

The Seminary's Unchanging Foundation in a Changing World: *Sola Fide*

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[This is the third in the series of three essays presented at the 125th anniversary convocation at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary on Friday, April 22, 1988. The convocation's theme was "The Seminary's Unchanging Foundation in a Changing World: *sola gratia, sola scriptura, sola fide*."]]

In presenting this essay I gratefully remember my teachers, particularly my father, Paul G. Eickmann. When he assigned seats to preparatory school students for exams, he would sometimes leave empty desks between the rows to prevent cheating. One year a prep complained, "Don't you know we're all Christians here?" My father is said to have answered, "And we're all damned sinners, too." That was my practical introduction to Luther's description of the believer in Jesus as "*simul justus et peccator*," "at the same time both righteous and a sinner."

Besides my father, I also thank my professors at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary from 1950 to 1955. Two of them are still with us in the church on earth: Professors Carl Lawrenz and Hilton Oswald. The seminary's motto is chiseled on its cornerstone, but our fathers in faith wrote *sola gratia, sola scriptura, sola fide* with the Spirit of the living God on the tablets of our hearts (2 Cor 3:3).

The words *sola fide* occur in their best-known connection as part of Luther's controversial translation of Romans 3:28 into German: "*So halten wir es nu, Das der Mensch gerecht werde, on des Gesetzes werck, alleine durch den Glauben*" ("So we hold that a man is justified without works of the law, only through faith"). Luther granted that *alleine*, "only," could be omitted; it is not in the Greek text. Yet in his 1530 "Open Letter on Translating" he argued that "only through faith" fits Paul's line of thought in Romans 3 and also makes good clear German sense.¹

The translation "*alleine durch den Glauben*"—*sola fide* in Latin—raised a storm of Catholic protest. Luther's translation was indeed clear. The Lutheran Confessions accepted the words *through faith alone* as a useful summary of all the expressions Scripture uses to exclude work-righteousness (*opinio legis*, "the opinion of the law") from justification. We are justified *freely* by God's grace (Ro 3:24), *without* the works of the law (Ro 3:28). By grace we are saved through faith, and it is *not from ourselves, not by works*, so that no one can boast (Eph 2:8, 9). In other words, we are justified through faith *alone*.²

This essay considers

- I. A paradigm of justification through faith alone;
- II. A definition of justifying faith;
- III. Faith not a work;
- IV. The promises on which our faith depends.

I. A paradigm of justifying faith

The first chapters of Genesis trace a history of disaster, from the sixth day of creation, when God saw that all his creatures, including man, were "very good," through the Fall, to God's assessment of man before the Flood: "The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth" (6:5, 6). Even the new beginning after the Flood led to the erection of a secular temple to the greater glory of man (11:1–9). The history of Terah's descendants beginning in Genesis 11:27 indicates no reason at all why the LORD should have chosen Terah's son Abraham to be the ancestor of the Savior and the father of believers. In

¹ LW, 35, 175–202. See Bluhm, 125–137.

² See Apology of the Augsburg Confession, IV, 71–74: *Triglotta*, pp 141–143.

fact, Terah's family served other gods (Jos 24:2). The reason for the LORD's choice of Abraham lay in his mercy and in the sad plight of the whole human race.³ Not only in Romans and Galatians but also in Genesis, salvation is by God's grace alone.

The LORD called Abraham with a promise: "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gn 12:1–3). The LORD repeated his promises to Abraham in 12:7; 13:14–17; 14:19, 20; 15:1–5; 17:1–8, 15–21; 18:10, 13, 14; 21:12; and 22:16–18. The promises in Genesis 15:1–5 are the setting and prerequisite for the description of Abraham's faith in verse 6. "Faith comes from hearing the message" (Ro 10:17); God makes believers and keeps them in faith through his promises. Luther says, "God's thought or promise, and faith, by which I take hold of God's promise—these belong together."⁴

Fears are assailing Abraham's faith. The patriarch remains childless because his wife Sarah is barren. In Genesis 15 the LORD comforts Abraham in a nighttime vision: "Do not be afraid Abram, I am your shield, your very great reward" (v 1). Hearing the promise, Abraham casts his anxiety on the LORD: "O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me (מַה־תִּתֶּנְּךָ־לִי, "what will you give me") since I am childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus? You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir" (vv 2, 3). What we hear in Abraham's prayer is more than the loneliness of a childless old man. He is concerned for the fulfillment of the LORD's first promise, "I will make you into a great nation," and "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (12:2, 3).

The LORD responds by repeating his original promise in vivid terms: "This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir. . . Look at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them. So shall your offspring be" (15:5). Abraham will not die childless. From him will come seed beyond counting. From his offspring will come the Seed, still unmentioned explicitly, through whom all peoples on earth will be blessed.

The LORD repeats the promise, and, as Luther says,

[to the promise] faith attaches itself, or, to speak more clearly, faith lay hold of it. Moreover, the confident laying hold of the promise is called faith; and it justifies, not as our own work but as the work of God. For the promise is a gift, a thought of God by which He offers us something. It is not some work of ours, when we do something for God or give Him something. No, we receive something from Him, and that solely through his mercy.⁵

Luther called Genesis 15:6 "one of the foremost passages of all Scripture,"⁶ because "our doctrine that we are justified before God solely through his accounting mercy has its foundation in this passage"⁷—"Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness" (וַיֵּאֱמֶן בַּיהוָה וַיַּחְשְׁבֶהָ לּוֹ צְדָקָה).

This is the first occurrence in the Bible of the verb אֱמַן, "trust, believe."⁸ The root idea of אֱמַן is "firmness" or "certainty." The Hiphil conjugation is used here, not in a causative but in a declarative sense, to *declare* God to be trustworthy, to say Amen to God.⁹ Compared with the word בָּטַח, "trust," אֱמַן has a personal element: one can *trust* in fortified city walls (Dt 28:52), but אֱמַן, "believe in," describes the heart's trust in a *person*. After the destruction of Pharaoh's army at the Red Sea, "the people feared the LORD and *believed* in him and in Moses his servant" (Ex 14:31). They "relied" or "depended" on the LORD and so also on his prophet.

³ See Hals, 40f.

⁴ LW, 3, 22.

⁵ LW, 3, 23.

⁶ LW, 3, 19.

⁷ LW, 3, 22.

⁸ Brown, 53.

⁹ Weiser, 187.

