

Lutheranism Goes Global: Understanding Lutheran Theology in the Context of Africa

Introduction

The arrival of Lutheran Christianity in Africa coincided with the colonization of the continent by major European powers. Missionary agents representing various missionary agencies and associations from Germany and the Scandinavian countries began working in different parts of the continent. North American missionaries arrived after World War II.¹ European and North American manufactured theology then, dominated Christian thought and practice in the new Lutheran territories.

Postcolonial Africa has witnessed most of the work of foreign missionaries taken over by local agents. Indigenous evangelists, pastors, teachers and theologians have become key players in mission, evangelization, and articulation of theological discourses and Lutheran Christian praxis.

This study is motivated by the rise of Lutheran Christianity in the non-Western global South. Scholars of world Christianity have suggested that the center of Christian gravity is shifting from the traditional stronghold in the West to the non-Western, global South where Africa is experiencing the most growth of all expressions of Christianity.² In this connection, statistics given over the years by the Lutheran World Federation show that African membership in Lutheran World Communion has consistently gone up perhaps at an unprecedented pace.³ According to Moyo (1991: 257), there is a Lutheran presence in almost every country South of the Sahara. As the axis of Christianity and Lutheranism in particular continues to shift, the major question that emerges is: what does Lutheran

¹ For a brief history of Lutheran Missions in Africa, see *The Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church*, vol. 1. 1965, s.v. "Africa, Lutheranism in."

² See Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity: The Gospel Beyond the West*. (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 14-16; Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom The Coming of Global Christianity*. (New York: Oxford University, 2007), 2-3. See also *The World Christian Database* at www.worldchristianitydatabase.org.

³ See for instance "Slight Increase Pushes LWF Global Membership to 66.2 Million: Lutheran Churches in Africa Have 900,000 New Members," (Lutheran World Information, 2006), <<http://www.lutheranworld.org>> (accessed 27 November 2009); "Global Increase in LWF Churches' Membership Pushes Total to Over 68.3 Million: An Additional Two Million Members in Africa's Lutheran Churches," (Lutheran World Information, 2008) <<http://www.lutheranworld.org>> (accessed 27 November 2009); "Membership in LWF Member Churches Reaches Just Under 68.5 Million: Increase in Africa, Asia and Latin America Compensates for Decline in Europe and North America," (Lutheran World Information, 2009) <<http://www.lutheranworld.org>> (accessed 27 November 2009).

theology mean today? The question is relevant because as it continues to spread in the Southern hemisphere—thanks to the work of indigenous agency, the faith is not expressed (and received) through the European frame but through the local cultures—languages, customs, music and traditions of the people (Sanneh 2003: 22). Thus, accepting the faith does not imply subscribing to a foreign religion or submitting to a foreign political yoke any longer. Henceforth, the validity and value of Lutheran theology and any theology for that matter will depend on its ability not only to raise questions but to recognize the cultural conditions which shape people into who they are, deal with the socio-economic and political realities which people face, and address the pertinent questions that people ask as they continue to live out their faith in their given circumstances (Macquarrie, 1977: 21). Furthermore, as Deifelt points out, there are no universal theological categories that presume to speak with the same meaning to all people at all times (2000: 7). This means that meaningful theology occurs only within the contingencies of a particular context. Hence Nyiwe's comment is valid: "What happens in local contexts and circumstances of churches has a major impact on how theology is formulated" (LWI 2009: 4).

Purpose and Scope

The purpose of this study is to offer a cross-cultural reading of Lutheran theology in Africa. The focus is on the doctrine of justification. The goal is to understand the relevance of the doctrine and how it is interpreted or reformulated as it encounters the concrete life experiences of the "new Lutherans," which forms the *Sitz im Leben* of the African churches today.

Admittedly, a comprehensive examination of the life experience of African peoples could more adequately be given in the context of individual countries, but the scope of this paper limits such endeavor. It should suffice to point out, however, that the Lutheran churches and all churches operating in sub-Saharan Africa carry out their work under difficult circumstances. The majority of people in the region face social and economic constraints, some of which are a direct result of colonialism and others are fueled by neocolonial strategies and oppressive regimes. Declining economies and unpredictable weather patterns keep pushing people into a vicious circle of poverty and starvation. Corruption, the widespread suppression of freedom of speech and other human rights

abuses as witnessed in Zimbabwe in the last few years for instance, add to hardships that pose challenges to the people and churches of Africa.

