

# Justification in Mission and in Ministry

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✠ *In nomine Jesu* ✠

The Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy, “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed who correctly handles the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15). Important in the study of doctrine is not only the correct exposition of Scripture but also the way it is handled—its correct application. Today’s essay explores the practical implications of the doctrine of justification—especially objective justification—and its use in ministry and mission work at home and around the world.

## The value of objective justification

The term *objective justification* never appears in the Lutheran Confessions. Without using the term, however, Luther and the confessors taught that God’s justifying work in Christ stands as an objective, accomplished fact, which is apprehended by faith. It wasn’t until nearly 350 years after Luther that another controversy in the Lutheran church forced theologians to formulate terms to relate the justification completed at the cross to its appropriation by faith.

The *status controversiae* which precipitated a thorough discussion of the universal nature of God’s forensic act was a dispute among Lutherans in the later 1870s about the nature of faith and God’s eternal election to salvation.

The predestinarian controversy arose in response to statements made by Missouri Synod theologian C. F. W. Walther regarding God’s foreknowledge and election of believers to salvation. Walther maintained, “God foresaw nothing, absolutely nothing, in those whom he resolved to save, which might be worthy of salvation.”<sup>1</sup> Those who disagreed with Walther taught that God elected believers to salvation *intuitu fidei* (“in view of faith”). Theologians of the then-Ohio Synod insisted that in eternity God chose some to be saved because he knew that they would come to faith and because he foresaw in them something that would distinguish them from unbelievers. The controversy fractured the fledgling Synodical Conference (formed in 1872) when Ohio withdrew from membership. Fallout from the bitter polemics on both sides continued well into the 20th century.

Walther correctly observed that Ohio’s doctrine of election was synergistic.<sup>2</sup> It undermined God’s grace, and it incorrectly made faith—something inside man—into an effective *cause* of salvation. Walther stood with Luther and the early Lutheran theologians and insisted that there are only two causes of salvation: (1) the grace of God and (2) the merits of Christ. The Ohio theologians insisted that there is no such thing as justification apart from faith and that faith is a condition for justification. Theologians who remained with the Synodical Conference taught justification as a completed reality wrought by Christ and grasped by faith. Walther stated:

The Word of God is not rightly divided when faith is required as a condition of justification and salvation, as if a person were righteous in the sight of God and saved, not only by faith, but also on account of his faith, for the sake of his faith, and in view of his faith.<sup>3</sup>

The terms *objective justification* and *subjective justification* came out of this controversy, as the theologians of the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods grappled with how best to express the justification won at

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<sup>1</sup> Walther, *Synodal-bericht*, 51; cited in Nelson, 316.

<sup>2</sup> Synergism is cooperation or collaboration between God and man in matters of salvation. Salvation by grace alone is *monergistic*; God does everything without any contribution on the part of man.

<sup>3</sup> Walther, *Law and Gospel*, Thesis XIV.

the cross as a completed reality, while maintaining the necessity of faith as the receiving organ that grasps the imputed righteousness of Christ offered in the gospel.

### **Objection justification is the foundation of comfort**

To some these distinctions might seem like theological hair-splitting, but the practical implications of objective justification are enormous.

When a sinner is troubled in conscience, burdened by guilt, afflicted by past sins, nagged by thoughts of his own mortality, and assailed by doubts about his salvation, where is he to turn? Lutheran teaching has always pointed the troubled sinner away from himself to a completed salvation that exists completely outside himself. A sinner, troubled by the weight of sin and the fear of God's wrath, should never look inside himself for the assurance of salvation. He cannot find consolation in his own life or his own works. He cannot find comfort in his own fickle feelings. He is not to look to his own prayers and spiritual wrestling for the assurance of salvation. He is not to find comfort in his faith; in other words, he is not to have faith in his faith.<sup>4</sup> Looking inside himself, a sinner will find only sin and death, from which he can in no way set himself free. Introspective self-searching will spiral the troubled soul downward into the black hole of despair.

