IS THE FINNISH LINE A NEW BEGINNING?  
A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE READING OF LUTHER 
OFFERED BY THE HELSINKI CIRCLE*

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The 1998 collection of essays on the Finnish perspective on Luther, edited by Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson, is both a fascinating contribution to modern ecumenical debates and an interesting challenge to accepted interpretations of Luther’s theology. Many of the issues raised are extremely complex and a short paper such as this cannot aspire to do much more than offer a few passing comments and criticisms on the whole.¹

The context of the collection is the ecumenical dialogue between the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland and the Russian Orthodox Church.² While we must beware of reading too much significance into this context in terms of research outcomes, it undoubtedly shapes the contours of debate in which the protagonists engage. Tuomo Mannermaa and his colleagues in the “Helsinki Circle” are clearly driven by a desire to find in Luther’s writings more ecumenical potential with reference to Lutheran-Orthodox relations than has typically been assumed to be available. That the research of the Finns has borne just such fruit, and is significant precisely because it is pragmatically so useful for ecumenical relations, is confirmed with great and unmitigated enthusiasm by Robert Jenson in his own response to the group’s work.³

Without wishing to endorse all of the enthusiasm which surrounds the Helsinki Circle, I would like to note at the start a number of points at which this group makes extremely valid points and thus renders a useful contribution to the wider field of Luther interpretation. In the central contention that modern

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³ “I cannot respond to Tuomo Mannermaa’s paper in the usual fashion: by first expressing appreciation and then registering reservations. For I have none of the latter. . . . My interest in Luther is not that of a Lutherforscher, but that of a systematic theologian and ecumenist. As a systematician, I have found that I can do very little with Luther as usually interpreted” (Jenson, “Response to Tuomo Mannermaa, ‘Why Is Luther So Fascinating?’” in Union with Christ, 21-24, 21).
readings of Luther have been distorted by the use of an anti-ontological grid provided by the post-Kantian trajectories of German liberal theology. I think the writers do us a great service. The work of those under the sway of Ritschl and Holl comes in for some timely and necessary criticism. To a historian, it is obvious that Luther is operating within an intellectual framework shaped by the late medieval schools; the kind of anti-metaphysical thinking propounded by Kant and those who came after him is simply inappropriate as a framework for reading Luther's own writings. In addition, the kind of existentialist reading offered by Ebeling is equally damaging in its failure to understand the significance for Luther not simply of the force of language but also of the propositional content of the same. To the extent that these excesses of interpretation can only be corrected by an acknowledgment that Luther's view of the world was not that of a post-Kantian, the Finnish interpretation stands as a necessary corrective.4

Yet, while acknowledging the positive benefits of finding previously untapped ecumenical potential in the writings of Luther, there is a series of issues which needs to be addressed before we can say with confidence and certainty that this Helsinki research represents a significant enrichment of the theological scene. Perhaps the most obvious question is that of the nature of the opinions of those who contribute to this volume. With one exception, those responding to the Finns are entirely enthusiastic in what a cynic might consider to be a suspiciously uncritical manner. The collection would surely have been much stronger had there been more debate, more dissent, and had more of the hard questions been asked and, hopefully, answered.5

Second, there is the obvious issue of the use of one man's writings as a basis for fruitful ecumenical dialogue. On the one hand, it is true that Luther does occupy a peculiar position within the Lutheran communion in a way that no single theologian does within either Reformed, Catholic, or Orthodox traditions. Not only has he been an iconic figure and a rallying-point for group identity almost from the start, but his writings also carry official confessional weight.6 Indeed, the Formula of Concord not only grants official confessional status to his Large and Small Catechisms but also commends all his other writings to the church, albeit in critical subjection to the word of God.7 Thus, it is certainly

4 See Albrecht Ritschl, Die christliche Lehre von der Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung (3 vols.; Bonn: A. Marcus, 1882-83); Karl Holl, Luther, in vol. 1 of Gesammelte Aufsätze Kirchengeschichte (ed. Karl Holl; Tübingen: Mohr, 1927); Gerhard Ebeling, Luther: An Introduction to His Thought (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970). For a recent defense of the Kantian interpretation of Luther over against the existentialism of Ebeling, see James M. Stayer, Martin Luther, German Saviour: German Evangelical Theological Factions and the Interpretation of Luther, 1917-1933 (Montreal: McGill-Queen's, 2000).

