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# Martin Chemnitz's Use of the Church Fathers in His Locus on Justification

Carl Beckwith

Lutherans have always recognized the value of studying the early church fathers. Whether Martin Luther or Johann Gerhard, C.F.W. Walther or Hermann Sasse, one finds a considerable familiarity with and appreciation of the church fathers. In his important study on post-Reformation Lutheranism, Robert Preus explains, "The Lutherans were convinced that the church fathers were worthy of being read directly, although critically, 'dividing the straw from the gold.'"<sup>1</sup> The Lutherans appealed to the fathers, according to Jacob Preus, because they "were part of the 'heavenly witnesses,' men standing before the judgment seat of God and bearing witness to their faith."<sup>2</sup> By using the testimony of these heavenly witnesses, the Lutherans demonstrated the continuity of their teaching with the church catholic.

When it comes to studying and teaching the fathers, Martin Chemnitz stands out among all the Lutheran reformers. Indeed, J. A. O. Preus declares that Chemnitz is "the best informed and equipped student of patristics that Lutheranism has ever known."<sup>3</sup> When we look at Chemnitz's work, we discover a variety of ways in which he used the fathers. In his exhaustive *Examination of the Council*

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<sup>1</sup>Robert D. Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1970-73), 1:36; Aegidius Hunnius, *Operum Latinorum* (Frankfort am Main: Impensis Iohan. Iacobi Porssij bibliopolae, 1608) vol. 2, col. 226, quoted in Robert D. Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 1:36.

<sup>2</sup>J. A. O. Preus, *The Second Martin: The Life and Theology of Martin Chemnitz* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1994), 252.

<sup>3</sup>J. A. O. Preus, "The Use of the Church Fathers in the Formula of Concord," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 48 (April-July 1984): 99.

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of Trent, he offered numerous testimonies from the fathers to demonstrate the novelty of certain Roman teachings and customs.<sup>4</sup> He used the fathers to defend the Lutheran understanding of the eucharist against the Sacramentarians in his *On the Lord's Supper*.<sup>5</sup> Finally, he constructively engaged the thought of the fathers in his masterful *The Two Natures in Christ*.<sup>6</sup> In the following essay, we will look at his use of the fathers in his *Loci Theologici*.<sup>7</sup> These lectures, primarily delivered to future pastors, give us a unique opportunity to see how a faithful Lutheran, committed to *sola Scriptura* as the only rule and norm for doctrine, makes positive use of the fathers in the theological formation of his students. In order to appreciate Chemnitz's pedagogical method, we will limit our examination to a close reading of

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<sup>4</sup>For some scholarly remarks on Chemnitz and Trent, see, among others, Eugene Klug, "Chemnitz on Trent: An Unanswered Challenge," *Christianity Today* 17 (August 31, 1973): 8-11; Fred Kramer, "Chemnitz on the Authority of the Sacred Scripture: An Examination of the Council of Trent," *Springfielder* 37 (December 1973): 165-175; Arthur Olsen, "Martin Chemnitz and the Council of Trent," *Dialog* 2 (1963): 60-67.

<sup>5</sup>See G. L. C. Frank, "A Lutheran Turned Eastward: The Use of the Greek Fathers in the Eucharistic Theology of Martin Chemnitz," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 26 (1982): 155-171.

<sup>6</sup>A handful of scholarly articles have documented Chemnitz's constructive engagement of the fathers. See, among others, Paul Strawn, "Cyril of Alexandria as a Source for Martin Chemnitz" in *Die Patristik in der Bibelexegese des 16 Jahrhunderts* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1999), 205-230; Francis J. Watson, "Martin Chemnitz and the Eastern Church: A Christology of the Catholic Consensus of the Fathers," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 38 (1994): 73-86; Robert Kelley, "Tradition and Innovation: The Use of Theodore's *Eranistes* in Martin Chemnitz' *De Duabus Naturis in Christo*," in *Perspectives on Christology: Essays in Honor of Paul K. Jewett*, ed. Marguerite Shuster and Richard Muller (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 105-125.

<sup>7</sup>There is a fine article on Chemnitz's use of Irenaeus in the *Loci*. See James Heiser, "The Use of Irenaeus's *Adversus Haereses* in Martin Chemnitz's *Loci Theologici*," *Logia* 7 (Epiphany 1998): 19-31.

the locus on justification. Here we might expect Chemnitz to be rather dismissive of the fathers since they failed consistently to articulate Scripture's clear teaching on the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*. Yet, it is precisely here in this disputed locus where we observe Chemnitz, the pastor and teacher, engaging the heavenly witnesses who have gone before him, faithfully and critically "dividing the straw from the gold."