To find comfort, the sinner must look outside himself. He looks to the gospel of Jesus Christ, which holds out the objective truth of Christ's completed salvation. In faith he lays hold of the completed forgiveness already won for him at the cross and apprehends it for his own. This *theocentric* (God-centered) approach to theology has always been a hallmark of Lutheran doctrine. It directs the troubled sinner away from his own fears, his own feelings, his own doing, his own praying, and even his own believing, and it points him to the reality of God's grace in Christ and his completed work at Calvary.<sup>5</sup>

But even looking outside himself, the troubled soul may fail to find peace, if Jesus' justifying work is not seen as complete for all. For whom did Jesus live, die and rise again? Was it only for the elect? Was it only for those whom God recognized in his foreknowledge? Did Jesus somehow manage to pay for the sin of the entire world, yet still overlook me? When Jesus said from the cross, "It is finished," did that triumphant decree embrace me and declare my justification finished, complete and certain—or was I left out? Is there something that I have to add to make Jesus' justifying work real for me? Is there a change inside me that has to take place for me to be found not-guilty before the judgment bar of God?<sup>6</sup>

The next time you find yourself lying awake in the pre-dawn darkness, thinking of the passage of time, contemplating your own mortality, and reflecting upon the approaching appointment you have with a just and holy God, your only unassailable assurance of salvation is the unchanging truth that Jesus lived, died and rose again to justify the world—and the world includes you!

The objective reality of justification for the world that was achieved at the cross does not change with the roller coaster of human emotion. Whether a person's faith is weak or strong, Christ—the object of faith—remains rock-solid and unshakeable. God's completed forgiveness, acquired at Calvary and sealed by Easter's empty tomb, is the objective basis of comfort for troubled sinners.

This use of objective justification *as a comfort for anguished sinners* was the primary application of the doctrine throughout the predestinarian controversy and well into the 20th century. The primary task of the church was understood to be the preaching of the forgiveness of sins for the comfort of souls yearning for peace

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<sup>4</sup> The phrase, "Take comfort in your faith," can be understood correctly, but saying this to a sinner troubled by a guilty conscience points him in the wrong direction—inward, instead of outward. Our comfort is not in our faith but in the *object* of our faith, namely Christ and his promises sealed to us in word and sacrament.

<sup>5</sup> Please don't misunderstand the phrase "his own believing" to imply that faith is the product of human effort or will. Faith is a gift of God worked exclusively by the Holy Spirit. The phrase is used here to emphasize that Spirit-worked faith is something inside of man.

<sup>6</sup> These questions illustrate the inability of both Calvin's double-predestination and Arminius' decision theology to impart comfort to a troubled sinner. A Calvinist can never really be sure that Jesus died for him, since there is no guarantee that he is part of the elect—and Calvin taught that Jesus died only for the elect. A believer in free will must look to his own decision, his own feeling and his own faith and ask, "Was my decision for Christ unreserved and genuine? Is my commitment sincere? Do I feel saved? Is my faith strong enough?"

with God. This theme of comfort for sinners recurs frequently in the writings of the defenders of objective justification. George Stoeckhardt wrote:

The entire Pauline teaching of justification, and also all the comfort of justification, stands and falls with this particular article of general justification. This is how it becomes completely clear and obvious that justification is entirely independent of man's conduct. And this is the only way that the individual can become entirely certain of his own justification. For it is a compelling conclusion: If God has already in Christ justified all men and forgiven them their sins, so I also in Christ have a gracious God and the forgiveness of all my sins.<sup>7</sup>

Hoenecke declared, "The emphasis on general justification is necessary in order to preserve the true content of the gospel."<sup>8</sup>

The Lutheran Church was born of Martin Luther's *Anfechtung*<sup>9</sup> and his subsequent rediscovery of the righteousness of God in Christ freely given by grace. Only the pure doctrine of God's completed salvation in Jesus offers the comfort that a troubled heart craves, and preserves an afflicted conscience from despair.

### Doctrine must be used correctly

We can formulate and expound doctrine precisely in all points, but if we use and apply the doctrine incorrectly, we do great damage with our mishandling of the truth. Consider, for example, the doctrine of predestination (election to salvation) taught in Scripture.<sup>10</sup> The amazing truth that believers were chosen before the creation of the world to be conformed to the likeness of Christ brings tremendous comfort and joy to a Christian. This is the purpose of the doctrine of election: to fill the Christian with amazement and rejoicing at the eternal grace of God. But what if we use the doctrine of election to try to answer the question, "Why are some saved and not others?" Misusing the doctrine this way, we will quickly find ourselves walking a path that leads to confusion, doubt and inevitable falsehood. The doctrine of election is never intended to answer that question, and to use it that way is an abuse of the doctrine.

