

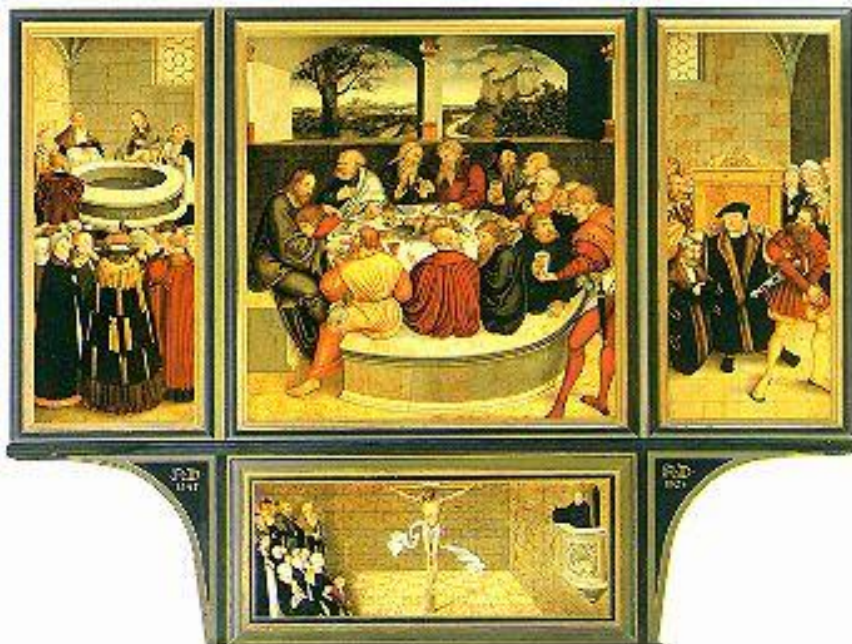


Vol. 1
Issue 3
Reformation
2009

The Confessional Lutheran Letter

In this issue:

- † **Do Lutherans and Catholics Agree on Justification?**
- † **Sermon for the Installation of Rev. Robert A. Lawson, Sr.**
- † **Reformation Hymnody**
- † **Sola Scriptura—What Does This Mean?**



Altarpiece by Lucas Cranach showing the Means of Grace

Page 2

Do Lutherans and Roman Catholics Agree on Justification?

Rev. Rolf David Preus

Ten years ago, representatives of the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church signed a document that celebrated a coming together of Lutherans and Roman Catholics on the doctrine of justification. The “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification” (JDDJ) announced this agreement in these words:

The Lutheran churches and the Roman Catholic Church have together listened to the good news proclaimed in Holy Scripture. This common listening, together with the theological conversations of recent years, has led to a shared understanding of justification. This encompasses a consensus in the basic truths; the differing explications in particular statements are compatible with it.

A consensus in basic truths is not bad. Indeed, it is very good. No wonder headlines all around the world heralded the JDDJ as an historic breakthrough in ecumenical relations. Finally Lutherans and Roman Catholics agree on what the gospel is! Finally they agree on how a sinner becomes a saint! Finally the tired old condemnations of the Reformation era can be set aside. Who would want to rain on this parade?

It must be done. The truth matters. When the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation claim that there is now a basic consensus between Lutherans and Roman Catholics on this topic they do not speak the truth.

Perhaps they think they do. Perhaps the church in our day has become so politicized that even the best and the brightest cannot tell the difference between theology and politics. Or, perhaps the wish gives birth to the pretence. We want so much to agree that we will pretend with all our might that we do. But we do not.

How can they claim agreement that does not exist? They agree to a common statement that each side interprets as it pleases. One side defines words one way while the other side defines those same words another way. Thus they can agree with the same statement while disagreeing on the doctrine.

A sinner is justified through faith. Both sides agree. But they disagree on what sin is, on what righteousness is, and on what faith is.

The Bible teaches that sin is not merely the outward acts spoken or done against God's commandments, but also the inclination or desire to do them. The desire to sin is sin (Romans 7, 7). We may not acquit ourselves of sin by claiming that we did not act on our sinful desires. There is a fancy word for this constant inclination toward evil: concupiscence. Concupiscence is sin. As Jesus said, "Out of the heart proceed evil thoughts . . ."

