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# Justification: The Article by which the Church Stands or Falls

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of Luther's distinction between the hidden God and the revealed God in *Bondage of the Will*, Steinmetz says:

... [T]he central theological problem for Luther remains the problem of God. The mercy and compassion of God are always set against the background of God's hiddenness. There is a God who wills and does not will the death of the sinner, whose life-giving promises in the Gospel are hidden under the death-dealing prohibitions of the Law. The thought which terrifies Luther is not that the devil is his enemy but that God might be. Therefore, Luther clings with both hands to the revealed God against the hidden God, to the Gospel against the Law, to what is heard against what is seen (31).

Exactly. Which is why those who are uncomfortable with Luther's existential combination of honesty and *angst* will never be able to grasp his theology as they attempt to domesticate these fears which all of us have but few of us are willing to express. Here are Luther studies which open our ears to the voice of the real Luther and which express Luther's theological genius. Read Steinmetz and you will know why Luther's work forever changed the course of theology.

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## Justification: The Article By Which The Church Stands or Falls

Carl E. Braaten  
Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990  
\$16.25

What does it mean to be Lutheran today? What "distinguishes" our theology from all other theologies loose in the marketplace today? "Justification by Grace through Faith" (God's unconditional acceptance of each of us) is THE ARTICLE that enables and empowers, or to use Braaten's words, "gives shape and direction to the theology of the Lutheran movement." Taking a cue from Tillich and the reformer, Martin Chemnitz, Braaten reminds us of "the radicality of Justification". "Justification by faith alone is *the* article by which the church stands or falls, and (is) not merely one criterion among many concerning Christian authenticity," writes Braaten. "Justification is *prior* to faith," says Braaten. "The fact that God accepts us as we are, simply as sinners, is the creative ground of our acceptance of God's acceptance, of receiving the forgiveness of sins. Justification as an objective event precedes the subjective side of receiving by faith what God offers" (42). Faith *follows* justification.

Lutherans are at a “crossroads” writes Braaten, a historical and confessional juncture. The gospel of Justification is the article of faith at which “Lutherans entered history, and it continues to be *the place* where Lutherans must check things out when questions of their identity and future are being asked” (3). The first half of the book offers us a stirring discussion and review of our theology. For us as Lutherans, everything— culture, religion, history, philosophy, psychology, sociology—everything is viewed “under the critical light of the judgement and grace of God, making every element in its relativity point to the absolute, the God who justifies by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone” (43). In this discussion on Justification, there is an excellent chapter on Karl Barth and Justification. Braaten reminds readers “for Martin Luther the gospel of God in Jesus Christ was the heart of Scripture.” “It formed the ‘canon within the canon,’ governing the church’s interpretation of the whole of Scripture.” According to Braaten, “this gospel was expressed with utmost clarity in Paul’s epistles to the Galatians and the Romans in terms of the idea of righteousness/justification” (81).

The second part of this volume offers an excellent and insightful review of the ecumenical dialogues Lutherans are currently engaged in. Recalling and explaining anew our understanding of Law and Gospel, election, and the doctrine of Two Kingdoms, Braaten offers a friendly critique of the dialogues.

Another chapter explores and critiques the clinical pastoral care movement from a Lutheran perspective. In both sections, the one on the Dialogues and the one on Pastoral Care and Counseling, Braaten has done his homework. Recognizing contributions from both of these quarters, the author offers theological critique. Some may feel he is too critical. Others may feel he is not critical enough. As with his other writings, the thoughts expressed here tend to be provocative and profound.

This is a GREAT BOOK. It belongs not on the shelf, but in the hands, head, and heart of *every Lutheran pastor* and seminarian who would preach, teach, and celebrate in the 1990s.

This one really is worth its weight in gold!

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