

# Luther's Impact on Mission Work

By David J. Valleskey

[St. Paul Lutheran Church, Norfolk, Nebraska, Reformation 1993]

May God bestow on us his grace,  
With blessings rich provide us,  
And may the brightness of his face  
To life eternal guide us  
That we his saving health may know,  
His gracious will and pleasure,  
And also to the heathen show  
Christ's riches without measure  
And unto God convert them.<sup>1</sup>

So wrote Luther in 1523, some six years after he had nailed the 95 Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. With the words of this hymn Luther displayed a spirit of mission-mindedness, the subject of our study this Reformation weekend. Our topic is Luther's Impact on Mission Work.

We intend to look at two things. First, we will let Luther speak for himself to indicate the depth of his mission-minded spirit. Then we will explore some of the key scriptural doctrines restored to the church through the Reformation and see how these doctrines impact mission work.

## Luther's Mission-Mindedness

Luther writes, "The very best work of all works is that the heathen have been led from idolatry to the knowledge of God."<sup>2</sup> In his explanation to the Second Petition of the Lord's Prayer in his Large Catechism, Luther prays

that God's name be so praised through the Holy Word and a Christian life ...that it may ...proceed with power throughout the world, that many may find entrance into the Kingdom of Grace, be made partakers of redemption, being led thereto by the Holy Ghost, in order that we may altogether remain forever in the one Kingdom now begun.

In his commentary on Psalm 117, Luther emphasizes that mission work involves, not just waiting for people to come to us, but going to them with the gospel:

We are faced with the fact that God sent his apostles and disciples to all the heathen, had the gospel preached, gave his Holy Spirit, redeemed them from sin, death, and the devil, purified their hearts through faith and thus accepted them as children and heirs and as his own people ....And there are enough other verses in Scripture which declare that God's word should go to the heathen where they are. Thus, for instance, Psalm 19:4: "Their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world."<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> *Christian Worship*, #574

<sup>2</sup> Ewald M. Plass, *What Luther Says*, vol. 2 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), p. 957.

<sup>3</sup> LW 14: 9,10.

In another comment on this same brief two-verse psalm, Luther underscores the need for preachers (missionaries) to proclaim the gospel. The psalmist writes, “Praise the Lord, all you nations; extol him, all you peoples” (verse 1). To that Luther responds:

If all heathen are to praise God, this assumes that he has become their God. If he is to be their God, then they must know him, believe in him, and give up all idolatry. One cannot praise God with an idolatrous mouth or an unbelieving heart. And if they are to believe, they must first hear his word and thereby receive the Holy Spirit, who through faith purifies and enlightens their hearts. One cannot come to faith or lay hold on the Holy Spirit without hearing the word first, as St. Paul has said (Rom. 10:14): “How are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard?” and (Gal. 3:2): “You have received the Spirit through the proclamation of faith.” If they are to hear his word, then preachers must be sent to proclaim God’s word to them; for not all the heathen can come to Jerusalem.<sup>4</sup>

In his commentary on John 14:13,14, Luther brings out that outreach with the gospel is a natural fruit of faith. With the apostles, the Christian cannot but speak those things which he has heard and seen. Luther writes:

Once a Christian begins to know Christ as his Lord and Savior, through whom he is redeemed from death and brought into his dominion and inheritance, God completely permeates his heart. Now he is eager to help everyone acquire the same benefits. For his greatest delight is in this treasure, the knowledge of Christ. Therefore he steps forth boldly, teaches and admonishes others, praises and confesses his treasure before everybody, prays and yearns that they, too, may obtain such mercy. There is a spirit of restlessness amid the greatest calm, that is, in God’s grace and peace. A Christian cannot be still or idle. He constantly strives and struggles with all his might, as one who has no other object in life than to disseminate God’s honor and glory among the people that others may also receive such a spirit of grace.<sup>5</sup>

In a sermon on 1 Peter 1, Luther reminds his hearers that a Christian really has only one reason for continuing to live on this earth after he has been brought to faith in Jesus, and that is to live for his neighbor. And the best thing I can do for my neighbor, Luther forthrightly states, is to lead him to Jesus:

We have no other reason for living on earth than to be of help to others. If this were not the case, it would be best for God to kill us and let us die as soon as we are baptized and have begun to believe. But he permits us to live here in order that we may bring others to faith, just as he brought us ....The greatest work that comes from faith is this, that I confess Christ with my mouth and, if it has to be, bear testimony with my blood and risk my life ...in order that others, too, may be brought to faith.<sup>6</sup>

In speaking of joy as one of the fruits of the Spirit in his commentary on Galatians 5:22, Luther points to the joy one experiences when he is able to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with people and when they, through the gospel, become believers: “The faithful rejoice when the gospel is disseminated and when many come to faith and thus the Kingdom of God is increased.”<sup>7</sup>

The above is probably a sufficient sampling to underscore the fact that Martin Luther had a heart for missions and that he saw gospel outreach as a primary task of the church, both corporately and individually.

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> LW 24: 87,88.

<sup>6</sup> LW 30: 30,31.

<sup>7</sup> LW 27: 93,94.

There are some who take exception to the claim that Luther saw the church's mission as "making disciples of all nations." In a Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly article entitled, "Luther's Practical Mission-Mindedness," Paul Peters mentions that some contend Luther's view was that the Great Commission to preach the gospel to all nations was binding only on the apostles. Dr. Peters refers in particular to Harry R. Boer in *Pentecost and Missions*, who quotes Luther's exposition of Psalm 82:4: "That the apostles entered strange houses and preached was because they had a command and were for this purpose appointed, called, and sent, namely, that they should preach everywhere, as Christ had said, 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.' After that, however, no one again received such a general apostolic command, but every bishop or pastor has his own particular parish."<sup>8</sup>

Does this quotation say Luther taught that the Great Commission applied only to the apostles, and not to the church down through the ages, as Boer contends? Dr. Peters answers that question by analyzing the context of this quotation of Luther's<sup>9</sup>:

In this context Luther is differentiating between "public preaching," to which one has a divine call, and the private preaching of the Anabaptists, who without being called and sent succeeded there and there to steal their way into Lutheran homes and parishes. That is why Luther says that only the apostles had a command to enter "strange houses" and to preach. He is emphasizing the sanctity of the call, which assigns to each bishop or pastor certain parish-limits as to his preaching, a call which is not to be encroached upon. The same applies, according to Luther, to any pastor, "however pious or upright," who preaches to or teaches in secret "the people of a papistic or heretical pastor ...without the knowledge or consent of that pastor"<sup>10</sup> and without the call to do so. According to this context Luther is not betraying a lack of mission-mindedness, but is carrying on a controversy against mission endeavors for which there is no command or call."<sup>11</sup>

Dr. Peters adds, "Today ..we also have those itinerant and erring missionaries (e.g., Jehovah's Witnesses), who without a call enter the houses of our parishioners to deceive their minds and to upset whole families by their teaching (cf. Tit. 1:10ff)."<sup>12</sup>

Did Luther believe that the Great Commission applied to every generation of Christians? Absolutely. In his commentary on Psalm 117, Luther applies the Great Commission at the end of Mark's Gospel to the entire New Testament era. He writes: "The gospel and baptism must come to the whole world, as they have indeed come and *every day must come again* [emphasis added]. Thus, he has said (Mark 16:15): 'Go into all the world, and preach the gospel to the whole creation.'"<sup>13</sup> A Luther who believed that the Great Commission had been given only to the apostles certainly would not have written: "We must also go to those to whom Christ has hitherto not been proclaimed. We must teach the people who have not known Christ, so that they, too, may be brought to the spiritual kingdom of Christ."<sup>14</sup>

It is hardly overstating the case to make the claim that Luther was mission-minded.

His mission-mindedness is seen in his attitude toward the people of his day who did not know the gospel, in particular the Turks and the Jews. At the time the Turks were a feared enemy, but Luther also saw them as mission prospects. In one of his writings, Luther counseled that if a person happened to be captured by the Turks, he should "be careful to maintain good works." By doing this, he said, "you may convert many." "We love the Jewish people," he wrote. He sought, though unsuccessfully, to bring about their conversion. He

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Paul Peters, "Luther's Practical Mission-Mindedness" (*Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, 66:2 [April 1969], p. 116).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. LW 13: 64f.

<sup>10</sup> LW 13: 65.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Peters, *op. cit.*, pp. 117-118.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>13</sup> LW 14: 13.

<sup>14</sup> Ewald Plass, *op. cit.*, p. 960.

was convinced that “many Jews would be converted if they but heard our sermons and the exposition of the Old Testament.”<sup>15</sup>

Luther’s mission-mindedness was evident not only in word. It also manifested itself in his actions. He translated the entire Scriptures from their original languages to the German language, a translation that formed the basis for the Danish, Swedish, Icelandic, and other versions.<sup>16</sup> He did not have to do this for his own benefit, since he could read the Bible in its original Hebrew and Greek, or the Latin translation of the Bible. He did it so that other people, too, could hear the good news of justification.

There were Luther’s hymns. They not only served the purpose of edifying God’s people, but of evangelizing those who had not yet come to know the message of salvation. Peters writes that “Roman Catholics regarded them [Luther’s hymns] as the most instrumental means in the spread of the Reformation.”<sup>17</sup> Luther’s *Large and Small Catechisms* also were intended to serve as tools for missions. Luther, in fact, defines “catechism” as “the instruction in which the heathen who want to be Christians are taught and guided in what they should believe, know, do, and leave undone, according to the Christian faith.”<sup>18</sup> Today, some 475 years after the Reformation, the primary instructional tool used by Lutheran missionaries continues to be the catechisms of Luther. Evangelist/pastor Kaki Devabhushanam of Nayadupeta, India, with whom the Committee for Mission Expansion of the Board for World Missions has been working for several years, uses both catechisms in his instruction of Hindus, the *Small* to prepare them for baptism, the *Large* to get them ready for reception of the Lord’s Supper.

