

**Roman Catholicism or Evangelicalism:
Which Poses a Greater Challenge to Confessional Lutheranism Today?
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Introduction: Our Duty to Condemn Error and Errorists

The means by which the Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies His church on earth are the purely preached gospel and the rightly administered sacraments. Confronting challenges to the truth is essential to the pastoral office. We are required to study, learn, teach, preach, and apply the doctrine of God's word. This means that we must rebuke error. Rebuking error is not an option. Were the truth readily received and in agreement with human wisdom we might be able to set it before the people without ever pointing out those teachings and teachers that contradict it. But the truth we preach is foolishness to this world. Our flesh recoils against it. The devil is constantly falsifying it. The theological task is the pastoral task and the pastor must attack wolves. Should he fail to do so, he is a hireling and not a pastor.

Attacking wolves is not the same thing as attacking sheep. When we condemn false doctrine we do so for the benefit of Christ's sheep. But here is where we face a seemingly insurmountable problem in carrying out the pastoral task. Many if not most people don't want to listen to criticism of false doctrine. This is especially the case when that false doctrine is identified as features of churches from which they have come and to which some of their affection still belongs. It may be that the condemned false doctrine is taught by a church to which some of their loved ones presently belong. We do our best to distinguish between the false teaching that various churches promote and the people who belong to these churches. Still, our best is often not enough. You preach a sermon in which you criticize papal claims, studiously avoiding saying anything at all critical about Roman Catholics in general, and you learn through the grape vine that you've been bashing the Catholics. When I was young and naïve I thought I could criticize Billy Graham by name from the pulpit without any negative reaction. Well, you live and learn. About twenty-five years ago, after I was at my first parish for a little over a year, someone in Bible class asked me if it was a sin to pray to the saints. I said that it was. The next day a parishioner – about six feet four inches tall and three hundred pounds – came storming into my office wanting to know why I told his son that his grandmother sins when she prays. It's amazing the things we say without even knowing it! But we should not shrink from our duties. By both apostolic command and example we must

identify error and errorists. We should pray that as we do so we learn to speak in such a way that those we are called to serve can recognize that it is our love for them and concern for their spiritual wellbeing that compels us to warn them against false doctrine.

When we criticize the false teachings of church bodies to which Christians belong, it is especially important that we do not leave the impression that a man is justified by his orthodoxy and not through faith alone. The pure teaching of God's word is necessary. It is not necessary as a good work by which the doer of the work will be saved. The pure teaching of God's word is necessary for the simple reason that error does not justify or give life but the preaching of the pure gospel is a means of grace through which the Lord and giver of life justifies, regenerates, and saves sinners. Even when we are required to judge the teaching of men that depart from God's truth we do well to remember Francis Pieper's famous felicitous inconsistency. While condemning false doctrine as poison to the soul we have no right to speak falsely about those who promote it. To demonstrate lovelessness in defense of God's truth is ironic indeed when you consider the fact that the very center of God's truth is the love of God in Christ that brings to sinners the righteousness by which they are justified through faith alone.

The Challenge of Rome

The Evangelical Lutheran Church claims that the central article of the Christian religion is that topic of Christian doctrine that took central stage in the debate between the Lutherans and the Roman Catholics of the Sixteenth Century. The reason that justification by faith alone was confessed to be the chief topic of Christian doctrine by the Lutheran reformers was not because they imagined that they and their time and place were at the center of time and space. They did not project their own controversy upon the Scriptures to rework God's Word in the image of their parochial concerns. They made a discovery. While Luther's personal quest of the sinner for a gracious God makes for good drama, it was not Luther's experiences that drove the Lutheran Reformation. What animated the Lutherans of the Sixteenth Century was the discovery of a truth so clearly taught in the Holy Scriptures that only by a diabolical scheme of cosmic dimensions could it have been obscured within the church. The truth they discovered is that God's greatest glory is revealed in His justification of the ungodly. What to Rome and human reason was an abomination condemned by God in His holy word was to the Lutherans the very heart of Christianity. The sinner who can find no righteousness within himself and who in doing what is in him to do can only sin and compound sin should believe that God reckons to him the righteousness of His holy Son. He should believe that by that reckoning alone he becomes righteous with a perfect righteousness. The sinner who can do nothing but sin is delivered from his sin by means of God speaking words to him that give to him the righteousness that avails before God.

Remember President Reagan's famous challenge to Michael Gorbachev? The line that drew spontaneous and excited applause was delivered in West Berlin: "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down

this wall!" The wall came down. Germans who had lived for years under the tyranny of Communist oppression were free. They freely walked from east to west as the city became one once again. Similarly, the Lutheran Reformation tore down a wall. It had been erected in the church separating the second and third articles of the Creed. Sinners set free by the redemption of Christ were held in bondage by a spiritual tyranny that blocked the way from Christ's redemptive work to the Holy Spirit's work of justifying the sinner through faith alone. When the wall was torn down, sinners could now know and believe that their personal justification was as certain as the fact that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Roman Catholicism confesses the vicarious atonement of Christ. It teaches the redemption of the whole world. But there is this wall. The wall is too high to climb over. It is too high to see over. It separates what Jesus did then and there from what we are to believe here and now. The work of the Holy Spirit is on the side of the wall where the sinners live. The work of Christ is on the other side of the wall. The only way through the wall is by means of the Sacrifice of the Mass. But this is a one-way street going the wrong way. Instead of the redemption of Christ flowing into the work of the Holy Spirit, defining it, giving it substance, and rendering it efficacious, the Sacrifice of the Mass turns it around. It has the work of the Holy Spirit defining, giving substance to, and serving as the catalyst for an insufficient and inherently impotent redemption. The body and blood of Christ by which all sinners are redeemed fails to meet its divinely ordained goal in the justification of the individual sinner through his personal faith. The wall stands in the way. In over fifty paragraphs devoted to a discussion of the Lord's Supper, the Catechism of the Catholic Church barely mentions the forgiveness of sins and it does not teach that forgiveness of sins is actually bestowed in the Sacrament.[\[1\]](#)

