

The Enduring Relevance of the Doctrine of Justification

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I received my invitation to speak to you today with mixed feelings. On the one hand, I was honored to be asked to speak on the enduring relevance of the doctrine of justification. On the other hand, I was a little daunted by the subtitle that the Rev. Fehrmann gave to my essay which is, and I quote from his letter of November 3, 2000,

Why the Lutheran confessors divided the Western church over this teaching; why this doctrine is the only source of assurance of personal salvation and perseverance in the faith, why the doctrine of justification is the only instrument for changing bad attitudes in human hearts and therefore the only foundation for praiseworthy motives and true good works; why this doctrine continues to cause division in the Christian Church.

I thought to myself, "Well that's great, maybe John would like to write the paper for me while he's at it." It sounds like the title of a book written by a 19th Century German theologian. Now Norwegians are somewhat different than Germans. Among the Germans, the ability to categorize, analyze, synthesize, and write long compound sentences, will most likely get you where you want to go. In the Missouri Synod you won't get a position at the seminary if you don't have a doctor's degree. In the Norwegian Synod you won't get a position at the seminary if you do have a doctor's degree. Call it a vestige of Pietism. Among the Norwegians it is bad to be overeducated. The Germans of course can't understand this.

Perhaps I can explain it. Even as God is incomprehensible, that is, not comprised of a number of attributes that when combined become his essence, likewise theology is also simple as to its essence. Theologians can construct systems, of course, and they can make distinctions between different parts of theology. In fact, they love to do this. But truth is essentially simple. Error is what is complicated.

The simple truth, the foundational truth, of Christian theology is the blood of Jesus shed for us for the forgiveness of sins. I think that this is obvious. It leaps off the pages of the Bible. It is the center of the drama of Christ's passion. It flows into Christ's institution of the office of the ministry and literally creates the church

from which his ministers are born and which they are to serve. It is the very heart of St. Paul's theology. It grounds sacramental theology in Christ's atonement where it belongs and from which it cannot be severed. Baptism reveals, as Luther's hymn puts it, "the wonders of his precious blood" and by so doing assures us of God's own pardon. And, of course, it is the essence of the Sacrament of the Altar that tells us in what specific manner Jesus wants us to remember him, namely, as he sheds his blood for us for the forgiveness of sins. This is simple.

Jesus said, "Given and shed for you for the remission of sins." St. Paul said, "being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:24) and being "justified by His blood" (Romans 5:9). The meaning is the same. It has always been the same. This is why God clothed Adam and Eve -- covering their shame -- with the skins of animals whose blood was shed. This is why Abel offered a bloody sacrifice. This is why God provided a ram to be offered on Moriah instead of Isaac. This is why God required so much shedding of blood in the worship of his Old Testament Church. This is why the angels witnessed the sprinkling of blood on the Mercy Seat. And this is also the only place where theology can be relevant. If the blood and righteousness of Jesus are not relevant, the Christian faith is not only irrelevant: it is absurd. Unless justification is the illuminating truth through which every other topic of theology must be seen, theology itself will become not only irrelevant, but downright harmful as well.

This has to do with the nature of God and the nature of man. The whole theological enterprise faces a major problem at the outset. God wants to talk about himself while we want to talk about ourselves. Only when we are talking about the justification of sinners by the blood of Jesus do both kinds of talking take place at the same time. The only way theology can be relevant to man is if it is centered in where God and man are joined together. This is only where the blood of Jesus is given and shed for the forgiveness of sins.

This point of contact between God and man is where all Christian theology must focus if it is to have any relevance at all to Christians. The heart of all Christian theology is the very same as the point of contact between God and man. This is what we are saying when we say that justification is the chief topic of Christian doctrine. We mean more than that this article is the touchstone by which we determine whether we have correctly understood all other articles. We mean that theology is personal. All theology must flow into and out of where God imputes Christ's righteousness to the sinner and the sinner receives this forgiveness through faith. Where this faith is born the theologian is born and this is where the theological task is permanently anchored. There is no other legitimate orientation for theology than the care of the soul burdened by sin, death, doubt, fear, and the wrath of God. The heart of theology must hit the heart of man or it is irrelevant.

The doctrine of justification is relevant precisely because it hits our heart. Furthermore, if theology or “God talk” is to remain relevant, it must always be talk about how God and man are reconciled. If it is not, it will deteriorate into either academic speculation or moral posturing.

