

Article III of the Formula of Concord: The Righteousness of Faith Before God

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Otto F. Stahlke, in his book, *Getting Into The Formula Of Concord*, writes, “The justification of the sinner before God by faith alone without the works of the Law was the Reformation’s pivotal, watershed article. This teaching is the most precious of Christianity’s crown jewels. By God’s grace, through the imputed merits of Christ, forgiveness of sins is declared to the world, to sinners everywhere, for acceptance by faith. This is God’s Gospel. By it the Christian church either stands or falls. With it, all Christian doctrine hangs together in one harmonious whole; without it, the articles of faith fall like so many dominoes. No wonder Satan has made it the target of incessant attacks from the beginning.” (p. 34) To this statement, those of us in the WELS would add a hearty, “Amen!” The devil, though duped by God on more than one occasion, knows full well that if he can attack the chief article of Christianity, he will have won the victory that he has been battling forever since the Fall. It is a battle for souls!

From our studies in Christian church history, we can perhaps recall each of the controversies which attacked the doctrine of justification by faith. It was a battle for truth. It was a battle for the comfort and assurance that one’s sins were forgiven by grace through faith alone.

Thus Article III of the Formula of Concord was written to combat errors in this doctrine of doctrines, and to speak clearly about the sinner’s assurance of pardon. To this end, may this paper serve to renew our sense of awe and thankfulness over the righteousness of faith before God.

Background and Controversy

It was Martin Luther who declared in the Smalcald Articles, “Of this article (doctrine of justification) nothing can be yielded or surrendered, even though heaven and earth, and whatever will not abide, should sink to ruin. And upon this article all things depend which we teach and practice in opposition to the Pope, the devil, and the world. Therefore we must be sure concerning this doctrine, and not doubt; for otherwise all is lost, and the Pope and the devil and all things gain the victory and suit over us.” (461, 5.)

Martin Luther was a man of many talents. One of the many talents he did not have was the ability to predict the future. Yet in this article one can sense an ominous tone regarding the future. Luther was convinced that orthodox theologians would have to defend this article of justification. He was right on the mark.

Enter Andrew Osiander (1498 - 1552). In 1549, just three years after the death of Luther, he began to teach a justification by infusion, an infusion of the eternal essential righteousness of the divine nature of Christ. He walked away from the Scriptural concept of a forensic justification by the imputed merits of Jesus Christ. While it appears that he held on to these views as early as 1522, he never publicly expounded these ideas until after the death of Luther. Osiander is reported to have said, “Now that the lion (Luther) is dead, I shall easily dispose of the foxes and hares.” - i.e., Melancthon and the other Lutheran theologians. (F. Bente, *Historical Introductions to the Book of Concord*, p. 153.)

And why did he not come forward with these views earlier, or at the very least oppose Luther? We learn the reasons when we inspect more closely the character of this man. “He was indeed a leader, but inclined to be overbearing, arrogant and domineering. Working together with others in a relationship, in which he could not occupy the first place, could not set the tone and direction and without further thought express his own individuality, simply was not his thing Osiander was decidedly an original thinker Yet human originality can not produce the substance of Christian theology In setting forth God’s saving truths, a sound theologian

can not say more, nor can he say less, than God has actually and clearly revealed to us in the Holy Scriptures. Osiander was inclined to be speculative.” (Carl J. Lawrenz, *-No Other Gospel*, pp. 152-153).

Osiander simply could not accept that justification is an act by which God declares a man just due to the merits of Jesus Christ. In Osiander’s system, righteousness of faith was the essential holiness of the divine nature of Christ inhering and dwelling in man; an act that actually makes man just and righteous. He consistently maintained that it was not the Christ for us which was important, but the Christ in us. This was our righteousness before God. Osiander focused on texts such as Romans 8:9-11, “You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through the Spirit who lives in you.” And, Ephesians 3:17 “...so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.”