The persistent inequalities in the world political economy have caused African countries to average inexplicably lower than other regions on the development charts. This situation does not guarantee an opportunity for better life for many. Inter-religious and ethnic conflicts have forced many to live a displaced, often extremely inhuman and insecure mode of existence. Such people are traumatized and separated from their families. They are poor, hungry, voiceless, and have no rights in the host countries. They are people with less future or hope. They are vulnerable to violence, abuse, disease, and exploitation (Darfur is but one case example). Indeed, the humanity of the victims is disrespected and violated.

Killer diseases, especially AIDS continue to cause immense human suffering in the continent. According to 2008 report of Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), in 2007 sub-Saharan Africa accounted for two thirds (67%) of the global total of 32.9 million people with HIV.⁴ The most obvious effects of this crisis have been illness, loss of lives, suffering of families, extreme social, economic, and emotional burdens on caregivers and orphans left behind, loss of productivity and food security, and the staggering costs and overwhelming demands on health systems. Victims of HIV/AIDS are also subjected to prejudice and discrimination directed at them. In some cases the victims are rejected from their communities and shunned. This not only leads to dehumanization of the victims but makes it more difficult for them to come to terms with and manage their illness on a personal level. Given such circumstances, one of the things that the victims have tended to rely on for strength, hope and guidance is faith.

This summarized context of the African experience cannot be complete without mentioning the role of indigenous culture and religious expression in the shaping of Christianity in Africa. Postcolonial Africa has witnessed a renewed interest in African culture. In the intentional attempt to indigenize the Christian faith, efforts are made to present it in a way congenial to the peoples' culture and integrate the faith into their worldview. Culture legitimizes peoples' identity, and it is the medium through which

⁴ See "Status of the global HIV Epidemic," (2008). Available from UNAIDS 2008 Report on the global AIDS epidemic <http://data.unaids.org/pub/GlobalReport/2008/jc1510_2008_global_report_pp29_62_en.pdf> (accessed 27 September 2009).

faith expresses itself (Sindima 1994: 163). As such, the process of indigenizing the faith involves the appropriation of the riches of African culture and indigenous spiritual values “into the human condition and divine life, so as to enrich and enhance Christian life and thought” (Martey 1993: 55). The ultimate goal is to help African believers to live out their beliefs faithfully within their cultural settings. Therefore, it goes without saying that people are comfortable when the teachings of Christianity are presented to them in the framework of their culture, but they also expect the faith to take notice of the key moments in their lives. In this regard, the influence of indigenous religious heritage in the communication of the gospel cannot be overstated. Religion is not simply a system of ideas or doctrines; religion is functional. Its primary task is to preserve and reinforce life, more specifically, to “enhance the life force of the human person and society” (Magesa 1997: 51). As such, people expect religion to offer not only an understanding of their existence but also an interpretation of their circumstances, and where possible suggest practical solutions to their problems. It is in this light that Lutheran theology and all of Christian theology in Africa is interpreted and its relevance sought or tested.

Justification and Wholeness of Life

Martin Luther, following Paul in Romans 4:1 ff, understood justification as “the act by which God considers and receives the sinner who is unrighteous before him as righteous” (Althaus 1966: 227). A person cannot earn justification through their own doing. Rather, it is granted and given to a person through God’s free grace by faith in Jesus. Justification is entirely the work of God, and sinners only have to look away from themselves to God as the center of the universe.

However, Luther’s teaching of justification has been viewed by some as inadequate due to its forensic metaphor in which “liberating praxis is ignored, on the one hand, and due to its neglect of social relations on the other hand” (Chung 2005: 39). At the center of this criticism is the question that if justification is a purely objective pronouncement of God’s favor to sinners for Jesus’ sake, how are the lives of the justified changed? How should the justified live? Shouldn’t justification make a difference for peoples’ lives and in the world? Such questions are as valid elsewhere as they are in Africa.

One of the characteristics of African religious heritage which informs Christianity is the assertion of transcendental reality, the psychosomatic nature of human beings and the intrinsically understood meaningful nature of life as a gift from a transcendental creator. The African religious heritage also affirms some plenary standards of morality and behavior to respond to the implications of the transcendent being. From this vantage, African Lutheranism views justification as rebirth. The sinner disappears from God's sight, and they appear before God as a new creature, God's own child. Hence the justified is a renewed creation who is bound to living their life in line with the Gospel, the end result of which is producing good fruits. Such a conclusion is arrived at when Luther's teaching of justification is read in light of the doctrine of Christology (and theology of the cross).