Luther’s teaching at the University of Wittenberg also served the purpose of mission work. Students came from all over Europe to study under Luther and Melanchthon. When they returned to their homes, they brought along with them the restored gospel of salvation.<sup>19</sup>

Luther himself was mission-minded in what he said, in what he did. Yet Luther’s greatest contribution to mission work does not lie in the mission work he did directly, but rather in the work he did as reformer of the church. In what follows it is my intention to bring out that if there are any Christians who have reason to be leaders in outreach with the gospel, it is those who have and hold to the teachings of Luther as drawn from the Scriptures and summarized in the Lutheran Confessions. F. Bente, author of the historical introduction to the Concordia Triglotta, which contains the confessional writings (“symbols”) of the Lutheran Church, writes:

Not the great number of her adherents, not her organization, not her charitable and other institutions, not her beautiful customs and liturgical forms, etc., but the precious truths confessed by her Symbols in perfect agreement with the Holy Scriptures constitute the true beauty and rich treasures of our Church as well as the never-failing source of her vitality and power.<sup>20</sup>

As Lutheran Christians we do have a beautiful and rich treasure to share with the world. Francis Pieper properly asserts that “the Lutheran Church in its original, unchangeable form of doctrine should therefore not act timidly among men, as though it had to apologize for still existing, but it should by God’s grace step before the Church and the world with that confidence which the knowledge of the divine truth flowing from the continuance in the Word of the Apostles and Prophets inspires.”<sup>21</sup> What we believe provides a solid foundation and a compelling motive for speaking.

<sup>15</sup> cf. Paul Peters, *op. cit.*, pp. 120-122.

<sup>16</sup> Paul Peters, *op. cit.*, pp. 119.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> LW 53: 64.

<sup>19</sup> For a survey of the spread of “Luther’s doctrine” by Lutheran missionaries from the time of Luther to the present, cf. the series of articles by Paul Peters on “Fruits of Luther’s Practical Mission-Mindedness” (*Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, 67:1 [Jan 1970], p. 41ff; 67:4 [Oct 1970], p. 253ff; 68:1 [Jan 1971], p. 31ff; 68:4 [Oct 1971], p. 237ff).

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in *Popular Symbolics*, Th. Engelder, W. Arndt, Th. Graebner, F.E. Mayer (St. Louis: Concordia, 1934), pp. 24-25.

<sup>21</sup> Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 1 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1950), p. 184.

**Luther's Bible-based, Christ-centered Doctrine**  
**-- sola scriptura, sola gratia, and sola fide --**  
**And Its Significance for Mission Work**

Time-constraints keep us from looking at every doctrine the Lord restored to his Church through Luther. We will look at the ones which have the greatest bearing upon mission work. We will do this using the three, solas of the Reformation as our outline: *sola Scriptura, sola gratia, sola fide*.<sup>22</sup>

**Sola Scriptura**

Already in 1519, in his preface to his lectures on Galatians, Luther insisted on the priority of the Scriptures to any human writing or decree, be that by the pope himself. He writes:

In our age we have seen that some councils are repudiated and others again are confirmed, that theology is dealt with by mere opinions, that the meaning of the laws depends on one man's arbitrary decision, and that everything is thrown into such confusion that almost nothing certain is left for us.... Necessity compels us to flee for refuge to the most solid rock of Divine Scripture and not to believe rashly any, whoever they may be, who speak, decide, or act contrary to its authority.<sup>23</sup>

Luther even goes so far as to say regarding his own writings, "I may say with a clear conscience that I desire nothing more than the destruction of all my books. I have been obliged to publish them merely to warn people against ...errors and to lead them into the Bible so that they obtain an understanding of it, and then let my books disappear."<sup>24</sup>

The importance of Luther's emphasis on sola Scriptura can hardly be over-stated; for it is in the Scriptures that people are introduced to "the only true God and Jesus Christ, whom you [God] have sent" (John 17:3). To know the only true God and Jesus Christ, that, says Jesus, is "eternal life" (John 17:3).

This underscores the importance of the Scriptures for mission work. Only the Scriptures reveal the true God who saves the sinner. Essentially, then, our task is to bring the message of the Scriptures to the sinner in need of salvation.

There are a number of reasons why one can do this with absolute confidence.

**The Scriptures are the inspired, inerrant Word of God**

"All Scripture is God-breathed" (2 Timothy 3:15), writes Paul. God himself breathed into the writers the very words he wanted them to write. Since the Scriptures were written under inspiration of the Holy Spirit, it should come as no surprise that Jesus himself speaks of their inerrancy. "The Scripture cannot be broken," he declares (John 10:35).

While the Lutheran Confessions do not have a separate article on the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture (that was not a matter under debate at the time), it is clear that they do assume Scriptures' inspiration and inerrancy. The Confessions use phrases such as "the Holy Spirit through the mouth of the holy apostle"<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> What follows is, in abbreviated and somewhat modified form, a portion of a forthcoming book by the author on the theology and practice of evangelism.

<sup>23</sup> LW 27:156.

<sup>24</sup> As quoted by Plass, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 89.

<sup>25</sup> Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article X, 15.

and “the clear Scripture of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>26</sup> The Formula of Concord asserts: “God’s word is not false nor does it lie.”<sup>27</sup> In his Large Catechism Luther says, “God’s word cannot err.”<sup>28</sup>

The implication for mission work is clear. In using the message of the Scriptures to speak to people we can have complete confidence in our message. What we tell people about sin and grace is the truth. God, whose Word it is, cannot lie.

Because our message is that of the inspired, inerrant Word, we do not have to say, “I think,” or “It could be.” With St. Paul, we, too, can say, “I know” (2 Timothy 1:12). The Scriptures have been written “so that you may know that you have eternal life” (1 John 5:13).

### **The Scriptures are sufficient**

This does not mean they tell us everything we may want to know; but they do reveal everything we need to know. What we need most is found in the statement with which John summarized his Gospel: “These [things] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31).

Recall the parable of the Rich Man and Poor Lazarus. The Rich Man in hell begged Abraham to permit Lazarus to return from the dead and warn the Rich Man’s brothers of the eternal consequences of unbelief. “They have Moses and the Prophets,” Abraham replied. “Let them listen to them.” The Rich Man was not convinced that would work. It would take something more. He says, “If someone from the dead returns to them, they will repent.” In no uncertain terms Abraham responded: “If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead” (cf. Luke 16:29-31).

The Word is sufficient. This, too, has implications for mission work. People need nothing more than the message of the Word, sin and grace, law and gospel. Our tool is not the Word plus something else; it is the Word alone.

### **The Scriptures are powerful**

Not only do the Scriptures authoritatively and sufficiently reveal everything necessary for salvation; they also have within them the power to lead a person to accept what they authoritatively and sufficiently teach.

“The word of God is living and active,” the writer of Hebrews says (4:12). Peter tells us, “You have been born again ...through the living and enduring word of God” (1 Peter 1:23). “The gospel ...is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes,” writes Paul to the Romans (1:16). “Our gospel came to you,” Paul reminds the Thessalonians, “not simply with words; but also with power, with the Holy Spirit” (1 Thessalonians 1:5).

Again, the implications for mission work are significant. The Christian needs only to get the Word out, to unleash its power. Knowing this helps to overcome timidity and feelings of inadequacy. The Word will produce its own results. The Word is the seed sown in the soil which springs up and sprouts of its own accord (Mark 4:26-29). It is the net cast into the sea by fishers of men (Luke 5:11). We are seed-sowers. We are net-casters. God makes the seed grow. God fills the net.

We are witnesses telling the truth about what we have seen and heard (Acts 1:8; 4:20). We are not lawyers who have to convince a jury. God does that. Christ’s witnesses have a simple commission: Unleash the powerful Word of truth.

### **The Scriptures are clear**

<sup>26</sup> Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Preface, 9.

<sup>27</sup> Epitome, Article VII, 13.

<sup>28</sup> Large Catechism, Baptism, 57.

The psalmist says to the Lord, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path” (Psalm 119:105). The purpose of a lamp and a light is to illuminate, to show the way. So, says the psalmist, God’s Word is like a lamp and a light. It clearly shows the way to salvation. It is so clear that even a child can understand what it is saying, as the psalmist declares: “The entrance of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple” (Psalm 119:130). Writing to Timothy, Paul reminds him, “From infancy you have known the holy Scriptures” (2 Timothy 3:15).

God’s purpose in giving the Scriptures was not to obscure whatever pertains to the world’s salvation, but to reveal these truths. That is why he chose to address us in human language rather than in the kind of “inexpressible words” which St. Paul heard when he “was caught up to Paradise” (2 Corinthians 12:4). Since we cannot rise to God’s level, in love he chose to descend to ours and to speak to us in words we can understand.

While it is true that there are “some things that are hard to understand” in the Scriptures, as the Apostle Peter says in his second epistle (2 Peter 3:16), this does not deny the clarity of the Scriptures but simply points to our human weakness to grasp all that God has clearly revealed to us. “Everything that was written in the past,” writes Paul to the Romans, “was written to teach us” (Romans 15:4). That which is not clear cannot teach; that which is clear can teach. And that is why God has given us the Scripture and made sure that, objectively, externally, its message is clear: so that through it he might teach us, especially the way of salvation (cf. 2 Timothy 3:15).

