

Preface

Sin boldly! That's what Martin Luther advises. Of all the aphorisms and slogans generated by this revolutionary thinker five centuries ago, this is the one I like best. It's enigmatic, puzzling, stalwart, liberating. The maxim "Sin boldly!" most dramatically expresses the exhilarating freedom that erupts from a robust soul filled to the brim with faith and love.

Fragile and broken souls would do well with a large dose of courage, daring, and hardiness. Justifying faith provides that boldness.

Although I'm a theologian who loves arcane and abstract ideas, I have long pondered a rather practical question: Can faith make one's daily life better? More vibrant? More robust? After working thoroughly through the issues, I have arrived at an answer: yes, indeed. How? By relieving our anxiety, which is manifest in the practice of self-justification. When we discover that we don't need to justify ourselves because we have been justified by God, we experience both contentment and vitality. What St. Paul's concept of "justification-by-faith" points to is the transformative presence of the crucified and living Christ in the human soul, placed there by our gracious God. In *Sin Boldly!*, we will see how all this takes place.

I like the ambiguous phrase used in the subtitle of the book—*Justifying Faith*. This phrase could mean two things. First, it

could mean that if we are persons of faith we'd darn well have good reasons for it. We need to justify why we would choose to embrace faith in a secular world that seems to get along quite well without it. Twenty percent or more of us are "nones," that is, persons who respond with "none" on questionnaires regarding religious affiliation. The aggressive New Atheists among us dub faith as something foolish, a residual from an outdated religious era that should be replaced with reason, science, and secularism. The spiritual-but-not-religious among us replace old-fashioned faith with post-religious intuition, experience, and meditative practice. Can faith be justified in this situation? In the pages that follow, we will see that there are good reasons for living a life of faith, especially faith understood as trust in God.

There's a second meaning. "Justifying faith" means that in the eyes of God we are just. It's God's will that our daily lives be imbued from dawn until dusk with love, compassion, care, and the pursuit of justice in an unjust world. Sometimes we miss the mark, and other times our active pursuit of justice still results in someone getting hurt. The point here is this: justifying faith maintains our relationship with God despite the injustice afoot. God treats the unjust unjustly—that is, God treats the unjust with grace. Does this mean God contradicts Godself? Well, yes, it looks that way. This apparent divine self-contradiction will be sorted out in the pages that follow.

For five centuries, theologians have fought over the meaning of justification-by-faith. The first shot in this war was fired by Martin Luther on October 31, 1517, when the young Augustinian monk posted his 95 Theses on the front door of the castle church in Wittenberg, Germany. Five centuries later, the theological guns are beginning to quiet. Today, we hear only sporadic firing, and the truce flag between the main combatants is flying. Drafts of the final peace agreement—*The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of*

Justification—are being considered by the disagreeing parties. Soon, we can only hope, the issue of justification-by-faith will no longer be a matter of dispute between the Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Reformed (Presbyterians, United Church of Christ, Evangelicals, and others), or Methodists.

In this book, I will examine what the dispute is all about. However, the details of the dispute will take second place to the primary agenda: the power and value of the concept of justifying faith for illuminating our daily life. Like a magnifying glass that makes invisible things visible, the very call to embrace a justifying faith reveals new dimensions to our self-understanding.

Not long ago, my physicist friend, Rollie Otto, took me on a brief tour of STXM on the campus of the University of California at Berkeley. STXM stands for “Scanning Transmission X-Ray Microscopy.” Basically, it’s a big microscope. Through the timed use of magnets, the centrifuge sends electrons to speeds up to 99.99 percent the speed of light. The light produced by this process is brighter than the sun. At various points, some of these high-speed electrons are siphoned off, channeled through individual electron microscopes, and used to look at living cells and even the internal makeup of cells. This allows lab researchers to see down to objects only twenty-five nanometers in size. One nanometer is the length of ten hydrogen atoms side by side. The STXM microscope can look at the physics of cells at levels more primary than the biology of the cells. This is the power of light to expand and deepen human understanding.

Theological light offers an analogous power to expand and deepen our self-understanding. A self-examination through the lens of justifying faith uncovers depths and dimensions invisible on the surface level. We human beings are complex. Below the conscious surface lies a complex web of genetic, biological, neural, and

psychological circuitry. Just as we can examine our cells through STXM, perhaps the lens of justifying faith can show us what might be going on at the spiritual nano-level within us.

Our thoughts and behavior from moment to moment mark a synthesis of internal self-initiation plus interaction with our physical, social, and spiritual environment. We might ask from time to time: Who am I? The answer must be: I am all of these processes. We might then ask: Am I more than the sum of all of these processes? Yes.