Let me make my point crystal clear. The central article of the faith is not the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. It is not the doctrine of the incarnation of the Son of God. It is not the doctrine of the sacramental presence of Christ among us. It is not the doctrine of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the mystical union, baptismal regeneration, or the real presence of Christ’s body and blood in the Lord’s Supper or anywhere else for that matter. The central article of the faith is the justification of the sinner by grace for Christ’s sake through faith. I am talking about forensic justification. God renders a verdict upon us. On the basis of the active and passive obedience of his incarnate Son offered up vicariously for us, God tells us that we are righteous and that makes it so.

If theology is to be relevant, it must talk about the individual who is engaged in the talk. Nobody wants to talk about a theology that doesn’t involve him. This is why the heart of theology must hit the heart of man. If you won’t meet the needs of his sinful heart with the doctrine of justification, the void will be filled with something else than God’s doctrine. We are by nature incurably works-righteous and legalistic. So naturally, theology that relates to man will be works-righteous and legalistic theology. Moralism is always relevant. The more godless things become in our country, the more relevant moralistic, legalistic, work-righteousness will become. It relates to people. It touches their hearts. You ask the average person what kind of doctrine is “relevant” to his life, and it will likely be a teaching on how he may do, perform, achieve, or accomplish a particular moral good. If the doctrine doesn’t yield moral improvement, it does not relate and is not relevant.

This legalistic impulse is stronger than our will to resist. Self-justification does not flow from holding formally to an incorrect doctrinal formulation as if we could prevent it from occurring by holding to the correct doctrinal formulation. It flows rather from what the Formula of Concord calls the “deep, wicked, abominable, bottomless, inscrutable, and inexpressible corruption of [our] entire nature in all its powers, especially of the highest and foremost powers of the soul in mind, heart, and will.” (FC SD I 11) This means that theology will always be perverted to serve the carnal will of the theologian. You can count on it. It is a false dream to assume that one can construct a doctrinal formulation that will somehow keep theology from being perverted. Doctrine will always be turned into a legalistic defense of carnal pride and a legalistic weapon of spiritual tyranny. This is what sinners do to God’s word.

The theological enterprise would be different if we were angels. Perhaps if we weren't burdened by our own sin, we could change the focus of theology to something a bit more elevated than the bitter sufferings and death of God's Son. Perhaps theology could then be focused upon the essence and the energies of God, or on the Trinitarian nature of all theological truth, or on the implications of the personal union for the full deification of the Christian through his participation in the Lord's Supper, or maybe even on the beatific vision itself. I suppose there are many more pleasant things to ponder than Christ's bloody sacrifice to appease God's burning wrath. There are more noble human aspirations than to be a poor, miserable sinner. God has more to say to us than the words that absolve us. He has more to give to us than the righteousness of Christ. Perhaps we could focus elsewhere than on our sin, Christ's blood, and forensic justification.

If we were angels or if we were in heaven. But we are neither, and so the only way doctrine can be relevant is if it relates to us where we live. And since our heart is unbearably wicked, if theology were to be centered inside of our heart, it would of necessity become the occasion for idolatry. But theology must hit our heart or we just won't care about it. It must hit our heart. It must go to our heart. It must penetrate our heart. But the very essence or center of our theology cannot be located within us. As soon as it is it becomes perverted.

It is at this point that evangelical Lutheran theology faces its fiercest criticism from all sides. The classic Roman Catholic criticism is that our doctrine of justification is a legal fiction that has God saying we are righteous even though we are not. What could be more irrelevant than a legal fiction, a theology that exists only in a false abstraction? Thus they call our doctrine "merely" forensic as if it is only words and not reality. The Eastern Orthodox argue in a similar fashion. They claim that our "merely" forensic doctrine of justification ignores the deeper christological essence of Christianity and binds the Christian truth to an essentially negative paradigm. Jesus becomes merely the solution to our problem. They are quite critical of our "merely" forensic doctrine of justification.

What can we make of this "merely forensic" criticism of the Lutheran doctrine of justification? Whenever anyone uses the word "merely" to describe forensic justification, as if there is anything "mere" about the word of God that tells me I am righteous, I would like to remind such a person of how utterly impossible it is for an enemy of God to do theology. God talk must be relational. It must involve a personal relationship. Our personal relationship with God is established by God when he tells us that we are just or righteous. This is how he justifies us. He tells us that Christ Jesus died for us and that for his sake our sins are forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. God talks and so it is. There can be nothing "mere" about God talking. God said, "Let there be light!" What happened? Oh, well that was a mere word! Just a verbal thing! I see! So the light

that lightened the world before the sun was created was just a verbal fiction? Was it only a pretend or “what if” kind of light? What lunacy! (No pun intended.) Forensic justification effects what it says because God’s word is almighty.

Natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God. So says St. Paul. Any doctrine that is “relevant” to natural man must needs be a distorted, demonic doctrine designed to salve the flesh with lies. This is why we must let God relate his teaching to us where he relates himself to us and that is where he applies the blood of Jesus to us and penetrates our hearts with his word of grace. The fact that we are involved here in a life and death battle against the father of lies and murderer of souls should be sufficient motivation for us to keep the doctrine of justification pure from any admixture of human reasoning. This means that the theological task is a serious business. It is too serious to be left to theoreticians and academics. Theological abstractions can be useful only as a shorthand means of communicating between theologians. Theology in its proper sense, however, can never be abstract. It is always concrete and personal. Why, we could even say it is existential! It penetrates into my soul and it conquers my heart and it raises me from death and it provides for me the truth that makes me free and keeps me free.

This is what evangelical Lutheran theology does.

There is nothing wrong with putting our Lutheran doctrine into so called scholastic terms with all of the various categories of thought this involves. This is not really a bad idea and can be very useful in teaching God’s word. What we may not do is to conceive of theology as an academic discipline that may be divorced from the actual care of souls.

When we insist on the relevance of the doctrine of justification we are saying that God relates to us as he teaches us. He does not relate to us in any other way than by teaching us. There is something strange about the notion that Christian doctrine can be gotten right as one activity and then shared with others as another activity. Doctrine is a verbal noun. It begins as a verb and becomes a noun by derivation. God teaches us his holy word. This teaching is called doctrine. This teaching is always directed to us as sinners redeemed by Christ’s blood and absolved in Christ’s resurrection from the dead. This teaching is always God’s almighty word. This teaching always conveys to us the Teacher. Even to conceive of Christian doctrine as an abstract system of religious or spiritual truths is to ignore the very heart of Christian doctrine and turn it into the plaything of “professional” theologians who need not be bothered with the care of souls. The notion that the theological task is something in which only professional theologians may be engaged is the Protestant version of

sacerdotalism. The people of God are warned away from the theological task until they have passed a test. God talk becomes captive to the academy, college, or seminary. Joe and Jane Christian are shut out.

Theology is not theology in the Lutheran sense if it is not relating God to man. We live on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God. Lutheran theology views the pure doctrine as the medicine for the soul of every Christian. To disconnect theology as an academic work from theology as the care of souls is to distort its very essence. Dogmatic theology is practical theology. Dogma relates God to man. It is God relating to man. The doctrine of justification is the means by which God relates to us throughout our lives. This doctrine is not relevant because someone who is a communications specialist has made it so. It is not relevant because a minister with good interpersonal skills has learned how to relate it. It is relevant because this doctrine is how and when and where God comes to us in love and reveals himself to be our gracious Father so that we may embrace him in faith and rest confident in his love. It is relevant because it relates God to us in the only way we can know him. We cannot know him apart from him teaching us his heavenly doctrine. To deny the essentially relational character of all Christian doctrine is to set up a dead orthodoxy which is no orthodoxy at all.

This caricature of orthodoxy, which we may call the orthodoxist approach to theology, views doctrine as a tool that must be supplemented with professionally acquired skills so that it may be used properly to relate to the needs of people. The tool must be sharp, accurate, and of excellent quality. But a tool is only as good as the skill of the one who is using it. And so we have "expert" theologians who must also learn how to relate that theology to real people in their real needs. The doctrine of justification is the key component in this system of pure doctrine that serves as the tool of the skilled practitioner of the theological trade. This is why the pure doctrine is so important to the orthodoxist. He cannot use an inferior tool and be expected to do a good job. In this orthodoxist approach, the theologian must learn and accept this pure doctrine which becomes for him the beginning of the theological task. After getting the doctrine right and placing justification at its center, the theologian is ready to make it relevant to people in their needs. And these are two distinct tasks. First you get your theology straight. You learn the various topics of theology, how they all hang together, and why you must firmly maintain every article that you have learned. But, of course, the pure doctrine is not enough. It is only a tool, albeit a vitally important one, for the professional minister. He must also become adept at various administrative tasks, interpersonal skills, homiletical fluency, and so forth.

