

Justification as the Center of Christian Theology

By Pr. Rolf Preus

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When you get into an argument you often invest much time, emotional energy, and pride into the effort to show yourself right and your opponent wrong. When you have done so you hate to think that perhaps the argument was not worth it. If it wasn't worth it, why did you engage in it? And if the collateral damage caused by the execution of the argument was severe, it only makes it all the more compelling to find justification for it. Otherwise we have done wrong by causing needless harm in service to a contentious spirit.

And so, centuries after the debate between the papists and the Lutherans on the doctrine of justification, it seemed time to put the argument to rest, to set aside harsh judgments against the other side, and to concede, for the sake of peace and unity, that the argument did not merit the division of western Christendom. Why argue that an old argument was worth it? Why try to settle sectarian scores? Can't we have the good grace to let sleeping dogs lie? We have made so much progress. Caricatures have given way to mutual understanding. Why revisit old arguments and lay bare wounds that have taken many years to heal?

The reason we must argue the argument of the Lutherans in the Sixteenth Century is not because we need to validate a partisan cause. It certainly is not to open old wounds or to denigrate whatever progress in mutual understanding has occurred. The reason we must argue the argument is because it is the truth on which our identity as Christians, our relationship with God, and our eternal salvation rests. Simply put: it matters.

The Lutheran teaching of justification is at the very center, not only of Lutheran theology, but of all theology that can claim the name Christian. It is not in defense of the Lutherans of the Sixteenth Century or of any other age that we must make this claim. It is for the sake of the truth that God has revealed to us in his Son our Lord Jesus Christ.

Luther discovered this truth in the Bible. He discovered it only after deep conflict that raged within his heart and conscience. Luther confessed it in bold and biting polemics. It was confessed clearly in the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. But it was always the biblical teaching. Jesus himself said, “You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me.” (John 5:39) St. John the Evangelist explained why he wrote his Gospel with the words, “but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.” (John 20:31) St. Paul wrote about how Israel according to the flesh was blinded to the gospel of justification by faith alone. He wrote,

But their minds were blinded. For until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because the veil is taken away in Christ. But even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart. Nevertheless when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. 2 Corinthians 3:14-16

Only when the Lord our righteousness is revealed to faith can faith correctly discern anything else that God has to say in the Bible. The natural man who does not receive the things of the Spirit of God will naturally reject what the Bible says about his own justification. The theological task is not for those who seek to justify themselves. Indeed, self-justification is the chief cause of the distortion of the clear meaning of the Holy Scriptures.

Justification by faith alone must be at the center of all Christian teaching precisely because justification by faith alone contradicts the religious impulse of man at its very foundation. For the unregenerate man, everything pertaining to religion – God, faith, law, life, death, heaven, and hell – must be grounded in his own good deeds done to ensure that he has God’s approval and acceptance. Since legalism is at the root of all human religion, the negation of legalism must be at the root of the divine revelation. This is so because man is evil and God is good.

We should not shy away from talking about Luther's experience or about religious experience in general. Faith is experiential. Since the center of Christian theology is justification by faith alone the center of Christian theology has to do with experience. You cannot disjoin theology from the faith of the faithful. Faith is born where God justifies the sinner. God's justification of the sinner through faith alone is a justification that is experienced.

We may and should speak of the outside of us feature of our justification. The righteousness of Christ's perfect obedience and vicarious suffering lies outside of us. The validity of the oral absolution does not depend on the hearing or faith of the one who receives it. The trustworthiness of the gospel itself is based on God's faithfulness, not on our faith. But the justification that is true outside of our experience of it is the justification that becomes ours through the faith that receives it. This faith lies within us. That is to say, it is experienced by us.

This does not mean that our justification is validated by a religious experience. It does not mean that anyone's experience is the norm of what is true. Faith does not prove anything. The only source and norm of true Christian teaching is the Holy Scriptures. What it does mean is that justification is not only the center of a system of Christian theology; it is the defining truth that identifies a Christian as a Christian.

