

Why isn't faith a work? An examination of Protestant answers

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Abstract

Protestant critique of the Catholic idea of inherent righteousness has, since the time of the Reformation, given rise to counter-questions about the status of faith in Protestant theology. Is faith a human condition for justification (that is, a human act or inherent property which is necessary for justification), and why should not faith in that case be counted as a kind of work? Many Protestant theologians, however, view it as very important to dissociate faith from works. This article examines a number of Protestant attempts to explain why faith is not a work. The examined explanations rely on a number of ideas, for example, that faith is not a work because faith is a gift of God, or because faith is non-voluntary, or because faith is not a condition of justification, or because faith does not merit justification, or because faith is union with Christ. The problem with many of these Protestant answers to the question of why faith is not a work is that they can equally well be used to explain why the supernatural virtue of love is not a work. The Reformers, however, strongly associated love with 'works of the law', and wanted to keep love out of the doctrine of justification. For Protestants who share this view of love, the present article poses a challenge. Is it possible to dissociate faith from works without at the same time dissociating love from works, thereby legitimising the Tridentine understanding of justification? The author concludes that this is indeed possible, but only if an important identity marker for much Protestant theology is given up, namely the purely forensic understanding of the doctrine of justification.

Keywords: doctrine of justification, faith, Finnish Luther interpretation, Protestant theology, union with Christ, works of the law.

The distinction between justification by faith and justification by works was central to the Protestant Reformation, and a standard Protestant complaint against the medieval church was its (perceived) promotion of 'works-righteousness'. 'The Reformation accusation is often that Catholic theology teaches some form of salvation by one's own work'.¹

¹ Michael Root, 'Aquinas, Merit, and Reformation Theology After the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification', *Modern Theology* 20 (2004), p. 10.

How St Paul understood the distinction between justification by faith and by works (e.g. in Rom 3:28 or Gal 2:16) is a hotly debated question. Proponents of the so-called New Perspective on Paul claim that ‘the works of the law’ which Paul contrasts with ‘faith in Christ’² are the boundary markers which served to separate the Jews from other nations, for example, circumcision and purity laws.³ Interpretations of the New Perspective-type ascribe, accordingly, a narrow meaning to the phrase ‘works of the law’. This goes against the tendency of much modern Protestant theology, which interprets ‘works’ in a very inclusive sense, for example, as moral achievement in general, or as ‘man’s self-powered striving to undergird his own existence in forgetfulness of his creaturely existence’.⁴

The purpose of this article is not to discuss Pauline interpretation. It is, instead, to examine what I will call ‘Protestant conceptions’ of the relationship between the notions of ‘faith’ and ‘works’, as they figure in the context of the doctrine of justification. I will use the term ‘Protestant conceptions’ (with scare quotes to indicate that it is a term of art) to refer to *ways of conceiving the relationship between faith and works which satisfy the following two conditions.*

- (1) In order for a conception of the faith/works relationship to qualify as ‘Protestant’, it must have an understanding of ‘works’ which is sufficiently wide so as to include something that the Council of Trent as well as mainstream medieval theology regarded – controversially in relation to the Protestant Reformation – as an all-important factor in justification, namely the believer’s possession of the supernatural virtue of love.⁵ The virtue or habit of love is, according to Trent, a constitutive

² Or ‘Christ’s faith(fulness)’, which currently is a popular interpretation of *pistis christou*, see e.g. Richard B. Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1–4:11* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002).

³ James D. G. Dunn, ‘New Perspective View’, in James Beilby and Paul Rhodes Eddy (eds), *Justification: Five Views* (Downer’s Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), p. 194. This interpretation is also common among patristic and medieval theologians, see Robert B. Eno, ‘Some Patristic Views on the Relationship of Faith and Works in Justification’, in George Anderson, T. Austin Murphy and Joseph A. Burgess (eds), *Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VII: Justification by Faith* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), p. 114.

⁴ Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, vol. 1 (London: SCM, 1952), p. 139.

⁵ According to mainstream medieval theology as well as modern Catholic theology, there is a close communion (if not identity) between the sanctifying grace which is the formal cause of justification and the supernatural virtue of love or charity.

element of the justified believer's inherent sanctity or righteousness.⁶ According to standard Protestant polemics, however, this amounts to a form of works-righteousness. 'Love', as Philip Melancthon says, 'is the fulfillment of the law', its highest work.⁷ Views which do not imply this verdict – that is, which do not associate love with works of the law and thereby exclude love from being an integral part of justification – are not 'Protestant'.⁸

- (2) 'Protestant conceptions' of the faith/works distinction portray 'faith' and 'works' as mutually exclusive categories. Faith is not a certain kind of work. It is true that the early Luther (1520) can describe faith as the 'first and highest good work, the noblest of them all'.⁹ In later writings, however, he recognises that this is an inappropriate way of speaking.¹⁰ The concern to keep faith and works as exclusive categories is shared by many modern theologians. Karl Barth writes: "Justification by faith" cannot mean that instead of his customary evil works and in place of all kinds of supposed good works man chooses and accomplishes the work of faith.¹¹ Bruce McCormack: 'Paul's concern is to contrast justification by faith with justification by works. It would be strange if, given this

⁶ Heinrich Denzinger, *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, 43rd edn, ed. Peter Hünermann (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), §§ 1528–30, 1561.