### Locus XIII: Justification

Martin Chemnitz begins his locus on justification by warning that if this article is "obscured, adulterated, or subverted," it is not possible to retain the purity of any other article of faith.<sup>8</sup> If the theologian wishes to retain the purity of this article or any other article of faith, he must, insists Chemnitz, properly distinguish between law and gospel. A detailed review of the word "gospel" in Scripture and by classical authors reveals the relative agreement among both sacred and profane writers on the meaning of this word. The scriptural understanding of gospel, explains Chemnitz, is "the doctrine of gratuitous reconciliation or of the benefits of the Mediator."<sup>9</sup> The considerable amount of exegetical work

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<sup>8</sup>*Loci Theologici, Pars Secunda, De Loco Iustificationis*, 200b (Preus, 443a): "Imo his Locus est tanquam arx et praecipuum propugnaculum totius doctrinae et religionis Christianae, quo vel obscurato, vel adulterato, vel subverso, impossibile est puritatem doctrinae in aliis Locis retinere." Hereafter cited only as *De Loco Iustificationis*. Since neither Chemnitz's manuscript nor Preus' translation incorporates line numbers, I have chosen to identify the page and column in which the quoted text appears. Therefore p. 200b corresponds to page 200, right column. The manuscript used throughout is Martin Chemnitz, *Loci Theologici, De Coena Domini, De Duabus Naturis in Christo, Theologiae Jesuitarum*, facsimile edition (Sterling Heights, Mich.: Lutheran Heritage Foundation, 2000). I use my own translations but cite the corresponding page and column in the Preus translation for the reader's convenience.

<sup>9</sup>*De Loco Iustificationis*, 203a (Preus, 445b): "Doctrina de gratuita reconciliatione, seu de beneficiis Mediatoris, appellatur Evangelium."

done in Chemnitz's first chapter prepares the reader for chapter two and his initial comment on the church fathers.

Justin, Tertullian, Clement, and Epiphanius incorrectly offer a chronological or linear understanding of law and gospel. For them, the natural law justified people before the time of Moses, the mosaic law from the time of Moses to Christ, and the gospel from Christ forward. The scholastics refined this view arguing that the law and gospel, which coincide with the Old and New Testament respectively, differ according to time, precepts, promises and sacraments. For them the old law was external and motivated by fear, whereas the new law is internal and a matter of love. The scholastic error has its roots, Chemnitz notes, in Eusebius of Caesarea, Augustine, and Jerome. Using various statements by these theologians, Chemnitz demonstrates how they link the commandments in the New Testament to the gospel, confusing the distinction between law and gospel. While it is true that their doctrine of the gospel consists of the gratuitous promise of the remission of sins for the sake of Christ, they add to this meaning our new obedience or good works and obscure Scripture's clear teaching that a person is justified by faith alone apart from the works of the law (Rom. 1:17, 3:21).

We can, at this point, begin to see Chemnitz's chief criticism of the fathers. The failure to distinguish between law and gospel confounds the article of justification (reconciliation) by not properly distinguishing it from the article of sanctification (renewal). Both the scholastics and the early church fathers failed to maintain a correct distinction between our reconciliation with the Father on account of the Son's redeeming work and the renewal or newness of life brought about by the Holy Spirit in the justified person. Toward the end of the chapter, Chemnitz explicitly warns, "it is necessary that the benefits of Christ, on account of which we receive remission of sin and are received unto eternal life, are distinguished from the

benefits of sanctification, or renewal, which follow justification." Such a distinction must always be maintained. Chemnitz continues, "We are not justified because of this [renewal], that is, we do not receive the remission of sins nor are we received unto eternal life because of the newness of life that follows [our justification], although it too is a benefit of Christ."<sup>10</sup> For Chemnitz a proper order must be maintained and preserved between justification and sanctification. It must be clearly taught that following the person's justification, the Holy Spirit renews and sanctifies him and the fruit of good works "which God prepared in advance" follow (Eph. 2:10). At the same time, Chemnitz instructs Lutherans that the justified person is never without the Spirit's renewal (cf. Titus 3:5).<sup>11</sup> The principal point in

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<sup>10</sup>*De Loco Iustificationis*, 207a (Preus, 450a): "Et hic necessario illa beneficia Christi, propter quae accipimus remissionem peccatorum, et acceptamur ad vitam aeternam, discernenda sunt a beneficiis sanctificationis, seu renovationis, quae sequuntur justificationem. Propter haec enim non justificamur, hoc est, non accipimus remissionem peccatorum, nec acceptamur ad vitam aeternam, propter sequentem novitatem, licet sit beneficium Christi."

For a similar comment, see *De Loco Iustificationis*, 208a (Preus, 451a): "Et qui disputant, Evangelium proprie dictum, non tantum continere promissionem gratiae; verum etiam doctrinam de bonis operibus. Tales quid dicant, non intelligent. Hoc modo enim discrimen Legis et Evangelii confunditur, quod Paulus ita constituit, Roman. 3. v. 27. Lex fidei et Lex operum: et transformatur Evangelium in legem." ("There are those who dispute that the gospel, properly speaking, contains not only the promise of grace but also the doctrine of good works. They do not understand what they are saying. For in this way the distinction between law and gospel is confounded, which Paul set forth in Romans 3:27, the law of faith and the law of works: and the gospel is transformed into law.")