There are implications for mission work here also. The clear message of the Scriptures, which God has used to teach us through parents, pastors, and teachers, is the same tool he puts into the mouth of those who have learned and believed its message. We do not go out armed with a complex, convoluted philosophical system which no one, not even we ourselves, really understands. We do not represent some vague, indefinable “new age” system of religious thought. The message of the Christian witness is very simple, very clear. It can even be summed up in a sentence, e.g.,

- + The wages, of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 6:23); or
- + God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16); or
- + God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21).

The familiar children’s song puts it this way: “Jesus loves me, this I know; for the Bible tells me so.” There is hardly a simpler, clearer, more straightforward declarative sentence than that. Even a child can grasp it.

Sola Scriptura is one of the three solas of the church of the Reformation. The Holy Scriptures, inspired, inerrant, sufficient, powerful, clear, are the tool God has put into the hand of his Church. Mission work, in fact, stripped to its bare essentials, is not very complex at all. One needs just three things: the gospel, someone to communicate the gospel, and someone to whom to communicate it. When a Christian brings to a non-Christian the good news of what God has done to rescue the world from condemnation, that’s mission work.

### **Doctrine of inspiration and mission work**

Before moving on, we should explore one further issue. What place does the doctrine of inspiration have in the message we bring to those who do not yet know Christ? The Bible as the inspired, inerrant Word of God is the sure source of our message. It is the power behind our message. It is not the message itself, however.

Our purpose is not to convince a person that the Bible is the inspired, inerrant Word of God. Our purpose is to tell the good news that the inspired Scriptures reveal. When the Holy Spirit through the our message of sin and grace, law and gospel, brings a person to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, one of the results of this faith will be an acceptance of the Bible as the inspired, inerrant Word of God.

Inspiration can never be proved to an unbeliever. It is an article of faith. Faith in the atoning blood of Christ, produced by the Spirit through the proclamation of law and gospel, is the starting point. That will in turn lead one to accept in faith the inspiration of the book from which came the message that saved him. Spurgeon's counsel to a young pastor who inquired how best to defend the Bible is good advice yet today: "How would you defend a lion? Let it loose. It will defend itself."

Francis Pieper summarizes well what we have been discussing here:

Our missionaries in heathen countries, our home missionaries, and our institutional workers do not therefore begin with rational arguments for the divinity of Holy Scripture, but they preach to one and all repentance and remission of sins. And when faith in *Christum crucifixum* [Christ crucified] has once been created, there is no need to worry about securing faith in the divinity of Holy Scripture.<sup>29</sup>

The same holds true, by the way, on a congregational level. A congregation which hopes to gain a hearing with unbelievers through an advertising strategy that centers on its adherence to inspiration and inerrancy will find few takers. Such a strategy may appeal to some conservative Christians who are disenchanted with what is happening in their congregation or church body; but it is not likely to attract non-Christians. It is more likely, in fact, to keep them at arm's length and thus make it more difficult for the congregation to bring them the message of sin and grace.

The Holy Scriptures—inspired, inerrant, sufficient, powerful, clear—*Sola Scriptura*, Scripture Alone, that is a major part of the legacy bequeathed to us through the Reformation, and one which has a definite impact on mission work.

### **Sola Gratia**

*Sola gratia*, grace alone, is the second of the three mottoes of the Lutheran Church. Grace is first of all an attitude, a disposition of God. It means, as Luther puts it in his Preface to the Epistle of Paul to the Romans, "God's favor, or the good will which *in himself* [emphasis added] he bears toward us, by which he is disposed to give us Christ and to pour into us the Holy Spirit with his gifts."<sup>30</sup>

"Grace," Luther writes, "means that God is merciful to us, that he deals graciously with us for the sake of Christ our Lord, forgives us all our sins, and that he does not impute them to us or punish us with eternal death. Grace is the forgiveness of sin for Christ's sake, the covering of all sin. That is grace."<sup>31</sup>

St. Paul put the message of God's grace in Christ this way: "There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:22-24).

### **"All have sinned"**

Adam's sin affected all people. "Through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners ....The result of one trespass was condemnation for all men" (Romans 5:19,18). "In Adam all die" (1 Corinthians 15:22).

Loss of the image of God, death in all three of its dimensions—that is the birthright of everyone descended from Adam and Eve. "Flesh gives birth to flesh" (John 3:6). Sinners beget sinners. A stream does not rise higher than its source. All people share Adam's nature. All share Adam's guilt. All share Adam's condemnation.

---

<sup>29</sup> Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 1, p. 313.

<sup>30</sup> LW 35: 369.

<sup>31</sup> LW 22: 139.



The Scriptures describe the descendants of Adam and Eve as dead. Paul reminds the believers in Ephesus and us as well: “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins” (Ephesians 2:1).

Adam and Eve’s descendants are characterized as enemies of God: “The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature [which is 100% true of every unbeliever] cannot please God” (Romans 8:7-8). Not only are they opposed to God, but they are unable to change their disposition toward him. The “things that come from the Spirit of God,” that is, all the things God reveals in his Word, “are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them” (1 Corinthians 2:14).

This, then, is the nature of those descended from Adam: They are blind to things spiritual; they are enemies of God and everything that stands for God; they are dead spiritually; they call God’s message foolishness; they are helpless and unwilling to change their condition.

This condition, this spiritual disease, usually called original, or inherited, sin, is referred to frequently in the Lutheran Confessions. The Augsburg Confession, for example, puts it this way:

Since the fall of Adam all men who are born according to the course of nature are conceived-and born in sin. That is; all men are full of evil lust and inclinations from their mothers’ wombs and are unable by nature to have true fear of God and true faith in God. Moreover, this inborn sickness and hereditary sin is truly sin and condemns to the eternal wrath of God all those who are not born again through Baptism and the Holy Spirit.<sup>32</sup>

The Formula of Concord states: “Original sin is not a slight corruption of human nature, but ...is so deep a corruption that nothing sound or uncorrupted has survived in man’s body or soul, in his inward or outward powers.”<sup>33</sup> St. Paul summarizes mankind’s sorry condition in very simple fashion: “I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature” (Romans 7:18).

Original sin manifests itself in thoughts, speech, and actions that reveal the depravity of those descended from Adam (actual sin). Jesus speaks of the kinds of thoughts and words and actions that flow out of the heart of those who inherited Adam’s sin: “Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander” (Matthew 15:19). Writing to the Romans, Paul describes all unregenerated people, Jew and Gentile alike. He does not paint a pretty picture: “There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.” “Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit.” “The poison of vipers is on their lips.” “Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.” “Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways; and the way of peace they do not know.” “There is no fear of God before their eyes” (Romans 3:10-18).

The Bible’s teaching about the fall and its consequences has some major implications for mission work. For one thing, knowledge of this doctrine should help us to understand the spiritual mindset of the unbeliever. One should not expect proper spiritual responses from a person who does not have the Spirit. The picture the Scripture paints prepares us to expect just the opposite.

What this means in a practical way can perhaps best be brought out through a few illustrations. A congregation is trying to decide whether to conduct a vacation Bible school and, if so, what its emphasis should be. Someone suggests, “I think we should use it, at least in part, as an outreach tool. There are many unchurched families in the vicinity of the church who may be willing to send their children to a vacation Bible school.”

Another member of the committee responds, “I don’t think we should do that. All these people want is some free babysitting for a week or two.” That could well be, though probably they are looking for more than that. Common sense (prompted by the natural knowledge of God) and the general opinion of society is that it is good for children to receive moral training of some sort. A week at vacation Bible school might help.

---

<sup>32</sup> Augsburg Confession, Article II, 1-2.

<sup>33</sup> Formula of Concord, Epitome, Article I, 8.

Even such a motive, however, falls far short of proper spiritual motivation. But -- and this is the point we should not ignore -- what kind of motivation can one expect from an unbeliever? Unbelievers cannot possibly send their children to vacation Bible school or Sunday school or even attend a church service themselves for proper spiritual reasons. They are blind, dead, enemies of God. They call God's message foolishness. What will motivate them is self-interest of some sort. One needs to realize -- and accept -- this fact. You will look in vain for living fruit on dead trees.

The same would apply if an unbelieving family wants to enroll their children in the congregation's Lutheran elementary school. Someone might object: "All they want to do is get out of the public school. They're just looking for better discipline, for more personal attention on the part of the teacher. They're not coming for 'the one thing needful'" (Luke 10:42). That, of course, is correct. What unbeliever would, or could, be longing to give his children "the one thing needful"?

The point is that we should not be determining whether or not to conduct an outreach-oriented vacation Bible school or to open the doors of the Lutheran elementary school to the unchurched on the basis of their desire to make use of such services for the right reasons. That will never happen.

Both of the examples cited above, however, may well be avenues through which the Lord can touch families with his life-giving, life-changing Word. The following scenario was repeated often during my years in the parish ministry: Parents enrolled their children in the Lutheran elementary school and then attended the Bible information class. By the end of the class they told me, "We had one reason for wanting our children to be in your school to begin with. Now we have an entirely different, and far more important, reason." With a Spirit-generated faith in their hearts, they now desired for their children what God desired for them.

The doctrine of the fall and its consequences has a second major implication for mission work: It tells us what we will encounter when we seek to evangelize the unbeliever.

There are some who maintain with Donald McGavran that "the greatest obstacles to conversion are social not theological,"<sup>34</sup> that "in most cases of arrested growth of the church, men are deterred not so much by the offence of the cross as non-biblical offenses."<sup>35</sup>

As an example of non-biblical offence, McGavran cites forcing people to cross linguistic, class, or racial barriers in order to hear the gospel. He speculates that in the early Christian Church the Jews, who "liked to become Christian without crossing racial barriers," stopped becoming Christians once Gentiles predominated and they had to join a "house church full of Gentiles"; so they "turned sorrowfully away." He further surmises that "in the initial turnings to the Christian faith in northern Europe, the principle that men like to become Christian without crossing barriers kept whole countries out of eternal life for centuries."<sup>36</sup>

The solution, McGavran claims, is to work among homogeneous units -- Anglo to Anglo, Hispanic to Hispanic, Black to Black, Asian to Asian -- because "men like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers."<sup>37</sup>

While there is undoubtedly some value in evangelizing people of one's own culture, the truth of the matter is that no unbeliever, whether of one's own or another culture, likes to become a Christian. Mission work is not just a simple matter of removing a few external social barriers that are holding a person back from the Christian faith he would otherwise gladly embrace.