The justification of the sinner before God makes a sinner a saint. This is God's greatest work. Since man is the crown of God's creation the justification of sinful man is God's greatest achievement. This is why the angels preached about glory in heaven when Mary became the mother of God and laid him in a manger. "God is man; man to deliver." That is why Jesus spoke of his glorification as his going to the cross where he would take away the sin of the world. The justification of sinners is God's greatest work. It brings God more glory than anything else he does. The slogan, *Soli Deo Gloria* must, if it is to be more than a slogan, place justification at the center of everything that we say about God. The theology that gives God all the glory is the theology of God's justification of sinners. The two are inseparable. "Glory be to God on high and on earth peace, goodwill toward men." There is glory to God in the highest precisely because God's peace and goodwill are here on earth. And

that peace and goodwill are not a future goal but a present reality wherever the gospel of justification is preached and taught and believed.

Since the justification of the sinner is the means by which God makes the sinner into a saint, the theological task and the pastoral task are one and the same. This would suggest that theologians be pastors and that pastors be theologians. A theologian who is not a pastor might skew his theology into some sort of political, social, or psychological system – neat, tidy, and irrelevant to the sinner’s genuine spiritual needs. This pretty much describes modern theology. Torn away from the pastoral task of caring for souls the theologian identifies more with other theologians than he does with sinners who need the forgiveness of sins. Since academics are more brutally style-conscious than high school girls, this means that the theological task will invariably miss or distort the pastoral task.

A pastor who is not a theologian might substitute for the gospel of the imputed righteousness of Jesus a “how to” system of overcoming whatever problems most visibly trouble the church. The anti-intellectual, anti-clerical, anti-creedal spirit of American Evangelicalism is most clearly revealed in its rigid pragmatism. Does it work?

How do you know if something works? You look and see. There is no room here for a righteousness hidden under the cross, an alien righteousness to which we cling even though neither we nor the world around us can see it. Combine this pragmatism with the democratic spirit that deifies the masses and marketing becomes the chief objective of gospel proclamation. My father used to call it the “Walmartization” of the church in America. A pastor who is not first of all a sound evangelical theologian will succumb to the gods of the market and when they crash he will crash with them.

“All Theology is Christology” has become a slogan for some Lutherans and, as slogans go, it’s a pretty good one. But this slogan does not necessarily tell us that justification is at the center of all Christian theology. Obviously, all Christian theology is Christology – otherwise it wouldn’t be Christian! But what makes justification the center of all Christian theology is not just that it is about Jesus. Rome teaches the truth about Jesus. But Rome teaches falsely

about the justification of the sinner. Christology pertains to who Jesus is and what he has done, is doing, and will do. There is no justification without Christology. But it is quite possible to speak the truth about Jesus – his eternal generation from the Father and his conception and birth of the Virgin Mary, his obedience, vicarious suffering, redemption of the world, and resurrection – and yet define justification falsely. It is not enough that I know the truth about Jesus. I must know the truth about Jesus and me. I must know that his living and dying for me is my personal guarantee that I stand before God righteous, clothed in the very righteousness of Christ, and that I am a saint who lives under the favor of God.

We Lutherans must never concede to the Baptists, Methodists, Pentecostals, or any other Protestants that their theology has more to do with a personal relationship with Jesus while ours pertains more to correct doctrine. Correct doctrine that does not establish a living relationship with God is a dead orthodoxy that neither glorifies God nor brings his peace and goodwill to men. Justification is through faith. There are not two justifications: objective and subjective. There is only one justification that can be considered both from the objective side of its universal truth and validity and from the subjective side of receiving forgiveness and righteousness in God's gospel through faith alone.

When God reckons to us the righteousness of Christ he establishes a relationship with us from which we hear him and live on every word he speaks to us. It is within this relationship, as dear children of their dear Father, that God teaches us everything he wants us to know about himself, about us, about life, love, truth, righteousness, and the battle against sin, death, and the devil. God's doctrine is God's activity among us. As he teaches us he justifies us. We may not dissociate the one from the other. Christian doctrine does not become pastoral and personally compelling. It is. It is or it is not Christian doctrine.

We know God as God justifies us. We learn how to read his holy Word. We understand who God is and what faith in God is in light of God justifying us through faith alone. We understand God's law when we know we have received the credit for Christ's submission to it. We understand what the

Church is and what the ministry of the Church is only when we know how it is that God turns sinners into saints. Only from a right understanding of faith can the exercise of faith in prayer be understood. So let us consider how justification is the light that illumines the Holy Scriptures, the doctrine of God, of faith in God, of the law, of church and ministry, and of prayer.