The living voice of God is thus turned into a set of doctrinal abstractions that must be supplemented by various skills. Doctrine serves an essentially legal function for the professional minister who looks to the creeds and confessions of

the church only when he wants to check on his own work to see if he is doing anything that needs correcting. The Lutheran minister who takes the orthodoxist approach doesn't look to the Lutheran Confessions to receive spiritual sustenance and nurture from his fathers in the faith, but simply to show him if and when his ideas, practices, or methods run afoul of the doctrinal standards. But since he has already learned the doctrinal rules, he need not constantly refer back to the rulebook.

The orthodoxist approach takes theology away from those to whom it belongs. It also makes orthodoxy a human achievement and an occasion for boasting. The so-called Wauwatosa theologian, J. P. Koehler, recognized this in his day. He criticized what he called "the bravado of orthodoxy" in which "intellectualism" makes comprehension more important than faith. (The Wauwatosa Theology, Vol. II, pages 237ff) The Wauwatosa theologians criticized the "repeat after me" theology of their day and sought to approach the Scriptures anew and reinvent the Lutheran doctrinal wheel as it were. It would be an irony indeed if some of the less fortunate formulations of the Wauwatosa theologians were made into a test of orthodoxy for Lutherans one hundred years later. While they certainly had a valid criticism of what they called "fathers' theology" it is naïve to assume that any generation of Christians can avoid parroting the fathers.

And there is nothing wrong with parroting the fathers. There is nothing wrong with talking as we have been taught to talk. God teaches us his doctrine through men and women who learned how to talk from others and if we dismiss them with disrespect we will surely dismiss the teaching as well. The solution to the orthodoxist approach is not to retreat one inch from either our doctrine or the sound formulations of it offered by the fathers. It is certainly not to approach the biblical text all alone without the sound direction of the Lutheran Confessions. It is to regard the theological task and the pastoral task to be one and the same.

The orthodoxist approach gives way to the reaction known as gospel reductionism. The gospel reductionist looks at the orthodoxist preoccupation with crossing every theological T and dotting every doctrinal I and bemoans the fact that the gospel itself becomes buried underneath a system of orthodoxy. They see the self-congratulatory pride that is the orthodoxist spirit. They see that something is wrong, and they surmise that doctrinal inflexibility is what is to blame. They argue that since the gospel is really all that matters, inasmuch as it is what saves us, every other doctrine must be shown to impinge upon the gospel in some way before it can be imposed upon the church. When the gospel reductionists at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis a generation ago were confronted with the demand that they affirm biblical inerrancy, they sincerely could not see how such a doctrine affected the gospel of justification. How could a legalistic doctrine dealing with a rigid correspondence theory of truth that reduces all divine revelation to a list of human propositions be the foundation for

the saving gospel of Jesus Christ? Unthinkable! They honestly believed that the imposition of biblical inerrancy from a synodical authority forced the gospel of justification into a legalistic straightjacket.

A form of gospel reductionism remains popular today. We are told that we must show how a particular biblical truth relates to the gospel before we assert it as dogma. The logic appears to go like this. God saves us by his gospel. All doctrine relates in some way to how God saves us. Therefore if we cannot demonstrate how a particular article of the faith pertains to the gospel, we mustn't insist upon adherence to it. If we do, we are following a legalistic or scholastic or Reformed hermeneutic instead of respecting the hermeneutical role of the doctrine of justification in Lutheran theology.

Gospel reductionism of every stripe is simply the sanctification of unbelief. The God who in talking to us justifies us by Christ's blood has many things to say. He says them in the Bible, the book that he wrote. When he says what he says we don't need to know how it relates to our justification. The point is that since God says it, it must relate to us. Since it is from God and it relates to us it must relate to justification because God relates to us as he justifies us. This is how he makes us his children. Children listen to their Father and believe what he says. To assert that the doctrine of justification is the chief article that relates to every other article of the faith is true, not because we can demonstrate this by our own theological systems, but because of the very nature of theology itself. All Christian theology is talk of or about the God who justifies us. This is how justification relates every other article of the faith to us.

Must I prove how the ordination of women attacks the doctrine of justification before I condemn the practice as shameful? Of course not! St. Paul said it was disgraceful. That settles it. Ah, but you must develop a more iconic understanding of the ministerial office and demonstrate how the minister's maleness has implications for the gospel itself! This will yield a more evangelical reason for the apostolic injunction against women pastors. It will make the all male ministerium a gospel mandate rather than a law prohibition. Thus you will relate the doctrine of justification to the doctrine of the ministry.