Contrast this with the thoroughly evangelical definition of the Sacrament set forth in Luther's Small Catechism. Christ's words, "Given and shed for you for the remission of sins" are cited four times in five paragraphs. The part on the Lord's Supper teaches the doctrine of justification by faith alone more clearly than it is taught anywhere else in the Small Catechism. The Evangelical Lutheran Church understands all Christology and sacramental theology in light of the central article precisely because there is no other way to understand it correctly. That is to say, we cannot understand Jesus – either as to who He is or as to how He comes to us – unless we see Him as taking away our sins and setting us free. Until Jesus is the One in whom there is nothing but divine mercy that forgives us all of our sins, we cannot know Jesus.

Here we are faced with the central irony of the Antichrist. It might be summed up as, "So close, and yet so far." Or, "Water, water everywhere, and not a drop to drink." There is no question that the pope looks like the Lamb. Nowhere is this clearer than at the Lord's Supper. He defends the divine institution. He contends for the great mystery of the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the sacramental elements. He does so while faithfully affirming the truth concerning the trinitarian and christological context of this sacred meal. In fact, he affirms the essence of the Supper that is instituted for the forgiveness of our sins. Yet he refuses to say that forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are given to everyone who believes these words. He has Jesus, but he won't let the Holy Spirit whom Jesus sends do what Jesus

sent Him to do. Instead of having the Holy Spirit speak to sinners from the wounds of their Savior to bestow upon them the fruit of that all-sufficient sacrifice, the Antichrist turns the Holy Spirit back from His appointed task. He sends the Holy Spirit back to the wounds from which Jesus sent Him while forbidding Him to do precisely that for which Jesus sent Him. The Savior of sinners is represented to God without having been presented to those for whom His blood was shed.

How can Rome defend the divine institution, confessing that it is what it is, while at the same time denying that those who receive in faith the blood by which they are justified can rest confident that they are thereby justified by Jesus' blood? Rome can and does do so by erecting a wall between Christ's atonement and the Holy Spirit's activity in our lives. Christ is present. This is Rome's great appeal. But the wall keeps the fruit of His redemptive work from flowing out of His wounds into the Spirit's words. The sacramental theology of Rome guarantees a presence of Christ even while it denies to contrite hearts the assurance of salvation that Christ is present to provide. The united testimony of the Spirit, the water, and the blood is that he who has the Son of God has eternal life. Rome's sanctification of pious doubt is a direct contradiction of this testimony. There can be no assurance of eternal life when the righteousness by which we are justified is anything less than Christ's vicarious life and death. Every time the Sacrifice of the Mass is offered for the sins of the living and the dead the central article of the Christian faith is emphatically denied. The very body and blood in which Jesus invites our souls to find true rest and peace are present in denial of that peace as they are offered again and again and again to propitiate a God who refuses to be propitiated.

On the face of it, there can be little doubt that the Roman Catholic Church constitutes a greater threat to the pure gospel of Christ than does any other force within Christendom. While a confessional Lutheran must challenge the sacramental theology of the so-called Evangelicals, there is no more important topic of Christian doctrine than justification through faith alone. The confession of justification by faith alone must stand in stark contrast to its denial. But it's not quite that simple.

The Challenge of the "Evangelicals"

Just who are the Evangelicals? We Lutherans have always claimed the term for ourselves. Our rubrics for the rite of confirmation identify the church of the pure doctrine as the Evangelical Lutheran Church. We call our synod the Evangelical Lutheran Synod. Many of our congregations have the word evangelical in their names. One would think that the term would designate those Christians and churches that believe, teach, and confess the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Sometimes it does. For example, the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals has set forth the biblical doctrine of justification quite clearly in words that confessional Lutherans could accept. In an irenic but pointed fashion it has called upon Roman Catholic and Evangelical theologians who claim a consensus on the gospel to answer

the unanswered questions raised in the 16th Century.^[2] If by Evangelicals we were talking about such theologians as Michael Horton, David Wells, James Montgomery Boice, J. I. Packer, and the like, that would be one thing. Then we could compare historic Reformed theology to Roman Catholic theology and see which is more objectionable. But the few confessionally minded Reformed do not represent the mainstream of modern day Evangelicals.

The National Association of Evangelicals, which includes as member denominations various Baptist, Pentecostal, and Reformed church bodies, does not confess justification by faith alone in its confession of faith. It ignores the central article altogether while insisting on the absolute necessity of regeneration.^[3] While there was a time not so long ago when Evangelicals were distinguished from Charismatics, this distinction has become increasingly difficult to make as many features of the Charismatic Movement have become standard fare in Evangelical churches. The Church Growth Movement, with its preoccupation with spiritual gifts, brings much of the Pentecostal emphasis into mainstream Evangelicalism. This shouldn't surprise us. The history of Evangelicalism in America has been a history of a theological movement veering ever leftward from strict Calvinism into Arminianism. Consider the two most famous Evangelicals of the Eighteenth Century: Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley. Both men were born in 1703. Edwards was a Calvinist. Wesley was Arminian. During the Eighteenth Century Edwards had a much greater influence than Wesley but it was Wesley's theology that triumphed in America.