Not so, says Rome. The inclination to sin is not sin because sin must involve a choice and one doesn't choose one's inclinations. That makes a certain kind of sense, but it is utterly unbiblical. And it is a serious error as well. If our sinful desires are not sin then they cannot be forgiven. It will not do to rationalize sin away. Only the forgiveness of sins that we have in Christ will do.

And this brings us to the second theological term defined differently by the two sides: righteousness. Both Roman Catholics and Lutherans agree that when God justifies someone he imputes righteousness to that person. That is, God says that the person is righteous. Furthermore, both sides agree that this righteousness comes from Christ. The JDDJ says: "Justification thus means that Christ himself is our righteousness, in which we share through the Holy Spirit in accord with the will of the Father."

When Lutherans say that Christ is our righteousness they mean that the righteousness that God reckons to us is the obedience and suffering of Jesus (Romans 5, 19, Philippians 3, 9). When Rome says that Christ is our righteousness they mean that we are conformed to God's love and gradually become more and more righteous. This is how it is put in the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

Justification is at the same time the acceptance of God's righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ. Righteousness (or "justice") here means the rectitude of divine love. With justification, faith, hope, and charity are poured into our hearts and obedience to the divine will is granted us. . . . [Justification] conforms us to the righteousness of God, who makes us inwardly just by the power of his mercy. (CCC par 1991-1992)

When Lutherans say that Christ is our righteousness we mean that his obedience is credited to us. As we confess in the Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article III, paragraph 15:

Thus, the righteousness that out of sheer grace is reckoned before God to faith or to the believer consists of the obedience,

suffering, and resurrection of Christ because he has satisfied the law for us and paid for our sins

Lutherans teach that the righteousness by which we are justified is what Jesus did for us. Rome teaches that the righteousness by which we are justified is the inner change that God works in us. These are not the same thing.

The third theological term that is defined differently by the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church is the word faith. Both sides agree that faith is necessary and that one is justified in connection with his faith. The Lutherans believe that faith receives the righteousness of Jesus, that is, the forgiveness of sins. We are justified through faith because faith receives the verdict of righteousness that God pronounces on us for Christ's sake.

Rome denies that faith justifies solely by receiving the gift of righteousness. Instead, Rome teaches that faith begins the process of justification. The JDDJ speaks of being justified "in faith" rather than being justified "through faith." To be justified through faith means that faith does nothing; it simply receives the righteousness of Christ. To be justified in faith could mean that. It could also mean that we are justified in connection with faith, that is, by the process of becoming more and more righteous that begins with faith.

What is really comes down to is this: Are we justified by God freely forgiving us all our sins and giving us the credit for Christ's obedience and suffering? Is this gracious verdict ours simply by believing it? Or are we justified by becoming more and more righteous? If the former, we can know for certain that we are righteous right now and are going to heaven. If the latter we cannot ever know if we have become righteous enough.

We are grateful for any progress in mutual understanding between churches. Talking is a good thing. But the talk should be scrupulously honest. The JDDJ fails the honesty test. It is a political solution to a theological division. It is therefore no solution at all, but it is surely a sign of the times in which we live.

Lord, have mercy upon us!

The 2nd Sunday After Trinity

The following sermon was preached by Rev. Robert A. Lawson, Jr. at the Installation of Rev. Robert A. Lawson, Sr. as Pastor of Christ Lutheran Church, Princeton, MN
St. Luke 14:15-24

In the Name of + Jesus. Amen.

Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Who has known the mind of the Lord? St. Paul asked on Trinity Sunday in Romans 11. My father preached for my own ordination and installation service out in California in September of 2002. That's normal. It happens every year as sons graduate from Seminary. Nor is it unusual that I should be returning the honor today. I imagine plenty of sons have preached installation sermons for their fathers over the years. But really, who has known the mind of the Lord? Which of us, seven years ago, or even two or three or years ago, could have imagined that the circumstances of this morning's installation service would be what they are.