Justification and the Bible

To say that justification is at the center of all Christian theology is not to say that justification is the norm of Christian teaching. The canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the only rule and norm according to which all teachings and teachers in the Church are to be evaluated and judged. The Bible is the only norm or standard of Christian teaching because it is the only source of Christian teaching. God wrote the Bible. The normative authority of the Bible comes from its authorship, not its content. It isn't normative because of what it says. It is normative because of who says it. The prophets and apostles spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.

To make the gospel of justification a norm for itself is to void it of its divine content and turn it into an empty shell into which unregenerate man can put whatever notions come into his head and pass them off as if God said it. The Bible, not the gospel, is the norm for the teaching of the Church. The gospel is, however, an interpretive principle in the light of which we can ascertain whether or not we are reading the Bible as God wants us to read it. If you read the Bible and don't find the gospel in it you are misreading the Bible.

Years ago at the first congregation I served I had a parishioner who had become a Lutheran via a short and inadequate class that left her with many questions. She knew that our congregation did not permit membership in certain secret societies, notably the Masonic Lodge, but she could not understand why. She told me that she had been a member of Job's Daughters when she belonged to the Presbyterian Church. What was wrong with that? I asked her what they did in Job's Daughters. She said that they read the book of Job. "Well, there's nothing wrong with reading Job," I said. Then I asked her what the book of Job said about Jesus. "Nothing," she said. So we opened up a Bible and turned to Job chapter 19 and read those familiar words, "I know that my Redeemer lives and that he shall stand at the latter day upon

this earth.” She saw immediately what was there. And then she understood what was wrong with the Masonic Lodge. Why would they take Jesus out of the Bible?

Our theology influences how we interpret the Bible and nobody is free from a theological orientation. If justification is at the center of all theology then we will find Jesus in the Old Testament wherever Jesus is taught in the Old Testament. We will assume that the Old Testament Christians trusted in a personal Savior from sin just as we do and that they knew they were justified through faith alone. There is no room for any form of dispensationalism among those for whom justification is the center of the divine revelation. If justification is at the heart of the whole Bible we will not try to find in the Psalmist David what the holy apostles say is to be found only in Christ. When David is speaking of Jesus and for Jesus he is speaking of Jesus and for Jesus. We will not look for a young woman of Isaiah’s day to be an immediate fulfillment for what the Virgin Mary was an ultimate fulfillment – as if the Old Testament Christians were ignorant of the Virgin birth. It is for the sake of the centrality of justification that we hold to the historic Lutheran rectilinear view of messianic prophesy and reject the intrusion of a Reformed hermeneutic that proposes double meanings and partial fulfillments. Our devotion to the centrality of justification enables us to interpret the Bible correctly, not imposing a foreign meaning upon the text, but drawing out from the text its natural sense, unimpeded by false theological presuppositions.

I was browsing through the book section at Sam’s Club a while back and I found a book called The Beginning Reader’s Bible, published by Tommy Nelson, a division of Thomas Nelson Publishers, in 2011. It excised from the text passages that the editors apparently felt the beginning reader did not need to read. Verses 15 and 16 were taken out of the third chapter of Genesis. Apparently, those responsible for this children’s Bible thought that while creation and the first sin were important for the children to know, the first gospel promise was not. According to the real Bible, God gave the first gospel promise – that the virgin born Savior would by his suffering crush the lying head of the devil – before God spoke his word of judgment against either the woman or the man. The gospel was removed from this children’s Bible. Whoever did it did not know the first thing about how to interpret the Bible.

As a result, the little lambs are being denied the gospel by well-meaning parents and grandparents who buy such books.

Justification and the Doctrine of God

How do we approach the teaching of who God is? Do we begin with the Unity or with the Trinity? We could begin with the natural knowledge of God, proceed to a listing of his attributes as given in the Bible, and finish off with an articulation of the Trinity. Or, we could begin with the Trinity and move from the relationship of the persons to the unity of the Godhead. Both approaches have their advocates.