Luther maintained that a person receives justification only through faith, that is, by believing in Jesus Christ. Believing in Jesus implies recognizing and seizing the *love of God in the history of Jesus Christ* (*Luther's Works* 34:110).⁵ Luther held further that true theology and knowledge of the justifying God are to be found in the crucified Christ (*LW* 31:51). And we know from studies in Christology that through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the world has been reconciled to God. If justification happens through God's invasion into history in Jesus Christ justification makes it possible to take history seriously—recognizing that the kingdom of God has already been ushered in, and is being realized here and now, with its complete realization to be fulfilled at the end of times. This eschatological fulfillment does not mean that history should be left unchanged. Rather, it has a continuing, transforming effect on people and on the existing conditions. Thus it is proper to suggest that God's justification refers to the question about the justice of God in history, especially as revealed in the life and work of Jesus Christ.

It follows therefore, that since justification brings the sinner to righteousness, God's justification is active, and it leads to a justice-creating kingdom of God. Justification is not abstract theory. Rather, it has practical implications. It leads to liberation, which leads people to action. The new beginning of the life of the justified leads to life of repentance by establishing the justification and compassion of God's grace in all of life. In other

⁵Emphasis added. See also George W. Forrell, *The Protestant Faith*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960), 21.

words, God's justifying action should be reflected in individuals as well as in the social, economic and political order since God's justice is always identical to itself. Justification is the justification of creating justice in the wholeness of life, and the justified are called to participate in the life of God full of grace, justice, forgiveness, reconciliation, compassion, acceptance, respect, and love. Justification in this regard fuels a conviction that God desires that people experience wholeness, *shalom*. It means that life, that is *meaningful* life, is a gift from God. This gift is offered to all, including the "wretched of the earth,"—the weak and powerless, the poor, disgraced, humiliated, alienated, and oppressed people.

In African culture that views the universe and life holistically—where the sacred and the secular, the spiritual and the material areas of life are held together (Mbiti 1991:29, 30), this understanding makes perfect sense. Justification cannot be limited to the moral level because it functions as a narrative of truth that affirms life for all and challenges all narratives of the lie, which distort truth in order to demean, oppress, exploit, marginalize, and dehumanize people whom God has justified. Justification cannot be compartmentalized because its implications do not leave any part of life untouched.

Justification as Rehumanization

In a culture that recognizes the origin of humanity in God, and is able to trace the dignity of human beings back to humanity's unique relationship with God (Ng'weshemi, 2002: 24), it seems almost natural to understand justification as God's act of reversing the human condition and granting value to human beings in relationship to God. We mentioned earlier that according to Luther, the human being is justified only through faith, by believing in Jesus Christ. The faith in Christ has two effects, first, it makes available the forgiveness of sin and therewith the imputation of righteousness, and second, because those that the Lord has justified are also glorified (Romans 8:28-30), faith in Christ establishes a new being, that is, it transforms the human being to a new obedience (*LW* 35, 371). Justification, in the full sense of the word, consists in both of these together. If so, justification is the declaration of worth of humanity. As Althaus contends, "The basic and decisive factor is that [hu]man[nity] is forgiven and receives new worth before God," (1966: 235).

Justification is an affirmation of the worth of humanness and humanity. It is an assurance that God affirms and upholds the dignity and human worth of every individual who repents. This God, as Luther maintains, accepts humans without using the medieval standard of value or merit. Instead, all can acquire a new relationship with God through God's goodness and forgiveness. It means that grace is available even to those who are dispossessed of dignity because they have no place in the prevailing socio-economic and political setup. God shows no partiality toward those in positions of power (socio-economic and political) who abuse or use God's gifts to inflict injustice on those who are powerless and those who do not have. For oppressed, persecuted people, and those who are caught in violence, this is an assurance of the merciful God who has accepted them as they are and is there with them even in the midst of the hardships of life.

The doctrine of justification by faith provides people with pride in their own value. It sets people free from all forces of alienation and psychological paralysis that result from internalizing images of inferiority, failure, sin, and from all constraints that obstruct their creativity. Amid the threat of neo-colonialism, global capitalism and unfair global trade arrangements, being justified means recovering and reclaiming human dignity, and restoration of the image of God in humanity. Justification faces off with all dehumanizing tendencies and strategies that block out the movement of God toward human beings by radicalizing the "respect for human dignity, in as far as it attributes this dignity to God's free will ... valuing the human being for what he or she is despite or especially because of certain deficiencies, weaknesses, impotence and marginality" (Altmann, 2000: 122). In the eyes of God no one is insignificant.