The doctrine of objective justification must be articulated clearly, and it must be used correctly. Its essential use, as the heart of the gospel, is *to comfort sinners with the rock-solid foundation of salvation as an objective reality in Christ.*

### Correctly handling law and gospel

The Law	The Gospel
Declares that God hates all sinners (Psalm 5:4,5; Psalm 11:5)	Declares that God loves all sinners (John 3:16)
Commands what we must do and not do (Exodus 20)	Reveals what God did for us in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:18-21)
Exposes our sin (Romans 3:19,20)	Reveals our Savior (John 1:17,18)
Demands righteousness from man (Leviticus 18:5; Romans 10:5)	Gives righteousness from God (Romans 3:21-31)
Damns sinners (Galatians 3:10; Revelation 21:8)	Saves sinners (Romans 1:16,17)
Restrains unbelievers (1 Timothy 1:9-11)	Liberates in Christ (Galatians 5:1)
Instructs Christians (Psalm 119)	Motivates Christians (2 Corinthians 5:14)

Table 1 – Distinguishing characteristics of the law and the gospel.

<sup>7</sup> Stöckhardt, *Römerbrief*, 264.

<sup>8</sup> Hoenecke, 355.

<sup>9</sup> The German word *Anfechtung* doesn't have an exact equivalent in English. It might be translated as "struggle of conscience" or "spiritual wrestling." It describes Luther's anguish of soul and fear of judgment that were only assuaged when he rediscovered the free gift of salvation through the merits of Christ apprehended by faith alone.

<sup>10</sup> See Ephesians chapter 1 and Romans chapters 8-11.

To learn how to handle the doctrine of justification and to apply it correctly to mission and ministry, we must first review the two great teachings of Scripture: the law and the gospel. *Table 1* offers a side-by-side comparison of some distinguishing characteristics of law and gospel.

As you can see from the table, the divine law brings about some horrible consequences for man.<sup>11</sup> It demands of man something that he cannot deliver, namely, perfect obedience and untainted righteousness. The law peels back the outward veneer of man's civil obedience and all his efforts to present a good face to those around him, and it exposes the wretched depravity of the natural human heart. It reveals the frightful fury of the living God, who is a consuming fire. The law introduces man to the true God—not the god of his own imagination—the God who hates all evil, and who hates all who sin against him.<sup>12</sup>

The law brings dreadful consequences, and yet the law is necessary. How else can a human being know of his despicable natural condition before God, so that he perceives the need for a solution? The law exposes mankind's eternal problem: he is a sinner who must die and face his Maker. His sins have separated him from God. His destiny is the most dreadful, tormented existence apart from God in hell. "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10:31).

### **Is the doctrine of justification for the impenitent and unbelieving?**

Justification is gospel—pure gospel. As gospel, it finds application only to sinners who have been crushed, broken and brought by the law to see their helpless and hopeless condition.

But what if a sinner has not come to terms with his own sin? Can justification—especially objective justification—still be preached to the impenitent? Can Christ's forgiveness as an objective reality acquired for the world be proclaimed to those who have not heeded the testimony of their conscience convicting them and who have not been broken by the law? The answer is: *absolutely not!*

Jesus said, "Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces" (Matthew 7:26). C. F. W. Walther observed:

We may not preach the Gospel, but must preach the Law to secure sinners. We must preach them into hell before we can preach them into heaven. By our preaching our hearers must be brought to the point of death before they can be restored to life by the Gospel.<sup>13</sup>

We live in a world that in outward respects is very different from the world in which Jesus walked, from the world in which Luther worked, and from the world in which Walther and the theologians of the Synodical Conference formulated the doctrine of objective justification. Years of peace on our soil have fostered a sense of domestic tranquility and personal security; we haven't lived through anything like the Thirty Years War, which ravaged Germany in the 1600s. Sin is viewed as an outmoded or, at worst, a venial<sup>14</sup> concept; people aren't even ashamed about grossly immoral lifestyles. Material abundance, technological advancement, and a level of prosperity unprecedented in the history of the world have produced a climate of comfort, luxury, and infatuation with the material, while fostering complacency and indifference about things spiritual. "Who really cares about better life in the world to come? Who needs all that 'pie in the sky in the by-and-by'? We've got it all now! Get the most out of life! Live the American Dream!"

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<sup>11</sup> This does not mean that there's anything wrong with the law. The law of God is perfect and holy—and thus it unmasks the wretched depravity of man.