But let's ask the question: What would Jesus do? What did Jesus do? Jesus taught the teacher of Israel that the one and only God is triune by directing him to where the Son of Man is lifted up on the cross to take away the sin of the world. There is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is as Jesus bears in his body the sin of the world and removes God's condemnation from us all that God is revealed as God to us and we can know him. That is how Jesus taught the doctrine of God to Nicodemus.

Later on in the Gospel of St. John, Jesus joins his death to the sending of the Holy Spirit who will convince the world of righteousness. Not only is it impossible to understand the work of the Triune God except in light of our justification through faith alone, it is impossible to understand who God is. There is no fatherhood of God except as he is revealed as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and that revelation occurs as the Lord Jesus Christ comes vicariously for our justification by water and by blood. In the Jordan where Jesus is pledged to fulfill all righteousness for us and on the cross where Jesus, the Lamb of God, bears away the sin of the world is where the eternal relationship between the Father and the Son is revealed. We cannot know who the Spirit is or what he does apart from him taking what is Christ's and declaring it to us, that is, apart from him reckoning to us the righteousness of Jesus and thereby justifying us.

Justification and Faith

How do we keep faith from turning into a work? We define it and identify it according to its function in receiving the forgiveness of sins for Christ's sake.

Rome's problem with faith is that it defines faith apart from justification. Once faith is defined as a theological virtue it cannot then become the purely receptive organ through which the sinner is justified.

Popular Evangelicalism might possibly have a theoretical adherence to justification by faith, but justification is subordinated to the religious experience. This experience may be the decision to invite the Lord Jesus into one's heart or it may be a baptism in the Holy Spirit. It doesn't really matter. In either case, the religious experience is the hermeneutic or interpretive principle by which all doctrine is to be understood.

This is backwards. It is rather God's justification of the sinner through faith that defines the religious experience. We cannot define faith apart from justification. The reason faith is falsely defined as a decision or as a theological virtue is because it is defined apart from its reception of the righteousness by which we are justified by God. It is not enough to reject all forms of synergism and to insist that faith is worked by God alone without human cooperation. We must also insist that faith is born where God reveals himself in Christ as the One who justifies the ungodly by imputing to him the righteousness of Jesus. Thus faith will be formed by what it receives and it will thereafter be defined according to God's declaration of forgiveness for Christ's sake. This is how both Moses and Paul defined faith when they wrote that God reckoned Abraham's faith to him as righteousness.

Justification and God's Law

It was a false misleading dream
That God his law had given
That sinners could themselves redeem
And by their works gain heaven
The law is but a mirror bright
That brings the inbred sin to light
That lurks within our nature.

It is impossible to understand God's law correctly as long as one attempts to justify himself by obeying it. Self-justification is essentially self-deification because it is God who justifies. If we could gain God's verdict of justification

by what we do we would be in charge of the law. But such a law could not be divine. A law with binding divine authority over us is a law over which God is in charge. The only way that God can be in charge of his law is if it plays no role whatsoever in the justification of the sinner. To the extent that the sinner can justify himself by the law to the same extent the sinner is lord over the law. What kind of a law would it be where the lawbreaker could use it to advance himself?

This is precisely what is wrong with what is falsely identified as Evangelicalism. Because the doctrine of justification is given lip service (if that!) and ignored, the law's accusatory function is forgotten and the law mutates into a list of doable principles for successful living. Pastors who don't know their jobs (more on this later) succumb to the temptation to preach "practical" sermons on how to overcome this or that personal problem by the correct application of legal principles.

The preacher is never in charge of the law. We don't empower it to accuse. It is God's law. God is always the one in charge of it. It is not our duty to make it do what only God can do. It is our duty to preach it. But who would dare? Who would dare to set forth the law in its full severity if he did not know that a man is justified through faith alone? Only when we know that there is a sure and certain hope for people who are and remain as guilty as sin will we have the stomach to preach the law clearly. And if anything is lacking in the church today it is clear law preaching.