Genesis 15:6 does not describe the event of Abraham's becoming a believer. The *waw* consecutive perfect form is most simply translated to describe a continuing attitude: "Abraham was believing" or "had faith" in the LORD. The patriarch received all God's words with an attitude of trust. By the working of the promises in his heart he was "fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised" (Ro 4:21). Hear Luther: "Faith alone lays hold of the promise, believes God when He gives the promise, stretches out its hand when God offers something, and accepts what He offers."¹⁰ The Apology says, "Where there is a promise, faith is required. For the promise cannot be received in any other way than by the heart's relying on such word of God, and not regarding its own worthiness or unworthiness."¹¹

The words *לֹא יִחְשַׁבֶּהָ לּוֹ* are translated in the NIV, "and he credited it to him." The word *חָשַׁב* means "think, account,"¹² "reckon something (as something) to someone's account,"¹³ either as a credit or as a debt (2 Sm 19:19 [Heb. 20]). The object of this "accounting" is the thought of the whole first clause, "Abram was believing the LORD." It was Abraham's believing the LORD, his faith in the LORD, which was accounted to him as righteousness.

"Righteousness," *צִדְקָה*, often paired with "justice," *מִשְׁפָּט*, describes the administration of a good king (e.g., David in 2 Sm 8:15) and thus also the reign of the LORD and his Messiah (Ps 99:4; 72:1, 2). "Righteousness" can describe the innocence of someone accused in court (Job 27:6) or ethical uprightness generally (Gn 30:33). Keeping the law of God establishes legal righteousness before him. When Moses repeated the Ten Commandments on the border of the promised land, Israel confessed: "If we are careful to obey all this law before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us, that will be our righteousness" (Dt 6:25; cf. Ro 9:31). Such "righteousness which is by the law" (Ro 10:5) would earn the reward of life guaranteed in the conditional law-promise: "Keep my decrees and laws, for the man who obeys them will live by them" (Lv 18:5; cf. Hab 2:4!).

To Abraham's account is reckoned the same righteousness which God would acknowledge to someone who perfectly kept his whole law. Abraham, however, did nothing at all. The words, "He counted it to him for righteousness," do not stand after Genesis 12:4, "So Abram left, as the LORD had told him," or after 22:10, "Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son." God's accounting follows upon "he believed the LORD": his *faith* was accounted righteousness.

Whatever Abraham had was all of the LORD's giving, as God later reminded the Israelites with one first-person verb after another: "I took your father Abraham from the land beyond the River, and I led him throughout Canaan, and I gave him many descendants, and I gave him Isaac" (Jos 24:3, Hebrew text; cf. also the following outline of Israel's history). Abraham became the father of believers by God's grace alone.

In Romans 4 Paul cites Abraham as a paradigm of how a sinful human being is justified before God through faith alone. Quoting Genesis 15:6, he explains, "'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.' Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness" (Ro 4:3–5). God did not justify Abraham because the patriarch did any work, kept any law or earned any merit. It is a universal principle that work earns wages. But such earning and deserving are ruled out in the case of Abraham. Not on account of anything he did but by the grace of God through faith alone Abraham was credited with righteousness. God, Paul says, "declares the *wicked* righteous." Abraham, still a sinner, was justified through faith alone, apart from observing the law.

The faithful LORD promised Abraham a son, and in the precious promise of Isaac was wrapped the gift beyond price: the promised Seed, the Savior. The Seed was still concealed in the LORD's assurance that a son would come from Abraham's own body, that his offspring would be innumerable as the stars and that all nations would be blessed through him. Yet with the eye of faith Abraham saw the day of Jesus in the LORD's

¹⁰ LW, 3, 24.

¹¹ Apology, III, 141; *Trig.*, p 195.

¹² Brown, 362.

¹³ Seybold, 234.

Word, so that his heart rejoiced (Jn 8:56). With the hand of faith the patriarch received God's promises, and because of the Christ who was promised Abraham was declared righteous.

So the father of believers was credited with righteousness through faith in a Savior who—in our time-bound view—had not yet suffered and died for the sins of the world. God's promise testified that his heart is forever overflowing with love for all mankind—"all nations" (Gn 12:3)—and that his thoughts from eternity completely formed the plan which he would unfold in human history. Abraham, trusting in the LORD, was accounted righteous through faith in "the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world" (Re 13:8). The righteousness of Christ's holy life was credited to Abraham as it is credited to us. Luther writes, "The only difference between Abraham's faith and ours is this: Abraham believed in the Christ who was to be manifested, but we believe in the Christ who has already been manifested; and by that faith we are all saved."¹⁴ Justification through faith alone is salvation through Christ alone.

Paul supports justification through faith alone by quoting Psalm 32: "David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: 'Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD will never count against him'" (Ps 32:1, 2 in Ro 4:7, 8). With the word λογίζομαι, "account, credit, count," Paul links Genesis 15:6 with Psalm 32:1, 2. God's gift of righteousness to Abraham in Genesis 15:6 is equivalent to his non-imputation of guilt to sinful David. When God places a credit (righteousness) into his book, he cancels a debt (sin). Like Genesis, Psalm 32 makes no mention of works. The transgressor's guilt is forgiven, the sinner's sins are covered; David, who committed adultery with Bathsheba and murdered Uriah, will never have his sins counted against him. Faith in the promise of the LORD receives the blessedly free forgiveness of sins "apart from works."

Paul chose the word λογίζομαι, "account, count," again in 2 Corinthians 5:19 to describe the forgiveness of the whole world's sin: "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not *counting* men's sins against them." The Father accounted the sins of the world to Jesus in order to forgive all sinners, and he accounted the righteousness of his Son to all humankind. "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21). Paul says the same at the end of Romans 4: "[Jesus our Lord] was delivered over to death for our sins." Christ died for the sins of the world. "And [he] was raised to life for our justification." The Father declared all sinners righteous for Christ's sake (v 25). So the promise of Genesis 12:3 that "all nations" would be blessed through the Seed of Abraham is fulfilled in God's verdict of justification spoken at the empty tomb of Jesus over all mankind, including Abraham, including you and me, including every human being we ever meet, even those who are finally and eternally lost.

II. A definition of justifying faith

What, then, is justifying faith? *Justifying faith is the sinner's trust in God for righteousness (the forgiveness of sins), credited not because of works but for the sake of Jesus Christ, the Savior, who died for the sins of the world and rose again to justify all humankind.*

Instead of defining faith, the biblical writers rather *confess* their faith in words inspired by the Holy Spirit. God revealed his eternal plan of salvation to the prophets and apostles. They know the LORD as their God because he disclosed his thoughts and his will to them, and they confess to him and to us the wonders of his salvation revealed in Christ. The knowledge of God they share with us is not like the detailed description a close observer might give of a stranger on the street. It is more an expression of the way a child knows the rhythm of particular footsteps on the stairs, senses the strength of a large hand holding his small hand, and recognizes the sound of a familiar voice saying, "Don't be afraid." That is how the holy writers know God.