⁷ Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), p. 145. Melancthon also says: 'From among these results of faith the opponents single out only one, namely, love, and teach that love justifies. From this it is clear that they teach only the law', p. 143. Luther also connects love and works: 'Therefore the Christ who is grasped by faith and who lives in the heart is the true Christian righteousness . . . Here there is no work of the Law, no love': *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), *Luther's Works*, vol. 26, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), p. 130.

⁸ Even an ecumenical document such as the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* by the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church says that justification, according to Lutherans, 'is not dependent on the life-renewing effects of grace in human beings': http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_31101999_cath-luth-joint-declaration_en.html (accessed 8 Jan 2015), § 23.

⁹ Quoted in Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism* (St Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), p. 100. See also Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 233.

¹⁰ Martin Luther, *The Disputation Concerning Justification* (1536), *Luther's Works*, vol. 34, ed. Lewis W. Spitz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960), p. 160.

¹¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, IV/1, The Doctrine of Reconciliation* (London: T & T Clark, 2004), pp. 615, 633. Barth sometimes calls faith 'a work', but it is not as a work that faith leads to justification.

intention, he were to turn around and treat faith as a “work” – that is, as a human possibility.’¹²

My definition of ‘Protestant conceptions’ of the faith/works relationship is not meant to imply that (e.g.) Reformed or Lutheran doctrines of justification must necessarily be interpreted in accordance with the two conditions above. My interest in this article, however, is limited to views which fit the definition. These are common within Protestantism but, as we will see, *prima facie* problematic. The main problem which they face is occasioned by certain features which they have in common, and which my two criteria are intended to capture. This is why I have chosen to define and study the general type rather than particular exemplifications of it. The polemical edge that the relevant type of views direct against the Tridentine doctrine of justification justifies my choice of the label ‘Protestant’.¹³

The Protestant emphasis on the *solus Christus* and the alien nature of Christian righteousness has often expressed itself in a critique of the Catholic idea of inherent righteousness. ‘To conceive of the new righteousness in Aristotelian terms as a qualitative property (*qualitas*) inhering in a substantial self is to give support, even if unwittingly, to the constant human temptation to rely on something within the self, something other than God.’¹⁴ The latter is the essence of works-righteousness, according to Protestant polemics. The fact that the sanctifying grace of Tridentine doctrine is not an *act* but an internal *state* does not, accordingly, save it from being classified as a work. ‘Works-righteousness’ – as it figures in much Protestant theology – is a very inclusive concept which may apply to any attempt to base justification on some inherent property of the justified subject.

¹² Bruce L. McCormack, ‘What’s at Stake in Current Debates over Justification? The Crises of Protestantism in the West’, in Mark Husbands and Daniel Treier (eds), *Justification: What’s at Stake in the Current Debates* (Downer’s Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), p. 108. Outside Protestantism it is not hard to find theologians who do not mind thinking of faith as, in some sense, a work. ‘Most patristic authors simply refused to construe “works” as engaged in causal competition with grace’: Paul L. Gavrilyuk, ‘The Retrieval of Deification: How a Once-Despised Archaism Became an Ecumenical Desideratum’, *Modern Theology* 25 (2009), p. 653.

¹³ There are different views about how Luther’s attack on medieval doctrines of justification relates to the Tridentine doctrine. According to one school, Luther’s main target was the kind of nominalist theology represented by Gabriel Biel rather than the broader medieval tradition. Others contend, however, that Luther ‘attacked the whole medieval tradition as it was later confirmed at the Council of Trent’: Heiko A. Oberman, ‘“Iustitia Christi” and “Iustitia Dei”: Luther and the Scholastic Doctrines of Justification’, *Harvard Theological Review* 59 (1966), p. 19.

¹⁴ George Lindbeck, ‘A Question of Compatibility: A Lutheran Reflects on Trent’, in Anderson et al., *Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VII*, p. 238.

The Protestant critique of the idea of inherent righteousness has, however, always provoked counter-questions about the status of faith. Is faith a human condition for justification (that is, something inherent in humans which is necessary for justification), and what distinguishes it, in that case, from a work, in the wide sense? Why does love – understood as a divinely infused quality of the human soul – belong in the general context of works, but not faith? In this study, I am primarily interested in exploring the logical options which are available for reconciling a wide understanding of works (condition 1) with the claim that faith is not a work (condition 2). I will do this by examining six suggested explanations of why faith is not a work, selected on the ground that they represent what I see as the spectrum of logically available approaches to the problem.