One of Osiander’s own statements clearly convicts him: “But if the question be asked what is righteousness, one must answer: Christ dwelling in us by faith is our righteousness according to his divinity; and the forgiveness of sins, which is not Christ himself, but merited by Christ, is a preparation and cause that God offers us His righteousness, which He is Himself.” (F. Bente, *Historical Introductions to the Book of Concord*, p. 156)

While holding to passages like Romans 8 and Ephesians 3, Osiander chose to ignore other passages which clearly set forth the doctrine of justification, passages such as Romans 1:17, “For in the Gospel a, righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith.’”; 4:3, “What does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’” To this list we could add Romans 1:17; 3:24; Galatians 3:11 and Hebrews 11.

In reality, his speculative theory on justification was nothing more than what Rome had taught concerning justification. “Moehler, the renowned Catholic apologist, declared that properly interpreted and illucidated, Osiander’s doctrine was ‘identical with the Roman Catholic doctrine.’” (F. Bente, *Historical Introductions to the Book of Concord*, p. 155.) While Osiander was thought of highly in many circles; while he was considered to be one of the Reformation theologians; the truth was that he had fallen into the same trap as Rome. This was the very thing which caused the Lutherans to split from Rome in the first place.

Article III of the Formula of Concord was not written solely because of the heresy of Osiander. Article III was also written to combat the error of Francesco Stancarò (1501 - 1574), an ex-priest who had defected from Italy because of his protestant views. Like Osiander, history records him as being haughty, stubborn and insolent. While he opposed Osiander vigorously, he was no friend of the orthodox Lutherans. He also attacked Luther and Melanchthon. He was a student of Peter Lombard. Stancarò was quoted as saying, “One Peter Lombard is worth more than one hundred Luthers, two hundred Melanchthons, three hundred Bullingers, four hundred Peter Martyrs, five hundred Calvins, out of whom, if they were all brayed in a mortar, not one drop of true theology would be squeezed.”

Stancarò fell into the opposite error of Osiander. He believed that Christ is mediator not according to his divine nature, but according to his human nature alone.

What these doctrines do, in effect, is to split the two natures of Christ in reference to Jesus’ saving work. Osiander and Stancarò did not deny the two natures of Jesus Christ, but they did reject that both the human and the divine accomplished our salvation.

Article III of Formula of Concord

It was against such a background that the authors of the Formula drafted Article III. The principal question in this article reads as follows: “Since it is unanimously confessed in our churches, in accordance with God’s Word and the sense of the Augsburg Confession, that we poor sinners are justified before God and saved alone by faith in Christ, and thus Christ alone is our Righteousness, who is true God and man, because in Him the divine and human natures are personally united with one another, Jer. 23:6; 1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 5:21, the

question has arisen: According to which nature is Christ our Righteousness? and thus two contrary errors have arisen in our churches. For one side has held that Christ according to His divinity alone is our Righteousness, if He dwells in us by faith; contrasted with this divinity, dwelling in us by faith, the sins of all men must be regarded as a drop of water compared to the great ocean. Others, on the contrary, have held that Christ is our Righteousness before God according to His human nature alone.” (pp. 791, 793)

In the Epitome, Article III, the Negativa rejects these errors:

1. That Christ is our Righteousness according to His divine nature alone.
2. That Christ is our Righteousness according to His human nature alone.
3. That in the sayings of the prophets and the Apostles where the righteousness of faith is spoken of the words justify and to be justified are not to signify declaring or being declared free from sins, and obtaining the forgiveness of sins, but actually being made righteous before God, because of love infused by the Holy Ghost, virtues, and the works following them.
4. That faith looks not only to the obedience of Christ, but to His divine nature, as it dwells and works in us, and that by this indwelling our sins are covered.
5. That faith is such a trust in the obedience of Christ as can exist and remain in a man even when he has no genuine repentance, in whom also no love follows, but who persists in sins against his conscience.
6. That not God Himself, but only the gifts of God, dwell in believers.
7. That faith saves on this account, because by faith the renewal, which consists of love toward God and one's neighbor, is begun in us.
8. That faith has the first place in justification, nevertheless also renewal and love belong to our righteousness before God in such a manner that they (renewal and love) are indeed not the chief cause of our righteousness, but that nevertheless our righteousness before God is not entire or perfect without this love and renewal.
9. That believers are justified before God and saved jointly by the imputed righteousness of Christ and by the new obedience begun in them, or in part by the imputation of Christ's righteousness, but in part also by the new obedience begun in them.
10. That the promise of grace is made our own by faith in the heart, and by the confession which is made with the mouth, and by other virtues.
11. That faith does not justify without good works; so that good works are necessarily required for righteousness, and without their presence man cannot be justified.

