

Luther Revisited:
The Doctrine of Justification Is Still the Issue

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There are two things we can say about doctrinal error. First, every doctrinal error contradicts the teaching of the Holy Scriptures. Second, every doctrinal error is an attack on the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Now the first of these assertions is simple and easy to demonstrate. The Bible is God's Word. Any assertion that contradicts the Bible must be false. Jesus told the Sadducees who denied the resurrection that their error was due to their ignorance of the Bible (Mt. 22:29). The second assertion is not always so easy to prove. How does this or that error militate against the doctrine of justification? Twenty-five years ago, during the debate in the Lutheran Church -- Missouri Synod over the inerrancy of the Bible, the so-called "moderates" frequently argued that the doctrine of biblical inerrancy couldn't be binding precisely because it denial, in their judgment, did not undermine the doctrine of justification. That was Paul Bretscher's argument in his book, [After the Purifying](#). This argument has also been used to challenge traditional doctrine and practice on such matters as closed Communion and the ordination of women. This position came to be called "Gospel Reductionism" by conservatives who argued that we must determine what s true and false doctrine by the standard of Scripture alone. It is the Bible, not the Gospel, which is and must be the norm of doctrine for the Church.

It is precisely at this point that the so-called "moderates" accused the conservatives of displacing the gospel of justification as the central article of

Christian doctrine and replacing it with a sub-Lutheran, fundamentalistic, legalistic biblicism. The conservatives vigorously denied these charges. It is not true, they argued, that insistence on biblical inerrancy will obscure the centrality of the gospel. On the contrary, they maintained that it is for the sake of the doctrine of justification that we must affirm the inerrancy of the Bible. The conservatives were right. The denial of the inerrancy and the historicity of the Bible takes away from the gospel its flesh and blood reality and leaves us with nothing more than religious ideas.

But did the so-called "moderates" have a point? Was there within the conservative movement a sub-Lutheran, fundamentalistic, legalistic spirit seeking to displace the doctrine of justification as the central, essential doctrine on which the church stands or falls? After all, the devil constantly infiltrates orthodox churches and movements and his sole goal is to keep sinners from trusting in the righteousness of Christ. Whether one formally rejects this righteousness as Rome does; ignores it as most Protestants do; or relegates it to the periphery of the church's proclamation as many Lutherans do; it matters little to the father of lies. Among Lutherans who formally hold to the pure doctrine on the justification of the sinner, the "*deep guile and great might*" of the devil are seen in how effectively he changes the subject.

For Luther, the subject is always the righteousness which avails before God. Every defense of every article of Christian teaching is always and only for the sake of this central truth of justification. Luther knew that every doctrinal error was an attack on the doctrine of justification. I invite you to revisit Lutheran with me to find three things. First, let's hear Luther on the topic of justification. Second, let's listen to him place this topic in its proper place. Third, let us shine the light of this precious teaching on some of the significant doctrinal issue of our day.

One of the most clear and thorough as well as beautiful treatments of justification is found in Luther's lectures on Galatians of 1531. Commenting on Galatians 3:13 (which reads), "**Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us, for it is written, Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.**" Luther says:

And this is our highest comfort, to clothe and wrap Christ this way in my sins, your sins, and the sins of the entire world, and in this way to behold Him bearing all our sins. When He is beheld this way, He easily removes all the fanatical opinions of our opponents about justification by works. For the papists dream about a kind of faith "formed by love." Through this they want to remove sins and be justified. This is clearly to unwrap Christ and to unclthe Him from our sins, to make Him innocent, to burden and overwhelm ourselves

with our own sins, and to behold them, not in Christ, but in ourselves. This is to abolish Christ and make Him useless. For if it is true that we abolish sins by works of the Law and by love, then Christ does not take them away, but we do. But if He is truly the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, who became a curse for us, and who was wrapped in our sins, it necessarily follows that we cannot be justified and take away sins through love. For God has laid our sins, not upon us but upon Christ, His Son. If they are all taken away by Him, then they cannot be taken away by us. All Scripture says this, and we confess and pray the same thing in the creed when we say "I believe in Jesus Christ the Son of God, who suffered, was crucified, and died for us.