As far as the external requirements of the law are concerned, Rome appears to have a more solid foundation in God's word than does most of Protestantism. Abortion, divorce, war, planned barrenness, money as the measure of human worth, and various related evils will often be identified as such by Roman Catholic sources. But Rome's false doctrine of justification compromises God's law in its most crucial purpose: its theological purpose to condemn even the Christian. Rome's scholastic mixture of nature and grace requires her to define concupiscence in a Christian, not as sin in the proper sense, but merely as a propensity that leads to sin. But the Bible disagrees. Jesus says, "For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies." (Matthew 15:19) Jesus identifies the inclination

to sin as sin. The desire to sin is sin. The tendency to sin is sin. An orientation to sin is sin. Rome cannot afford to teach any such thing. Their doctrine of justification requires that the law be doable. Since no Christian is permitted to believe that he is righteous by the reckoning to him of Christ's vicarious obedience, the law must be modified so that it no longer condemns Christians. The moralism of Rome may be a bit more sophisticated than the common garden variety of Evangelical moralism sold out of the bins at Sam's Club, but moralism is moralism and it's a far cry from the law that demands a perfect heart and sends the sinner fleeing for refuge to God's infinite mercy freely bestowed for the sake of the holy, innocent, bitter, suffering and death of Jesus Christ.

Justification and the Church

We do not know what the Church is if we don't know how a sinner becomes a saint. The Church is a communion of saints. The greatest treasure the Church has is the righteousness that avails before God. Call it the gospel, call it the means of grace, call it the forgiveness of sins, whatever we call it, it is what makes the Church the Church.

We Lutherans emphasize the means of grace when we talk about the Church and for good reason. The means of grace are the marks of the Church. They identify the Church for what she is. Wherever the gospel is purely preached and the sacraments are rightly administered, there is the Holy Spirit who calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies his Church on earth, keeping it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. But what makes the means of grace means of grace? What is it about the gospel and the sacraments that guarantee for us that wherever they are found the Church will be found so that the means of grace are infallible marks of the Church?

St. Paul says that the reason the gospel is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes is because the righteousness of God is revealed in it. He writes:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from

faith to faith; as it is written, “The just shall live by faith.” (Romans 1:16-17)

The righteousness of God is the righteousness of Christ’s obedience and suffering. The individual’s personal justification through faith alone is what makes him a Christian. Consider the various biblical metaphors for the Church and you will find that the corporate reality depends on individuals. A body has different parts to it. A building is made up of materials. A nation, a priesthood, a people are collective nouns that are comprised of the individual members of it.

We distort the doctrine of the Church by denigrating individualism. The doctrine of justification by faith alone is the most radically individualistic teaching ever taught. The just shall live by his faith, not by the faith of another, even if the other is the entire Holy Christian Church on earth. Unless our ecclesiology is subordinated to the doctrine of justification the Church will become an oppressive bully. Just consider the natural inclination of those who belong! But the Church has no claim to being the Church except for the fact that she is comprised of Christians who are individually justified through their own personal faith.

When the righteousness that avails before God is regarded as the hallmark of the Church we will not seek out an identity for her that trades off her true identity for a cheap counterfeit. We Lutherans must learn to take this to heart. Why do men leave the Lutheran Church for Rome or some Eastern Orthodox sect? They do not permit the central article to be the central article. They seek some form of authenticity – whether historical, aesthetic, cultural, or political – that they think is lacking in Lutheranism. What they fail to see is that without the pure teaching of justification they are nothing and their church is nothing, all impressive pretenses notwithstanding. The wealth of the Church, what makes her the Church, what identifies her as the Church, is the obedience and suffering of Jesus as our righteousness before God that is proclaimed to sinners and received through faith alone.

Justification and the Ministry of the Word

Jesus established the ministry of the Word so that we may obtain the faith through which we are justified. This is what we confess in the Augsburg Confession. In article four we confess:

Our churches also 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 on account of Christ, who by his death made satisfaction for our sins. This faith God imputes for righteousness in his sight (Rom. 3-4).

How do we obtain this faith that God imputes for righteousness in his sight? In article five we confess:

In order that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and the sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given, and the Holy Spirit produces faith, where and when it pleases God, in those who hear the Gospel. That is to say, it is not on account of our own merits but on account of Christ that God justifies those who believe that they are received into favor for Christ's sake. Gal. 3:14, "That we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith."

Our churches condemn the Anabaptists and others who think that the Holy Spirit comes to men without the external Word, through their own preparations and works.