<sup>11</sup>Chemnitz's point is that while a logical distinction exists between our reconciliation (justification) and renewal (sanctification) they are not temporally distinct. That is to say, the justified person is at no time not also renewed by the Holy Spirit. They are, however, logically distinct and that distinction must be preserved if the article of justification is correctly understood. The article of justification concerns the promise of the gospel, which is the remission of sins for the sake of Christ. Faith is the instrument and means by which that

this matter, argues Chemnitz, is that "the true and clear distinction between law and gospel be determined and diligently retained."<sup>12</sup> Only when a proper distinction is maintained between the law and the gospel can the articles of justification and sanctification be preserved.<sup>13</sup>

Martin Chemnitz's most thorough discussion of the fathers occurs in the fourth part of his locus under the heading "Controversies." Given the importance of the

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promise is applied to us; not, insists Chemnitz, the Spirit of renewal or works of love. It would simply be illogical to suggest that our justification depends on our renewal since that renewal results only from our justifying faith. Chemnitz explains his point more fully in the next section of the Locus when he outlines the teachings of Gropper, Pighius, and Vicelius. See *De Loco Iustificationis*, p. 227b-228a (Preus, 473b-475a); cf. also the discussion on grace toward the end of the Locus. The best and most concise explanation of Chemnitz's point, however, occurs in the *Enchiridion*, paragraph 164: "Likewise, though making alive, or renewal, is always with justification, yet they are not to be mixed or mingled with each other, for justification is one thing, renewal another. And though they cannot be separated according to difference in time, yet, in the order of significance or nature, justification precedes and renewal follows, which does not come in the nature of justification but is its fruit or consequence." See, Martin Chemnitz, *Ministry, Word, and Sacraments: An Enchiridion*, trans. Luther Poellot (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1981), 79.

<sup>12</sup>*De Loco Iustificationis*, 206b (Preus, 449a): "Ideo principale caput in hac quaestione est, ut constituatur, et diligenter retineatur verum et illustre discrimen Legis et Evangelii."

<sup>13</sup>Chemnitz quotes Luther's famous words: "Whoever knows well how to distinguish between law and gospel should give thanks to God and should know that he is a theologian. In temptations I certainly do not know it as I ought. You should distinguish the righteousness of the gospel from the righteousness of the law as diligently as heaven is distinguished from earth, light from darkness, day from night ... and would that we could separate them even farther." Martin Luther, "Commentary on Galatians (1535)," trans. Jaroslav Pelikan, vol. 26 of *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Walter A. Hansen (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), 115 (hereafter cited in notes as *LW*).



article of justification for the Reformers and Chemnitz's initial comments on the fathers, we might expect him to be dismissive of them on this disputed article of faith. This, however, is not the case. In the preface to this section on controversies, Chemnitz explains how he intends to proceed. He will first discuss the distortions to the doctrine of justification found in the Old Testament and then turn to the New Testament. In a lengthy third section he will review the distortions to this article that occurred in the church after the New Testament period. Here Chemnitz further divides his discussion into three parts: the Gnostics, the apostolic fathers, and the church fathers. He explains:

This consideration should be added that even great saints, disturbed by thoughts of reason and the law, entertained certain wanderings of the mind on this article. Particularly of note are the ecclesiastical writers, who, when occupied with controversies on other articles, were not always attentive and circumspect in their treatment of the doctrine of justification. On numerous occasions many unfortunate statements (*incommode dicta*) were carelessly made on this article, which caused the long and gradual departure from the purity of this doctrine.<sup>14</sup>

When we arrive at the section on the fathers, Chemnitz again characterizes their teachings on justification as "unfortunate statements" ("*de incommode dictis Patrum*").<sup>15</sup> He repeats himself explaining, "when they [the fathers] were involved in controversies on other articles of

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<sup>14</sup>*De Loco Iustificationis*, 217a (Preus, 462a): "Addatur et haec consideratio, quod saepe etiam magni sancti cogitationibus rationis et Legis turbati, hallucinationes quasdam in hoc Articulo habuerunt. Praecipue autem, quomodo Scriptores Ecclesiastici, dum certaminibus de aliis Articulis occupati sunt; saepe non ea, qua decet, diligentia et circumspectione tractent doctrinam Iustificationis. Et qua occasione saepe multa incommode dicta in hoc articulo ipsis exciderint: quae postea occasio fuerunt, quod a puritate huius doctrinae paulatim longius recessum est."