It is somewhat of a misnomer for us Lutherans to identify popular Protestant theology in America as Reformed. As Nathan Hatch demonstrates in his fascinating study, The Democratization of American Christianity^[4], the history of American Evangelicalism in the Nineteenth Century is the history of the victory of democracy over clericalism and free will over predestination. American bootstraps theology as it developed on the frontier departs substantially from classical Calvinism. Traditional Calvinism is identified by five pillars represented by the acronym: TULIP. They are: total depravity of man; unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints. Of these five principles only one is held by contemporary Evangelicals: the perseverance of the saints, commonly known as "once saved always saved."^[5] On every other topic Calvinism has given way to Arminianism and it was by means of Methodism that Arminian theology triumphed in America. Scratch a Baptist and underneath he is a Methodist. The insistence that we must invite the Lord Jesus into our heart to make Him our personal Savior is important, but not central to popular American Evangelicalism. At the center is the ongoing religious experience. It is Wesley's "heart strangely warmed" that has been the impetus for American revivalism since the Nineteenth Century and has become the material principle of American Evangelicalism.

Here it is that American Evangelicalism raises its most serious challenge to confessional Lutheranism. Our hymnody is powerful and beautiful, teaching us and comforting us. Our liturgy is solidly grounded in a proper distinction and application of law and gospel. It is historic, dignified, Christ-centered, and reverent. Our doctrine is pure and wholesome, in its whole and in every part in complete agreement with the written word of God. But

Evangelicalism has something we don't have and cannot have if we are to be authentically Lutheran. Still, it is something we want because we are, after all, children of our age. What they have is an inner feeling. Call it faith or spirituality or some kind of religion sense. Whatever it is, it serves as a norm for all claims to religious or spiritual truth. It is a refined form of enthusiasm. It resonates with the religious seeker because it conforms easily to the popular religious culture. It is packaged within relatively traditional Christian language. It is justification by faith with the faith set free from any dogmatic definition. It is a form of Protestantism without creedal or denominational boundaries.

This does not mean that modern American Evangelicalism has no boundaries. It means that you cannot identify them in the traditional way. In evaluating Roman Catholicism we can sit down and read the Catechism of the Catholic Church. We can read the writings of Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI. While American Catholics may dissent here and there we can nevertheless identify what is official Roman Catholic doctrine and practice. This is not possible with Evangelicalism. This doesn't mean that we cannot identify the broad outlines of Evangelical theology and the main areas where it poses a challenge to us and the people we serve. It does mean that we will need to examine Evangelicalism from its roots.

The Calvinistic Roots of Modern American Evangelicalism

If TULIP represents classical Calvinist theology it would appear that the Arminian rejection of every one of the five points represents a radical departure from Calvinism. But appearances can be deceiving. Evangelicalism is deeply indebted to the Calvinism against which it is constantly reacting. Both variants of Reformed Protestant theology share certain theological assumptions. When it comes to the means of grace, there is basic agreement between confessional Reformed theology and popular Evangelical theology at least in this regard that our doctrine is wrong.

Classical Calvinism attacks the means of grace on two sides. First, by denying the universal atonement, it must deny as well the inherent efficacy of the gospel and sacraments as means through which the Holy Spirit works faith. A Calvinist can say that the Holy Spirit works along side of the means of grace. He cannot say that the Holy Spirit works through the means of grace. Since the Holy Spirit cannot give forgiveness to one who is not elected by God to receive it and since we cannot identify who those people are it would be false to say that the Holy Spirit gives forgiveness through Holy Baptism or through the Lord's Supper. However, the sacraments do serve as signs of grace. They should be included as marks of the church, not because they are means through which the Holy Spirit works faith, but because they are signs by which the faithful may be recognized. Church discipline is also such a sign of the church's presence. The Calvinist doctrine of limited atonement requires an understanding of the means of grace radically different from confessional Lutheranism.

Arminianism broke with Calvinism on unconditional election and limited atonement. It did not for this reason embrace the biblical doctrine of the means of grace, however. Historic Reformed theology has another reason for rejecting the doctrine that God gives forgiveness of sins and eternal life through the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. It is their Christology. While Calvinists deny that their Christology is Nestorian, the fact is that Calvinism keeps the human nature of Jesus separated from the divine nature of Jesus as far as the heavens are above the earth. Teaching that the divine Logos may be where the man Jesus is not has serious implications. Jesus' deity and humanity are separated. Simply put, our brother Jesus isn't here on earth. He's somewhere else. Keeping the man Jesus locked up in heaven not only keeps His body and blood away from the altar, it also succeeds in keeping justification from becoming the central article of the faith. The center of theology cannot be the justification of the sinner who lives here on earth when the blood by which sinners are justified is absent from this earth. Reformed Christology requires an absent Jesus at the Supper so that it becomes a memorial of a Jesus who simply is not there. This sets the justification of the sinner off to the periphery. This may not be deliberate, but it is inevitable. Rome denies the central article by building a wall between the blood of Jesus shed and the justification of the sinner here and now. The Reformed don't build a wall. They affirm the central article. But they cannot identify in any external time or place where God actually justifies the sinner. Since the gospel and sacraments are not infallibly efficacious means of imparting forgiveness and salvation, the faith that receives justification must be engendered in some other way.