But this is not how justification is relevant. This is the old orthodoxist opinion that caused the Wauwatosa reaction nearly a century ago and the gospel reductionist reaction a generation ago. We don't have to relate theology to theology. We can leave that up to the Calvinists. They do a far better job of it than we do anyway. We relate theology to people. That's where it relates. It is only in relating theology to people that theology coheres within itself. It can be no other way.

I am not saying that theology does not relate to itself as an organic whole. It does. It does so, not as a system in which each part fits neatly into its proper

place, but as a body of doctrine the heart of which is the justification of the sinner by grace for Christ's sake through faith. Since the heart of all theology is also the only possible point of friendly contact between the holy God and us sinners, the theological enterprise is always personal. As we look inside ourselves and see what God hates, we may not find our personal assurance of salvation within ourselves. This is why we must keep on hearing the pure gospel preached. This is why we must keep on eating the body and the blood of Jesus given and shed for us for the remission of sins. This is why when we are faced with doctrinal perversions that displace the centrality of justification in our doctrine and in our faith we must respond as Lutherans.

We must not imitate either the Reformed on the left or the Catholics on the right. We have seen that the doctrine of justification is relevant because the only possible meeting place between God and man is where the blood of Jesus is shed. This is what makes Lutheran theology relevant. We have the blood and we know what the blood is for. The Catholic doctrine is irrelevant because while they have the blood they don't know what it is for. The Reformed doctrine is irrelevant because while they know what the blood is for, they don't have it. The Catholics teach a High Church form of Pietism that is more corporate and sacramental. The Reformed teach a Low Church form of Pietism that is more personal and informal. Pietism is Pietism, however. They all agree in seeing the relevance of Christian doctrine in how that doctrine results in the believer doing good things. The Roman Catholics talk about faith formed by love. The Eastern Orthodox talk about theosis. Robert Nordlie and Phil Bickel talk about progressing from the faith that saves to the faith that obeys. It's all the same thing.

Pietism locates the center of theology in the authentic experience of faith within the individual believer. It is rightly concerned about true faith flowing into true obedience. It makes a cardinal error, however, in setting out to ensure that this happens. It moves the focus of theology from the giving of God to the receiving of man. The Lutheran Pietists agreed that God gives to us the righteousness that avails before him and that we receive this righteousness through faith alone. They refused however to subordinate the personal faith that receives to the heavenly doctrine that gives. Thus the pure doctrine of justification gave way to the pure faith of the justified. The Christ for us gave way to the Christ within us.

Ironically, the concern of the Pietists for the phenomenon of faith and the certainty of that faith is precisely what leads them into legalism as they seek out more and more external evidences of the sincerity of the faith. Faith that looks at faith becomes doubt. It looks within to where the problems are. Only the faith that looks to Christ can be certain. And Christ, while he lives in us, does not justify us by what he does in us, but by what he did for us on the cross and what he gives to us in his gospel and sacraments.

Pietistic Lutherans in America will always fall under the influence of the prevailing American versions of Reformed theology. This is because they have already rejected the relevance of the doctrine of justification. They think this doctrine is relevant primarily in the changed lives that result from it. Thus they are required to judge the gospel by means of evidence discerned by the law. Doctrine becomes a legalistic enterprise. For confessional Lutherans, the doctrinal emphasis has always been the “for us” character of the gospel which flows into the “to us” nature of the means of grace. Doctrine is not primarily law. It is gospel. When God teaches us, he gives us Jesus. And the Lutheran understands this teaching in terms of the means of grace. Being taught, he is given by God the very righteousness that he needs. Lutheran theology recognizes that Christ will never really be understood as being “for us” unless he is given “to us” in the very clearly identifiable means of salvation: the gospel and the sacraments of Jesus. And, of course, when the “for us” character of the atonement flows into the “to us” nature of the means of grace, Christ remains Immanuel: God with us.

If the doctrine of justification is to relate to us in our need, we must continually reaffirm sound Lutheran Christology and sacramental theology. A discussion of the divine attributes of Christ being communicated to his human nature may appear to be somewhat arcane, but this biblical teaching is vital as a foundation for the proclamation of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. This is not mere quibbling with historic Calvinism. This is fundamental. Stated simply, there is no God but the God revealed in the flesh of Jesus. Since the Calvinists insist on locating God apart from Christ’s flesh, we must emphasize the significance of the communication of the divine attributes to the human nature of Christ. This is called the personal union. Christ is one person, indivisible. His human nature shares in all of the attributes of his divine nature.