<sup>15</sup>*De Loco Iustificationis*, 224b (Preus, 469b).

faith, they failed to deal with the doctrine of justification carefully and circumspectly." Occupied by other controversies, the fathers, Chemnitz continues, "carelessly made many unfortunate statements that later on furnished the occasion for a long and gradual departure from the purity of this article."<sup>16</sup> Despite the numerous improper, unfortunate, and ill-considered ("multa improprie, incommode et incircumspecte")<sup>17</sup> statements regarding justification, our purpose is not, warns Chemnitz, to expose their errors disrespectfully: "we shall not criticize the lapses of those by whose labors we have been helped and whose gray hairs we ought to honor."<sup>18</sup> The unfortunate statements made by the fathers do not call for ridicule but rather for diligence in preserving the purity of the article of justification. If these saints, adept in the study of theology, are susceptible to unfortunate statements, how much more must we be? By discussing the unfortunate statements found in the fathers we will learn how to better preserve

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<sup>16</sup>*De Loco Iustificationis*, 224b (Preus, 469b): "cum certaminibus de aliis Articulis occupati essent, saepe, non justa diligentia, et circumspectione, doctrinam Iustificationis tractarint. Saepe etiam, cum alio respicerent, multa incommode dicta ipsis exciderunt, quae postea occasionem praebuerunt, quod a puritate huius articuli paulatim longius discessum est."

<sup>17</sup>Preus retains Chemnitz's alliteration in his translation rendering it "imprecise, inadequate, and injudicious." The problem here is that the reader fails to notice Chemnitz's consistent characterization of the statements by the fathers as "unfortunate" (*incommode*). Preus variously renders *incommode* as unfortunate, inadequate, unfelicitous, and imprecise. In order to preserve Chemnitz's argument, I have translated *incommode* as unfortunate throughout.

<sup>18</sup>*De Loco Iustificationis*, 224b (Preus, 470a): "ideo lapsus illorum non exagitamus, quorum laboribus adjuvamus, et quorum canitiem revereri debemus." Chemnitz continues, "sed has commonefactiones eo referimus, ut exemplis illis admoniti, eo simus et cautiores, et diligentiores, in conservanda doctrinae puritate, ne quacunq[ue] etiam occasione eius inclinationem faciamus."

and present the doctrine of justification to those who incorrectly cling to such statements.<sup>19</sup>

Given Chemnitz's prefatory comments on the fathers and his restatement of them, it is fair to characterize his attitude toward the fathers as one of esteem and discernment. He seeks to correct the fathers according to Scripture whenever they make "unfortunate statements," all the while remembering their many labors and tremendous contribution to Christian doctrine. Moreover, a rejection of their unfortunate statements on justification is not a rejection of their contribution to the faith. Indeed, we may be surprised to observe the great lengths Chemnitz is willing to go in order to explain why such statements were made. At every turn, Chemnitz seeks to put the best possible construction on the statements made by the fathers, criticizing rather those who zealously clung to these

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<sup>19</sup>We should note here the similarity between Chemnitz's comments and Luther's own view of the fathers. In his *Lectures on Genesis*, Luther wrote, "But this also has a bearing on our firmly holding the conviction that there were really six days on which the Lord created everything, in contrast to the opinion of Augustine and Hilary, who believed that everything was created in a single moment. They, therefore, abandon the historical account, pursuing allegories and fabricating I don't know what speculations. However, I am not saying this to vilify the holy fathers, whose works should be held in high regard, but to establish the truth and to comfort us. They were great men, but nevertheless they were human beings who erred and who were subject to error. So we do not exalt them as do the monks, who worship all their opinions as if they were infallible. To me the great comfort seems to lie rather in this, that they are found to have erred and occasionally to have sinned. For this is my thought: If God forgave them their errors and sins, why should I despair of His pardon? The opposite brings on despair – if you should believe that they did not have the same shortcomings that you have. Moreover, it is certain that between the call of the apostles and that of the fathers there is a great difference. Why, then, should we regard the writings of the fathers as equal to those of the apostles?" Martin Luther, "Lectures on Genesis," trans. George V. Schick, vol. 1 of *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), LW1:121.

unfortunate statements and those toward whom these comments were directed.

### The Church Fathers and Justification by Faith

The initial problem in the early church, notes Chemnitz, is the lack of a technical understanding of terms like "to justify" ("iustificare"), "righteousness" ("iustitia"), "to be righteous" ("iustus"), and "grace" ("gratia").<sup>20</sup> Quite often the imprecise use of these terms resulted in understanding Paul's teaching on justification as renewal. Chemnitz's principle concern emerges immediately. He explains: "Although this meaning in itself was not false or impious and it seemed that the improper use of this word [i.e., justification] had no unfortunate consequences, nevertheless because of this the doctrine of Paul was gradually obscured."<sup>21</sup> Chemnitz diverts blame from the fathers to