<sup>12</sup> The truth that God hates sinners often comes as an enormous shock to people who have been taught that "God hates the sin but loves the sinner." The latter statement is a tragic confusion of law and gospel. It contradicts Scripture, and it blunts the force of the law.

<sup>13</sup> Walther, *Law and Gospel*, 118.

<sup>14</sup> It might be a bad thing, but it won't send you to hell.

While creating heaven on earth, our culture has also sanitized death. Death frequently comes in sterile hospital rooms under controlled circumstances. The body is whisked away to be gussied up by the funeral home or cremated.<sup>15</sup> And in our humanist society, it's assumed that everybody goes to heaven—if there is a heaven.

All of this means that modern man is living an illusion. He is, for the most part, unconscious of his pending doom as he races down the freeway of life headed for destruction. He needs a reality check, because for all the changes and challenges in our modern world, some things never change. The nature of man has not changed since the fall into sin. The reality of his desperate condition has not changed. And the solution to man's single most pressing problem has not changed.

How did the apostles tackle the challenges posed to them by an indifferent, apathetic, lascivious, pagan world? They preached law and gospel!

### **Preach repentance!**

We don't like to preach the law the way it really is meant to be preached. Our *opinio legis*<sup>16</sup> loves "how-to" preaching that gives practical instruction in godly living—and there is a place for this use of the law. But the primary use of the law—to expose sin, to strip away the façade of human goodness, to unmask human hypocrisy, and to damn sin, impenitence and unbelief—that use of the law seems out of bounds to our kind and cultured society. We are loath to offend.<sup>17</sup>

But this preaching of the law is exactly what is required. We cannot preach the gospel to people who are comfortable loving their 401(k)s, their automobiles, their jobs, their leisure activities, their travel plans, or even their children more than God. We are to expose their idolatry and warn them to repent. We are not to rail upon the outward sins of the flesh that condemn all the wicked Hollywood movie moguls, slam the purveyors of porn, and indict the murderers and pedophiles at the state penitentiary. We are to condemn the sins that lurk, cold and sinister, within the hearts of our hearers in the pew. We cannot make excuses for people's apathy, stinginess, lack of Christian charity, and indifference to the means of grace. We must tell them in the words of Christ, "Unless you repent, you too will all perish" (Luke 13:5).

This application of Scripture is consistent with the teaching of Jesus and the apostles. When approached by a rich young man who was confident he had kept the law since his youth, Jesus offered him no gospel promise of salvation. "Jesus looked at him and loved him. 'One thing you still lack,' he said. 'Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.'" (Mark 10:21). When a lawyer wanted to justify himself, Jesus offered him no forgiveness of sins but told him the parable of the Good Samaritan and said, "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:37). When Peter confronted Simon the Sorcerer, who wanted to buy the ability to impart the Holy Spirit, Peter showed him no mercy. "Peter answered: 'May your money perish with you! Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you'<sup>18</sup> for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin'" (Acts 8:20-23, selected).

<sup>15</sup> For over a decade I served a congregation in the Pacific Northwest. The overwhelming majority of funerals in that part of the country were memorial services for people whose bodies had been cremated. Only a small percentage were interments.

<sup>16</sup> Literally, "opinion of the law." The term refers to man's natural tendency to think in law terms, and to relate the law to his efforts at being a "good person." The *opinio legis* produces superb Pharisees.

<sup>17</sup> Part of our reluctance stems from a confusion of terms. The word *evangelical* means "gospel-based." The word *legal* means "law-based." The word *legalistic* means "over-emphasizing the law" or "abusing the law." We are not to be legalistic, but there are times when we must be *legal*—that is, there are times when our approach to sin must be completely based on the law, which crushes, breaks and tears down. We must stand firm and offer no forgiveness where there is no repentance.

Another confusion arises between the terms *evangelical* and *loving*. They are not the same! Using the law correctly to demolish pretenses and lead a sinner to repentance is the most loving thing we can do for him, under the circumstances. In such a case we are being loving in the legal sense; there is no gospel involved. When we bind up wounds with the gospel, we are being lovingly evangelical. Law and gospel are always to be applied lovingly in their appropriate context.

<sup>18</sup> Notice that the phrase, "Perhaps he will forgive you," is not gospel. The gospel is never conditional, and it never leaves forgiveness in question. This phrase is pure law, and it's properly preached in such a way that it leaves the hearer wondering whether there is even the possibility of forgiveness for such a terrible sin.

