to counter. Luther's original theological struggles were compounded by the nominalist soteriology he had been taught, which told him that all he needed to do was to turn away from his sins and exercise a little love for God (*facere quod in se est*) and

then God would give him grace to enable him to perform meritorious works. It is precisely this nominalist, contractual understanding of salvation that Luther rejects in his Reformation theology. He does not assume it, adopt it, and find another way round it; he firmly repudiates it.

In his "Disputation on Justification" of 1535, Luther writes: "Faith is a divine, not a human work."[13] Faith is not something we exercise, it is something elicited in us by the Word, which presents the true God, the God of love, not the God of judgment. We are simply unable to place faith in a God of judgment, because we cannot love such a God. By contrast, it is when we hear who the true God is, that good news, or gospel, evokes faith and love in us. As Robert Kolb puts it: "God creates the trust that constitutes the believer's very being by promising life in Christ, a promise unshakeable and therefore trust-creating."[14] Or in the words of Gerhard Forde: "Faith is the state of being grasped by the unconditional claim and promise of the God who calls into being that which is from that which is not."[15] Unbelief is sinful not because it is a failure to fulfill the human part of a contract, but because it is a sign of rejection of the first commandment: a refusal to acknowledge God for who he is, the God of faithfulness, mercy, and grace.

Fides for Luther is not the one-off mental act of saying a sinner's prayer at an evangelistic rally. It is the ongoing daily disposition towards God that refuses to believe he is full of wrath and anger, but instead he is what the gospel says he is: a God of goodness and love. Naturally, faith is pivotal for Luther, not as a human act that triggers God's grace, but rather a daily recognition of the true nature of God and what he has done and given in Christ.

To take an example: Campbell quotes Luther in "The Freedom of a Christian" as saying "if you believe, you shall have all things, if you do not believe you shall lack all things."[16] This looks on the surface like faith as a condition of salvation, however, in context it reads very differently. The full text is: "If you wish to fulfill the law and not covet, as the law demands, come, believe in Christ in whom grace, righteousness, peace, liberty, and all things are promised you. If you believe, you shall have all

13. LW 34:189
14. Kolb, "Contemporary Lutheran Understandings" 171.
15. Forde, *Justification by Faith*, 22f.
16. LW 31:34; Campbell, *Deliverance*, 254.

things; if you do not believe, you shall lack all things."[17] In other words, it is not a statement of an arbitrary contractual arrangement whereby God rewards faith with justification: it is a statement of what faith in the true God enables you to do: it liberates the heart not to covet because all things are already given in Christ. Faith is elicited by the proclamation of the gospel of the goodness of God in Christ, which in turn enables us to do what we have no power to do on our own: to love the law.

Having said all this, it is still true that Luther's vision of salvation is primarily individual rather than corporate. It was left to the Swiss Reformation under Zwingli, Calvin, and Bullinger to develop a more corporate understanding of salvation; Luther's focus does remain on how the individual can know he or she is safe in the hands of God. Faith as trust (and not just as correct belief or faithfulness) is still central to Luther's conception of salvation, but not as a mental action that triggers justification, but as the daily posture towards God that receives the gift of union with Christ by a firm grasp of the promise that God is as he is in Christ, a God of love and mercy, not anger and judgment.

Conclusion

The Deliverance of God offers us a fascinating and, at least in parts, compelling re-reading of Paul's soteriology. From a Reformation perspective, it is to be welcomed that it avoids some of the crude generalizations and assumptions about Luther's theology as found elsewhere in the "New Perspective on Paul" debate. Whether or not its case on the interpretation of Romans 1–4 is to hold, I leave it for others to judge. However, the doctrine of salvation it offers, of a God who is utterly good, full of love and mercy, who rescues broken people from the spiritual and intellectual bondage of sin to freedom in Christ, a gospel that is revelatory, unconditional, participative, and liberating is one that has a great deal more in common with Luther's own soteriology than might at first sight seem possible.

17. LW 31:348.

Douglas Campbell's Response to Graham Tomlin

Graham posed two basic questions to me—Does my reading undermine the perspicuity of Scripture for ordinary Christians? and Does it misrepresent Luther by suggesting that he periodically supports the discourse I am describing and criticizing as "the Justification discourse"? That is, Graham—in his main concern—plants Luther firmly on the good, participatory, essentially Trinitarian side of the distinction being articulated through much of the discussion—although Luther speaks there at times in terms of something called "justification."

Regarding the first question: a longer and a shorter answer—both still regrettably brief.