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<sup>20</sup>In his *Treatise on the Reading of the Fathers or the Doctors of the Church*, Chemnitz encourages discretion in using the commentaries of the fathers when they are discussing vocabulary. For example, since Augustine did not possess an adequate knowledge of Hebrew, he understood words like "to justify," "righteousness" and "grace" in a slightly different way than does Scripture. See *Loci theologici*, "De Lectione Patrum," 6a (Preus, 33a). Chemnitz makes a similar point in the introduction to the *Loci*. He points out how the ancients departed from the natural and proper meaning of words like "justification" and "grace." He proceeds once again to offer the example of Augustine. See *Loci Theologici*, "De Lectione Patrum," 16a (Preus, 46b). Luther makes a similar point concerning the Psalm commentaries of Augustine and Hilary of Poitiers in Martin Luther, "To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools (1524)," Albert T. W. Steinhäuser, rev. Walther I. Brandt, vol. 45 of *Luther's Works*, ed. Walther I. Brandt (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), LW 45:361 and Augustine's understanding of Hebrew in Martin Luther, "Lectures on Genesis," LW 1:263.

<sup>21</sup>*De Loco Iustificationis*, 224b-225a (Preus, 470a): "Quae sententia licet per se nec falsa, nec impia erat, et ideo catachresis illa nihil

their interpreters, namely the schoolmen, who imprudently used their statements, expanded on them, and completely obfuscated Scripture's teaching on justification and sanctification.<sup>22</sup>

As already mentioned, a significant confusion occurred in distinguishing law and gospel. Even if we wished to speak charitably, explains Chemnitz, "the statements are unfortunate" ("incommoda dicta sunt").<sup>23</sup> As a result, either good works are required for salvation, or if a distinction between law and gospel is made, it follows the understanding of Clement, who argues that the law prohibits evil deeds while the gospel prohibits evil intentions.<sup>24</sup> Chemnitz demonstrates his point by offering examples from Theophilus of Antioch, Tertullian, Irenaeus, Clement, Cyprian, Origen, Eusebius, Hilary, and Chrysostom. These fathers erred, insists Chemnitz, because "they did not assign the doctrine of good works to its [proper] locus and position as the fruits of faith, but often mixed it with the article of justification itself." Here again it

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videbatur incommodi habere; tamen sensim inde subsecuta est obscuratio doctrinae Paulinae."

<sup>22</sup>In the section on the vocabulary of justification, Chemnitz shows how Augustine interpreted *iustificare* to mean sanctification and taught that our justification resulted from our renewal in good works. Chemnitz does not blame Augustine for his improper use of this word but rather typically blames the schoolmen, which, in this case, are Peter Lombard and Thomas Aquinas. See *De Loco Iustificationis*, 229ff (Preus, 475ff).

<sup>23</sup>*De Loco Iustificationis*, 225a (Preus, 470a).

<sup>24</sup>*De Loco Iustificationis*, 225a (Preus, 470b). Chemnitz paraphrases Clement of Alexandria ("Stromatum," in *Patrologiae Graecae*, ed. J. P. Migne, vol. 9 [Paris: Apud Garnier Fratres, 1890], col. 495-512, *Stromata* 7.12.314-317 [hereafter cited in notes as PG]) as, "Lex prohibet tantum malas actiones: Evangelium vero etiam malas cogitationes" ("The law prohibits only bad deeds but the Gospel prohibits also evil thoughts." Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.], 2:542-546 [hereafter cited in notes as ANF]).

is worth noting Chemnitz's criticism. Did the fathers fail to distinguish between justification and sanctification because they were poor exegetes? The answer is no. Chemnitz continues:

And because they saw that when the gratuitous reception to eternal life is preached among profane men a great sense of security follows, neglect of good works, and the dissolution of a person's whole life is brought about. Therefore, in order to restrain this sense of security, they kindled and urged an ardent and efficacious (so it seemed to them) zeal for good works and often bent the article of justification toward works and merits, burying Christ and his benefits.<sup>25</sup>

Chemnitz proceeds to cite Chrysostom, Hilary, and Clement. From John Chrysostom we read, "God enters into a kind of agreement with us: Give alms and I will give you eternal life."<sup>26</sup> Similarly Hilary of Poitiers declares, "This blessed eternity must be earned by our effort."<sup>27</sup> The lengthiest quote comes from Clement of Alexandria, explaining the meaning of the words, "Your faith has saved

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<sup>25</sup>*De Loco Iustificationis*, 225a (Preus, 470a): "Doctrinae bonorum operum non tribuerunt suum locum et gradum, tanquam fructibus; sed in ipsum Articulum Justificationis saepe immiscuerunt. Et quia viderunt apud homines prophanos sequi magnam securitatem, neglectum bonorum operum et totius vitae effrenem dissolutionem, ex praedicatione gratuita acceptionis ad vitam aeternam. Ut igitur securitatem reprimere, et studium bonorum operum eo ardentius et efficacius (ut ipsis videbatur) excitare et urgere possent, saepe inflexerunt Articulum Justificationis ad opera et merita, sepulto Christo et beneficio ipsius."