As a desire for the radical justice of God, justification in the African context means that the poor, hopeless, and dispossessed can become what God wills them to be: to be humans who are acceptable to God, and to be themselves again because they have been set free and guaranteed salvation from sin and death. Justification is power to be human. It amounts to rehumanization, the restoration of that which was taken away or denied.

Justification means that God has acted on people's behalf without any work on their part. As such, justification opens the door toward self-actualization, which all humans deserve and aspire to. The message of justification frees people from systems that have created fear and doubt about the purpose of their being, their daily lives, and their future.

Through the rediscovery of grace in Christ, justification sets them free to live freer, fuller, and meaningful lives. It enables people to acquire the creative dynamism that leads to new discoveries that are necessary for life, provides new confidence in themselves so that they can manage their lives and their affairs, and brings hope for future potential.

Justification as a Communal Affair

Perhaps the main troubling Lutheran teaching on justification is to be found in the understanding of justification as a personal and individualistic affair. Indeed, Lutheranism as received from Europe and North America placed an emphasis on individual conversion as a means to attain salvation. We do remember that Luther struggled with a tormented conscience, an inner conflict that only led to an inner conversion. Luther then became convinced that the state of 'the inner person' is decisive in determining the state of the self. Reading or misreading Luther from the context of (his) personal experience resulted in emphasis on individualism. Hence, in classical Protestantism after Luther, justification was theologized as an external pronouncement by God concerning the status of the individual sinner. This yielded to individualistic spiritualism, subjectivism, and interiorization of the faith. Individual justification then implied individual destiny and afterlife. As Kustenbauder (2005: 6) remarks, "Church historians have pointed out that the Reformation made possible a religion that could be practiced in private, rather than in community. The Enlightenment in the West has fashioned in its own image a Christianity distinguished by individual choice, privatized religious belief, and abstract intellectual and philosophical concepts."

However, this individualistic spiritualism, subjectivism, and interiorization of justification pose difficulties to the African mind. Here is why. In African societies, the human being is overtly social and communitarian. A person is not just an individual but a member of a community which incorporates the living members, the dead, and the unborn ones. On this account, there is a spirituality in human beings which not only connects them to the Creator but also unites them too, and keeps them in continuous communication with this physical and unseen world of spiritual being. It follows that an individual's life is secured through a balanced communion with the visible and invisible being. Consequently, a person is caught in a web of relationships—horizontal and

vertical, which ultimately in the communal unity defines and enables one to attain a true humanity. Put simply, one's self image is formed in terms of how one is regarded by the group. A person (the individual self) is considered to be an instantiation of the whole, empowered and given identity by the whole, the community to which one belongs and shares life with. Neither contemplative nor solitary life is a foundation of quintessence of humanity, but life lived in the company and relation with others.

This view has two implications. The first implication can be seen in matters of faith. Religion is not a private affair since no single individual stands wholly alone with God. The community is a necessary player in the process of reaching out for God. As Moyo asserts, "Religion is not a matter for the individual but for the community as a whole, a community that is essentially religious, since religion permeates all aspects of life" (1991: 261). The second implication is that the quality of a person is dependent on the vigor of maintaining the network of relationships in community. Actions of an individual member of the community may either contribute to the welfare and well-being of the community, or invite divine anger and punishment upon the entire community (Magesa, 1997:65). Such punishment for misconduct is executed in this world and not in the world to come.

From that vantage point, for African Lutheranism, privatization of faith defies the communal and social character of human existence and of the Triune God. The communal-centered understanding of both humanity and religion suggests that the African understanding of justification breaks ranks with its Western counterpart. For African Lutheranism justification has a communal orientation. Hence, Kustenbauder (2005) rightly contends that by insistently framing faith in a communal context, African Christianity most often resembles pre-Reformation Christianity in contrast to post-Reformation Christianity (2005: 6).

Because justification occurs the moment one believes in Christ (Romans 8:1), group conversions are an instantiation of corporate, communal justification. Commenting on group conversions, Costas writes:

The concept of multi-individual decisions gives a sociological orientation to the experience of conversion because it affirms that conversion, which depends on a personal act of faith in Christ, can take place in a group setting, where all members of a given group (family, clan, tribe or mutual interest) participate

in a similar experience with Christ after considering it together and deciding to turn to Christ at the same time” (1974: 128).

