

Introduction

Cardinal Ratzinger's interview, "Luther and the Unity of the Churches" (1983), is in the background here. This evening's talk, which is focused primarily on Joseph Ratzinger's theology, will (1) identify affinities between the theologies of R and L; (2) highlight nuances of difference between R and L; (3) point to some serious differences/ecumenical challenges between the positions of R and L; and (4) reflect briefly on R as an ecumenist in connection with the role he played *en route* to the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (1999).

(1) Ratzinger's Appreciation of Luther – Affinities between the Two

R and L are theologians driven by the urgency of the question of God. Personal encounter with the living God is acutely important for each; neither is a "desk theologian." The *character* of the theology of each theologian is similar, since each is permeated by a core insight about God and God's relationship with human beings. For L this insight is best expressed in the idea that human beings are *justified by faith alone*. For R it is best expressed in the idea that human beings are primarily *receivers*. There is much compatibility between these two viewpoints.

(2) Luther and Ratzinger: Nuances of Difference

J. Ratzinger wrote in 1964: *Das Beschenktsein bestimmt die ganze Struktur der christlichen Existenz* (The fact of being "gifted" determines the entire structure of Christian existence). Our efforts at love are so deficient that we must open our hands to let ourselves be "gifted" (*beschenkt*) from God's love-to-the-end in Christ (John 13:1). R speaks of the wretchedness of our action (*Armseligkeit unseres Tuns*) and of our questionable character. Thus while R does not remove love from the realm of faith when reflecting on justification, it is not our deficient love that is the decisive factor here, but rather faith, for it is faith that makes up the deficiency of our ever-inadequate love. It is faith, then, that really saves – and whatever love there is, this is saved by faith also. Thus R is very close to L's "justification by faith," but not so close that he expels love from the domain of faith entirely (recall L's *maledicta sit caritas!*). There is a nuance in R *vis-à-vis* the role accorded to love by L, because for L there can be no place for love in faith but for R there can be, once faith is given ultimate importance. R agrees with L that *works* play no role in the salvific process, but he does not secularize love to the point that it becomes synonymous with a work. In the end, R and L understand *love* differently but they are close in their estimate of our human condition before God and of our need of saving grace.

(3) Luther and Ratzinger: Genuine Differences (Ecumenical Challenges)

R identifies the "fundamental element" of L's theology as "personal assurance of salvation." For L, according to R, the personal faith by which alone – *sola fide* – I become certain that my salvation is assured is fundamental: I, who believe, am saved, and in that I believe, I am saved. Nothing can add to or guarantee this personal faith, which alone saves me. This "radical personalization of the act of faith" (thus R in relation to L), while understandable, he admits, in the ecclesial context of L's time, is unacceptable to R because it means that ultimately even the Church "must remain outside" faith and it "can neither assume the guarantee of certainty for one's personal salvation nor decide in a definitively binding manner about the content of faith" ("Luther and the Unity of the Churches," p. 113). Thus it is in the area of ecclesiology that the differences between R and L are greatest and I shed a little further light on that here.

(4) R's Decisive Role in regard to the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*

In a kind of "addendum," R's memorable role in "saving" the Declaration will be recalled – as a means of addressing the *quaestio disputata* as to how he should be assessed as an ecumenist.