

The Centrality of the Central Article

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We Lutherans confess that the central topic of Christian doctrine is the justification of the sinner by grace alone, through faith alone, for the sake of Christ. Here is how we confess this truth in the Augsburg Confession:

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).

The doctrine of justification by faith alone is clearly taught throughout the Holy Scriptures but perhaps nowhere with the thoroughness and clarity of St. Paul as recorded in Romans 3:19-28 where we read:

Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law *is* the knowledge of sin.

But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Where *is* boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith. Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.

Justification by faith alone is the central article. What does this mean? It means that this is at the center of the personal faith of every individual Christian. It is the central truth of all divine doctrine. It is the central hermeneutical principle in the sacred task of interpreting the Holy Scriptures. It is the central reason for all Christian preaching. It is at the center of the catechetical instruction of the young and the indoctrination of the church's pastors. It is the center of the church's liturgy, hymnody, creeds, and confessions.

Those of us who are heirs of the theology set forth by and preserved in the synods of the former Synodical Conference are heirs to much that is good and much that is bad. We have a mixed history. On the one hand, we come from a tradition that produced Walther's Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel, an outstanding practical presentation of the central article of the faith which, well over a hundred years after it was written, remains the finest book on homiletics and pastoral practice available anywhere. The stance taken by the Missouri Synod and the confessional contingent of the Norwegian Synod for the doctrine of grace alone during the election controversy of the 19th Century signaled the high point of confessional integrity within the Synodical Conference in the defense of the pure gospel.

How far we have fallen! The same tradition for which we rightly thank our gracious God has spawned endless inter and intra-synodical bickering leading to one division after another. The conflicts always seem to center on the doctrine of church, ministry, and fellowship. Our fathers' generation likes to opine that, on church and ministry anyway, the differences between Missouri and Wisconsin were mostly cosmetic whereas the real conflict was on the doctrine of fellowship. One might be tempted to suggest the very opposite and claim that the real point of conflict was on church and ministry and fellowship simply followed in its wake. I would like to make a more radical suggestion. What has caused endless splits and quarrels among the heirs of the old Synodical Conference has been the failure to frame the debates on church, ministry, fellowship, or any other topic of controversy squarely within the proclamation of the central article.

When I was at the seminary I was taught that every doctrinal error originated by breaking with the plain sense of the Holy Scriptures and that every doctrinal error concluded in a distortion or denial of the central article of justification by faith alone. I have learned from experience how true this is. The fact that Luther rediscovered the central article by means of a study of the biblical text is instructive for us. He was forced to the text of the Bible. He had no choice but to find the answer he required in the sacred Scriptures. No other source could provide divine assurance. He needed a righteousness that he did not have. He searched in vain to find it. He could not find it in himself. He could not find it in

the duties assigned to him by the church. He could not rely on any extra-biblical authority at all.

Luther's personal quest for righteousness drove him into the biblical text. This required him to oppose any authority that would to any degree challenge scriptural authority. Luther was willing to defy pope, emperor, and every political and ecclesiastical entity that would stand in the way of his quest for the righteousness that avails before God. Luther found that righteousness in the words of the Bible specifically Romans 1:17, "In it [that is, in the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, as it is written: 'The just shall live by faith.'" Far be it from me to suggest that Luther's experience must serve as some kind of theological norm for his spiritual heirs. But there is the simple fact that in Lutheran theology the Bible and justification have become intertwined in such a way that they can never be disjoined again. I believe that it was by divine providence that Luther discovered the gospel by which he was personally justified as he grappled with those Scriptures where the doctrine of justification by faith alone is most thoroughly set forth. He was not born from above by reading St. John Chrysostom, Augustine, or even St. Athanasius. He was not led into a knowledge of the forgiveness of sins for Christ's sake by the proper performance of liturgical tasks. For Luther all matters liturgical, historical, or practical (though in those days they didn't need to be told that theology was by its very nature practical) were to be subordinated to the divine doctrine that is clearly presented in the plain sense of the biblical text.

