

What is the Gospel? What Difference Does it Make?

By Pastor Rolf Preus

Luther Forum at Trinity Lutheran Church

Brewster, Massachusetts

November 18, 2006

Justification as the Central Article of the Christian Religion

What is the Gospel? If this is a legitimate question to ask, it must also be a question that can be answered. This means that the gospel can be defined and communicated. One can use human language to communicate transcendent truth, for the gospel is from God and not merely from men. When St. Paul calls it the “gospel of God” (Romans 1:1) he is not only saying that it is about God but that it comes from God. God is the One who teaches it and proclaims it among us. This means that the gospel is not merely a theological construction. It is the living voice of almighty God. When we set out to define it or teach it we are walking on holy ground. We are treating that topic by which God makes Himself known. We may not do so except in the fear of God.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church has historically claimed that the teaching of God’s word on the justification of the sinner by God’s grace, through faith, for Christ’s sake is the chief topic of the Christian religion. Here is how it is defined in Article IV of 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).[\[1\]](#)

This definition is reiterated in Article V on the ministry of the word, in Article VI on good works, and indeed throughout the Augsburg Confession. The Roman Confutation rejected the Lutheran definition of justification, accusing the Lutherans, among other things, of adopting the teaching of the Manicheans[\[2\]](#) who taught a bizarre form of dualism that denied the Christian teaching of a good creation by a good God. The false charge of Manicheanism has

been leveled against the Lutherans over the years on account of the Lutheran teaching on the total depravity of man and his inability to do anything at all toward his justification by God.

But the Roman Catholic criticism that drew the most sustained response from Melancthon in the Apology was the Confutation's insistence that faith alone did not justify but rather faith that works through, that is, faith that is formed by love.^[3] The Catholic argument was in favor of a balance between grace and works that excluded neither but included both. They promoted the eminently reasonable idea that one was to do what was in him to do^[4] and then trust that God would graciously supply what was lacking. This is no more nor less than what any coach would expect from the members of his team. For the Lutherans, there could be no mixing of grace and works. One could not rely on both. Sin is too deep. The requirements of the law of love are too high. No one can begin to love God until all his sin is forgiven and God has reckoned him to be righteous. This can only be reckoned for Christ's sake whose righteousness replaces the sinner's sin. This can only be received through faith. The role of faith in the justification of the sinner, therefore, was no minor detail for the Lutherans. At stake was not only the nature of justifying faith, but also the glory of Christ as Mediator, the consolation of terrified consciences, the assurance of salvation, and the trustworthiness of God's word, that is, of God Himself. Indeed, for the Lutherans, every single article of the Christian teaching was at stake in this controversy. Melancthon's response to the Roman Confutation in the Apology not only rejected the Confutation's criticism of justification through faith alone, but insisted that the article on justification as set forth in the Augsburg Confession is the chief topic of the Christian religion. This is how he puts it at the beginning of his discussion of justification in Article IV of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession:

In this controversy the main doctrine of Christianity is involved; when it is properly understood, it illumines and magnifies the honor of Christ and brings to pious consciences the abundant consolation that they need. (Ap IV 2)^[5]

Melancthon's treatment of justification in this portion of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession remains relevant to the church of every age, as I hope to demonstrate. True, the specific issues of the Sixteenth Century debate have changed, but the general outlines of this doctrine as set forth here are as pertinent to the theological scene today as they have ever been.

May we speak of the gospel and the teaching of justification interchangeably? When our Lutheran forefathers identified justification as the central article of the Christian faith were they using a bit of understandable hyperbole to emphasize the importance of the issues at stake in the controversy of their day? Or is this topic by its very nature central to the theological task and to the Christian proclamation? Is justification the gospel? More to the point, is the gospel justification? Or was justification merely that metaphor for the gospel on which debate was centered when the Lutheran Confessions were written? Perhaps in our day as we seek to overcome the prejudices of the past we will also discover that there is no easy equation of justification and the gospel. After all, the Eastern Orthodox Church knows little if anything about justification and the Roman Catholic Church says relatively little about it. Isn't the

elevation of justification as the central truth of the Christian teaching a sectarian vestige of Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Lutheranism? Aren't we better off, as Christians of the Twenty First Century, to be rid of this anachronistic claim? Will not insistence upon an historically bound judgment keep us from understanding history, and worse, prevent us from overcoming in our day some of the misunderstandings of the past?

It is certainly true that there are features of the Sixteenth Century debate that may appear to have little bearing on our discussions today. Who among us is eager to discuss the difference between condign and congruent merit? That Melancthon addresses such distinctions may, on the surface, suggest that we have moved beyond that particular debate. But this appearance would be quite deceiving. The centrality of justification does not require running back into the Sixteenth Century. We can demonstrate it right here and now without reference to anything at all but the plain teaching of the Scriptures and the compelling need for everyone in this room to know with certainty that his sins are forgiven by God in heaven.

It is customary to refer to justification as a metaphor. But justification is not one metaphor among many and it may not be particularly useful to speak of such terms as justification, atonement, redemption, and salvation as metaphors. True, these terms have non-theological definitions. But this does not make them metaphorical when used theologically. Metaphors are figures of speech that point beyond themselves to a reality they are intended to convey. They aren't intended to be taken literally. But these soteriological terms with which we are familiar all teach literal truth. Consider redemption. Jesus quite literally redeems us. He pays the ransom price to set us free and so we are set free from the bondage of sin, death, and the devil. The ransom price is real. It is His very life. The payment is real. He is born, lives, obeys, suffers, and dies. The freedom it effects is real, just as the bondage from which we are set free is real. Consider the vicarious atonement. Christ becomes our substitute. By means of what He does as our substitute He reconciles us to God. This is not a metaphor pointing to something else. This is the literal truth. Consider salvation. God saves us. He rescues us from our enemies and delivers us from all evil. These various biblical terms that we call soteriological (because they all pertain to our salvation) are not metaphors for another reality that cannot be expressed except with metaphors. These are the reality revealed to us in Christ. At the very heart of this reality is the sinner's justification by grace alone, through faith alone, for the sake of Christ's vicarious obedience all the way to His death on a cross.

Justification cannot be understood apart from redemption, atonement, propitiation, reconciliation, and salvation. In fact these terms are roughly synonymous inasmuch as they all entail each other and they all refer to the activity of God in Christ by which sinners become saints and are restored to perfect communion with their Creator. Why, then, is the article specifically on justification regarded as the chief article of the faith?