This is the most joyous of all doctrines and the one that contains the most comfort. It teaches that we have the indescribable and inestimable mercy and love of God. When the merciful Father saw that we were being oppressed through the Law, that we were being held under a curse, and that we could not be liberated from it by anything, He sent His Son into the world, heaped all the sins of all men upon Him, and said to Him: "Be Peter the denier; Paul the persecutor, blasphemer, and assaulter; David the adulterer; the sinner who ate the apple in Paradise; the thief on the cross. In short, be the person of all men, the one who has committed the sins of all men. And see to it that You pay and make satisfaction for them." Now the Law comes and says: "I find Him a sinner, who take upon Himself the sins of all me. I do not see any other sins than those in Him. Therefore let Him die on the cross!" And so it attacked Him and kills Him. By this deed the whole world is purged and expiated from all sins, and thus it is set free from death and from every evil. But when sin and death have been abolished by the one man, God does not want to see anything else in the whole world, especially if we were to believe, except sheer cleansing and righteousness. And if any remnants of sin were to remain, still for the sake of Christ, the shining Sun, God would not notice them.

This is how we must magnify the doctrine of Christian righteousness in opposition to the righteousness of the Law and of works, even though there is no voice of eloquence that can properly understand, much less express, its greatness. Therefore, the argument that Paul presents here is the most powerful and the highest of all arguments against the righteousness of the flesh; for it contains this invincible and irrefutable antithesis: If the sins of the entire world are on one man, Jesus Christ, then they are not on the world. Against, if Christ Himself is made guilty of all the sins that we have all

committed, then we are absolved from all sins, not through ourselves or through our own works or merits but through Him. But if He is innocent and does not carry our sins, then we carry them, and shall die and be damned in them. "But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ! Amen."

As I often warn, therefore, the doctrine of justification must be learned diligently. For in it are included all the other doctrines of our faith; and if it is sound, all the others are sound as well. (LW 28, 279-280, 283).

Everything is included in the doctrine of justification. The doctrine of God, the holy Trinity, the two natures in Christ, the law, sin, the atonement, faith, works, love, baptism, the Lord's Supper, the office of the ministry is there. Like the spaghetti sauce ad of T.V. "It's in there." Not only is every topic of Christian doctrine in there, but every doctrinal issue is settled there as well. Every issue is simply another facet of the doctrine of justification. Every defense of the truth at any point is and must be a defense of justification, and if it is not them it is not a defense of the truth at all. It is merely doctrinal dueling for carnal purposes. If we aren't defending and promoting this article of Christian doctrine, then we aren't defending and promoting Christianity.

Listen to Luther as he places justification in its proper place.

This is the highest article of our faith, and if one should abandon it as the Jews do or pervert it like the Papists, the Church cannot stand nor can God maintain His glory which consists in this, that He might be merciful and that He desires to pardon sins for His Son's sake and to save. (Erl. ed. Lat. 10,137)*

If this doctrine of justification is lost, the whole Christian doctrine is lost. (op. 21,20)*

This doctrine can never be urged and taught enough. If this doctrine is overthrown or disappears, then all knowledge of the truth is lost at the same time. If this doctrine flourishes, the all good things flourish, religion, true worship, the glory of God and the right knowledge of all conditions of life and of all things. (op. cit. 21,12)*

Therefore I say (as I have often said) that there is no power and remedy against the sects except this one article of Christian righteousness. If you lose this it is impossible to avoid other errors or the sects. We see this today in the fanatics, the Anabaptists, the Sacramentarians, who having set aside this doctrine never stop doing away with other doctrines, erring, and seducing others. And

there is no doubt that they will raise up more sects and invent new works. But what are all these things, even though they seem fine and very holy, compared with the death and blood of the Son of God Who gave Himself for me? (WA 40, 296)*

Nothing in this article can be given up or compromised, even if heaven and earth and things temporal should be destroyed. For as St. Peter says, "There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved," (Acts 4:12). "And with His stripes we are healed" (Isa. 53:5). On this article rests all that we teach and practice against the pope, the devil, and the world. There we must be quite certain and have no doubts about it. Otherwise all is lost, and the pope, the devil, and all our adversaries will gain the victory. (SA II I 5)

* quoted from the files of Robert Preus entitled, "Luther Quotations & Justification" no date.

Luther is very predictable. In 1520 he attacks the sacramental system of the Roman Church in his tract, "**The Babylonian Captivity of the Church.**" In 1527 he writes "**That These Words of Christ, 'This is My Body' Still Stand Against the Fanatics.**" In 1537 he writes the Smalcald Articles. In 1545 he writes "**Against the Roman Papacy, An Institution of the Devil.**" In every one of these writings his topic is the same. Whether he is defending the real presence, the principle of Scripture Alone, the true office of the ministry, or whether he is attacking the sacrifice of the mass, or the enthusiasts who acted as if they had swallowed the Holy Ghost, feathers and all, his consistent theme never changes. It is always the righteousness of Christ which is given to faith. We would do well today to follow Luther's example.