The false Christology of the Reformed does great harm to their teaching of the gospel. They refuse to locate God only where God has chosen to be located. Thus, their doctrine of justification, which in most aspects of it is quite sound, will necessarily be set aside, off in a corner somewhere where it cannot really flow into the preaching and piety of the church. If God can be found apart from Christ’s flesh, folks will look for him apart from Christ’s flesh. This is human nature. The Lutheran knows that the doctrine of grace and justification through faith alone is grounded in and flows out of biblical Christology. Calvinism, on the other hand, can conceive of Christ’s divinity apart from his flesh so it must ground its doctrine of grace elsewhere than in what is accomplished for us in the divine flesh of Christ alone. Such an anti-incarnational conception requires Calvinism to safeguard the doctrine of grace by means of their doctrine of God’s “decrees.” It doesn’t work. God’s sovereignty is a rotten foundation for his grace. A sovereign God cannot bear my sicknesses and carry my sorrows. Only an incarnate God can do that. The sovereign God is a mean bully that nobody really likes at all. Because he’s sovereign we’re stuck with him. It’s not as if we can get

away from him. If we could, he wouldn't be sovereign after all, would he? But we surely don't much want to "flee for refuge" to such a God. And, of course, few people do. This is why Calvinism ñ despite its clear and often beautiful expressions of Christ's atonement and the doctrine of justification ñ also breeds legalistic and sectarian opposition. Arminianism, which rejects the "divine decrees" of Calvin's God, is seen as a "kinder and gentler" version of the Protestant faith. As hostile as it is to historic Calvinism, however, it couldn't have arisen without it. And it has never been able to overcome Calvin's fundamental error on Christology. Calvin's rationalistic denial of the so-called *genus maiestaticum* (the divine attributes being communicated to Christ's human nature) has had incalculably serious consequences for Protestantism. We Lutherans need to be made aware of these consequences.

The incarnation is where to locate grace because grace is always centered in Jesus and in his suffering for us. Since the Reformed will put the Son of God where the man Jesus is not, the mystery of the incarnation cannot relate to them. It doesn't flow into the saving mysteries of the here and now, namely, the pure gospel and sacraments of Christ's church. For the Reformed, the incarnation has no immediate practical importance, except perhaps as a dogma which is logically necessary to the atonement and which must be believed if one is to be a Christian. When it comes right down to it, Reformed theology has Jesus absent from his church.

Their bad Christology has dire consequences for Reformed sacramental theology. Just as God the Son may be present when and where the Son of Man is absent, so also the gospel and sacraments may be present when and where the Holy Spirit himself is absent. Since this can be, it will be. There go the means of grace. They know what Christ's blood does, but they don't know where it is. They cannot depend on the means of grace. Therefore the doctrine of justification, while true enough, doesn't relate to them. It is information. It is not God giving the righteousness of Jesus to sinners through the means of grace.

Reformed theology has a hard time relating Jesus' blood and righteousness to people. That's not surprising when you consider that Jesus isn't really there and the doctrine of the real absence of Christ does tend to make atonement and justification theology rather irrelevant. So they fall into a kind of revivalistic type of piety in which they come into contact with Christ's blood by means of a dramatic religious encounter. This is often combined with the rigorous application of relevant principles for Christian living that they have gleaned from the Holy Scriptures. Whether a strategy for Church Growth, overcoming financial challenges, empowering wounded healers, teaching men to keep their promises, or even making an entire synod comprised of over two and a half million souls functional again, the "spiritual principles" approach to theology is an effort to bring Christ to bear on problems when Christ himself, that is, Christ in the flesh,

is not available. Of course, the most prominent feature of the so called Church Growth Movement is the “spiritual gifts” doctrine that teaches the church will grow as the individual members discover and use whatever spiritual gifts they have. While God established the initial contact with you when you came into contact with the atoning blood of Jesus, this relationship will continue to be strengthened as you find a certain interior gift and use it to relate to God and to the church. The “spiritual gifts” doctrine is just another form of Pietism. When you believe that God is relevant to you primarily by what he does inside of you instead of what he gives to you, the real point of contact between God and man is lost and all doctrine is irrelevant. We are left to discover a relevance by coming up with busy body religious rules for success and then blaming the Holy Ghost for our own inventions.