The conclusion that the present study will arrive at is somewhat surprising. I will argue that there are two coherent ways of combining a wide conception of 'works' with the claim that faith is not a work. Only one of them, however, is plausible. It requires, furthermore, the rejection of something that many Protestants view as important for Protestant identity, namely an exclusively forensic understanding of justification.

Faith is not in the Decalogue

The Lutheran tradition is careful to distinguish between law and gospel (or law and 'promise'). Luther says that 'there are two teachings, law and promise; and law and work are correlatives, just as promise and faith are'.¹⁵

If we take 'law' as referring to the Decalogue,¹⁶ then we have a possible answer to why faith is not a work. Faith, it could be argued, is not an act which is prescribed by the Decalogue. Faith is only related to the promise. Love, however, is prescribed by the Decalogue and is therefore a work.

The problem with this solution is that it presupposes a narrow and literalistic interpretation of the Decalogue. The Reformers did not interpret it that way. Luther, for instance, finds faith and trust in God to be implied by the first commandment: 'The intention of this commandment, therefore, is to require true faith and confidence of the heart, which fly straight to the one true God and cling to him alone.'¹⁷

The commandments have, of course, different implications for people living in different phases of salvation history. If faith and trust in God is

¹⁵ Martin Luther, *The Disputation Concerning Justification*, p. 160.

¹⁶ As Melancthon does in the *Apology* (Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, p. 121).

¹⁷ Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, pp. 386–7.

implicit in the first commandment,¹⁸ as Luther claims, then faith and trust in Christ and the gospel is what obeying this commandment means for those who (through the Holy Spirit) have knowledge of Christ's divinity.¹⁹ To disbelieve God is not consistent with trusting him, and to reject the gospel is to disbelieve God. 'True faith', accordingly, 'is to be found within the scope of the first commandment'.²⁰ If the Decalogue is narrowly and literalistically interpreted, on the other hand, we will not find any commandment about love there either (contrary to what Jesus says, Matt 22:37). So to distinguish faith from works by reference to the contents of the Decalogue does not seem to be a very promising idea.²¹

Faith is a gift of God

A knee-jerk response to the question of why faith is not a work is that faith is 'a gift of God'.²² This response is obviously inadequate, if the agenda is to distinguish the Protestant doctrine(s) of justification by faith from any medieval doctrine of justification. The created habit of grace which, according to the medieval schools, is the formal cause of justification is certainly a gift from God. So is St Thomas Aquinas' *iustitia infusa*, the infused property which makes humans intrinsically righteous.²³ The good deeds which the justified sinner performs are, according to St Augustine, gifts from God ('When God crowns our merits, he crowns nothing but his own gifts'²⁴). The universally acknowledged fact that 'believing is not something we can muster up on our own steam'²⁵ therefore does not distinguish

¹⁸ Faith can be commanded even though it is a gift of God. Love is a gift from God but also commanded.

¹⁹ Simo Peura writes about Luther's view: 'The first commandment . . . demands trust and faith solely in the Trinity': 'What God Gives Man Receives: Luther on Salvation', in Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (eds), *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 80 (my emphasis).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 84. According to Paul Althaus, 'faith becomes [for Luther] the real fulfillment of the first commandment': *The Theology of Martin Luther*, p. 233.

²¹ The argument of this section is, of course, also effective against a view which identifies 'works of the law' with 'prescriptions found in . . . the whole Old Testament': Joseph A. Fitzmyer, 'Justification by Faith in Pauline Thought: A Catholic View', in David Edward Aune (ed.), *Rereading Paul Together: Protestant and Catholic Perspectives on Justification* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), p. 88.

²² E.g. Martin Luther, *The Disputation Concerning Justification*, p. 160; McCormack, 'What's at Stake in Current Debates', p. 108.

²³ Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 65.

²⁴ *Epistolae* 194.5.19, CSEL 57.190. Quoted in McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, p. 44.

²⁵ McCormack, 'What's at Stake in Current Debates', p. 108.

believing (faith) from a lot of other states, conditions or actions which the Reformers were eager to keep out of the doctrine of justification, most prominently Christian love.

Faith is non-voluntary

A possible way to salvage the 'gift of God' response is to construe faith as a property which God unilaterally confers on humans without any cooperation with their free will. God gives me, according to this suggestion, faith in a similar sense of 'give' as when we say that God has given me two arms and two legs. I did not voluntarily affirm or accept God's giving of arms and legs, and the transaction took part without any cooperation between God and my free will. If God's giving of faith is like that, then this may be a basis for distinguishing between faith and works.

Faith can be understood both as a virtue (or some other kind of state) or as an act. Applied to faith as a virtue, the suggested solution would mean that God gives me the virtue of faith without in any way considering my response. 'Works' can then be distinguished from faith on the ground that they, as opposed to faith, involve my free will in some way.