The authors of the Epitome had solidly set out the points that were to be rejected. There could be no doubt that both Osiander and Stancarus had missed the boat. Their views on justification were not what Scripture clearly taught. Carl J. Lawrenz, in his article on justification, in the book, *No Other Gospel*, (pp. 169 - 171), lays out the Scriptural confessions contained in Article III in a question and answer format:

According to which nature did Christ procure our righteousness?

... it must be carefully considered in what respect Christ is called our Righteousness in this affair of justification, namely, that our righteousness rests not upon one or the other nature, but upon the entire person of Christ, who as God and man is our Righteousness in His only, entire and complete obedience. (p. 935)

For even though Christ had been conceived and born without sin by the Holy Ghost, and had fulfilled all righteousness in His human nature alone, and yet had not been true and eternal God, this obedience and suffering of His human nature could not be imputed to us for righteousness. As also, if the Son of God had not become man, the divine nature alone could not be our righteousness. (p. 935)

What is our righteousness of faith?

In order, therefore, that troubled hearts may have a firm, sure consolation, also, that due honor be given to the merit of Christ and the grace of God, the Scriptures teach that the righteousness of faith before God consists alone in the gracious reconciliation of the forgiveness of sins, which is presented to us out of pure grace, for the sake of the only merit of the Mediator, Christ, and is received through faith alone in the promise of the Gospel. (p. 925)

... the righteousness of faith is the forgiveness of sins reconciliation with God, and our adoption as God's children only on account of the obedience of Christ, which through faith alone, out of pure grace is imputed for righteousness to all true believers, and on account of it they are absolved from all their unrighteousness. (p. 917)

What does justify mean?

... the word justify here means to declare righteous and free from sins, and to absolve one from eternal punishment for the sake of Christ's righteousness, which is imputed by God to faith, Phil. 3:9, "...and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ - the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith." (p. 921)

How is righteousness or justification appropriated to us?

(Through faith alone it is imputed for righteousness to all true believers.) This faith is a gift of God, by which we truly learn to know Christ, our Redeemer, in the Word of the Gospel, and trust in Him, that for the sake of His obedience alone, we have the forgiveness of sins by grace, are regarded as godly and righteous by God the Father, and are eternally saved. (p. 919)

... faith alone... is the means or instrument by and through which God's grace and merit of Christ in the promise of the Gospel are received, apprehended, accepted, applied to us, and appropriated. (p. 929)

In like manner, too, in justification before God faith relies neither upon contrition nor upon love or other virtues, but upon Christ alone, and in Him upon His complete obedience by which he has fulfilled the Law for us, which (obedience) is imputed to believers for righteousness. (p. 925)

How will the article of justification be kept pure?

We believe, teach, and confess that for the preservation of the pure doctrine concerning the righteousness of faith before God it is necessary to urge with special diligence the exclusive particles, i.e. the following words of the holy Apostle Paul, by which the merit of Christ is entirely separated from our works, and the honor given to Christ alone, when the holy Apostle writes, "Of grace, without merit, without Law, without works, not of works." All these words together mean as much that we are justified and saved alone by faith in Christ. Eph. 2:8; Rom 1:17; 3:24; 4:3f; Gal. 3:11; Heb. 11. (p. 795)

What should not be included in the article of justification?

... renewal and sanctification, although it is also a benefit of the Mediator, Christ, and a work of the Holy Ghost, does not belong in the article of or affair of justification before God, but follows the same, since, on account of our corrupt flesh, it is not entirely perfect and complete in this life,... (p. 925)

It is also correctly said that believers who in Christ through faith have been justified, have in this life first the imputed righteousness of faith, and then also the incipient righteousness of the new obedience or of good works. But these two must not be mingled with one another or be both injected at the same time into the article of justification by faith before God. For since this incipient righteousness or renewal in us is incomplete and impure in this life because of the flesh, the person cannot stand with and by it (on the ground of this righteousness) before God's tribunal (p. 927)

Hence, even though converted and believing (in Christ) have incipient renewal, sanctification, love, virtue, and good works, yet these neither can nor should be drawn into, or mingled with, the article of justification before God, in order that honor due Him may remain with Christ the Redeemer, and tempted consciences may have a true consolation, since our new obedience is incomplete and impure. (p. 927)

What should also not be done with justification and renewal or sanctification?