We need to remember who the unbeliever is. He is born in sin. He is living in sin. He is actively opposed to God. Evangelizing the unbeliever means getting involved in a battle of cosmic proportions. Writing to the Christians in Ephesus, Paul urges them to arm themselves spiritually against Satan. He says, "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:12). Those evil forces which rage against the Christian totally control the non-Christian. Every unbeliever is a part of Satan's "dominion of darkness" (Colossians 1:13).

<sup>34</sup> Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 215.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 230.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 230-232.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 223.

That is the battleground which we enter when we seek to evangelize the unbeliever. We are not going to be dealing with one who is morally neutral. We will look in vain for some little spark of goodness to fan into a glowing flame of faith. It is not reform that is needed, but rebirth.

To be forewarned is to be forearmed. If we underestimate the magnitude of the battle, we will not be properly equipped for it. We are entering the devil's stronghold. We need to be armed, then, with something, or Someone, stronger than Satan.

That is exactly what God promised to our first parents in the Garden when, speaking to Satan, the instigator of the Fall, he said, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel" (Genesis 3:15). An Offspring of the woman would enter the world and crush the serpent's head.

That gracious promise of the Lord in the Garden, the gospel, the good news of rescue from the power of sin and Satan and death, fulfilled at Calvary, is what gave hope to Adam and Eve. It is likewise the weapon we need to bring into the battle for people's souls. Rescuing people from Satan's clutches and restoring them to their place in God's family—that is God's business. We are his agents, using his means—the message of sin and grace—to convict people of sin and to bring about repentance, faith, and a new life.

### **“The redemption that came by Christ Jesus”**

We return to Romans 3:22-24:

There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

We have reminded ourselves of sin and its consequences. Now we want to explore another key concept in the passage, that of redemption: "justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." The word translated "redemption" comes from a Greek verb which has the idea of "to let one go free on receiving the price." The noun (Greek: *apolutrosis*) means "a releasing effected by payment of ransom."

The Scriptures do not leave us in doubt as to what the release consisted of. They tell us that in Christ "we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Colossians 1:14). The releasing effected by the payment of a ransom is the releasing, the being set free, from sin.

Nor do the Scriptures force us to speculate as to what the ransom price was: "In him [Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace" (Ephesians 1:7). Using a different form of the same verb, Peter points us to the same ransom price: "You were redeemed ...with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect" (1 Peter 1:18-19).

The picture is clearly one of substitution. This is accentuated in Paul's first letter to Timothy: "There is one God and one mediator between God. and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men" (1 Timothy 2:6).

This action on the part of Christ in which he willingly went to the cross as the sinners' Substitute is often termed his *passive obedience*. It is what he permitted himself to endure to pay the just penalty for sin on behalf of the human race. By allowing the full thunder and lightning of God's wrath against sin to strike him he served as the Vicar, or Substitute, for all of humanity.

Luther never tires of speaking of the substitutionary, or vicarious, character of the redemptive work of Christ. In his commentary on Galatians, for example, he writes in his exposition of chapter 3, verse 13:

[Paul] does not say that Christ became a curse on his own account, but that he became a curse "for us." Thus the whole emphasis is on the phrase "for us." For Christ is innocent so far as his own person is concerned; therefore he should not have been hanged from the tree. But because, according to the Law, every thief should have been hanged, therefore, according to the Law of Moses, Christ himself should have been hanged; for he bore the person of a sinner and a

thief—and not of one but of all sinners and thieves. For we are sinners and thieves, and therefore we are worthy of death and eternal damnation. But Christ took all our sins upon himself, and for them he died on the cross. Therefore it was appropriate for him to become a thief and, as Isaiah says (53:12), to be “numbered among the thieves.”

And all the prophets saw this, that Christ was to become the greatest thief, murderer, adulterer, robber, desecrator, blasphemer, etc., there has ever been anywhere in the world. He is a sinner, who has and bears the sin of Paul, the former blasphemer, persecutor, and assaulter; of Peter, who denied Christ; of David, who was an adulterer and a murderer ...In short, he has and bears all the sins of all men in his body -- not in the sense that he has committed them but in the sense that he took these sins, committed by us, upon his own body, in order to make satisfaction for them with his own blood.<sup>38</sup>

That is one side of the vicarious, substitutionary work of Christ. The other side is what dogmatists call his *active obedience*. That, too, is spoken of by St. Paul in his letter to the Galatians:

When the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons (Galatians 4:4-5).

He was “born under law” that he might obey the law in our place, and that his obedience might be credited to our account in God’s divine ledger. Paul brings this out clearly in his letter to the congregation at Rome: “Just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous” (Romans 5:19).

Christ’s obedience on behalf of all people is also, as Pieper states, “an integral part of the payment which Christ, as our Substitute, made to the just God for the reconciliation of men.”<sup>39</sup> Luther puts it this way:

He satisfied the Law; he fulfilled the Law perfectly, for he loved God with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his strength, and with all his mind, and he loved his neighbor as himself. Therefore, when the Law comes and accuses you of not having kept it, bid it go to Christ. Say, There is the Man who has kept it; to him I cling; he fulfilled it for me and gave his fulfillment to me. Thus the Law is silenced.<sup>40</sup>

Our Lutheran Confessions, likewise, point to the substitutionary character of the active obedience of Christ:

His obedience consists not only in his suffering and dying, but also in his spontaneous subjection to the law in our stead and his keeping of the law in so perfect a fashion that, reckoning it to us as righteousness, God forgives us our sins, accounts us holy and righteous, and saves us forever on account of this entire obedience which, by doing and suffering, in life and in death, Christ rendered *for us* to his heavenly Father [emphasis added].<sup>41</sup>

In that way—through his active and passive obedience in the place of all—Christ, as the Substitute for all, redeemed all. He paid the price to fully satisfy the justice of the holy God on behalf of all.

It is sad to see how this doctrine has been mutilated, even by some Lutherans. In a book that likely is in use in many of the seminaries of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) today,<sup>42</sup> Gerhard Forde,

<sup>38</sup> LW 26: 277.

<sup>39</sup> Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 2, p. 374.

<sup>40</sup> Erlangen Edition, XV, 61, 63, quoted in Pieper’s *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 2, p. 375.

<sup>41</sup> Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article III, 15.

<sup>42</sup> Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, ed., *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

professor of systematic theology at Luther Northwest Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota, writes regarding the doctrine of the vicarious atonement:

This view would hold that Jesus' death is a sacrifice in which he is a substitute for us who pays the divine justice what is due for human sin and/or appeases the divine wrath ....There seems to be a virtual consensus among contemporary biblical scholars, however, that this tradition finds little support in the Scriptures, either in the Old or New Testament ....At the most it could claim to be only one of the ways the early Christians sought to come to terms with Jesus' death ....Paul does not seem to speak so much of Jesus' death as a sacrifice for sin or a ransom. Nor does he dwell on the concept of guilt and forgiveness coming from the cross ....Rather for him the cross is total crisis, the end of the old, the breaking of the demonic powers and the opening of something new, the life of love and freedom ....It has to do with the future, the new age.<sup>43</sup>

What, then, is Christ's work? How shall it be described? Forde asserts that a careful study of Luther will give this picture of the atonement:

Atonement occurs when God gives himself in such fashion as to create a people pleasing to God, a people no longer under law or wrath, a people who love and trust God. When God succeeds in that, God is "satisfied" .... [God's] wrath cannot be placated in the abstract by heavenly transactions between Jesus and God [i.e., through Jesus' perfect obedience and sacrificial death. as the sinner's Substitute]. Nothing is accomplished for us by that. God's wrath is placated only when God's self-giving makes us his own, when God succeeds in creating faith, love, and hope.<sup>44</sup>

That this is not the way the Scriptures or Luther or the Lutheran Confessions speak hardly needs to be said. Luther writes, as quoted above: "He [Christ] has and bears all the sins of all men ....He took these sins, committed by us, upon his own body, in order to make satisfaction for them with his own blood."<sup>45</sup> God is satisfied, his wrath is appeased, when the death penalty for sin has been paid. To maintain, as Forde does, that "God's wrath is placated only when God's self-giving makes us his own, when God succeeds in creating faith, love, and hope," is a repudiation of the objective character of the work of Christ. It is a denial that his work was valid and efficacious in and of itself apart from our response. It is to say that Christ had no right to cry out from Calvary, "It is finished."

Quite obviously, the scriptural doctrine of the vicarious atonement has deep implications for mission work. To be properly doing the work of outreach with the gospel we must be telling what Christ has done. To speak of Christ without telling about his work of vicarious atonement—his obedience, his cross is not the gospel. The gospel has content, and not just any content. The gospel is not "God succeeding in creating faith, love, and hope," as Forde seems to imply. Nor is the gospel the bare message, "Whoever believes on the Son will have everlasting life."<sup>46</sup> This is defining the gospel in terms of people's response to it rather than in terms of what it is. Nor is the gospel a message such as: "Jesus can make you feel good. Jesus can give you peace. Jesus can give you happiness." Peace and happiness, an inner joy which outer circumstances cannot destroy, are the fruit of the gospel, but not the gospel itself.