Applied to faith conceived as an act, the same solution would mean that faith is construed as non-voluntary – as an 'act' which is not even partially a result of a free decision or choice on the part of the subject. It is God who unilaterally makes me perform it. It would then, in some sense, be correct to say that I have performed the act of faith (since the act involves my mental faculties) but it would nevertheless also be correct to say that I was totally passive (since my mental faculties did not freely or voluntarily perform the act, but were forced to do so). The idea, hence, is that faith's character of non-voluntary act, wholly and exclusively controlled by God, is what distinguishes faith from works – the latter being understood as voluntary acts.

It is important to see that this solution requires that there is no cooperation whatsoever between God or God's grace and human freedom in the act of faith. If the act of faith is, in any sense, voluntary on the side of the human subject (if God, for instance, causes humans to freely perform it, as for example Aquinas thinks), then nothing relevant distinguishes this act from other grace-assisted human acts, such as the good deeds which Trent views as meritorious. Both Catholics and many Protestants assume that the justified sinner's good deeds are cooperative enterprises, in which God's grace and human free will are both involved. Protestants normally insist, however, that those acts belong on the 'works' side of the faith/works dichotomy, and that

they therefore cannot play any role in relation to salvation.²⁶ If faith is partly a voluntary human act, even though it presupposes grace, then the question of what distinguishes faith from a grace-assisted work remains unanswered.

Luther famously denied the existence of free will after the fall, at least with respect to salvation and spiritual things.²⁷ For Luther, the act of faith does not seem to depend on free will in any sense.²⁸ The *Formula of Concord*, however, says that God has ‘one way of accomplishing his will in a human being as a rational creature, and another way of accomplishing his will in other, irrational creatures, or in a stone or block of wood’. Furthermore, all who have been baptised ‘have now *arbitrium liberatum* [a freed will or freed choice] . . . For this reason they not only hear the Word but are also able to assent to it and accept it – although in great weakness.’²⁹

Oswald Bayer interprets this to mean that ‘human faith is no mechanical echo, but God alone creates faith entirely as a free response’.³⁰ For those who accept this view of faith, it is not possible to follow the suggestion above and distinguish faith from works on the ground that faith, as opposed to works, is a non-voluntary act. In Bayer’s interpretation of the *Formula*, faith is voluntary, even though the contribution of the will is dependent on grace.

We have seen that the suggestion that faith is a totally non-voluntary act may provide a basis for distinguishing faith from works (defined as voluntary acts). The price for this solution, however, is high. If God does not care about receiving a voluntary human response to his offer of communion, then why did he create free will in the first place,³¹ considering the amount of evil which it has unleashed? It is of course possible that free will has a very great value in itself, even though it is of little or no importance in our relationship to God. The possibility in question, however, seems very unlikely from a Christian perspective. How can free will be valuable if it has nothing to

²⁶ Luther sometimes distinguishes ‘works of the law’ from ‘works of grace’, the latter being the works of the regenerated believer, see Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, p. 241, nn. 77 and 78.

²⁷ See e.g. *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518), *Luther’s Works*, vol. 31, ed. Harold J. Grimm (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), p. 40.

²⁸ At least much of what Luther says about free will points in this direction. However, for a different interpretation, see William C. Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking about God went Wrong* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Know Press, 1996), pp. 124–5.

²⁹ Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, pp. 556–7. According to McGrath, the *Formula of Concord* does not endorse the monergist position: *Iustitia Dei*, p. 247.

³⁰ Oswald Bayer, ‘Freedom? The Anthropological Concepts in Luther and Melancthon Compared’, *Harvard Theological Review* 91 (1998), pp. 383–4.

³¹ Even Luther seems, at least for the most part, to assume that free will exists with respect to matters with no direct relation to salvation.

do with the purpose for which the world was created – our communion with God? If faith, as Protestant theology emphasises, is the primary and all-important way by which we relate to God, and if faith is non-voluntary, then our communion with God is also non-voluntary. This leaves free will hanging in the air as a more or less superfluous but extremely dangerous appendix.

Even more pressingly, if free will has nothing to do with salvation, why did God choose to save us through an elaborate salvation history? God's historical election of and dealings with Israel and the church, by which he gradually educates the human consciousness and raises its awareness of his love, seems to make sense only if God respects human freedom and wants us voluntarily to choose communion with him. If God does not see any value in a voluntary conversion on our part, however, then there seems to be no point for God to use such indirect, messy and costly means. God could instead have converted our hearts smoothly and directly by internal force.