Faith is a relationship of personal dependence. It rests confidently on the Lord Jesus Christ as he reveals himself in the witness of his prophets and apostles. Faith grasps for itself the promises which formed it, to which it assents. It speaks "first person" language to and about God. The Psalms especially are the book of

¹⁴ LW, 3, 26.

faith: “I trust in you, O LORD; I say, ‘You are my God’” (Ps 31:12). The prophets often speak the same way: “I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness” (Is 61:10). The apostles speak their own confession: “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Ga 2:20). The biblical writers teach us to confess, “I believe that Jesus Christ, true God...and also true man...is *my Lord*, who has *redeemed me*.”

In Roman Catholic theology “faith” is only the *knowledge* of revealed truth, coupled with the will’s assent: “We are obliged to render by faith a full submission of intellect and will to God when he makes a revelation.”¹⁵ Catholic terminology likes to speak of “the obedience of faith” and “an act of faith”: “A simple and widely used act of faith says: ‘My God, I believe in you and all that your Church teaches, because you have said it, and your word is true. Amen.’”¹⁶ Such faith is only the “*beginning* of human salvation,” according to the First Vatican Council. By itself, until love is added, it cannot save.¹⁷

There may be times in the lives of theological students and pastors when faith seems to mean not much more than intellectual assent: “It’s in the Bible, God said, and so it’s true.” Then preaching God’s Word can become comparable to explaining a wiring diagram, and studying theology like memorizing key forms of the Hebrew weak verbs. If dogmatics is dull, if doing biblical exegesis is a chore, we may well ask ourselves what we mean by “faith.” Young theologians with such an intellectual conception of believing are likely to flee to some lively, people-oriented activity, and let the professors at Mequon take care of theology.

But theology involves *me*. The law describes my sins and sentences me to death. The gospel proclaims my justification in the Easter victory of the Lord Jesus Christ. Part of the secret of Luther’s vigorous language when he preached and wrote was that all this theology involved Martin. What I preach and teach involves me and the people who hear me—involves us eternally. If we can look back at times when our own faith came close to being an intellectual exercise, let us thank God that he did not break the bruised reed or snuff out the smoldering wick (Is 42:3). The Lord blows on the flame with the breath of his Spirit in the means of grace to remind each of us: Jesus died *for me*—and for all those who hear me.

Luther wrote about faith in language altogether different from the intellectual terms used by the medieval church. The Roman Catholic conception of “faith” described above he calls by the technical terms “infused” or “acquired” or “historic faith”:

Acquired faith, or the infused faith of the sophists, says of Christ, “I believe that the Son of God suffered and arose again,” and there it stops. But true faith says, “I certainly believe that the Son of God suffered and arose, but he did this all for me, for my sins, of that I am certain. For he died for the sins of the whole world. But it is most certain that I am some part of the world, therefore, it is most certain that he died also for my sins.”...Acquired faith stands like a lazy man concealing his hand under his armpit and says, “That is nothing to me.” True faith with arms outstretched, joyfully embraces the Son of God given for it and says, “He is my beloved and I am his.” Paul gives an example of this to the Galatians from his own case, saying, “Who loved me and gave himself for me” [Gal. 2:20]. Accordingly that “for me” or “for us,” if it is believed, creates that true faith and distinguishes it from all other faith, which merely hears the things done. This is the faith which alone justifies us without law and works through the mercy of God shown in Christ.¹⁸

The same joyful “for me” speaks in Luther’s hymns (and again in Paul Gerhardt’s). In “Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice” Luther’s voice in Stanza 2 is a cry of anguish for all humanity in sin’s prison:

¹⁵ First Vatican Council, Denzinger, 1789 (Clarkson, 631), cited again at Vatican II, Abbott, 113.

¹⁶ Hardon, 205.

¹⁷ Denzinger, 800 (Clarkson, 564).

¹⁸ “Theses Concerning Faith and Law,” based on Romans 3:28, *LW*, 34, 110f.

Fast bound in Satan's chains I lay,
 Death brooded darkly o'er me,
 Sin was my torment night and day,
 In sin my mother bore me...¹⁹

When I try to justify myself with my own good works (Stanza 3), the law puts me face to face with death and lets me taste the pains of hell. But God took the action he planned from eternity: Christ came “for me.” Stanza 4:

But God beheld my wretched state
 Before the world's foundation,
 And, mindful of His mercies great,
 He planned my soul's salvation.
 A father's heart He turned to me,
 Sought my redemption fervently:
 He gave His dearest Treasure.

The Confessors of the 16th century learned to know this faith from Luther and the Scriptures:

[Justifying faith] is the certainty or the certain trust in the heart, when, with my whole heart, I regard the promises of God as certain and true, through which there are offered me, without my merit, the forgiveness of sins, grace and all salvation, through Christ the Mediator... Faith is that my whole heart takes to itself this treasure. It is not my doing, not my presenting or giving, not my work or preparation, but that a heart comforts itself, and is perfectly confident with respect to this, namely, that God makes a present and gift to us, and not we to Him, that He sheds upon us every treasure of grace in Christ.²⁰

Faith alone justifies, but from such faith comes love like clear water welling up from a deep spring. Jesus says that good works grow from a heart that trusts him, like the fruit on a sound apple tree or grapes on a well-pruned branch connected to the vine (Mt 12:33–35; Jn 15:1–17). Faith alone justifies, but faith never remains alone. It is rather like a mother who bears a whole “crop” of virtues.²¹

For all his insistence on justification through faith alone, Luther also exuberantly praises such fruits of faith:

O[h], it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith; and so it is impossible for it not to do good works incessantly. It does not ask whether there are good works to do, but before the question rises, it has already done them, and is always at the doing of them... Faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace, so sure and certain that a man would stake his life on it a thousand times. This confidence in God's grace and knowledge of it makes men glad and bold and happy in dealing with God and with all His creatures; and this is the work of the Holy Ghost in faith. Hence a man is ready and glad, without compulsion, to do good to everyone, to serve everyone, to suffer everything, in love and praise of God, who has shown him this grace; and thus it is impossible to separate works from faith, quite as impossible as to separate heat and light from fire.²²

¹⁹ *The Lutheran Hymnal*, 387.

²⁰ *Apology*, VI, 48; *Trig.*, p 135.

²¹ *LW*, 3, 25.

²² “Preface to the Epistle to the Romans,” 1522, *Philadelphia Edition*, VI, 451f; *LW*, 35, 370f.

Works are also praised in Scripture, but, our confessions remind us, always as fruits of justifying faith: “It is necessary to understand not only outward works, but also the faith of the heart, because Scripture does not speak of hypocrisy, but of the righteousness of the heart and its fruits.”²³ The branches can bear no fruit apart from the Vine (Jn 15:5).

