

PAUL, ORIGEN AND MELANCHTHON ON JUSTIFICATION

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Abstract

Origen wrote the first great commentary on Romans, which had considerable influence in the Latin West. The subtle, multifaceted character of Origen’s exegesis has led to conflicting interpretations of his position, some seeing him as the first Pelagian, others as a witness to the *sola fide*. Melanchthon, in his lifelong preoccupation with Romans, attempted to come to grips with this slippery situation, praising Origen for some insights but criticizing him for betraying them in further developments. Revisiting this debate, with special attention to Romans 3.21-4.8, we attempt to grasp what is fundamentally at stake and to open a path to fruitful reading of Paul, Origen, the Reformers and the Council of Trent for today.

Introduction



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Philip Melanchthon (1497-1560) is one of the more sympathetic figures in the history of Christian doctrine. As the protégé and right-hand man of Martin Luther (1483-1546), he was a co-architect of the Reformation. A temperate, lucid and irenic spirit, he brought clarity of thought and expression to Luther’s insights, and Luther’s own later writings bear marks of the influence of his disciple. The relationship between two such diametrically opposed temperaments cannot have been an easy one. Each respected charisms in the other that he felt to be lacking in himself. Melanchthon lacked Luther’s visceral sense of sin and grace, his eloquence, passion and decisiveness, and his popular touch. Yet he had an ‘administrative flair’ (Grane, 108) that Luther lacked, which in addition to his theological vision became very necessary to the internally

divided Protestant community from 1525 on. Deeply respectful of established authority, both academic and political, and coolly rational in his approach to burning questions, he infused the Protestant movement with a pallid hue, a modern sobriety, contrasting with the vitality and abundance of Luther's explosive personality, which was a product of the medieval world.

Unlike Luther, Melanchthon did not become involved in every dog-fight and abstained from personal abuse. Even in the *Loci Communes* of 1521, whose 'coarse' language he later regretted, when he denounces theologians whom he considers to have distorted the Gospel as sophists, insane, etc., this rhetoric is hardly more than a formal theological style. His moderation exposed him to attack from all parties. A poem found by his deathbed expresses his longing for heaven, where he will know at last the true relation between the human and divine natures of Christ and where he will be released from 'the furies of the theologians'. On the other hand, he could be steely when it came to theological essentials: with Luther he took a hard line at the Marburg Colloquy of 1529; he approved of Calvin's execution of Servetus for Trinitarian heresy; and he advised German princes to crush theological disagreements by force.

Nevertheless, Melanchthon was the most ecumenical of the Reformers, placing Luther's doctrine in its broadest theological horizons, and conscious that all the confessions were united in the biblical faith that was beginning to come under attack from nascent modernity. In an age of sectarian polemic, this made him seem shallow, uncertain and too quick to compromise. Now, after centuries of mistrust and neglect, he has emerged from under Luther's shadow as the most promising bridge between Catholicism and Lutheranism. Interestingly, perhaps the first Catholic theologian to recognize in Melanchthon 'a man we can do business with' was Joseph Ratzinger in his seminars on the *Augsburg Confession* and *De potestate et primatu Papae* in Freising (1958-9, 1960-1) and Bonn (1962-3) (Wiedenhofer, 72).

Melanchthon was not ordained (hence the lack of sermons in his output) and, even more surprisingly, he was not a doctor of theology or a professor of theology. As a Master in the faculty of arts at Wittenberg he was expected to pursue studies in one of the higher

faculties, and he acquired a Bachelor's degree in biblical theology in 1519. This obliged him to lecture on theology from October 1519, but after lecturing on Matthew, Romans, I-II Corinthians and John, he withdrew from teaching theology in March 1523, pleading his unripeness for the responsibilities involved. He felt that his personal spiritual experience was too insignificant, especially as compared with Luther's. He resisted immense pressure from Luther, who wanted him to become a professor in the Faculty of Theology. He protested that his services as a teacher of humane letters would be of substantial benefit to theologians. He was intent on countering the desire of Wittenberg students to study the controversial questions of the hour about the nature of salvation without first acquiring a grounding in logic and classical grammar (Scheible, 373). He did resume his biblical lectures in 1526, but his major efforts were devoted to the ethics, psychology and physics of Aristotle (Scheible, 374). This educational investment may have seemed a divagation to the more excitable theologians of the time, but it added to the Reformation a precious ballast. Put into practice in preaching, catechesis, theological and philosophical study in churches, schools and universities throughout Europe, it was to give Protestantism its greatest strength. If the Lutheran church was built *by* men like Melanchthon it was built *on* men like Desiderius Erasmus (d. 1536), the prince of humanist scholars, to whom Melanchthon owed a lifetime debt though increasingly divided from him theologically (see Grane, 125). It is noteworthy that Melanchthon's textbooks, like those of Erasmus, were used by the Jesuits, too, with the author's name omitted.

If theology is to remain fruitful and sane, it must be placed in the larger perspective of the humanities, and for this purpose some theologians must step aside from exclusive concentration on the discipline in order to explore the wider context of human and religious questioning that calls for the theological response. This must be done without a constant ulterior purpose of reducing the other disciplines to theological terms. The autonomy of other paths of learning must be respected, with a readiness to put theology in its place as one voice among others. Calvin, though a keen humanist, 'consciously absorbed humanism in his theological system' (Faber, 25), a subordination of culture to faith that Melanchthon resisted. Melanchthon was a university man, a protagonist in the

humanist transformation of Wittenberg University, whereas there was no institution of higher learning in Geneva until 1559 when the Genevan Academy offered a reduced humanistic curriculum with a view to preparing students for the ministry (Maag, 63).

That wide and free humanistic horizon is what gives Melanchthon's specifically theological writings their well-aimed, functional quality. 'His freedom from theology is the mark of the later Melanchthon' (Maurer 2.423). 'Melanchthon's flight from theology... is a retreat into "secularity", a retreat first made possible indeed by the Reformation, but which produced the type of the scholar who is interested in theology and at the same time criticizes it. Melanchthon was after Erasmus the first representative of this type' (2.424). These statements could lead one to underestimate the degree to which Melanchthon's theological writings are governed by a profound ecclesial conviction, enacted in forty-two years of service of the Reformation. His critical and secular aspect was not in conflict with his religious concern, as a thoroughly 'godly' man, who sought to live not a happy life but a righteous one, as he faced trials and disappointments in his domestic life (his marriage was not particularly happy, though he was at a loss after his wife's death, not many years before his own), in his situation in Wittenberg (where he often felt isolated and frustrated, though refusing all offers to teach elsewhere), and in his health (he was sickly and prone to insomnia). Everything he writes about the guilt of the sinner before God's law and the consolation of the Gospel promises has an authentic ring. The tone of his writings is one of moral gravity and their central concern is human sinfulness. But they are not depressing, for he constantly holds out the invitation to confide in a gracious God who forgives our sins in Christ and accepts our imperfect obedience. This is theology with a heartbeat, as Maurer himself stresses (2.115).

Melanchthon's religious experience was not as rich as Luther's, and was therefore easier to cast in a regular and orderly pattern, centered on the lucid differentiation of the roles of Law and Gospel. The vast flood of Luther's writings, which he often dashed off to the printer without even rereading what he had written (Friedenthal, 258), threatened to drown his central insight. Luther enacts a constantly mobile response to the Word of God, whether as judging the sinner (the *opus alienum Dei*; cf. Is. 28:21) or as

conferring forgiveness of sins (the *opus proprium Dei*). The drama of this dialectic engages the reader intensely. But to state Luther's theological principles in a clear and coherent way is no easy matter. Without Melanchthon's clarity the Reformation teaching of *sola fide*, *sola gratia*, *sola scriptura* would not have been capable of enduring transmission.

The systematic logical coherence of his position does not mean that it has lost its bearings in the experience of being addressed by the Word of God. Though Melanchthon's hearing of the Word is not as lively or varied as Luther's, his account of justifying faith refers to a series of existential events. It begins from the position of the human being confronted by the Law and brought to a consciousness of radical sinfulness and of the anger of God. Then comes the encounter with the consolation of the Gospel, which is not something we find within ourselves but something *extra nos*, conveyed to us by the preaching of the Word, and embraced in an act of trusting faith. All genuine theological knowledge is rooted in the experience of these events. In the introduction to the *Loci* Melanchthon expressed this as a principle of theological method, in what is perhaps his only famous utterance: 'To know Christ is to know his benefits' (*Hoc est Christum cognoscere, beneficia eius cognoscere*). It is because of this event-centeredness that Melanchthon is often invoked by those who would overcome metaphysical abstraction in Christian theology (Ritschl, Harnack, Bultmann).

Perhaps the lack of a teaching role allowed his theology to remain narrow, focussing on the essentials of the Pauline Gospel, as he revised his *Loci* and Commentaries from edition to edition. A parallel could be drawn with the labors of Athanasius in the fourth century. What the doctrine of Christ's divinity as enunciated at Nicea was to Athanasius, the Pauline doctrine of justification was enunciated by Luther was to Melanchthon. For both theologians Christianity stood or fell by the single doctrine to which they devoted their career. Both are just short of obsessive in their constant harping on their theme, yet both remain serene, rational and eloquent as they patiently put forth their arguments again and again.

Melanchthon enlarged the scope of the *Loci* as he came increasingly to see that the *beneficia Christi* could not be set forth without a solid doctrine of the Trinity and creation. Although he is sometimes blamed for giving Lutheranism a rigid, dogmatic cast, and losing the mobile dialectic of Luther's responses to the biblical Word, his constant revisions reveal an intellectual flexibility that perhaps further strengthened the durable identity of his church. They suggest that he was constantly seeking to make the grounds of faith as secure as possible, but their inevitable effect was to introduce the appearance of wavering and uncertainty. Rather alarmingly, Melanchthon brought out revised versions even of the Augsburg Confession, and is said to have drawn from Luther the protest: 'Philip, Philip, you do not do well to alter the *Confessio Augustana* so often; for it is not yours but the Church's book' (Barth, 44); though Luther also thought that the Confession was too bland and soft-spoken, as did Calvin (Barth, 14). Whereas in the Calvinist tradition Confessions were seen only as local and provisional witnesses to the faith, the Lutheran Confessions followed the model of the early Councils and claimed a universal and perpetual binding authority. Some theologians such as Hutter (d. 1616) and Hollaz (d. 1713) could even describe them as *theopneustoi*, divinely inspired (see *BSLK* 840; Barth, 5-11). As the author of the Augsburg Confession, Melanchthon no doubt knew that it was a product of rational reflection and diplomatic phrasing, perfectly capable of being improved. He also wrote the Saxon Confession 1551, the Wuerttemberg Confession 1552, and other lucid syntheses of doctrine, well suited for guiding catechesis.

Whereas Erasmus was enthralled by Origen of Alexandria (c. 185-254), Luther and Melanchthon swore by Augustine (354-430), whom Erasmus set lower than Jerome (331-420), the patron of disinterested exegetical inquiry, which again must be pursued in an autonomous way, not subjected at every turn to dogmatic theology. Luther and Melanchthon retrieved Augustine's polemic against Pelagius (c. 350-418), giving it a sharper and more dramatic cast. Where Augustine had insisted on the power and necessity of grace with a tendency to regard it as a quality infused into the soul, Luther and Melanchthon presented a series of events in which the human subject is caught up: first we are condemned by the Law, which reveals our sinfulness, and then we are

acquitted by the Gospel, which invites us to embrace Christ in faith and to be clothed with his righteousness. Grace, as Melanchthon learned from Erasmus, is simply God's favour (*favor*) to sinners (see Schäfer 1997); it is the action of divine forgiveness, which is also a revelation of 'the righteousness of God' (Rom. 1:17). The sanctification of the sinner, never complete in this life, is an effect that follows on the initial act of justification and that is not to be confused with it. The beginning of sanctification that follows on justification is so imperfect that it throws us back again and again on our initial situation of depending utterly on Christ's word, 'Thy sins are forgiven', for our justification.