In Luther's quest we find brought into bold relief the truth that was always there, always believed, always assumed, but never explained with quite the clarity achieved by Luther. The source of all divine truth and the substance of all divine truth are joined. The little children learn it this way: "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

The gospel reductionists cannot tolerate such a notion. Gospel reductionists teach that since the gospel is the central article of Christian teaching it must serve as the standard by which we judge all other doctrine. The gospel becomes the norm rather than the Holy Scriptures. Whatever the Scriptures say that does not, in the mind of the interpreter, pertain directly to the gospel itself is not essential. But the gospel is not the norm for itself. The Bible, not the gospel, is the standard by which all teachings and teachers in the church are to be judged. The gospel reductionist argues that this makes faith a rational deduction from an authoritative Bible as the Christian accepts as a first principle that the Bible is the inerrant word of God and then resolves to accept for his faith whatever this inerrant book says. Since this inerrant book teaches that he is justified by faith alone, the Christian then accepts this gospel on the prior authority of the Holy Scriptures as the infallible word of God. But this is a caricature of what we teach.

We do not, by a rational deduction from an inerrant book, conclude that Jesus is our Savior from sin. To the contrary, we confess:

I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him, but the Holy Ghost has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith even as He calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth and keep it with Christ Jesus in the one true faith.

The gospel's power does not lie in any rational deduction we must make. It inheres in the gospel itself. But the power of the gospel to bring us to faith and sustain us in the true faith should not be confused with the normative authority of the Holy Scriptures. If the gospel, rather than the Bible, is to be the norm or standard by which we are to judge all the teachings and teachers of the church how are we to know that the gospel is? How can we determine what teaching of God's word directly pertains to the gospel? Who makes such a determination? Luther's discovery of the gospel in the Scriptures did not come about by his imposition of a norm that was different from the actual words of the Bible. Indeed, it was precisely by staying with the very words of the Bible and insisting on their full authority that Luther discovered the gospel by which he was born from above.

The danger of gospel reductionism cannot be overstated. A generation ago gospel reductionists at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis and Valparaiso University appealed to the principle of gospel reductionism to deny or call into question the historicity of Adam and Eve. Historical details were not essential to the gospel, they argued. As one of the members of the faculty majority at Missouri's crown jewel seminary in St. Louis put it, "My faith doesn't depend on the accuracy of ancient historians." So what if the Bible contains errors of history, geography, and science? We believe in the gospel! And so the gospel is opposed to the Bible as if we need to choose between them.

The ordination of women to the pastoral office has been defended by a gospel reductionist argument. How does putting a woman in the pulpit militate against the gospel? If we cannot come up with a persuasive answer we are told that we are legalistic to deny the pulpit to women. But why should we be required to show how the ordination of women militates against the central article? God is the one who forbids it. We need only appeal to the normative authority of the Holy Scriptures which teach that ordaining women to preach is a shameful thing to do. What is shameful according to the express words of Holy Scriptures surely militates against the central article! It isn't up to us to show how this is so.

We oppose women's ordination, homosexuality, rape, abortion, evolution, murder, theft, and a whole host of evils on the authority of the Scriptures alone.

When we confess that justification is the central article we are not giving to this doctrine a normative authority that belongs to the Scriptures themselves. We are, however, confessing that the justification of the sinner by grace for Christ's sake through faith alone is the purpose the Bible was written and the center of all that the Bible teaches. Those who read the Bible and do not find justification at the center of it are not rightly reading it. We know this not by imposing an extra-biblical norm upon the biblical text. We know this by the plain sense of the biblical text itself. We cannot concede *sola Scriptura* to the sectarians! It is a fundamental principle of the Evangelical Lutheran Church to which we should hold fast even as we confess that the Scriptures are an empty husk of no spiritual benefit at all if the righteousness of Christ by which poor lost sinners are justified is taken away. There is no tension at all between justification by faith alone and *sola Scriptura*. Indeed they are joined by an inseparable bond.