It is just these circumstances that make this quite an unusual installation service. First of all, a father is actually being installed by his son. I couldn't say for sure, but this just might be a first. Secondly, today's installation comes over two years after your Pastor accepted the Call to serve you. Some might wonder: why even have an installation service at this point? Why not just forgo the formalities and carry on? Well, it's true that under normal circumstances, installations take place before a pastor begins to serve a congregation, not a month after and certainly not two years after. But these aren't normal circumstances. So let me just say for starters that there ought not be any doubt that Pastor Lawson has truly been the pastor of Christ Lutheran for these last two years. After all, it is the Call of Christ Jesus through the congregation that makes a Pastor, not the installation rite.

Still, the whole point of an installation is that the Call of a pastor to serve a congregation is something of the utmost seriousness, and it demands public recognition. Thus, the rite of installation is indispensable no matter when it takes place. It publicly declares, through the exchanging of solemn oaths, that the relationship between pastor and congregation is a relationship established by Christ Himself, not by men, and it is to be viewed and maintained as such by all parties. Today's installation publicly declares, then, that God, through the congregation's Call, did indeed put Pastor Lawson and the members of Christ Lutheran together into one divinely established congregation.

Public installations serve to bind the Pastor and the people he is called to minister to together for life, until such time as God separates them. Not unlike the public marriage of a man and a woman, a pastoral installation is a public ritual whereby the pastor and congregation swear to be faithful to each other. Each party solemnly and seriously vows before God to act toward the other, and to receive the other, as God

Himself has instituted and commanded. First the Pastor swears to care for Christ's people, as His own ambassador, and to faithfully perform the duties of the ministry - to preach and teach, to uphold and defend only the pure Word of God. Then second, the congregation takes an oath before God to listen to and believe the pastor's preaching and teaching, to obey the pastor and submit to Him as Christ's own representative - the one who watches out for their souls and for whom he must give an accounting on judgment day as the catechism teaches. The congregation promises to honor and love the pastor, to pray for him, to provide for his temporal needs, etc.

Surely such solemn oaths are no small matter especially these days when both the pastoral office and the true Christian congregation are so despised and treated with such contempt. The Church is filled from one end to the other with those who consider these oaths to be nothing more than trivial formalities. Self-absorbed Pastors abound who are more interested in being "fashionably successful" than in being faithful to Christ and His Word. Instead of caring for their people as the sheep of Christ in need of Law and Gospel, they treat their congregations like guinea pigs in the next "cutting edge" program and technique designed to boost their numbers and prestige. Too many congregations are more interested in being popular and non-controversial than in being faithful to the truth. The people are more interested in feeling good about themselves and having their own way than in dying to their sin and rising to life in Christ's forgiveness. So, they treat the pastors God sends them, who are only trying to be faithful, like the refuse of the earth for not scratching their every itch. Either the pastor gets pummeled all the way out the door, or folks sneak off under cover of darkness to find a church and pastor more to their liking.

The Pastor and the current members of Christ Lutheran Church have taken it at both ends, which is why this little parish exists. Now you know what St. James means in today's Epistle: "Do not marvel, my brethren, if the world hates you." By the grace of God Christ Lutheran Church exists for one purpose: to be faithful to the truth and to provide for the care of souls by preaching the pure Word of the gospel and by administering the holy sacraments of our Lord according to His institution and command. The fact that you are having this installation two years after the fact is proof of how seriously you take this charge.

Now, you couldn't have picked a better Sunday for an installation. The Gospel lesson for Trinity 2 is perfect for an installation sermon. This parable of the Great Supper summarizes, neatly and concisely, the duties of both the pastor and the hearers. The details of the

parable are simple enough. The heavenly Father is the rich man who gives the banquet and invites many. The banquet food is the Father's Son Whom He sent into our flesh to be the true Passover Lamb. Christ was offered up by the Father's love to suffer and to be slaughtered, to be nailed to the cross and roasted over the fires of hell as the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the whole world.