The gospel is the good news of a Substitute, God and man in one indivisible person, who took the place of the human race under the law and then hung in place of the human race on the cross. The gospel is our Substitute's cry of triumph from the cross, "It is finished! Complete! Paid in full!" It is the good news that no

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., pp. 15, 16, 17, 18.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., pp. 50-51.

<sup>45</sup> LW 26: 277.

<sup>46</sup> As maintained by Donald A. McGavran and Win Arn in *Ten Steps for Church Growth* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1977), p. 28.

matter how far we have strayed from the path, no matter how far short we have fallen of God's standard of perfection, through Christ the way back to God has been thrown wide open. His life, his death count for us—and for all. The world has been redeemed.

### “Justified freely by his grace”

Mission work revolves around the Reformation-restored message of sin and grace. All have sinned. All have been redeemed. There is yet one more element, the heart and center of the gospel: the message of justification.

We look again to the words of Paul in Romans 3:

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are *justified freely by his grace* through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus (Romans 3:23-24).

“Justified” is a translation of a Greek word (*dikaioo*) which means “to declare righteous.” A legal, forensic term, justification is the act of a judge pronouncing a “not guilty” verdict upon a defendant. It is sin which makes people guilty in God's eyes. Justification, therefore, can be equated with the removal, the forgiveness, of sin. That is what Paul did in the synagogue of Antioch in Pisidia, where he spoke of forgiveness and justification in almost the same breath:

Through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses, (Acts 13:38-39).

Justification is God declaring, “Your sins are forgiven; therefore you are no longer guilty, but righteous, in my eyes.”

We note three aspects of the Bible's teaching about justification, each of which has considerable implications for evangelism.

First, the Scriptures make it clear that justification is *sola gratia*, by grace alone. The sinner's justification in the eyes of God is in no way a cooperative effort. Paul says that we are justified “freely.” The original Greek word (*dorean*) means “as a gift, without payment, gratis.”

This does not mean that no payment was made. This same verse brings out, in fact, that payment was made, but by another. It was “through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.” God himself took the initiative. In Christ he did everything that had to be done so that he could call the sinner “not guilty.” The sinner's justification is free, gratis, to him. The sinner is justified “apart from observing the law” (Romans 3:28). But his justification was not cheap. The price was the humbling and sacrifice of the Son of God.

The implication for mission work is clear: There can be no more positive and certain a message one can give to another person than that of a conditionless, no strings attached justification. The sinner's prior or subsequent lifestyle has nothing to do with his or her justification. Even faith is not in any way a cause of the sinner's justification. Faith accepts God's verdict of “not guilty”; it does not bring it about.

Secondly, Scriptures reveal that God's verdict of “not guilty” because of the redemption that came by Christ Jesus extends to all people of all time. Justification is universal. The construction in the original Greek text of the passage cited above (Romans 3:23-24) makes it clear that as many as have sinned and thus fall short of the glory of God are also “justified.” “All” (Greek: *pantes*) have sinned; “all,” therefore, are also justified.

Writing to the Corinthians, St. Paul, while using a different term, makes the same point: “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them” (2 Corinthians 5:19).

In his first letter to Timothy, Paul uses yet another term, but stresses the same truth: “There is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus who gave himself as a ransom for all men” (1 Timothy 2:5-6).

The Apostle John emphasizes the same truth: “He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John.2:2).

In Christ, God has effected a universal justification, a universal reconciliation, a universal ransom, a universal atonement. Different terms, but all communicating the same message: God in Christ has declared the whole world to be not guilty. God in Christ has won forgiveness of sins for the whole world. God in Christ has paid the ransom that has set the entire world free. God in Christ has atoned for the sins of the whole world.

What this means for mission work is not difficult to ascertain. As we go out into our communities and the world with the good news of Jesus’ finished work, we can do so in the confidence that there is not a single individual to whom this message does not apply. We do not have to qualify our testimony with such doubt-inducers as, “Perhaps you are among those whom God has declared ‘not guilty’ through Christ’s redemption”; “Perhaps you are numbered among the ransomed of God”; “Perhaps God has reconciled you to himself in Christ”; “Perhaps Christ’s atoning sacrifice counted for you.” There has been a universal justification.

Thirdly, and closely connected with both of the above, the Scriptures teach what has come to be known as objective justification. God’s verdict of acquittal, his “not guilty” declaration regarding the whole world, is “objective” in this sense: it operates independent of any response on the part of the individual.

The resurrection of Jesus is the sign and seal of the objective character of justification. Paul writes to the Christians at Rome: “He [Christ] was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification” (Romans 4:25).

The Greek word (*dia*) translated as “for” in this verse (“for our sins”; “for our justification”) literally means “on account of, because of.” The first half of the verse states the reason for Christ’s death: Because of the world’s sins, which merit the death penalty, Christ was handed over to death as the Substitute for everyone in the world.

The second half of the verse tells of a primary reason for the resurrection: Christ was raised because of our justification. Paul does not say Christ was raised so we could be justified. He was raised because through his death we have been justified. The resurrection was God’s way of saying, “I have accepted in full my Son’s payment for sin. World, you are no longer guilty in my eyes. Your sins are forgiven.”

In a treatise entitled, *The Keys* Martin Luther pointed to the objective character of the justification won at Calvary and proclaimed through the empty tomb. He wrote:

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 does not nullify the faithfulness of God.” ...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.<sup>47</sup>

The doctrine of objective justification has a direct bearing on mission work. We do not have to say, nor should we say, “God will forgive you, if you shape up, if you repent, if you believe...,” and in that way compel the person to look to himself and his response for the assurance of forgiveness. Our message, rather, is, “God raised Christ from the grave to tell the world, to tell you, that he is fully satisfied with his Son’s work on your behalf. Your sins have been forgiven. Now God promises you: Believe in the Lord Jesus, the one who took your sins on himself and gave you his holiness, and you will be saved.”

The doctrine of universal, objective, sola gratia justification, restored through the Reformation, is the message Christ: has entrusted to his church. It is the gospel. It is the only message that can give the assurance of forgiveness and thus comfort and peace to the troubled conscience. It is the only message that makes one certain

---

<sup>47</sup> LW 40: 366, 367.

of his standing with God now and throughout eternity. It is to be expected, therefore, that Satan would do his utmost to distort and destroy this teaching.

The Calvinist, with his contention that Christ died, not for all, but only for the elect, denies the universality of justification. The Arminian, with his “decision theology,” denies both the objective and the sola gratia character of justification. Justification becomes something that must be completed by one’s decision to become a Christian. The Roman Catholic, with his teaching of “infused grace,” likewise denies both the sola gratia and objective character of justification. Justification becomes a process of becoming righteous rather than God’s decisive declaration of righteousness through Christ. Justification by “infused grace” becomes a cooperative affair, with people assisting in their justification by a life of love through the grace God implants in them.

All such aberrations rob people of the certainty of where they stand with God. The Calvinist can look only to his faith for the assurance that he is one of God’s elect rather than to such beautiful promises as, “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself” (2 Corinthians 5:19). The Arminian also looks to his faith, but as a cause of his salvation (“I accepted Christ; therefore I am saved”). The Roman Catholic looks to his grace-assisted life of love.

But how can one be sure that his faith is genuine, that his love is sincere? If the assurance of my justification is not rooted solely in the external, objective word and promise of God, which cannot change, then it is going to be based on inner, subjective feelings, which can change, even from minute to minute.

Those who hold, with Luther, to the Scripture’s teaching on justification, will look, not within, but up and out to God’s faithful Word. It tells us that 2000 years ago God declared the whole world “not guilty” through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. Justification is an accomplished fact. This is our message, as a very able 20<sup>th</sup> Century follower of Luther, Siegbert Becker, brought out nicely in a short treatise on the work of the Holy Spirit:

It is the will of the Savior that we should go to all men (Matthew 28:20; Mark 16:15) and tell them the good news that their sins are all forgiven. We are not to tell them merely that they “can be” forgiven. We are certainly not to tell them that they “will be” forgiven, provided they on their part will meet certain conditions, such as contrition, or faith or amendment of life. We are simply and plainly to tell them that because of what Christ has done their sins are forgiven.<sup>48</sup>

Some in our day are asking whether such a message is relevant to our times. People today, some maintain, are not plagued by guilt and fear of an angry God as Luther was. People, therefore, will not be interested in a message that centers on forgiveness and a right standing with God.

Whether or not such a contention is true, what do people need more than to hear that which confessional Lutherans see as “the central message of Scripture upon which the very existence of the church depends”?<sup>49</sup> The challenge for contemporary mission work is not to come up with a new message, but to find new and creative ways, if the situation so requires, of approaching people with the old message.

We have what people need. Somehow they have to be brought to the point where they are made aware of that need. They have to feel the crushing weight of the condemning law of God. And then God himself will lift them up when we as his spokespeople pronounce the absolution, “Son, daughter, be of good cheer. Through Jesus Christ your sins are forgiven.” Evangelical Lutherans, who know and treasure the doctrine of sola gratia, universal, objective justification can hardly keep quiet about it.

## **Sola Fide**

### **Justified by faith**

---

<sup>48</sup> Siegbert W. Becker, *The Holy Ghost and His Work* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1977), p. 30.

<sup>49</sup> *This We Believe: A Statement of Belief of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1980), p. 11.



We have quoted several times Paul's words in Romans 3:23-24, which emphasize the *sola gratia*, universal; objective character of justification: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." Objectively, apart from any response on the part of man, God has justified, declared "not guilty," the whole world.

Just a few verses later St. Paul adds another element that must also be considered when talking about justification: faith. He writes: "We maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law" (Romans 3:28).