Why do we defend biblical inerrancy, traditional Christian morality, the binding nature of dogma, the Lutheran doctrine of the ministry, and the historic liturgy? Why do we oppose the Historical Critical Method, the breakdown of traditional morality, doctrinal indifference, the Charismatic Movement, the Church Growth Movement, and other popular forms of false teaching? It is for the sake of the proclamation of Christ's righteousness which God imputes to the sinner by grace alone.

Theological issues change with the rapidity of clothing styles. Just a few years ago my boys wouldn't be caught dead wearing corduroys. They stayed where they were, in a pile, in the dark, up in the attic, where no one goes. Now they're all wearing them. Recently one of my older boys has been wearing a pair of wide cords which my father wore back in the late sixties -- and my is he stylish! Just so, we flit from this to that theological emphasis, thinking that every time we have

discovered the key to orthodoxy. It may be the "*priesthood of all believers*," something Luther indeed taught, but didn't really emphasize that much, certainly not in his later years. Or it may be the "*theology of the cross*," something else Luther taught in his youth, but which wasn't nearly as prominent as we are led to believe. Now we are being told that Luther's great emphasis on "*vocation*" is the cure to what ails us. Well, I certainly do approve of it, especially as an alternative to the pop sociology which, dressed in the garb of trendy religious jargon, has replaced the Ten Commandments as the standard of conduct among Christians. You don't find "vocation" to be the central theme in Luther's writing, however.

What do you find? You find the justification of the sinner, that is what you find. This article never leaves center stage, and Luther doesn't just assert its centrality, he consistently teaches it, preaches it, defends it, uses it, if you will, as a Hermeneutical or interpretive principle with which to judge every religious notion and every theological controversy. Read what Luther says about the "priesthood of all believers" and you will see that it is nothing else that a discussion of justification and how this truth overthrows the Roman doctrine of the priesthood. Likewise his so-called "theology of the cross" is an application of the doctrine of justification to the philosophical triumphalism of his day. His teaching on vocation is nothing else than a proper distinction between law and gospel, each of which has the authority of Almighty God, with the final word being that the mandatum dei to preach the gospel of justification trumps everything else.

Let's do what Luther did. Let us consider the key theological issues of our generation and see if they are not all directly related to the doctrine of justification. Briefly, we look at the following topics: biblical inerrancy and dogmatic authority, the office of the ministry, liturgy and the worship wars, and fellowship and unionism.

Biblical inerrancy and dogmatic authority are the same issue. Does God speak? Can His truth be known? Can His truth be stated in words which are understandable and binding upon the conscience? If not, there can be no gospel at all, for the gospel must be a promise with the authority of God Himself, or it loses its character completely. This, of course, was Luther's position which he stated so well in his attack on Erasmus in Luther's Bondage of the Will. Responding to Erasmus' disinclination to make assertions, Luther wrote:

For it is not the mark of a Christian mind to take no delight in assertions; on the contrary, a man must delight in assertions or he will be no Christian. And by assertion -- in order that we may not be misled by words -- I mean a constant adhering, affirming, confessing, maintaining, and invincible persevering . . .

I am speaking, moreover, about the assertion of those things which have been divinely transmitted to us in the sacred writings. Elsewhere we have no need either of Erasmus or any other instructor to teach us that in matters which are doubtful or useless and unnecessary, assertions, disputing, and wrangling, are not only foolish but impious, and Paul condemns them in more than one place . . .

Let Skeptics and Academics, keep well away from us Christians, but let there be among us "assertors" twice as unyielding as the Stoics themselves. How often, I ask you, does the apostle Paul demand . . . that most sure and unyielding assertion of conscience? In Rom. 10 he calls it "confession," saying, "with the mouth confession is made unto salvation." And Christ says: "Everyone who confesses me before men, I also will confess before My Father". Peter bids us give a reason for the hope that is in us. What need is there to dwell on this?