Here is where Edwards and Wesley and their heirs meet. The one may appeal to God's sovereign will while the other may appeal to a second blessing but in either case the assurance of salvation does not come by identifying and locating the forgiveness of sins as it comes in water, bread and wine, or the words coming out of the mouth of a man. Stripped from its location in the objectively identifiable means of grace, the message of justification becomes a theological abstraction. Whether the justification of the sinner through faith comes about by God's sovereign will or man's free will is beside the point. In either case the assurance of justification must rest on faith as faith, that is, on the experience of faith instead of on the objective means of grace that are pure and unadulterated gift.

Lutherans insist that the Holy Spirit is joined to the external word of God.^[6] There can be no wordless Spirit and there can be no Spiritless word. Evangelicals – while rejecting strict Calvinism on nearly every point – share with Calvin and the Reformed tradition the conviction that there can indeed be a wordless Spirit and a Spiritless word. Lacking concretely identifiable means of grace not only forces justification into abstract theory, it makes Christianity essentially a law religion. The purpose of the gospel is to bring about obedience. Since the gospel and the sacraments are not means by which God engenders and sustains faith they are no longer vital to the life of the Christian. The gospel is a missionary word, a word necessary for the unbeliever so that he may know what it is he is accepting when he accepts it. On this point Evangelicals argue among themselves, with some insisting that the Lordship of Christ ought to be emphasized more while others are suspicious of anything that smacks of Calvinism. But Evangelicals are agreed that the gospel is not necessary for the

believer to sustain him in the faith. As I mentioned earlier, most Evangelicals reject the T, U, L, and I of classical Calvinism, while holding on to the P in the form of “once saved always saved.” To reject the doctrine of grace alone while teaching the “once saved always saved” doctrine makes salvation a once in a lifetime deal you make with God and once the deal is done it’s done and there’s really no more need to talk about it except to try to get others to make the same deal you made.

This is why the gospel is seldom preached. The Holy Spirit has not bound Himself to it. The relationship between the preached word of God and the Christian is not that of God giving and faith receiving the gift. The preaching consists in the teaching of spiritual principles that the Christian must apply to his life. Law replaces gospel as the power in the Christian’s life. Holding one another accountable in small groups produces greater spiritual growth than attending the Divine Service and receiving God’s gifts of forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation in the preached and sacramental word. The power of the Holy Spirit is activated by faithful application of spiritual principles as you “trust and obey for there’s no other way to be happy” in your Christian walk. A penitential attitude is good, of course, as a Christian virtue. Confession is beneficial, because, as The Purpose Drive Life author reminds us, “Revealing your feeling is the beginning of healing,^[7]” but it is beneficial as therapy, not because the broken and contrite heart can find comfort and peace in the words of the absolution and in the body and blood of Christ given and received in the Lord’s Supper.

How Evangelicalism Penetrates the Lutheran Church

If we want to be protected from the harmful influence of the false doctrine of modern American Evangelicalism it is important to hold to a solid doctrine of church fellowship that actually applies God’s warning to mark and avoid false teachers and teaching. It is a great blessing to have a synodical consensus against unionism. But the baneful influence of Evangelicalism upon us Lutherans cannot be avoided merely by avoiding certain kinds of religious gatherings. Yes, by all means avoid attending revival meetings such as Promise Keepers rallies. In addition to that, we need to examine how the spirit of American Evangelicalism has already penetrated our confessional Lutheran congregations. We need to take a critical look at ourselves as pastors. Are we exercising the kind of discernment our office requires of us? Are we thinking theologically as we consider our duties? As those appointed by God to keep watch over the flock purchased by His blood we need to know what kind of theology is out there and how it is infecting our churches. The challenge Evangelicalism presents to us confessional Lutherans is not primarily that our people will be lured into Evangelical churches. It is far more subtle and dangerous. It is that Evangelical theology will penetrate Lutheranism and transform it into another form of Evangelicalism. American Lutherans need not fear an imposition like the Prussian Union. It doesn’t work that way here in America. From Simon Samuel Schmucker to the Church Growth Movement Lutherans have been quite willing to embrace popular Protestant theology while pretending that they are doing so within the true spirit of Lutheranism.^[8]

Let me briefly address five areas where Evangelicalism has already had an impact upon us confessional Lutherans. Consider with me five questions: Why do we preach? Why do we retain the liturgy? Why do we sing the hymns that we sing? How do doctrine and personal relationships relate? What is wrong with Rome?

Why Do We Preach?

When we preach we are competing with television, radio, and various other media. The people we serve listen to sermons preached by Evangelicals. But they aren't hearing the evangel. They are hearing "practical" sermons on how to overcome this or that besetting personal problem. They suffer from all sorts of problems and there are a multitude of places – some quasi-religious and some explicitly so – that offer them success in place of their failure.

Meanwhile we preach the same old same old every single Sunday. We preach sin and grace, law and gospel. We preach Christ crucified for sinners. We preach free forgiveness received through faith alone. We preach and the lives of the people don't seem to change. Kids keep getting into trouble, couples still get divorced. Unfaithfulness, drunkenness, cheating, lying, and every kind of vice you would think couldn't find its way into a Christian congregation finds its way into our congregations. We get a bit discouraged. Then we might even get subtle or not so subtle suggestions that we preach more practical morality and less doctrine (by doctrine, I mean the gospel doctrine) because, after all, we want to learn how to overcome our problems. We know all about Jesus and the gospel. We know that. We need more.