The Council of Trent in 1547 flatly condemned the Lutheran teaching about faith. “If anyone says that justifying faith is nothing else than confidence that divine Mercy remits sins for Christ’s sake, or that it is confidence alone which justifies us: let him be anathema.”²⁴ In Roman Catholic teaching justification is not God’s free gift of the forgiveness of sins assured by the work of Christ. It is rather a *process of man’s becoming righteous* through the infused grace and love of God. “When faith works along with their works, the justified increase in the very justice which they have received through the grace of Christ and are justified the more.”²⁵ The Council explained Paul’s words away:

When the apostle says that man is justified “through faith” and “freely,” those words must be understood in the sense that the Catholic Church has always continuously held and declared. We may then be said to be justified through faith, in the sense that “faith is the beginning of man’s salvation.”²⁶

Since sinful man can never know that he is perfected in love, in Catholic teaching he remains by God’s own intention uncertain whether he will finally be saved or not.²⁷ Luther recognized such uncertainty about salvation as the pernicious result of a failure to distinguish law from gospel.

The promise must be distinguished from the Law. The promise requires faith; the Law, works. The promise is certain and reliable, and is surely carried out, because God carries it out. But the Law is not carried out, because we, who try to fulfill it, are human beings, that is, weak sinners.²⁸

Only through faith in the sure promise of our faithful God can we be certain of salvation, no matter how God’s own law, our conscience and Satan—the “Accuser”—may condemn us (Ro 8:31–39).

The faith which receives God’s righteousness is not born into human nature. Adam and Eve came into the world trusting in their Creator, but since the Fall no human being is born a believer. We have no natural knowledge of our heavenly Father’s love for us.

In Adam we have all been one,
One huge rebellious man,
We all have fled that Evening Voice
That sought us as we ran.²⁹

Conscience has a blurry idea of God’s law, but not an inkling of his gospel. As Jesus told Nicodemus, without being “born again,” born “of water and of Spirit,” we sinful children of Adam and Eve can neither see nor enter the kingdom of God (Jn 3:3, 6). “Flesh gives birth to flesh” (Jn 3:6), and “flesh” cannot know or trust or follow Jesus Christ. Only “the Spirit gives birth to spirit” (Jn 3:6). As the Augsburg Confession states,

²³ Apology, III, 250; *Trig.*, p 221.

²⁴ Denzinger, 586; Clarkson, 822.

²⁵ Denzinger, 803; Clarkson, 567.

²⁶ Denzinger, 801; Clarkson, 565.

²⁷ Denzinger, 802, 823–826; Clarkson, 566, 587–590.

²⁸ *LW*, 3, 26; see also Apology, IV, 110; *Trig.*, p 153.

²⁹ Franzmann, 759.

Since the fall of Adam, all men begotten in the natural way are born with sin, that is, without the fear of God, without trust in God, and with concupiscence; and...this *disease*, or *vice of origin*, is truly sin, even now condemning and bringing eternal death upon those not born again through Baptism and the Holy Ghost.³⁰

By nature we are “without trust in God.” For the first minutes, days or years of our lives, until we believed and were baptized, all of us were “separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world” (Eph 2:12). The Small Catechism says it simply enough so that our children can confess it with us: “I believe that I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him.”

God acted for our salvation on Calvary and in Joseph’s garden. Another saving act of God, no less miraculous, took place within each of us. It was like the miracle of God’s giving me my body and soul in my birth from my mother (Jn 3), and just as little my own work. It was a wonder of enlightenment, like Jesus’ opening the eyes of a blind man (Jn 9). It was an event as much beyond human power as the resurrection of Christ’s body from the grave on the third day. In fact, it *was* a resurrection from spiritual death. And, as in every other aspect of our salvation, God acted in pure grace. The Holy Spirit “called me by the gospel” and “enlightened me with his gifts.” He gave me faith.

“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live...Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Eph 2:1–9).

III. Faith not a work

Our Confessions repeatedly warn us against doctrine which would require faith as only the beginning of justification, to be supplemented by works of love which supposedly perfect our righteousness. Are we equally on guard against presentations of justification which make faith itself into the ultimate good work? The sinner in this scenario is himself responsible for adding his own faith to Christ’s work of redemption in order to be saved. Such teaching comes to us not only from television pulpits but also in conservative Bible commentaries. A “high” view of verbal inspiration does not insure a proper distinction between law and gospel. Thus a commentary on Genesis 15:

In Noah’s case, “grace” comes before “righteousness”; in Abram’s case, “faith” comes before “righteousness.” The one stresses God’s sovereignty, the other man’s responsibility. Both are true and necessary. “By grace are ye saved through faith...For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works” (Ephesians 2:8, 10).³¹

Compare our Confessions, which teach faith as:

that very righteousness by which we are accounted righteous before God, namely, *not because it is a work that is in itself worthy, but because it receives the promise* by which God has promised that for Christ’s sake He wishes to be propitious to those believing in Him.” (emphasis added)³²

³⁰ A.C., II, 1, 2; *Trig.*, p 43.

³¹ Morris, 325.

³² Apology, IV, 86; *Trig.*, p 147.

Neither can high scholarship assure a proper distinction between law and gospel in teaching about faith. Articles in the multivolume theological dictionaries contain many helpful insights into the Word, but they can easily lead the unwary astray. Consider, for example:

Although it is often very difficult to trust in man, it is still possible to trust in God. This is the only possible right conduct toward God, and therefore it is recognized by God as such. Thus, in [Genesis 15:6] it is clear what the right conduct toward God is in the view of this narrative...: trusting in him, relying on his promise without doubting, indeed contrary to all appearance.³³

When faith becomes “the only possible right conduct toward God,” faith itself is a work of the law which merits reward. No! The Apology is right: “Faith justifies and saves, not on the ground that it is a work in itself worthy, but only because it receives the promised mercy.”³⁴

When Lutherans deny the justification of the whole world of sinners at the resurrection of Jesus, they also make faith a supplement to the LORD’s promise of grace, and grace is no more grace. Arguably, the deciding issue which led to the separation of the WELS from The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LC-MS) was the inadequacy of the *Common Confession* as a settlement of the doctrinal differences which had separated the LC-MS (and the rest of the Synodical Conference as well) from the old American Lutheran Church, now part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (E.L.C.A). We could no longer be one with a synod which did not require doctrinal unity for church fellowship.