Note the tight connection between justification by faith alone and the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments. The former is the reason why the latter was instituted. Should we forget this, we will assign to pastors all sorts of duties that do not belong to them as ministers of Christ. Their God-given duties are to teach the Gospel and administer the sacraments – nothing else. This is what the Lord Jesus gave them to do after he suffered and died on the cross to take away the sin of the world and rose from the dead. St. Paul says that Jesus was crucified because of our sins and was raised again

because of our justification. His resurrection is the absolution of the world. As the risen Lord Jesus Christ he gives to his ministers the responsibility to teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, teaching them to hold on to everything he taught them. He commands them to preach the gospel to every creature. He tells them that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name to all nations. He breathes on them and tells them to forgive and retain sins. Read in the Gospels what the Lord Jesus says to the apostles as the Church's first pastors and you will see that the Augsburg Confession has it right. The ministers of the word are to preach the gospel and administer the sacraments so that those whose sins Jesus took away on the cross might receive by faith the forgiveness of sins.

There are two common errors promoted among us about the ministry of the word, both of which have come about by severing the connection that the Bible makes between the ministry and justification by faith alone. The first error is the error of lazy laymen. The second error is the error of papistic pastors.

The error of lazy laymen is to confine the means of grace to an office of the Church as if the individual Christian has no personal responsibility to teach God's word to his own family. The word of God is greater than the office to which its proclamation has been entrusted. This does not mean that everyone is a minister or a preacher. It means that the ministry of the word belongs to every individual Christian as his birthright as a Christian. When St. Paul says in Galatians that all Christians, regardless of race, sex, or station in life, are heirs of the promises God gave to Abraham he is saying the same thing he says in 1 Corinthians where he insists, "All things are yours." The pastor has nothing, owns nothing, and is entitled to nothing that does not belong to every single Christian.

Those who think that the only instruction in God's word their children need is what the pastor gives them don't know the strength of sin and the flesh or the power of God's word when spoken, confessed, read, or taught by a layman. What an irony that, in response to the errors of the Church Growth Movement that replace the power of the gospel with marketing principles, a subtle form

of sacerdotalism should emerge, denying to the laity the duty to do what God through Moses commanded all Israel to do.

You don't need Sunday schools, Bible schools, or parochial schools. There's not a word about any of these things in the Bible. You need fathers and mothers who love God's word and want to teach God's word to their children and who do so. I am not saying that Sunday schools and parochial schools are a bad idea. I am saying that they are unnecessary. Their only purpose is to assist parents in doing what God gave the parents to do and teaching the gospel to our children is the most fundamental duty of Christian fatherhood and motherhood. Why is that? It is because there is nothing our children need more than the righteousness that avails before God, the righteousness of Christ, the righteousness of faith, the perfect righteousness of Christ's perfect obedience and vicarious suffering and death. To confine to an office of the Church all responsibility in teaching this gospel to the lambs of the flock is to put their souls in jeopardy. Every Christian father is the pastor of his family because we are justified through faith alone and faith needs the constant nurture that God's word provides.

The means of grace are not confined to an office of the Church. The doctrine of justification informs and interprets the doctrine of the ministry. A ministry that is instituted specifically so that we might be justified through faith must of necessity be the possession of those whose faith depends upon it. Ignoring this leads to sacerdotalism. But sacerdotalism is not imposed on the laity against their will. They welcome it as an excuse to ignore their God given duty to teach God's word to their children.

The answer to sacerdotalism must not be a denigration of the office that our Lord Jesus instituted. The error of lazy laymen has an evil twin. It is the error of papistic pastors who insist on adding to or taking away from the one and only office that the Lord Jesus instituted in his Church as if it is theirs to fold, spindle, and mutilate at will. Jesus instituted this office exclusively for the purpose of administering the means of grace. Jesus Christ personally instituted an office which, if it is entrusted to a man, he has the responsibility of preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments. This is the only office Jesus instituted. This is the only office the Church needs.

Many debates have arisen among Lutherans on the ministry of the word and most of them have been less than productive. Much trouble could be avoided were we Lutherans who engage in these debates to keep our enthusiasms in check by holding fast to justification by faith alone as the hermeneutical light to understand this holy institution. When debates about form and substance ignore the substance they bog down into legalistic and sectarian squabbling.