Brothers in Christ, I submit to you that the greatest threat to confessional Lutheranism in our day is that pastors will lose heart, that they will lose their confidence in the inherent power of the gospel that they preach to create faith and the new life that comes from the true faith. The greatest threat of Evangelicalism to us preachers is that we will set aside our Lutheran confidence in the power of the gospel and be conned into thinking that teaching principles for holy living will do what the preaching of the blood and righteousness of Christ can't do.

God has entrusted us with the preaching office. So, then, what shall we preach and why? This is what we confess:

We teach that men cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits or works, but are freely justified for Christ's sake through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake, who by His death, has made satisfaction for our sins. This faith God accounts as righteousness in His sight, Rom. 3 and 4. That we may obtain this faith, the office of teaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given, who works faith where and when it pleases God in those who hear the Gospel. That is, God, not because of our own merits, but for Christ's sake, justifies those who believe that they are received into favor for Christ's sake. (AC IV & V)

That we may obtain this faith: that's why preachers get up in the pulpit to preach! That's the purpose of the preaching office! What faith is that? It is the faith that believes that we are received into favor and that our sins are forgiven for Christ's sake. And why are we forgiven for Christ's sake? Why must Christ be preached? Because by His death He has made satisfaction for our sins. We certainly haven't! We obtain and keep the faith through which we are justified through the preaching of the Gospel. That is, God, not because of our own merits, but for Christ's sake, justifies those who believe that they are received into favor for Christ's sake.

The time we spend in the pulpit is the most important time we spend. Every single time God puts us there to speak His holy word we should ask ourselves what gives us the right to say anything at all. We aren't there to facilitate something or other. We aren't there to impart important religious principles by which our hearers can succeed in this or that venture. We are there because the Holy Spirit works faith, where and when it pleases God, in those who hear the gospel and it is our job to preach it. It won't do to talk about the gospel. Preaching the gospel requires us to talk about Jesus, who He is, what He has done, how what He has done brings to us forgiveness of sins, peace with God, freedom from guilt and condemnation, new and eternal life, and every other spiritual blessing to which we are heirs.

If the Evangelicals are right we don't need to preach the gospel every single time we get up in the pulpit. If faith comes apart from the actual preaching of the gospel and if once a person comes to faith he cannot fall from grace then we can spend our time in the pulpit talking about someone other than Jesus. Moralizing is beneficial, after all. But the Evangelicals are wrong and the Augsburg Confession is right. The preacher is put into the preaching office and into the pulpit to preach that gospel by which the Holy Spirit creates and sustains justifying faith. This is why Walther, in his final thesis, said that God's word is not rightly divided when the teacher of it doesn't permit the gospel to have a general predominance in his teaching. Don't think they already know it. Don't think you can refer to it by some kind of theological shorthand. What's more important, what we do or what God in Christ has done? Sinners need to be justified through faith. That's why the preacher is called to preach. If he doesn't understand that he should not preach anything at all.

Why Do We Retain the Liturgy?

I was on a plane to St. Louis a couple of weeks ago, sitting next to a retired Air Force officer who was working on his PhD. He was a member of the United Church of Christ and he managed to let me know that he was a Mason. He was an expert on every topic he addressed and he enjoyed addressing many topics, so as we drew near to St. Louis I was looking forward to a bit of golden silence. I had been thwarted in my efforts to get into a conversation about the gospel and the captain had just told us to fasten our seat belts for the landing. We were discussing the liturgy and I thought that I would use it as a final opportunity to address the one thing needful. I told him that we did not look at the liturgy primarily as

something that we do for God, but as something God does for us. The liturgy is where God gives His gifts of forgiveness and eternal life to us. His response was interesting. He replied that God is bigger than any religion.

How did my comment inspire such a response? The man objected to my locating God within the liturgical rites of a church. I attempted to depict the liturgy for him purely in terms of gift, without any demand for a particular structure. But it is precisely this claim – that God joins Himself and His spiritual treasures to the speaking and acting of a man – that offended the man, not just because he was a liberal and a Mason but because he was Reformed.

God is bigger than the liturgy. Of course! But the fullness of God is contained within the liturgy. Yes it is! In Christ all the fullness of God dwells bodily, and wherever the gospel is preached and the sacraments are administered Christ Himself is present bringing to us the salvation that He alone can give. This takes place liturgically. It must. The question is not whether or not we will follow a liturgy. It is what liturgy we will follow. Arguments about High Church versus Low Church frequently miss the point. All theology will find expression liturgically. The argument for retaining traditional worship forms is not an argument for form for form's sake. It isn't an argument for tradition for tradition's sake. It is a theological argument that the liturgy we have inherited from our fathers is too precious to be ignored or radically altered because it is a thoroughly biblical and balanced diet of the word of God by which we are justified and nourished in the true faith.

Our Evangelical friends don't think they need the Divine Service because they believe that God does not bind Himself to any external means of grace. We need the Divine Service because God does bind Himself to the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. Worship as worship comes from worshippers and it would be unfair to argue that this man's worship is of greater quality or worth than that man's worship. And this is the only way the Evangelicals can see it. But we Lutherans see it quite differently. Divine Service must be divine, and for that reason every single part of the liturgy must not only be doctrinally sound, but carefully said and done so that God's proclamation is clear. Arbitrary or thoughtless changing of the liturgical form may make its appeal to Christian freedom but in fact it represents either ignorance or disrespect. The Divine Service is not normative as a product of the church. But if we take our theology seriously and apply the normative doctrine to our pastoral decisions with respect to the liturgy, we will think long and hard before tampering with it. From the Kyrie to the Benediction the Ordinary of the service bring the solidly Trinitarian, Christ-centered, Spirit-filled, word and sacrament to us so that we sinners can know and not doubt that we are going home justified every single Sunday. The Son of Man who has authority on earth to forgive sins has forgiven us all our sins and we can stand before God.^[9] We can stand, not because we were successful in applying to our lives so many spiritual principles for success, but because the Lord Jesus who bore our sins in His body on the cross has come to us in our sins, failures, and the pains of life. We pleaded with the Son of David for mercy, and He answered our plea. Now we can live or die at peace with the God who created us.