I cannot pretend to trace the complex web of the relationships between Paul, Origen, Augustine, Erasmus, Luther, and Melanchthon, each of whom in his own right presents many puzzles to the interpreter. I cannot even offer an exhaustive account of Melanchthon's relation to Origen, but only an initial exploration, based on sporadic study of Origen over the years and more recent acquaintance with the following texts of Melanchthon: *Loci Communes* 1521 and 1559 (*StA* II), the Augsburg Confession and its *Apologia* (*BSLK*), the 1527 *Scholia on Colossians* (*StA* IV), the *Commentary on Romans* (1532, *StA* V; 1540 and 1556, *CR* 15). Unless otherwise indicated I quote the 1540 edition, which contains the most references to Origen. For Origen's *Commentary* I give chapter and line references to Caroline Hammond Bammel's handsome three-volume edition of the Rufinus translation, page references to Thomas Scheck's English translation [= *S*], column references to Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* XIV [= *M*], and for the Greek fragments, page references to Theresia Heither's edition [= *H*, VI].

Erasmus



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Origen comes closest to the Reformation problematic in his *Commentary on Romans*, which is extant in an abridged Latin translation by Rufinus (with some fragments of the original and a substantial segment found at Tura in 1943). (For the wider context in Origen's soteriology and doctrine of grace, see O'Leary 2003.) Following Paul's argument, Origen tackles the theme of justification otherwise absent from his writings. But his Christocentrism tends to rob Origen's account of grace and justification of the almost legal preciseness sought by Melanchthon, who had to battle against the insidious anxieties and blind spots

of the medieval Church. Stressing that Christ is our righteousness, Origen sees justification by faith as simply the reception of Christ by believers. The character of Origen's exegesis is well summed up by Robert Morgan:

Clement and Origen interpreted Paul within the framework of their Christian Platonism, minimizing his ambivalence about the Jewish law and understanding his teaching on predestination (Rom. 9) as divine foreknowledge. Origen's commentary (c. 247), exercised a huge influence over subsequent writers East and West. In his exegesis of Romans 5 he moved away from his earlier speculation on the fall and closer to later Western debate on original sin, but in general his Paul is the spiritual man rather than the justified sinner, and he owes more to Romans 8 than to chs. 5-7. He sees that 3.28 implies 'faith alone', but does not see this as antithetical to moral or religious practice. Origen is not a Lutheran. (Morgan, 134)

One needs only to add that Origen's Platonizing vision has a concrete Christological content. The 'spiritual man' possesses Christ, and in Christ salvation and righteousness, a righteousness surely 'inherent' rather than 'imputed' (see *S* 1.37). Whatever the defects in his grasp of Paul, and whatever further loss of contour occurs in the Rufinus translation, Origen nonetheless engaged the Pauline problematic more closely than any before him and with such address that his views, as relayed by Rufinus, became an unavoidable reference, in praise or in blame, on both sides of the Pelagian controversy and its later sequels.

Erasmus sought to repristinate some aspects of Origen's thought on redemption for the sixteenth century, but with no success at the time. In the next century Origen did find favour among some Anglicans and Jesuits, moderates on the issue of grace, while radicals such as Jansenius (1585-1638) continued to see him as the worst enemy of grace and his writings as the fountainhead of Pelagianism. The chief sources for Erasmus's Origenizing soteriology are the five editions of his *Annotations on Romans* (1516, 1519, 1522, 1527, and 1535) and the three books of his *De Libero Arbitrio* comprising the *Diatribes* (1524) in defence of the freedom of human choice and the *Hyperaspistes* or 'Shield of the Diatribes' (1526-7), his lengthy, unanswered reply to Luther's *De Servo Arbitrio* (1525). Mainly concerned with establishing the text, the *Annotations* engage in a dialogue with a number of Fathers, which expands from edition to edition. Erasmus often follows Origen's *Commentary on Romans*, though he sometimes chides Origen for his tendency to 'philosophize' the biblical text: 'In these commentaries, you will find certain things interspersed here and there, though somewhat obscurely, concerning the salvation of the devil (in the third chapter), concerning souls that sinned before they were born, and many other things of this kind' (Erasmus, 250). Erasmus deplores the inadequacy of Rufinus's version of Origen's commentary, which he attributes to Jerome in the first four editions: 'From Origen, however, it is not so easy to gather what his view was, for he is, of himself, slippery in argument, [and is so] especially since we have him translated freely with many things added, removed, or changed' (Erasmus, 142). However, comparison of Rufinus with the various Greek fragments has led to a higher appreciation of Rufinus's work among

scholars (see Verfaillie, 13-19; Roukema 1988:13). He rearranges and abridges, but remains true to the thought of Origen, which he presents in an attractive and readable form, ensuring its warm reception in the Latin Middle Ages and the sixteenth century.

Origen and Erasmus agree on an exegetical point that was unwelcome to Augustinian thinkers. Erasmus was the first Western exegete to point out that the *eph'hô* in Romans 5:12 does not mean 'in whom all had sinned' but 'in that all had sinned'. He notes that when Origen says that 'the death which had come to him from the transgression consequently passed through to them as well, who were dwelling in his loins' (V, 1.201-3; S 1.311; M 1010) he is not talking of original sin inherited by infants but is 'showing why the blessed Paul makes neither the devil nor Eve the author of sin' (Erasmus, 143), and the continuation of Origen's text shows he is thinking of human imitation of the sin of Adam. Origen argues, in a way Erasmus finds 'forced', that 'sin was passed down only in the world, that is, to those of a worldly spirit' (see V, 1.215-32; M 1010). This is echoed by Pelagius, in a text ascribed to Jerome: 'it passed to all those who lived in a human way, rather than divine... to all those who transgressed the natural law... They sinned through the example of Adam' (Erasmus, 142).

Erasmus notes a suppressed discussion of pre-existence lurking behind the words: 'A further question you should consider for yourself is: From where did sin enter this world?... Was it prior to him to whom it is said... "for this reason I cast you to the earth" (Ezek. 28:17). But it is not safe for us to discuss these things further...' (V, 1.237-43; S 313; M 1011; Erasmus, 143, 156). (Similar allusions are found in V, 2.150-4; M 1025 and V, 4.30-2; M 1029; see Verfaillie, 26.)

Erasmus himself believes that Romans 5 is not about original sin, since all the sins mentioned in Romans 1-4 are personal sins (Erasmus, 144). He follows Origen in seeing Rom. 5:12, 15 as referring not to original sin but to a sin of imitation. Sin is transmitted less by generation than by bad teaching; hence Christ's regeneration comes with good teaching: 'They are not prodded into the death of sin so much by nature as by instruction' (*non tam natura urgentur in mortem peccati quam disciplina*) (V, 2.115; S 1.332; M 1024); the one who 'is enabled to receive Christ's grace... leaves behind

Adam who had begotten or taught him unto death, and he follows Christ, who teaches him and gives birth to him unto life' (*capax Christi gratiae effici potest, et ibi relinquit Adam qui eum vel genuit vel docuit in mortem et sequitur Christum qui eum et docet et gignit in vitam*) (V, 2.120-3; S 1.333; M 1024). Origen stresses that sin reigns with the consent of free will, which has surrendered itself to its bondage (V, 3.22-7; M 1026); the loss of the freedom not to sin seems to be freely incurred by each individual soul rather than being imposed by the sin of Adam (see III, 3.47-59; M 938-9). However, 'in this very development, the idea of a state of sin, independently of every personal fault, is not at all absent from his mind, though relegated to the second level' (Verfaillie, 27). The double remedy of Christ – baptism and teaching – heals the double dimension of sin, as affecting our nature and as transmitted by imitation (V, 2.124-37; M 1024). Nonetheless, 'in seeking to explain all the passages of the Epistle in function of human freedom, Origen lends to St. Paul his own preoccupations. These even lead him to seek meanings manifestly contrary to those of the Epistle' (Verfaillie, 37).

Origen states that not all who commit sins, but only 'many' (Rom 5:19), are sinners in the full sense; it is one thing to sin, another to be a sinner (V, 5.18-44; M 1030). Origen further dilutes the Pauline vision of universal sinfulness by talking of degrees of sinfulness and of justification. 'No one does good' (Rom 3:12) is taken to mean that no one completely succeeds in accomplishing the good (III, 2 [2-5].232-52; M 934), or that we perform a shadow of good in obeying the Law, which is a shadow of future goods (*ComPs* 52:2; cf. Heb 8:5; 10:1; *ComRm* V, 1.600-43; M 1020-1). 'The humanism he acquired from his Hellenistic formation prevents Origen from reading in Saint Paul the radical corruption of human nature, without however closing his eyes to our misery' (Verfaillie, 39).

Erasmus seems comfortable with such ideas and with Origen's tendency to restrict Pauline polemic against the Law to the ceremonial laws of Judaism. Of course he is very happy with Origen's defence of free will, which can lead Origen to assert human freedom even in commenting on the most 'predestinarian' sounding passages of Paul such as Rom. 11: 'Each becomes either a good or a wild olive tree by the power of choice... he has the freedom of his will in himself by which he can be converted to the

good' (*Sic ergo unusquisque ex arbitrii potestate aut bona oliva aut oleaster efficitur... habet enim in se arbitrii sui libertatem qua converti possit ad bonum*) (*ComRm VIII, 10.75-6, 86-7; S 2.178; M 1192-3*).

Faced with the polymorphous subtlety and open-endedness of the theologizing of Erasmus and of his ancient soulmate Origen, Luther and Melancthon were obliged to ascribe to these theologians a set of fixed positions that could be attacked. Up to 1521 Luther's references to Origen were not hostile (Dechow, 742-3). His reply to Jerome Emser in March 1521 accuses Origen of relying too much on unnecessary spiritual meanings of the scriptural text while letting the necessary literal meaning go. Luther's most intensive engagement with Origen was in response to the *Diatribes*, in which we find Erasmus 'casting bits and pieces of an ancient Origen into the contemporary fray, without appreciably advancing the Origenian arguments or applying them with precision to the biblical questions Luther raised' (Dechow, 747). This is a temptation of the theologian with pretensions to scholarship, especially where Origen is concerned. Origen can often sound like an enlightened liberal theologian (in his Christology, for instance), suitable for sharing with contemporaries, but the huge gulf between his Ante-Nicene world and ours means that the grafting of his thought onto contemporary problems runs the risk of opportunism. Erasmus took up Origen's view that 'it is not God's purpose to harden, but he acts with kindly intent, and the hardening follows as a result of the substance of evil present in the particular evil person, so that God is said to harden him who is already hardened' (*PArch III, 1.10*). In *De Servo Arbitrio* Luther rejects this: 'God is said to harden when he indulges sinners with his forbearance... Why, then, does God not say, "I will have mercy on Pharaoh" instead of "I will harden Pharaoh's heart"' (*WA 18.704*). Erasmus came back to this debate in his response, but nonetheless he made some Lutheranizing changes in the 1527 edition of his *Annotations*. As to Luther, he consigned Origen to irrelevance, occasionally growling at a caricature of Origen in his table talk. Erasmus met the same fate. The characterization of Erasmus as a skeptic and a slippery eel dispensed Luther from following his scholarly scruples and nuances. Only those with a strong and clear theological thesis had a right to be heard in the great debate.

Melanchthon on Origen



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In his earliest university lectures, on Matthew (1519-20), Melanchthon cites Origen in dependence on Erasmus, but pits Origen's asceticism against Erasmus's idea of Christian perfection (Maurer 2.108-9). Meanwhile Melanchthon deprecates Origenian allegorizing as early as 1520 (Meijering, 74) and opens the *Loci Communes* (1521) with an attack on him: 'Remove from Origen the inconsistent allegories and the forest of philosophical sentences, and little will remain' (*Ex Origene si tollas inconcinneas allegorias et philosophicarum sententiarum silvam, quantum erit reliquum*) (*StA* II, 4). In 1531 we find Melanchthon accepting the charges brought against Origen by the heresiologist Epiphanius of Salamis (d. 403) (*CR* 12.1015-16) – again a convenient way of disposing of a slippery theological eel. Melanchthon was far less familiar than Erasmus with the Fathers. Indeed his lack of patristic learning was a source of unease among the followers of Luther. His review of the merits and demerits of the Fathers in *De Ecclesia et de autoritate verbi Dei* (1539), republished in the second edition of the *Commentary on Romans* (1540), is scanty enough. Here his judgment on Origen is a balanced one. His views on justification are given a mixed review, and he is cited as a witness to such doctrines as the Trinity and to infant baptism (also in *Loci Communes* 1559 [*StA* II, 514] and *Confessio Saxonica* [*StA* VI, 127]). An incorrect reference to *ComRm* VI instead of V (*M* 1047) is seen by Meijering as 'a not unusual carelessness' (Meijering, 76).