5 The one dissenting voice is that of Dennis Bielfeldt, "Response to Sammeli Juntunen, 'Luther and Metaphysics,'" in Union with Christ, 161-66.

6 On Luther's iconic influence in Lutheranism, see the stimulating study by Robert Kolb, Martin Luther as Prophet, Teacher, and Hero: Images of the Reformer, 1520-1620 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999).

7 See Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, eds., The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 528-29. The confessional material also contains throughout explicit and repeated references to Luther and his writings.
legitimate to explore these writings as being of some ecumenical relevance. On the other hand, the methodological problems involved in such a task are at the very least utterly daunting. Luther lived a long life and wrote a huge amount in a wide variety of genres and contexts; in addition, his thinking underwent considerable development over time. The intellectual historian thus faces a vast array of preliminary methodological questions, such as: which texts do we privilege in our quest for the voice of the "authentic" Luther? To what extent do we impose a coherence on Luther's thought, or at least upon its development over time which will allow us to synthesize ideas in texts which are widely separated by chronological and/or generic context? Once one moves beyond the interpretative boundaries or trajectories set by the documents embodied in the Book of Concord, or, as do the contributors here, one assumes a basic disjunction to exist between the voice of the authentic Luther and the voice of the Lutheran confessional community as this finds public expression in the key creedal documents, one cannot avoid such sharp hermeneutical questions or be particularly surprised when others make accusations of selective reading of texts, projectionism, and eisegesis.8

Third, and more substantively, there is the question of the historical accuracy of the picture of Luther presented. As a historian, my first question of this collection is not whether the new perspective offered is useful to ecumenical dialogue—that much is obvious from the collection itself—but whether this new perspective in fact represents a fair and proper interpretation of what Luther himself actually believed. Now, I appreciate that the systematic truth of a theological claim does not ultimately depend upon who, humanly speaking, is making the claim. That Luther says "Such-and-such is the case" is significant: his writings are, after all, mentioned in the Book of Concord as having important theological weight for the church's public confession of the faith. Yet in focusing so much upon the usefulness of this Finnish picture of Luther rather than upon its historical accuracy, the contributors to this volume seem to want to have their cake and eat it at the same time. A systematic theological position which relies very heavily upon a particular reading of history as part of its basic case can—indeed, surely must—legitimately be called to account in relation to the historiography on which it is, in part, constructed and which forms an important part of the argument's rhetorical force.

This is the burden of the essay by the one dissenting voice in the volume, that of Dennis Bielfeldt. He sees the Finns as engaging in significant unhistorical theological eisegesis to make a sixteenth-century Luther fit a twentieth-century ecumenical encounter with Orthodoxy. It is therefore disconcerting that at least one reviewer has singled out this note of historical skepticism as being a "worn out scholarly criticism." Really? Then why do the contributors make so much of

the historical validity of their reading of Luther? It is the contributors who have decided to play the historical card; they can hardly complain when others then call them to account on this score. While an accusation of anachronistic projectionism is indeed a two-edged sword, as likely again to cut the very one who wields it, nevertheless those systematicians who purport to build great castles on foundations laid down by historical figures must accept that historians at least have the right to expect them to be able to justify their understanding of these foundations with reference to the accepted canons of history and historical interpretation.9

It is on the historical front that this volume does not score as highly as it does on that of systematic construction. While the use of Ritschl and Holl as key opponents is legitimate, given their massive influence both theologically and historiographically in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the more recent and highly influential work of Heiko Oberman is entirely absent from the discussion.10 This is not incidental nor is it an irrelevant criticism; indeed, the omission is little short of stunning. The kind of historical method pioneered by Oberman, by his student, David Steinmetz, and by those who follow in their wake, such as Timothy Wengert, has stressed the need to set Luther’s theological actions within both the synchronic and diachronic contexts in order to understand exactly what intentions, theological or otherwise, are being expressed in any given text, and why these are being expressed in the way they are.11 It is not surprising, then, that in reviewing the volume in hand, Wengert in particular has been brutal in his criticisms of the lack of historical sensitivity and the failures to understand the wider context which the authors consistently exhibit.12

We should perhaps here take a number of examples. First, one of the collection’s central claims is that union with Christ is the key to Luther’s understanding of salvation, and that this union is something real and ontological which leads to


10 See Heiko A. Oberman, Luther: Man between God and the Devil (trans. E. Walliser-Schwarzbart; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); also the essays on Luther in the following works by Oberman: The Dawn of the Reformation (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992); The Reformation: Roots and Ramifications (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994); and The Impact of the Reformation (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).