Certainly, we do not regard justification as the central article in opposition to redemption as if we must choose between the two. In the Large Catechism, after a beautiful description of the

article of redemption in his explanation of the Second Article of the Creed, Luther concludes his comments by writing:

Indeed, the entire Gospel that we preach depends on the proper understanding of this article. Upon it all our salvation and blessedness are based, and it is so rich and broad that we never can learn it fully.^[6]

And it is worth noting that the term “justification” does not occur in Luther’s Small Catechism, though the forgiveness of sins is mentioned several times. In the Apology Melancthon identifies justification with reconciliation. There cannot be the one without the other. The reason we usually refer specifically to justification rather than to another soteriological topic as the central article is because justification is where everything comes together. Christ’s redemption, God’s word, our faith, the personal possession of the forgiveness of sins, and true fellowship with God meet in the justification of the sinner through faith alone. What Christ has done for us, what God gives to us, and the faith engendered within us through which we are personally forgiven of all our sins and reconciled to God, are joined. *Justification takes place here and now by means of the word of God.* It is possible to speak of redemption, atonement, propitiation, or even salvation without reference to that word of promise by which it is brought to the individual and made his personal possession. Justification, on the other hand, is by its very nature forensic, that is, it is a judicial decree that assumes the form of a verbal declaration. It is words. But it is more than words. It is divine words. But it is more than divine words. It is divine words that bring to us all that God promises. The word of divine reckoning by which we are justified is the word of God by which all of the treasures of Christ – expressed by such words as redemption, propitiation, reconciliation, atonement, and salvation – are given to us and become ours through faith alone. This faith is faith in the very words that bestow these treasures. This faith is itself engendered by the words it receives. Justification is where we meet God. It is where God meets us. It is the intersection of the Second and Third Articles of the Creed. This is where Jesus and the Holy Spirit are joined together in our faith and life. Everything that Christ has done for us is joined to everything that the Holy Spirit works within us. The redemptive work of Christ, the word of God that declares us to be righteous, and the personal faith of the Christian are all joined together in our justification through faith alone.

Justification as a Work of the Holy Trinity

Justification is thus a work of the Holy Trinity. God does not send His Son into the world because He must be changed from a wrathful God into a gracious and loving God. By no means, God loves the world and He sends His Son into the world precisely because He loves sinners who need to be saved from their sins. Nevertheless, Jesus does suffer divine retribution against the sins of humanity and this is the deepest expression of divine love. The doctrine of the propitiatory sacrifice of Christ whereby He offered up His innocent life on the cross to placate the wrathful and vengeful God is probably the most offensive teaching of the Christian Church, but it is foundational for a correct understanding of our justification. God’s

love and God's wrath are in contradiction according to our sinful human reason. But this contradiction is resolved at the cross where our sins are taken away.

Consider the word "so" as it appears in the well known Bible passage, John 3:16. This text is usually interpreted so as to say that God loved the world so much that He gave His only begotten Son. But the word "so" here does not mean so much. Rather, it means "thus" or "in this way." God loved the world in such a way that He gave His only begotten Son. It is not so much the magnitude of God's love that is here being emphasized, but its nature. Here we are invited into the mystery of divine love. It is not by means of philosophical speculation about the interpenetration of the persons of the Holy Trinity that we learn to understand God's love. No, it is by looking at Christ lifted up for us. There it is that the Holy Spirit directs us, whether at the Font when He first fills us or from the Pulpit where He absolves us or at the Altar where He sustains us in the true faith. We look at Christ lifted up and we see the nature of God's love. There is divine love as the Son who is eternally loved by the Father is forsaken in His suffering while He must drink to the bitter dregs the cup of divine vengeance against all sinners.

The Offense of the Cross

This is the offense of the cross. It offends modernists who argue that to portray God as an angry Judge needing to be placated contradicts the doctrine of love. For example, Robert Jenson writes:

It will do no good, for example, to proclaim Jesus' death as the payment of a great indemnity to God, to people freed – partly from the gospel itself! – from the feudal fear of indemnities, and from conceiving of God as supreme feudal master.[\[7\]](#)

It offends the Eastern Orthodox who teach a more mystical and synergistic notion of redemption that dismisses as "Western" the so called "theory" of the vicarious atonement that has Christ paying to God what sinful mankind owes. But anything less than the propitiatory sacrifice of Christ is unworthy of divine love. Listen to how the character Brand, from Henrik Ibsen's play by the same name, describes the love of God in a conversation with his wife:

Of what the paltering world calls love,

I will not know, I cannot speak;

I know but His who reigns above,

And His is neither mild nor weak;

Hard even unto death is this,

And smiting with its awful kiss.

What was the answer of God's love

Of old, when in the olive-grove

In anguish-sweat His own Son lay

And prayed, O, Take this cup away?

Did God take from him then the cup?

No, child; His Son must drink it up!

The word is not bare. It is not absolute. Its almighty power is not adequately expressed merely by identifying it as coming from God, as if God could simply declare what runs counter to His own justice, truthfulness, and faithfulness. No, the almighty power of the word by which we are justified is the word that cries out from Christ's blood. The power of the gospel is not the absolute power of God's sovereign majesty, as if it were simply an afterthought that Christ's incarnation, obedience, and suffering would be required. It is precisely from the righteousness of Christ's vicarious satisfaction that the gospel obtains its power to save. When St. Paul says that we are saved through the word of the gospel, he says this is so because the gospel reveals the righteousness by which we are justified. The reason the gospel is the power of God to save those who believe it is because in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith. (Romans 1:16-17) Justification is the center of it all because justification takes place by means of God's word and God's word is how and when and where we come to know God.

God's Word and our Faith

This is Melancthon's argument in the Apology. He puts it this way: "But one cannot deal with God or grasp him except through the Word." (Ap IV 67)^[8] This is why we are justified by faith and by faith alone. Faith alone receives the word. The very nature of justification requires that it be bestowed by means of the word of God and received through faith in that word of God. Melancthon goes on to say: "For if justification takes place only through the Word, and the Word is received only by faith, then it follows that faith justifies."^[9]

Modern Protestant Evangelicalism emphasizes a personal relationship with Jesus that sometimes makes Lutherans uncomfortable. We don't want the doctrinal foundation of faith to degenerate into some kind of a subjective experience. Of course we don't. But neither do we want doctrine to be confined to an academic ghetto from which it cannot escape and find a place within our affections. The faith by which the righteousness of Christ is received is certainly no mere historical knowledge to which we give an intellectual assent! It is our life

with God. The word of God is the means by which we receive forgiveness of sins, have fellowship with Christ's redemption, and experience salvation.

So then, the reason justification by faith alone is the heart of the Christian teaching is because it is the heart of the individual Christian's personal faith in God. We should not shy away from emphasizing the personal relationship each Christian enjoys with God, for if another concern than the justification of the sinner takes central stage the central article will be set aside for another lesser concern. When this happens Christ is buried and Christian consciences experience no peace.