Melanchthon's earliest study of Romans is found in the *Theologica Institutio in Epistolam Pauli ad Romanos*, a manuscript of 1519 used as the basis of lectures in 1520, and referred to in the dedicatory letter of the 1521 *Loci Communes*. It shows a great debt to Erasmus, his 1516 *Annotations* and 1517 *Paraphrases*. 'Melanchthon learned simultaneously from Erasmus and Luther to see faith and justification as the

theme of theology; and it is not yet clear in early summer 1519 from which of them he had received the most' (Maurer 2.105). Romans provides the substance of the *Loci Communes*. 'To concentrate the content of Romans on some central concepts (*loci*), as Melanchthon did, was something completely outside the field of vision of the biblical humanist' (Maurer 2.105), nor did Erasmus work out a comprehensive argumentative and rhetorical structure of the Pauline text as Melanchthon did so painstakingly. The most comprehensive framework Erasmus finds in Paul is a quite Origenian and Platonist one: 'the polar tension between inner and outer, spiritual and bodily' (Maurer 2.106). Without naming Erasmus, Melanchthon contradicts him on two basic points: the Law in Paul is the moral law, never merely the Jewish ceremonial code; Pauline faith is not a historical opinion about Christ but the *fiducia* or trust that justifies the sinner (Maurer 2.106).

Melanchthon would not have been familiar with Luther's work on Romans, dating from before his arrival in Wittenberg. It was in studying Romans through the eyes of Augustine, especially the latter's *De Spiritu et Littera*, that Luther attained a new vision of the Gospel as consisting in the forgiveness of sins. He first expounded this vision in his lectures on Romans of 1515-1516, where we can see his positions in the process of being formed. This work was lost for four centuries, and was first published in 1908. This much-discussed commentary sparked the twentieth-century renewal of Luther studies and is sometimes seen as one of Luther's three major theological works, alongside *De Servo Arbitrio* (1525) and the great *Commentary on Galatians* (1531).

Luther published Melanchthon's *Annotations on Romans* in 1522 without the author's permission, as part of his campaign to have Melanchthon resume the role of teaching theology. In his preface, Luther contrasts Melanchthon's commentary with the *meras nugas et ineptias* of Origen and Jerome (WA 10.2:310). Luther himself did not return to the exegesis of Romans, leaving this to Melanchthon. Like the 1521 *Loci*, these *Annotations* strike the Lutheran notes from the start: the wrath of God, the uncleanness of the heart, *fides eriget et consolatur perterrefactas mentes* (CR 15.441-2). The 1532 *Commentary* is intended to replace the *Annotations*, which Melanchthon disowned despite Luther's praise. This commentary, in its three editions, was much

more popular in the sixteenth century than that of Calvin, greatly admired by exegetes today. Calvin gives detailed, scholarly exegesis, whereas Melancthon focusses on the theological questions raised by the Pauline text, the same questions as are dealt with in the *Loci*.

The 1540 edition states as follows the *argumentum* of Romans: ‘It contains the supreme and specific topics of Christian doctrine, discerning Gospel from Law and philosophy, and showing the benefits of Christ, the gratuitous remission of sins, liberation from eternal death, the imputation of righteousness, the gift of the Holy Spirit and eternal life’ (*Continet enim praecipuos et proprios locos doctrinae Christianae, discernit Evangelium a Lege et a Philosophia, monstrat beneficia Christi, remissionem peccatorum gratuitam, liberationem a morte aeterna, imputationem iusticiae, donationem Spiritus sancti et vitae aeternae*) (CR 15.495). Vestigia of its teaching are found in the following Fathers: Ambrose [including Ps. Ambrosius, and perhaps also the Pauline commentator now known as Ambrosiaster], Basil, Augustine, Gregory [the Great], and Bernard. In the 1556 edition Prosper and Tauler are added, Gregory dropped (CR 15.803). The conscience of pious Christians attests that ‘we obtain the remission of sins and the imputation of righteousness not through our good deeds or through the law, but freely through Christ, and by faith, that is, by trust in the promised mercy through Christ’ (*nos non propter nostra bene facta, non propter legem, sed gratis propter Christum consequi remissionem peccatorum et imputationem iusticiae, fide, id est, fiducia promissae misericordiae propter Christum*) (CR 15.495). If these truths are lost there is no ‘secure consolation of consciences’ (*firma consolatio conscientiarum*) (CR 15.496).

This reading involves no distortion of Paul, contrary to those who reduce Paul’s message to the common sense of moral philosophers: ‘They proudly mock what we say of original sin, recalling us to philosophy; and in sum they imagine righteousness before God, or what God’s law demands, to be nothing other than that discipline with which philosophy is content. Pelagius professed this view, but its seeds are scattered in the commentaries of Origen’ (*Superbe derident ea quae de peccato origines dicimus, revocant nos ad philosophiam: Et in summa, non aliud imaginantur esse iusticiam*

coram Deo, aut quam lex Dei postulat, nisi illam ipsam disciplinam, qua contenta est philosophia. Hanc opinionem Pelagius professus est, sed semina sparsa sunt in commentariis Origenis) (CR 15.496). Pelagius is the arch-heretic, but the ultimate seeds of the evil can be found in Origen.

The identification of divinely demanded righteousness with the demands of natural law as discerned by philosophy seems at first sight to be an innocuous idea, one that goes back to Origen's precursor Philo of Alexandria, who found the moral teachings of the philosophers in a more perfect form in the Torah. Melanchthon sees it as a teaching that flatters the natural man: 'And since it is an opinion agreeing with the judgment of human reason, which knows not the terrors and the true consolation in penitence, humans easily embrace this plausible account' (*Et cum sit opinio consentanea iudicio rationis humanae, quae non est experta vero pavores et consolationem veram in poenitentia, facile homines haec pithana amplectuntur*) (CR 15.496). The idea that the content of the Torah is the same as that of natural law seems to imply for Melanchthon that observance of the Torah can be attained by natural efforts and that righteousness is obtained by works, *quaerendam esse iusticiam per opera legis* (CR 15.497). But the logical connection of the three ideas is not apparent. Fallen nature may be incapable of fulfilling the natural law without the aid of grace. However, Melanchthon believes that in practice the identification of God's law with the law of nature as discerned by philosophical reason leads to a whittling down of the law's demands and a confidence that humans can fulfill the law unaided.

After an attack on Origen's idea that justifying faith is a synecdoche for all the other virtues – to which we shall return – Melanchthon discusses justification (499-513), grace (513-4), faith (514-21), and good works, the always imperfect obedience shown by the justified sinner (521-37), with a number of glances at Origen. Origen had an unclear grasp of what the Law requires: perfect holiness, which means that none can meet its demands. 'To this crowd belong Origen and his followers, who see only the veiled face of Moses, since they teach only a carnal righteousness' (*Maneant in hac turba et Origines et caeteri qui eum sequuntur, et velatam Mosi faciem intueantur, cum non aliam iusticiam, nisi carnalem doceant*) (CR 15.500). Limited by human reason,

they can neither experience the recognition of sin and the wrath of God, revealed by the Law, nor understand the consolation of the Gospel, the promise of the benefits of Christ. There is irony in the allusion to 2 Cor. 3:13-16, the very text that Origen cites again and again as the charter of his allegorical exegesis.

In the corresponding discussion in 1556 of justification (CR 15.799-812), with notes on the terms law (812-3), sin (813-4), grace (814), justification (814-5) and faith (815-6), we have this reference to Origen: ‘strong arguments to refute corruptions, whether Origenian or recent’ (*firma argumenta ad refutandas corruptelas, seu Origenicas seu recentes*) (CR 15.807). These general discussions are close to those in the *Loci* of 1535, reproduced with only minor changes in the editions of 1543 and 1559. Here again Origen is an implicit target: ‘they make light of the sin in nature, and think that the Law of God requires only discipline. Hence they imagine that nothing distinguishes philosophical from Christian righteousness’ (*extenuant peccatum in natura, cogitant Lege Dei tantum requiri disciplinam. Deinde imaginantur nihil interesse inter Philosophicam et Christianam iustitiam*) (StA II, 353). He is named explicitly as well:

But when the Gospel proclaims this understanding of Law and the recognition of sin, many, inflated with the presumption of wisdom, think that these are Stoic hyperboles, which can be dismissed. Since discipline is in itself sufficiently difficult, they contend that nothing more is required, and that such diligence merits remission of sins and is righteousness before God. To these human imaginations did Origen and the monks twist the teaching of Paul. (*Sed cum de hoc intellectu Legis et de agnitione peccati concionatur Evangelium, putant multi tumentes persuasione sapientiae has esse hyperbolas Stoicas, quibus nihil opus sit. Sed cum disciplina per sese satis difficilis res est, contendunt nihil amplius requiri et hanc qualemcunque diligentiam mereri remissionem peccatorum et esse iustitiam coram Deo, et ad has humanas imaginationes Origenes et Monachi male detorserunt Paulum.*) (StA II, 357)

There is again more than a touch of caricature here. It was convenient to erect Origen as a puffed-up intellectual, insensitive to the urgency of the Gospel and content with a lazy lip-service to its demands. Inauthentic and insincere, the Alexandrian had lost the

biblical sense of faith as *fiducia*. He is contrasted with good theologians who had a sound faith, though they may have expressed it clumsily: ‘I say that later many writers, such as Origen and others, passed on another, inauthentic kind of doctrine, but some more learned had the same view as us, even if these too sometimes spoke more suitably, sometimes less’ (*Fateor autem postea plerosque scriptores, ut Origenem et alios, tradidisse aliud genus doctrinae et insincerum, sed aliqui eruditiores nobiscum revera sentiunt, etsi hi quoque alias commodius alias incommodius loquuntur*) (StA II, 367). The 1540 commentary lists these *eruditiores* as Augustine, Chrysostom, Bernard (CR 15.519-20). The Reformation needed a perspicuous account of church history, with clearly identifiable heroes and villains. Origen was of more service as a villain than as a hero, though Melanchthon will pick out one or two statements from him that might almost have served as a passport to the camp of the heroes.

Against Origen’s Platonism

Luther was sensitive to a disparity between the Gospel and the massive importation of Greek metaphysics into Christian theology, notably in Pseudo-Dionysius, whom he denounced as ‘Platonizing rather than Christianizing’ (WA 6.562), and in the scholastics, who failed to see that the ethics of Aristotle is ‘the worst enemy of grace’ and who believed that ‘without Aristotle one cannot become a theologian’, whereas in reality ‘one cannot become a theologian unless one does so without Aristotle’, for ‘all of Aristotle is to theology what darkness is to light’ (WA 1.226). Melanchthon gave a historical cast to these insights, pointing out that Christian doctrine was adulterated by Platonic philosophy immediately after the beginnings of the Church (*Loci* 1521, I 6). He taught Luther to see ‘the time of the truth-and-error mixture between the apostles and Augustine’s alleged return to the apostolic sources’ as what he calls (in 1548) the *aetas Origenica* (CR 11:786).

In his *Commentary on Romans* Melanchthon criticizes Origen’s Platonist outlook, sometimes ascribing to him Platonizing exegeses that he does not in fact give. Commenting on the word ‘slave’ in Rom. 1:1, Origen wrote: ‘He serves Christ, then, not in a spirit of slavery but in the Spirit of adoption because being a slave of Christ is

more distinguished than any freedom' (*ComRm* I, 3 [1].12-14; *S* 1.60; *M* 837-8). He went on to ask: 'Who is able to obtain such complete freedom that he no longer serves the flesh in any respect whatsoever?' (I, 3 [1].61-3; *S* 1.62; *M* 840). Melanchthon finds an inappropriate interiorizing twist in this: 'This rhetoric about the servitude and freedom of conscience is untimely, for Paul is not speaking here about private servitude or freedom of conscience but about his office' (*hic intempestive rhetoricatur de servitute et libertate conscientiae, cum Paulus hic non loquatur de privata servitute aut libertate conscientiae, sed de officio*) (*StA* V, 57). From the start, it is implied, Origen misses the scope of the Pauline text as a formal, coherent exposition of the core Christian teaching. In 1540 Melanchthon rewrites his criticism inaccurately: 'Origen here ineptly rhetoricizes about liberation from ceremonies' (*Origenes hic inepte rhetoricatur de liberatione a ceremoniis*) (*CR* 15.547-8). There is no such discussion in Origen.