12 See his review of Union with Christ in THK 56 (1999): 432-34: “This volume presents readers with a perspective that is neither new nor, in final analysts, germane to the heart of Luther’s theology. It is also not, as the preface boasts, radical. Instead it represents a debate with certain aspects of ‘German’ theology. It ignores major schools of Luther interpretation. . . . [I]t glosses over the fact that Lutherans have been debating the question of justification among themselves since the sixteenth century. . . . Here one sees what happens when modern ecumenical agendas and old-fashioned pietism become the chief spectacles through which to view an historical figure.”
a transformation of the believer akin to the Orthodox notion of theosis.\textsuperscript{13} If true, this claim distances the thought of Luther from the confessional formulation of justification, with its overarching emphasis upon declarative and forensic categories and its transformation (so many opponents would claim) of the whole matter into a legal fiction.\textsuperscript{14} The claim can be broken down into two parts: first, that Luther’s language, or way of expressing salvation differs somewhat from that of the confessional materials; and, second, that this difference represents a basic discontinuity of theological substance. As such, this goes well beyond the more modest (and, in my opinion, legitimate) ambition of demonstrating the distorted nature of post-Kantian readings of Luther; it serves to attenuate or even to sever Luther’s connection to the Lutheran church on one, if not the, central point of that communion’s confession, namely, the issue of justification.

A few comments are in order here. First, there is no doubt that in, say, The Freedom of the Christian Man, Luther’s preferred analogy for justification is not so much the courtroom but that of the marriage union of bride and groom. While it is true that the analogy does involve a certain legal dimension—for example, the “joyful exchange” of property which takes place within marriage occurs partly because of the legal framework which defines the union—we should not overplay this. Union with Christ is indisputably part and parcel of Luther’s approach to justification, and this has a variety of roots and connotations, not all of them by any means legal.\textsuperscript{15} To acknowledge this, however, is not to concede the case to the Finns. After all, the meaning of “union with Christ” is not a universal given. Marriage union, legal union, ontological union—these all offer models of understanding the idea which may well differ in significant ways. Thus, the Finnish case rests not so much upon the idea that union with Christ is central to Luther’s articulation of justification but rather upon the use of realistic language to describe the union and its effects.

Mannermaa, for example, insists on discussing union with Christ by using language of “participation in God,” phraseology which, of course, brings with it a large amount of theological baggage which may or may not be appropriate to Luther. Thus, he claims:

The core of Luther’s concept of participation finds expression in the notion of the “happy exchange,” according to which Christ takes upon himself the sinful person of the human being and bestows his own righteous person upon the humanity. What takes place here between Christ and the believer is a communication of attributes or properties: Christ, the divine righteousness, truth, peace, joy, love, power, and life gives himself to the believer.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{13} E.g., Mannermaa, “Why Is Luther So Fascinating?” 9-12; also his second essay, “Justification and Thesis in Lutheran–Orthodox Perspective,” Union with Christ, 25-41.

\textsuperscript{14} E.g., The Formula of Concord, ch. 3 in Kolb and Wengert, 562-63.

\textsuperscript{15} See the essay by Oberman, “Suscit Gemitus et Raptus: Luther and Mysticism,” in idem, The Dawn of the Reformation, 126-54.

\textsuperscript{16} “Justification and Thesis,” 32.
What is puzzling about this particular claim is that the reference provided to demonstrate that there is a "real" absorption of Christ's righteousness by the believer and of sin and death by Christ is a passage from Luther's lectures on Romans from 1515–1516, dealing with Rom 7:18. First, this is a rather early work upon which to hinge an important argument about Luther's understanding of justification and salvation. If, for the sake of argument, we allow for the "Reformation breakthrough" having occurred by this time (and I myself reject such a claim), there is clearly huge intellectual development between 1516 and 1520, let alone 1535, when the great commentary on Galatians is published. Even if the text says what Mannermaa claims (and that is a point I shall dispute below), one wonders what the ultimate historical, theological, or ecumenical value of such a claim is. After all, the role of humility in this work is also crucial to Luther's understanding of salvation at this point—but that will very soon be abandoned in favor of a single-minded focus on faith.