In the African context, justification embraces the confessions that Christ has come into the world and that through faith in him people are made righteous before God. However, such confessions are made in the context of a community of people—interacting with each other and with God. The justice of God which justification seeks to reformulate manifests itself for the salvation of ALL, not simply for EACH individual. This view helps people see God’s righteousness and grace as not essentially and entirely located in the drama enacted in the individual soul, rather, the fullest embodiment of God’s salvation should occur at the communal or societal level.

African Lutheranism is not concerned about reproducing a doctrine of justification in an individualistic-forensic sense, rather actualizes it as a corporate, communal phenomenon. Justification is about people experiencing, sharing, and celebrating God’s love and forgiveness. Justification is not alienation of one from others. Justification is a joining together of people, not something one may claim or possess for him/herself. To claim that justification is only personal and individualistic detracts one from the communal task of building God’s community of believers, the kingdom of God on earth. Justification is a communal event.

The Lord’s Supper as an Expression of Justification

Justification as a communal affair is linked with celebration of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. The community is the arena where the Lord’s Supper is celebrated, and the fact that the justifying God has unconditionally made righteous those who believe is reinforced through this sacrament. Here, again, the African notion of human community helps shape the idea. In African societies a meal holds a unique place. Meals are communal activities; rarely does one eat alone. A meal is the most basic symbol of unity, love, care, and friendship. When food and drink served are taken in common, they are signs that life is shared. As Boston states, “Eating a meal together is the most basic way of sharing common life; it restores what has been lost and gives strength for what lies ahead” (1973: 53). In a similar manner the Lord’s Supper is understood and celebrated as a communal meal and not just in terms of Christ and the individual. The table draws

together into a communion all who are baptized. Inclusive as it is, it brings them together to affirm their common life and need for one another. As the community of believers shares the meal, members are reminded of their righteousness and acceptance to God effected through Jesus' self-offering as sacrifice on their behalf, and the promise that he will be with them always. Members communally enjoy Jesus' real presence in bread and wine. In the process, Christ grants them communion with himself, enlivening his body, the community/church, and affirming and renewing each member's relationship with God, with himself (allowing them to share in all his spiritual possessions), and with one another. This allows a sharing of all joys, sufferings, pain, and sins (*Works* 35: 51, 52). Christ's real presence in the supper is what fills those who believe in him with joy and braveness to confront the challenges of life. As such, the Holy Communion is an occasion for those who have given up life to obtain the power of new life that invigorates and revitalizes them, as they anticipate Christ's victorious return.

As people participate in the Lord's Supper, God's message of justification continually reaches out into the community. Through the sacrament, God renews the promise that they are pardoned and accepted unconditionally. The sacrament is given to strengthen, affirm, secure consciences, and comfort those tormented by guilty consciences, and those who are assailed by, or fallen into sin.

The Lord's Supper, therefore, has a comforting message especially to the victims of HIV/AIDS, who are often discriminated against and sentenced by society to death. It reiterates that they no longer need to establish their own worth by justifying their choices. Rather, they are freed from self-justification or denial, and empowered to look for a more appropriate way to deal with the crisis without the stigma of being HIV positive. They are accepted by God unconditionally, and therefore allowed to enjoy life. They are assured that there is life and hope even after HIV/AIDS. In this regard, justification implies that their humiliation and exclusion has been conquered on the cross of Christ. With the strength they receive from God and from one another in the community, they are empowered to start to live life despite the reality of the virus, and are able to go out and live as God's faithful people, as God's presence in the world.

Conclusion

The rise of Christianity in general and Lutheranism in particular in the Southern hemisphere has theological implications. The relevance, meaning, and significance of theological formulations lay in their proper interpretation which must take seriously everyday questions, concerns, and realities that people and churches face in a given situation. A theological endeavor that ignores this fact risks being abstract and at most becoming a mere obsolete ideology of the past that has no use any more.

In the context of sub-Saharan Africa, justification is a firm, active, and present reality that yields hope and peace in the life of believers. Justification is a motivation and assurance to people that God affirms the worthiness and dignity of humanity. It gives people a sense of acceptance and inclusion, that they are an essential part of God's kingdom, that they are recipients of God's free grace. The message of justification is not be reserved merely for the inner life or the afterlife. Rather, it is understood in light of the living experience of faith. Justification is an assurance of life, and therefore has to do with the total life of humans in their communal setting. It brings judgment to religio-cultural, socio-economic and political practices that dehumanize, demean, oppress and exploit people. Justification is a declaration that God's people are meant to live and experience life in its fullness.

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