What will the lens of justifying faith uncover? What will it reveal? It will reveal that we lie. One of the blocks to clear self-understanding is that we lie. We lie to others, and we lie to ourselves. This deception does not come in the form of a series of stories we tell others that we secretly know to be untrue. The stories we tell are largely true, at least at the level of consciousness at which the stories are told. What I am talking about is a pattern of misdirected self-understanding that operates at the hinge of the pre-conscious and the conscious. This deception turns on the articulation of what we believe to be true in light of who we think we are. Or, perhaps, in light of who think we ought to be.

I will refer to this pattern of self-deceit as self-justification. To say it more precisely, self-justification refers to justification apart from faith in the God who graciously justifies us. By employing the term *justifying faith*, I will describe the fulfilling and flowering life that results in trusting the God of grace to take care of our justification for us. If we can avoid the temptation to justify ourselves, a cleanliness in our thinking takes over. This cleaner thinking, so to speak, liberates the inner self for an un-self-protective, open, and vulnerable disposition toward loving oneself and others. Suddenly, the world looks more lovable. The psychic work it takes for us to love the unlovable is drastically reduced, and compassion and self-giving become as automatic as the refrigerator door light.

In this book, I will stress the real presence of Christ in the person of faith. The theology of Christ's real presence can be summarized. Jesus died as a just person at the hands of unjust authorities. He is, in himself, just; he needs no verbal self-justification. When the Holy Spirit places the just Jesus within our faith, Jesus' justice becomes our justice. He has justified us, so to speak. If in our faith we are justified by Christ, we have no need to self-justify and, hence, no need to scapegoat others. Our justification is a divine gift, not the product of our self-deception.

In addition, I will stress that the Christ present in our faith is both crucified and resurrected. The suffering of the crucified one is present to us, even in our suffering. The eternity of the resurrected one is present within us—an eternity that transcends even our most sublime vision of the moral universe.

Two kinds of persons could especially benefit from this doctrinal disclosure: those with fragile souls and those with broken souls. Each of us knows what it means to live with a fragile soul, although some suffer more than others. One's soul can become fragile if one is unable to handle the anxiety that wells up from the empty center within the self. Although we think of the soul as the essential self, we protect the self's existence by conforming it to the moral universe. Our moral universe provides the world of meaning within which we live, and to keep it from breaking, we codify it and legalize it and rigidify it and absolutize it. Most devastatingly, we engage in self-justification. That is, we tell ourselves the lie that the soul and the moral universe are at one.

For the fragile soul, justification-by-faith comes as both bad news and good news. The bad news is this: before God, our lies won't work—only truth will. The good news is what we call the gospel: namely, by grace God offers the free gifts of forgiveness and relationship. Because God justifies us, we don't have to justify

ourselves. Our salvation is like a Christmas present: all we need do is open it up and make it our own. Then, of course, we can enjoy playing with it.

For the broken soul, the situation is quite different. The soul breaks when the moral universe breaks. Because the centered self is so dependent upon the moral universe that forms its identity, the shattering of the latter leads to the loss of the former. The moral universe evaporates in times of overwhelming trauma, that is, in times of moral injury. Violence and death accompanied by atrocity and betrayal can so overrun one's moral universe that it collapses like a fence in a stampede; the soul gets run over and buried. No amount of forensic justification can lift the fence and fix it firmly in the ground again.

The only healing for the broken soul is relational presence. Accepting presence allows the broken soul to mend, to re-form, to heal. The accepting presence must be gracious, understanding, loving, and transcendent to the now shattered moral universe. It must be the presence of ultimate reality. In this case, justification-by-faith suggests that the presence of the suffering and risen Christ in faith provides a spiritual accompaniment that coaxes a new sense of soul to assert itself.

Beyond justification-by-faith lies the life of beatitude. God's promised future—symbolized by new creation (or the kingdom of God)—becomes present in faith, and faith expresses itself in beatitudinal living. Matthew 5:6: Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice, says Jesus, for they will be filled. Or, to say it another way, God's future justice is already present in our thirst for it now. What is curious, if not puzzling, is that our pursuit of justice is, in fact, a form of sinning. To pursue what is already provided by grace is sin. Yet, the life of beatitude motivates us to sin boldly. If you find this knot hard to untie, read on!

Five centuries after the Wittenberg door incident, the statute of limitations has expired on Reformation theology. It's time to bring the treasure out into the public square where it can be enjoyed by all. The insight into the justifying dimension of faith is more edifying and healing to the human psyche than any Freudian psychoanalysis, retrieval of archetypes, meditative technique, behavioral modification, or spiritual retreat. The presence of the resurrected and living Christ within the soul—the actual consolidation, if not new creation, of the soul—reorients our life around a single and eternal center. This spiritual insight is a gift to be shared, not hoarded by a small club of churchgoers.

In the pages ahead, it will be my task to unwrap this invaluable gift out in the open, in public view where all spiritually sensitive and morally responsible people can come to appreciate it.

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Easter, April 5, 2015