A similar use of pre-Reformation Luther occurs in two other essays. Juntu- nen's essay on metaphysics and ontology depends heavily upon the Luther of the middle years of the second decade of the sixteenth century; and Peura uses the Dictata super Psalterium of 1513–1516 to build much of the foundation for his arguments about favor and gift, and hinges the crucial arguments about theosis on this work. Indeed, his essay title refers to "Luther's understanding of justification" in the singular, which, given the use of material from either side of the Reformation watershed on justification, is immediately suggestive of a systematic over-harmonization of the early Luther and the later Luther which does not do justice to the history of his intellectual development over time. Further, the specific relation between contemporary systematic use of Luther's writings and the historical understanding of the development of his thought rears its head in a particularly acute form when the Finns use these early, pre-Reformation or transitional works as sources for Luther's normative theology. It is, to say the least, very disappointing that Mannermaa, Juntuinen, and Peura never address the kind of awkward issues of historical interpretation that such use raises.

To return, however, to Mannermaa's quotation from the Romans com- mentary: when read in the context in which the passage occurs, Luther is in fact not here discussing the joyful exchange of sins and righteousness as Mannermaa claims but rather the paradoxical reality of the believer being both old and new man. Indeed, the passage contains no explicit reference to or discussion of the union between the believer and Christ and is simply not relevant to the argument Mannermaa is trying to make. In this passage, Luther is drawing an analogy between the believer as old and new man and the paradoxical nature of Christology. The comparison is explicitly analogue, however, and is in no way intended as a definitive explanation of the nature of union with Christ or of justification. To use the passage to argue for realistic union in the context of

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17 Simo Peura, "Christ as Favor and Gift (donum): The Challenge of Luther's Understanding of Justification," in *Union with Christ*, 42-69, esp. 50-51. Neither Peura nor any of the other contributors sets Luther's use of the terminology of favor and gift against the contemporary theological or exegetical use of these terms.
justification is entirely illegitimate, representing a clear misappropriation and misapplication of the passage. Such a loose approach to the context of given statements from Luther is not an isolated occurrence in the essays in this volume.

The Finnish case for real union does not, of course, rest solely upon this one misconstrued passage. Mannermaa uses the notion of "participation" as a means of unlocking the theology of Luther's teaching on salvation from his early writings to the mature works of the 1530s. While, on the surface, this appears to give unity to those writings which have traditionally been regarded as pre-Reformation or transitional and those which have been considered to be Reformation, it yet raises some crucial questions: what exactly is meant by, or results from, this "participation"? And does participation play the central role in Luther's thinking which the Finns ascribe to it? Here we might look at Mannermaa's treatment of a later work: in discussing the importance of Christ as "gift," Mannermaa quotes a passage from the 1535 Commentary on Galatians to the effect that the presence of Christ in the believer's heart as a gift is that which makes the Christian greater than the world. He then reads this passage as revealing "how real (indeed, ontologically real [my emphasis]) Luther supposes the presence of the 'gift,' that is, Christ, to be."21

I would respond to such a reading in a number of ways. For a start, no attempt is made by the author to trace the meaning of the word "gift" in the wider theological and exegetical context within which Luther is working, something which should be basic to any careful exegesis of his meaning at this point. The word has a significant exegetical and theological history, and is used after all by both Erasmus and Melanchthon—individuals whose work is scarcely incidental to Luther's own—and chosen because of its wider connotations. It is therefore not simply a neologism or an empty bucket into which Luther can pour whatever content he wishes. Yet the reader of this volume looks in vain for any discussion which might help to contextualize and to clarify Luther's use of this terminology.

Second, even taken in isolation from the wider linguistic and theological context, the passage as presented does not self-evidently point towards an ontological reading, at least not one that tends in the direction of an Orthodox notion of theosis. All the passage says is that believers who have Christ as gift by faith in

18 See WA 56, 343, 16-21 (the text cited by Mannermaa). It is perhaps worth noting that, as the passage goes on, it refers to the unity produced by sexual intercourse but stresses that such unity is "figurative," a somewhat less than ontological term (see WA 56, 26-28).

