

GETTING THE RIGHT MESSAGE OUT— AND GETTING IT OUT THE RIGHT WAY With Special Emphasis on Public Worship and Classroom Instruction

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Getting the Right Message Out

“**T**he article of justification is the master and prince, the lord, the ruler, and the judge over all kinds of doctrines; it preserves and governs all church doctrine and raises up our consciences before God. Without this article the world is utter darkness and death.”¹ Luther’s appraisal of the doctrine of justification is also ours. We hold it to be the *primary doctrine* of Scripture, that is, the central and most important teaching revealed by God for us sinners.² As such, it is also the central and most important teaching in outreach to others.

The truth of justification, above all others, distinguishes Christianity from all other religions. If this teaching were obscured or lost, attempts to show significant differences between the Christian religion and others would ultimately prove to be futile. Also, as revealed and emphasized in the Bible, other doctrines either prepare for or flow from this chief article of faith. Without this truth, all others would mean little. This doctrine is the source or basis of the benefits and blessings which mankind receives from God.

What precisely is this “master and prince, lord, ruler, and judge” over other doctrines? Justification is a declaratory act of God, in which he pronounces sinners righteous. As revealed in the Bible, this declaration of God is made totally by grace and on account of Jesus Christ and his substitutionary life and death on behalf of mankind. To phrase it somewhat differently, God has justified, acquitted or declared right-

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¹Martin Luther, *What Luther Says*, Vol. 2, p 703.

²Lutheran theologians sometimes have difficulty deciding which is *the* central teaching of Christianity. Usually it is said to be justification, but sometimes Christ’s vicarious atonement or his resurrection as the cornerstone of the faith is so labeled. These doctrines are so intimately connected that none can be taught correctly without the others. Professor Siegbert Becker briefly discusses this (*WLQ*, 1986, p 13).

eous the whole world of sinners. He has forgiven them. They have been reconciled to God. Their status in his eyes has been changed from that of sinner to forgiven sinner for the sake of Jesus Christ. Since all this applies to all people, the term *universal* or *general justification* is used. In our circles an alternate term, *objective justification*, is also used. If justification is universal, it must also be objective; sinners have been forgiven whether they believe it or not. This is precisely what Scripture teaches in Romans 3:23-24, when it says, “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.” All have sinned and all are justified freely by God’s grace. Romans 4:5 also teaches the grand truth that our God is the “God who justifies the wicked,” all of them. “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them” (2 Corinthians 5:19). Literally, God was not counting “their” sins against them, and the only antecedent of “their” in the sentence is “the world,” which includes all people.³

The accomplishments of justification in the lives of sinners like us are profound. The declaratory act of God, like the substitutionary life and death of Jesus Christ that serve as its basis, is not debatable or changeable. It stands firm as the solid hope for otherwise hopeless and helpless mankind. This declaration of forgiveness, that is, the gospel, conveys life to those spiritually dead. The message of justification invites faith, creates faith, and then maintains faith in the message. With faith come spiritual and eternal life, deep joy, and a profound sense of awe toward the forgiving Lord. Divine love gives birth to love, and justified people who are brought to embrace the truth now love because he first loved them. As we have learned to expect from God’s truth, justification accomplishes profound things in people’s hearts and lives.

What Objections Do People Express or What Problems Do People Have With This Right Message?

There are no problems in the doctrine of justification—no problems at all. This is God’s Right Message for all mankind, the revealed answer to the ultimately important questions people ask and to the problems sinful mankind faces because of sin. (What is God like? Does he love me? Really? What must I do to be right with him? Can I ever

³“*Subjective justification*” is the very same forgiveness as it is received or applied to the individual sinner through the gift of faith. Objective justification is clearly the basis for subjective justification. The sad fact that many sinners forfeit the blessings of forgiveness and reconciliation with God in unbelief does not, however, change the fact or reality of universal justification.

hope to stand safely in his presence?) But there are problems with regard to justification that people—many of them within in the church—have created out of nothing. Major examples of this include the following:⁴

1. *“Justification must be something other than a forensic act of acquittal.”* Here the struggle is against the biblical teaching of what “divine grace” is, what the “righteousness of God” is and how it is given to mankind, and what role human merit has to play in justification. This objection prevails in the visible church today as much as it did in the early church and in the church of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. Sample evidences of this:
 - Tuomo Mannermaa and four other Finnish scholars associated with the University of Helsinki have given a “new” interpretation of Luther’s doctrine of justification. Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson (*Union with Christ*, 1998) gush over their conclusions. What is involved is a denial of the purely forensic nature of justification and an attempt to combine forensic and indwelling/renewing righteousness to serve as the basis of justification.
 - The Orthodox teaching of *theosis*.
 - William Beck, LCMS scholar, persistently held to his preference for the term “make righteous” to translate the “justify” word in Romans 4:5, as an analogy to Luther’s translation, “*der die Gottlosen gerecht macht.*”
 - The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ), 1999, between representatives of the Vatican and the Lutheran World Federation and its warm reception among so many Lutherans in America.
 - Ted Peters (ELCA, *God—The World’s Future*) in the two pages devoted to this (out of 403 pages): “Some miss by shooting too high and emphasize a strictly forensic or declarative understanding of justification. . . . The tendency in this case is to return to the autocratic magician in heaven who simply waves a hand or mutters magical words to alter the cosmos.”
 - *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994): “Justification consists in both victory over the death caused by sin and a new participation in grace” (Par. 654). “Justification is not only the remission of sins, but also the sanctification and renewal of the interior man” (Par. 1989). “By giving birth to the ‘inner man’ justification entails sanctification of his whole being” (Par. 1995). “Justification includes the remission of sins, sanctification, and the renewal of the inner man” (Par. 219).