Nothing is better known or more common among Christians than assertion. Take away assertions and you take away Christianity. (Martin Luther, Bondage of the Will, Library of Christian Classics, Vol XVII, Westminster Press, 1969, pp. 105-106)

It is vital to understand Luther's vehemence on this point. Dogmatic certainty is always for the sake of the pure gospel. This Luther makes crystal clear in what follows. He chides Erasmus for minimizing the importance of the doctrinal issue which divided them. For Luther, the notion that our will accomplishes anything at all in matters pertaining to eternal salvation is not only unscriptural, it overthrows the doctrine of grace and justification. It robs God of His glory and the penitent of all comfort. Doctrinal indifference is incompatible with justification by faith. Furthermore, when Luther exalts the Scriptures it is usually in connection with the promise of the gospel, frequently in support of the sacraments as means of grace.

A dogmatic spirit in the Lutheran sense cannot be separated from the divine doctrine of God's grace. All theology flows from the doctrine of Christ and His righteousness. Nothing can be more unlutheran than as insistence on pure doctrine without the topic of justification as the soul and center of all divine truth. It is the devil's dogmatism which does not reckon that justification is the theme of all Christian theology. This is Luther's position.

Several years ago, Dr. David Scaer, professor at Concordia Theological Seminary in Ft. Wayne, wrote an essay entitled "*Sanctification in Lutheran*

Theology" (CTQ, April-July, 1985, pp. 181-197) in which he presented Luther's position quite well especially in response to the increasingly popular claim of allegedly conservative Lutherans that the goal of the gospel is obedience. He wrote, "The Gospel is not an opportunity for reinstating the religion of the law." (P. 194) The following sentence concluded his essay:

Any attempt to make Christology preliminary to theology, or even only its most important part, but not its only part, is a denial of Luther's doctrine and effectively destroys the Gospel as the message of a completed atonement. (p. 194)

This orthodox Lutheran statement was dogmatically condemned by a certain Church Growth entrepreneur by the name of Waldo Werning who had been hired by the seminary to raise money. Scaer later revised his statement to satisfy Werning, but Scaer's defender, Dr. Robert Preus, refused to withdraw his support of Scaer's original statement. Werning then took Preus through the adjudication process of the Missouri Synod, accusing him of, among other things, a false doctrine on the Trinity for asserting that Christology is the only part of theology. After Preus won, Werning accused everyone who ruled against him of false doctrine.

What is particularly interesting about this case is a little known portion of the testimony which illustrates our point. During the trial, Werning's theological advisor, Dr. Howard Tepker, asserted that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit were three *separate* persons. This rather odd assertion would leave us with three Gods. The orthodox formulation, of course, is that they are three distinct persons. Assuming that Tepker had misspoken and would certainly like to correct his false statement, Preus called it to his attention. Neither Tepker nor Werning were willing to correct it. Clearly, a view of justification which isolates this doctrine into its own separate theological ghetto, can lead to separating the three persons of the Godhead and thus ending up in the Trinitarian heresy as well.

The doctrine which gives all the glory to God and which alone provides true comfort to penitent sinners is the doctrine which must inform every article of the faith or, as Luther warned us, every other article of the faith is at risk. Dogmatism must always be for the sake of the doctrine of Christ and his righteousness or it is nothing more than the personal weapon of the church bully.

We turn to the doctrine of the ministry. It is popular today to pit the young Luther against the mature Luther, depending on whether you favor congregations beating up on pastors or pastors imposing their will on the congregations. The former prefer the young Luther whose view of the ministry was allegedly quite democratic, sort of bubbling up out of the priesthood of all believers. The latter prefer the mature Luther who supposedly amended his youthful extremism when

he saw how it could lead to an anarchistic anti-clericalism. So, depending on where your sympathies lie, you may choose either Luther. Its like voting on which picture of Elvis should appear on the postage stamp.

But this young Luther versus mature Luther really isn't very helpful in understanding his doctrine of the ministry. His tract, "*That a Christian Assembly or Congregation Has the Right and Power to Judge All Teaching and to Call, Appoint, and Dismiss Teachers, Established and Proven by Scripture*" which strongly supports the rights and authority of the laity was written in 1523. Nine years later he wrote on "*Infiltrating and Clandestine Preachers*" exalting the call into the office of the ministry and insisting on it most strongly. The focus of Luther's theology didn't change. the young Luther defended the gospel against a gang of church-political tyrants who falsely claimed that they have the authority of the keys. The mature Luther defended the gospel of justification against those who denigrated the external word in favor of finding God and his favor in their internal spiritual exercises. In the Smalcald Articles, on the topic of Confession, Luther lumps together the radical leftist Thomas Muenzer with the reactionary pope as well as the Jews and Muhammed. Whoever seeks the Holy Spirit elsewhere than in the word of the gospel rejects the righteousness of Christ which is the righteousness of faith. Whatever their brand name, they're all the same. Luther did not defend the office of the ministry for the sake of the ministers. It was always for the sake of the faithful proclamation and bestowal of the righteousness which avails before God.