This is not to say that we need *more law* in our circles, or to suggest that we drop the “Ev.” from the names of our synod and churches. I am suggesting that we *use* the law in the harsh, bitter way it is meant to be used, so that the beauty of the gospel gleams more brightly. We are to move beyond the insipid, “We’re all a bunch of filthy, rotten sinners who deserve to go to hell—but Jesus died for us,” and preach repentance. We are to use the law to expose sin—individual sins, personal sins, the pet sins that we’re comfortable with—to convict, and to condemn, aiming to leave the most smug, self-righteous Pharisee in the congregation quaking in fear of God.

### **Proclaim the good news!**

Preaching the law to sinners sets the stage, but it’s not the main event of Scripture. The purpose of God’s revelation to mankind is not to condemn but to save. “These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31).

To the brokenhearted who grieve over their sin, to those who have been brought by the law to despair of themselves, to those who feel God’s wrath and fear his condemnation—to contrite sinners we preach not a shred of law. To penitents we preach only gospel.

When the law has done its hard work of crushing the sinner, then the precious truth of salvation purchased by Christ at the cross beams into the darkness of spiritual anguish and shines the light of comfort. The gospel of forgiveness brings hope to despairing hearts. The sacrament of Holy Baptism washes away every stain of sin; it clothes the believer with the righteousness of Christ that counts before God. The feast of Holy Communion brings Christ personally to sinners hungering for salvation. The proclamation of absolution on the lips of the pastor causes troubled hearts to rejoice in the declaration of free forgiveness.

As the Spirit works through these means, the sinner exclaims, “I am justified! My salvation was secured by my Substitute, Jesus Christ, who suffered God’s wrath in my place and has brought me peace with God! I have no more fear of judgment, for Christ has befriended me. My Savior has washed me and made me his very own. He intercedes for me before the throne of God. I can now call God my dear Father, through my brother, Jesus Christ.” All the gifts of God’s grace, rooted in the objective truth of God’s completed work in Christ, are personally communicated to the sinner through the gospel in word, sacraments and keys.<sup>19</sup>

This application of gospel is consistent with Scripture. Jesus placed no condition on the absolution he spoke to a paralytic when he declared, “Son, your sins are forgiven” (Mark 2:5). When Jesus saw multitudes laboring under the legalistic yoke of the Pharisees, yearning for comfort and forgiveness, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd (Matthew 9:36). Jesus called to the crowds:

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30).

The Apostle Paul made no demands of the jailer at Philippi—a man despondent to the point of suicide. He said unconditionally, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31).

### **A popularity contest?**

Is preaching repentance and faith the ticket to a growing synod? In recent years, our church body has evinced considerable interest in growth. This is healthy, to the degree that it is prompted by a love for lost souls and a desire to reach more people with the gospel. Some of this, frankly, is unhealthy and is driven by envious glances at the regional mega-church, as we wonder why we don’t have the same numbers.

The ancient prophets cared not a whit about popularity. They were royal jerks when it came to preaching repentance. They thundered against the impenitent with fury from on high. It wasn’t just *what* they said that

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<sup>19</sup> By “the keys” is meant the “Ministry of the Keys,” the authority which Christ gave to his church to forgive and to retain sins.

offended; they weren't particularly politic about *how* they said it. Their stinging rebukes won them persecution, not popularity. In fact, the mark of true preaching was its *unpopularity*. The same is true for the preaching of the apostles. Jesus said,

“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matthew 5:12).

Remember, God's word must be not only rightly expounded; it must be rightly applied. Once again, without impugning anyone's faithful service to the Lord, let's review some examples from our synod's recent history and ask ourselves if we've properly applied law and gospel.

A few years ago our synod developed an outreach campaign for use in congregations entitled “Reflections.” The artwork—very professionally done—pictured people in various situations wrestling with life's problems, along with the line, “I am saved.” On the back of each piece the words continued, “You are too through Jesus Christ,” followed by an exposition of the gospel of God's free grace given in Jesus. The objective truth of the gospel was very clearly and correctly expounded. Sadly, objective justification, in the case of this campaign, was misapplied. What was missing was the preaching of the law to prepare hearts for the gospel. Missing was a universal call to repent of sin. A blanket proclamation of God's love that precedes a blanket proclamation of God's wrath is a recipe for sinners to abide securely in their sin.