<sup>26</sup>Chemnitz gives the following citation which I was unable to confirm: John Chrysostom, *Homily 37 on Matthew*.

<sup>27</sup>Hilary of Poitiers, *Sur Matthieu*, Ed. Jean Doignon, Sources chrétiennes 254. (Paris : Éditions du Cerf, 1979), 254:176, *In Matthaeum* 6.5.11-12 (hereafter cited in notes as SC): "de nostro igitur est beata illa aeternitas promerenda." Chemnitz also cites *In Matthaeum*, 4.2.24-25 (SC 254, p. 122).

you" (Mt. 9:22, Mk. 5:34, Lk. 7:50). Clement argues, "we do not understand this in the absolute sense that those are, or are going to be, saved who in some way or another believe, unless they have also done the works that follow."<sup>28</sup> Although the fathers tried to overcome the smugness of Christians by preaching good works, their efforts resulted in the corruption of the article of justification. As such these statements by the fathers cannot, insists Chemnitz, be excused or defended as they are "exceedingly unfortunate" ("valde incommode").<sup>29</sup>

Related to the preaching of good works was the practice of public satisfaction for sins. These spectacles further promoted the idea of merit and righteousness by works. In Chemnitz's estimation, the fathers show an excessive amount of admiration for outward discipline and natural human powers. The positive value given our own works in meriting something that contributes to our salvation seriously hindered the clear teaching on justification. As Chemnitz has noted, these teachings were often the result of attempts to curb the smugness of Christians neglecting good works. By trying to arouse and encourage these smug Christians, the fathers often perverted the distinction between justification and sanctification. Chemnitz explains, "the true doctrine of repentance, grace, faith, and the gratuitous remission of sins was to a great extent obscured. The fathers failed to notice this because of their excessive zeal for discipline."<sup>30</sup> These unfortunate statements, while on a certain level well intended, built the foundations for Pelagianism. Chemnitz purposefully does not identify the

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<sup>28</sup>"Stromatum," PG 9, col. 330, Stromata 6.14.283; ANF 2:505. Preus incorrectly cites *Stromata* VI.6 (471a).

<sup>29</sup>*De Loco Iustificationis*, 225a (Preus, 471): "Haec non possunt aliter mitigari, vel defendi, nisi quod sunt valde incommode dicta."

<sup>30</sup>*De Loco Iustificationis*, 226b (Preus, 472a): "Et inde vera doctrina de poenitentia, gratia, fide et gratuita remissione peccatorum non parum obscurata fuit. Id quod Patres, prae immodico zelo disciplinae, non animadverterunt."

fathers as Pelagian but duly notes how their statements led to such errors and should therefore never be defended.

At this point, Chemnitz directs his attention to the positive statements made by the fathers regarding justification. He assumes that God in all historical periods raises up witnesses who defend his word against errors and restores the purity of his teachings.<sup>31</sup> From his historical vantage point, Chemnitz observes how God kindled the genuine teaching of his doctrine on justification in the early church.<sup>32</sup> For Chemnitz two examples are obvious. The first occurred with the Montanists and the Novatians, who, asserts Chemnitz, denied any repentance or remission of

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<sup>31</sup>Luther makes a similar assertion in his commentary on Psalm 45:5 (Martin Luther, "Psalm 45 (1532)," trans. E. B. Koenker, vol. 12 of *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955], 222-23): "Saint Hilary lived at a time when righteousness was deeply humiliated and the truth was thoroughly damned, when hardly two sound bishops maintained their churches and the madness of Arius had seized all the other churches. Then truth and righteousness lay completely prostrate, and yet Christ came and drove off the Arians with their heresy, and the truth remained unshaken. So it was in the case of the Pelagians. So today the Sacramentarians and Anabaptists have debased this righteousness and truth of ours, and there will be many others like them. Therefore arm yourselves with these promises that Christ will be a successful fighter in us, and you will witness miracles performed by the right hand of Christ, which now seems to be weak. Thus our cause has passed through a number of definite threats, and if we look back, we see only miracles that would have been simply incredible before they took place. Christ has directed all these things so marvelously."