The Glory of Christ and the Consolation of the Conscience

These two things go together: Christ's honor and the consolation of terrified consciences. Here is how Melancthon puts it:

We are debating about an important issue, the honor of Christ and the source of sure and firm consolation for pious minds — whether we should put our trust in Christ or in our own works. If we put it in our works, we rob Christ of his honor as mediator and propitiator. And in the judgment of God we shall learn that this trust was vain and our consciences will then plunge into despair. For if the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation do not come freely for Christ's sake, but for the sake of our love, nobody will have the forgiveness of sins unless he keeps the whole law, because the law does not justify so long as it can accuse us. Justification is reconciliation for Christ's sake. Therefore it is clear that we are justified by faith, for it is sure that we receive the forgiveness of sins by faith alone. (Ap IV 156-158)[\[10\]](#)

God's greatest glory is revealed in being merciful to undeserving sinners. Therefore, to believe that God intends to be merciful and gracious to us for Christ's sake is to worship God rightly. We honor God by believing that what He promises us is true. This makes faith true worship of God. Melancthon writes:

The faith that justifies, however, is no mere historical knowledge, but the firm acceptance of God's offer promising forgiveness of sins and justification. To avoid the impression that it is merely knowledge, we add that to have faith means to want and to accept the promised offer of forgiveness of sins and justification.

It is easy to determine the difference between this faith and the righteousness of the law. Faith is that worship which receives God's offered blessing; the righteousness of the law is that worship which offers God our own merits. It is by faith that God wants to be worshiped, namely, that we receive from him what he promises and offers. (Ap IV 48-49)[\[11\]](#)

Far from being a mere theological virtue which, when formed by love, contributes to the justification of the sinner, faith transcends all virtues by virtue of what it receives from God. The value of faith is not anything inherent in it. It is solely in what God gives to it. Since faith

glorifies God by acknowledging God's glory precisely when and where God is gracious to sinners for Christ's sake, faith is true worship. God determines what true worship is. It is in that faith which receives from God what He promises.

This was expressed beautifully by Luther a decade earlier in his treatise: "The Freedom of the Christian," where Luther describes justifying faith as clinging to the promises of the gospel in such a way that it is "saturated and intoxicated by them."^[12] This faith, formed by the gospel itself, ascribes to God what is His and thereby worships Him as God wants to be worshiped. Luther writes:

It is a further function of faith that it honors him whom it trusts with the most reverent and highest regard since it considers him truthful and trustworthy. There is no other honor equal to the estimate of truthfulness and righteousness with which we honor him whom we trust. Could we ascribe to a man anything greater than truthfulness and righteousness and perfect goodness? On the other hand, there is no way we can show greater contempt for a man than to regard him as false and wicked and to be suspicious of him, as we do when we do not trust him. So when the soul firmly trusts God's promises, it regards him as truthful and righteous. Nothing more excellent than this can be ascribed to God. The very highest worship of God is this that we ascribe to him truthfulness, righteousness, and whatever else should be ascribed to one who is trusted.^[13]

If the faith by which the sinner is justified is the highest worship of God, surely the doctrine of justification by faith alone likewise magnifies Christ's glory, whereas its denial obscures it altogether. What honors and glorifies God is what brings comfort to the terrified conscience, burdened by sin and guilt. Where Christ is glorified and where the sinner is justified is the very same place. What buries Christ is what burdens the conscience. The glory of Christ and the justification of the sinner burdened by his sins are inextricably bound. This is fundamental to an understanding of justification.

To deny that we are justified freely for Christ's sake without works is to bury Christ. Melancthon writes:

Thus they bury Christ; men should not use him as mediator and believe that for his sake they freely receive the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation, but should dream that they merit the forgiveness of sins and are accounted righteous by their own keeping of the law before God. (Ap IV 18)^[14]

What buries Christ burdens the conscience and leaves us under the wrath of God. We read:

In this way we are reconciled to the Father and receive the forgiveness of sins when we are comforted by trust in the mercy promised for Christ's sake. Our opponents suppose that Christ is the mediator and propitiator because he merited for us the

disposition of love. And so they would not have us make use of him now as our mediator. Instead, as though Christ were completely buried, they imagine that we have access through our own works, by which we merit this disposition, and then, through this love, have access to God. Does this not bury Christ completely and do away with the whole teaching of faith? Paul, on the other hand, teaches that we have access (that is, reconciliation) through Christ. And to show how this happens, he adds that through faith we have access. By faith, therefore, for Christ's sake we receive the forgiveness of sins. We cannot set our love or our works against the wrath of God. (Ap IV 81)[15]

We may not divorce the glory of Christ from the comfort of penitent sinners. Apart from the comfort that God's free forgiveness provides, God cannot be glorified. He cannot be loved. Melancthon writes:

Then, too, how can the human heart love God while it knows that in his terrible wrath he is overwhelming us with temporal and eternal calamities? The law always accuses us; it always shows that God is wrathful. We cannot love God until we have grasped his mercy by faith. Only then does he become an object that can be loved. (Ap IV 128-129)[16]

The glory of Christ and the consolation of the terrified conscience belong together. This of necessity excludes the very concept of human merit, whether it is prior to or subsequent to the reception of divine grace. We cannot love until we are forgiven. It's that simple. The Roman Catholic Church taught (and teaches) that one is justified by faith only insofar as that faith is formed by love. Here is how it was later set forth at the Council of Trent: "For faith, unless hope and charity be added to it, neither unites man perfectly with Christ nor makes him a living member of His body." [17] Melancthon points out in the Apology that such a notion of faith that requires love to be added to it for it to meet its goal in fact shuts out the very possibility of love. He writes:

Finally, it was very foolish of our opponents to write that men who are under eternal wrath merit the forgiveness of sins by an elicited act of love, since it is impossible to love God unless faith has first accepted the forgiveness of sins. A heart that really feels God's wrath cannot love him unless it sees that he is reconciled. While he terrifies us and seems to be casting us into eternal death, human nature cannot bring itself to love a wrathful, judging, punishing God. It is easy enough for idle men to make up these dreams that a man guilty of mortal sin can love God above all things, since they themselves do not feel the wrath or judgment of God. But in the agony of conscience and in conflict, the conscience experiences how vain these philosophical speculations are. Paul says (Rom. 4:15), "The law brings wrath." He does not say that by the law men merit the forgiveness of sins. For the law always accuses and terrifies consciences. It does not justify, because a conscience terrified by the law flees before God's judgment. (Ap IV 36-38)[18]

Our Justification and Our Love

Surely the conscience that flees from God cannot love Him. This is why, if our love is to become part of justification, we will never be justified. It isn't a question of whether or not we must love God. It is a question of the source of that love. St. Paul makes it quite clear. In Romans 5:1-5 we read:

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith in to this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

Note the progression. As foundational, St. Paul asserts that we are justified by faith. Since this is so, we have peace with God. We are reconciled to Him and He is reconciled to us because we are righteous with the righteousness of faith, that is, the righteousness of Christ. Since this is so we have access to God. This access is not to a status of uncertainty or probation before the divine Judge. We have access to divine grace in which we stand. We stand before God. We are covered with Christ's righteousness. We are living in a state of grace. From this we can face every kind of tribulation, not merely grudgingly or in silent bitterness, but with joy because we know for a certainty that the suffering we face is not a sign of the displeasure of the God whom we have offended by our sins. It cannot be, for we are justified by Him and live at peace with Him and have access to His grace in which we stand. The patience and character and hope that ensue would have been quite impossible were we not justified by faith alone. There is no Christian character or hope apart from having received the forgiveness of sins and being at peace with God. The hope we enjoy is not fictitious or vain. We won't be disappointed by it, for the love of God is already poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. This love is ours, it defines our union with God, it shapes our lives, it points to our future in heaven, and it could not have come into the heart that was running away from God. But, while running from God is futile, it is the only thing a terrified conscience can do. Only Christ can stand between God's judgment and our conscience.