The *Common Confession*’s Article VI “Justification” stated that “forgiveness of sin has been secured and provided for all men...God justifies the sinner solely on the basis of Christ’s righteousness, which He imputes to the sinner through the Gospel and which the sinner accepts by faith.” It sounds like an adequate statement until you hear some of the doctrinal history behind it. The matter directly involves *sola fide*, and perhaps a more extended quotation will also give you some flavor of the questions in the center of our synod’s attention at the beginning of my ministry.

I quote from *Continuing in His Word*, a series of pamphlets distributed to every congregation in 1954 by our Conference of Presidents. One of the church bodies which made up the American Lutheran Church was the former Ohio Synod.

Ohio taught: “Through the reconciliation of Christ the holy and merciful God has made advances to us, so that forgiveness of sin and justification have been made possible on His part; justification itself, however, does not occur until through God’s grace the spark of faith has been kindled in the heart of the sinner” (*Kirchenzeitung*, June 17, 1905). In 1938 the American Lutheran Church stated in its *Declaration* (II,A): “God purposes to justify those who have come to faith.” Dr. R.C. Lenski, a leading scholar of the American Lutheran Church, states in his commentary on St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans: “But for faith there would be no justification... Nowhere in the Bible is any man constituted or declared righteous ‘without faith,’ all asseverations and argumentations to the contrary notwithstanding.”

It is easy to see that this way of speaking is entirely different from that of the Bible. Perhaps we should go to a courtroom for a moment to see how distorted this picture is. A group of prisoners stands before the bar of justice. Their debt is established. Their guilt is proved. A man walks in with the announcement that he has paid in full and pleads for the release of the prisoners. But what does the judge now do in this case? He recognizes the fact that payment has been secured and provided for all prisoners [cf. *Common Confession*: “forgiveness of sin has been secured and provided for all men”], but strangely enough he announces no verdict of acquittal. Instead, he invites all the prisoners before his bar of justice and tells them that he will acquit them only upon the condition that they first show their willingness to accept his verdict. He will do his part if

³³ Jepsen, *TDOT*, 305.

³⁴ Apology, IV, 56; *Trig.*, p 137.

they in good faith will show him the proper attitude and spirit of cooperation. “Without faith, no justification.” Those are his terms of justice. This places the whole emphasis upon an attitude of man rather than upon the unconditional declaration of God.

...Our church has stood upon [the] objective truth of salvation for many years. It has always stressed with Scripture what *God* has done as a basis for our hope, rather than what *man* can do. We may sometimes wonder, perhaps, if this is always so practical. Wouldn't it better at times to wake up some of our “dead Christians” by giving them a little more responsibility?...Maybe we would be better off if we would stress the personal side more than we do...What good will God's verdict of acquittal do us if we don't stress personal faith?...

A time will come in our life, however, when the picture of the Bible will become more practical and more personal to us than ever before. That is when we are face to face with death, and when we realize that we are but one short step from appearing before the final judgment seat of Christ. Whether we like to put off thoughts of that moment or not, we realize that our whole life points to that moment. The faith by which we live will be the faith in which we die. Where do we wish to have our faith rest as we approach that final hour? What comfort do we wish to have brought to us...?

Will it be no more than this: “My justification has been made possible by God, and I know that he will finally pass judgment in my favor because I am sure that I have a personal and saving faith in my heart”? No, it must be nothing less than this: “My faith is a weak and faltering thing. My personal feelings betray the weakness of my heart. But God has already declared the whole world righteous in Christ's death and resurrection. Sinner that I am, I know that I am included.”³⁵

Within the old Iowa Synod, later also absorbed into the American Lutheran Church (now in the E.L.C.A.), it was taught concerning conversion that God “earnestly endeavours to take away the resistance from some as well as from the others, but that by some His gracious purpose is frustrated because they stubbornly and willfully resist the grace offered to them, whereas in the others God's work is accomplished because they do not willfully resist, but let God's work be done on themselves.”³⁶ This distinction, nowhere taught in Scripture, puts a cause of conversion in man. It amounts to a rejection of *sola gratia* because it gives us some credit for our own coming to faith. The matter of natural and willful resistance was not taken up in the *Common Confession*, although the document was said to be a settlement of past doctrinal differences between The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and the American Lutheran Church.

The Iowans were not the first to find a cause of man's conversion in man himself. One of the saddest chapters in the history of Lutheranism tells how Philip Melanchthon, Luther's faithful friend and co-worker, the author of our Augsburg Confession, turned more and more toward synergism in the later editions of his *Loci Communes* and in his commentaries and in his altered versions of the Augsburg Confession and Apology. Instead of attributing our conversion to only two causes, the grace of God expressed in the work of Christ and the power of the Spirit working by the means of grace, Melanchthon added a third: the will of man.

Since the promise is universal, and there are no contradictory wills in God, the cause must be in *man* that Saul is cast away and David is accepted...David was not converted as if he were a stone...The free will of David worked something when he heard the threats and promises. The Gospel is the power of God to salvation to one not opposing but consenting and believing.³⁷

Melanchthon's third cause of conversion was rejected in the Formula of Concord because it contradicts *sola gratia*, “by grace alone.” Article II cites 1 Corinthians 2:14 (“The natural man receiveth not the things of

³⁵ *Continuing in His Word*, No. 3, “Every Sinner Declared Righteous,” *passim*.

³⁶ Dr. G. Fritschel, *Monatshefte*, 1872, p 99, cited in *Continuing in His Word*, 4, “Not By My Own Reason Or Strength,” p 2.

³⁷ *Loci*, 1535, quoted in Manschreck, 297, from CR 21, *Lutheran Church Review*, XXVIII (1909), 325f.

the Spirit of God...neither can he know them”), Romans 8:7 (“The carnal mind is enmity against God”) and Ephesians 2:5 (“We were dead in sins”).

In spiritual things the understanding and reason of man are [altogether] blind, and by their own powers understand nothing...The unregenerate will of man is not only turned away from God, but also has become an enemy of God...As little as a dead body can quicken itself to bodily, earthly life, so little can man, who by sin is spiritually dead, raise himself to spiritual life.³⁸

Conversion is effected by the Holy Spirit through the preaching and hearing of the gospel. “With this Word the Holy Spirit is present, and opens hearts, so that they...are attentive to it, and are thus converted alone through the grace and power of the Holy Ghost, whose work alone the conversion of man is.”³⁹

If I am not justified until I come to faith, and only those come to faith who give up their willful resistance to the Holy Spirit, then my justification hinges on my willingness to believe. My eternal salvation depends partly on me: if I do not make a positive contribution, I must at least omit willful resistance when the Spirit in the gospel knocks on my heart’s door and invites me to believe. Faith itself becomes in part a human work, and grace is no more grace.