<sup>32</sup>Not only was it necessary for God to rescue the article of justification in the early church, but in the introduction to the *Locus*, Chemnitz explains how God allowed "insidious teachings" to follow Luther's work on justification. God did this for our great benefit, explains Chemnitz, "so that in the future we might be both more diligent and more cautious." *De Loco Iustificacionis*, 201b (Preus, 443b): "Et has insidias Deus ingenti beneficio in lucem protraxit, ut in posterum simus et diligentiores et cautiores."



sins to those who lapsed after baptism. While they eventually softened their position, the Novatians denied any hope of grace and remission of sins to the lapsed. When confronted with this heresy, the fathers corrected their statements according to Scripture. Chemnitz explains:

The fathers recalled on this occasion what they had not noticed before when they were overly concerned with discipline. They began to consider more carefully the scriptural meaning of sin, repentance, grace, faith, remission of sins, etc. They retracted the many unfortunate statements they and others had made that supplied the seeds for Novatianism and corrected their statements according to the norm of the word of God.<sup>33</sup>

To be sure, a certain amount of historical revisionism is present in Chemnitz's comments. For our purposes, however, his attitude toward the fathers and the length to which he is willing to go to avoid simply rejecting their labors is remarkable. Even more noteworthy, perhaps, is the method Chemnitz attributes to the fathers. They retracted their unfortunate statements and corrected them according to Scripture alone. That is to say, they put aside any tradition that may have arisen because of their statements and returned to the only rule and norm of doctrine, God's word. This is quite an important point made here by Chemnitz. When the fathers taught something contrary to Scripture and that teaching led others to distort the word of

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<sup>33</sup>*De Loco Iustificationis*, 226b (Preus, 472b): "Patres hac occasione admoniti, id quod antea, cum tantum in disciplinam intenti essent, non animadverterant, coeperunt sententiam Scripturae de peccato, poenitentia, gratia, fide, remissione peccatorum, etc., diligentius inspicere, et multatam sua tum aliorum incommode dicta, quae praebuerunt seminaria Novatianismo, retractarunt, et ad normam verbi Dei correxerunt." See also, Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, trans. Fred Kramer, 4 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971), 1: 1:256-58.

God, they retracted their casual statements and clung to the Scripture alone.<sup>34</sup>

A second divine intervention occurred when the righteousness of faith was obscured by extravagant statements on free will that diminished original sin, endorsed the sufficiency of the law, and commended the perfection of the righteousness of works.<sup>35</sup> At this time, God permitted Pelagianism to rise up and disrupt the church nearly to the point of its collapse. Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine rose to this challenge. Chemnitz writes:

[They] acknowledged what they had not noticed before, namely that the many words which they and others had carelessly spoke for such a long time when they were so intent on exciting zeal for good works did not agree with the analogy of faith.<sup>36</sup>

The encounters with the heretics taught the fathers a significant lesson. Chemnitz explains, "just as they should not do evil that good may come of it, so they should not teach falsely in order that the truth might be defended and retained."<sup>37</sup> In their effort to curb the smugness of believers, the fathers emphasized works and discipline, distorting the

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<sup>34</sup>This very idea is echoed by Melancthon at *Apology* XXIV.95 (*The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Translated and edited by Theodore G. Tappert, in collaboration with Jaroslav Pelikan, Robert H. Fischer, and Arthur C. Piepkorn [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959], 267, *Apology* 24.95 [hereafter cited in notes as Tappert]).

<sup>35</sup>*De Loco Iustificationis*, 227a (Preus, 472b): "Ita postea cum de libero arbitrio, extenuatione peccati originalis, de possibilitate Legis, et perfectione iustitiae operum, imo supererogatione multa, magis oratorie et hyerbolice, quam pie et vere in Ecclesiis declamarentur, et iaceret ibi obscurata doctrina de iustitia fidei..."

<sup>36</sup>*De Loco Iustificationis*, 227a (Preus, 472b).

<sup>37</sup>*De Loco Iustificationis*, 227a (Preus, 473a): "Sicut enim non sunt facienda mala, ut eveniant bona: ita non sunt tradenda falsa, ut defendantur et retineantur vera." Cf. Gen. 50:20.

purity of the doctrine of justification. These distortions led to heresy and forced the fathers to reconsider their unfortunate and imprecise statements.<sup>38</sup> Quoting Augustine, Chemnitz says, "Many points pertaining to the catholic faith have been stirred up by the heat of the heretics' restlessness, so that we have had to defend these points against them, consider more diligently, understand more clearly, and preach more powerfully."<sup>39</sup> When we read the fathers, we keep this in mind by discerning the context governing their writing. If they wrote before a particular controversy, then we read their words accordingly. We do not disparage them for speaking casually on a subject before they had the opportunity to reconsider their statements in light of heretical distortions. At the same time, the fathers retaining extravagant and dangerous language after a controversy and after the opportunity to consider and define matters more circumspectly and according to Scripture should be censured.<sup>40</sup>

The disputes with the heretics forced the fathers to return to Scripture and the correct and proper teaching on justification. Chemnitz explains, "when they were led to discuss those passages which possess the *sedes doctrinae* of the matter, then the very clearness of the divine revelation proved incontestably to them the need to explain more

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<sup>38</sup>For more examples, see *Loci Theologici, Pars Prima, De Humanis Viribus, seu de Libero Arbitrio*, 179 (Preus, 242b).