⁴Robert Preus (1981, pp 163-184) does a fine job of identifying “perennial problems” people have with the doctrine.

- Members of the largest Lutheran church body in America are told, “Jesus was not born to die, but to live for us. . . . The cross is central to our preaching because it shows the depth of God’s love for us. . . . Some preaching describes Jesus’ death as a payment of God’s wrath. This approach stresses guilt as a barrier to our entry into heaven. There is truth here, but this is only one of many ways the Scriptures proclaim the meaning of Jesus for us” (in *The Lutheran*, March 30, 1988, p 46). And future clergy of the ELCA are confronted with language like this: “The meaning of the historical cross was transmitted in the suprahistorical language of mythological symbolism. . . . When the cross is viewed mythologically, and not simply as one historical event alongside others, it receives redemptive significance of cosmic proportions” (Braaten and Jenson, CD, I, 547-548).
2. “*Justification can be separated from its basis in Christ’s atonement.*” People occasionally seem to forget that there can be no imputation of Christ’s righteousness to us unless Christ has provided such a righteousness by his life and death. This inadequate understanding of justification was high profile in the Middle Ages (Abelard; nominalists who merely pointed to divine will separated from Christ’s work). It remains an issue to be dealt with today. This may be seen by current emphases on:
 - “Smile, God loves you!” (This is a tremendous theological statement, but inadequate if it stands alone.)
 - The rise in popularity of *inclusivism* in the wake of Vatican II, demonstrated by its acceptance in many Evangelical circles.
 3. “*Faith is the basis of justification, either its cause or condition.*” Again, centuries ago this was a hotly debated issue. Rome denied that justifying faith was mere trust and that it was passive in receiving the declaration of God. Some Protestants likewise made faith a work of man in some way, one that merited divine love and pardon. Some still do. Examples:
 - Catechism of the Catholic Church: “The preparation of man for the reception of grace is already a work of grace. This latter is needed to arouse and sustain our collaboration in justification through faith, and in sanctification through charity” (Par. 2001); “Like conversion, justification has two aspects. Moved by grace, man turns toward God and away from sin, and so accepts forgiveness and righteousness from on high” (Par. 2018).
 - Any promise of pardon that is joined to expressions like “if you believe” or “because of your faith.”
 - The Lutheran Confessions clearly speak of objective or universal justification and the imputation or forgiveness of all people prior to and aside from justifying faith (e.g., FC, Ep, III, 4,7,9; Apol., IV, 103). But the Confessions also use terms or phrases

that, if torn from the context of the rest of the Confessions, could be understood to say that justification is more of a potential reality without faith (e.g., “God wants to justify,” Apol. IV, 69, 180, 292; “If we believe,” e.g., FC, SD, III, 13; Apol IV, 238, 296; Apol XIII, 8; “When we believe,” e.g., Apol. IV, 222, 382; FC, SD, XI, 38). Lutherans who seem to spend more time quoting the Lutheran Confessions than they do the Scriptures have been known to pit subjective justification against objective justification and try to use the Confessions as their ally.

4. *“Justification is less than a ‘real thing’ but is more a concept or idea. We need more than that.”* This was the kind of argument thrown at the Lutheran reformers and later advanced by Albrecht Ritschl (d. 1889) and Rudolf Bultmann (d. 1976). People complain about the same basic “problem” today.
 - Robert Jenson (in *Lutheranism*, 1976) echoed the thought by saying justification was not a “content item” of the gospel, “not a particular proposed content of the church’s proclamation . . . rather a metalinguistic stipulation of what *kind* of talking—about whatever contents—can properly be the proclamation and word of the church” (p 43).
 - Pentecostalism, Neo-Pentecostalism, or the charismatic movement downplays or replaces justification with “more real” experiences, especially the second filling, baptism of the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues, etc.
 - Millennialism, pervasive in our current theological climate, diverts attention from justification and presents other ideas incompatible with Scripture. But to some millennialism seems “real” because it attaches itself to geography, current countries, and political entities.
 - Church Growth Movement principles and practice downplay the value and the usefulness of doctrine in general in favor of what initially attracts the unchurched. Perceived needs win out over real needs. Justification languishes.
5. *“Justification answers a question few people are asking. It offers a solution to a problem few people are concerned about.”* The secularization of society, the rise of materialism, and the failure of the visible church to testify to matters of conscience and the vertical relation of the creature with his Creator contribute to this notion. At Helsinki in 1963 the LWF failed to formulate a statement on justification in part because participants were convinced (and content with this) that modern man is generally not concerned to know a gracious God but to find meaning in everyday life. And today?
 - The gospel account has become a rallying cry for those who have various social-political agendas (e.g., feminists; environmentalists; children’s advocates; family counselors), many of whom openly quarrel with the gospel message.

- Postmodern thought really has no center of reality and little formal concern for one. No fundamental explanation for the meaning or purpose of life is sought outside one's own viewpoint and "intuition." "Practical" rather than "doctrinal" studies are preferred by some in our own circles. The relation between one's "faith" and "life" is obscured or denied while a vague "spirituality" is too often considered "enough" to lay claim to.
6. *"The teaching of objective justification is dangerous and will lead to universalism."* A student of the history of American Lutheranism will remember that there were perennial objections to the Synodical Conference teaching—objections that came from other Lutheran synods. No wonder we were concerned when the LCMS (*Declaration*, 1938; *Common Confession*, 1950) was willing to accept a confessional statement offered by ALC churches that allowed for a rejection of objective justification. This discomfort with the biblical teaching of objective justification is still apparent today.
- More recently (ca. 1980) Dr. Walter Maier from the Ft. Wayne seminary questioned the exegetical basis of our doctrine. We're still not sure if this matter was settled in a God-pleasing way. Statements like "Justification can only be spoken of in connection with faith," "Christ's work has only made it possible for God to change hearts of men so that they can become reconciled to God through faith," and "forgiveness and justification, because of Christ, are objectively available for all mankind" have never been adequately retracted or disavowed by the author, only muffled or silenced. [These were statements of the LCMS Presidium and Walter A. Maier, printed in *The Reporter* in 1980 and 1981.]
 - Following Karl Barth, many among the neo-orthodox thinkers and writers do indeed end up teaching a universalism, thus departing from biblical truth, ignoring subjective justification, and in effect giving objective justification a bad name.