Origen tends to conceive faith as an interior, invisible disposition: 'faith is in secret yet works are openly visible' (*ComRm* IV, 1.42; *S* 1.238; *M* 960). His preoccupation with the contrast of letter and Spirit, sensible and intelligible occasionally distracts him from Paul's argument, as when he interprets 'the flesh' in Rom 8:3 as a reference to literalism (VI, 12.24-6; *S* 2.48; *M* 1094, criticized by Melanchthon, *CR* 15.750). Faced with such a text as Rom. 7.14, 'the law is spiritual', Origen was bound to invoke his habitual theme of the contrast between a carnal, literal understanding of the Old Testament and a spiritual, allegorical one: 'This statement applies well to the law of Moses. For that law is a spiritual law and a life-giving Spirit for those who understand it spiritually. But the one who understands it in a fleshly way recalls it as a law of the letter and a letter that kills' (VI, 9.41-4; *S* 2.37; *M* 1085). Taking 'law' to refer here not to the natural law but to the written law of Moses, he stresses that it must be spiritually understood, which involves an allegorical or typological reading. The existential significance of the law as a call to perfect holiness is missed. Melanchthon correctly criticizes this: 'The interpretation of Origen and others who think that "spiritual" signifies the same things as "allegorical" is alien to what Paul says here' (*Aliena est igitur ab hoc dicto Pauli interpretatio Origenis, et similibus, qui spirituale putant*

significare idem quod allegoricum). But his own interpretation is rather flat: ‘The law is spiritual, that is, not merely political, but requiring spiritual and perfect obedience’ (*Lex est spiritualis, id est, non tantum politica, sed requirens spiritualem et perfectam obedientiam*) (CR 15.650). Paul does not oppose ‘spiritual’ to external and civil law, but to ‘the flesh’ that is hostile to the demand of holiness.

Origen reads 7:15, ‘I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate’ as referring to the losing battle between the natural law and the passions in one who is not yet spiritual and whose will is not yet strong enough that he can resolve to fight unto death (VI, 9.70-3; S 2.38; M 1086). He reads Rom. 7 in a gradualist sense, as describing the inner contradictions of the still imperfect Christian. He does not capture the drama of the total impotence of the sinner unless released by grace. Paul, in Origen’s reading, portrayed the inner struggle in order to show ‘from how many evils and from how many kinds of death Christ has rescued us’ (VI, 9.186-7; S 2.42; M 1089). The Apostle was not speaking in his own person but empathetically portraying the situation of the sinner. One who would see Paul as referring to himself ‘smites every soul with hopelessness. For there would then be absolutely no one who does not sin in the flesh’ (VI, 10.10-13; S 2.44; M 1091). Origen stresses the achievement of moral perfection, grasped in Platonic terms as triumph over carnal desires, rather at the expense of ongoing dependence on grace. Melancthon, who considers the persistence of concupiscence even in the baptized as a condition of sin, which cannot be removed in this life, writes: ‘This whole passage teaches what the corruption of nature is... Some elude this, pretending that Paul is speaking here not in his own person, not about the converted and holy, but about the ungodly. This quibble must be rejected. Just as David speaks of himself and all the saints when he says “no living person is justified in your sight”’ (*Hic totus locus declarat, qualis sit corruptio naturae... Haec eludunt aliqui, et fingunt Paulum hic loqui, non de sua persona, non de conversis et sanctis, sed de impiis. Haec cavillatio repudianda est. Ut enim David de se et de omnibus sanctis loquitur, cum ait: Non iustificabitur in conspectu tuo omnis vivens*) (CR 15.651). That this is directed against Origen is confirmed by the reference to David, cited by Origen as an example of a saint speaking in the person of sinners, though he quotes a different text from the

Psalms (*ComRm* VI, 9.188-96; *S* 2.42; *M* 1089-90). Melanchthon embraces the very view that Origen thinks would lead us to despair, that even the saints are not free of carnal sin: ‘concupiscence is a sin by its nature even in the saints, but is overlooked in those who devoutly believe’ (*quod concupiscentia etiam in sanctis sit peccatum sua natura, sed piis credentibus condonatur*) (*CR* 15.652). Origen does not want to recognize this sinfulness, thereby being numbered among those of whom Melanchthon writes: ‘These inner sins the complacent and ungodly do not see; hence they make light of original sin and concupiscence’ (*haec peccata interiora non cernunt securi et impii, ideo extenuant peccatum originale et concupiscentiam*) (*CR* 15.652). The situation of the Christian is that of a sinner who constantly relies on divine pardon, not of one who is free of sin and needs divine pardon no longer. Origen is again the target in the following: ‘we must reprehend the false imagination of those who claim that Paul is assuming the foreign persona of the ungodly in this place and who deny that the struggle here described fits the person of the converted and sanctified, as if in the sanctified no traces of sin remained’ (*hic reprehendenda est falsa imaginatio illorum, qui fingunt Paulum assumere alienam personam impii in hoc loco, et negant hoc certamen, quod hic describitur, convenire in personam conversi et sanctificati: quasi in sanctificatis nullae sint reliquiae peccati*) (*CR* 15.652-3).

The phrase ‘I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self’ (Rom 7:22) means more than the mind’s approbation of the natural law: ‘in the ungodly, though there be some knowledge of the law, yet it is not that willing or delighting in the law of God that is spoken of here. For these words, “I delight in the law of God”, are not to be understood in a cold way’ (*in impiis etiamsi est noticia aliqua legis, tamen non est illud velle, aut delectari lege Dei, de quo hic loquitur. Non enim frigide intelligenda sunt haec verba: Delector lege Dei*) (*CR* 15.653). The one who understands these words coldly is again Origen: ‘The person portrayed is not completely estranged from good things but he has begun, at any rate, to seek the good with purpose and will, yet has not yet been able to attain it in reality and deeds’ (VI, 9.92-5; *S* 2.39; *M* 1087). Such a mild way of talking about sin is abhorrent to Melanchthon. The image of the sinner progressing towards perfection in a continuous manner, rather than recognizing his incapacity for

accomplishing the good and his need to rely on divine forgiveness, is redolent of paganism to Melanchthon's sense. Even if applied to the progress of the justified sinner in producing good works, its tone would be insufficiently marked by fear and trust, *timor et fiducia*. Certainly, Melanchthon, and Augustine before him, make us sense a certain superficiality in Origen's bland attitude to the Christian's moral struggle: 'To be sure he both reflects to himself and decides, for example, that he should not become angry, and he resolves this in his will; but since the vice of wrath has been dominant in him due to continuous practice and long-standing habit, it opposes even the will and purpose, and a violent outburst of rage results' (VI, 9.97-102; *S* 2.39; *M* 1087). Origen has ascetic earnestness, but lacks tragic vision. The *interior homo* who delights in the law, as Melanchthon points out, is not the Platonic soul of Origen's interpretation but 'signifies man insofar as he is renewed by the Holy Spirit, that is, insofar as he has true fear and true trust. Likewise, "mind" does not signify merely our knowing part, but both our knowing and desiring part insofar as it is renewed by the Holy Spirit' (*significat hominem, quatenus renovatus est Spiritu sancto, hoc est, quatenus habet verum timorem et veram fiduciam. Ita et mens non significat hic tantum partem cognoscentem, sed utramque partem, cognoscentem et appetentem, quatenus renovata et Spiritu sancto*) (*CR* 15.653). Likewise the external man is not the flesh only but 'even the higher potencies, reason and will, insofar as they are not renewed' (*etiam potentias superiores, rationem et voluntatem, quatenus non sunt renovati*) (*CR* 15.654). Origen tends to cherish a cocoon of Platonic spiritual interiority, whereas Lutheran salvation is *extra nos*, in Christ, and throws the whole person into a relationship to Christ and the Spirit that cannot be mapped in Platonic terms. The Platonic map leaves the individual the master of the inner sphere and identifies externality with unreality. The Pauline message dislodges us from that inner sanctum and takes us out of ourselves into a world of living relationships.

On Rom. 12:1, Melanchthon remarks: 'Origin frigidly refers this passage to chastity alone, whereas Paul wants us to subject every kind of affect in our whole life and to embrace all good works and all trials to be borne in our confession' (*Origenes frigide interpretatus hunc Pauli locum de sola castitate, cum Paulus hic voluerit nos subicere*

omnibus affectuum generibus in tota vita et complecti omnia opera bona et omnes aerumnas in confessione perferendas) (StA V, 293). Origen says of ‘reasonable service’ (or ‘rational worship’; *logikê latreia*) of God that ‘it should be offered with the body of a rational human being and your bodies, rather than those of animals, should become a sacrifice of God and be placed upon the sacred altars’; this is done by ‘those who put to death their own members from the incentive of lust and rage’ (IX, 1.28-9; S 2.192; M 1203). Though he sees virginity as the model of such a spiritual sacrifice he agrees that those who are married can also make their bodies a living sacrifice (IX, 1.74-81; S 2.194; M 1205). He does refer to the other virtues and good works, as he talks of overcoming pride, greed, deceptive thoughts and words, but it is true that an overriding concern with chastity narrows the Pauline vision. This focus on preservation of purity may chime with the Platonist sense of inviolate interiority opposed to diminishing exteriority. Moreover, where Melanchthon stresses the total, existential character of the divine claim, Origen speaks of virtues and vices in a somewhat more extrinsic manner. Melanchthon objects to Origen’s definition of ‘rational worship’ by contrast with animal sacrifices; it should rather be contrasted with worship that does not understand God, i.e., that is ‘without fear of God and without faith in mercy. The “rational service” is a service of the mind, which knows or discerns God through the Word, that is, which has fear and is built up by faith’ (*sine timore Dei et sine fide misericordiae. Est enim ‘rationalis cultus’ cultus mentis, quae Deum intelligit seu cernit per verbum, h. e. quae habet timorem et fide erigitur*) (StA V, 295). But Origen’s flat reading may be closer to the sense of the Greek word *logikê*. In this parenetic section of the letter, Paul was hardly thinking of justification and the dialectic of *timor* and *fides*, which would not be aptly described as *logikos*.

In reconnecting with Paul, Luther and Melanchthon shook Christian piety out of its Platonic slumbers. Though Origen is the most foundational figure in Christian Platonism, it would be unfair to say of him, as Luther said of Pseudo-Dionysius, that he ‘Platonizes rather than Christianizes’. He operates a thorough conversion of Platonist material into biblical terms and his writing can be seen to some extent as overcoming Platonism. Nonetheless, the Reformation vision disrupts any complacent reception of

Origen, and obliges us to practice a critical discrimination between the Platonist and biblical elements in his thought. That critical revision is still proceeding, slowly, in the world of Origenian scholarship.