As we return to our liturgical and sacramental heritage as Lutherans, however, it is vital that we do so as Lutherans. The threat from the Reformed left leaves us without the blood. The threat from the Catholic right is even more dangerous. It leaves us with blood that doesn't flow into a forensic justification and thereby deceives us with false promises. It is bad enough to have Jesus absent from us so that we must content ourselves with a Holy Spirit who makes us jump through spiritual hoops in order to relate to God. It is even worse to have Jesus present with us without hearing him tell us what we need to hear.

The Catholics have the blood but have never quite figured out what it is for. Rome denies that God reckons to faith the righteousness of Christ and thereby justifies the sinner. While they have a fine doctrine of redemption on paper, it doesn't inform their doctrine of justification. They have a rich doctrine of the incarnation. They see the incarnation made manifest in the sacramental life of the church, indeed they define the church in sacramental terms. But they have a fatal and incurable bias against the justification of the sinner being effected by means of God telling the sinner here and now that his sins really are fully and finally forgiven for Christ's sake. They won't back off of their essentially sanative or transformational model of justification that has God pronouncing the person righteous on account of the righteousness that inheres in the individual. So while Rome and the Orthodox do indeed teach a sacramental presence of Christ the Savior here on earth with his holy church, they don't permit Jesus to say what Jesus wants to say. They have the blood but don't know what it is for and when we tell them they insist on changing the subject. The Reformed have their scriptural principles for Christian living. Rome and the Orthodox have their sacramental presence. Neither can join the blood shed to those for whom the blood was shed. Neither can teach a relevant theology without descending into the very same morass of legalism. And as we have seen, legalism is always very relevant.

I would like to suggest to Lutherans who want to claim our liturgical and sacramental patrimony that we may only do so as we subordinate every other doctrinal assertion, theological consideration, and churchly reform to the task of bringing the atoning blood of Jesus Christ to the individual sinner by means of the teaching, preaching, and sacramental bestowal of the forgiveness of sins. We cannot understand the Lutheran teaching on the office of the ministry or on the sacraments of Christ unless we understand this in relation to the article on justification and in subordination to it. I know that a pastor is a minister because God justifies me through the gospel the pastor preaches and the sacraments he administers. He doesn't justify me through the administrative or bureaucratic work of a synodical president who is ordained or through the loving discipline and teaching of useful skills that come from the parochial school teacher who is not ordained. This is how I know that neither a synodical president nor a parochial school teacher is a minister in the proper sense of that term. Likewise, we must reject any talk about a sacramental presence of Christ among us that militates against a clear understanding of forensic justification by the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the sinner. The article on justification serves as a hermeneutical check on all our theology. One side argues in favor of the priesthood of all believers and the other side argues for a more sacramental understanding of ordination. I would urge all sides to use justification as the interpretive principle to understand the ministry, the liturgy, the sacraments, and everything else so hotly debated among Lutherans today.

Lutherans who want to reconnect with the liturgical life of the historic church may profitably consider the writings of such theologians as Aidan Kavanagh and Alexander Schmemmann. However, the confessional Lutheran will subject their contributions to a rigorous test. The centrality of justification in the body of Christian doctrine and its unique role in God's care of the soul requires extraordinary care in applying to Lutheran theology the liturgical insight of men who reject the Lutheran doctrine of justification. I am not sure that this has always been done.

We are hearing more and more these days of our Lord's incarnational and sacramental presence in the church. Lutherans are telling us that Christ is present in "the sacramental life of the church." What do they mean by this? When Rome or the Orthodox speak of the sacramental life of the church they do so in service to an alien theology that rejects the confessional Lutheran doctrine of justification. In Roman Catholic theology, the church is Christ's sacramental presence in the world. Lutherans don't talk about the sacramental life of the church. We talk about the administration of the sacraments. In this way we keep the focus on the actual bestowal of forgiveness where God has chosen to give it. When Lutherans start to talk of Christ's "real presence" and are not specifically talking about the sacramental union of Christ's true body and blood with the elements of bread and wine they are changing the standard meaning of words. I

know what a Catholic means when he says that Christ is present in the sacramental life of the church. I don't know why Lutherans are talking about Christ's incarnational presence in the sacramental life of the church. When everything is sacramental, nothing is sacramental. It's like the "everyone a minister" claim. We find that it leaves no one as a minister. For us Lutherans, the sacraments are powerful means of salvation not because they ensure Christ's incarnational or sacramental presence among us, but because they give us the forgiveness of sins.