Such heresies are never finally laid to rest. When the devil is locked out of the door, he goes looking for a window. Pastors and evangelists who are members of orthodox church bodies may very easily becloud the gospel in their sermons, Bible lessons and evangelism calls. We do that if we require faith as a *condition* of salvation which people must fulfill before being forgiven: “God will forgive you *if* you believe,” or even “if you *truly* believe.” Such teaching turns faith into a work and the gospel into law. Instead of being the offer of a free gift, the good news of salvation becomes instead the proposal of a bargain with God, his righteousness in exchange for our faith.

When the jailer asked: “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” was he not told: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved”? True, but we must not understand such exhortations as orders of the Law, as if believing is something man should be able to bring about in himself. Rather, these are blessed *Gospel invitations*—creative invitations which immediately not only give the hearer the right to accept the Christ, but also contain within them the power to bring him to do so. There is no problem when the emphasis is kept right: Not, “*Believe* on the Lord Jesus Christ,” but rather, Forget about what *you* must do, and “Believe on the *Lord Jesus Christ*, and thou shalt be saved.”

What is needed, is simply to set before the famished spiritual beggars the bounteous feast of the Christ and his righteousness, with the pardon, peace, and eternal life He has earned for us. Point to the Bread of Life; don’t pester the sinners to eat.⁴⁰

IV. The promises on which our faith depends

According to the Apology, “Whenever there is a promise, faith is required, and conversely, wherever faith is required, there must be a promise.”⁴¹ That was true in Abraham’s life; it is also true for us. How, then, do we come to faith?

God cannot be treated with, God cannot be apprehended, except through the Word. Accordingly, justification occurs through the Word, just as Paul says, Rom. 1, 16: *the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth*. Likewise 10:17: *Faith cometh by hearing*.⁴²

³⁸ FC, Epit., II, 2, 3; *Trig.*, p 787.

³⁹ FC, Epit., II, 5; *Trig.*, p 787.

⁴⁰ Reim, 105f.

⁴¹ Apology, IV, 50; *Trig.*, p 135.

⁴² Apology, IV, 67; *Trig.*, p 139.

That we may obtain this faith, *the Ministry of Teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted*. For through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Ghost is given, who works faith, where and when it pleases God, in them that hear the Gospel.⁴³

God is superabundantly rich [and liberal] in his grace [and goodness]. First, through the spoken Word by which the forgiveness of sins is preached [He commands to be preached] in the whole world; which is the peculiar office of the Gospel. Secondly, through Baptism. Thirdly, through the holy Sacrament of the Altar. Fourthly, through the power of the keys, and also through the mutual conversation and consolation of brethren, Matt. 18, 20: *Where two or three are gathered together, etc.*⁴⁴

When we baptize a child or an adult, when we preach the good news to God's people, when we announce his absolution, either in the liturgy to the whole congregation or privately to an individual sinner, when we distribute Christ's body and blood in the Lord's Supper, our gracious God speaks through us his promise of righteousness, the same promise he gave Abraham. When sinners come to faith and when their faith is nourished, God's Word is accomplishing the purpose for which he sent it (Is 55:11). Our faith in no way establishes the promise, supplements the promise or makes the promise true. The promise itself remains powerful and true whether we believe it or not, because the promise is God's Word in all the means of grace.

When we were put under the water of *baptism*, we died with Christ. When we were brought out of the water, we were raised to new life with him. "All of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death. We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life" (Ro 6:3, 4). By baptism we were recreated in God's image—though the sinful nature also still remains—reborn as his children, raised from the dead with Jesus by the working of the Holy Spirit in the Word.

"You were washed, you were cleansed, you were anointed, you were sealed, you were enlightened, you were buried, you were raised." Even by their grammatical (passive) form all the verbs through which the New Testament speaks of what happens in Baptism unanimously insist that the significant activity in this event is God's, not man's.⁴⁵

The means of grace are intimately bound up with the redemptive work of Jesus. Paul speaks in one breath of the "appearance" of the kindness and love of God our Savior, namely, at the incarnation of the Son of God, and of baptism, by which God reaches out to touch our lives and our children's in the world today with his kindness and love, "not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life" (Tt 3:4–7—the historical Epistle for Second Christmas Day).

If they do not have God's Word and work in the means of grace to depend on, believers cling to their own experience of salvation. According to the constitution of a local Baptist church every candidate for membership "shall give testimony of his or her Christian experience," first before the deacons and then before the whole congregation, as a requirement for being accepted into membership.⁴⁶ This "Christian experience" of conversion is what Baptists call "salvation." The favorite hymn of WELS Lutherans in the *Sampler* is "Amazing Grace," with its simple, haunting tune. I hope that when we sing it, we think of Jesus on the cross and of our baptism. It may be better to overlook the fact that the author is singing about his conversion

⁴³ A.C., V, 67; *Trig.*, p 45.

⁴⁴ S.A., Part III, IV; *Trig.*, p 491.

⁴⁵ Jungkuntz, 110f.

⁴⁶ Constitution of Calvary Baptist Church, Watertown, Wisconsin, Art. II, 2.

experience and makes no mention at all of the crucified and risen Christ. Omitted from the *Sampler* for good reason was this stanza of Newton's hymn:

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed.⁴⁷

Here the difference between a wholesome and an unwholesome "subjectivity" in our faith becomes quite evident. For Newton, salvation by grace through faith means principally "*I* believed." For Luther, it means "*Christ died for me*."

When he gave the baptismal command, Jesus added, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned" (Mk 16:16). Only faith can receive the blessings of baptism, but faith does not put the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation into the sacrament. Christ Jesus did, with his redeeming work, with his baptismal command and with the promise of salvation his Word adds to the water. Likewise, unbelief cannot empty baptism itself of the blessing which the almighty, gracious God put into the water by his Word. Even if a person does not believe, God's Word has been spoken and the sacrament remains baptism, God's work and not ours. Faith is only a receiving, never a doing, never an earning, never a meriting. When Paul says, "You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord" (Eph 5:8; see Jn 1:4–12), we confess that the darkness was all ours, but all the light comes from him.

Only so long as the light shines does the darkness receive it and participate in it. Without the light the darkness is darkness; with the light the darkness is transformed, not into the light itself but into the place where light shines so that what once was darkness can now be described as light. (Cp John 1:4–12; Eph. 5:8.) This is what faith is like. Its posture is sheerly receptive; its function is to receive (which is not exactly the same as that favorite watchword of modern evangelism, "to accept").⁴⁸

God speaks his promise in *the preaching of the gospel*. "Promise" is used here in the sense of a word communicating a gift. The promise to us is news of a finished work, like an announcement that the occupation of our country by enemy forces (sin, death, Satan) has been ended.⁴⁹ A future gift is also promised, however: with Abraham and all the Old Testament faithful, we are still "looking for the city that is to come" (He 13:14).