The theology of the Church Growth Movement which locates the spiritual power of the church in the releasing of certain alleged spiritual gifts which supposedly reside within each Christian, is, to be sure, a challenge to the Lutheran doctrine of the ministry. But it is primarily an attack on the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Let's not be distracted by side issues. The issue is not how much education the pastor has in comparison with others in the church, as if education were the essence of the ministerial office. The issue is not who is in charge of the local congregation in what specific areas and who gets to decide which disputes and on what basis. The issue isn't even primarily who is to be called a minister and who has a divine call, although this is usually where the argument centers. We cannot properly address the debate about the ministry unless we can answer this fundamental question: Does God justify sinners through the gospel proclaimed by Christ's ministers? Or is there some other kind of ministry than the ministry *through which the Holy Ghost works justifying faith where and when it pleases God through those who hear the gospel* (AC V)? Does Jesus Christ himself, through the ministers whom He has chosen, speak words to us today which impart to our faith His righteousness which avails before the judgment seat of God? Or, does He serve us in some other way? Perhaps through a ministry of financial planning or a ministry of physical education or a ministry of the

disciplining of children or a ministry of improving our self-esteem by showing us that we are special of a ministry of religious paper pushing?

There is no ministry but the gospel ministry. There is no Christian ministry but the ministry of that word by which sinners are justified. Any other so-called ministry is the ministry of death described by St. Paul in 2 Corinthians 3. To confuse these two ministries for no better reason than to make church-workers feel good about themselves is to show contempt, not only for the ministry, but for the gospel of justification. This confusion leads souls to entrust their spiritual care to that which cannot care for them because it cannot give to them the forgiveness of their sins and the righteousness which avails before God.

Even more serious than the proliferation of "ministries" which have nothing to do with the justification of sinners is defining the pastoral office itself in terms which ignore the very purpose for its existence. The Rev. Will Sohns, a former Synodical executive and district president in the Missouri Synod, presented a forty-five page report to the Council of Presidents of the LCMS on April 1 of this year on the subject, "*Current Issues on Church and Ministry*." The report is essentially an argument with various unnamed high church men who write interesting articles for Logia which admittedly sometimes contain rather extreme views. While Sohns gives no indication that he has understood what these men have written, he does present us with a clear statement of his understanding of the pastoral office. Page 29 of this document is headed, "A Summary -- The Rights, Authority and Responsibility of the Called Pastor." Let us consider what Rev. Sohns includes and excludes from this summary. He remembers to say under point #9 that "pastors submit to the supervision of the congregation." Apparently there are pastors out there who aren't submissive to such supervision. He neglects to say anything at all about the forgiveness of sins or the righteousness which avails before God. Listen to the purpose of the ministry according to Will Sohns. Under point #5, he writes:

The called pastor administers God's Word to empower, equip, train, direct, encourage, oversee, and lead the royal priests of God to exercise their faith, to display it to others inviting them to believe and the congregation to discharge its God given mission in this world.

Notice what is lacking. What does God's Word do, according to Sohns? It empowers, equips, trains, directs, encourages, oversees, and leads. Sohns says nothing about it imparting forgiveness of sin and the righteousness of Christ. And what about the faith which receives the forgiveness of sins? Might God's Word create such faith or perhaps strengthen it? There's nothing about that either. Rather, faith is exercised and displayed. Sohns lists seven things which the administration of God's Word does, and neglects to mention the single thing mentioned in the Augsburg Confession, "*that we may obtain this faith, that is,*

the faith which believes "that Christ suffered for us and that for His sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us" (AC, V, IV).

No, Will Sohns' doesn't deny justification by faith. He affirms it explicitly 21 pages earlier, calls it the "first and chief article of the Christian faith" and even quotes from the Augsburg Confession. He makes no effort, however, to show how the doctrine of the ministry relates to the doctrine of justification, despite the fact that the Augsburg Confession joins the two. His doctrine of the ministry has little to do with the justification of the sinner. It is clear that whatever paradigm of the ministry this prominent Lutheran leader has adopted as his own, it is not that of the Lutheran Confessions. Not when absolving and justifying penitent sinners is ignored in favor of training and equipping them. Not when obtaining the faith which receives Christ's righteousness is ignored in favor of exercising and displaying it. Surely, it is not too much to ask of this highly respected Lutheran churchman that he be content to leave faith hidden under the blood and righteousness of Jesus, that is, under the despised but pure marks of the church and let the sectarians babble on about displaying that faith which can be seen only by God and will not be displayed until Jesus returns in glory with His holy angels.