The servants sent out at supper time to call the invited guests in to eat are the pastors as Luther so eloquently explains in one of his own sermons on this text:

Christ, having suffered with terrible pain on the cross, was afterwards removed from the spit of the cross, laid in the tomb, risen from the dead, and so on, in order that the whole world might have this food. For Christ was the world's genuine Bread of Life. So now this heavenly food, so carefully prepared and subjected to the intense fire of the cross, is served up and offered to the whole world. Wherever Christians are gathered, there you find the table. The preaching of the gospel is the dish. The servers are the pastors. Christ is the food. Through the pastor's mouth the food is laid on the table and served; for when the gospel is preached, this food is served up and offered. It is embraced solely in the Word and is heard by both young and old, learned and unlearned, rich and poor, and the like. (House Postil for Trinity 2)

This, then, is the Pastor's duty: to feed, with healthy food, poor sinners who are sick unto death from having stuffed themselves with the devil's seemingly tasty, yet poisonous food. The call of the Pastor is to rebuke sin and bid those who hunger and thirst for righteousness to come in to the banquet hall, which is the Divine Service of the church. Here, in the church, he is to fill them with the food of righteousness, which is Christ, the Bread of Life. Luther goes on to say:

This food is offered in the following way: The gospel is proclaimed, telling how Christ suffered, was crucified, and died for our sins. Everyone in the world is urged to come and not to stay away, to eat of this food, gladly hear the gospel of Christ, and believe what the gospel proclaims. For to the serving up belong three things: first, the dish, which is the Word of God; second, the waiter, that is the pastor's mouth; and third, to believe it

with all one's heart. When these three things come together, man's heart and soul begin to eat, saying, Here is a deliciously prepared hen or chicken; here Christ is proclaimed; I see and hear what this food is, the "roasted" Christ; I am to eat of this; hence, I must believe what is proclaimed and taught in the gospel. Whoever believes this with all his heart eats of this Christ.

Note that Jesus Christ is the church's only food. Thus the duty of the congregation is to eat the food God provides and no other. The church is not a buffet where a variety of goodies are spread before the consumers so that they can pick and choose what most appeals to them. There is only one item on the menu in the heavenly master's banquet hall, and for those who are spiritually hungry and thirsty only this one meal will satisfy. The message of Christ crucified to reconcile sinners to God is what poor miserable sinners crave who desire to be released from sin and find peace with God. Forgiveness of sins; God's verdict of "not guilty" and the righteousness of Christ is what is proclaimed in the preaching of the Gospel. This is what is distributed and received in holy baptism, holy absolution, and the holy Supper. Only this food will nourish and strengthen weary and hungry souls through time and into eternity.

Most people, unfortunately, don't want this food, which can seem rather strange to us, I suppose. Tasting Christ in the Gospel and Sacraments is nothing less than receiving eternal life. It is reconciliation and communion with God Himself. What more could sinners want than that? What else is there? Well, it's not what folks crave. They're hungry and thirsty for other things. The first invited guests in Jesus' parable gave excuse after excuse when they were called to come in to the feast. Now it's not that the other things they had to do were unimportant. But couldn't they have been taken care of after the master's meal? The invited guests simply weren't hungry for what the master had to offer. That's why they spurned the invitation. It wasn't that the one fella just had to spend time with his wife right now, or that the other two couldn't have waited a few hours to look at the new oxen and new piece of ground. Those were just excuses. They didn't care about the meal because they saw no need for it. If you're already stuffed full, there's not much desire to eat another big meal. That's how most folks respond to God's invitation to feast on Christ. They're stuffed full of their own goodness and aren't hungry for Christ.