Though in an objective sense God has declared every single person in the world to be not guilty through Christ's redemptive work, that verdict does not become one's personal possession apart from faith. The Lutheran Confessions speak frequently about justification by faith. Article IV of the Augsburg Confession reads:

Also they [our churches] teach that men cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works, but are freely justified for Christ's sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor, and that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake, who, by his death, has made satisfaction for our sins. This faith God imputes for righteousness in his sight. Romans 3 and 4.

The Formula of Concord, quoting the Apology to the Augsburg Confession and Luther, emphatically states:

This article of justification by faith is "the chief article of the entire Christian doctrine," "without which no poor conscience can have any abiding comfort or rightly understand the riches of the grace of Christ." In the same vein Dr. Luther declared: "Where this single article remains pure, Christendom will remain pure, in beautiful harmony, and without any schisms. But where it does not remain pure, it is impossible to repel any error or heretical spirit."<sup>50</sup>

Justification by God's grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus, received by faith, this is the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*, the article by which the church stands and falls.

It is important for us to understand what faith is. Perhaps the simplest definition is that faith is the hand that receives the benefits of the finished work of Christ. It is the hand into which God places the forgiveness of sins and justification won by Christ.

Faith is not the cause of justification. To say, "A person is declared righteous in the sight of God ...because of having believed,"<sup>51</sup> is to fail to distinguish properly the relationship between faith and justification. Faith is not in any way that which brings about the sinner's justification. The cause of justification is the perfect life and sacrificial death of Christ. Faith is simply the way by which the individual sinner apprehends the salvation won by Christ.

The Confessions put it this way:

Faith's sole office and property is to serve as the only and exclusive means and instrument with and through which we receive, grasp, accept, apply to ourselves, and appropriate the grace and merit of Christ in the promise of the Gospel.<sup>52</sup>

In a certain sense we can speak of faith as an activity. To "receive," "grasp," "accept," etc., involves the intellect and will of a person. The Scriptures, however, make it clear that faith is not a self-determined,

<sup>50</sup> Solid Declaration, Article III, 6.

<sup>51</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), p. 1012.

<sup>52</sup> Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article III, 38.

self-willed activity. It is not a work performed by man, as Paul makes clear in the passage cited above: “A man is justified by faith apart from observing the law” (literally, “without the works of the law”). To say to a person, “All you have to do is believe in Jesus,” is to make of faith a work of the law. The Scriptures say, “To the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness” (Romans 4:5).

Faith in Christ is not something a person would or could choose through his own volition. Luther emphasizes this in the first sentence of his explanation to the Third Article of the Apostles Creed: “I believe that I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him.”

The Formula of Concord makes this strong statement on the will of unregenerate mankind:

We believe that in spiritual and divine things the intellect, heart, and will of unregenerated man cannot by any native or natural powers in any way understand, believe, accept, imagine, will, begin, accomplish, do, effect, or cooperate, but that man is entirely and completely dead and corrupted as far as anything good is concerned. Accordingly, we believe that after the Fall and prior to his conversion not a spark of spiritual powers has remained or exists in man by which he could make himself ready for the grace of God or to accept the proffered grace, nor that he has any capacity for grace by and for himself or can apply himself to it or prepare himself for it, or help, do, effect, or cooperate toward his conversion by his own powers, either altogether or half-way or in the tiniest or smallest degree, “of himself as coming from himself,” but is a slave of sin (John 8:34), the captive of the devil who drives him (Eph 2:2; 2 Tim. 2:26). Hence according to its perverse disposition and nature the natural free will is mighty and active only in the direction of that which is displeasing and contrary to God.<sup>53</sup>

Faith is not something man does. Faith, rather, is something God gives. Paul tells the Ephesians: “It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8,9). It is unscriptural, therefore—and pointless—to ask a non-Christian to make a decision to believe in Jesus Christ. An unbeliever will not and cannot do this.

It is also unscriptural to assert that some people are more receptive to the gospel than others and that the task of the evangelist is to seek out such receptive people. No people are by nature “friendly to the idea of becoming Christian,” as Donald McGavran maintains.<sup>54</sup> Such thinking is based on a faulty idea of the nature of man. It assumes the presence of at least a little spark of inherent goodness which the evangelist can fan into flame, with the result that the person is now ready to choose Christ for himself or herself.

The evangelist, Billy Graham, for example, writes:

As you stand at the foot of the cross, the Holy Spirit makes you realize that you are a sinner. He directs your faith to the Christ who died in your place. *You must open your heart and let him come in* [emphasis added] ....There are three things that are involved in faith. First, there must be a knowledge of what God has said ....Secondly, the emotions ...are involved....There is going to be a tug at the heart. Emotion may vary in religious experience. Some people are stoical and others are demonstrative, but the feeling will be there ....Third, and most important of all, is the will. It’s like three little men—one is named “Intellect,” the second is named “Emotion,” and the third is named “Will.” Intellect says that the gospel is logical. Emotion puts pressure upon Will and says, “I feel love for Christ,” or “I feel fear of judgment.” And then the middleman, called Will, is the referee. He sits there with his hand on his chin, in deep thought, trying to make up his mind. It is actually the will that makes the final and lasting decision.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Solid Declaration, Article II, 7.

<sup>54</sup> Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 170.

<sup>55</sup> Billy Graham, *Peace with God* (Westwood, NJ: Fleeting H. Revell, 1968), pp. 137-139.

Jesus, though, says, “You did not choose me, but I chose you” (John 15:16). Decision theology, as Robert Kolb, aptly puts it, is “a theology which proclaims salvation by grace, but then undercuts it by insisting that a human act of will is necessary before divine grace can become operative.”<sup>56</sup> Faith is a gift of God, not of works. It is not a cause of justification, but the hand which receives the justification won by Christ.

To this we need to add one further point: It is by faith alone that one is justified. This is the third of the three Reformation mottoes: *Sola fide*, faith alone.

Luther drew some sharp criticism when he translated Romans 3:28, “A man is justified by faith alone.” In his “On Translating: An Open Letter” Luther answered his critics. Though he was well aware that the word “alone” (Latin: *solum*) did not appear in the Greek text of Romans 3:28, he defended its inclusion in his translation on two grounds. First, it was linguistically proper to do so. He writes:

I knew very well that the word *solum* is not in the Greek or Latin text; the papists did not have to teach me that ...I wanted to speak German, not Latin or Greek, since it was German I had undertaken to speak in the translation. But it is the nature of our German language that in speaking of two things, one of which is affirmed and the other denied, we use the word *solum* (*allein*) along with the word *nicht* [not] or *kein* [no].<sup>57</sup>

We do the same thing in English. To say, “A man is justified by faith alone, apart from observing the law,” is simply emphasizing positively in the first half of the verse what the second half is saying negatively: faith alone, not works.

Luther, however, had a deeper reason for translating “faith alone.” He writes:

The text itself and the meaning of St. Paul urgently require and demand it. For in that very passage he is dealing with the main point of Christian doctrine, namely, that we are justified by faith in Christ without any works of the law ...If a man is going to read St. Paul and understand him, he will have to say the same thing; he can say nothing else. Paul’s words are too strong; they admit of no works, none at all. Now if it is not a work, then it must be faith alone .... The matter itself in its very core, then, demands that we say, “Faith alone justifies” ....And the danger of the people also compels it, so that they may not continue to hang upon works and wander away from faith and lose Christ ....For these reasons it is not only right but also highly necessary to speak it out, as plainly and fully as possible, “Faith alone saves, without works.”<sup>58</sup>

In short, to translate, as Luther did, “A man is justified by faith alone,” is to say nothing more and nothing less than the Scriptures say.

To be justified by faith alone means that nothing which precedes faith and nothing which follows after faith is a part of a person’s justification. Contrition, or sorrow over sin, will precede faith and a new life of love will follow after faith. But faith is not contrition and faith is not love.

The Lutheran Confessions speak directly to this matter. On the one hand they declare that contrition is necessary: “There cannot be genuine saving faith in those who live without contrition and sorrow and have a wicked intention to remain and abide in sin.”<sup>59</sup> They speak in a similar way of the new life of love that will follow faith: “Love is a fruit which certainly and necessarily follows true faith. For if a person does not love, this indicates certainly that he is not justified but is still in death, or that he has again lost the righteousness of faith.”<sup>60</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Robert Kolb, *Speaking the Gospel Today: A Theology for Evangelism* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1984), p. 171.

<sup>57</sup> LW 35: 188-189.

<sup>58</sup> LW 35: 195, 197, 198.

<sup>59</sup> Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article III, 26.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

On the other hand the Confessions maintain: “When Paul says, ‘We are justified by faith apart from works,’ he indicates thereby that neither the preceding contrition, nor the subsequent works belong in the article or matter of justification by faith.”<sup>61</sup>

If contrition were a part of justifying faith, a person could never be sure of where he or she stood with God. One would constantly be wondering, as Luther did in his early years, “Am I sorry enough for my sins? Have I done enough fasting and praying, have I practiced sufficient self-denial to show that I am truly contrite?”

C. F. W. Walther, a later champion of justification by faith alone, went through such a period of spiritual turmoil in his student days. He was deeply affected by the devotional writings of some of the Pietists who insisted that certainty of forgiveness could be gained only by a high degree of remorse and putting down of the flesh. Through excessive fasting and other forms of self-denial Walther harmed his physical health, requiring him to drop out of school for a time. And he fell into deep spiritual depression. He was lifted up out of this depression only when he was offered “counsel and comfort from the Word of God which put aside all his useless struggling to become repentant enough to merit grace and directed him to accept forgiveness and salvation as a complete gift of God.”<sup>62</sup>

There are implications here for mission work. We dare not require a certain level of contrition before we speak the word of absolution. One is justified by faith alone. He is justified by trusting the promise of God, “Your sins are forgiven,” not by leaning on the depth or the sincerity of his contrition.