Getting the Message Out the Right Way How Can We Best Get the Message Out?

The connection between justification and gospel outreach dare not be forgotten. David Kuske says this:

In two ways then objective justification provides the motivation for mission outreach: It provides us with a whole different view of our fellowmen which compels us to tell them about Jesus; and God fills us with a whole new view of our lives which moves us gladly and willingly in thanks to serve as his instruments in bringing the gospel to all men.

Here objective justification also serves in another way in our mission outreach. It gives us, who are God's instruments in bringing the gospel to all men, also the message to share with the world.⁵

What are aspects of getting the right message out the right way—or the best way we can do so under God? What follows is a list of items for consideration and discussion. They all touch on the “right way” of sharing the supreme message of the Bible with other sinners.

1. We do well to make use of the Bible's vocabulary and the picture language it uses to emphasize justification.
2. We do well to keep the message of the forgiveness of sins unconditional. We can train ourselves to avoid the “if you believe” and “because you believe” since they will more than likely give a false impression. Proclaim Christ unconditionally.
3. We do well to make sure the person and work of Christ is explicitly mentioned when we share the message of pardon. We also will emphasize how Christ's work demonstrates that our justification is real, not fuzzy fiction.
4. We do well to use Law and Gospel in tandem, making sure we use Law as Law and Gospel as Gospel.
5. We do well to trust the gospel—trust the message of justification—to have its impact in the hearts of fellow members, outsiders, and ourselves as well.

How Can We Best Get the Message Out In Worship Assemblies?

Among the fruits of justification is worship. Worship involves the forgiven sinner's expression of joyful thanks, dedication, and rededication to his saving Lord. In its widest sense, it is the Christian's entire lifestyle, his eating and drinking and doing everything to God's glory. Prominent in the Christian's lifestyle (his worship) is listening as God continues to speak to him in his Word. In a narrower sense, worship may be defined as more specific expressions of new life in Christ such as prayer, reading and meditation on the Word of God, reciting or singing hymns and songs of praise—those moments of personal devotion as well as specific times set aside for such purposes. Justification is the source of such worship activity in the lives of God's people.

When these believers assemble to hear God's Word, to pray, praise, and encourage each other mutually, that is, when they “go to church” and “worship” publicly, they express the same thanks and joy as they do privately. We do not pit the private worship lifestyle of any

⁵David Kuske, (1980), p 22.

believer against the more formal, public acts of devotion in church services. Still, public worship has often been called the “preeminent” and “most important” activity among Christians. James Tiefel offers reasons for this:

Worship affords the best opportunity for believers to encourage each other with the Word. It sets a full banquet of the means of grace and marshals all of God’s created gifts for the praise of his grace. Worship repeats for Christians the truths about Christ that are essential for Christian faith, and it sets a pattern and a pace for Christian life. No other congregational activity affords such a variety or such fullness of receiving and response.⁶

With this in mind we turn our attention to the influence justification exercises in this setting, namely, in establishing and shaping worship principles.

Justification helps to keep our worship God-centered

Worship is usually understood almost exclusively as something people do over against God, for example, honoring, adoring, or praying. It is seen primarily as human response to God, human action at least partially determined and measured by human standards. This definition of worship, although common, is inadequate to express biblical and Christian reality. The doctrine of justification reminds us that what God has done, does, and says is of greatest value and importance. This influences the way Christians think and act, also (or especially) at worship. Worship, simply put, is much more than something we do. It begins with God, maintains its basis and source in God, and primarily consists of God coming to us rather than our responding to him. Human response is unquestionably an important part of worship, but not the main thing and surely not the only thing.

Our Lord speaks and we listen. His Word bestows what it says. Faith that is born from what is heard acknowledges the gifts received with eager thankfulness and praise. . . . Saying back to him what he has said to us, we repeat what is most true and sure. Most true and sure is his name, which he put on us with the water of our Baptism. . . . The rhythm of our worship is from him to us, and then from us back to him. He gives his gifts, and together we receive and extol them. We build one another up as we speak to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Our Lord gives us his body to eat and his blood to drink. Finally his blessing moves us out into our calling, where his gifts have their fruition. How best to do this we may learn from his Word and from the way his Word has prompted his worship through the centuries.⁷

⁶*Christian Worship: Manual*, p 6.

⁷*Lutheran Worship*, Introduction, p 6.

A fairly recent incident in American Lutheranism demonstrates how sensitive Lutherans are to the primacy of God's coming to us in worship services. When the Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship (ILCW) proposed inserting a eucharistic prayer (a prayer that encloses or includes the Words of Institution) into the liturgy of a new hymnal (now the *Lutheran Book of Worship*), cries of complaint came quickly. The thought of making a biblical proclamation (what God does) into a prayer (what Christians do) or at least of confusing the two, was unthinkable. The compromising of "sacramental" worship aspects by mingling them with "sacrificial" tones is simply unacceptable to Lutherans.⁸ It is certainly possible to use some kind of eucharistic prayer that is free from unbiblical and offensive elements. Whether it is wise to do so is a question that is best answered when the primacy of justification is kept in mind.