First faith receives; then the Spirit fills. To speak of any activity of Christ or the Holy Spirit within us apart from first establishing, as the foundation for it, the reception of the forgiveness of sins and justification by God through faith alone is to promote a fiction. The troubled heart cannot love God until it learns to rest in His grace. The Roman polemicists against the Lutheran doctrine of justification in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth centuries called forensic justification a "legal fiction" because it allegedly had God declaring what was not so, telling a sinner that he is righteous when in fact he is not. The Lutherans replied to this calumny by insisting that the righteousness of Christ was very real, the imputation was real, the word by which the imputation was declared to the sinner was real, and the faith was real because it

received and was formed by the almighty word of God. The real fiction is any notion of love for God coming from the heart of the one who is constantly running away from God. The only genuine indwelling of the Holy Spirit, mystical union with Christ, participation in the divine nature, or Christian love come as a direct consequence of the perfect justification of the believer through faith alone. The certainty of salvation yields every good fruit of faith. When we do not run from God but embrace Him and His promises in faith, we continue to receive from Him the righteousness by which we are justified. This faith has no depth, height, width, or dimension at all. It is a mathematical point. It receives every good and perfect gift that comes from God, and it flows into every good thing that will be done by the Christian. But the faith cannot be defined except with reference to what it receives, for it is in receiving that it obtains its nature as faith.

The Certainty of Salvation

The certainty of salvation is not a prerequisite for the genuine faith. Rather, the certainty of salvation is given to faith with the gospel itself, for the very nature of the gospel is that its truth does not to any degree depend on what happens within the one who receives it through faith. The truth of the gospel depends on Christ's vicarious work and the word of God that bestows the fruit of this saving work. Faith is not the catalyst that actualizes an impotent word that requires faith to make it powerful. Faith does not examine itself to see if it has received the righteousness that avails before God. Rather, it sees Christ's work and the blessings it provides. How does it see this? The word is proclaimed. The word does not proclaim a justification that is contingent upon the proper response, but a justification that provides in itself the sure and firm consolation we need. Listen again the Melancthon from the Apology:

What we have shown thus far, on the basis of the Scriptures and arguments derived from the Scriptures, was to make clear that by faith alone we receive the forgiveness of sins for Christ's sake, and by faith alone are justified, that is, out of unrighteous we are made righteous and regenerated men. One can easily see how necessary it is to understand this faith, for through it alone we recognize Christ's work and receive his blessings and it alone provides a sure and firm consolation for devout minds. And there must needs be a proclamation in the church from which the faithful may receive the sure hope of salvation. Our opponents give men bad advice when they bid them doubt whether they have received the forgiveness of sins. For in the hour of death, what will sustain those who have heard nothing about this faith and who believe that they should doubt about receiving the forgiveness of sins? Furthermore, the Gospel (that is, the promise that sins are forgiven freely for Christ's sake) must be retained in the church. Whoever fails to teach about this faith we are discussing completely destroys the Gospel. (Ap IV 117-120)[\[19\]](#)

The Formula of Concord and Justification through Faith Alone

So far I have presented the Lutheran teaching of justification by faith from what was written during Luther's own life. After Luther's death, much controversy broke out among those who identified with his teaching, especially his teaching on justification. In 1577 the Formula of Concord was written, later to become incorporated into the Book of Concord, published in 1580. There have been numerous and vigorous attempts over the years to dissociate Luther from the teaching on justification found in the Formula of Concord and the Lutheran dogmatic tradition that came afterwards. Luther allegedly did not embrace the purely forensic doctrine of justification taught in the Formula. I will address some of these attempts in the second part of this paper. Right now, suffice it to say that these attempts must finally fail for the simple reason that the teaching of the Apology and the teaching of the Formula on this central article of our Christian faith are one and the same teaching. Just as the Augsburg Confession and the Apology of the Augsburg Confession define justifying faith as trust in the promise that forgives sins for Christ's sake, likewise the Formula teaches that faith justifies solely on account of what it receives in the promise of the gospel. We read:

Concerning the righteousness of faith before God we believe, teach, and confess unanimously, in accord with the summary formulation of our Christian faith and confession described above, that a poor sinner is justified before God (that is, he is absolved and declared utterly free from all his sins, and from the verdict of well deserved damnation, and is adopted as a child of God and an heir of eternal life) without any merit or worthiness on our part, and without any preceding, present, or subsequent works, by sheer grace, solely through the merit of the total obedience, the bitter passion, the death, and the resurrection of Christ, our Lord, whose obedience is reckoned to us as righteousness. The Holy Spirit offers these treasures to us in the promise of the Gospel, and faith is the only means whereby we can apprehend, accept, apply them to ourselves, and make them our own. Faith is a gift of God whereby we rightly learn to know Christ as our redeemer in the Word of the Gospel and to trust in him, that solely for the sake of his obedience we have forgiveness of sins by grace, are accounted righteous and holy by God the Father, and are saved forever. Thus the following statements of St. Paul are to be considered and taken as synonymous: "We are justified by faith" (Rom. 3:28), or "faith is reckoned to us as righteousness" (Rom. 4:5), or when he says that we are justified by the obedience of Christ, our only mediator, or that "one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men" (Rom. 5:18). For faith does not justify because it is so good a work and so God-pleasing a virtue, but because it lays hold on and accepts the merit of Christ in the promise of the holy Gospel. This merit has to be applied to us and to be made our own through faith if we are to be justified thereby. Therefore the righteousness which by grace is reckoned to faith or to the believers is the obedience, the passion, and the resurrection of Christ when he satisfied the law for us and paid for our sin. (FC SD III 9-14)[\[20\]](#)

Two things need to be noted here about justifying faith. First, it justifies without regard to anything prior or subsequent to it. Second, it justifies solely on account of what it receives in the promise of the gospel. Since this is so, we cannot place within the article on justification a

quality of faith, a fruit of faith, an activity of faith, or a participation of faith which would make such a quality or fruit or activity or participation a part of the justification of the sinner by faith. Only when every dimension of faith as faith is excluded can faith then be what faith must be if it is to be justifying faith. Faith must be pure receptivity. What it receives must be complete, entire, and perfect. Its perfection is in Christ, not the believer. True, Christ becomes ours through faith, but the Christ who is present in faith is not our righteousness on account of being present in faith. He is our righteousness on account of what He has done and accomplished by His vicarious fulfilling of the law and by suffering and dying for our sins. The righteousness by which we are justified is our righteousness because it is given to us and with this righteousness comes Christ. It is our righteousness as we receive it. But it is not righteousness because of our participation in it. It is righteousness prior to our reception of it. Therefore, our justification by faith must exclude as a matter of principle the subsequent indwelling of Christ whether we call this the mystical union or participation in Christ.