The worship wars. How to settle them? Certainly not by abandoning the sola scriptura principle and insisting -- contrary to Luther -- that standards of worship obtain which are not clearly taught in the Bible. There can be no extrabiblical standards for worship. Those who insist on using the fathers to supplement what isn't clearly taught in the Bible itself should read Luther's 1521 tract entitled, ***"Answer to the Hyperchristian, Hyperspiritual, and Hyperlearned Book by Goat Emser in Leipzig -- Including Some Thoughts Regarding is Companion, the Fool Murner."*** It's even better than its title.

The reason to retain the historic liturgy of the church is that it is a superior means of proclaiming the pure Gospel. As an example of this, consider the latest fad which substituted for the Sanctus in the liturgy the hymn, "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty" the only so-called "traditional" hymn that one might find sung at a Promise Keepers rally. Now that hymn might be fun to sing, but it contains no gospel at all beyond ascribing to God the attribute, merciful. Consider how the historic Sanctus, on the other hand, takes us from the fear of the thrice holy God of Isaiah's vision at whom we cannot bear to look, and then invites us to behold Him who comes humbly to us in the name of the Lord as the church cries out Hosanna. It is a beautiful blend of the Scriptures as well as a stark and dramatic distinction between Law and Gospel. Whoever decided to foist the inferior hymn upon Christians in the place of the superior Sanctus did so, not because he wasn't sufficiently educated in the "correct" liturgical forms, but because he wasn't sufficiently interested in the pure Gospel!

Finally, we consider the pure doctrine of church fellowship and the sin of religious unionism in the light of the doctrine of justification by faith. Listen to Luther's words quoted in the Formula of Concord (SD VII 33):

I reckon them all as belonging together (that is, as Sacramentarians and enthusiasts), for that is what they are who will not believe that the Lord's bread in the Supper is His true, natural body, which the godless or Judas receive orally as well as St. Peter and all the saints. Whoever, I say, will not believe this, will please let me alone and expect no fellowship from me. This is final.

What is Luther saying? He is saying that he cannot have fellowship with those who insist on rejecting the plain words of Scripture. He is saying that he cannot have fellowship with those who attack the means by which God bestows the righteousness of Christ, in this case, the Sacrament of Christ's body and blood. This is where we began. For Luther, false doctrine cannot be tolerated because it is contrary to Scripture and false doctrine cannot be tolerated because it attacks the doctrine of justification by faith alone. And for Luther, not to tolerate false doctrine is to have no fellowship with those who persist in promoting it.

The doctrine of church fellowship is not a matter of submitting to rules determined by the democratic processes of the synod to which we belong. It is a matter of confessing the pure gospel by which we sinners are saved from hell. The unionistic spirit is utterly incompatible with the Christian gospel. It holds the righteousness of Christ in contempt. We condemn religious unionism because we love the gospel of justification by faith alone. Why do Lutheran pastors promote participation in the Promise Keepers or similar organizations? Because they don't have enough rules on how to apply the doctrine of church fellowship? Of course not. They do it because they don't value the righteousness of Christ. If they did, they would teach their members to mark and avoid such gatherings.

Find a preacher who preaches Christ, His person, His work, His atonement, His righteousness reckoned to us, the forgiveness of sins, all within the context of preaching the law without any compromise, and you'll find someone opposed to religious unionism. The same faith which receives the righteousness of Jesus with which God clothes us is the faith which rejects the unionistic spirit of doctrinal indifference. The reason a Lutheran marks and avoids false doctrine and refuses to worship with those who don't is not because he has been sufficiently indoctrinated in his church's rules. Rather, it's a simple matter of love and hate. If you hate something, you don't express fellowship with it. If you love the pure teaching by which God has saved you, you hate the false teaching which can damn you.

And it is just this love for the gospel of justification that will find in every other article of Christian teaching the same golden thread of the righteousness of the God-man which covers us and renders us fit to enter into eternal life. Nothing is worth teaching, preaching, defending, or confessing, except for the sake of this truth which glorifies God as it reveals his mercy to poor, lost, undeserving sinners like you and me and thus saves us eternally.