I am not suggesting that we do not have Christian freedom to change traditional forms. We do. But we are not free to give God's people inferior service. We are not free to water down doctrine for the sake of winning approval from men. Contrary to the claims of Lutherans who in the name of relevance and freedom mimic the so-called "style" of the Evangelicals, people don't reject the liturgy because they want to take God out of a confining box. They reject it because they want to do their own spiritual thing unhindered by any normative biblical or doctrinal content outside of their own religious feelings. Evangelical freedom is impossible without the gospel. The gospel content of the liturgy is why we retain it and exercise great care before cutting and pasting.

Why Do We Sing the Hymns that We Sing?

Some time ago I ran across a Norwegian Synod choral book published in 1904. About three quarters of the hymns were in Norwegian and the rest were in English. Among the Norwegian selections were the finest hymns by Martin Luther as well as other gospel laden classic Lutheran chorales. The English language selections were quite weak in comparison. They didn't contain any false doctrine, but the theology had thinned out considerably.

Lutheran hymnody joins the doxological to the didactic. What they teach is Trinitarian, Christological, and rich with atonement and sacramental theology. I'm not just talking about catechetical hymns such as Salvation unto Us Has Come, or creedal hymns such as Luther's Credo. Lutheran hymns are written and sung with the assumption that all hymnody should praise God for those things God has done for us and that God's creative, redemptive, and sanctifying work should be explicitly confessed and taught in the hymns that are sung. The joining of the doxological with the didactic goes back to the biblical psalms and is featured as well by the early Christian hymns with which we are familiar.

Evangelical hymnody has a different purpose. The expression of religious devotion in song is something we do for God to bring Him pleasure. We glorify Him, not by saying back to Him what He has taught us, but by expressing our personal devotion to him.^[10] The celebration of the Christian's faith as faith need not be stated in terms that express divine doctrine. Worship is for God's benefit, not for our own. Therefore, singing praises to God is acceptable to God for the sake of the sincerity with which it is offered. To demand a doctrinal statement from a hymn would be to bind faith to dogma.

But for the Lutheran, dogma belongs within hymnody because to praise God is inseparable from confessing what we believe about Him and that means making doctrinal assertions. Hymnody is so closely bound to the means of grace that it becomes another form of gospel proclamation. For the Evangelical, we sing in order to express ourselves. The personal experience – call it faith as a phenomenon – is celebrated, and in this way we glorify God for being worthy of such praise. For the Lutheran, the singing of the bride to her husband celebrates his sacrificial love that led him to lay down his life for her and to wash her clean of

every fault. For the Evangelical, the singing of the bride to her husband celebrates her wifely submission to him.

Many if not most Lutherans in our day have adopted the Evangelical as opposed to the Lutheran understanding of why we sing what we sing. This is why people often cannot understand why, at a funeral or a wedding, we try to steer them away from empty songs that focus on the faith experience but say little if anything about the substance of the gospel.

It is easy to diagnose the problem with hymnody among us. It is much more difficult to bring about the cure. Music takes a firm hold in our emotions. The pastoral task requires patience, persistence, and the confidence that if our people will learn to love the great Lutheran chorales they will thereby be spiritually enriched and their faith strengthened throughout their lives. The feeding of the flock surely entails doing our best to cultivate an appreciation of good hymns, and there is no better place to begin than with the children. As the people sing so they confess and as they confess so they believe. A popular religious song should not be used for congregational singing simply because it's popular. The fact that it has no false doctrine is not a good enough reason to sing it. If Willie Nelson can sing it at one of his concerts, it's probably not the best of hymns to use in the Divine Service.

How Do Doctrine and Personal Relationships Relate?

If the gospel of justification by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith alone is at the heart of all Christian doctrine, then doctrine is essentially evangelical. The pure doctrine is the pure gospel. The defense of the pure doctrine is the defense of justifying or saving faith. Doctrine is paramount because it is the source of spiritual life. It is the source of the mystical union the Christian enjoys with Christ and it brings about the fellowship Christians enjoy with one another. This primacy of doctrine over life in Lutheran theology correlates to the Lutheran insistence that there is no wordless Spirit and no Spiritless word.

The Evangelical insistence on disjoining the Spirit from the word has its corollary as well. Doctrine no longer saves. It is necessary as the framework for the Holy Spirit's activity, but it is not through the actual teaching of the pure gospel that the Holy Spirit keeps us in the true faith. The Reformed tradition has always been reluctant to define doctrine in any finally binding way and the American Evangelicals follow this tradition. Pure doctrine is a laudable goal, but can be emphasized to the detriment of more important things. A personal relationship with the Lord Jesus is more important than your view of baptism. Faith in Jesus as your personal Savior is more important than your view of the Lord's Supper. An unhealthy devotion to binding dogma can easily hamper the development of vibrant spiritual relationships with God and one another.