19 See the comments of Wengert: "Countless times the present reviewer also encountered passages in Luther torn from their historical and exegetical contexts in order to serve greater ecumenical ends. . . . In short, this book will help readers to know what Finnish theologians think of their own tradition" (Wengert, review of Union with Christ, 434).


21 "Justification and Thesis," 33. The quotation is from WA 40.1, 235, 26-236, 16.
their hearts have conscientiae that are rendered free of all laws and subject to nothing. And this, after all, is central to Lutheran concepts of forensic justification, where God, the judge, declares the individual to be innocent in foro conscientiae.

In order to find out what Luther is really saying here, it is useful to look at the preface to the commentary, where he makes a number of crucial theological distinctions that serve to provide a framework for understanding the argument of the whole. These are a twofold understanding of righteousness and a corresponding two kingdoms understanding of the reality in which the believer must live.

As to twofold righteousness, Luther distinguishes between that which is passive and that which is active. The passive is that which, quite literally, does nothing and thus receives Christ by faith alone; in this context, language of righteousness is to be understood of the heavenly realm, not of the earthly; were this not the case, the absolute distinction Luther makes between the heavenly and the earthly would be rendered meaningless. We might add that this is also the framework within which later discussion in the commentary concerning the nature of justification and righteousness must be understood. What is absolutely crucial is the fact that active righteousness, that which involves the believer in doing good works and in dealing with the earthly realm, is radically mediocre and provides no basis for the relationship between the believer and God. Moreover, it is utterly dependent upon the logically prior heavenly righteousness—that which is really of Christ and only of the believer by imputation through faith, as is elaborated in the commentary itself. Luther's preface makes it quite clear that these distinctions provide the great framework for his understanding of the teaching of Galatians on justification and that to confuse the two kinds of righteousness involves a basic confusion of the two realms and constitutes a basic and fundamental category mistake.

It is, to say the least, extremely surprising that Mannermaa makes no attempt to set the teaching he finds on righteousness in the main text of the Commentary on Galatians within the larger theological framework laid out in the preface. The two realms distinction, and the active and passive distinction, make Luther's

22 For the preface, see WA 40.1, 39-52. This is crucial in summarizing the theological framework within which Luther understands the letter's teaching to be understood.

23 "Haec est nostrae theologiae qua docemus accurate distinguere has duas iustitias, activam et passivam, ne confundantur mores et fides, opera et gratia, politia et religio" (WA 40.1, 45, 24-26).

24 "Nos vero quasi duo mundos constituisse, unum coelestem, alterum terrenum. In illos collocamus has duas iustitias distinctas et inter se maxime distantes. Iustitia legis est terrena, de terrenis agit, per hanc facimus bona opera. Sed sicut terra non profert fructus, nisi prius irrigata et foecundata e coelo (Terra enim non potest iudicare, renovare et regere coelum, sed epona coelum iudicat, renovat, regit, et foecundat terram, ut faciat quod Dominus iussit), ita per iustitiam legis multa faciendo nihil facimus et implendo legem non implemus, nisi prius sine nostro opere et merito iustificati simus per iustitiam christianam nihil pertinentem ad iustitiam legis seu ad iustitiam terrenam et activam. Ista autem est iustitia coelestis et passiva quam non habemus, sed e coelo accipimus, non facimus, sed fide apprehendimus, per quam ascendimus supra omnes leges et opera" (WA 40.1, 46, 19-30).
teaching in the *Commentary on Galatians* so clear; and the failure of the contributors to the Finnish volume to bring out the significance of these and then to use them as Luther did, as the framework for understanding the relationship between Christ’s righteousness and ours, is one of the major flaws in this collection. The obvious question is: if participation in Christ in a manner akin to theosis is so crucial to Luther, why is there no major prolegomenal discussion of this in the preface to Galatians, and why is there so much discussion of these other distinctions?

Given this, the fact that Luther uses dramatically realist language to describe the presence of Christ at various points in the commentary does not require in any way an ontological reading à la Orthodoxy. Indeed, we know from elsewhere in Luther’s writings that even the real presence of Christ does not require such an understanding: take, for example, the Lord’s Supper, where Luther stresses the real presence of Christ yet where there is a deep sense in which the presence in the elements leaves the substance of those elements unchanged: they remain bread and wine even when Christ is really, sacramentally joined to them. Indeed, the whole point is that the real presence of Christ in the elements does not lead to anything approaching a divinization of the bread and the wine. Thus, to move from language which speaks of the real presence of Christ by faith in the believer to an understanding of salvation based upon some notion of transforming divinization or theosis is thus a not inconsiderable leap and needs to be established on foundations of a contextual reading of the said language in the narrower context of the Luther texts within which it occurs and the wider theological and historical context of Luther’s own life and work.