Some parts of the Lutheran tradition tend to address problems like this by reference to mystery and to the unfruitfulness of speculating about the mind of the *Deus absconditus*. In the context of a theological discourse where God's existence is unproblematically taken for granted, this may be fine. As a response to a question concerning the coherence of Christian faith raised in the context of modern scepticism about the existence of God, it is much less adequate. In that context, we may find that the (perceived) theological gains of Luther's position on free will come at the price of a considerable loss in Christian philosophical credibility.³²

Faith is a not a condition for justification

Another approach to explaining why faith is not a work argues that faith is not a condition for justification. To make justification dependent on faith is to misconstrue the doctrine of justification precisely by turning faith into a work. Robert Preus represents this approach: '*The fifth assault against the evangelical doctrine of justification by faith is to make faith a condition for justification*'. '*Historic Roman and Arminian theology made faith as a work and virtue of man a condition for fellowship with God and for salvation*'.³³ Bruce McCormack sees tendencies in this direction even in Luther's theology:

The residual problem created by Luther's analysis (and one he bequeathed to later generations of Protestant theologians) lies in the fact that the

³² This may not matter, of course, if faith is non-voluntary.

³³ Robert Preus, 'Perennial Problems in the Doctrine of Justification', *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 45 (1981), p. 176.

priority of the giving of faith over the act of divine imputation would seem clearly to require a certain logical priority of regeneration (a work of God 'in us') over justification. And to the extent that that were so, the 'break' with Catholic understandings of justification . . . would be less than complete.³⁴

McCormack's point is that, if faith is understood as a condition for justification, then justification is made dependent on regeneration (the work of God 'in us', in this case the giving of faith). If so, the essential difference between the Reformation doctrine of justification and the Catholic view is lost. The ground of God's forgiveness of sins is again conceived as (partly) located in us (namely, our faith), and not exclusively in Christ's righteousness. In order to avoid this relapse into pre-Reformation doctrine, we must conceive of faith as a consequence rather than a condition of the divine imputation of righteousness to sinners.

As an interpretation of Paul, McCormack's view is strained. If it is correct to say that we are justified 'by' or 'through' faith even though faith is a consequence (and not a precondition) of justification, then why would it not be equally correct to say that we are justified by good deeds? Good deeds are a consequence of justification, and a necessary one. The Reformers (and Paul), however, would certainly have been very surprised if someone had attempted to express this by saying that we are justified 'by' (or 'through') good deeds.³⁵

McCormack believes, as we have seen, that it is detrimental to sound doctrine to understand faith as a condition of justification. Faith would then be equivalent to 'a "work" – that is, a human possibility . . . a condition which we humans must first provide before divine imputation can occur'.³⁶ This reasoning depends on a tacit premise, namely that *any condition which we humans must first satisfy before divine imputation can occur is a 'work'*. If this premise is true, then it follows that justification must be unconditional, or else we are faced with the spectre of works-righteousness.

If the tacit premise is true, however, then it is impossible to avoid works-righteousness. Most people would agree that God only imputes the righteousness of Christ to beings who are (or have been) *alive*. God does not impute Christ's righteousness to, for example, rocks or ping-pong balls. This means that there is something that the recipient of justification must

³⁴ McCormack, 'What's at Stake in Current Debates', p. 94.

³⁵ Maybe McCormack can reply that faith is a *direct* consequence of justification while good deeds are an *indirect* consequence (following faith). Whether this makes an essential difference, I leave for the reader to determine.

³⁶ McCormack, 'What's at Stake in Current Debates', p. 108.

'provide before divine imputation can occur' – she must live (or have lived). It is also very probable, as far as we know, that God only justifies humans, which means that *being human* is a condition of justification.

This indicates that the attempt to deny that faith is a condition of justification is wrongheaded. Such a denial does not solve any problem. Even if faith is not a condition of justification, other human properties clearly are. So justification is not unconditional, and if conditional justification is equivalent to works-righteousness, then works-righteousness is the only kind of righteousness there is. This shows that it is a bad idea to define 'works' in the super-inclusive way suggested by McCormack.

Faith is union with Christ

Another proposed way of avoiding portraying faith as a human work is to construe it as a 'divine entity'.³⁷ The background to this proposal is the so-called Finnish school of Luther interpretation, which argues that Luther thought of justification in terms of the believer's union with Christ, understood in an ontologically realistic manner. The believer participates in Christ through faith, which means that Christ himself becomes the sinner's righteousness. Tuomo Mannermaa writes:

Luther does not separate the person of Christ from his work. Rather, Christ himself, both his person and his work, is the ground of Christian righteousness. Christ is, in this unity of person and work, really present in the faith of the Christian (*in ipsa fide Christus adest*).³⁸

The critical edge of this interpretation is directed against the one-sidedly forensic understanding of the doctrine of justification which has dominated the later Lutheran tradition. The *Formula of Concord*, for example, seems to distinguish justification as forgiveness of sins from the divine indwelling, and conceives the latter as a separate phenomenon belonging to the doctrine of sanctification. Mannermaa argues that this separation represents a departure from Luther's own theology.³⁹ In Luther's thought, justification and the real

³⁷ Olli-Pekka Vainio, *Justification and Participation in Christ: The Development of the Lutheran Doctrine of Justification from Luther to the Formula of Concord (1580)* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), p. 5.