Here is where the spirit of modern Evangelicalism has had great success in capturing Lutheran loyalties. Personal relationships trump doctrinal fidelity more often than we care to admit. It is true that doctrinal debate often degenerates into little more than carnal quests for

political power in the church, but surely a confessional Lutheran can distinguish between the two. One might be tempted during times of acrimonious doctrinal debate to cry, "A plague on both your houses," and appeal for a setting aside of whatever the differences may be in order to be about the business of the church. We need to remember that God's pure truth is always carried about by fallible and sinful men and its proclamation and defense are always the business of the church. Luther was wont to admit his personal failings as he extolled the pure doctrine above life itself as the most precious treasure we have in this world. Let that love be damned that would presume to silence the truth. That love does not come from God. God's grace is always joined to His truth.

Let us take careful note. We pastors in the ELS cherish good relationships with brothers as we should. Perhaps we assume that doctrinal controversy militates against the maintenance of such relationships. Yet it is precisely as we engage in the theological task together and do so with utter seriousness and devotion to the Scriptures and the Confessions that we find our brotherly bond strengthened. It is when we subordinate the theological task to the maintenance of good relationships that we lose our heart for the pastoral task and carnal division arises among us. The pastoral task is essentially theological. It is not relational except as the divine doctrine establishes the relationship. To put it simply, doctrine must trump every other card in the deck. On this score the Evangelicals have the hearts of most Lutherans and they are knocking on our hearts, asking to be invited in. It is our job to defend the truth of what God teaches us above all else. If the pastors don't do so, who will?

What is Wrong with Rome?

Evangelicals have their principles to apply. Roman Catholics have their rituals to enact. Confessional Lutherans have their doctrine to teach. We have principles and we have rituals, but doctrine must rule because the teaching of the Evangelical Lutheran Church is from God. We are not content to derive principles for doing this or that from God's word and then to apply the principles. Applying a principle requires a certain kind of result. You judge the application of paint to a house by how the house appears. So you judge the application of religious principles to Christians by how the Christians appear. One does not judge doctrine in the same way. We don't judge doctrine by what it does as we can discern it. We judge doctrine by whether or not it is true, that is, whether or not it agrees with the clear sense of the biblical text which is the written word of God.

Similarly, we judge rituals by doctrine. A sacramental church will have rituals because the administration of sacraments will necessarily assume a ritual form. Baptism, absolution, and Holy Communion do not administer themselves nor do they take place in a liturgical vacuum. They take place within a liturgical context and they take on the form of rituals. Doctrine governs rituals. Stewards of the mysteries of God must treat those mysteries with respect. When we administer the sacraments the ritual that we follow should help us in teaching the nature and benefits of these gifts.

Evangelicals are not fond of rituals. They criticize Rome for being too ritualistic. Much of their criticism of Rome could just as well be directed against Lutherans. The use of historic vestments, making the sign of the cross, and having a crucifix on the altar are no more Roman Catholic than they are Lutheran but our Lutheran people have to a great extent adopted the Evangelical opposition to such things. A little religious prejudice may be relatively harmless, and since I'm not aching to wear a chasuble and I'm not comfortable crossing myself (at least not in America) it would be easy for me as well as for many of you, I'm sure, simply to dismiss the knee-jerk anti-Catholic prejudice as being of little import.

But I think it is more serious than that. The Reformed objection to Catholic ritual is not primarily an objection to ritual, but to the very idea that the sovereign God would deign to become located in specific created things. Evangelicals reject Roman rituals for the same reason they reject Lutheran sacraments, Lutheran absolution, and the Lutheran doctrine of the ministry. It is an anti-incarnational bias that comes out of their Nestorian Christology. By placing Christ in His human nature in a location apart from His church, they rob the Christian sacraments of Christ's presence and hence their saving power. It is the God-man, after all, who is the Savior of the world. If the God-man is not there, neither is the salvation He alone can bring. By keeping the God-man disjoined from His own sacraments they can hardly appreciate the liturgical rituals in which the sacraments are found. You might be thinking that they are objecting to ritual for ritual's sake when in fact they are objecting to the substance to which the ritual is attached.

What is offensive about the teaching of Rome is not that the priest elevates the consecrated elements and kneels before them. Should he do so to confess that this is the body and blood of Christ, what Lutheran could object to such a confession? What is offensive is that in elevating the consecrated elements he is purporting to offer up to God the body and blood of Jesus as a sacrifice to win God's favor for the souls of men. It is the Sacrifice of the Mass that is so deeply offensive to the true faith. But the Evangelicals cannot distinguish between teaching that the sacramental elements are Christ's body and blood and offering them up as a sacrifice to God. Make no mistake. The Reformed objection to the crucifix standing on the altar has less to do with worshipping a risen Lord Jesus and more to do with denying that the body and blood of Jesus ever come anywhere near the altar. Perhaps it is time that we encourage our people to accept the crucifix once again as the Lutheran symbol it is. At least we should consider the implications of objecting to it. I have never met a Lutheran who believed in the Sacrifice of the Mass, but I have met many Lutherans who had adopted the Reformed doctrine of the real presence which is more accurately called the doctrine of the real absence.

All Roads Lead to Rome

As Evangelicalism moves ever leftward from classical Calvinism the implications of the Calvinistic errors on the doctrine of the means of grace become more and more serious.

Traditionally, the Reformed emphasis on the catechesis of the laity and thorough doctrinal instruction of the pastors kept the means of grace central in the life of their church. Means of grace are means of grace, after all, even if they aren't rightly acknowledged as such. But as concern for doctrine becomes overwhelmed by the celebration of the personal experience of faith the faith becomes increasingly unfocused, uncertain, and empty. Evangelicalism may be on the rise in the United States and Latin America, but this is only because nature abhors a vacuum. The mainstream Protestant bodies in America have long given up on theology in favor of leftist political ideology. Evangelicalism fills the void. But it is becoming increasing void of solid doctrinal content.