When we deny that justification or any other expression of the gospel is the norm of Christian doctrine we are not taking away from the gospel. We are establishing it. We are insisting that God defines the gospel for us in words of His own choosing. We are bound to His words for they are spirit and they are life. Our faith does not have a quality by which it can decide for itself what is normative and what is not. Faith is purely receptive. The words of the Bible are from the Holy Spirit and since the Holy Spirit makes us holy by the gospel we can be confident that holding firmly to the Scriptures alone as the only source and norm of all doctrine we will be holding on to the pure gospel.

Whenever the gospel is set off to the periphery of the theological conversation we are dealing with a form of legalism. The central article will always be brought to bear on every theological topic, not as a norm to determine what the truth is, but as a hermeneutical check on all carnally imposed legalisms. We do not agree with the Reformed who insist that the word must have the Spirit descend upon it in order for it to be efficacious. It is inherently efficacious. But this does not mean that the inherent legalism of our flesh, a permanent feature of our fallen sinful human nature that will not be eradicated until we are taken up into glory, will not impose itself upon the divine doctrine at every opportunity to twist and distort God's saving truth. If it militates against the gospel of justification by faith alone it is unscriptural. That's that. If you interpret the Bible in such a way that the gospel is compromised you can be sure that you have misinterpreted the Bible.

I can think of no topic of our Christian faith on which the doctrine of justification has a more direct and compelling influence than on the topic of church, ministry, and fellowship. I call these three one topic because they go together. The

ministry belongs to the church and the ministry serves the church. Neither can be separated from the other. And church fellowship is not really a separate locus from the doctrine of the church but is rather simply a description of what the church, by God's grace, enjoys. There cannot be a proper understanding of church, ministry, and fellowship apart from the doctrine of justification. I would like to suggest that the interminable debates among the synods of the former Synodical Conference on church, ministry, and fellowship have been caused and exacerbated by a theological hermeneutic that has set the central article off to the sidelines.

Look at how the Augsburg Confessions joins the articles on church, ministry, and fellowship to the central article. After grounding the justification of the sinner in Christ's vicarious atonement it proceeds from the article on justification directly to the ministry of the word. It says that the purpose of this ministry is that we may obtain justifying faith. Then, after reiterating justification by faith alone in its discussion of good works, it proceeds to the topic of church and church fellowship by binding the true unity of the church to the pure teaching of the gospel and the right administration of the sacraments. See what is here joined together. The means by which God elicits justifying faith are identified as those marks by which we recognize the true unity of the church. Justification and church fellowship are joined. Being justified by faith we have peace with God. Being justified by faith we have peace with one another. The vertical fellowship is the foundation for the horizontal fellowship. Justification is at the center.

But is this how the doctrine of fellowship is perceived among us today? It has become a legalistic caricature of what we confess in the Augsburg Confession. No longer is fellowship with one another tied to the fellowship we enjoy with God as He graciously forgives us all our sins for Jesus' sake. Now fellowship is grounded in agreement with whatever doctrinal statement is crafted together by means of the political process of a particular synod. The Augsburg Confession conceives of true church fellowship as divinely established by means of the purely preached gospel and rightly administered sacraments of Christ. Nowadays church fellowship is achieved by the correct application of "fellowshipping principles."

The cause of this decay in our confessional Lutheran understanding of church fellowship is easy to determine. It is not on account of a rejection of the normative authority of the Bible in principle. It is among those with the highest regard for the Bible as the inerrant word of God that this has taken place. Rather, this has happened because the doctrine of fellowship has been developed in isolation from the doctrine of justification. When justification is no longer at the center in our treatment of the doctrine and practice of church fellowship, the vertical relationship between God and the justified sinner is ignored while the horizontal relationship takes over. Fellowship with God is set

aside into a corner somewhere and fellowship with one another replaces it as the chief concern. In this way the church becomes a club of likeminded people – somewhat like a political party or some other kind of civic organization – instead of the body of Christ and the temple of the living God. By disconnecting the fellowship the church enjoys from the central article it is materially changed into something else. The gospel is replaced by the law. Synodical authority replaces gospel authority.