Justification will help us to speak explicit law and explicit gospel

When God's words and actions are kept central in worship, we can anticipate that our worship will reflect enduring values rather than shallow and temporary ones. In addressing the weighty issues of our lives and destinies, God speaks to us in law and gospel, to kill and to make alive, to wound and to heal. The gospel of justification presupposes the prior preaching of law. A declaration of acquittal follows the real threat of condemnation; reconciliation assumes a prior alienation; forgiveness follows a prior emphasis on real guilt. God speaks to remove the rubble of self-chosen worship and to create, reinforce, and preserve faith and love, which worship God his way. His meaty messages of sin and grace penetrate heart, soul, and mind. As these twin truths are proclaimed to and by his people, an obvious impact on their worship will result.

If, on the other hand, God's law is not proclaimed accurately as law in all its seriousness, sin will likely be considered a minor moral problem, an ethical aberration that can be treated with emotional or psychological remedies. Supernatural help and healing will accordingly take a back seat to human effort and ingenuity. The result will be worship assemblies characterized by religious pep talks, exhortations, lectures to shame people or to stimulate changes in external human behavior. Law-oriented moralizing, shallow sentimentality, and the inducement of religious feelings that may have little or nothing to do with justification in Christ may also be seen when theologi-

⁸In 1973 three seminary faculties voiced unanimous objection to the proposed eucharistic prayer. One was ALC (Luther Seminary in St. Paul) and two were LCA (Southern Seminary in Columbia, SC, and Luther Seminary in Philadelphia). When the same idea was mentioned in the Missouri Synod (1975) it was also strenuously opposed.

cal substance is absent. The centrality and benefits of justification and its companion doctrines are then forfeited.

Many observers of the contemporary church scene draw parallels to the church situation Dietrich Bonhoeffer claimed to have seen six decades ago when he accused his peers of preaching a message of “cheap grace.” Richard Krause aptly comments on this phenomenon:

Luther’s “terror for a holy God” and “pangs of conscience” are perceived today, patronizingly, as something quaint, barely comprehensible, antiquated. Our secular culture is built on the myth of evolution. This is reinforced daily in one hundred and one subtle and overt ways. Our people breathe this falsehood and their perceptions of reality, guilt, right and wrong, truth and error become clouded and colored. For many the depth of their depravity is summed up in the trite cliché, “We’re all sinners anyway.” Our sin is no longer a horror or terror but a comfort, almost a point of pride rather than a source of shame. As a result, all too often “justification by faith” becomes an embalmed intellectual abstraction and the door is opened to “cheap grace.” The only known remedy for this situation is a proper application of law and gospel so that we might achieve the divine objective of comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable, rather than the abominable opposite.⁹

Regarding the proclamation of explicit gospel, no finer example of this can perhaps be found than in the way we announce absolution in our worship assemblies. To illustrate this point, a question and answer drawn from the Q & A service on the WELS Web site is here reproduced:

Hello,

A Baptist friend of mine is having trouble with pastors forgiving a congregation’s sins. Could you please explain to me what gives pastors or others the right to forgive sins. I see James 5:16 and John 20:23. Still kind of confused. Thank you.

The Bible verses you mention are appropriate. It may also be said that all passages that invite and urge us to preach the gospel are also rightly mentioned. To preach the gospel is to proclaim the forgiveness of sins for the sake of Christ and his atoning work.

No one will really understand what the Lutheran church teaches about “absolution” (declaring forgiveness of sins) unless he clearly understands the truth of objective or universal justification. That is at the very heart of what we believe and teach. Long ago God has already forgiven every human being his or her sins. Christ’s life and death as our substitute is finished. Nothing more needs to be done by the sinner himself. A Christian can go to any person on earth and rightly say to him, “Your sins are forgiven.”

⁹Richard Krause (1991), p 16.

To put it another way: The forgiveness of sins is not a potential fact that becomes a reality only when sinners do something to qualify for it, or even when the gospel is proclaimed and personally received through faith. It has long been a reality to be proclaimed to sinners without conditions. When Jesus Christ rose from the dead 2000 years ago, he was raised because of our justification—because we had already been justified (Romans 4:25). 2 Corinthians 5:19-21 and Romans 3:22-23 stress the same truth.

This is why we may speak to one another to say “Your sins are forgiven” or “In the name of God, I forgive your sins.” This is why a pastor, acting on behalf of all the Christians in the assembly, says the same thing. This is not arrogance or trying to “play God.” It is serving as God’s ambassadors and messengers, which is what we are.

Perhaps your Baptist friend is thinking, “This should not be done in a large group, since there may be people who are really not repentant or who are hypocrites in that church. You cannot tell them they are forgiven, can you?” We answer in this way: “Yes, we can and must say this, for God has invited and commanded us to do so. Jesus died and took away their sins, reconciling them to him—whether they believe it or not.”

Lest we be misunderstood, we also say that if we know someone to be impenitent or a hypocrite, we will first speak to that person about sin, God’s wrath, and eternal damnation in hell to expose his sinfulness and allow the Holy Spirit to convict him. That is also why the absolution in our public assemblies is always preceded by a general confession of sins and expression of repentance. But the fact remains—From God’s standpoint Christ died for them and took away their guilt. We tell people this whether they are believers or unbelievers. And we hope and pray that this time they will believe us so that they too will know it is true and rejoice with us in the amazing grace of God (F. Bivens, Archived in “Forgiveness and Repentance Section,” Set 11).

Justification will help us to keep the message of Christ prominent

Charles H. Spurgeon once lamented how religious leaders of his day could give an entire sermon or present a whole lecture without ever once mentioning the name of Jesus. There is ample evidence to indicate that this problem remains with the visible church. Additionally, even when the name of Jesus is mentioned frequently, explicit gospel may still be missing. To proclaim Christ’s active and passive obedience is to proclaim the gospel.