If one can object first, to the decontextual reading of the notion of gift, and, second, to the imputation of ontological significance to the passage where such is not required, my third objection is that the passage occurs in the heart of a section dealing precisely with imputation. In the previous paragraph, a Christian is defined as not being someone who feels no sin but someone to whom God does not impute sin because of faith in Christ and to whom Christ’s righteousness is itself imputed, as a basis for justification and for the subsequent Christian life. Then, the following paragraphs make it clear that kind of righteousness possessed by the believer through faith in Christ is absolutely discontinuous with any notion of intrinsic justifying righteousness, congruent or condign. To describe the presence of Christ using ontological terminology is perhaps not incorrect, since Christ is indeed really present for Luther; however, it is somewhat confusing, since this ontological presence is specifically understood in terms of its effects with reference to imputation and declaration, not first and foremost of deification. Once more, had the important distinctions between active and passive righteousness and earthly and heavenly realms been

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25 “Definimus ergo hunc esse Christianum, non qui non habet aut non sentit peccatum, sed cui illud a Deo propter fidem in Christum non imputatur. Ista doctrina afferit firmum consolationem consentias in veris pavoribus. Ideoque non frustra tam saepe et tanta diligentia inculcamus remissionem peccatorum et imputationem justitiae propter Christum” (WA 40.1, 235, 15-19).

26 WA 40.1, 236, 17-238, 19.
noted, Luther’s meaning would have been clear. Moreover, as I shall argue below, the role of the two realms, the two righteousnesses, and imputation here surely means that the kind of disjunction between Luther and the Lutheran confessions on this issue, if it exists at all, is really fairly small.

Of course, the Finnish Circle might well respond that imputation, like union with Christ, is not a given and may well have a variety of meanings which would allow for significant differences between, say, Luther and Melanchthon, to be hidden or obscured by apparent verbal similarities. Yet again, it is worthwhile noting that the historical evidence again points clearly towards substantial identity between the two men on this issue, despite attempts as far back as the Reformation, and, more recently and most notably by Holl and his followers, to drive a substantial wedge between them on the issue of justification.

A useful summary of the relationship between Luther and Melanchthon, theological and otherwise, and the history of the interpretation of that relationship by later scholars, is provided in an important article by Timothy Wengert. In this, he points to the dependence of Luther upon Melanchthon on numerous issues, but, most significantly for the Finnish Circle, he also draws attention to a crucial letter from Melanchthon to Johannes Brenz, dated 12 May 1531. In this letter, Melanchthon lays out his forensic (in foro conscientiae) understanding of justification in contrast to Brenz’s argument that it is the transforming or renewing work of the Holy Spirit that is the essence of the doctrine. In contrast to this, Melanchthon characteristically emphasizes the promise in Christ as the basis for a good conscience before God. Significantly, Luther adds a postscript to the letter in which, while offering a different emphasis to that of Melanchthon, one that focuses directly on Christ rather than on the promise, he yet makes the same point, implicitly affirming his colleague’s position while expressing himself in slightly different terms. The language is different, the emphases are different, but at no point does Luther even hint at any real tension between his view and that of Melanchthon. It is therefore clear that those who wish to drive a decisive wedge between Luther and Melanchthon, or between an alleged pristine view of justification as held by Luther and later alleged forensic perversion of the doctrine have some very difficult historical texts with which to deal.

My challenge to the Finns is: sure, imputation can be understood in a variety of ways, but, given the fact that Luther himself seems never to have had a major problem with Melanchthon’s understanding, on what basis can we legitimately read back into Luther’s use of words such as “imputation” any meaning which puts him at real