He foists this on Origen's text in his 1532 comment on Rom. 5:1: 'Origen corrupted the reading and transformed the doctrine of the Gospel into law in his way: "Justified by faith, let us have peace." And here "peace" is interpreted as referring to the offices of benevolence towards human being, as if Paul were concerned here with nothing else than transmitting precepts on behavior. But it is clear that Paul is still speaking of faith and the conscience acting before God' (*Origenes corrumpit lectionem et transformavit evangelii doctrinam in legem hoc modo: 'Iustificati fide pacem habeamus'. Et hic 'pacem' interpretatus est de officiis dilectionis erga homines, quasi nihil hic agat aliud Paulus, nisi ut praecepta de moribus tradat. Sed constat Paulum adhuc de fide contionari et de conscientia agente cum Deo*) (*StA V*, 156). In 1540 he says that we have peace with God through faith and not in reason of our obedience: 'Origen twists this passage to refer to peace toward men and the offices of charity, and corrupts the reading. We have peace, that is, let us be of peaceable behavior towards others' (*Origenes detorquet hunc locum ad pacem erga homines, et ad officia dilectionis, et depravat lectionem. Pacem habemus, id est, simus placidis moribus erga alios*) (*CR* 15.611). Origen then would seem to have lacked all sense of Christ's benefit in putting the sinner at peace with God. Here Melanchthon is captious and inaccurate. Origen's text had *echômen* ('let us have') not *echomen* ('we have'), so his reading of the verse as a parenthetic injunction is understandable. The same is true of all the Fathers with the exception of Ambrosiaster. Nor does the parenthesis begin with talk of peace with one another, but rather with putting an end to our hostility to God; the interpretation followed by most of the Fathers (see Schelke, 151-2). Moreover, the ethical lesson comes from a sense of the blessing of peace that justification by faith brings: 'He is very openly inviting the one who has grasped what it means to be justified by faith and not by works to "the peace of God which surpasses all understanding" [Phil. 4:7], in which the sum of perfection consists' (*IV*, 8.5-8; *S* 1.279; *M* 988). Origen delights in this peace of conscience, and he immediately refers it to Christ's work of changing us

from enemies of God into friends: ‘We who were once God’s enemies by following that enemy and tyrant, the devil, now most assuredly have peace with God, if we have thrown down the devil’s arms and have taken up the sign of Christ and the banner of the cross’ (IV, 8.11-14). The first parenetic point he makes is not that we should have peace with our neighbors but that we should abjure the ‘wisdom of the flesh’ (Rom. 8:7) that is hostile to God (both in the sense of our desires and in the sense of a carnal understanding of Scripture) (IV, 8.21-9; *M* 988-9). By turning back to sin we would undo Christ’s work of reconciliation (IV, 8.44-7; *S* 1.280; *M* 989). Only then does he say that if we are without dissension among ourselves we will have peace with God (IV, 8.51-2), an *obiter dictum* on which Melanchthon pounces. Origen says that the peace of Christians is experienced in the midst of an ongoing struggle against the devil (IV, 8.58-66; *S* 1.281; *M* 990); in contrast, one may find Melanchthon’s insistence that ‘it is necessary that there be in the pious terrors and penitence’ (*necesse est existere in piis terrores et poenitentiam*) (*CR* 15.612) rather morose; even when he says of afflictions that ‘they are not signs of the wrath of God but signs of God’s good will’ (*quod non sint signa irae Dei, sed signa bonae voluntatis Dei*) (*CR* 15.614) the focus on sin creates a sombre mood. Origen does continue in what sounds like a rather Pelagian vein, saying that we can enter by the gate of Christ that gives access to this grace only if we are truthful, righteous, humble, meek. Grace is earned by virtue, it seems: ‘If there is someone who... wants to have access through our Lord Jesus Christ to the grace of the Lord in which Paul and those who are like him claim to stand, he must be purged from all these things we have recorded above (IV, 8.82-6; *S* 1.282; *M* 990). But the meaning is that to stand in virtue, which entails standing in humility and in faith, is to stand in grace: ‘If there be another, who would work harder, who boasts in his weaknesses... and amidst all these things should stand constant in faith, he will likewise be said to stand in grace’ (IV, 8.96-100). Origen can be praised for having a concrete vision of grace here, derived from 2 Cor. 11:16-33.

Faith and Works (Romans 3:21-8)

(a) ‘Apart from the Law’

Commenting on the words *sine lege* in Romans 3:21, Melanchthon says in the 1556 commentary:

Origen becomes stuck here and cannot clarify the passage, as he debates about how the righteousness of the Gospel is shown without law. An error at the beginning produces many more later... Since Origen does not weigh how great a thing the law of God is, and how far this miserable nature is from that conformity with God which the law demands, and how great an evil sin is, and since he does not rightly discern law and Gospel, he falls into these delusions—that the Gospel is a new law, that the righteousness of the Gospel is the works commanded in the legal utterances, which are constantly recited by Christ and the apostles... Origen and many others effect a pernicious mutilation of the statement, “The righteousness of God is revealed apart from law”, taking Paul to refer not to the whole law but to be saying, “apart from law, namely, the ceremonial and judicial law” (*Haeret in hic loco Origenes, nec potest eluctari, disputans, quomodo iusticia Evangelii manifestata sit sine lege: sed error in principio parit deinde alios multos errores... Cum non consideret Origenes, quanta res sit lex Dei, quam procul absit haec misera natura ab illa conformitate cum Deo, de qua lex concionatur, et quantum malum sit peccatum, nec recte discernat legem et Evangelium, delabitur ad has hallucinationes, Evangelium esse novam legem, et iusticiam Evangelii esse opera, quae praecipuntur in dictis legalibus, quae passim recitantur a Christo et Apostolis... Origenes, et alii multi in dicto: Iusticia Dei revelata est sine lege, fecit perniciosam mutilationem: Sine lege, scilicet ceremoniali et iudicali, nec interpretatur Paulum de tota lege*). (CR 15.860-1; see also StA V 117)

In fact, Origen interprets *sine lege* as referring to natural law and contests the initial impression that it refers to the law of Moses (*non ad naturae sed ad Mosei legem referri*) (III, 4 [7].9; M 941). ‘Contrary to Paul’s meaning, *sine lege* [Rom. 3:21] according to him excludes only the natural law, for Christ was predicted and figured in the Old Testament’ (Verfaillie, 43, quoting III, 4 [7].117-22; M 944). Law is used in two senses in the Pauline verse: *sine lege* refers to the law of nature, *testificata a lege* to the law of Moses (an unlikely exegesis, to be sure). ‘What he is saying, then, is this: It is not the case that, just as the knowledge of sin comes through the law, so also the

disclosure of God's righteousness comes through law. But God's righteousness is disclosed apart from law. For the *law of nature* was able to reveal the nature of sin and bring to light the knowledge of sin; but the righteousness of God surpasses and rises above whatever the human mind can scrutinize by natural senses alone' (*ComRm* III, 4 [7].49-54; *S* 1.210; *M* 942). Melanchthon's accusation that Origen sowed the seeds of the Pelagian attitude, which contents itself with the kind of righteousness that philosophy teaches, is refuted by this emphasis on the unfathomable depth of divine righteousness which the law of nature is unable to manifest.

Only in the following phrase *testificata a lege et prophetis* does he see a reference to the law of Moses, pointing out that in the Greek the first 'law' has a definite article and the second does not (III, 4 [7].92-116; *S* 1.212-13; *M* 943-4). It appears that Melanchthon attributes to Origen the sort of error he imagines to be typical of him. This illustrates the pitfalls of a dismissive hermeneutics, which are particularly to be feared in dealing with an author as subtle and soft-spoken as Origen (or Erasmus). (In the 1532 commentary the error here denounced is not attributed to Origen. The notes in *StA* V, 117, 125 find it in Ambrosiaster, Jerome and Catholic adversaries, and Melanchthon may have misremembered its source.) The law of Moses, Origen adds, can indeed testify to divine righteousness – but only when it is spiritually read (by Christians) (III, 4 [7].104-6; *M* 944). That last twist is alien to Paul's reasoning here.

Origen's need to differentiate two meanings of law here is premised on the impossibility of divine righteousness being manifested apart from law if it is witness by the law; he does not have the dialectical idea that the weakness of the law or the bondage it reveals could itself be a testimony to a righteousness beyond law. The contrast of law and Gospel does not acquire the dialectical tightness it has in the Reformers, possibly because Origen is more scrupulous than Paul himself about the consistency of Paul's use of the term 'law' and so fails to impose a sweeping vision on this point.

In stating positively what the righteousness that is revealed consists in, Origen speaks of Christ as our righteousness (I Cor. 1:30), 'disclosed apart from the natural law, but

not apart from the law of Moses or the prophets' (III, 4 [7].121-2; S 213; M 944). This righteousness hardly consists in fulfilling a new set of precepts, as Melanchthon reports, unwisely following his hunch that Origen is just the kind of moralistic thinker who would be inclined to reduce the Gospel to a new law. To be sure, the Greek text says that Jesus is the teacher (*didaskalos*) of this righteousness of God (H VI, 94), which is rather inapposite here.

'Faith alone, apart from the law and the prophets, does not disclose the righteousness of God nor, on the other hand, do the law and the prophets disclose it apart from faith. Thus the one is rooted in the other so that perfection comes from both' (*neque fides sola sine lege et prophetis manifestat iustitiam Dei, neque rursus lex et profetae sine fide; alterum ergo haeret ex altero ut sit ex utroque perfectio*) (III, 4 [7].142-4; S 1.214; M 945). This does not make Mosaic precepts or natural law precepts a condition of justification, or put them on the same level as the Gospel. Rather, Origen is stressing in anti-Marcionite fashion that the Old Testament points to the New, and even includes the New when spiritually read in light of Christ. Nonetheless, this complementarity of faith and law is unacceptable to Melanchthon because it seems to put the two on the same level as contributions to salvation, which is not carefully enough distinguished from moral perfection. Perhaps this is what gives rise to his charge that Origen reduces Gospel to Law. Origen does tend to equate the Law *as spiritually understood* with the Gospel, but the letter of the Law, as well as natural law, are clearly distinguished from the Gospel. He gives them only a positive, preparatory role, not the negative role so important in the Lutheran dialectic of Law and Gospel. Or if the negative is stressed, it is that of the carnal understanding that cannot read the Law spiritually, according to the habitual Origenian schema. The Law is never allowed to be a hostile accuser; its detection of sin is the kind work of a physician, who is, however, unable to provide the healing (III, 3 [6].139-45; M 941 and III, 4 [7].43-53; M 942).

He defines gospel righteousness more precisely as follows: 'The righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ reaches to all who believe, whether they are Jews or Greeks. It justifies those who have been cleansed from their past crimes and makes them capable of receiving the glory of God; and it supplies this glory not for the sake of

their merits nor for the sake of works, but freely to those who believe' (III, 4 [7].154-8; *S* 1.215; *M* 945). While Origen speaks elsewhere of the Gospel as a new law, what he says here is quite close to Melanchthon. Using Origen as a foil in ideological polemic, Melanchthon has not bothered to look closely at Origen's text.

In failing to radically oppose the Gospel to the Law, Origen seemed to Melanchthon to reduce Gospel to Law. I think Scheck goes too far when he sees this attitude as a latter-day Marcionism of just the kind that Origen fought against. Wielding a theological sledge-hammer, he finds 'real and apparent similarities between certain Protestant theological formulae, especially those of Calvinism and Lutheranism, and the assertions of Gnostic and Marcionite exegesis' and denounces 'the Marcionite sympathies of some modern interpreters' of Origen (*S* 1.23-4). But certainly a dramatic contrast between Law and Gospel would have undercut Origen's project of establishing the theological harmony of the two covenants. Perhaps showing a tinge of the Marcionism denounced by Scheck, Verfaillie writes: 'He did not concern himself with adopting the point of view of the Apostle; the absolute impotence of the Law to justify man is not at the forefront of his thought... Origen feels the need to say that the Gospel was already in the Law' (42). Again, this underestimates the degree to which Origen articulates the impotence of the natural law and the law of Moses when read according to the letter.

(b) 'Without works'

'A human being is justified through faith; the works of the law contribute nothing to his being justified' (or: 'he to whose justification the works of the law contribute nothing is justified by faith'; *iustificatur homo per fidem cui ad iustificandum nihil conferunt opera legis*) (III, 6 [9].61-2; *S* 1.228; *M* 953). This is a clear statement of justification by faith alone, to which the works of the Law make no contribution. Attuned to Melanchthonian suspicion, we are inclined to ask: 'Where's the catch?' And indeed this statement seems to be qualified in the direction of *iustificatio ex operibus fidei* in the next sentence: 'But where there is not faith which justifies the believer, even if one possesses works from the law, nevertheless because they have not been built upon the foundation of faith, although they might appear to be good things, nevertheless they are

not able to justify the one doing them, because from them faith is absent, which is the sign of those who are justified by God' (III, 6 [9].62-7). The implication is that the works do justify when attended by faith.

Scheck incorrectly claims that Origen is referring throughout this section to the works of Jewish ceremonial law. If Origen confined the sense of 'justified through faith without works of the law' (Rom. 3:28) to the ceremonial Jewish law it would be an entirely unconvincing exegesis. But it is clear that Origen has well internalized the Pauline doctrine that we cannot boast of works, in the sense of any virtues whatsoever, and that he uses the phrase 'works of the law' in this sense (see III.6 [9], 61-114; *M* 953-5). At one point Origen blurs the issues somewhat: 'He says the "law of works" and the "law of faith". You who read should consider whether this expression ought to be applied to the law of Moses and the natural law, or to the law of the letter and the law of the Spirit' (III, 6 [9].109-11; *S* 1.229; *M* 955). This is criticized in Melanchthon's 1532 commentary: *Illud est ridiculum, quod quidam hic interpretantur 'legem operum' legem Mosi, 'legem fidei' legem naturae* (*StA* V, 118-19) and is perhaps the source of Melanchthon's impression that Origen confines 'without works' to the ceremonial laws.