Graham is really raising here the relationship between historical critical interpretation of the Bible and the Reformation advocacy of lay reading, which presupposes sufficient clarity or perspicuity in Scripture for ordinary readers to "profit." My work is admittedly in conversation with historical critical professionals and those in related disciplines and hence will inevitably be difficult for ordinary readers to understand. Such, however, is simply the price that academic work must pay—and Graham himself pays it when he wrests the interpretation of Luther away from its popular pietistic but historically inaccurate appeals to justification theory to a more appropriate reading! However, his question is a good one, although this is not the place to discuss it. So I will simply note that I think it is entirely fair to ask how historical critical studies should relate to the reading of Scripture by the average Christian in the church. I suspect that it ought to, at the least, fit into a broader spectrum of approaches to Scripture that includes types of reading that do not disempower or marginalize non-academic readers. But in the mean time what are we to do about the identification of Paul's voice as against the voice of opponents in his texts when reading those texts in a historical mode?

Fortunately, there is a simple answer to this question: punctuation. After the scholars have had their deliberations, off-setting sentences and paragraphs with quotation marks identifies particular texts as the voices of others whom Paul is quoting as against his own speech—a technique used already in most of our Bibles to identify Paul's otherwise unmarked quotations of Corinthian statements in 1 Corinthians. (And the occasional explanatory footnote can help here as well.) So when teaching Romans 1–3 in class I offer my students a suitably punctuated text and this

seems to deal with most of the confusion. Perhaps one day a published Bible will contain a Socratic punctuation of Romans 1–3 and thereby, at least from my point of view, avoid many nasty problems. (The Bible League International, concerned especially about African contexts, is currently working on the ERV—the easy-to-read version—and is considering punctuating Romans 1–3 in Socratic terms.) It is somewhat ironic to note that most of our difficulties here arose after Paul's day from the comparative lack of punctuation in ancient Greek texts. Once the original paralinguistic cues had been lost, Paul's original sense became much harder to reconstruct—a problem he probably did not himself envisage, but that was produced when his work was published later on in a letter collection and then incorporated into Christian Scripture.

Regarding the second question, concerning Luther: just as Graham has prescinded from judging the validity of my readings within the technical NT guild, I have prescinded in my book from asserting anything too strongly in relation to Luther, given the complexity and passion surrounding Luther scholarship and will continue to do so here. Graham, however, has not been so cautious, suggesting rather more forcefully than I did that Luther belongs on the good side of the debate, in principal if not nearly unalloyed support of a vigorous, gracious, and participatory account of the gospel. And as a Reformation scholar he is entitled to make this claim and more competent to do so than I.

I am of course quite happy to accept it since it strengthens the argument of *Deliverance* so much. That this critical Reformer would be so supportive of a covenantal account of the gospel and so consistently opposed to false contractual versions is only helpful to my main concerns. But accepting this bold position—bold because not many scholars are as confident as Graham is about Luther's consistency—has a couple of important entailments that must be grasped clearly.

It would follow, first, the Luther's weight falls strongly *against* the reading of Romans 1–4 currently being undertaken by so many modern Protestants. His testimony, rightly appreciated, would urge us still harder than it already does to find an alternative reading that does not release the contractual and conditional dynamics he recognized and abhorred into the wider church. *Moreover,* second, we must avoid a potential source of confusion here. If Luther characterizes his participatory account of the gospel occasionally in terms of "righteousness," "faith," "not law," and even "justification," this does not entail that we can rest from the labor

of rereading Romans 1–3. The problematic reading of that text remains problematic—because the "justification" it speaks of in crassly conditional terms is, strictly speaking, a fundamentally different justification from the "justification" Luther speaks of in gracious and participatory terms. We might say then that Luther's commitment to a healthy type of justification, Justification Type A, does not eliminate but strengthens the need to find a rereading of Romans 1–4 that avoids the sinister type of justification, Justification Type B. Many of my critics have drawn the opposite and entirely false conclusion here so it is helpful to have the correct entailment emphasized so clearly by Graham.[18] In short, *Deliverance* is arguing, he avers, for a rereading of Paul's "justification" texts that Luther himself, properly understood, would have strongly and univocally advocated, and I am of course happy to accept this suggestion and hope that he is right about it.

18. That is, Luther is committed to a healthy view of justification, Type A, so we do not need to reread and eliminate "justification" from Paul as I do—thereby overlooking that Romans 1–4 releases a different version, Type B (!).