<sup>39</sup>*De Loco Iustificationis*, 227a (Preus, 473a); *Patrologiae cursus completus, series Latinae*. Ed. J. P. Migne, vol. 41 (Paris: Migne, 1845), col. 477, Augustine *Civitate Dei* (*On the City of God*) 16.2 (hereafter cited in notes as PL): "Multa ad fidem catholicam pertinentia, dum haereticorum callida inquietudine exagitantur, ut adversus eos defendi possint, et considerantur diligentius et intelliguntur clarius, et instantius praedicantur, et ab adversario mota quaestio, discendi existit occasione, etc."

<sup>40</sup>In this regard, J. A. O. Preus gives the example of Chemnitz's treatment of John Cassian and his semi-Pelagianism. See, J. A. O. Preus, "The Use of the Church Fathers in the Formula of Concord," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 48 (April-July 1984): 101.

rightly and properly this doctrine."<sup>41</sup> Further along in the Locus and beyond the section we are here dealing with, Chemnitz explains that although the fathers generally used the word "justification" to mean "an infusion of good qualities" (referring to sanctification) they were also at times "convinced by the clear testimonies of Paul" and understood "the true and genuine meaning of the word."<sup>42</sup> It was clear to Chemnitz that a great variety of opinions existed among the fathers and that the discriminating reader would use Scripture to separate the "straw from the gold."<sup>43</sup> As Luther insists, it is the prerogative of God alone to establish articles of faith, not the words or opinions of the fathers.<sup>44</sup> When the fathers properly articulate and defend the clear teaching of Scripture on justification or any article

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<sup>41</sup>*De Loco Iustificationis*, 227a (Preus, 473a): "Quando vero deducuntur ad tractationem illarum sententiarum, in quibus sedes est huius doctrinae, tunc ipsa evidētia divinae patefactionis ipsos convincit, ut rectius et commodius doctrinam illam explicant. Sicut in commentariis Origenis, Ambrosii, Chrysostomi, Augustini, et aliorum hoc deprehenditur." As can be seen from the end of this quote, Chemnitz names the commentaries of Origen, Ambrosiaster (not Ambrose of Milan), Chrysostom, and Augustine.

<sup>42</sup>*De Loco Iustificationis*, 235a (Preus, 482b).

<sup>43</sup>Chemnitz does not provide patristic support of this point but it is abundant. See, for example, Clement of Alexandria who says that it is the heretics who rely on the opinions of men instead of Scripture. Clement of Alexandria, "Stromatum," PG 9, col. 529, Stromata 7.16.321. See also, Caius the Presbyter, *Against the Heresy of Artemon or Little Labyrinth*, III (As quoted in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*. Ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. 2<sup>nd</sup> Series (Grand Rapids: Wm.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1952), 1:248, Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 5.28.13 [hereafter cited in notes as *NPNF 2*]; Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, I.18.3 [*ANF 3:284*] and *Apology*, 17.2-3 [*ANF 3:31*]; Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity*, I.18, et passim [*NPNF 2 9:45*]).

<sup>44</sup>Smalcald Articles, III, 2.13-15; cf. II, 2.15. For patristic comments along these lines, see their various comments on passages like Psalm 118:8, Jeremiah 17:5, or 1 Cor 3:21.

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of faith, we rightly cling to their statements as the evangelical tradition of the church catholic.<sup>45</sup> When their statements stray from Scripture, we do not simply reject them and set them aside but first determine why such statements were made. By determining the context of their teachings, we learn how to better defend the word of God in our own day. By learning from their mistakes and seeing how no good can come from evil, we better protect ourselves from compromising God's word to accomplish a fleeting and seemingly good thing in our own day.

In the end, Martin Chemnitz's approach to the fathers is one of esteem and discernment. He appreciates and makes use of their contribution to Christian doctrine, their guidance in theological terminology, and their many struggles to defend God's word against the heretics. When the fathers fail to distinguish between law and gospel, distort the articles of justification and sanctification, or overemphasize works and discipline, Chemnitz seeks to understand why such statements were made. He does not see their shortcomings as an opportunity for ridicule but rather as a call for diligence that we not repeat their mistakes in our defense of God's word. When we reverently and faithfully approach the fathers, we do so knowing they

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<sup>45</sup>Chemnitz offers numerous citations from the fathers on justification by faith. See, for example, *De Loco Iustificantiōnis*, 235a (Preus, 482b), 285-286 (Preus 541-543); *Ministry, Word, and Sacraments: An Enchiridion*, trans. Luther Poellot (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1981), 78, para. 161; *Examination of the Council of Trent*, trans. Fred Kramer, 4 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971), 1:505-513.

sought only to confess the faith that leads to everlasting life. Just as we pray today for brotherly correction when we stray from God's word, so too we correct these heavenly witnesses when they stray from the only rule and norm for doctrine, God's inspired and inerrant word.