Elsewhere Origen writes: 'The works that Paul repudiates and frequently criticizes are not the works of righteousness that are commanded in the law, but those in which those who keep the law according to the flesh boast; i.e., the circumcision of the flesh, the sacrificial rituals, the observance of Sabbaths or new moon festivals. These, then, and works of this nature are the ones on the basis of which he says that no one can be saved' (*ComRm* VIII, 6.111-14; *S* 2.159; *M* 1178). 'Works are so necessary in his eyes that he limits the *sine operibus* of Saint Paul to the ritual law. This implicitly safeguards moral works' (Verfaillie, 82). But the issue here is really more a matter of sanctification than justification. Origen is momentarily confused: Paul in fact never repudiates or criticizes works, including those of the ritual law, but only the pretention to be justified by works. Scheck claims that 'this passage also confirms that moral works are deemed by Origen as absolutely necessary for salvation' (*S* 1.42). Origen also stresses the need for works preparatory to justification except in the exceptional cases (Verfaillie, 83).

But these points do not necessarily conflict with the claim that works are irrelevant *in loco iustificationis*, that when it comes to our justification for God we have no ground for boasting of any works.

In 1556 the phrase *sine operibus* prompts an attack on the reading of ‘faith’ as a synecdoche (CR 15.880), directed here against Andreas Osiander (1498-1552), a more up-to-date and rewarding target than Origen. Osiander wanted justification to be something more than divine favour or forgiveness. He spoke of implanted rather than imputed righteousness and associated it with the indwelling Christ. Where Melancthon’s animus against Origen is often directed equally against Erasmus in the early editions, it is transferred to Osiander in the last edition.

Sola Fide is not a Synecdoche (Romans 4:1-8)

(a) Softening Pauline oppositions

Melancthon singles out Origen’s commentary on Romans 4:1-8 (*ComRm* IV, 1) for critical animadversions. Origen writes: ‘The Apostle clearly makes known that there are two kinds of justification, one of which he designates as by works and the other by faith’ (IV, 1.31-3; *S* 1.238; *M* 960). The *duo dikaiōseis* correspond to the ‘law of faith’ – which ‘excludes boasting’ – and the ‘law of works’ respectively (Rom. 3:27).

Abraham is justified by faith rather than by works (*ek pisteōs mallon edikaiōthē huper ex ergōn* [*H* VI, 118]), but the two kinds of justification are in contrast rather than in opposition, and others can be justified by works even if Abraham is not. However, this justification by works does not amount to salvation.

Only the justification by faith ‘has a boast before God’, who alone can see our ‘disposition of faith’. Origen does not entirely exclude that works justify us before God (vs. Beck, 110), though not in a way that allows us to boast: ‘it can come to pass for the person who hopes for the justification by works that his works may be approved by men as well’ (IV, 1.39-40; *S* 1.238; *M* 960). The ‘as well’ indicates that works win divine approval. This concern with divine reward for works is found earlier in the Commentary, though the reward does not include eternal life, for that cannot be gained

by works without faith in Christ (II, 5-7 [7].295-318; *M* 888). This attitude corresponds to his view that Paul upholds the value of Jewish law and Greek philosophy so as not to alienate these peoples from the Gospel.

Thus 'Origen softens the polarization in Rom. 4, because he senses that Abraham is being presented by Paul not so much in terms of a radical contrast (righteousness by faith vs. righteousness by works) but as a synthesizing and mediating figure' (Gorday, 207). But Paul sets up the idea of Abraham being justified by works as something to be refuted, and presents him not as a figure synthesizing two kinds of righteousness, but as an example of righteousness by faith alone. Origen's harmonizing disposition is the constant source of the missed insights in his commentary. One might say that the opposition of faith and works in Rom. 4:1-8 is a simplistic moment in Paul's polemic, and that Origen corrects local twists and turns of Paul's dialectic in the light of the full Pauline vision. But Origen's comprehensive understanding of Romans as proclaiming a *translatio religionis* from a regime of carnal types and shadows to one of spiritual truth, while it captures the social context of the epistle, missed by Melancthon, subjects the relation of the Testaments to a distorting Platonic paradigm. If this vision guides Origen whenever he smoothens out anfractuositities in the text, it is as productive of blindness as of insight.

(b) *A Platonic model of inwardness*

What distinguishes faith is that it wins approval from God alone (*apud solum deum*) (IV, 1.37-8; *M* 960) and not from others as well. This shift from the idea that *only* justification by faith allows one to have glory before God to the claim that it allows one to have glory before God *alone* is provided with a rational basis that further blurs the contours of the Pauline argument: God alone can see our 'disposition of faith', hidden in the heart.

Origen derives the contrast from Paul (Rom. 2:16, 28-9), but develops it according to a Platonic opposition of outer and inner. The quotation of Deut. 29:28 can be read in a Platonist sense too: 'The secret things belong to the Lord your God, but what is manifested is for you and your sons' (IV, 1.44-5; *S* 1.238; *M* 960). Justification by works is of a lower order than justification by faith. It is mediated by saints 'who receive

authority from God for passing judgment upon visible human works' or angels 'who are certainly able to glorify the one whose works they have approved' (IV, 1.51-5; S 1.239; M 961).

The contrast between God judging the inner heart and saints and angels being able to appraise only visible works pervades the commentary on this passage, superimposing on Paul's argument a Platonist horizon quite alien to it. Faith is characterized Platonically as an inner virtue, wherein lies its superiority to the externality of works is operative. Heither unconvincingly claims that 'Origen understands Paul from the Jewish way of thinking that sees no opposition between faith and works' (H II, 160-1). That would be a strange way for Origen to save Paul from himself, given that the opposition of faith and works is one of the keystones of the Pauline dialectic, especially at this point in Romans. In reality Origen understands the opposition in his habitual Platonistic style, missing Paul's point.

(c) Conflation of justification and sanctification

A commonsense objection to justification by faith alone blocks Origen's access to Paul here: faith cannot co-exist with unrighteousness. Origen alludes to 2 Cor 6:14 to stress this (also in IV, 7.71-83; S 1.275-6; M 985-6; cf. *ComJn* XIX 21; *HomLev* 12.3): 'Now you should not imagine that if someone has such faith, by which, having been justified, he may have a boast before God, that he would be able at the same time to have unrighteousness with it as well. For there is no common ground between faith and infidelity; there is no communion of righteousness with wickedness, just as light can have no fellowship with darkness' (IV, 1.63-7; S 1.239; M 961). The radical opposition of good and evil, life and death, excludes any dynamic of *simul iustus ac peccator*. Instead Origen makes elsewhere the rather unsatisfactory concession that most people are *nec iustus nec peccator* (*HomEx* 2.3) but something in between (*HomGen* 5.1; 3; *HomLev* 8.11). The same point is backed up by the claim in 1 John that to believe Jesus is the Christ is to be born of God and that the one born of God does not sin (IV, 1. 67-70; M 961). The harmonizing importation of Johannine Christology blurs Paul's

concern with faith as trust, *fiducia*. Paul attributes no Christological content to Abraham's faith, and Johannine sinlessness is also in tension with Paul.

'The proof of true faith is that sin is not being committed... For this reason then it is also said of Abraham in another passage of Scripture [James 2:21-2] that he was justified by the works of faith. For it is certain that he who truly believes works the work of faith and righteousness and of complete goodness and becomes capable of both kinds of boasting' (IV, 1.70-1, 74-5; S 1.239-40; M 961). Faith appears here as a quality added to one's works, like the wedding garment of the parable; it entitles one to a higher boast than mere works, so it can appear as an achievement (a work) or a higher order. The idea of faith as dependence on God's mercy is lost from view. Abraham is doubly justified: by the achievement of his perfect faith and, on a lower level, by the works done in the spirit of faith. But this celebration of his justification seems oblivious of the grim scenario of the wrath of God expounded in the earlier chapters of the epistle. Redemption is not something one basks in as a glorious attainment.

What Melancthon objects to is that Origen imports justification by works into a text designed to exclude it. Melancthon resolves the contradiction between James and Paul by admitting works only as a sequel on justifying faith, which play no role in justification itself. Origen resolves it by seeing Abraham's works as dependent on grace just as is the initial act of faith, itself interpreted as a commitment to works of righteousness.

Origen focuses less on the guilt of sin than on its bad effects (cf. Verfaillie, 55), and images justification as a process of house-cleaning wherein vices are replaced by virtues. Scheck (1277) praises the image of 'the soul's active participation in the process of justification' as a householder who receives from outside piety and all the virtues rather than vice (I, 21 [18].84-116; M 867-8). But justification is not an ascetic exercise. It is the forgiveness of sin, something in which the one forgiven cannot have an active role. We see how the conflation of justification and sanctification obscures the heart of redemption as the forgiveness of sins, the conferral of Christ's *aliena iustitia* on sinners with no claim to it. 'The negative aspect of justification is the remission of

past sins in which sin is put to flight and exterminated from our flesh' (Scheck, 1277, citing VI, 12.146-52; *M* 1097). In Protestant thinking our dependence on the remission of sins is a constant structure of the redeemed state; it is not just a precondition for the all-important ontological transformation (sanctification); the relational dependence of the sinner on the Savior is the core Christian experience that is easily lost from view in ascetic projects of sanctification and self-perfection. An exclusive focus on past sins (mentioned in Rom. 3:25) robs justification of its existential actuality throughout Christian life: 'The efficacy of saving faith, which Paul expressed in unqualified and all-embracing terms, appears in Origen, though in brief and restricted ways. Like most second- and third-century writers, Origen relates Paul's declaration of justifying faith to the forgiveness of past sins' (Williams, 655, referring to Wiles, 111-12).

Melanchthon would agree that good works follow on faith, but he would nonetheless insist that faith alone justifies and that justification owes nothing to works, despite the problem created by James 2:21. Origen tends to conflate the Pauline themes that Melanchthon disentangles and dramatically opposes. In Origen, the meritorious value of works is not in rivalry with faith, but is rooted in the grace of justification which it brings to fruition. Works are not disvalued in favour of faith: the works of pagans are rewarded even if they are condemned for their lack of faith, while the bad deeds of believers are punished (*ComRm* II, 7). Works express faith, and without them faith cannot be real. Justification tends to converge with sanctification and sanctification tends to converge with the practice of virtues. Faith itself tends to become a work. It may be that Paul himself does not consistently advance the clean divisions of Law and Gospel, the law of works and the law of faith, justification and sanctification, on which Melanchthon insists. Origen recalls Paul to his own harmonizing system, toning down the dramatic oppositions of Pauline rhetoric. Melanchthon parses Paul in terms of a dialectical system which forces consistency on those moments of dramatic rhetoric. The actual concrete horizon of Pauline thought, which can tolerate some unclarity and inconsistency in the use of terms like 'law', is imperfectly grasped by both theologians. Origen is more alert than Melanchthon to the social context of Paul's argumentation, its reference to the concrete problems of Jewish and Gentile communities, but he

simplifies Paul's thought in terms of a Platonizing opposition of flesh and spirit, shadows and truth; the Jews are trapped in the former and have not yet advanced to the latter.

'There are various degrees of being justified' (Scheck, 1278) since justification is conceived as the soul's acquisition of virtue (III, 2.[2-5].173-82; *M* 932). This places justification in the realm of the creature and occludes its absolute character as the gratuitous gift of forgiveness at every moment, a gift not received in greater or lesser degree. 'Faith is not a mere sentiment or mere trust but signifies a moral life' (Scheck, 1278). But trust in Christ's mercy is not a mere sentiment, and the liberation of forgiveness is not 'a moral life', though it may enable such. A condemned criminal might depend totally on the promise of a pardon, and might receive the pardon with joy; but the sentiments here are mere overflows of the objective situation. Premature stress on the need of good works undercuts the reality of the divine pardon and courts the danger of self-justification through works. To say that 'justification itself can be lost' (Scheck, 1278) suggests that justification is a quality that the soul possesses, rather than a relation of trusting dependence on the justifying Savior. Origen believes in meritorious good works, but they come 'after justification' (Verfaillie, 115); 'merit is the supreme fruit of justification' (Verfaillie); Scheck comes close to confusing merit and justification itself.

(d) What is faith?

Melanchthon accuses Origen of reducing faith to historical knowledge of Christ rather than saving trust. Faith is characterized in the Greek version as 'believing that Jesus is the Son of God' (*H* VI, 121) and 'believing in the one who raised Jesus the Lord from the dead' (*H* VI, 157). Rather than say that 'for our contemporary understanding too, this touches the core of Christian faith' (Beck, 107), I would note that this robust Christological faith may miss the understanding of faith that is most crucial for the Pauline argument, the sinner's existential trust (*fiducia*) in divine mercy *propter Christum*.