Important as it is to preach "the whole will of God" to the church "which he bought with his own blood" (Act 20:27, 28), and grateful as we must all be to the seminary for teaching us to preach the text, we have no direct command from the Lord Jesus to "preach the text." His command is to "preach the good news." We preach the good news in every sermon not only for the sake of any non-Christians who may be present, but to feed our flocks. I would ask my own future pastors to portray Christ as crucified before my eyes, as Paul did (Ga 3:1), on the basis of every text.

One of the painters of the Reformation era portrayed Luther in the pulpit surrounded by his Wittenberg congregation. The Reformer is pointing the people to the cross standing in the middle of the church: Jesus is suffering and dying for the Wittenbergers' sins. Mark 16:15, κηρύξατε τὸ εὐαγγέλιον, stands before us in the seminary chapel every schoolday morning for three years so that it will be indelibly etched on our memories every time we step into our own pulpits. It takes a miracle of God's grace for people to cling to his promises; and his gospel, the only power that can create and nourish faith, deserves much more than the quick sentence or two it sometimes receives in our preaching.

⁴⁷ Newton, 24.

⁴⁸ Jungkuntz, 115.

⁴⁹ Nygren, 29–31.

In an effort to be down-to-earth and practical, it seems to me that some of our newer seminary graduates preach the law very clearly, but with the sanctification of the church in view. I thank them for applying the Word to my life, and for reminding me that I was enlightened by the Spirit to bear “the fruit of the light” (Eph 5:8, 9), that is, to live a Christian life. They may feel that the preaching they themselves have heard from my generation of pastors did not do full justice to the important place of sanctification in every book of the Bible. In Scripture, however, and in the Lutheran Confessions the primary purpose of preaching law is to make us “conscious of sin” (Ro 3:20; note all of Ge 3 to 11 and Ro 1–3:20!).

[God] terrifies...for this reason, namely that there may be a place for consolation and quickening, because hearts that are secure [that is, complacent] and do not feel the wrath of God loathe consolation...For the two chief works of God in men are these, to terrify, and to justify and quicken those who have been terrified. Into these two works all Scripture has been distributed.⁵⁰

Because I am flesh and spirit, at the same time righteous and a sinner, I need a regular diagnosis of my lukewarmness in faith: “You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked” (Re 3:17). But please don’t follow that terrifying diagnosis of my sin with an admonition to live a sanctified Christian life. The Lord’s own sermon goes on, “I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich”—that is faith; “and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness”—the perfect righteousness of Christ, which the gospel promise brings; “and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see”—the enlightenment which is the gift of the Spirit in the Word (v 18). Those whom Jesus loves he rebukes and disciplines and calls earnestly to daily repentance (v 19).

Like every Christian’s workaday living, our pastoral practice is a part of the total message our ministry proclaims. The way we feed the lambs and sheep either confesses or denies before our congregation and before the world the gospel we proclaim. Evangelical care of our congregations means, as Paul had to teach Peter, “acting in line with the truth of the gospel” (Ga 2:14). Our seminary faculty continues to remind us that the pastor is “the shepherd under Christ.”

The gospel promise in a simple, clear form is contained in the *word of absolution*. “Peace be with you!” Jesus said. ‘As the Father has sent me, I am sending you...Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven’” (Jn 20:21–23).

[Absolution] is the true voice of the Gospel. Thus we also comprise absolution when we speak of faith, because *faith cometh by hearing*, as Paul says Rom. 10:17. For when the Gospel is heard, and the absolution is heard, the conscience is encouraged and receives consolation. And because God truly quickens through the Word, the keys truly remit sins before God according to Luke 10, 16: *He that heareth you heareth Me*. Wherefore the voice of the one absolving must be believed not otherwise than we would believe a voice from heaven.⁵¹

The gospel we proclaim does not take its validity from the fact that it is believed. We plainly confess this when we speak the word of absolution to sinners without any conditions whatsoever: not “if you believe” or “if you truly repent” or “if you are resolved to amend your sinful life, you are forgiven,” but rather, “In the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins.” This is God’s good news. Faith receives it and says, “I am forgiven before God in heaven.” Christians confess their sins before absolution not to fulfill a condition of forgiveness but to request the word of pardon.

⁵⁰ Apology, XII, 51; *Trig.*, p 265.

⁵¹ Apology, XII, 39f; *Trig.*, p 261.

In the early years of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (founded 1847) and of the Synodical Conference (1872) the inter-Lutheran discussion of objective justification centered on the public declaration of absolution.⁵² C.F.W. Walther recalled to his synod these words of Luther:

Even he who does not believe that he is free and his sins forgiven shall also learn, in due time, how assuredly his sins were forgiven, even though he did not believe it. St. Paul says in Rom. 3: “Their faithlessness [will not] nullify the faithfulness of God.”...He who does not accept what the keys give receives, of course, nothing. But this is not the key’s fault. Many do not believe the gospel, but this does not mean that the gospel is not true or effective. A king gives you a castle. If you do not accept it, then it is not the king’s fault, nor is he guilty of a lie. But you have deceived yourself and the fault is yours. The king certainly gave it.⁵³

Of confession we Lutherans teach “that Private Absolution ought to be retained in the churches, although in confession an enumeration of all sins is not necessary.”⁵⁴ Do we pastors make use of this privilege? Who pastors the pastor? I can only encourage my young brothers to choose a brother (or, if it is easier, a father) in the ministry as their own pastor. People today bring themselves to make all sorts of revelations to psychological counselors. Can we not confess our sins to another pastor and receive the promise of God’s forgiveness? Or don’t any of our brothers in the ministry deserve our confidence that they will keep our secrets to themselves? If we ourselves learn to confess, we might also without hypocrisy encourage the members of our congregations to use the privilege of private absolution.

In connection with absolution, pastoral counseling is often mentioned. If there is one aspect of the ministry which has changed in the 33 years since I graduated from the seminary, it is the time, toil and tears given to counseling, particularly, marriage counseling. Is the pastoral counselor as the representative of Jesus Christ bringing law and gospel to sinners? Or is he rather a Christian friend, giving advice on personality disorders, sexual problems, family budgets and the difficulties of bringing up children in today’s moral climate? The answer to that question may help us set priorities for our ministries.

If today’s pastoral counselor is serving as a minister of the Word, many of our congregations seem to need more ministers. If the pastoral counselor more nearly resembles a concerned Christian friend, does he counsel at the expense of his ministry of the gospel? The first step toward helping a similar situation in the early church was taken when the twelve gathered all the disciples together, described their own priorities for ministry, told the people what the problem was and suggested a possible solution: Choose men from among the congregation “who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word” (Ac 6:3, 4). Do we need congregational counselors? Are there individuals or couples in our churches who could serve as Christian peer counselors? Are we making full use of agencies within our synod like the Wisconsin Lutheran Child and Family Service?