We cannot separate Christ's indwelling from our justification nor can we separate our justification from Christ's indwelling. But we certainly must distinguish between the two as the Formula of Concord does. Listen to how it is stated in the Formula:

On the one hand, it is true indeed that God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who is the eternal and essential righteousness, dwells by faith in the elect who have been justified through Christ and reconciled with God, since all Christians are temples of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who impels them to do rightly. But, on the other hand, this indwelling of God is not the righteousness of faith of which St. Paul speaks and which he calls the righteousness of God, on account of which we are declared just before God. This indwelling follows the preceding righteousness of faith, which is precisely the forgiveness of sins and the gracious acceptance of poor sinners on account of the obedience and merit of Christ. (FC SD III 54)[\[21\]](#)

Faith rests on Christ alone, the Christ who is for us. Everything that comes about within us is consequent to the Christ for us being given to us and received through faith alone. This giving of Christ and His righteousness to us is the gospel in which we trust. God says it. That settles it. We receive it by believing what God says.

Part Two: What Difference Does it Make?

Faith as Confidence

How do you know that you are God's child, at peace with Him, in fellowship with Him, and an heir of all His promises? How do you know you are going to heaven? Is it not because God has forgiven you all your sins? But how do you know this? Is it not because God has told you so? What other foundation for your faith could there possibly be? If our salvation depends on God's will to save us, surely our confidence that we are saved must depend on God revealing this will to us in no uncertain terms. The very nature of faith as confidence or trust requires a

trustworthy word from God to which faith can cling. Otherwise, faith is religious pretence or delusion.

But is faith confidence? Can faith rightly be understood as trust? I am not speaking here of trust in the absence of knowledge and assent. Rather, I am asking whether or not the essence of faith is confidence in the promises that it receives. If faith is confidence, and if faith is purely receptive, that is, if it simply receives what is given to it to receive, then the foundation for faith rests entirely outside itself. Faith is directed outward to what it receives, that is, to what it trusts. Faith doesn't examine faith in order to find itself. Faith exists by the word and so it is always directed to the word and if it is not directed to the word it is not faith. The word is the word of God concerning His Son who gave up His life for us on the cross to purchase our freedom from sin and death and hell. That word tells us that for Christ's sake and the sake of His vicarious satisfaction our sins are forgiven, God is gracious to us, and eternal life is given to us. The belief that we are justified through faith alone necessitates such a view of faith. Once we attribute to faith a quality that brings about our justification we have redefined faith into something else.

The Point of Controversy between the Lutheran Church and Rome

During much of the ecumenical dialogue of the past several years between Lutherans and Roman Catholics on the doctrine of justification it has been accepted as a truism that there was much misunderstanding of their respective teachings during the Sixteenth Century. The highly celebrated "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" signed by the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church on October 31, 1999 claims that "a consensus in basic truths of the doctrine of justification exists between Lutherans and Catholics."^[22] While refusing to repudiate the past teachings of either communion, it claims that "new insights" have led to this consensus. But has the JDDJ overcome the divisions of the past? Or is it rather the clarity of expression of the 16th Century debate that has been overcome? We don't have the time today to review the JDDJ,^[23] but we can set side by side the teaching of the Lutherans and its rejection by the Roman Catholics of the 16th Century to see if the Roman Catholic Church understood the doctrine that it was rejecting. Consider the following from 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). (AC IV)^[24]

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. (AC V 3)[\[25\]](#)

We begin by teaching that our works cannot reconcile God or merit forgiveness of sins and grace but that we obtain forgiveness and grace only by faith when we believe that we are received into favor for Christ's sake, who alone has been ordained to be the mediator and propitiation through whom the Father is reconciled. (AC XX 9)[\[26\]](#)

Compare these words to Canons 11 and 12 of the Sixth Session of the Council of Trent, which say:

If anyone says that men are justified either by the sole imputation of the justice of Christ or by the sole remission of sins, to the exclusion of the grace and the charity which is poured forth in their hearts by the Holy Ghost, and remains in them, or also that the grace by which we are justified is only the good will of God, let him be anathema.

If anyone says that justifying faith is nothing else than confidence in divine mercy, which remits sins for Christ's sake, or that it is this confidence alone that justifies us, let him be anathema.[\[27\]](#)

Clearly, Rome understood what it was rejecting. It correctly stated the Lutheran definition of faith as "confidence in divine mercy, which remits sins for Christ's sake." It correctly identified the purely receptive function of such faith by attributing to the Lutherans the view that "it is this confidence alone that justifies us." It correctly defined the Lutheran understanding of justifying grace as "the good will of God." It correctly understood the Lutheran teaching concerning the righteousness by which we are justified by describing justification as "the sole imputation of the justice of Christ." This was in 1545. The internal consistency of the Roman Catholic teaching over the years, as well as the agreement of the Lutheran dogmatic tradition with the Lutheran Confessions and Luther himself is remarkable, especially in light of current popular claims that the breach between the Lutheran Church and Rome on the doctrine of justification was just one big misunderstanding.[\[28\]](#)

What was at stake in the Sixteenth Century is precisely what is at stake today. What is it? It is faith and it is righteousness. These two are related. If the righteousness by which we are justified is solely the righteousness of Jesus, then it cannot to any degree be aided, deepened, supplemented, or perfected by anything else. Christ's vicarious satisfaction has rendered righteous those who fell in Adam's fall. "By the obedience of one shall many be made righteous." (Romans 5:19b) The righteousness by which we are justified is wrought solely by Christ's obedience. Thus faith serves as that purely passive reception of this righteousness that avails before God.

Driving a Wedge between Luther and the Lutheran Confessions

The challenges to this biblical and confessional doctrine of justification over the years have by no means come solely from Rome. There are many challenges within Lutheranism. One thinks of Karl Holl, the influential German theologian and leader of the so called “Luther Renaissance” that began during World War I. He taught an “analytic” view of justification that had God justifying the sinner now in view of the fact that he will become righteous some time in the future. The foundation for justification for Holl was not the righteousness of Christ, but the new creation.[\[29\]](#)

The Lutheran / Roman Catholic dialogue has featured Roman Catholic theologians outwardly sympathetic to Luther but intent on assigning to Luther a different view of faith and righteousness than that set forth clearly in the Lutheran Confessions. Consider, for example, Daniel Olivier, whose book Luther's Faith, was published by Concordia Publishing House. Olivier attributes to Luther this view of how faith relates to Christ's work of redemption.