So, finally, who is it that the master invited to the banquet? He sent his servants out into the back allies and country dirt roads to drag in the penniless and starving, the beggars, cripples who can't provide for themselves, the blind who stumble about in darkness. These are they who have looked inside themselves and have found nothing but emptiness and despair. About them Proverbs 9 says: "Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!" Also Isaiah 55:1, "Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; And you who have no money, come, buy and eat. Yes, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price." Listen to Luther again:

When we are encompassed by death, sin, disease, hard times, peril, terror, fear, and all manner of affliction, this is our hunger and thirst; and that is when we need this food. Specifically, those under great affliction are the ones who find this food so delicious. When these terrified and fearful hearts and consciences hear in the gospel that Christ suffered, was crucified, and died for their sins, allowed Himself to be prepared and served up as food for all hungry and thirsty souls, that is, for all terrified and fearful hearts, and believe this without doubting, then their fragile hearts, distressed consciences, and troubled souls experience strengthening, and they are comforted and revived.

That's the church and that is the work of the church. The Church is Christ's own people - baptized beggars gathered in the power of the Holy Spirit each week to be justified; forgiven of all their sins by means of the gospel and sacraments. The Church is the great banquet hall where the body of Christ listens to Christ's Word and feeds on His Body and Blood and is filled to the brim, with each person receiving even more than he could imagine.

Dear Dad and members of Christ Lutheran Church. Today I exhort you to be the church! By the grace of God, persevere in coming to the banquet and be faithful to the pure doctrine of Christ, the doctrine that is able to save our souls. That's all your Lord has called you to do. To those who insist on walking by sight, your parish doesn't look much like a banquet hall. It looks more like a soup kitchen. I mean, here's 15 or so people who meet in the Princeton Train Depot with portable altar furniture, for crying out loud. Where is everybody? Where's all the stuff? Where's all the activity? Where's the success? And now you've gone off and joined up with this Mickey Mouse association of misfits

who claim to do a better job of preserving the truth than the established synods. How arrogant is that? That's what those who have other concerns on the brain are thinking. Never mind any of that. Faith really is the evidence of things not seen. The church is here in all of its fullness, more-so than in all the "successful" churches who have abandoned their first love for the poisonous eye-candy of growth, good feelings, and doctrinal compromise for the sake of peace. The pure Gospel and sacraments are here in this place and so Christ is graciously present in this place, and that's what makes a Church. For where Christ is there are the saints on earth as well as the whole company of heaven with Him. As Luther would say, then: "Stick to Christ like a burr sticks to a top-coat." Dad: Preach the Gospel and preserve the doctrine pure. Members of Christ Lutheran: Don't be too proud to be beggars before God. Be lame and blind in spirit and confess your sins. Listen to Jesus' preaching and believe the forgiveness of sins. For He is the friend of sinners and the justifier of the ungodly. He will continue to feed you and you will be satisfied all the way in to eternal fullness.

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost.
Amen.

Reformation Hymnody

By Rev. Robert A. Lawson Sr.

When we think about the 16th Century Reformation of the Church, we think immediately of Martin Luther and his Ninety-five Thesis on Indulgences which he nailed to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517. Luther had struggled for most of his life in the greatest anguish of soul, because he had been taught and he believed that "The Righteousness of God" demanded that one be righteous on the basis of his own works. When Luther read in St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans (1:17) that "The just shall live by faith," he concluded that he had to be righteous in order to be given faith. He knew of course that God was righteous; but he, Martin Luther, certainly was not. How, then, could he possibly "live by faith?"

When through the study of the holy Scriptures the scales finally fell from his eyes and he realized that righteousness is not something that is earned here on earth but something given from heaven, he had no time whatsoever for the notion that one could simply buy righteousness with money. He therefore thundered forth in the Ninety-five Theses: "Those who believe that they can be certain of their salvation because they have indulgence letters will be eternally damned, together with their teachers." "The true treasure of the church," wrote Luther, "is the most holy Gospel

of the glory and grace of God.” Therefore he asked: “Why does not the pope empty purgatory for the sake of holy love and the dire need of the souls that are there if he redeems an infinite number of souls for the sake of miserable money with which to build a church?” “Christians,” wrote the liberated Luther in the two concluding theses, “should be exhorted to be diligent in following Christ, their head, through penalties, death, and hell; and thus be confident of entering into heaven through many tribulations rather than through the false security of peace [Acts 14:22].”