This should not be understood as though justification and renewal were sundered from one another in such a manner that a genuine faith sometimes could exist and continue for a time together with wicked intention,... (pp. 929, 931)

Does Christ, yes, the triune God, dwell in believers?

Likewise also the disputation concerning the indwelling in us of the essential righteousness of God must be correctly explained. For although in the elect, who are justified by Christ and reconciled with God, God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, who is the eternal and essential righteousness, dwells by faith (for all Christians are temples of God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, who also impels them to do right), yet this indwelling of God is not the righteousness of faith of which St. Paul treats and which he calls the righteousness of God, for the sake of which we are declared righteous before God; but it follows the preceding righteousness of faith, which is nothing else than the forgiveness of sin and the gracious adoption of the poor sinner, for the sake of Christ's obedience and merit alone. (pp. 933, 935)

Finally, what was the great concern of the Formula of Concord in setting forth the scriptural doctrine of justification clearly?

... that troubled hearts may have a firm, sure consolation, also, that due honor be given to the merit of Christ and the grace of God,... (p. 925)

And so, based on the Word alone, Article III of the Formula of Concord clearly taught what the righteousness of faith before God was and is. The teachings of Osiander were mystical and devoid of all comfort. How could a Christian ever be assured of their salvation based on what Osiander and Stancarus taught? We thank God that the authors of the Article were moved by the Spirit to speak a clear confession, a confession which every Christian must confess. Nothing less than the salvation of sinners is at stake.

Article III for Today

By now, many of you are probably way ahead of me and have thought of many instances from your own ministries where you have used these truths to comfort the guilty and to give spiritual rest to the weary. But for the sake of application, let's consider a few.

Imagine you have been asked to call on a person with a terminal illness. The family has told you that their loved one has less than two months to live. You also find out that the person has not worshiped in years. The individual has not been to church because of some past hurt, and the devil has taken the opportunity to sow the seeds of bitterness over the years. When you walk into the house you have no idea what to expect. You say a little prayer that God would give you the wisdom of Solomon to apply Law and Gospel properly. If we were to walk into the house with Osiander's system of justification, we would have to tell them that there is no way they could be a Christian because it is obvious that Christ was not living in them. If he was, they would have been to church and communion long before the time cancer invaded the body. We would demand some visible sign: "I need to see evidence that Christ lives in you! Until I see proof, I can give you no comfort at all!" If this is what we as pastors would have to work with, who would ever go out on such a call?

But here is where the Lord and the authors of the Formula give us the greatest tool, the Gospel of Jesus Christ! The sins of the whole world have been paid, and faith is the net that brings these blessings to us. Oh, what a privilege to make that call, see that repentance is present, tears flow down the cheeks of this individual, they know their sins, the "wages of sin is death." In this case, no Law needs to be preached, the terminal disease is the preaching of the Law. We don't have to demand a sign that Christ lives in the individual. The Lord has given us the grace to be able to say to that individual, "As far as the east is from the west, so far has God removed your sins from you." The rest of the call can be spent declaring the free and faithful love of God in Christ Jesus. That individual does not have to fear death. They will pass from life to life.

This was the great concern in Article III, that sinners, pastors, lay people everywhere might be assured of their salvation and not have to wonder if they had the "right stuff." The work of salvation is done outside of us by the God of power and mercy.