Purification remains the exclusive action of Christ, in whom we have faith. That faith is all that is required of us; because of it Christ can dwell in us and accomplish in each believer the redemption of Calvary.[\[30\]](#)

Roman Catholic theologian George Tavard, active in the Lutheran / Roman Catholic dialogue in the United States, attributes to Luther a similar view of justification. He speaks of Christ achieving true justice, but this justice works inside and comes from faith.[\[31\]](#) Neither Olivier nor Tavard have correctly understood Luther's teaching. Faith doesn't justify because it serves as the occasion for the working of anything at all. It justifies solely on account of what exists entirely whole and perfect apart from faith. Here is how Luther himself puts it lecturing on the words of St. Paul recorded in Galatians 3:6, “Thus Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” Luther says:

Therefore this is a marvelous definition of Christian righteousness: it is a divine imputation or reckoning as righteousness or to righteousness, for the sake of our faith in Christ or for the sake of Christ. . . . Therefore this inestimable gift excels all reason, that without any works God reckons and acknowledges as righteous the man who takes hold by faith of His Son, who was sent into the world, who was born, who suffered and who was crucified for us. . . that righteousness is not in us in a formal sense . . . but is outside us, solely in the grace of God and in His imputation. . . . From this it is clear how faith justifies without works and how the imputation of righteousness is necessary nevertheless. Sins remain in us, and God hates them very much. Because of them it is necessary for us to have the imputation of righteousness, which comes to us on account of Christ, who is given to us and grasped by our faith.[\[32\]](#)

It is only fair to point out that Luther also attributes much to faith as he freely uses faith as a metaphor for just about everything associated with it. Luther's eloquence was much more

poetic than conventionally didactic. He cannot be accused of attempting to construct a systematic theology or even of a consistent use of terms. For this reason many theologians over the years have appealed to Luther in support of decidedly unlutheran notions. And there's always plenty of evidence available! But mining Luther for little nuggets to drive a wedge between his doctrine of faith and righteousness and that of the Lutheran Confessions is doomed from the start for the simple reason that the Formula of Concord and the teaching of the great Lutheran dogmaticians preserved the same doctrine that Luther drew from the Scriptures from about 1518 until his death.

If we are looking in Luther for the systematic presentation of the later Lutherans we might be disappointed. Luther's writing is much more existential and experiential. This is why, when he discusses the role of faith in justification, he sometimes appears to attribute to it an activity that would militate against the later Lutheran understanding of faith as purely passive receptivity. But this is a false appearance. The activity of faith in Luther's theology is pitting faith against the judgment of God, against the demand to trust in merit, against anything that would displace as the sole object of faith Christ and His righteousness. When Luther's mature theology is examined with respect to the role of faith in justification you will find no dimension or quality or circumstance of faith by which it justifies except that it receives Christ and His righteousness. Martin Luther's doctrine of faith and righteousness is the doctrine of faith and righteousness taught by the Formula of Concord and the Lutheran dogmatic tradition.

A Finnish theologian by the name of Tuomo Mannermaa has recently popularized the notion that Luther's doctrine of justification is essentially no different than the Eastern Orthodox doctrine of *theosis*. *Theosis*, or divinization, teaches that the Christian participates in the divine nature by being united with the life of Christ through His body the church. The Christian is made to be like God by the indwelling of Christ. Mannermaa claims that Luther included the divine indwelling in the article on justification. When the Formula of Concord and later Lutheranism taught that the presence of God in faith was not the same thing as the righteousness of faith they broke with Luther's teaching, according to Mannermaa.^[33] Mannermaa claims that Luther's doctrine of justification was more christological than that of the Formula and later Lutheranism who allegedly separated Christ's person from His work. Mannermaa insists that teaching that the justification of the sinner is totally forensic and consists solely in the imputation of forgiveness is to neglect the presence of Christ in faith. Mannermaa writes:

In faith, the person of Christ and that of the believer are made one, and this oneness must not be divided; what is at stake here is salvation, or the loss of it. In the *Formula of Concord*, on the other hand, justification is defined only as the imputation of the forgiveness of sins, whereas *inhabitatio Dei* [that is, the indwelling of God, RDP] is defined as a separate phenomenon and part of sanctification or renewal.^[34]

It's not quite correct to say that the Formula of Concord regards justification and the divine indwelling as separate. The word distinct would be better. Even as the persons of the Trinity are distinct, we certainly cannot separate them, otherwise we end up with three gods. Similarly, we cannot separate sanctification from justification, but we most certainly can and should distinguish between them.

The faith that receives the forgiveness of sins for Christ's sake is the faith in which Christ, who is the fullness of God, dwells. There certainly is a participation of the believer in the very nature of God. The confessional Lutheran definition of justification in no way questions this. But the presence of Christ in faith is not to be confused with the righteousness of Christ that faith receives. That righteousness is the righteousness won by Christ when He obeyed the law, suffered for our sins, redeemed us by His blood, and thereby fulfilled all righteousness. Our participation in the nature of God requires as its foundation that we are rendered righteous by God by means of God's declaration. To denigrate the purely forensic nature of justification is to undermine any possibility of the believer sharing in the divine nature. For what fellowship can there be between light and darkness? How can a sinner share in what is divine? He cannot, unless God has reckoned him to be a saint and by that purely forensic reckoning has made him a saint, not with his own righteousness that is imperfect and tainted by sin, but with the righteousness of Jesus that is flawless. By including the divine indwelling, participation in the divine nature, the presence of Christ in faith, or whatever else you want to call it as a part of the sinner's justification is to bring justification into doubt, replacing faith with uncertainty. For I can know and be certain of one thing: The righteousness of my Lord Jesus Christ passes the test. If I must be certain of the presence of Christ within me I will of necessity search for Christ within me and in my search I will come face to face with my sins. This is why we must insist that the presence of Christ in faith is not, strictly speaking, part of our justification. Spiritual growth and sanctification flow from justification by faith alone. Nothing but the righteousness of Christ's vicarious obedience will do for faith. Any other foundation is sinking sand.

I have spent a good bit of time reviewing various challenges to the purely forensic doctrine of justification and its teaching that faith justifies solely on account of receiving the righteousness of Christ. It seems that attacks on this central truth of our Christian faith are relentless. Ironically, Tuomo Mannermaa thinks he's offering a corrective to the theology of Karl Holl. But when it comes to the heart of the matter they are in agreement. The righteousness of faith is not the righteousness offered to God for us by Jesus Christ. But if it is not, faith cannot be confidence in the forgiveness of sins. It cannot be confidence in anything at all.

Justification by Faith and Christian Vocation

The doctrine of Christian vocation has received much attention in theological circles in recent years. We cannot understand it apart from our justification through faith by the divine imputation of Christ's righteousness. Good trees bear good fruit. In teaching the children in Catechism class I enjoy making up a story about one of them wanting to change the apple tree in the back yard into a pear tree. So he or she goes out and picks off every single apple

from the tree and fastens pears to where the apples were. "Now you have a pear tree," I say. The kids think it's funny because it's absurd. "No you don't," they say. I argue with them and they argue that the tree is what it is and since it is an apple tree it will not bear pears.