³⁸ Tuomo Mannermaa, 'Justification and Theosis in Lutheran-Orthodox Perspective', in Braaten and Jenson, *Union with Christ*, p. 28.

³⁹ Tuomo Mannermaa, *Christ Present in Faith: Luther's View of Justification* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), p. 4. There are, however, different views within the Finnish school about the relationship between the *Formula of Concord* (and later Lutheranism in general) and Luther's theology, see Olli-Pekka Vainio, 'The Doctrine of Justification in the Book of Concord – Harmony or Contradiction?', *Dialog* 48 (2009), pp. 380–89.

presence of God are ‘completely united in the person of Christ’.⁴⁰ Christ is both God’s *favor* (God’s changed attitude to the sinner, his forgiveness of sins) and *donum* (God’s gift of himself to the believer). Forgiveness of sins and the life-renewing indwelling of Christ in the believer are two sides of the same event, namely justification.⁴¹

This means that justification is not exclusively forensic – it is also effective and transformational. By participating in Christ, the believer is ontologically transformed by receiving a share in the divine properties and the divine life. ‘The faith that saves is a new divine reality in the human being: Christ, who takes over the intellect and other faculties of the soul.’⁴²

Olli-Pekka Vainio believes that this view of faith can solve the problem addressed in the present study – how to avoid picturing faith as a work:

The Lutheran doctrine of justification strenuously denies the meritorious nature of human deeds and love. This stance can be maintained only if the new life given to the sinner is construed as participation in divine Life in Christ . . . Only when Christ is the form of faith do human deeds lose their justifying significance. The Lutheran doctrine of justification stands or falls on this Christological basis.⁴³

In this quotation, Vainio describes the union with Christ in terms of the Aristotelian philosophy which Luther himself uses. Form, according to Aristotle, is that which makes a thing what it is. Form is distinguished from matter, which is the potentiality that ‘receives’ form (or is ‘informed’). That Christ is ‘the form of faith’ (*forma fidei*) means that Christ ‘informs’ the matter that is the human soul. ‘Christ, as the form of faith, gives human faculties of soul a new essence.’⁴⁴

The key sentence in the longer quotation from Vainio above is the following: ‘Only when Christ is the form of faith do human deeds lose their justifying significance.’⁴⁵ Faith, as we normally conceive it, is a ‘human deed’. However, if faith as a human deed is a condition of justification, then it seems that a human deed has ‘justifying significance’. This is a problem, because the Lutheran tradition denies the justifying significance or ‘meritorious nature’ of human deeds. There is, however, a solution to the problem, according to Vainio, namely to picture Christ as the form of faith.

⁴⁰ Mannermaa, *Christ Present in Faith*, p. 5.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁴² Vainio, *Justification and Participation*, p. 33.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 227. Ted Peters argues in a similar way: ‘The Heart of the Reformation Faith’, *Dialog* 44 (2005), pp. 6–14.

⁴⁴ Vainio, *Justification and Participation*, pp. 40–41.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

Why does this help? I can see two possible interpretations of Vainio's argument.

- (1) If Christ is the form of faith, then faith is a 'divine entity' and not a human deed. This is why human deeds lose their justifying significance.
- (2) That Christ is the form of faith does not exclude that faith is also a human deed. However, it is Christ's presence in faith that is justifying (meritorious), not the human aspect of faith (the 'matter'). This is why human deeds lose their justifying significance.

It could be argued (in support of 1) that since the believer's faculties of soul have changed essence by being informed by Christ, they are no longer her faculties. 'A believer lives no longer as himself but Christ lives in him.'⁴⁶ So faith (as informed by Christ) is not a 'human deed'.

This argument actualises a dilemma, however. If the human faculties of soul which are 'informed' by Christ can no longer be said to be part of or belong to the believer, then Christ is no longer present to (united with) the believer and therefore no longer effective with respect to her salvation. If, on the other hand, the human faculties of soul which are informed by Christ can still be said to belong to the believer (as one of her properties) then faith is a 'human deed' (or other kind of human property), and human deeds have not lost their justifying significance.

In other words: if faith remains (in part) a human property after being informed by Christ, then human properties have justifying significance. If faith is a purely divine property, then faith does not connect humans to Christ.

The dilemma which interpretation 1 leads to suggests that interpretation 2 is a more promising way to argue for the insignificance of human deeds in justification. Vainio sometimes steers the argument in this direction:

The factuality of change must be maintained, but its meritoriousness denied. This is the problem that Luther's idea of Christ presence in faith is particularly positioned to solve. Renewal has to take place, and it truly changes the spiritual faculties of a sinner, but it is not the change or the faith that is reckoned as righteousness, but Christ himself.⁴⁷

In this passage, it seems that faith is not a purely divine entity. 'The change or the faith' is distinguished, in the quote, from 'Christ'. There is no denial that faith is (partly) a human property. There is only a denial that the human aspect of faith, the 'change', is meritorious.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 41.