If we omit or obscure the law, intentionally or not, we end up undermining the gospel. When we soft-pedal the law to avoid offending, we leave people wondering about the relevance of Christ. A recent article in *Forward in Christ* illustrated this sentiment about the relevance of preaching: “As a kid all I remember was hearing the preacher say over and over again, ‘You are sinners who don't deserve anything, but . . . Jesus died for you.’ Okay, but so what? What does that look like for me on Monday in my cubicle or Thursday night out on the town?”<sup>20</sup> There is much to be said for practical instruction in God's word in the sermon, but I was left wondering whether a person who doesn't grasp the relevance of being rescued from eternal damnation through the sacred blood of Jesus really has grasped Christianity.

It's easy to entertain the sentiment, “Perhaps if only we in the WELS were a little more sensitive, and we weren't so harsh in criticizing every doctrinal aberration and every moral weakness, we might be able to grow larger churches.” This is the onramp to the freeway of apostasy. Law and gospel, rightly handled, are an enormous offense to the human psyche. The preaching of repentance wounds a person's self-esteem, shatters his self-love, and exposes his self-infatuation. The preaching of free, unconditional forgiveness in Christ is an absurdity to the human mind. It's the foolishness of the cross. Law and gospel are neither popular nor palatable to the unconverted—and they are not popular to the residual sinful nature that lurks inside all Christians and remains unconverted to the day we die. There is no way to dress up law and gospel to make them less offensive. But in the hands of the Spirit of God, they are the power to convict and the power to heal.

Does this mean we should hunker down in our fortress, develop a martyr mindset and celebrate our smallness as evidence that we're the chosen little flock of God? How absurd! The word of God must be preached! It must be brought to people, so the Spirit can do his work. But I don't have the privilege of worrying about things that are out of my hands—and *I have no control over the growth or popularity of my church or synod!* My call in Christ is simply to proclaim the full counsel of God, to unleash the powerful and effective word. The Spirit works where he wills.

### **Methods and strategies**

Another development in recent years is a growing interest in methodology for ministry, engineering strategies for ministry, and casting visions for ministry. In our church body we are blessed to serve an increasingly educated constituency. Many in our midst have completed graduate training in business

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<sup>20</sup> Parlow, 29.

administration, and these emphases on methods, strategies and vision are direct imports from the business world.

I am entirely in favor of seeing churches administered in an efficient, orderly way. Our called servants are to be hard-working, using their talents and creative abilities to their maximum potential. There is no excuse for laziness. We are to equip the saints for meaningful service. We are to strive for excellence in our teaching and preaching, in our promotion and publicity,<sup>21</sup> in everything we do. It's the King we're serving! We are to be active in Christian charity, involved in our communities, serving our neighbors. Today we have wonderful tools in technology to serve the proclamation of the gospel. We are to use our gifts to plan, organize and strategize. We employ methods to minister to people. We set goals, under God's grace, and, imploring his blessing, we work toward those goals. Because Christians are optimists, we envision success, in God's terms.<sup>22</sup> There are many things we can learn from the business world, in Jesus' words, being as shrewd as snakes but as innocent as doves (Matthew 10:16; see also Luke 16).

But as we emphasize North American Outreach and carry on our mission work around the world, in the final analysis there is still only one powerful word of God that convicts and heals. The gospel is changeless. The world is changing. *But the things about the world which the gospel impacts—spiritual things—remain forever unchanging!* Law and gospel are the only timeless remedy for the human condition. The only *methods* that will achieve spiritual results are methods that center in the proclamation of the universal condemnation of the law and the universal justification of the gospel. The only *strategies* that will be successful are strategies that expose more people to the preaching of the word of God, to the washing of Holy Baptism, to the feast of Holy Communion, and to the spoken absolution of the pastor. "To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn" (Isaiah 8:20). "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead" (Luke 16:31).

Our current financial crisis, which is prompting ministry cutbacks at home and abroad, is a case in point. *The malaise afflicting our church body will not be ameliorated by business-based programs and strategies!* When God's law convicts us of our collective and individual materialism, driving us to our knees in fear of God's wrath upon our greed, apathy and coldness, and when the gospel of Jesus Christ floods our forgiven hearts with God's grace, rekindles our zeal for the lost and perishing, and motivates a life of generous Christian love—then our fiscal situation will change.