Perceived legalism on one side breeds legalistic reaction on the other side, and sad to say, this describes much of the history of the debates about the ministry among the heirs to the theology of C. F. W. Walther.

There is an opinion proposed against the alleged legalism of insisting that Christ instituted solely the pastoral office for the public administration of the means of grace. This opinion is that the office of divine institution may be divided into different parts, each part being a form of the office that is as divinely instituted as the entire office or any other part of it. Those of this persuasion claim that the teaching of C. F. W. Walther and the old Synodical Conference is untenable in insisting that the pastoral office, that is, the office to which the full exercise of the means of grace has been entrusted, is the only divinely fixed form of office.

When considering this formless doctrine of the ministry we should keep in mind the words of Moses describing what was without form as void. Remember that. If it is without form it will be void as well. That is how it works in nature and that is how it works in theology. Formless abstractions lose all their substance very quickly.

We must appeal to the clear words of Jesus that he spoke to the Church's first pastors when he sent out the apostles to preach the gospel and administer the sacraments. Jesus gave all of the ministers the same duties. The duties all pertain directly to the justification of sinners through faith. If the duties are not for the purpose of obtaining justifying faith they do not belong to the ministry of the word.

When Jesus established the office of preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments for the purpose of engendering and sustaining the faith through which we are justified, he joined gospel proclamation to sacramental administration. What God has joined together, let not man put asunder. Sacraments without gospel proclamation become legalistic rituals. Teaching without sacraments becomes abstract theologizing. The sacraments are not legal ordinances. They justify, and no one is justified by the law. “I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins.” “Given and shed for you for the remission of sins.” The gospel and the sacraments go together. This bond is not merely by human arrangement. It is the office that Jesus established.

The notion that Jesus did not institute any particular form of office should be called the formless view of the ministry, not the functional view of the ministry. What is the office, if not functional? The office exists solely for the sake of the function for which our Lord established it: that we may obtain and possess the faith through which we are justified by God.

The very fact that Jesus established only one office in and for his Church on earth, the preaching office, which exists solely for the purpose of proclaiming the gospel and administering the sacraments through which God gives us forgiveness of sins and by which God works faith in our hearts to receive the forgiveness of sins, is proof that justification through faith alone is at the center of all Christian teaching. Once we start slicing the office that Jesus gave us into its various constituent parts and then refashioning it by taking some of these parts and attaching to them things that are not subsumed under the preaching of the gospel and administration of the sacraments we have created new offices that are not the ministry by which we obtain the faith through which we are justified.

Just a few of these manmade offices are: parochial school teachers, district and synodical presidents, planned giving counselors, publishing house executives, Sunday school teachers, congregational elders, directors of Christian education, and the list goes on. These offices may or may not be useful. They may be held by men who are ordained and qualified to serve as pastors or by men and women who are not qualified to serve as pastors. The

church is free to create as many such offices as she pleases to assist churches and their pastors in carrying out the divinely established work God has given them to do. But, for the sake of the gospel of justification by faith alone, we must distinguish between what God gave to the Church and what the Church in Christian freedom chooses to do or leave undone. God gave the Church pastors. The Church is not free to do without them. Why? Because the Church, if she is to be the Church, must have men to preach the gospel and administer the sacraments of Christ, the means by which we obtain the faith through which we are justified by God.

Once we define offices that are not the office of preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments as the ministry of the Word we will fall into legalism and the doctrine of justification will suffer. It has been suggested that a synod has kingdom of the left hand authority, what we might call Fourth Commandment authority. It is also suggested that synodical executives are ministers of the Word with divine calls to carry out their synodical work. This would mean that God calls men to serve his church with the coercive authority of the kingdom of his left hand. But the purpose of Christ's ministry is not coercive or legal. It does not fall under the Fourth Commandment. The gospel forces no one to do anything. A minister of the gospel has no left-hand kingdom authority at all. (AC XXVIII, Treatise)

The insistence of our confessional Lutheran fathers in America that a synod was to have advisory authority only over a congregation was not simply to bow to democratic demands of the New World. It was to safeguard the gospel itself. Once the church as church submits to a coercive authority that appeals to the Fourth Commandment she has abandoned the ministry of the Word as a divine institution of the gospel and has replaced it with a human institution of the law.