There is an enduring myth that Evangelicalism represents a conservative strain of Christianity. This myth is supported by the tendency of Evangelicalism to attach itself to various social and political causes associated with conservatism. They are likely to oppose abortion, homosexuality, and the new morality. They are also likely to be pro-military and since they tend toward a dispensational eschatology they support the State of Israel and adopt Israel's causes as America's causes.

Upon closer examination Evangelicalism is not conservative at all. Conserving the views of the popular religious culture conserves some decidedly radical opinions, from the fantasies of Dispensationalism to the conceit that the experience of faith is the source of individual personal piety. Would you be surprised to learn that ELCA congregations in northern Minnesota have Bible classes featuring the "Left Behind" videos? No, you wouldn't. Can you tell the difference between the teaching of Norman Vincent Peale and Joel Osteen? No, and neither can I. They each have formulas for success that don't need anything uniquely Christian to support them. No one would have called Peale an Evangelical and no one would call Osteen a liberal but there's not a dime's difference between what they preach. Liberalism and Evangelicalism are merging into one another. Pastors and congregations from liberal denominations often look to what Evangelicals have produced as they seek spiritual sustenance in their increasingly empty churches.

Evangelicalism doesn't satisfy. In the end their anti-sacramental, rationalistic, and individualistic biases drive them so far away from the divine mysteries that their religion becomes void of true spiritual strength. The exaltation of faith unfettered by any solid doctrinal substance leads to a profoundly self-centered focus. While it is unfair to lump all Evangelicals together, the "health and wealth" religious hucksters on TV who sell the promise of divine blessing to losers who send in their "seed money" are simply taking modern Evangelicalism to its logical conclusion. The Me Generation has found its religious home.

While it is still necessary to have a personal relationship with Jesus, Jesus becomes more and more malleable to whatever the pop culture demands. He is, quite simply, irrelevant to the chief theological concern. One wonders if this concern is even of a theological nature. Listen to Joyce Meyer sometime and ask yourself if there is any essential difference between what she has to say and what Dr. Phil has to say. There is no need for Jesus.

But people need Jesus. They need Jesus and they need His church. They need His holy mysteries. They need a time and a place where they can get away from the corruption of our increasingly godless culture and find peace. They are looking for what we Lutherans have if we will resist the penetration of Evangelicalism into our churches. When Lutheranism becomes another form of Evangelicalism, where will disillusioned Evangelicals and the Lutherans among them have to go? They will have nowhere to turn but to Rome or to the Eastern Orthodox.^[11]

Consider what Rome offers disillusioned Evangelicals. She offers moral clarity. Which popular Evangelical preacher takes a stand against contraception? The pope does. Why should he change? He doesn't need to pander to the materialistic and self-centered ethic of a dying culture. Rome offers historical depth. She's been around. She's seen her competition come and go. She is still here. She has liturgical integrity. She looks churchly. She doesn't need to incorporate into herself whatever the popular culture demands. She takes her own culture with her. She has clear, visible, and embodied authority. She provides opportunity for personal spiritual growth without compromising the communal identity of the church. She has beautiful forms, images, architecture, and music. She has unchangeable dogma. She takes theology seriously and is willing to engage other communions within Christendom and other religions as well in making the case for the truth she claims to possess.^[12] She has sacramental depth. This means she has Jesus. Jesus is the One we need and when Evangelicals become hungry to find Him they will find Him in the Roman Catholic Church.

And there they will be confronted by the wall. They will find Jesus but the Jesus they find will forbid them to rest confident in His wounds. He will not send them home justified, but will rather leave them in "pious doubt" concerning their salvation. All roads lead to Rome. But it is Jesus who is the way, the truth, and the life, and the only way to the Father. Jesus is not only present with us. He is present to forgive us freely, to justify us by His blood, so that we may live in joy with God forever. May God give to us whom He has called to be preachers and ministers in His church the confidence that as we keep preaching – with dogmatic zeal and theological clarity – the saving gospel of Christ crucified for sinners the Holy Spirit will continue to bring sinners to the faith through which they are justified.

Soli Deo Gloria!

^[1] [Catechism of the Catholic Church](#), Paulist Press, 1994, pages 334-356.

^[2] Alliance Response to the Second ECT Document, "The Gift of Salvation" at www.alliancenet.org

^[3] See their statement of faith on www.nae.net

^[4] [The Democratization of American Christianity](#), Nathan O. Hatch, Yale University Press, 1989.

[5] See, for example, Eternal Security: Can You Be Sure?, Charles Stanley, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1990. Stanley has served as president of the Southern Baptist Convention and is a popular television preacher.

[6] Smalcald Articles, Part III, Article VIII

[7] The Purpose Driven Life, Rick Warren, Zondervan, 2002, page 213.

[8] Consider the use of D. James Kennedy's "Evangelism Explosion" by Lutheran congregations in the 1970's and the popularity of Carl F. George's Prepare Your Church for the Future among Lutherans during the 1990's.

[9] See "Why Go to Church?" and "Lutheran Worship Wars" by Rolf Preus at www.christforum.org

[10] The Purpose Driven Life, page 66.

[11] The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod has been losing a steady stream of pastors to the Orthodox in recent years.

[12] See as illustrations of this Crossing the Threshold of Hope, Pope John Paul II, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1994 and Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Ignatius Press, 2004.