⁴⁷ Vainio, 'The Doctrine of Justification', p. 386 (my emphasis).

The claim that faith, as a human property, is not meritorious but simply a means by which Christ's righteousness is transferred to the believer is a classical Protestant idea.⁴⁸ This idea is logically distinct from the Finnish claim that Christ is ontologically present in faith, and the two ideas can therefore be divorced. Nothing in principle prevents faith from being a non-meritorious 'pipe-line' for the transference of Christ's righteousness to the believer even though Christ and the believer are not ontologically united.

I have argued that the Finnish understanding of faith as union with Christ does not make it possible to deny, without incoherence, that faith is a human deed (or some other human property). Faith must be conceived as having a human aspect, or else it is irrelevant for human salvation. What can be denied is that the human aspect is meritorious. This is what Vainio's view seems to boil down to. It may therefore be classified as a particular version of the classical, Protestant view that faith (or the human aspect of faith) is an 'instrument' of justification. This classical view is examined in its own right in the next section.

It might seem, then, that the Finnish paradigm – the conception of faith as ontological union with Christ – does not help us to explain why faith is not a work. This, however, would be a premature conclusion, because the Finnish paradigm allows us to conceive of faith as a human and divine entity. Human 'faculties of soul' is the matter which is 'informed' by Christ himself. This two-nature or two-aspects character of faith (human-divine) can function as an interesting and important distinguishing mark which separates faith from works, if the latter are conceived as non-divine (even though divinely caused) realities, such as good deeds, supernatural virtues and habits, or the 'created grace' that the Council of Trent and mainstream medieval theology conceived as the formal cause of justification. To be precise, faith should, if we want to follow this route, be defined as a human-Christic reality (a union with Christ) to distinguish it from the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the justified. We will return to discussing the implications of this solution in the concluding section.

Faith does not merit justification

The basic idea behind the classical Protestant view is that, even though faith is a subjective, human condition of justification (such as a human act or virtue), it does not merit justification. 'Faith does not justify or save because

⁴⁸ See e.g. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), III.XL.7.

it is a worthy work in and of itself, but only because it receives the promised mercy.⁴⁹

This view provides a basis for distinguishing faith from works. Faith, it could be argued, can be distinguished from 'works of the law' if the latter are understood as potentially meritorious conditions for justification – deeds or inherent qualities which actually merit (or are believed to merit) justification.⁵⁰ 'Scripture', T. F. Torrance says, 'opposes faith to works, to prevent it from being classified among merits.' There is, on this view, no need to deny that faith is a human property and a necessary condition of justification in order to avoid confusing it with 'works'. We need only deny that faith is a meritorious human property.

Unfortunately, this conception of the relationship between faith and works violates condition 1 of the definition above. Condition 1 says that a 'Protestant conception' of works must be sufficiently wide so as to include something that the Council of Trent regarded as an all-important factor in justification, namely the believer's possession of the supernatural virtue of love. The definition of 'works' contained in the suggested conception is not that wide. The virtue of love is not counted as meritorious in relation to justification by Trent. It is, in fact, not counted as meritorious in relation to anything. To think that possession of the virtue of love is in any sense meritorious would be to make a category mistake. The justified believer's inherent sanctity, which includes love, is not what merits her status as justified. It is what constitutes that status, according to Trent and the mainstream Catholic tradition. 'But when anyone has grace, the grace already possessed cannot come under merit, since reward is the term of the work, but grace is the principle of all our good works.'⁵¹ Justification is not a reward for having sanctifying grace and certain virtues – justification consists in receiving sanctifying grace and virtues from God by infusion. Certain acts, on the other hand, performed by the already justified believer, count as meritorious in relation to eternal life and can contribute to an increase of grace. Such meritorious acts flow from and presuppose the virtue of love, which is 'the principle of all merit'.⁵² 'Jesus Christ himself continuously infuses strength into the justified . . . this strength [virtus] always precedes, accompanies, and follows their good works, which,

⁴⁹ Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, p. 129.

⁵⁰ Melancton writes: 'The righteousness of the Law is that worship which offers God our own merits': Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, p. 128.

⁵¹ Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica* (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1990), hereafter ST, I-II, q. 114, a. 5.

⁵² Aquinas, ST II-II, q. 2, a. 9.

without it, could in no way be pleasing to God and meritorious.⁵³ Christian love, as the principle of merit, is itself freely given and not meritorious.