Just so. This is the doctrine of vocation grounded in the doctrine of justification. Just as Jesus asks His disciples who they say He is, we who have received from Christ all of His righteousness, even as he has taken upon Himself all of our sin, must ask ourselves: Who are we? Christians? Then the lives we live are lived by Christians, is this not so? What is the value of what a Christian does? Is it in what he does? Or is it in the fact that a Christian is doing it? Are we saints or are we not? Lutherans are more inclined to confess that they are sinners than to claim that they are saints. But the fact that we are saints is what makes what we do so valuable. In considering the value of the vocation to which we have been called, we can consider the things that are being done or we can consider the one who is doing the things that are being done. If we consider the things that are being done and ground our understanding of vocation in such things, we will constantly be looking for ways to elevate what we are doing so that it can provide us with the status we crave.

Perhaps this is the source of the proliferation of "ministries" and "divine calls" in the church these days. People want to find a way to sanctify what they are doing. To make it a ministry to which God calls us just might work. But there's a better way to sanctify what a Christian does. That is to sanctify the Christian. That is to define the value in what he does in his daily life not by focusing on its inherent value but by focusing on what makes him – the Christian – valuable. Why, he is the treasure in the field! He is the pearl of great price! He is the one for whom Christ died and the one to whom God has reckoned Christ's perfect righteousness. He is the one clothed in the garments of salvation and royally robed in the beauty of Christ's holiness. When he does something that something is valuable for the simple reason that he did it.

Study to be a doctor to save lives. Study to be a minister to save souls. Study to be a teacher to train young minds. But saving lives, and saving souls, and training the young do not define the lives of those Christians who are called to do these things. Christ and His righteousness define our lives, regardless of the specific external form our vocation may take. When a Christian drives a truck, sweeps a floor, cleans out a toilet, and listens to a neighbor complain about his troubles, he is doing good because he is good. He can and should believe that this doing is an offering acceptable to God because God, for Christ's sake, has accepted the one doing it. This is the heart of the Christian doctrine of vocation.

Justification by Faith and the Bible

The authority of the Bible is for the sake of the justification of sinners. We confess that the Bible, not church tradition, is the source of all divine teaching. Lutherans who question this frequently question themselves right out of the Lutheran Church only to find themselves in an allegedly more catholic church that rejects justification by faith alone. Scripture alone goes together with grace alone and faith alone. Did not Luther discover the central teaching in his

study of Romans 1:16-17? He learned from these inspired words that the righteousness of God was received through faith. When he learned this he learned how to read the Bible. The Bible revealed for Luther, not a system of principles to apply, but a righteousness by which he was justified by God. Apart from knowing that all our sins are forgiven for the sake of Christ, our God and brother and true Mediator, the Bible is for us a closed book. When we say that Jesus Christ is the topic of the Bible from cover to cover we are saying that justification by faith is the theme of the Bible from cover to cover.

Justification by Faith and Church and Ministry

The interminable debates about church and ministry that seem to be a permanent feature of life among the Lutherans may not be settled before Christ's return, but perhaps we can find a way toward genuine consensus if we define both church and ministry as tightly bound to the doctrine of justification. What is the church? Is it not the Communion of Saints, that is, the fellowship of those who are justified through faith alone? What is the ministry? Is it not the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments by which the Holy Spirit works faith where and when it pleases God in those who hear the gospel? Neither the church nor her ministry can be understood apart from the central article that is justification by faith alone.

Since God works justifying faith by means of the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments, we call these the means of grace. They are the means through which God bestows His grace and justifies sinners through faith. And since those who are justified by faith constitute the Holy Christian Church these means of grace are also the marks of the church. The means of grace by which we are justified through faith, the marks of the church which identify the existence of the church in this world, and the duties of the called and ordained ministers of Christ are all the same.[\[35\]](#)

When we start defining church and ministry in isolation from the article on justification we run into error. The purpose of the ministry is that we may obtain the faith that justifies. There is no other purpose. Therefore, the duties of the ministry are to administer the means of grace. There are no other duties. The authority of the ministry is the word of God. There is no other authority. In this way Christ Himself serves His church through His ministers.

There cannot be a divine call to do what God has not commanded. God commands the proclamation of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments through which justifying faith is engendered, nourished, and confirmed. To argue for a divine call into a ministry that is not the ministry of administering these sacred mysteries is to argue God against God and to displace justification as the central article. If it doesn't pertain to justification it doesn't pertain to the ministry.

This is why there cannot be any ranks in the ministry. How can there be ranks in an office which is instituted solely for the purpose of exercising the authority of Christ? Does Jesus use

more of His authority here and less of His authority there? There cannot be greater or lesser authority to forgive sins. The very idea of ranks among the clergy is a denial of the nature of Christ's authority on earth. The authority of Christ's ministers is no more and no less than the authority of Christ Himself to forgive sins. When the apostles argued among themselves for such ranks, Christ reproved them for it. We read in the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope:

Christ reproved the apostles for this error and taught them that no one should have lordship or superiority among them but that the apostles should be sent forth as equals and exercise the ministry of the Gospel in common. (Treatise 8)[\[36\]](#)

The church is not a hierarchy. Nor is it a democracy. It is a communion of holy people joined together as one by virtue of the fact that they have all received the same treasures of salvation from the same Lord and sealed to them by the same Spirit. This is what makes them the body of Christ. Likewise, the stewards of these heavenly mysteries are also one. There is not this or that or the other ministry as if I have my ministry, Pastor Krikava has his ministry, Pastor Beinke has his ministry, and so on. There is only one ministry. It belongs to Christ who is the LORD our righteousness and its only purpose is that for which Christ instituted it: the justification of sinners through faith in the merits and mediation of Jesus. When the church starts inventing her own ministries that are not the ministry instituted for the purpose of us sinners obtaining the faith through which we are justified, then she is no longer acting as the church and her many ministries are no more divine than any merely human imaginings.

People will always be enamored by material wealth, pretence to power and prestige, and the admiration of the world, but none of these things justify sinners and so they don't belong to the church as church. Unless justification is kept central, not only within a system of doctrine, but more importantly, within the affection of God's people, the church will begin to tyrannize faith. The freedom of the church is a freedom from being shackled by legalistic requirements that are opposed to the gospel. The freedom of the church is not a freedom to claim an authority that God did not give her. The church has no authority other than that given to her by Christ. She has no authority to establish laws, to discipline children, to regulate civil or domestic matters, or to do anything else that would keep her from fulfilling the only mandate Christ has given to her: to teach all nations by means of baptizing and teaching the baptized to hold on to everything Jesus gives us to hold on to. For this is how God justifies sinners in the here and now and from justifying them does all good in them and through them that will ever be done.

There is no divinely instituted form of church government beyond that government that governs us by means of the saving gospel. Voters' assemblies, synods, constitutions, conventions, and the multitude of interrelated structures that exist where the church exists may be a blessing or a curse depending on how they are used. But they are not of the essence of the church. If the church really is the assembly of those justified by faith alone there cannot possibly be anything of an essentially churchly nature that does not have to do

with the justification of the sinner. That is, if it doesn't have to do with justification, it doesn't have to do with the church.