Another area of concern for many pastors today is the increasing number of members who live with guilty consciences. When one is plagued by the attacks of the devil, who constantly attempts to accuse the conscience of a Christian before God, the only thing left for that individual is often despair and depression. This directly affects a pastor's schedule in the amount of time that needs to be spent with an individual, assuring them that, in Christ, they are truly free from the burden of guilt. I'm not speaking here about those whose consciences should be bothered over some unresolved sin. But more and more we seem to find people who cannot find peace under any circumstance because they don't "feel" right or "feel" saved. Friedemann Hebart, in his book, *One In The Gospel: The Formula of Concord for Our Day*, writes, "...I venture to say that a very large number of Christians are unsure and troubled in their faith. Instead of looking to what God has done in Christ, they look into their own hearts, and naturally they do not find very much holiness there to comfort them. For what if I discover that, having heard the Gospel, I am still not living a holier life? What if I do not always feel depressed about my sin? Is that not a clear sign that I am not accepted by God? ... For what happens when my faith wavers or falters? When I feel nothing? When a personal tragedy such as the loss of my life's partner or my child severely rocks my faith? What happens when I fight my bad temper or my gossiping tongue, and yet they get the better of me? What happens when I try to trust God with joy in my heart, but again and again find myself timid, nervous, and worried? How can I ever trust that I am really accepted by God when I see so little evidence of it in my life?

Those are the tortuous questions Osiander's teaching raises. And who does not know them? If we follow Osiander, our Christian life must become an endless soul-searching and self examination, and a matter of fear and doubt." (p. 32)

One task, then, among many others, is to unburden the consciences of those that need not be burdened. That can only be done through the proclamation of God's Gospel. It is the responsibility of the Spirit to take it the rest of the way in the heart. Since God's timetable and ours are usually never in sync, this may mean many

hours of counseling. But when God convinces that individual of the peace that is ours in Christ, the look of joy on a person's face is God's way of encouraging us in our ministries.

Osiander's error is still very much alive in the church today. His teaching rears its ugly head every time we hear of someone who will not commune because they don't feel "worthy" enough to commune. Those who distance themselves from the Lord's table because they feel they have "sinned too much," are advancing nothing more than a variation of the "Christ in us" theme. They don't feel quite good enough to receive the sacrament, so they stay away. Who knows how many are robbing themselves of the comfort, assurance and power contained in the Lord's Supper because they believe the lie of Osiander, and aren't ever aware of it. It ought to remind all of us to not only teach the Sacrament of the Altar frequently, but to also be very careful about the impressions we leave with reference to "worthy" participation. To this end may Article III help our teaching in regard to this holy meal.

In the world of professional baseball we hear an awful lot today about playing on a "level playing field." The reference is, of course, to small market clubs having the same chance to field a winning team as the other financial giants. Article III of the Formula of Concord places everyone on a "level playing field" when it comes to righteousness. The man or woman in our congregation who sings in the choir(s), serves on a board, committee or service group, cuts the grass, shovels the snow, gives 11% of his income, always volunteers, and chlorinates the church well - even on a Friday night is of no better standing before the Lord than the one who doesn't do any of those things. They are both declared righteous by the Lord through faith in Jesus Christ. This is a very difficult concept for the active member to grasp. Somewhere in the back of his mind may be the thought that God must be smiling more at him than the one who does not have an active part in church service. Even on the part of pastors, there may be the tendency for us to want to do more, serve more, love more, those who are constantly active in our churches. Article III frowns on this attitude: "Accordingly we believe, teach, and confess, that our righteousness before God consists in this, that God forgives us our sins by his grace, without any preceding, present, or subsequent work, merit, or worthiness, and reckons to us the righteousness of Christ's obedience, on account of which righteousness we are accepted by God into grace and are regarded as righteous." (p. 793)

And finally, one doesn't have to flip through too many channels be it on cable or standard TV to find a TV preacher asking you this question, with finger pointing, "Are you saved?" The more the question is asked, the more one really begins to ask the question of themselves. The application of this paper could have been spent entirely on the damage done by those groups who ask this question to those who are already Christian. By God's grace, this is a question which Lutheran Christians can answer quite easily. To this question, Lutheran Christians everywhere can answer emphatically, "Yes!" "Yes, I was saved the day I was baptized and the Holy Spirit was poured into my heart. Yes, I am saved, because God's Gospel assures me each and every time I hear it that God loves me and "remembers my sins no more." What a special blessing we have as Lutherans to have been blessed with the scriptural understanding of justification and the comfort it brings.

This is the righteousness of faith before God. May we always hold this doctrine as the crown jewel of God's Word. May we never lose appreciation for it because of our familiarity with it. It is truly the doctrine upon which all other doctrines stand or fall. To God alone belongs the glory!

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