29 WA Br 6, 100, 25-29, 38-40.
30 WA Br 6, 100, 49-101. Luther’s opening remarks are particularly clear (49-55): “Et ego solo, mi Brenti, ut hanc melius capiam, sic imaginari, quasi nulla sit in corde meo qualitas, quae fides vel chartas vocetur, sed in loco ipsorum pono Iesum Christum, et dico: Haec est justitia mea, ipsa est qualitas et formalis (ut vocant) justitiae mea, ut sic me liberam et expediam ab intuitu legis et operum, imo et ab intuitu objectivi illius Christi, qui vel doctor vel donator intelligitur. Sed velo ipsum mihi esse donum vel doctrinam per se, ut omnino in ipso habeam.” Clearly, Luther sees his explanation as an alternative way of expressing the same doctrine as that offered by Melanchthon.
odds with his younger colleague.\textsuperscript{31} In this volume, there is plenty of blunt assertion that there is a disjunction between Luther and Melanchthon/the later confessional trajectories, and not a little subtle insinuation to the same effect; but critical discussion of the crucial texts that might prove or disprove such a case is conspicuous only by its complete absence.

One might also add at this point that even in the Wittenberg of Luther’s day, theological truth was not the preserve of one man who acted as unique source but was frequently the result of debate, public disputation, even conversations over good, German beer, and typical co-operation among colleagues. Indeed, it seems basic to the Finnish case that it is possible to isolate pure “Luther theology” from the wider theological trajectories at Wittenberg, which reached back into the Middle Ages and the early Fathers, drank deep at the wells of Renaissance Humanism, interacted with wider contemporary opponents on the right and the left, and pushed forward to the confessional codifications which culminated in the Book of Concord. Such a position is, frankly, absurd, and cuts no scholarly ice with historians of the epoch.

Elsewhere in the article, Mannermaa proceeds to quote a number of further passages from the Commentary on Galatians, again stressing the centrality of union with Christ and again arguing that these indicate a strong ontological understanding of salvation that divides Luther from later Lutheranism because of his refusal to separate justification and sanctification.\textsuperscript{32} This claim is highly problematic. It is quite clear that Luther works with a clear distinction between justification and what we might somewhat anachronistically call sanctification in the Commentary. For example, Luther explicitly makes imputation and the believer’s possession of present perfect righteousness before God the basis for the subsequent performance of good works. There is no confusion of justification and what would later be called sanctification here; in fact, the two are clearly distinguished and the one is theologically subordinated to the other, albeit they are considered to be inseparable. That Luther does not embody this distinction in a specific conceptual vocabulary is in itself of no substantial dogmatic significance as it is a linguistic commonplace that the possession of a concept is in no wise dependent upon the possession of a specific word for that concept.\textsuperscript{33}

When we compare all this to the confessional material, nothing that Luther says in the Commentary on Galatians puts him at loggerheads with the teaching of the Augsburg Confession, where justification is clearly the result of God reckoning the believer righteous on the basis of faith.\textsuperscript{34} Then, new obedience is seen to flow directly from this prior justification, while carefully distinguished from

\textsuperscript{31} Cf. Luther’s own appreciative attitude to Melanchthon’s exegesis of Romans: \textit{WA TR} 1, 139, 2-4; also Wengert, “Melanchthon and Luther,” 65-66.

\textsuperscript{32} “Justification and \textit{Thesis},” 36-39.

\textsuperscript{33} See \textit{WA} 40.1, 233, 25-234, 23. Mannermaa comes close to conceding the essentially verbal nature of the difference at one point but still does not allow this to disturb his dogmatic interpretation: see “Justification and \textit{Thesis},” 38.

\textsuperscript{34} Article 4: Concerning Justification, in \textit{Book of Concord} (ed. Kolb and Wengert), 38-41.
being either a basis, or a constitutive part, of righteousness before God. There is nothing "ontological" in any Eastern Orthodox sense of theosis in all this and, considering that the Augsburg Confession was composed during Luther's lifetime and enjoyed his full support, we would not, of course, expect to find major discontinuity between the thought of Luther and that of the confessional trajectory at this point. Furthermore, there seems to be little difference in real substance between the Augsburg Confession on these points and the Formula of Concord. It is true that the language of the Formula is more strident, more polemical—but this is explicable in terms of the changed ecclesiastical situation which required precisely such sharpening of language and definitions to maintain the legitimate trajectory of thought articulated by Luther in the *Commentary on Galatians* and made normative in the Augsburg Confession. Such an interpretation is entirely adequate and does not require the positing of fundamental discontinuity or breach in the tradition which Luther apparently did not notice but which other approaches find necessary. Further, all of these confessional statements, one might add, presuppose precisely the same concepts of the two righteousnesses and the two kingdoms which we find in the preface to the *Commentary on Galatians* but which we do not find in the Finnish volume.