About thirty years ago there occurred a little known intramural debate between the then head of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the Missouri Synod, Dr. Ralph Bohlmann, and Prof. Kurt Marquart of Concordia Theological Seminary in Ft. Wayne. The argument was on whether the unity mentioned in AC VII was the same thing as the unity mentioned in FC SD X. Let's compare the pertinent portions of these two confessions. In AC VII we read:

For the true unity of the church it is enough to agree concerning the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments. It is not necessary that human traditions or rites and ceremonies, instituted by men, should be alike everywhere. It is as Paul says, "One faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all," etc. (Eph. 4:5, 6).

In FC SD X we read:

In line with the above, churches will not condemn each other because of a difference in ceremonies, when in Christian liberty one uses fewer or more of them, as long as they are otherwise agreed in doctrine and in all its articles and are also agreed concerning the right use of the holy sacraments, according to the well-known axiom, "Disagreement in fasting should not destroy agreement in faith."

Bohlmann argued that the agreement concerning the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments of the Augsburg Confession was not the same thing as the agreement in doctrine and in all its articles of the Formula of Concord. Marquart disagreed and insisted that they were the same. We don't have the time to delve into the details of that debate, but we are having the same argument today, perhaps without recognizing it. Are we to identify the entire corpus of Christian doctrine with the pure preaching of the gospel and the right administration of the sacraments? Or are we to claim that the basis for the unity of the Holy Christian Church on earth is one thing, while the doctrinal standards of this or that particular church is something else? But if we lay claim to standards of synodical fellowship that are different than the standards that apply to the unity of the one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic Church, are we not defining ourselves as a sect? I submit to you that Bohlmann's argument represents the

de facto position of the synods that hail from the old Synodical Conference. I would also suggest to you that they are wrong.

There is no article of the faith that can be dissociated from the pure preaching of the gospel. To speak of an alleged gospel in the narrow sense that applies to the so called invisible church and a broader doctrinal consensus that applies to a visible synod is to teach God's people that our doctrine of fellowship is a legal doctrine. But every Christian knows that this runs counter to the very nature of the gospel! Into this confusion come the gospel reductionists to woo our people away from such a legalistic conception of church fellowship. Who will you believe? Those who present church fellowship as something that comes as a result of a common submission to agreed upon principles or those who present church fellowship as something created by the Holy Spirit who calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth and keep it with Christ Jesus in the one true faith? What does genuine church fellowship have to do with the endless production of more and more doctrinal statements further refining theological systems that are imposed upon the biblical text? It is not possible to maintain a sound doctrine of church fellowship unless we persist in binding this doctrine and practice to the actual preaching of the pure gospel by real ministers in real churches to real sinners who are ushered into fellowship with God and with one another by means of the pure gospel and rightly administered sacraments that they receive in faith.

And this brings us to how and why justification must be at the heart of our discussions of the holy ministry of the word.

When a soul that is burdened by failure and sin and guilt goes to church on a Sunday morning and does not hear the gospel of the full and free forgiveness of sins for Christ's sake does it really matter if that church belongs to a synod that formally subscribes orthodox doctrinal statements? When a confident and impenitent sinner attends the Divine Service and hears no message of divine law that judges him to be guilty and accountable for his sins, will it even matter if a few slogans about divine grace are tossed out to him? Indeed, if the care for the soul by means of evangelical preaching that rightly divides the word of truth is not taking place why in the world would anyone want to get into a discussion about church and ministry except perhaps as a means of displaying his superior powers of argumentation or because he wants to be a part of this clique that has traditionally opposed that clique?

Debates about the ministry are often understood primarily as power struggles between various factions in the church. What kind of status does a pastor have? What kind of status does a parochial schoolteacher have? Well, if it's not equitable, how do we make it so? But it shouldn't be, because the pastor has more education! Yes, but the teacher serves too, and pastors are supposed to

be humble. Yeah, but the teacher is under the pastor. Yes, but it's not as if the pastor can just run the church! And as we listen to this kind of foolishness what is it that is entirely missing from the conversation? The gospel itself is lost in the debate. The purpose for the divine institution of the preaching office is the justification of the sinner through faith for Christ's sake.

What does the Bible say?

Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God. For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

2 Corinthians 5:18-21

What do our Confessions say?