(e) *The synecdoche approach*

This leads to the reading of *sola fide* as a synecdoche. Abraham, says Origen, showed faith at many points in his career. All these partial acts of faith are summed up in and surpassed by his act of perfect faith that is reckoned to him as righteousness (IV, 1.123-4; *S* 1.241; *M* 963) – ‘the perfection of faith, collected together from many parts into one whole, which deserved to be reckoned as righteousness’ (IV, 1.140-1; *S* 1.242; *M* 963). This distinction between partial and complete faith introduces a new complication. Faith begins to look like a work that can be performed more or less well. It is quantifiable, for the complete faith is attained by gather all the partial acts of faith up into one heap. The Greek text points out that perfect faith comes from love, citing I Cor. 13; one cannot have the perfect faith that moves mountains (I Cor. 13.2) without having love (*H* VI, 122). Beck exaggerates the import of this: ‘Paul points clearly to the origin of faith in love. Love first enables faith’ (57-8). The faith that justifies is a moral change of outlook that comes before justification and earns it – in the sense of winning God’s favour: *Dikaioi oun ton asebe dia tês pisteôs metathemenon apo tês asebeias hôste logizesthai tèn metatheisan auton apo tês asebeias pistin eis dikaiosunên* (*H* VI, 126).

Paul’s quotation of Ps. 31:1-2 in Rom. 4:6-8 is read in this sense.

Origen makes things worse by suggesting that other virtues as well can be accounted as righteousness: someone’s mercy ‘could be reckoned for righteousness, or wisdom or knowledge or gentleness or humility’ (IV, 1.143-4; *S* 242; *M* 963). Melancthon protests against the idea that faith is merely a synecdoche for all the other virtues, which perfect faith contains (this is not explicitly stated by Origen). In the idea that the other virtues could equally play the justifying role he finds the ‘smoking gun’ that convicts Origen of Pelagianism. He sees Origen as losing the thread of the Pauline argument and even of his own:

In his commentary on Romans, dealing with this proposition: “We are justified by faith, not by works”, he understands it *kata synekdochen*: we are just by faith, that is, by perfect

faith embracing all virtues. He says the same can be said of the other virtues. We are just by mercy, namely perfect mercy embracing the other virtues. This is equivalent to saying that humans have the remission of sins and are just because of their own works and their own virtues. Inattentive to what Paul is aiming at, what he calls faith and what he intend by the exclusive locution “not by works” he adds confused and perplexed elaborations and is inconsistent with himself. (*In Rom. tractans hanc propositionem: Fide iustificamur, non ex operibus, intelligit eam kata synekdochen, fide sumus iusti, id est, perfecta fide complectente omnes virtutes. Idque declarat, dicit idem posse dici de caeteris virtutibus. Misericordia sumus iusti, scilicet perfecta, complectente caeteras virtutes. Hoc nihil aliud est dicere, quam homines propter opera et propter virtutes suas habere remissionem peccatorum et iustos esse. Cumque non attendat, quid agat Paulus, quid vocet fidem, quid sibi velit illa exclusiva: Non ex operibus, addit enarrationes confusas et perplexas, nec sibi constat.*) (CR 15.749)

The impression of confusion and inconsistency in Origen is borne out by our own reading of his text both in Rufinus’s translation and in the Greek of the Tura fragment.

The synecdoche is already criticized in 1532 (*StA V*, 128), though without naming Origen. In 1540, we read that Origen ‘shamefully distorts Paul’s speech, nor does he keep the original sense of the words. The statement of Paul, “We are justified by faith”, contains nothing against our side. They dissolve it by synecdoche and impose a completely alien interpretation: “By faith, that is, by historical knowledge, we are justified, that is, we are prepared for learning the commandments whereby we may later merit the imputation of righteousness”’ (*turpissime dilacerat Pauli orationem, nec retinet nativam verborum significationem. Nihil adversariis nostris significat haec oratio Pauli: Fide iustificamur. Excusant eam per synecdochen, et affingunt prorsus alienam interpretationem: Fide, id est, noticia historiae, iustificamur, id est, praeparatur, ut praecepta discamus, quibus postea mereamur imputationem iusticiae*) (CR 15.498).

A synecdoche is a figure of speech that names the part to signify the whole. If ‘faith’ is taken as a synecdoche for the whole life or faith or for the virtues that take faith as their foundation, then the doctrine of justification by faith alone is abolished. Melancthon

comes back to this: ‘Now we must reprehend the sophistry of Origen, the monks, and many others, who think that it is according to a synecdoche that we are said to be justified by faith, that is, we are righteous through historical knowledge of Christ, or through the profession and the other virtues, or through general obedience... Thus this synecdoche transforms Gospel into Law, transfers the glory of Christ to our virtues, abolishes the consolation of consciences and the true doctrine of faith, that is, trust in mercy’ (*Nunc reprehendenda est sophistica Origenis, Monachorum, et multorum aliorum, qui kata synekdochen dici arbitrantur: Fide iustificamur, id est, propter noticiam historiae de Christo, seu professionem et caeteras virtutes, seu universalem obedientiam sumus iusti... Ita haec synecdoche transformat Evangelium in legem, transfert gloriam Christi ad nostras virtutes, delet consolationem conscientiarum, abolet doctrinam veram de fide, id est, fiducia misericordiae*) (CR 15.520-1). He promises to refute copiously this view of ‘faith’ as a synecdoche for ‘faith and works’. It is on this point that he has his most significant debate with Origen and scores his most telling points.

In 1556: ‘They would have it that in the proposition “we are justified by faith” there is a synecdoche, that is, we are justified by faith and the other virtues, or we are prepared by faith that we may later be just by the other virtues’ (*volunt in hac propositione synecdochen esse, fide iustificamur, id est, fide et caeteris virtutibus iustificamur, seu fide praeparatur, ut postea aliis virtutibus iusti simus*) (CR 15.803).

(f) The good thief

However, when Origen says *dikaiosunên autô logizesthai chôris ergôn* (H VI, 126), he means only without the works that will be done and that must be done for the justification to be retained. Justification without works is a temporary, paradoxical situation, not the basic situation of the Christian, as it is for Paul.

Origen conflates justification and sanctification, and he conflates sanctification and works. But this works both ways – if he tends to make faith a work, he also gives works the graced character of faith. The link of faith with grace and works with due reward in Rom. 4:4 is taken as referring only to evil works. Good works are not in tension with

faith, but are rooted in the grace of justification which they bring to fruition. In Philonic vein, Origen points out that all our works are gifts of grace, and since God provides the capital he can hardly be asked to reward our works as of due (IV, 1.157-62; *M* 963-4). For Philo, even ordinary perception and thought are impossible unless God opens up the senses: 'it is God who showers conceptions on the mind and perceptions on sense, and what comes into being is no gift of any part of ourselves, but all are bestowed by him, through whom we too have been made' (*De Cherubim* 127; cf. Prov. 20:12).

Now the faith of the good thief is portrayed as a perfect work: 'Faith cannot be reckoned as righteousness to one who believes in part, but only to him who believes completely and perfectly', and if it justifies the ungodly it is only after he turns aside from ungodliness and in order that 'he would no longer be ungodly' (IV, 1.191-7; *S* 244; *M* 964). Here the distinction between partial and complete faith, introduced in connection with Abraham, is applied back to the good thief mentioned in Book III. The tendency to see faith itself as a good work is carried further by Chrysostom and Ambrosiaster (see Schelke, 129).

'Even in the case of the thief, both his faith and his works contributed to his justification. Initially he was justified by faith alone in the sense that Jesus freely forgave him his past crimes and demanded no antecedent works before this first justification. But his faith was effective in the just works of publicly confessing the Lordship of Christ and rebuking the other thief who was blaspheming, and therefore, having been liberated by divine grace, this robber deserved to be justified' (Scheck, 1281, citing V, 9.83-90; *S*. 1.364; *M* 1045). The main point of that reference is that root of righteousness acquired by faith in God who justifies the sinner is acceptable to God even without the works that normally spring from it. The good thief's confession of faith (without works) associates him to Christ, the tree of life. However, as Scheck urges, this is not a forensic righteousness that is clearly differentiated from the sanctification that follows on it. Justification is a process, which begins with the act of faith in the one who justifies. Justification, conflated with sanctification, is complete only when moral perfection is attained, and is never complete in this life (cf. III, 2 [2-5].185-6; *S* 1.194-5; *M* 932).

Here we have a theory of double justification – the initial forgiveness is followed by a superior justification earned by good works as well as faith; just this is what the Reformation rejected. Verfaillie, quoted here by Scheck, is closer to the Reformers: ‘This meritorious character of our works has its source in the grace of justification and brings its concept to completion. Freed from the death of sin, the Christian soul is united to Christ, who gives it a new life and, by that very token, the means of bearing fruits pleasing to God’ (117). Sanctification here is seen as the ripe fruit of justification, not as its replacement.

Paul cites Ps. 32:1-2 in Rom. 4:7-8 as showing that ‘righteousness is reckoned to a person apart from works’ (IV, 1.205-6; *S* 1.244; *M* 965). Origen spells out Paul’s logic: ‘Either righteousness or unrighteousness must dwell in a person who has cognizance, through being old enough to distinguish good and evil. If this is so, no soul can be found without one of the two dwelling in it; and it is certain that if that [soul] should desist from evil, it would then be found in the good. But that soul is not in evil “whose iniquities are forgiven...” It is therefore logical that it is in the good’ (IV, 1.207-14; *S* 1.245; *M* 965) There is no room here for any *simul iustus et peccator*, nor is the righteousness of the justified sinner grasped as an external righteousness, a righteousness granted by Christ rather than possessed by the soul as its own. As Maurice Wiles writes, ‘Faith in Christ does not need to be supplemented by the virtuous life; it *is* the adoption of the virtues. Thus the connection between faith and works is a logically necessary one’ (114, cited, Scheck, 1281). Again from the Reformation standpoint this is a confusion between justification and sanctification. ‘Origen conceives justification to be an effective sanctification in which sin is expelled and grace is established in the believer’s soul’ (Scheck, 1282).

(g) A tolerable statement

But then Origen makes a statement that comes close to the heart of the Protestant vision of Paul and that Melanchthon singles out as *tolerabile dictum*, even if *id postea mox corrumpit* (*CR* 15.749 = *CR* 23.611):

The Apostle fittingly says that only on the basis that he believes in him who justifies the ungodly, righteousness would be reckoned to a man, even if he has not yet produced works of righteousness. For faith which believes in the one who justifies is the beginning of being justified by God. And this faith, when it has been justified, is firmly embedded in the soil of the soul like a root that has received rain, so that when it begins to be cultivated by God's law, branches arise from it, which bring forth the fruit of works. The root of righteousness, therefore, does not grow out of the works, but rather the fruit of works grows out of the root of righteousness, that root, of course, of righteousness which God also credits even apart from works. (IV, 1.214-24; S 1.245; M 965)

This lucid text momentarily unites Paul, Origen, Melanchthon, Catholicism and Protestantism in a blessed accord (see Schelke, 128; S 1.45). 'Faith obtains the righteousness out of which works emerge; and this relationship is not reversible' (Heither, 235; quoted, Scheck, 1280). But if the passage were a straightforward expression of *sola fide*, Melanchthon would not have called it merely 'tolerable'. The phrase, 'when it has been justified' (*cum iustificata fuerit*) could be seen as undercutting the sufficiency of faith: it needs to be justified as well.

Scheck reduces the impact of the passage by reading it in light of less penetrating ones: 'It seems to me clear in other texts that good works *can* effect reconciliation with God, and that not all faith is capable of doing so, nor is faith *alone* capable of doing so, except in exceptional cases' (1280). But it can be argued that precisely the alleged exceptional case of the good thief is the one that lights up the basic structure of Christian existence, as lived *extra nos* in dependence on Christ. Making up to God through our good works, rather than embracing anew the forgiveness that God alone can give, elides this basic Christian reality. 'Origen plainly says that faith can be present but that without the advantages of good works effectual reconciliation with God does not take place' (Scheck, 1281). Melanchthon would say that the absence of good works impugns the authenticity of the trusting faith (not just belief), but that the sinner is justified before and independently of good works, and even when his faith has borne fruit in abundant works, it is still the faith, not the works, that reconciles him with God.