Justification by Faith and the Sunday Morning Experience

Traditional Lutherans are often speechless when confronted by the arguments for contemporary forms of worship. Proponents of contemporary worship believe that it is wrong to stifle the spiritual gifts of God's people. They believe that this is being done by a slavish adherence to ancient liturgical forms and traditional ministerial functions. When traditionalists concede the point that the specific form the liturgy must take is nowhere prescribed in the Bible, innovators might think that that settles the issue. We are free to do what we please as long as we aren't promoting any false doctrine and everything is done decently and in good order.

I disagree. We are not free to do anything at all that militates to the slightest degree against justification by faith alone. We approach God begging for mercy. We expect to go home justified. We come to confess and we come to be absolved. We come to find Jesus who was crucified for us. We come burdened by our sins of thought, word, and deed. We come for forgiveness. Am I saying that we must go to church in order to be justified? No, not if going to church is defined as the good work I must do to be justified thereby. But yes, I most certainly do need to hear the gospel of the forgiveness of sins for Christ's sake. This is the source of my faith. And this forgiveness defines the shape of the liturgy. It is the substance of the preaching. It is the chief benefit of the Lord's Supper.

We go to church to receive that word by which God justifies us. If the justification of sinners through faith is not understood as the chief purpose of the Sunday morning gathering the historic liturgy within which the justifying word of God is given may be set aside for something else. But we go to church in our need, not in our strength. We go because we must, compelled by a hunger and thirst for that righteousness we do not possess except through faith in Him who is our righteousness.

We receive and then we give. Even the giving back to God in praise serves as the vehicle of God's grace right back to us, that is, if we are singing the great Lutheran chorales that are so wonderfully drenched in atonement and justification theology. Shallow hymns and songs that celebrate religious feelings may provide a bit of short term comfort, but cannot withstand the assaults of the devil when he chooses to attack our faith throughout the rest of the week. This is why faithful pastors should not only exercise great care in retaining the historic liturgies of the church, they should also do their best to reintroduce to their Lutheran parishioners the great Lutheran hymns that proclaim justification so beautifully. It is a tragedy that these priceless chorales have largely been lost throughout so much of the Lutheran Church today. I encourage pastors to do their best to bring them back, not just for the sake of a regaining a lost cultural treasure, but for the sake of sustaining the baptized in their faith.

What Difference Does it Make?

There is nothing in our lives unaffected by this central truth of the Christian faith that God justifies unworthy sinners solely by the imputation of Christ's righteousness to them in His holy gospel that is received through faith and through faith alone. This faith, without any independent substance, but existing only in receiving the treasures God gives, becomes in us the constant source of comfort and spiritual strength. We need this precious gospel truth because we need faith, and not just a generic "one size fits all" faith that knows nothing for sure and trusts in whatever passes before it. We need a faith that stands in the face of loss, pain, and sin. We need the faith in which we can face death. Take away justification by faith alone and you take away Christianity. When this truth is embraced in simple faith it defines our lives. It makes us wealthy. It raises us up above every trouble of life. It directs us to heaven when the fellowship with God begun here on earth will be perfected in eternal love. So we teach and defend this precious doctrine as the Church militant, for we know that the attacks against it will not relent until Christ returns to bring His bride home. Let the words of a Jewish convert to Christianity by the name of Philippi stand as a defense today against every attempt to subvert this precious truth.

He who takes away from me the atoning blood of the Son of God, paid as a ransom to the wrath of God, who takes away the satisfaction of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, vicariously given to the penal justice of God, who thereby takes away justification of sins only by faith in the merits of this my Surety and Mediator, who takes away the imputation of the righteousness of Jesus Christ, takes away Christianity altogether, so far as I am concerned.^[37]

But by His grace, and His grace alone, God will preserve this doctrine among us.

[1] Tappert, page 30 (All citations from the Lutheran Confessions are from The Book of Concord, Translated and edited by Theodore G. Tappert, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1959).

[2] Sources and Contexts of the Book of Concord, Edited by Robert Kolb and James Nestingen, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2001, page 108.

[3] Ibid. page 109

[4] Tappert, page 108

[5] Tappert, page 107

[6] Tappert, page 415.

[7] Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and its Confessional Writings, Eric W. Gritsch and Robert W. Jenson. Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1976, page 3.

[8] Tappert, page 116.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Tappert, pages 128-129.

[11] Tappert, page 114.

[12] Works Luther's Works, American Edition. General Editors, Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann. Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1958, Volume 31, page 349.

[13] Ibid page 350

[14] Tappert, page 109.

[15] Tappert, page 118.

[16] Tappert, page 125.

[17] Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, Translated by H. J. Schroeder, O.P., B. Herder Book Co., St. Louis, 1941, page 34.

[18] Tappert, page 112.

[19] Tappert, pages 123-124.

[20] Tappert, page 540-541

[21] Tappert, pages 548-549

[22] The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification is available at <http://www.elca.org/ecumenical/ecumenicaldialogue/romancatholic/jddj/declaration.html>

[23] For a review of the JDDJ see "The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification in Confessional Lutheran Perspective" by the systematic departments of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis and Concordia Theological Seminary in Ft. Wayne, published by the CTCR of the LCMS in 1999. For a shorter and simpler review, see

“Do Lutherans and Roman Catholics Agree on Justification?” by Rolf Preus available at <http://www.christforus.org/Papers/Content/JDDJ.html>

[24] Tappert, page 30

[25] Tappert, page 31

[26] Tappert, page 42

[27] Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, page 43

[28] See Justification and Rome, by Robert Preus, Concordia Academic Press, St. Louis, 1997.

[29] For a clear refutation of Holl, see The Theology of Martin Luther, by Paul Althaus, translated by Robert Schultz, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1966 pages 241-242.

[30] Luther's Faith: The Cause of the Gospel in the Church, by Daniel Olivier, Translated by John Tonkin, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, 1982, page 108.

[31] Justification: An Ecumenical Study, by George Tavard, Paulist Press, New York, 1983, page 54.

[32] LW, Volume 26, pages 233-235

[33] “Justification and *Theosis* in Lutheran-Orthodox Perspective” by Tuomo Mannermaa, in Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther, Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson, editors, Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1998, pages 26-29.

[34] Christ Present in Faith: Luther's View of Justification, Tuomo Mannermaa, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2005, page 42.

[35] “The Doctrine of the Call in the Confessions and Lutheran Orthodoxy” by Robert David Preus in Church and Ministry Today: Three Confessional Lutheran Essays, John A. Maxfield, Editor, The Luther Academy, St. Louis, page 15

[36] Tappert, page 320

[37] Robert Preus, “Perennial Problems in the Doctrine of Justification,” Concordia Theological Quarterly, Volume 45, No. 3, page 173.

Rev. Rolf D. Preus