### **Motive for mission and ministry**

The truth that God's work of salvation is completed for the entire world in Christ leads to an obvious conclusion: If Jesus died for the world, he is to be proclaimed to the world. Every soul is a treasure, whose worth is measured by the precious blood of Jesus.

Following World War II, there were Japanese soldiers remaining on South Pacific islands who never heard that the war was over. They remained in a state of hostility long after the United States and Japan had returned to peace and friendship, because they had not heard the declaration of peace.

This is the sad state of the world today, a world perishing in darkness, ignorance and unbelief. Billions have never heard that God has reconciled the world to himself in Christ. Countless souls will live out their days ignorant of the forgiveness that was purchased for them at Calvary's cross. St. Paul asks:

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" (Romans 10:14,15)

<sup>21</sup> Please don't confuse promotion and publicity with evangelism. Mailing flyers announcing Vacation Bible School or preschool enrollment is not evangelism. Evangelism is telling people the good news of Christ.

<sup>22</sup> Sometimes God reveals success in growth, as many people are brought to salvation. Pentecost is an example. Other times God reveals success as attrition, as many people are hardened in unbelief. The world sees the latter as failure, but with God it is still success.



The forgiveness acquired by Jesus for all at the cross gives us confessional Lutherans, among all the church bodies of the world, the highest motivation to share our Savior. In contrast to the “Jesus Saves” churches, we don’t preach a salvation that is incomplete and just waiting for the sinner to do something to complete the transaction. We proclaim boldly, “Jesus *Saved*,” past tense, finished, certain. We don’t leave God’s people twisting in an ambiguous morality asking, “What would Jesus do (WWJD)?” We proclaim what Jesus *did* to rescue sinners, and we rejoice that God counts every Christian work of faith done in the righteousness of Christ as good. We offer comfort to troubled sinners, the assurance, not the mere possibility, of salvation. Paul wrote to the Corinthians,

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God” (2 Cor. 1:3,4).

Our proclamation of the eternal gospel at home and around the world is not restricted to people of a particular race, social stratum or income level. The gospel doesn’t discriminate. I have been privileged to worship with fellow Christians in far-off mission fields. They speak a different language, live in a different culture, view the world from a different perspective, and are in many ways very different from me. But the things that unite us far surpass the things that divide us. Together we rejoice in a common Savior, who won for all people the forgiveness of sins. We share in a common confession of the truth. We rejoice in the comfort of the same gospel, are washed in the same Baptism, are bound by the same Communion, and rejoice in the same hope of eternal life rooted in a victory won for us nearly 2,000 years ago by our common brother, Jesus Christ.

God’s objective justification not only saved us. It still empowers us for our mission and ministry.

“Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again” (2 Cor. 5:14,15).

The gospel in word, sacraments and keys is the living breath of the Spirit, which enables each believer to live in constant repentance. The gospel makes no commands and imposes no demands upon us. It only quickens<sup>23</sup> and enables us to strive to become what we are already declared to be in Christ.

### **Vision for the church**

If we are to cast a vision for the future of our church body, by God’s grace . . .

We’ll envision the mercy of our gracious Lord preserving our congregations in faithfulness to Holy Scripture and our Lutheran confessional heritage.

We’ll envision ongoing diligence in preaching repentance for the forgiveness of sins, rightly dividing law and gospel for the eternal blessing of many souls.

We’ll envision a body of Christians that grieves over our sins and trembles in the fear of God—but also celebrates with exuberance our redemption in Christ.

We’ll envision a people hungry for the Bread of Life, eager for a greater knowledge of Christ, and thirsty for the living waters that quench parched souls.

We’ll envision a deeper appreciation for God’s gift of grace in Baptism, a profound and constant amazement at the gift of God’s Spirit, who brought us out of death to live with Jesus.

We’ll envision God’s people craving the Sacrament of the Altar, the present and tangible forgiveness offered in the body and blood of Christ.

We’ll envision a church body that appreciates the Ministry of the Keys and delights in the pronouncement of absolution—in public and in private—a declaration of forgiveness that

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<sup>23</sup> Makes us alive in Christ.

effects and seals to sinners the objective forgiveness won for us by our Savior nearly two millennia ago.

We'll celebrate the glorious vision of our victory in heaven, the vision of souls from every nation, tribe, people and language, united in praise to God: Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb. Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!<sup>24</sup>

*Soli Deo Gloria – To God alone be the glory*

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<sup>24</sup> Revelation 7:9-12