When ever-after Lutherans have paused on October 31 (or the last Sunday in October) to celebrate the Reformation, they have paused to celebrate the restoration of the Gospel, the Good News that sinners are justified by grace alone, through faith in Christ.

One wonders whether Rome would even have cared about the Wittenberg monk were it not for his 1522 treatises: *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, *The Freedom of a Christian*, and, of course, his 1525 masterpiece The Bondage of the Will, which Luther himself considered his most important work. Many, however, regard Luther’s publication of the *Personal Prayer Book* at the end of May 1522 as one of his conscious efforts at introducing the Reformation. It was intended merely as a beginning, a simple Christian form for praying the Lord’s Prayer and the Ten Commandments. Indeed, between 1522 and 1529 a veritable flood of catechetical literature was published in Wittenberg, including Luther’s own Large and Small Catechisms, which have been the mainstays of Lutheran catechetical instruction for nearly 500 years.

Luther’s real genius, however, was his understanding of the power of music to carry the Gospel to the common people. It was the German hymn, even more than the new-found role of preaching in the Divine Service or the flood of tracts and books or the holy communion in both kinds, that caused the Reformation to be so enthusiastically embraced.

Luther, who himself was an accomplished lute player and amateur composer, loved music. “Next to the Word of God,” he said, “music deserves the highest praise.” His most extended statement about the relationship of theology to music, is contained in a letter to the composer Ludwig Senfl, dated October 4, 1530:

I plainly judge, and do not hesitate to affirm, that except for theology there is no art that could be put on the same level with music, since except for theology [music] alone produces what otherwise only theology can do, namely, a calm and joyful disposition. . . . This is the reason why the prophets did not make use of any art except

music; when setting forth their theology they did it not as arithmetic, not astronomy, but as music, so that they held theology and music most tightly connected, and proclaimed truth through Psalms and songs.

Luther informed George Spalatin, the secretary to the great Elector Frederick the Wise, at the end of 1523 about his plan to produce German psalms or hymns for the people, “so that God’s Word might flourish among them through song.” He wanted Spalatin and other friends to translate individual psalms and turn them into hymns. These were not to be hymns of the kind that are so popular today—seven-lined ditties designed merely to stir the emotions. These hymns were to be sermons set to music; for Luther knew that even the best sermon would not stay in the head and heart like great poetry set to music. To answer the question whether this effort at setting the Gospel to music was successful, one need look only at a few of the initial attempts at hymn-writing by Luther’s colleagues and followers. In his fourteen stanza hymn, *Salvation Unto Us Is Come*, Paul Speratus, while depreciating the harshness of the Law not even a little, gives the Gospel’s full consolation to the troubled heart:

As Christ hath full atonement made
And brought to us salvation,
So may each Christian now be glad
And build on this foundation:
Thy grace alone, dear Lord, I plead,
Thy death now is my life indeed,
For Thou hast paid my ransom. (*ELH 227:6*)

Lazarus Spengler, a layman (the ninth of twenty-one children), who was forced to drop out of school to help support the family, contributed the only hymn quoted in the Formula of Concord. In his *By Adam’s Fall Is All Forlorn*, Spengler tackles the tough issue of original sin with great clarity, yet he does it with perfect division of Law and Gospel:

By Adam’s sin we all have sinned
And earned but condemnation;
So now in Christ we live again
Through free and full salvation.
Like as we all Through Adam’s fall
Eternal death do merit,
So now has God
Through Christ’s dear blood

Renewed what was corrupted. (*ELH* 430:3)

Even Luther's female followers got into the act. Elizabeth Cruciger, wife of the Wittenberg theologian Caspar Cruciger, stresses the Reformation theme of *sola fide*, by faith alone, in her wonderful three stanza hymn, *The Only Son from Heaven*:

O Lord, our hearts awaken
To know and love Thee more,
In faith to stand unshaken,
In Spirit to adore,
That we, still heav'n-ward hasting,
Yet here Thy joy foretasting,
May reap its fullness there. (*ELH* 224:3)

