

The Exegetical Hockey Fight:

When Luther Dropped the Gloves with Paul

You could say it was late in the game, 1519 or thereabouts [1] when a dispirited monk pondered how to crack through a suffocating defence known as 'The Righteousness of God'. With every rush, the ham-fisted monk, Martin Luther, could only see the relentlessly punishing nature of The Righteousness of God. Such a defence made Martin's head go a little haywire and light up his notoriously short fuse. He hated The Righteousness of God. [2] It was worse than a dirty body check in the corner or a broken hockey stick on the shins. All of the would-be philosophers who had coached him in the past told Martin that The Righteousness of God was only about dishing out punishment---vindictive poundings, angry smacks, and wrath by the bucket-full. [3]

All of this was too much. Luther snapped. If he was going to be crunched every time he bumped into The Righteousness of God, he was going to take his frustration out on somebody and give a bit of what he'd been taking. So Luther saw his target, the Apostle Paul, a sort of Mr. Everything whose offensive talent was totally dependent on the support he got from The Righteousness of God. Luther rushed over to Paul, dropped his gloves and grabbed Paul by the jersey so that he couldn't get away. Then Luther began to pummel Paul with his knuckle stumps. He pummeled and pummeled. Luther pounded on Paul and would not relent. If Luther could not handle The Righteousness of God, then at least he would beat on Paul until he got some relief. [4]

And the relief came in between exegetical uppercuts when Paul yielded the secret to dealing with The Righteousness of God. The secret was a syntactical insight [5] into the very phrase The Righteousness of God. Rather than seeing The Righteousness as only being a characteristic of God where he punishes sin and *unrighteousness*, The Righteousness of God was also God declaring a sinner righteous, even as God is righteous, on the basis of the righteousness of Jesus Christ. All that Luther needed to do was to keep his eye on the goal---namely Jesus Christ. [6]

After the beating Luther gave to Paul, the momentum shifted dramatically. Luther sailed through The Righteousness of God with the wild eyed delight of a goal scorer. But of course the goal was the difference. Never before had Luther been so driven toward Jesus Christ. In the past he could only see the impossible height and weight of The Righteousness of God. Now he could see the centrality of Christ's righteousness as the key to it all. And though Luther had some scars he felt like he had entered paradise. [7]

As fall turns to winter each year it is good to remember that historic scrap. It brought about a reformation in Luther's head but also a revolution in how the game is played. So when you celebrate Reformation Day, don't be afraid to drop the gloves and go toe-to-toe with Paul like Luther did.

[1] For discussion of the date of Luther's breakthrough see Alister McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, pp.99-100. See also Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers*, pp. 62-63.

[2] "*Oderam enim vocabulum istud 'Iustitia Dei'*". From the Latin preface to the 1545 edition of Luther's *Works*. The relevant Latin portion with English parallel translation can be accessed at <http://www.martinluther.dk/FORT45EN.htm> or McGrath's parallel translation in *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, pp.95-98.

[3] *quod usu et consuetudine omnium doctorum doctus eram philosophice intelligere de iustitia (ut vocant) formali seu activa, qua Deus est iustus, et peccatores iniustosque punit.* (McGrath translation: "...which according to the use and custom of all the doctors, I had been taught to understand philosophically, in the sense of the formal or active righteousness (as they termed it) by which God is righteous, and punishes unrighteous sinners." *LTOC* p. 96).

[4] *Furebam ita saeva et perturbata conscientia, pulsabam tamen importunus eo loco Paulum.* (McGrath translation: Thus I drove myself mad with a desperate disturbed conscience, persistently pounding on Paul in this passage" *LTOC* p. 96).

[5] Luther seems to point to a change in in his syntactical understanding of the 'Righteousness of God' from being a **subjective genitive** (God's righteous character manifested in judgement on sinners) to an **objective genitive** (a righteousness which is directed toward God as the object). This latter understanding presumes that the righteousness that is acceptable before God is supplied by God, and which Luther notes, is a gift by faith alone in Christ.

[6] *ibi iustitiam Dei coepi intelligere eam, qua iustus dono Dei vivit, nempe ex fide, et esse hanc sententiam, revelari per evangeliam iustitiam Dei, scilicet passivam, qua nos Deus misericors iustificat per fidem, sicut scriptum est: Iustus ex fide vivit.* (McGrath translation: "... I began to understand that 'righteousness of God' as that by which the righteous lives by the gift of God, namely by faith, and this sentence, 'the righteousness of God is revealed', to refer to a passive righteousness, by which the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, 'the righteous lives by faith'." *LTOC* p. 96-97).

[7] *Hic me prorsus renatum esse sensi, et apertis portis in ipsam paradisam intrasse.* (McGrath translation: This immediately made me feel as though I had been born again, and as though I had entered through open gates into paradise itself." *LTOC* p. 97).

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