To expound the person and work of Christ also lets others see justification as something real rather than as something imaginary or magical. The righteousness of Christ is real, for he was a real human being who really obeyed the law and really died in our place. Adolf Hoenecke comments on Quenstedt’s emphasis on this point:

He says that the imputation is so powerful that through it the sinner is considered righteous before God's judgment just as if he had rendered the obedience himself (or, just as if he had done it himself). This thought he then develops in this way: The essence of imputation is a real assessment, which absolves the sinning man who believes in Christ [N.B.: this could be misleading] from all his sins before the divine tribunal and actually ascribes to him in a judicial way the righteousness of Christ. God's imputation indeed does not cause the righteousness of Christ to become inherent in the believer, yet it is not on that account a fictitious, unreal and imaginary imputation, it is not just a bare opinion concerning the righteous man without any real effect on him, as the papists slanderously assert, but it is a λογισμός or imputation which is sincere and real, a gracious imputation based on Christ and coming upon us, which consists in a gracious assessment of God and a real assignment to and appropriation by the believer of the righteousness of Christ by which the believer is affected in such a way that by it he is made (constituted) and declared righteous in the judgment of God's mind. Therefore this imputation is real in the highest degree, whether you look at the righteousness itself which is imputed, or the act of imputation. The very righteousness or obedience of Christ, consisting in what He did and suffered, which is imputed to us is true and real in the highest degree, since it obviously corresponds exactly to the mind and will of God as He has expressed it in the Law. The act of imputing, or the imputation itself is likewise real, because its measure (standard) is the mind of God which never makes a mistake. It follows that God cannot consider or look upon a man as righteous if true righteousness has not become his possession, nor is it possible that from the will of God, the standard of all goodness, there should issue a statement of approval of an imaginary or fictitious evaluation or righteousness. And so those to whom the righteousness of Christ is imputed are truly righteous, even though not inherently or by indwelling, but by imputation; and at least by a naming that comes from outside of them they are such righteous people, for also from that which is outside of us a true naming can take place. And so it is foolish to ask whether on account of that imputation we really are righteous or whether we are only considered righteous. For the judgment of God is according to truth. Therefore he, who in the judgment of God is considered righteous, is really righteous (Hoenecke *III*, pp 344–345, English edition pp 328-329).

*Justification will help us maintain and
exercise our freedom in worship externals*

The message of full and free justification brings with it the truth of freedom in Christ. We are free from spiritual tyranny and have the specific call to stand firm and not allow ourselves to be burdened

again by any yoke of slavery (Galatians 5:1). Our Lutheran forefathers were swift and clear in applying this to our worship assemblies.

And to the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. Nor is it necessary that human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies, instituted by men, should be everywhere alike.¹⁰

With the gospel of justification, moreover, always comes the Holy Spirit and his gift of Christ-like love. Hence the fitting reminder accompanies the announcement of freedom: “Do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather serve one another in love” (Galatians 5:13). The way we conduct ourselves at worship assemblies will reflect this truth of freedom with love and love acting in freedom.

The God who justifies is also a God of order. As revealed in Scripture, orderliness and stability in the way things are done serve human needs better than confusion or unpredictable arbitrariness. Perhaps this is the reason for the frequently observed paradox among Lutherans as they approach external worship forms. While the Augsburg Confession asserts no need for uniformity in customs or ceremonies, Lutherans have proved to be very conservative in worship traditions. There is an apparent conviction that a liturgical stability is important to preserving and proclaiming what we hold as primary doctrine. The objective gospel is seen as best expressed in forms that don’t essentially vary from place to place or generation to generation. Our belief on this issue may be expressed in this way:

Ritual and ceremony exist for the sake of stability, something the people in our changing society need. Dr. Luther expressed concerns about the wide variety of worship rituals and ceremonies that could be found in Germany in his day. He feared “everyone parading his talents and confusing the people so that they can neither learn nor retain anything.”

C. S. Lewis made a point about the “liturgical fidget” whose continual novelties serve only to set up obstacles to worship. A service, he said, “is a structure of acts and words through which we receive the sacrament, or repent, or supplicate, or adore.” As in dancing, so in worship, Lewis suggested, one needs to be thoroughly at home with the form in order to concentrate on the content without distraction: “As long as you notice, and have to count the steps, you are not dancing, but only learning to dance.” The ideal service, he said, “would be one we were almost unaware of; our attention would have been on God. But every novelty prevents this.”¹¹

¹⁰Augsburg Confession, Article VII.

¹¹Cited by James Tiefel in *Christian Worship: Manual*, pp 48-49. The same quotations, cited more extensively, are used by Kurt Marquart (1978), pp 342-343.

Stability without adequate content or predictability without substance, of course, is not what we're talking about here. Only as the liturgical components of a worship service and the seasons of the church year keep our attention focused on the words and works of Christ do we grow in our grasp of sin and grace and ultimately exult in our justification. In Christ all things belong to us, and among us this includes the historic Christian worship tradition.¹²

Justification will help us communicate adequately with others

The preceding brief glance at how the doctrine of justification shapes basic principles of worship explains to a large degree why we are accustomed to doing what we do in rather predictable ways. Yet, as everyone knows all too well, problems in worship persist, also among us. Attendance at worship services is steadily declining. People within our churches find fault with the way we go about public worship, and we are supposedly quite poor at attracting visitors and the unchurched to our services. Does the doctrine of justification address any of these issues?