A district or synodical president may indeed proclaim the gospel by which sinners are justified. When he does so, he is carrying out a duty that Jesus gave to the pastoral office. This does not make a district president or a synodical president a pastor. The ministry of the Word must be sharply distinguished from a humanly established office that implements human decisions relying on the application of human rules. If it isn't the preaching by

which we are justified it is not the ministry of the Word that the Lord Jesus established in and for his Church on earth.

Justification and Prayer

You can tell Lutherans that prayer is not a means of grace and they will piously assent to your words. But they won't believe you. They will keep on believing prayer is a means of grace and they will keep treating it as a means of grace. They will therefore put their trust, their hope for forgiveness, their eternal destiny in their own hands instead of in the hands of their gracious God. So we must persevere and keep on preaching and teaching and expounding on this truth: the Holy Spirit comes to us and justifies us by speaking to us in God's word and sacraments and whatever purports to be from God that is not the speaking of God in God's word and sacraments is not from God at all but from the devil.

And that goes for prayer, too.

How do you know God has forgiven you your sins? Is it because you prayed to him and asked him to? Is it because God answers prayer and you prayed and so your prayer is now your assurance that God forgives you? If such were the case we'd have no need for churches or pastors, for preaching or the sacraments, or for the crucifixion of Jesus either for that matter, we could all just pray to God for whatever we wanted and since God must answer our prayer we could then believe that we had it.

But when we pray God for our daily bread we still go to the cupboard and see what is there, take something out of the freezer to thaw, or perhaps get in our car and drive to the local restaurant. We've never seen God drop a dinner on our table from heaven in response to the prayer, "Give us this day our daily bread." But do we doubt that the dinner on our table is God answering our prayer for daily bread? Likewise, when we pray to God, "Forgive us our trespasses," we go to where God himself has promised he forgives us our trespasses. Faith may be expressed in prayer, but faith is grounded in God's word. Why? Because God's word is the means by which God justifies us.

Until we are justified through faith we cannot pray to God. Does God answer our prayers for forgiveness? Of course he does. But our prayers do not justify us before God. “Ask and you will receive,” Jesus says. But asking is asking and receiving is receiving. We who pray for the forgiveness of sins that God gives us in Christ pray as those who have already received the forgiveness of sins that God gives us in his word. We are already justified by God for Christ’s sake. We do not pray to God to make him willing to do what he has already done. We don’t pray to God to actualize his promises to us. We pray in faith and faith is faith because of God’s declaration of justification to it. God justifies us by his grace, by Christ’s blood, by his word, through faith and from that faith our prayers are prayed.

We pray with confidence even though we are not in control. We don’t need to be empowered by God. We need to be made weak so that we may learn of the sufficiency of his grace and the perfection of his strength in weakness. We have come to know of God’s power under the humility and suffering of his Son. We can trust that the God who controls and governs all of creation does what he does for the sake of those he has justified. This is why St. Paul can boast of his suffering, Christ’s suffering, and God’s justification of him. His beautiful litany of praise in Romans 8 is a perfect example of justification issuing into prayer.

Conclusion

When God reckons to us guilty sinners the obedience and suffering of his Son as that righteousness that avails before him so that we who are trusting in Jesus can know with the certainty that God cannot lie that we stand before God righteous, not only do we know God as God wants us to know him, but we know everything worth knowing in this life. All theology becomes a pasture of good food for us, a delicious feast of choice pieces and fine wines. Nothing God says is unimportant, boring, or so far above us that we cannot grasp it. All of it is light on our way. And if it isn’t theological – if God didn’t say it – it may be all well and good and perhaps even useful for a while, but in the end, superfluous to our lives as children of God.

The true doctrine of justification is that light that lightens all of theology and makes it the joyful conversation of God’s people everywhere. The debate of

the Sixteenth Century is the argument of the ages and it determines whether our talk about God has any true and lasting value. God talk that is spoken by God's saints is precious indeed. It's the talk of angels. Thank God we can talk it here on earth where we live.

Soli Deo Gloria!