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." AC V

The reason the ministry debates get bogged down in endless quarrels that cannot be overcome is because justification is excluded from the debate. If we are going to spend our time debating who has what kind of churchly status, who would want to participate in such a debate? If it doesn't pertain to the justification of the sinner it has nothing to do with the divinely instituted ministry of the word.

If we are to ground the ministry of the word in the words that the Lord Jesus Christ spoke to the original ministers we are also going to be grounding this office in the justification of sinners by grace through faith. When Jesus condemns lordship among His ministers He joins His ministry to the redemption of many. The bond between Christ's redemption and the preaching office cannot be broken. What does Jesus say to the first ministers? He tells them to preach the gospel, to forgive and retain sins, to baptize, to administer the Lord's Supper, in short, to feed His sheep. This is not complicated. It is quite simple. All of this

activity is administering the means of grace through which God calls sinners to faith and reckons to them the righteousness of Christ.

Pastor, elder, bishop, teacher, ambassador, minister, angel, and on and on the titles go and endless debates about titles obscure the simple fact that the office is what the office does and what the office does is to preach the gospel and administer the sacraments of Christ and this on account of the fact that through these, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit produces justifying faith where and when it pleases God in those who hear the gospel.

One of the most foolish and useless debates in the debate that never ends is the sophistical distinction between the ministry in the abstract and the ministry in the concrete, as if these are two ministries, one abstract and the other concrete. Tired old argument about the meaning of German words make the debate unbearably boring and convince the laity that it's all just a lot of clerical quarreling, undoubtedly driven by ego, ambition, pride, and other unsavory motives.

If we frame the debate about the ministry within the center of justification by faith alone where it belongs, it will be easy to resolve debates and clear up confusion. The purpose of the ministry of the word and sacraments as we confess this in the Augsburg Confession is not to give expression to our faith. This may be done in any Christian occupation. The purpose of the ministry of the word is so that justifying faith may be engendered. We must not define the office of the ministry according to the faith of those who have it, whether the church or the ministers. We must rather define it according to its purpose in administering the means of grace by which faith is engendered. We don't have the ministry on account of our faith. We have faith on account of Christ's ministry among us. True enough, a man first becomes a Christian before becoming a minister. But it is equally true that a man becomes a Christian through the ministry of the word. So we do not look for the faith of Christians in order to find Christ's ministry. We look for the purely preached gospel and the rightly administered sacraments precisely because they are means by which the Holy Spirit elicits faith, justifying faith.

To sever the gospel from the sacraments as if there is no divinely instituted office specifically formed and fashioned by the Lord Jesus to preach the gospel and to administer the sacraments of Christ is to attack the justification of the sinner by grace for Christ's sake through faith. Jesus did not institute a preaching disembodied from the administration of His holy sacraments. Christ's clear mandate as recorded by St. Matthew is that the means by which Christians become and remain Christians is the teaching of Christ's word and Holy Baptism. Those who are justified by Christ's blood are given Christ's body and blood to eat and to drink. The Sacrament of the Altar is not instituted as some kind of icon of an incarnational and sacramental presence of Christ. No! It is given and shed

for you for the remission of sins! The very idea that it is a legalistic imposition to insist that Christ instituted a real office, a species of office, if you will, all of whose incumbents are given by God to preach the gospel and administer the sacraments by which justifying faith is born and sustained is to confuse gospel gift with law command. We may honor the Wauwatosa theologians for their legitimate concern about legalism, but it appears that in the case of defining the ministry they threw out the baby with the bathwater.

Much more could be said but we are just about out of time. The Divine Service, good Lutheran hymnody, pastoral care for the erring, the sick, and the grieving, issues of life and death in the social arena, family matters, marriage, childrearing, and a whole host of religious and therefore churchly concerns are all intimately related to the central article of justification by faith alone.

This is why we must resolve to engage in every theological endeavor with our eyes firmly fixed on Jesus, our God and brother, who has become our righteousness that avails before God and renders us acceptable before Him. For this is at the very center of our faith and our lives and this is what will bring us to heaven some day when all theological controversy will be forever resolved by the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world who sits on the throne to rule forever and ever.

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