This Bible teaching is so important and distinctive that we tend to use additional words or phrases, drawn from Scripture, to clarify what we believe and teach in this matter. So we speak of justification "*by grace alone*" to leave no doubt that the divine decree of pardon finds its cause only in God's love for us. It is "*unconditional*" in the full sense of the word. We are also quick to point out that justification is "*forensic*" or "*juridical*" in nature, not referring to a moral or ethical transformation within people but an imputation of a righteousness (Christ's) that is outside of us. Our status before God is new, but the renewal of our will and character is another matter, related yet different. Forgiveness is not dependent on an inner renewal of sinners, but solely on Christ's perfect work on their behalf. Justification is "*on account of Christ*" and his substitutionary life and death for mankind, not because of our faith or anything else in us. This righteousness from God, moreover, is "*real*" rather than imaginary, for it is none other than Christ's perfect obedience to the Father that is credited to us by the Father. The use of these and similar phrases shows that much effort has been expended over the years to defend this doctrine against perennial errors that seek to alter or replace it.

The task of communicating the gospel message accurately and adequately will remain one of utmost importance. If we are poor communicators, complaints from those inside and outside our churches are

¹²Those interested in reading Luther's comments on retaining the use of the historic liturgy and the church year are pointed to the American Edition of *Luther's Works*, Vol. 53, pages 11ff. and 68ff.

likely legitimate. The doctrine of forgiveness, as revealed in Scripture, stands as a classic example of how to communicate the truth. Any biblical study of justification quickly reveals the picturesque manner in which our gracious God gets his message across to us. The imagery used may well be that of a courtroom with the forensic, juridical vocabulary and phraseology. The picture language used in connection with our reconciliation to God or the forgiveness of our sins is equally memorable.¹³ God is the ultimate Communicator and leads us to imitate him in his style of catching and keeping attention along psychological norms appropriate to human experience. Of even greater import is the matter of accuracy in communicating the message of justification in word or song, in liturgy or sermon, creedal statement or prayer. This is especially true since many churches and theologians use language similar to that of Scripture to express a greatly dissimilar theology. The key to accurate communication is to retain, with clarity, the forensic nature of justification (“declare righteous,” “acquit”) instead of suggesting or allowing some meritorious moral renewal (“make righteous,” “gain God’s approval”) in the matter of forgiveness.

Justification will help us keep the role of faith clear

To state clearly the cause of justification is also an ongoing need, since “grace” is often turned from a divine favorable and loving attitude toward mankind into an imparted or infused quality that enables mankind to earn standing before God. And, particularly in modern America, the challenge of clarifying the instrumentality of faith in subjective justification is a necessary one.

Protestant theology has changed faith from an instrument apprehending God’s grace into a good work for which man is responsible, whether it is a decision, an acceptance, or a feeling which man must produce and thus make himself worthy or acceptable to God. Such an understanding of faith is the result of an emphasis and insistence on faith out of its context. When faith is made the center-piece of God’s justification, when it is presented as a condition to be fulfilled, or when it is demanded from the pulpit, a misconception of faith is created or strengthened. One word in particular, “accept,” is used indiscriminately by our own publications as well as translations of the Confessions. *Webster’s Dictionary of Synonyms* specifies: “receive implies passiveness . . . accept, in contrast with receive, always implies a measure of mental consent, even approval.” Faith is properly presented only

¹³The imagery of blotting out, forgetting or not remembering, casting into the depths of the sea, removing as far as east is from west, washing or cleansing, and the canceling of an enormous debt are samples of the biblical variety in defining or describing the fullness and reality of the forgiveness of sins.

in a context where it is pitted against works, the Law, good behavior, or the like.¹⁴

Learning from the article of justification to communicate to people accurately, as God does, will not solve all problems among us. Nor will it silence all critics of our worship assemblies. But it will perhaps alleviate some problems and at the same time offer evidence that we are consciously striving to be imitators of God for the sake of souls.

*Justification will help us as we ponder the best ways
to attract the unchurched*

Another problem frequently perceived among us is that we fail to attract large numbers of the unchurched or the unconverted as visitors to our worship assemblies. Justification inevitably moves us to think about this problem because it emphasizes that they, as part of the world, are included in reconciliation and that Christ accomplished his work for them just as surely as he did it for us. Our society largely expects us to seek these souls by means of our worship services as well as by means apart from the assemblies.

[There was a time when] Christianity did not consider the public worship of God's people to be the place for the initiation of the unchurched. . . . What changed the relationship between evangelism and worship was American Revivalism. Initially, Revivalism was a zealous attempt to reclaim pioneer Protestants who became detached from organized religion during the national expansion of the nineteenth century. Efforts by Revivalists like Charles Finney were so successful, however, that the mainline churches eventually invited the Revivalists to reclaim the spiritual deadwood of their congregations, too. Success after success (along with a variety of other factors) helped to solidify revivalistic worship principles on the American scene. Many of the churches that are part of the neo-Evangelical movement as well as those that subscribe to the tenets of the Church Growth Movement consider worship to be the preeminent assembly for evangelization and growth.

The obvious successes of American Revivalism have not gone unnoticed by Lutherans. With a deep interest in reaching the lost, many of America's Lutherans have wondered if the worship style of the Evangelical churches might have some application among Lutherans. . . . They have replaced liturgical style with a non-threatening Bible class format, hymnody with contemporary

¹⁴Theodore Mueller (1982), p 31. This article is heartily recommended to anyone desiring more information concerning the challenge of communicating God's truth accurately and adequately. A large portion of the article is a series of word studies highlighting the Hebrew and Greek vocabulary used by God to present the truth of justification in the OT and NT.