This means that love (inherent sanctity) does not fall under the category of 'works', if we follow the definition we are considering ('acts or virtues that are meritorious in relation to justification'). The suggested definition of 'works' is therefore too narrow, and violates condition 1.⁵⁴

So a theologian who subscribes to the understanding of 'works' discussed in this section cannot consistently claim that the Tridentine view of love as an all-important factor in justification is a doctrine of works-righteousness. It is irrelevant, in this context, that the Tridentine doctrine of justification pictures justification as based on something 'in' the believer. The Protestant view we are considering admits that faith is 'in' the believer, and that faith is a condition for justification. What distinguishes faith from 'works' is just that faith is not meritorious with respect to justification. But the same is true of the virtue of love, according to Trent.

Conclusion

I have found two consistent ways of avoiding (without violating condition 1 and thereby abandoning the 'Protestant' position) the conclusion that faith is a work. If we define a work as a voluntary act (or a virtue/habit voluntarily acquired/received), then we can avoid classifying faith as a work so long as we conceive of faith as a non-voluntary act (or a virtue/habit non-voluntarily received).

I have already pointed out that a denial of free will with respect to salvation and spiritual things is a position which has very problematic consequences, for example, with respect to the meaningfulness of a salvation history (why was all that necessary?). If the only way of rendering a 'Protestant conception' of faith and works consistent is to deny free will in salvation, then it should appear more reasonable to abandon the 'Protestant conception'.⁵⁵

There is, however, another consistent way of distinguishing faith from works within the limits set by my two conditions. If faith – following the Finnish school of Luther interpretation – is defined as a human-divine

⁵³ Denzinger, *Compendium of Creeds*, § 1546. See also J. Pohle, 'Merit', in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen> (accessed Jan. 2015), section 'Conditions of Merit'.

⁵⁴ It does not help to change the definition slightly by speaking of 'salvation' instead of 'justification'. There are indeed, according to Trent, acts which are meritorious in relation to salvation (eternal life). Possession of the virtue of love, however, is not meritorious in relation to anything (as shown above).

⁵⁵ I am aware that some Lutherans think that it is crucial to deny free will in relation to salvation, e.g. Gerhard O. Forde and Steven D. Paulson, *The Captivation of the Will: Luther vs. Erasmus on Freedom and Bondage* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005).

property, then faith can be distinguished from 'works' if works are defined as non-divine properties. Infused love or sanctifying grace are, according to mainstream medieval theology and the Council of Trent, *created* realities, which means that they are non-divine.⁵⁶ Infused love will therefore be classified together with 'works' by the suggested definition, while faith (as being partly divine) will not. This means that condition 1 is satisfied. The definition of 'works' is sufficiently wide.

The Finnish model provides, in my eyes, an elegant way of defending the consistency of a 'Protestant conception' of the faith/works relationship. The Finnish way seems, in fact, to be the only satisfactory way.⁵⁷ This conclusion is somewhat unexpected. The Finnish Luther interpretation is often described as 'ecumenically fruitful'.⁵⁸ It has been said that it 'could become a major influence on the future of the Christian ecumenical movement'.⁵⁹ This is mainly because the 'Finnish Luther' seems to be much closer to the transformation-orientated Catholic and Orthodox traditions than mainstream Lutheranism with its emphasis on forensic justification. If the argument of the present study is sound, however, it seems that the resources provided by the 'Finnish Luther' are also, surprisingly, more or less necessary for rendering coherent a distinctively Protestant perspective on the faith/works relationship. Only if faith is conceived in terms of Christ's real presence in the believer – which means that justification by faith is conceived as an effective and transformational event – is it possible to claim that the (Tridentine) virtue of love belongs in the context of 'works', while simultaneously insisting that faith does not.⁶⁰ This conclusion might be rather unwelcome for Protestants who believe that an exclusively forensic understanding of justification is essential for Protestantism.

⁵⁶ Medieval theology is, of course, not monolithic in this respect. Peter Lombard claimed that charity is the Holy Spirit himself, and hence a divine entity. Lombard's view was, however, rejected by the great theologians of the high Middle Ages, and the debate occasioned by the proposal led to the formulation of a distinction between created and uncreated grace: McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, p. 68. In modern Catholic theology, however, 'participationist' interpretations of created grace imply that the distinction between divine and non-divine is less clear cut than the solution that I have suggested above might require.

⁵⁷ It should be noted that the Finnish construal of faith as a human-Christic entity is compatible with – but logically distinct from – the traditional Protestant view that faith is a non-meritorious 'instrument' of justification.

⁵⁸ Robert W. Jenson, 'Response to Tuomo Mannermaa, "Why is Luther So Fascinating?"', in Braaten and Jenson, *Union with Christ*, p. 21.

⁵⁹ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, 'Salvation as Justification and Theosis: The Contribution of the New Finnish Luther Interpretation to Our Ecumenical Future', *Dialog* 45 (2006), p. 75.

⁶⁰ There is also, as we saw, the (unattractive) possibility of totally denying free will in relation to salvation.