The *Lord’s Supper* clearly proclaims the death of Jesus Christ for our justification. With “the declarations of the Gospel,” “the use of the Sacraments” nourishes faith.

For these are signs of the New Testament, i.e., signs of the remission of sins. They offer...the remission of sins, as the words of the Lord’s Supper clearly testify, Matt. 26, 26.28: *This is My body, which is given for you. This is the cup of the New Testament*, etc. Thus faith is conceived and strengthened through absolution, through the hearing of the gospel, through the use of the Sacraments, so that it may not succumb while it struggles with the terrors of sin and death.⁵⁵

⁵² See the accounts in Curia, 8–35 and 35–49.

⁵³ *LW*, 40, 363–369.

⁵⁴ A.C., XI, 1; *Trig.*, p 47.

⁵⁵ Apology, XII, 39–42; *Trig.*, p 261–263.

Paul prescribes self-examination before receiving Holy Communion (1 Cor 11:28) for more than one reason. The body and blood of the Lord Jesus are present by the power of his Word alone, not because of our faith, and “anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself” (1 Cor 11:29). He who will not receive Jesus as his Savior must receive him as his Judge.

As in baptism and the word of absolution, we need to distinguish between God’s promise and the faith which receives the promise.

Even though a knave takes or distributes the Sacrament, he receives the true Sacrament, that is, the true body and blood of Christ, just as truly as he who [receives or] administers it in the most worthy manner. For it is not founded upon the holiness of men, but upon the Word of God. And as no saint upon earth, yea, no angel in heaven, can make bread and wine to be the body and blood of Christ, so also can no one change or alter it, even though it be misused. For the Word by which it became a Sacrament and was instituted does not become false because of the person or his unbelief. For He does not say: If you believe or are worthy, you receive My body and blood, but: *Take, eat and drink; this is My body and blood*. Likewise: *Do this* (namely, what I now do, institute, give, and bid you take). That is as much as to say, No matter whether you are worthy or unworthy, you have here His body and blood by virtue of these words which are added to the bread and wine.⁵⁶

The sacrament does not depend on our faith, but the blessings of forgiveness and life which Jesus wants to impart through the gift of his own body and blood are received only through faith in his promise, “Given and poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins.” “And whoever believes these words has what they plainly say, the forgiveness of sins.”⁵⁷ If young pastors believe that, they will love administering the Lord’s Supper as they love to preach the Word, and they themselves will gratefully receive it often. They will encourage the members of their congregations not to despise the Supper, since the Word with the visible means simply and objectively proclaims God’s good news.

In concluding this chapter, I venture a word about a topic in the center of our synod’s attention, evangelism. What makes Lutherans distinctive in their evangelism efforts? All Christians more or less plainly confess Christ. But only Lutherans who have remained anchored in the Scriptures confess the means of grace as God’s promise of forgiveness, as an invitation to receive his mercy, spoken by the Lord himself to us lost sinners in our dying world. While many conservative Protestants demand, “Believe what the Bible says,” Lutherans have good news: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. He has forgiveness, life and salvation for everyone in his Word.”

As they are able, Lutheran Christians can certainly tell “what Jesus means to me.” That is a confession of faith. But they will also make their confession to the means of grace as God’s own objective promises of peace and life. They will point to the sacraments as God’s work, not ours. They will urge adults to be baptized and to bring their children to baptism. They will invite the lost to find comfort in the liturgy, with its words of absolution, and in sermons which proclaim Christ crucified and risen. “Faith is the *latreia* [divine service] which receives the benefits offered by God...By faith God wishes to be worshiped in this way, that we receive from Him those things which He promises and offers.”⁵⁸

It would be a great privilege for any man to take baptism to only one child, to speak God’s absolution even to just one troubled soul. We could consider our lives well spent if we had told the good news of salvation even to one fellow human being bound in Satan’s prison, or if we had served to only one fellow-Christian struggling against his fears and temptations the body and blood of God’s Son, given and shed for the forgiveness of his sins.

⁵⁶ L.C., Sacrament of the Altar, 15–18; *Trig.*, 757.

⁵⁷ Small Catechism.

⁵⁸ Apology, IV, 49; *Trig.*, p 135.

It has been the privilege of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary graduates for over 125 years to carry God's gospel promises to many of his people. In their own ways the congregations to whom we ministered have told us, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" (Is 52:7; Ro 10:15).

I think that the seminary plainly pointed our lives and ministries to that mission when my classmates and I graduated a third of a century ago: to be the feet which carry the voice of Jesus to his people. Then as now, our seminary teachers took us to the heart of the message of the Scriptures, that Christ suffered for our sins and rose from the dead on the third day for the justification of all mankind (Lk 24:46).

Our very comprehensive course of study, essentially unchanged today, required a number of class hours unparalleled in other Lutheran seminaries. We complained, but we gained an overview of theology which prepared us well to serve as confessional Lutheran pastors. In 1963, when the seminary celebrated its centennial, the Synodical Conference was breaking up. That was not easy for our people to accept. Pastors preached doctrinal sermons to their congregations to help them understand our synod's confession. Christians always need such sound, Bible-based instruction, as the risen Lord himself says, "[Teach them] to obey everything I have commanded you" (Mt 28:20).

Not so clear in my own mind when I entered the ministry—my classmates must speak for themselves—was Christ's commission to "make disciples of all nations," to reach out wherever we were with his good news. If I see something new and growing in the seminary in the years leading up to this anniversary, it is a stronger resolve that "repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in [Christ's] name *to all nations*" (Lk 24:47). A concern for missions is reflected in the course of study, in the calling of men to the faculty, in the vicaring experience of the students, in the ministries of the graduates. Coupled with this is a clearer understanding that pastors and teachers are given to the church to prepare *all* God's people for works of service, "so that the body of Christ may be built up" (Eph 4:12). The ministry is multiplied when all God's people serve.

When the prophet Jonah was called to preach in wicked Nineveh, he was persuaded only with the greatest difficulty that the LORD was "concerned about that great city" (Jon 4:11). Our little synod and its seminary are sending preachers into a "great city" indeed, a world numbering over four billion sinners. Not one of them knows by nature the only true Way to life; all of them are "without hope and without God in the world" (Eph 2:12) until they know Jesus Christ. With Jonah, you students and our church and I are still learning: God raised us from our own three-day death with Christ to "preach the good news to all creation" (Mk 16:15).

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