Christian anthems, the organ with a piano or pop ensemble, and vestments with a business suit.¹⁵

Can we do this and remain faithful to the principles established by the God who justifies the ungodly. Shall we, in efforts to attract and appease the unchurched, find ourselves facing a deep predicament? James Tiefel identifies the potential problem:

The presupposition many Lutherans hold is that visitors tend to be put off by the way Lutherans “package” their message of law and gospel. They rightly insist that if the package interferes with the gospel, it ought to be discarded. However, what may actually be keeping most visitors away from conservative Lutheran churches is the message of law and gospel itself. Guilt and grace, the essential ingredients of biblical theology, are not a part of natural religion, nor, for that matter, is sin or the bondage of the human will. What may actually appeal to the unchurched in contemporary Protestant worship is not only the style of the worship, but its substance as well. . . . Lutherans who try to copy the style of the fast-growing mega-churches in order to attract these seekers may find themselves in a predicament. . . . If these Lutherans want to provide what the seekers are really seeking, they will have to change much more than their style; they will have to change their substance, too, which, they believe, is what alone can convert the lost.¹⁶

Our substance, the content of law and gospel and biblical theology, is not up for grabs. Justification, which presupposes human depravity and damnableness and holds out the true and only remedy for our plight, cannot be compromised. Peter Brunner writes:

Our deliberations have shown us that the form of worship is regulated by an absolutely binding “Thou shalt not!” Thou shalt not express anything in the words or in the symbolic acts of worship that contravenes the Scripturally attested Gospel.¹⁷

Aside from “substance,” however, may we or should we change our worship “style”? If so, to what degree? The doctrine of justification doesn’t address this question directly other than pointing us to the freedom we possess in Christ and calling us to exercise that freedom in love and for the edification of souls. What must be stressed is that, in matters of genuine adiaphora, we are to cultivate truly evangelical and truly ecumenical perspectives. There is no such thing as “*the* Lutheran liturgy.” Purely external forms are legitimately influenced by histories of nations, peoples, cultures, and languages. A key is to seek and find forms that are appropriate for communicating the truth of the gospel in its fullness, in a particular setting. Some words,

¹⁵James Tiefel, *Worship Manual*, pp 105-106.

¹⁶*Worship Manual*, pp 106-107.

¹⁷Peter Brunner, (1968), pp 224-225.

tunes, and actions are inappropriate in certain situations, at best give mixed signals, and will disrupt serious efforts at educating and edifying. Good intentions may also be short on wisdom.

The idea, for instance, that the service should be “meaningful,” that is, clear and obvious to any casual visitor who might pop in from the street, is shortsightedly pragmatic. A “service” tailored to such a misguided ideal would comprise a *melange* of threadbare banalities, which even the casual visitor is likely to find unbearable after the third time—not to speak of the faithful who attend regularly for threescore years and ten.¹⁸

Let us continue in prayer for wisdom and discernment in making choices, ask God for growth in Christian love, and seek a tolerant attitude when dealing with things that pertain to our freedom. At the same time let us recall the prudent reminder of our Confessions that “nothing would serve better to maintain the dignity of ceremonies, and to nourish reverence and pious devotion among the people than if the ceremonies were observed rightly in the churches.”¹⁹ If we, in our freedom, use a given rite or liturgy, let us use it well. Let us, to the best of our ability, strive to understand and appreciate what we are doing and why we are doing it. May we appropriately use, not abuse, ceremonies.

As a final word on the issue of attracting and serving visitors and the unchurched, let us repeat a truth people often lose sight of: the primary reason our traditional approach to worship fails to attract unchurched and unconverted people is that it expresses and presents a totally different value system than the one they currently have. Our society is blatantly individualistic, human-centered, and ultimately self-centered. People seek things (including churches and religions) that make them feel good about themselves, allow them to achieve personally chosen goals and accomplishments, and further them in their quest for “meaning,” “fulfillment,” and “purpose.” Such thinking is fundamentally at odds with the biblical message of personal human guilt and universal helplessness and hopelessness outside of Christ.

Only when people’s natural value system is changed, when their self-centered approach to life is replaced with a God-centered set of values, will truly Christian worship services appeal to them. And what do we possess that can bring about such a change in people? The gospel, the truth of justification. So what the unconverted likes least, he needs most. What doesn’t attract him at all is what he desperately needs to be attracted to. Our task, as always, is to seek some point of contact where we can present the gospel to people who aren’t explicitly interested in it.

¹⁸Kurt Marquart, (1978), p 340.

¹⁹Augsburg Confession, Introduction to section on Abuses, 6, *Triglotta*, p 59.

That brings us to another truth that is also forgotten too many times: we possess the finest instruments for the spread of the gospel that can be imagined—justified people who know and rejoice in their justification and in the justification of their fellowmen. Such people are qualified to share the message with others as the opportunity presents itself in informal, commonplace settings in the home, school, or workplace. We are such people who are convinced that our gracious God has justified every person on earth. God’s will and our desire is that each person be brought to understand and embrace this truth. So the “right message” leads us to care for and strive to deal with people individually. On this point at least, the Christian church and the modern American see an agreement of sorts.²⁰

It should also be recognized that even godless thinkers have pointed to human nature itself as being the root of the problem of the strangely unhappy history of humanity. The French existentialist Albert Camus identified this problem as a profound alienation in our nature, a sense of lost innocence, humans wandering through history seeking a homeland from which we were expelled. He described the lostness of humanity in almost biblical terms, spoke in terms of alienation and inauthenticity of existence, and conceivably points us to our point of contact with modern pagans.²¹ While humanists and existentialists normally express no sense of personal guilt and appear disinterested in the authentic gospel, many may nevertheless be approachable. The doctrine of justification, with the accompanying announcement of sin and guilt, condemnation and alienation, offers people the full truth about what’s wrong with mankind and how God has remedied it. Something we could not achieve on our own is provided for us. This truth is fully capable of overturning secular, godless values and presuppositions. This is our only real solution to the problem of attracting the unconverted. Preach the truth. By word and song, in liturgy and life, proclaim it accurately and repeatedly. Beyond that, cheerfully leave the gathering of an audience to God.