God forgives us our sins when we go to the Lord's Supper. This is the chief benefit of the Sacrament. This is not what Rome teaches. It is what Luther's Small Catechism teaches. Luther asks three questions about the Sacrament of the Altar: "What is the benefit of such eating and drinking?" "How can bodily eating and drinking do such great things?" And, "Who then receives such sacrament worthily?" The answer to every question is the same, "Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." Nowhere do you see a clearer connection between the atonement of Christ then and there to the justification of the sinner here and now than you see in the Lord's Supper. We go to the Supper to be justified. We go to hear Jesus tell us that our sins are forgiven because he died for us. And should we wonder how serious Jesus is about this declaration of our justification (so that we are not seduced by the Catholic deceit that this is a "mere" forensic justification) Jesus graciously puts into our mouths the same body that bore our sins on the cross and the same blood by which our sins were forgiven. The Lord's Supper relates to us because it is God justifying us. The heart of Christian doctrine meets the heart of the penitent at the Altar. God justifies us by Christ's blood. We eat and drink Christ's body and blood and thereby can know without any doubt that we are righteous.

There is nothing wrong with using theological imagery that reflects on the incarnation of the Son of God and restoration through him to the image of God. Incarnational terms such as wholeness, wellness, restoration, and so forth are useful in describing the Christian's sanctification. Still, we are not perfectly whole. We will not fully experience the recreation until the resurrection. But we most certainly are perfectly righteous right now. This is what the Lutheran doctrine of justification teaches us. When we speak, therefore, of the Lord's Supper, we should be teaching the doctrine of the vicarious atonement of Jesus and the justification of the sinner who receives by faith the forgiveness of sins won by Christ's blood. It is theologically inadequate to talk in terms of an incarnational presence of Jesus in the sacramental life of the church for the purpose of restoring our fallen image to wholeness and wellness.

Lex orandi, lex credendi! The way of prayer is the way of faith! This little truism has become a rallying cry for confessional Lutherans who argue for retaining the historic liturgy of the church and for purifying our Lutheran liturgy from some of

the Reformed dress that has attaches itself to it. By getting the liturgical life of the church straightened out, the purity of the gospel will surely follow. *Lex orandi, lex credendi!* Yes, but we must not forget that the historic liturgical churches within the Roman and Orthodox communions have been wallowing in the mire of legalism for centuries now. The Bible, not the liturgy, is the norm of Christian doctrine. When we teach the centrality of justification both as the topic that informs all other topics of the faith as well as the place where God himself gives himself to faith, we will love the church's liturgy because we love the blood and righteousness of Jesus, the forgiveness of our sins, and the boundless mercy of our Father in heaven revealed in the bitter passion and death of his beloved Son, Jesus. Retaining the historic liturgy, having the Supper more frequently, and inviting the penitent to receive personal absolution of the sins that beset him must all be done for the purpose of God meeting sinners and absolving them through the blood of Christ the Lamb of God. Where the paschal blood is poured, death's dread angel sheathes the sword! Now I can know the God who made me. He can relate to me and I to him.

We dare not ward off the Low Church pietism of the left with the High Church pietism of the right. Either side severs the merits of Christ's blood from the personal faith of the Christian. The left does it by denying that Christ is really present. The right does it by denying that the blood of Jesus really does take away all of our sin. The left and right both force the Christian to relate to God by what God does inside of him. Looking for Jesus in my heart or looking for Jesus in the sacramental life of the church makes no difference. Corporate pietism is no better than individualistic pietism. In either case we are looking for the solution where the problem is.

Justification is relevant because we are not righteous in ourselves and yet we must be righteous or shrink in terror before the holy God. It is relevant because it is how God relates to us. This doctrine brings us forgiveness of sins, peace with God, the desire to please God in body and soul, and the confidence that we are going to heaven some day to see face to face the One whose righteousness covered us and sheltered us from the moment we were baptized. The enduring relevance of the doctrine of justification cannot be expressed any better, I think, than in these words from the hymn, "One Thing Needful," with which I will close this afternoon.

I have naught, my God to offer, Save the blood of Thy dear Son;

Graciously accept the proffer: Make his righteousness mine own.

His holy life gave He, was crucified for me;

His righteousness perfect He now pleads before Thee;

His own robe of righteousness, my highest good,

Shall clothe me in glory, through faith in His blood. (ELH 182, stanza 6)