It was Luther himself, however, that carried the bulk of the load. In hymns such as *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*, *Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice*, *Savior of the Nations Come*, *From Heaven Above to Earth I Come*, *To Shepherds as They Watched by Night*, and *Out of the Depths I Cry to Thee*, Luther's beloved Gospel is sung across denominational lines even today. Luther's genius for spreading the Gospel through music was not limited to hymn singing, however. In his German Mass he substituted hymns for the ordinary of the service in order to allow the people, especially in the country side, where there were no trained singers and choirs, to sing the liturgy. The two latest hymnals of the old synodical conference, The Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary, Copyright © 1996 by The Evangelical Lutheran Synod, and The Lutheran Service Book, Copyright © 2006 Concordia Publishing House, both contain settings of Luther's German Mass.

Finally, it was not through the Small Catechism alone that children were to be taught the word of faith. Correlating hymns were provided for each part of the catechism, some written before and some after its publication. In *These Are the Holy Ten Commands*, *We All Believe in One True God*, *Our Father*, *Thou in Heaven Above*, *To Jordan Came Our Lord*, *the Christ*, and *Jesus Christ, Our Blessed Savior*, the catechism is sung into the hearts of children and parents alike. Would that our pastors, parents, and churches today would revive these long forgotten Reformation gems.

Thou holy Light, Guide Divine,
Oh, cause the Word of Life to shine.
Teach us to know our God aright
And call Him Father with delight.
From ev'ry error keep us free;
Let none but Christ our Master be

That we in living faith abide,
In Him, our Lord, with all our might confide.
Alleluia! Alleluia! (Martin Luther, *ELH* 2:2)

Sola Scriptura – What Does This Mean?

Rev. Karl Heck

Such a question, it would seem, should be simple to answer, at least amongst Christians, and especially amongst Lutherans who claim that there is really only one book of wisdom—God's Word. But such is not the case. In fact, quite the opposite is true. For Sola Scriptura, one of the three Sola's of the Lutheran Reformation, can and does mean a variety of things according to one's presuppositions.

Much of Christendom, including Roman Catholicism, the Reformed, and, sadly, much of current Lutheranism, views the principal of Sola Scriptura (Scripture alone) in the abstract, we might say. They confess to believe that Scripture is inspired and authoritative, that it is God-breathed and without error. But the problem lies in the way that they interpret Scripture, in how they approach Scripture. While they confess, "Thy Word is truth" (John 17:17), they themselves establish the basis for determining the truth.

For many, truth is determined according to the interpretation of church fathers or certain leaders in the church of the modern era or days gone by. For others, truth is determined by personal opinion and feelings as one is apparently "led" by the Holy Spirit to a deeper understanding of the text. And yet others interpret Scripture according to reason (human rationale) which thus forces or subjects the Word (and God) to fit into man's neat (messy) little box of easy explanations.

This is not how Scripture is to be interpreted, and Martin Luther, by God's grace alone, got it right – and likewise so do we when we submit ourselves to His Word and His interpretation. We do well to remember Peter's words, "that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:20–21). Confessional Lutherans follow the principal that Scripture interprets Scripture. Man does not interpret Scripture; God does. And He does so only by His concrete Word. Forget emotions, feelings, reason, and everything else emanating from sinful man. Scripture interprets Scripture—the simpler passages interpreting the more difficult or complex passages, and always in context.

We confess, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16). Where Scripture presents to us what

appears to be humanly irrational or incomprehensible teachings and concepts, we ever confess that we do not subject our infinite God and His Word to our finite minds, and thus explain Him away to our own injurious spiritual ruin. “Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35), neither can it contradict itself. God’s Word endures forever (1 Peter 1:25; Isaiah 40:6–8). We do well to remember this.