Scheck claims that even the exceptional cases also show that ‘both faith and works are equally necessary conditions for justification’ (1283); yet Origen’s accounts of these cases are more naturally read as Melanchthon reads them. The Christian is not one who comes before God proving his worthiness by works, but one who sues for unmerited, gratuitous forgiveness, and for the gift of Christ’s righteousness, imputed and conferred as an *aliena iustitia*.

Origen’s commitment to justification by faith alone might be compromised if he sees it as applying only to those who had no time to produce the works that follow on faith, such as the good thief. This example is introduced with the remark that to preserve the consistency of Scripture we need to ask: ‘Who has been justified by faith alone without works of the law?’ (III, 6 [9].26-7; *S* 1.226; *M* 962). Does this imply that in the normal course of affairs we are justified not by faith alone but by faith and works? Of the good thief he writes: ‘In the Gospels nothing else is recorded about his good works, but for the sake of this faith alone Jesus said to him, “Truly I say to you: Today you will be with me in paradise” (Lk. 23:43)’ (III, 6 [9].29-32; *S* 1.226; *M* 962-3).

The good thief is not an exception, for many people are told by Jesus that their sins are forgiven *pro sola fide*, ‘making clear that the Apostle is correct to hold that a man is justified through faith without works of law’; but ‘if anyone acts unjustly after justification, it is scarcely to be doubted that he has rejected the grace of justification’ (III, 6 [9].52-3, 56-7; *S* 1.227; *M* 953). On the latter point, Melanchthon would say that we do not cease to act unrighteously after justification, for our obedience is never adequate. But if we commit grave sins against conscience we can lose faith and the grace of justification. For Origen, the justified can already be called saints, if they do not waste the grace of justification by unholy lives; that grace is not lost by lesser sins. Where Origen draws a line between mortal and venial sins, Melanchthon draws it between the mortally sinful concupiscence with God overlooks in imputing Christ’s righteousness to the sinner and the deliberate persistence in mortal sin that scorns God’s graciousness. When Origen adds that ‘the remission is not given for future crimes, but only past ones’ (III, 6 [9].59-60; *S* 1.228; *M* 953) he seems to reduce justification to forgiveness of past sins, whereas for Melanchthon it is operative at every moment, for

the sinner must constantly cast himself on the promise of justification through the imputation of Christ's righteousness.

(h) The insight lost

The following development is what Melanchthon was alluding to when he said *id postea mox corrumpit*: 'Because the starting point of a soul's conversion is to abandon evil, on account of its doing so it would merit the forgiveness of iniquities. But when it begins to do good, as if covering over each of the evils it has previously committed with later good actions and introducing a quantity of goods more numerous than the evils which had existed, it may be said to cover its sins' (IV, 1.237-40; S 1.246; M 965). Here saving faith has become a moral resolution to abandon evil; forgiveness is not granted as a grace but merited; it is no longer the Lord who covers the soul's sins but its own good deeds, quantitatively matching them! Pelagius echoes this in his commentary: 'Some say that sin is forgiven in baptism, covered by penitential works, and not counted against one through martyrdom. But others say that when sins have been forgiven in baptism, love for God is increased, which covers a multitude of sins [and] finally keeps them from being counted against one as long as daily good works surpass past misdeeds' (De Bruyn, 85). Here, in Origen, is the root of the medieval Pelagianism that Luther saw as enslaving consciences and making the Gospel opaque.

Verfaillie lauds this passage as an example of Origen's psychological realism, stating that 'Origen of course did not ask if righteousness is imputed or inherent; but one sees that the spiritual realism of his psychology moves in the direction of the latter conception' (Verfaillie, 110). If there is a commonsense realism here, it passes over the deeper reality of the justified sinner's continued dependence on divine forgiveness in the very structure of his virtuous life, which is not a merely psychological reality but which the deeper psychological realism of Luther lit up. Indeed, it misses the basic psychology of the Psalm text itself, which refers not to good works covering bad ones but to the Lord covering our transgression.

Melanchthon writes:

But after declaring these things, he seems to mean this, that initially man attains the remission of sins by faith alone. Later he is just by the other virtues; as he himself later says: 'Faith is reputed for righteousness to him who is converted, but later righteousness is reputed for righteousness'. Further on there is a remarkable variety and confusion in the account. Though granting that man initially attains remission of sins by faith alone, he nonetheless later imagines that the converted are without sin, satisfy the law, and are righteous on account of the other virtues. He dissents from Paul and from the rest of Scripture, as in: 'No one living will be justified in your sight', and again, 'If we say that we have no sin, etc. (*Sed postea declarans illa, videtur hoc velle, hominem initio consequi remissionem peccatorum sola fide, postea iustum esse caeteris virtutibus, sicut ipse postea inquit: Fides reputatur ad iustitiam, ei qui convertitur, sed postea iustitia reputatur ad iustitiam. Porro mira varietas et perplexitas est enarrationis, etiamsi largitur hominem initio sola fide consequi remissionem peccatorum, tamen postea imaginatur conversos sine peccato esse, satisfacere legi, et iustos esse propter caeteras virtutes, dissentit a Paulo et a reliquis scripturis divinis, iuxta illud: Non iustificabitur in conspectu tuo omnis vivens. Item: Si dixerimus, quod peccatum non habeamus etc.*) (CR 15.749-50)

Origen continues in the vein of celebrating moral achievement as what essentially justifies us before God: 'But when a [soul] would henceforth reach perfection so that every root of evil is completely cut off from it to the point that no trace of evil can be found in it, at that point the summit of blessedness is promised to the one to whom the Lord would be able to impute no sin' (IV, 1.240-4; S 1.246; M 965-6). The non-imputation of sin is no longer a miracle of divine mercy. Paul's doctrine of forgiveness is changed into an eschatological promise of the blessings of final perfection, when the Lord can impute no sin since the soul has in fact freed itself from sin. 'Thus the term of justification is a state of purity that will make the soul irreproachable on the day of judgment' (Verfaillie, 111, citing VII 10, M 1130). Yet on the day of judgment it is not one's purity that justifies but, as before, the gratuitous forgiveness of Christ received in faith. Origen's commonsense realism here misses the point of Paul's psalm situation and pretty clearly falls into the Pelagian trap.

Thanks to Melancthon's vigilance (building on Augustine) we cannot read such Pelagianizing texts uncritically today. Yet Origen scholars remain uncritical in their comments on this passage. 'Progressive overcoming of evil is progressive conquest of freedom, is self-realization. God wills that the being endowed with mind should move itself to the goal through itself, and therefore gives it freedom' (Heither, 202). 'Origen's understanding of justification as a transformational process, that is, as a renewal of the old Adam and a state that can be increased, decreased or lost altogether, and not merely as an imputation, was fully endorsed at the Council of Trent' (Scheck, 1288). Trent's language could however be sifted to differentiate more clearly the event of justification from the process of sanctification. 'The original decline but not total corruption of humanity, the necessity and efficacy of the redemptive work, its application by the indivisible concourse of God and man, the effective sanctification of the soul by grace, the meritorious value of its acts in view of glory: such are the doctrines that the Church sets up against the Reformation, and one finds them all clearly in Origen' (Verfaillie, 119). These points concern sanctification rather than justification, and risk occluding the original situation lit up by Paul.

Conclusion

The Reformers' questions are not the only ones to be put to patristic texts, and those questions can themselves be questioned in turn. But they remain thus far the most stimulating catalyst of a critical reading of patristic texts, seen as 'a product of the Greek mind on the soil of the Gospel' in Harnack's famous phrase. This critical reading attends to the tensions in patristic writing between conflicting forms of thought. Thus in these few pages of Origen we see how conventional moralism and common sense, philosophical reflection on ethical growth, Platonic dualism of internal and external, a Philonic doctrine of grace, a harmonizing quest to make Scripture consistent with itself, jostle against one another, and against the equally complex thinking behind the Pauline text, to generate a web of insights that often entail oversights, inviting contemporary readers to learn from both as they cut their own path to the matter at stake.

The debate about justification is one that many will find abstruse, outdated and unreal. Any attempt to clarify and resolve the old controversies today will muster only a pale replica of the clarity and conviction of the sixteenth century debaters. The old Catholic objections to the *sola fide* doctrine may now seem rather jejune in their insistence on logic: ‘How can mere faith make us righteous? Must it not be a "lively" faith and thereby already something more than faith? How can a righteous God account us righteous unless we really are so? How can it make sense to say that we are sinners and righteous at the same time?’ Today they are likely to yield to an ecumenical willingness to say that the Protestant and the Tridentine accounts of justification are merely alternative languages, both imperfect, for saying much the same thing. Such an entente can lead to confusions greater than any of which Melanchthon or even Luther is accused, as in Newman’s *Lectures on Justification* (see O’Leary 1991) or in the Lutheran-Catholic Agreement of October 1999, which has had only a spotty reception among the Lutheran churches. Yet Melanchthon’s thought testifies to a dialogal openness built into Luther’s message, and the implicit invitation must be taken up again and again as the churches seek to appropriate the evangelical thrust of *sola scriptura*, *sola fide*, *sola gratia* while setting it the broadest and most comprehensive context.

What best clarifies the Lutheran teaching is the scenario of a final judgment, and the question, ‘To what can we appeal when faced with our Judge?’ The Lutheran answer is that we can appeal only to the mercy of Christ, who clothes us with his righteousness, not to any holiness of our own, for the latter is always only an imperfect beginning. Unfortunately for many Christians today the scenario itself, the entire way the question is set up, may have an old-fashioned, perhaps mythic feel to it. The lack of grip exhibited by both Lutheran and Catholic theologians in discussing justification is perhaps a sign that it is no longer such a burning question for Christian faith. Even in exegesis of Paul the accent has tended to shift to a wider historical context within which talk of justification by faith is only a single strand. Nonetheless, in our engagement with the ‘signs of the times’ and the needs of the planet today, we do well to cultivate a consciousness of grace and to recall the vigilance with which the classical theologians

warded off every tendency to change the Gospel into something that was no longer pure gift.

The study of historical theology is a peculiar experience: one visits a series of battlefields, in which in each case the essence of Christianity seems to be at stake; yet from all those ancient urgencies there is little that retains immediate, direct relevance to today's concerns. The old theologies are a cloud of witnesses to the event or process of salvation, but their witness is cloudy; they communicate the challenge of their earnestness, the impetus of their quest, but we cannot simply take over the frameworks within which they thought. When a third-century Alexandrian thinker is caught up in the cross-fire of the Reformation he will inevitably be exposed to much distortion and misunderstanding, and this will continue when scholarship studies him in light of Catholic-Protestant controversy. Origen fared better than might have been expected at Melancthon's hands, though the Reformer used him primarily as a foil for his own 'purer' doctrine. A more generous hermeneutic might have done more justice to the integrity of Origen's vision, which is the first major reception of Pauline theology in Christian history. The Reformation challenge remains central in any contemporary attempt at a critical retrieval of Patristic theology, and it is a mistake to reject it as irrelevant or to regard the superior 'Catholic' wisdom of Origen as automatically triumphing over Protestant criticisms. The theology of grace and justification undoubtedly needs to be opened up beyond a certain dogmatism in the Reformers and in Augustine, but not at the cost of disparaging the insights they attained that were not accessible to Origen. Nonetheless, Origen, writing in Greek and closer chronologically and culturally to Paul, is a resource for this opening up. A more important resource, of course, is renewed exegesis of Paul himself in his Jewish context. But even Paul is but one historical witness to the matter itself, the situation of human beings before a gracious God. The Christian mind cannot rest comfortably in the thought-frames of past figures, be they Melancthon or Augustine, Origen or even Paul; the matter itself demands to be rethought in the context of contemporary rationality. Perhaps contemporary theology cannot produce a clear synthesis comparable to those of Augustine or Melancthon. Perhaps discourse about sin and grace has become

irremediably pluralistic and contextual, so that we can draw on the repertory of the old languages where we find them enlightening, but no longer with the old confidence of defining the logic of redemption. The controversy between Origen and Melanchthon is a historical drama that stimulates and fascinates, but that only obliquely guides our present thinking.

TEXTS

Origen:

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H = Heither, Theresia (1991-6). *Origenes: Commentarii in Epistulam ad Romanos*. Freiburg: Herder.

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Collected Works of Erasmus 56: Annotations on Romans. Ed. Robert D. Sider. University of Toronto Press, 1994.

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