The contrition that precedes does not belong in the article of justification; nor do the works that follow. One is justified by faith alone. The Roman Catholic Church vehemently denies this teaching, as is clearly brought out in the decrees of the Council of Trent:

If anyone says that justifying faith is nothing else than confidence in divine mercy, which remits sins for Christ’s sake, or that it is this confidence alone that justifies us, let him be anathema.<sup>63</sup>

If anyone says that works are merely the fruits and signs of justification obtained, but not the cause of its increase, let him be anathema.<sup>64</sup>

To those who work well unto the end and trust in God, eternal life is to be offered, both as a grace mercifully promised to the sons of God through Christ Jesus, and as a reward promised by God himself, to be faithfully given to their good works and merits.<sup>65</sup>

With such statements Roman Catholic theology denies sola fide justification. It makes of justification a cooperative affair: faith plus grace-assisted works. If the works that follow faith are a part of justification, a person can be no more sure of salvation than if justification included the contrition that precedes faith. One would again constantly be in doubt: “Have I done enough good works? Have I been sufficiently sincere in what I have done?”

It is not difficult to recognize that adding works to faith to produce justification is contrary to the passage we have been considering: “A man is justified by faith [alone], apart from observing the law” (Romans 3:28). There is a variation of this false teaching, however, that is a bit more difficult to discern: the error of broadening the definition of faith to include works. This is the error some evangelicals fall into when they maintain that a person is not saved unless he has accepted Jesus Christ as both Savior and Lord. D. James Kennedy, for example, advocates including words such as the following at the conclusion of an evangelism presentation:

---

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Martin O. Westerhaus, “The Confessional Lutheran Emigrations from Prussia and Saxony around 1839” (*Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, 87:3, Summer 1990), p. 202.

<sup>63</sup> H.J. Schroeder, trans., *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, sess. 6, can. 12 (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1941), p. 43.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., sess. 6, can. 24, p. 45.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., sess. 6, chapter 16, p. 41.

[Jesus] comes as Lord. He comes as Master and King. He comes to demand something of you. He says there is a throne room in your heart and that throne is rightly his ....Are you willing to yield your life, to surrender your life, to him, out of gratitude for the gift of eternal life?"<sup>66</sup>

To express thoughts such as these when talking about faith is a mingling of justification with the Christian's subsequent life of sanctification. What happens when the new believer discovers that the sinful flesh hasn't given up its efforts to control him? What happens when he yields to a temptation of Satan, when he surrenders to a sinful desire of the flesh, when he in a moment of weakness permits someone or something else to occupy the throne room of his heart? If the essence of faith in Jesus is not simply trust in his finished work but includes the new life that follows, the new convert will begin to doubt whether he really has faith.

It is true that faith is never alone, but always produces works. Justification is always followed by sanctification. But it is equally true and of first importance that justification is by faith alone, and never includes the works that follow. That truth, so beautifully restored to the church by God through Luther, needs to be clearly communicated.

### **Through the Means of Grace**

God in his overflowing grace has declared the whole world to be not guilty because of Jesus' substitutionary life and death. By Spirit-given faith, and by faith alone, the individual sinner receives the full benefit of Jesus' finished work: forgiveness of sins, a right standing with God, assurance of life eternal. One more element in God's plan of salvation remains to be discussed: the delivery system. How does the Holy Spirit create faith in the heart of a person to accept Christ's completed work? That brings us to a consideration of the means of grace.

The means of grace rightfully occupy a key place in Lutheran theology. With the Scriptures, the Lutheran church confesses the means of grace to be the way by which the Holy Spirit of God both offers to and confers upon the individual all the blessings procured by Christ through his life and death. Through the means of grace God the Holy Spirit conveys to people the gift of forgiveness of sins won by Christ and works faith in the heart to accept this forgiveness. The means of grace are the link between Christ's cross and a person's heart.

Strictly speaking, there is only one means of grace: the gospel. The gospel, says St. Paul, "is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16). "Our Savior, Christ Jesus ...has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light," writes Paul. How do freedom from death as well as life and immortality become one's personal possession? "Through the gospel," he says (2 Timothy 1:10). Paul reminds the Corinthians of the gospel he had preached to them—the message of Christ crucified, buried, risen. "By this gospel you are saved," he tells them (1 Corinthians 15:2).

In keeping with passages such as these, the Lutheran Confessions attach the saving work of the Holy Spirit to the gospel: "The Holy Spirit ...is not given and received through the law but through the preaching of the Gospel."<sup>67</sup>

This does not mean that the law has no place in mission work, of course. "Through the law we become conscious of sin" (Romans 3:20). Rather than being a means of grace, however, the law is a means of diagnosis through which God brings the sinner to the point where he or she recognizes the need for help. The law's place is to accuse, to expose, to condemn, to lead the sinner to cry out, "Help! There's no way out. What can I do?" Such was the effect of the law upon Luther. In his highly autobiographical hymn, "Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice," he writes:

My own good works availed me naught,  
No merit they attaining;

<sup>66</sup> D. James Kennedy, *Evangelism Explosion* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1970), p. 53.

<sup>67</sup> Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article VI, 11.

Free will against God's judgment fought,  
 Dead to all good remaining.  
 My fears increased till sheer despair  
 Left naught but death to be my share;  
 The pangs of hell I suffered.

That is the work of the law. The law always accuses, always condemns. As such it serves an important preparatory role in mission work. The only time it should not be used, in fact, is when its message of condemnation has already struck terror into the heart of the sinner.

In determining whether or not to use the law, we need to carefully distinguish between symptoms and disease. Most people recognize that all is not right with their lives. Many people are weighed down with such negatives as unhappiness, anxiety, boredom, emptiness, restlessness, dissatisfaction, feelings of worthlessness, frustration, to mention just a few of the burdens people carry around with them.

All of these, however, are only symptomatic of the real problem. It is not a proper use of the gospel to apply it directly to such symptoms. Treating symptoms doesn't cure the disease. Rather, the law needs to be used to reveal the source of all these problems in a person's life. The person needs to see that his deepest problem is a spiritual one: his estrangement from God. To make that clear is the law's intended purpose.

The law is the means of diagnosis. As such it serves a necessary function. The gospel, however, is the means of grace.

Where do we find the gospel? The answer of the Scriptures: The gospel is to be found in the Word, which also contains the law; and it is to be found in baptism and in the Lord's Supper (the sacraments), which are gospel only. The gospel in the Word and the sacraments—these are the means by which the Holy Spirit of God conveys and confers forgiveness, new life, and salvation. That is also the way the Lutheran Confessions speak of the means of grace. In the article immediately following the article on justification by faith the Augsburg Confession states: "Through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given, and the Holy Spirit produces faith, where and when it pleases God, in those who hear the Gospel."<sup>68</sup>

God confers identical blessings to people through the gospel in the Word or through the sacraments. Only the form is different. The Lutheran Confessions put it this way:

The Word and, the rite [sacrament] have the same effect, as Augustine said so well when he called the sacrament "the visible Word," for the rite is received by the eyes and is a sort of picture of the Word, signifying the same thing as the Word. Therefore both have the same effect.<sup>69</sup>

As we reach out to unbelievers with the means of grace, a certain logical order suggests itself. We will generally begin with the gospel in the Word, proceed to baptism, and then, following further instruction, offer the gospel in yet another way: through the Lord's Supper. In all three ways, however, the gospel in the Word, baptism, and the Lord's Supper, we are working with the same living and powerful instrument, through which the Holy Spirit himself comes with every spiritual blessing won by Christ.

When we bring the gospel to people, we can be confident that the Spirit's own power is in operation, raising up the spiritually dead, giving sight to the spiritually blind, turning enemies of God into his friends. Only the means of grace can and, according to God's promise, will accomplish such miracles.

The Lutheran Confessions again and again emphasize the value and absolute necessity of the means of grace. To give just a few examples:

One cannot deal with God or grasp him except through the Word.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Article V, 2.

<sup>69</sup> Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article XIII, 5.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, Article. IV, 67.

Through the preaching of and meditation upon the holy Gospel of the gracious forgiveness of sins in Christ there is kindled ...a spark of faith which accepts the forgiveness of sins for Christ's sake and comforts itself with the promise of the Gospel. And in this way the Holy Spirit, who works all of .this, is introduced into the heart.<sup>71</sup>

We must firmly hold to the conviction that God gives no one his Spirit or grace except through or with the external Word which comes before. Thus we shall be protected from the enthusiasts -- that is, from the spiritualists who boast that they possess the Spirit without and before the Word ....We should and must constantly maintain that God will not deal with us except through his external Word and sacrament. Whatever is attributed to the Spirit apart from such Word and sacrament is of the devil.<sup>72</sup>

“There is no need of climbing up into heaven to obtain remission of sins,” says Luther. “God has put the forgiveness of sins into holy Baptism, into the Lord's Supper, and into the Word. Yes, he has put it into the mouth of every Christian when he comforts you and assures you of the grace of God through the merit of Jesus Christ, so that you should accept and believe it just as if Christ himself had with his own mouth assured you of it.”<sup>73</sup>

It is not at all difficult to understand why the Confessions and Luther spoke so frequently and so strongly about the means of grace. For one thing, as seen above, the Scriptures themselves place great emphasis on the means of grace as the way God has chosen to both offer and confer forgiveness, new life, and salvation. To emphasize them, then, is simply to be faithful to the Scriptures.

In addition, there were many erroneous views of the means of grace that needed to be refuted. They came from several quarters, from Roman Catholic theology as well as from the followers of Calvin and Zwingli. They arose even from some who had once stood firmly at the side of Luther, e.g., Carlstadt and Melancthon.