Sola Scriptura means that we let, and demand that, Scripture interprets itself in spite of human reason and philosophy. We do not twist the text to mean what we want it to say (or what society wants it to say). We do not divorce the text from the context. And where interpretation seems to allude us, when the Bible says something inexplicable, we simply go back and continue to come at it again and again from God’s Word, knowing that therein He will provide the pure and true interpretation. Human reason does not reign supreme in the interpretation of Holy Writ. Reason is and always must remain the servant and not the master of true theology. As is so obvious in Biblical interpretation today, when reason is allowed to be the master, you will get into all sorts of impossible mazes, thus digging yourself into deeper holes rather than digging your way out of them. Simply stated, Sola Scriptura acknowledges that God is smarter—much smarter—than man.

Many churches and many Christians today operate on a foundation of quicksand regarding Scriptural interpretation; this is evident in their mountains of alleged “new insights” and “revelations” regarding the Word of God that He Himself says does *not* change. Solomon’s words have been forgotten by many seekers of new things today, “There is nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:9). The *new* twisted concepts and teachings of today, all allegedly taken from God’s Word, are as old as Eden. Ironically, the little child can get it right, but the learned scholar commonly gets it wrong.

It is essential to understand that it is not man’s thinking, wisdom, or enlightenment that lends truth to God’s Word. The wisdom of man is foolishness (Proverbs 15:14; 1 Corinthians 3:19) and not to be considered when studying the wisdom of God.

“Where God has spoken, the right of private judgment ceases... We must, therefore, not ‘correct’ the Scriptures according to our ideas and logical deductions, but we must correct our thoughts and ideas according to the Scriptures.” (*A Summary Of Christian Doctrine*, Edward Koehler, p. 2) Or simply stated, we do not subject God’s Word to man’s wisdom/foolishness. Instead, we must always return to the pure Holy Scriptures, for only they can transform our thoughts and thinking. We subject ourselves to the Word, ever and always remaining students of the Master Teacher Himself, Jesus Christ.

It is amazing, isn’t it, that someone can recognize that God created

the world, the universe, out of nothing, and yet have a problem with a literal six twenty-four-hour day creation, or reject how God chose to redeem man. It is amazing that one can recognize God but reject Him working through water and the Word in Holy Baptism, that he cannot accept that He is truly present in the Holy Supper, that he cannot believe that He is really forgiving sins through His called and ordained pastor. Many of these Christians, and many may seem well-intentioned, worry so much about safe-guarding God’s sovereignty that they will not let His Word simply mean what it says. Therefore they foolishly attempt to explain God according to their worldly wisdom. They deny that God works from His love and mercy, and thus they embrace the Law and therefore work’s righteousness. Why is that? Why such problems? Because man does not want to subject himself to God in His Word. Instead, he wants to subject God to himself, thinking that God needs him to protect Him. Yes, foolishly the creature thinks that he has to (and can) protect the Creator! And while it is certainly a problem of pride and rebellion, not any different than with Adam and Eve in Eden, it is also a problem when it comes to Biblical interpretation in our era.

Isaiah records how God addresses the problem of man not understanding His ways, “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,” says the Lord. “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8–9). And Job says, “Why do you contend with Him? For He does not give an accounting of any of His words.”

Edward Koehler, in *A Summary Of Christian Doctrine*, in the foreword to the First Edition, p. iii, states in the opening paragraph, “If the truth of God’s Word is to accomplish its divinely intended purpose, it must be taught and accepted as it is revealed in Holy Scriptures. Any change or corruption of these teachings will necessarily affect the influence on the hearts and the lives of men. Guided by wrong information, man will go wrong. Only the right doctrine can create the right faith in our hearts and lead us in the right way through life.” Especially note his words, “Only the right doctrine can create the right faith in our hearts and lead us in the right way through life.”

In a world that is more and more consumed with educational degrees and lauding individuals for their rationale, intellectual brilliance, and achieved human wisdom, it is easy to adapt and begin to subject the Word of God to errant man’s rationale, thereby attempting to make God fit into our understanding of things, packing Him into our neat (messy) little box. But this is not the principal of Sola Scriptura. We must ever and always let Scripture interpret Scripture – something it seems that children can often do better than the learned scholars! As humble sinners we must let the inspired, inerrant, and authoritative Word of God speak for itself. And who better to speak for God than God?—Soli Deo Gloria!