**Conclusion**

This paper has been of necessity short, and many of the issues raised by the Finnish volume have not been touched upon. I can, however, summarize my preliminary criticisms in four points as follows:

1) **Disregard for Methods of Modern Luther Historiography.** The Finnish volume, while making great play of building its arguments on historical texts, takes no account of major trajectories and methodologies of modern Luther scholarship. The absence of reference to the work of Oberman, Steinmetz and company, with their frank and legitimate stress upon the need to read Luther's works against the backgrounds of the exegetical and theological traditions to which they relate, leaves the volume historiographically very weak. Ideas of righteousness, gift and favor do not originate in a vacuum, and understanding their historical, intellectual, and exegetical background must form a necessary part of understanding how and why Luther is or is not using them.

36 We might also add here the Schmalkaldic Articles, penned by Luther himself in 1537 and later incorporated into the Book of Concord. Again, these articles contain not a hint of the exposition of a specific ontology or of theosis as part of justification.
2) Inattention to the Hermeneutics of and Development in Luther’s Writings. The writers raise very legitimate questions about the hermeneutical framework imposed upon Luther's works by the Kantian and post-Kantian trajectories of Luther scholarship. They do not, however, raise the equally pressing problem of how the Luther canon should itself be read, and do not address the crucially important issue of historical development and the like within Luther's own body of work. Thus, citations from pre-Reformation and Reformation works are routinely juxtaposed and synthesized in a manner which begs a huge number of questions about the validity of the method employed and the theological claims being made. One might add here that the virtually presupposed disjunction between Luther and the confessional trajectory (a contentious claim in itself) serves merely to exacerbate this as a methodological issue.

3) Decontextualized Readings of Theosis. Examination of crucial texts in the Mannermaa article on theosis reveals a disturbing pattern of decontextual reading, and the emphasis upon participation combined with the failure throughout the volume to grasp the significance of the two righteousnesses and two kingdoms as basic elements of Luther's understanding of the Christian life leaves this reader at least unsatisfied that justice has really been done to the original theological content of the primary texts.

4) Implausible Distancing of Luther from the Lutheran Confessional Tradition. The disjunction that is driven between Luther and the confessional trajectory seems to require a distancing of Luther not only from the Formula of Concord but also from the Augsburg Confession. Such seems scarcely plausible, given Luther's stand towards the Augsburg Confession and, certainly, the evidence drawn from the 1535 Commentary on Galatians points in exactly the opposite direction to that which is claimed. If, as the Finns appear to want to do, one wishes to argue the inherently unlikely scenario that Luther's theology is closer to that of Gregory Palamas than to those confessions composed within his own lifetime by Wittenberg colleagues engaged in exactly the same theological debates, discussions, and projects as Luther, and with which he seems to have been quite satisfied, then the burden of proof must lie with the revisionists and not with the Reformation scholars. Why should we feel obliged to reinvent the wheel when it has not yet been demonstrated that the traditional design is seriously flawed? Indeed, there are numerous occasions in this volume when the references to the lectures on Romans and to the Dictata led me to wonder whether the Finns are actually opposing a pre-Reformation Luther to a Reformation Luther. If such is the case, they have done little more than prove what we all knew all along: that Luther changes his mind in some significant ways on some very important issues. Of course, they might like to claim that Luther did not in fact change his mind significantly between 1513 and 1531; however, then they have unfortunately (for them at least) to deal not simply with a mass of very carefully footnoted, thoroughly documented, and tightly argued secondary scholarship which refutes such an idea (and is conspicuous in this volume only by its wholesale absence) but even with the very words and actions of Luther himself.
This again brings us back to the problem with which I started: what if Luther in his early years writes things that contradict the confessions? Not even in Lutheranism do these writings have the status accorded to the mature works and the church's more strictly confessional material. An ecclesiastical ecumenism built upon a selective reading from the whole of the Luther corpus seems doomed to achieve very little in terms of actual theological rapprochement. To build a systematic case on a reading of Luther which flies in the face of the most basic canons of historical method (reading texts in context, not isolating quotations in a manner which effectively subverts their meaning) might appeal to the most postmodern of minds, but it should have no place at the table of reasoned ecumenism and honest, genuine, interconfessional dialogue.