The issue, putting it very simply, is this: How does one know where he or she stands with God? Does assurance come from something internal and subjective, e.g., from one's feelings or from confidence in an action one has performed? Or does assurance spring from something external and objective, from God's word of promise? Which is the real means of grace, a divine promise or a human feeling or action?

Roman Catholic theology, for example, sees the means of grace as doing no more than offering some help to the individual who is still largely responsible for working out his own salvation. The Confessions speak of “the papists and scholastics ...who taught that by his natural powers man can start out toward that which is good and toward his own conversion, and that thereupon, since man is too weak to complete it, the Holy Spirit comes to the aid of the good work which man began by his natural powers.”<sup>74</sup>

According to Roman Catholic theology, the Holy Spirit assists a person by an infusion of God's enabling grace through the sacraments. That enabling grace, in turn, helps the person work toward furthering his justification. Justification is seen as a process of becoming just in God's eyes and the means of grace, particularly the sacraments, as a way of assisting in that process. One of the canons of the Council of Trent put it this way:

If anyone says that men are justified either by the sole imputation of the justice of Christ or by the sole remission of sins, to the exclusion of the grace and the charity [love] which is poured

<sup>71</sup> Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article II, 54.

<sup>72</sup> Smalcald Articles, Part III, Article VIII, 3 and 10.

<sup>73</sup> St. Louis Edition, XIII, 2439ff., as quoted in Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 3, p. 208.

<sup>74</sup> Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article II, 76.

forth in their hearts by the Holy Ghost, and remains in them, or also that the grace by which we are justified is only the good will of God, let him be anathema.<sup>75</sup>

As this canon from the Council of Trent brings out, Roman Catholicism's faulty teaching on the means of grace springs directly from its faulty doctrine of justification. If God has not declared the world to be not guilty solely through Christ's work, then obviously the means of grace cannot be the way by which God conveys that message to the world. Since more needs to be done, the means of grace in Roman Catholicism becomes the way by which God, with sacrament-infused grace, enables the individual to finish the work.

The effect of such a doctrine of the means of grace is a perpetual uncertainty, which is consistent with Roman Catholic theology: "No one can know with the certainty of faith ...that he has obtained the grace of God,"<sup>76</sup> i.e., that he has received enough grace and acted on it properly to make him certain of salvation.

Contrast that with the way the Scriptures speak: Justification is not a process but a verdict that God in Christ has declared the sinful world not guilty; and the means of grace are the way by which God conveys that verdict and creates the faith to accept it. The result for the individual? Certainty, based on the external word and promise of God.

Calvinistic, or Reformed, theology separates regeneration from the means of grace. It speaks of an immediate, i.e., without means, rather than a mediate operation of the Holy Spirit.

The Lutheran Confessions strongly insist that "we must condemn with all seriousness and zeal, and in no wise tolerate in the church of God, the enthusiasts who imagine that without means, without the hearing of the divine Word and without the use of the holy sacraments, God draws man to himself, illuminates, justifies, and saves him."<sup>77</sup>

Luther writes in his treatise, *Against the Heavenly Prophets*:

When God sends forth his holy gospel he deals with us in a two fold manner, first outwardly, then inwardly. Outwardly he deals with us through the oral word of the gospel and through material signs, that is, baptism and the sacrament of the altar. Inwardly he deals with us through the Holy Spirit, faith, and other gifts. But whatever their measure or order the outward factors should and must precede. *The inward experience follows and is effected by the outward.*<sup>78</sup> God has determined to give the inward to no one except through the outward [emphasis added].

Calvinistic, Reformed, theology turns the two around. It begins with inward, immediate experience, and follows with the external word. Let a modern day Calvinist, Herman Hoeksema, speak:

Regeneration is an immediate work of the Holy Spirit, independent of the preaching of the Word.<sup>79</sup>

It takes place in the very depth of man's existence. It is a new birth, a being born from the very start ....It precedes all mediate work of God in us ....It consists of an *infusing, implanting, of new life* [emphasis added].<sup>80</sup>

He goes on to say: "Regeneration is not even as such a matter of [a person's] own experience, seeing that it does not take place within, but below the threshold of his consciousness. It is therefore independent of

<sup>75</sup> H.J. Schroeder, trans., *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, sess. 6, can. 11 (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co, 1941), p. 43.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter IX, p 35.

<sup>77</sup> Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article II, 80.

<sup>78</sup> LW 40: 146.

<sup>79</sup> Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association), p. 642.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 462.



age and can take place in the smallest infants. We may even take for granted that ...God usually regenerates his elect children from infancy.”<sup>81</sup> With that Hoeksema dismisses the need for baptism as a means of regeneration.

What is the purpose of the preaching of the gospel, if the Holy Spirit regenerates apart from any means? The gospel causes “the sprouting out of the seed of the new life,”<sup>82</sup> that is, it helps the already regenerated person to grow in his or her Christian life. The gospel in Reformed thinking is thus transformed from a means of grace to instructions for living. It has more to do with sanctification than justification.

As different as Roman Catholic and Reformed theology are in many points, they converge in the way they handle the means of grace. Both speak of an infused grace, as Pieper brings out:

Rome conceives of saving grace as a current which flows into man by way of the many Papistic means of grace if man “does not place an obstacle in its way,” while Calvinism thinks of saving grace as a current which, like lightning, strikes immediately and hence irresistibly. Both take saving grace to mean, not the mercy or favor of God in Christ, but a good quality implanted in the heart of man.<sup>83</sup>

Calvinism, consistently held to, cannot produce assurance in the heart any more than can Roman Catholicism. Both rely on an invisible, internal working of the Spirit rather than on the external, objective promises of God in the means of grace.

There is a third way by which the means of grace are robbed of their full power. That is the way of Arminianism; which assigns the responsibility of conversion, at least to a degree, to man, who cooperates with God (called synergism) to become a Christian. The Confessions reject

the teaching of the synergists, who maintain that in spiritual things man is not wholly dead toward that which is good, but only grievously wounded and half-dead. As a result, his free will is too weak to make a beginning and by its own powers to convert itself to God and to obey the law of God from the heart. Nevertheless, after the Holy Spirit has made the beginning and has called us by the Gospel and offers his grace, the forgiveness of sins, and eternal life, then the free will by its own natural powers can meet God and to some degree -- though only to a small extent and in a weak way -- help and cooperate and prepare itself for the grace of God, embrace and accept it, [and] believe the Gospel.<sup>84</sup>

The synergist thus adds a third cause of conversion. It is effected not just by the Holy Spirit working through the means of grace, but also through the will of man which cooperates with the Holy Spirit. The gospel is thereby reduced to an offer which the person must decide whether to accept or reject. The real power thus resides in the person who makes the decision rather than in the gospel. In effect, man’s will rather than the gospel becomes the means of grace.

The weakness of such a view, which transfers the power for conversion from the means of grace to the will of man, can be illustrated by the story told by Herman Gockel about the little boy who on a wintry day was walking with his father on an icy sidewalk. The little boy slipped and fell. Raising himself from the sidewalk, he said, “Daddy, I think I had better hold on to your hand.” They came to another slippery spot. The little boy’s feet went out from under him. He lost his grip on his father’s hand and fell again. Getting up once more, this time he said, “Daddy, I think you had better hold my hand.” Now, if they came to an icy stretch, his father could hold tightly to him and he would be safe.<sup>85</sup>

---

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 463.

<sup>83</sup> Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 3, p. 121.

<sup>84</sup> Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article II, 77.

<sup>85</sup> Herman W. Gockel, *My Hand in His* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1966), pp. 136-137.

One who thinks that all is well between him and his God because he decided to accept Christ is like that little boy who thought he was safe because he was holding onto his father's hand. Such a person is safe and secure only so long as he keeps holding on.

On the other hand, one who knows that all is well between him and his God because God himself through the gospel has taken hold of him is like the little boy whose hand is being tightly held by his father. Such a person can be sure that nothing, even death, can cause his Father's hand to let go of him (cf. Romans 8:38-39). Using the picture of a shepherd and his sheep, Jesus, the Good Shepherd, promises those whom he has brought into his flock, "They shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:28).

What a blessing we Lutherans have in our scriptural understanding and use of the means of grace. Paul Eickmann brings this out nicely in the closing words of an essay, "The Seminary's Unchanging Foundation in a Changing World: Sola Fide," delivered on the occasion of the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary:

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.<sup>86</sup>

The means of grace are the great treasure the Lord has entrusted to his Church. Justification and faith to accept justification—that is entirely in God's hands. But the means of grace—that the Lord has placed into our hands, to use them and to use them faithfully.

When we recognize that the gospel in Word and sacrament is the powerful means by which the Lord conveys the message of justification and works faith to accept that message, we will use these means with boldness and confidence.

And when we recognize that the gospel in Word and sacrament is the only means by which the Holy Spirit accomplishes this work, we will feel compelled to use them whenever and wherever we can. Though the Lord could bring people to faith and salvation apart from the means of grace, he has chosen not to. "Faith comes from hearing" (Romans 10:17).

Let the Confessions remind us once more that if we have the means of grace, the gospel in Word and sacrament, we have all we need for successful mission work:

It is God's will to call men to eternal salvation, to draw them to himself, convert them, beget them anew, and sanctify them through this means and in no other way—namely, through his holy Word (when one hears it preached or reads it) and the sacraments (when they are used according to his Word) ....All who would be saved must hear this preaching.<sup>87</sup>

That is where mission work comes in. *Hearing* implies that someone is *talking*.

<sup>86</sup> *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, 86:3 (Summer 1989), p. 191.

<sup>87</sup> Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article II, 50, 52.