*Justification will help us also in our selection and
use of the gift of music*

A final “worship problem” mentioned here is that of agreeing on what music is most appropriate and most to be appreciated in wor-

²⁰Letting justification fashion us into a “mission-minded” corps of gospel witnesses is God’s way of raising people up to attract the lost to hear the gospel. Personal witnessing in informal settings (“friendship evangelism”) is perennially the most “successful” manner of gathering people to be exposed to the gospel.

²¹The whole subject of using such existential insight as a point of contact for the preaching of justification is explored by McGrath (1988) pp 93ff.

ship. Those within the church square off on the issue more than the unchurched do. The debate is neither new nor unusual. Whether we speak of liturgy or hymnody, we speak of contested territory. Justification obviously does not address this issue directly. The fruit of justification does enter the arena. Love, patience, mutual tolerance, and the willingness to hear others out will never go out of style in issues like this. But is one's preference of music purely a matter of personal taste, or is it a reflection of being strong or weak in biblical values? A contemporary defender of the historic Lutheran liturgy offers this appraisal and diagnosis of the problem:

Holy ground calls for holy songs. Yet some are put off by the foreign feel of the liturgy. Our ears are so jaded by the discord of modern life that the harmonious texts of the ancient liturgy seem stilted. Our voices are so attuned to the music of this age that the liturgy's timeless music seems awkward. . . . No wonder the liturgy seems foreign to us, then. For you and I live in a dying world, and the liturgy invites us to enter the land of the living. . . . In the sacred liturgy we live most completely as God's holy people, singing the songs of Zion in this foreign land. . . . The foreignness of the liturgy is really a matter of perspective, you see. . . . There is a certain beauty to these songs, though it is a beauty not of this world. . . .²²

To the degree that this appraisal is correct, the doctrine of justification can help. Justification leads to inner renewal and a reordering of values and priorities, likes and dislikes in Christian thinking and living. Our new status in Christ is accompanied by a new likeness to Christ. What pleases him pleases us, more and more. Still, since even the most ancient and approved components in our historical liturgy cannot be equated with heaven's songs or established as divinely mandated songs for us on earth, their use or nonuse remain a matter of choice. And choices, even among saints, differ widely.

I suspect that most of those present at this gathering are quite content with, even appreciative of, our historical liturgy and the great majority of hymns in our hymnal. But I may be wrong. No matter. Let us encourage each other to do our liturgical worship well! Let us not treat our inherited liturgical style like "some embarrassing old antique" and compromise its value with poor preparation and poor performance.²³ Above all else, cherish what gives all our worship, private and public, its tone and texture: the gospel of forgiveness through Christ. Do so in anticipation of being gathered around the throne in glory, the eternal setting for our thanks and praise.

²²Harold Senkbeil (1994), pp 128-129.

²³See James Tiefel, *Worship Manual*, p 108-110 for excellent encouragements in this regard.

How Can We Best Get the Message Out In the Classroom?

For most of the examples just presented, there are parallel applications for those who proclaim God's Word in classrooms. The external settings may differ, but the goals and subject matter are essentially the same. Perhaps one of the things that merits repeated emphasis for all teachers of Scripture is our handling of law and gospel. With apologies for some repetition of thought, here are selected points for discussion at this time.

Justification highlights biblical contradictions and contrasts of law and gospel. When stressing universal sin and universal justification, it is important to see that the biblical contradictions involved here are real and profound. It's also important to leave them stand.

Comparing Holy Scripture with other writings, we observe that from the perspective of human reason no book is so full of contradictions as the Bible, and that, not only in minor points, but in the principal matter, in the doctrine of how we may come to God and be saved. In one place the Bible offers forgiveness to all sinners; in another place forgiveness of sins is withheld from all sinners. In one passage a free offer of life everlasting is made to all men; in another, men are directed to do something themselves towards being saved. This riddle is solved when we reflect that there are in the Scriptures two entirely different doctrines, the doctrine of the law and the doctrine of the gospel (Walther, p 6).

Turning the leaves of the Holy Scriptures while still ignorant of the distinction between the law and the gospel, a person receives the impression that a great number of contradictions are contained in the Scriptures; in fact, the entire Scriptures seem to be made up of contradictions, worse than the Koran of the Turks (Walther, p 61).

We and our students will ideally be fully aware of these truths continuously:

- We are righteous and loved by God . . .
We are sinners and hated by God
- We are righteous by faith without works . . .
We are righteous by doing what is righteous
- We are blessed in the sight of God . . .
We are under a curse of God
- We are perfectly secure and need not fear . . .
We are constantly in danger and do well to fear

Justification is not a stand-alone truth. The truths of divine law and sin are to be used in tandem with it. So inadequate or improper uses of divine law are to be avoided in our teaching.

These will greatly hinder the communicating of the truth of justification. Three categories of wrong uses of the law are:

*Eliminating or minimizing the declaration
of divine law (antinomianism)*

- An often subtle downplaying of the law may be found among evangelical Lutherans, and this is often traceable to an attempt to reconcile law statements with our emphasis on universal grace and objective justification.
- Another reason for antinomian practices may well be that the declarations of divine law are so offensive to so many. The Lord God is quickly labeled a bloodthirsty God, a divine bully, or as Thomas Jefferson expressed it, a “demon” or “malignant spirit.”
- “God hates the sin but loves the sinner.” But the Law says God hates sin and the sinner. The gospel says he loves the sinner. “God doesn’t send people to hell because he wants to, but because he has to.” Yet no one will be put in hell but by the decree of God.
- Nevertheless, preaching the gospel effectively never involves abandoning law declarations. “The seed of the gospel can germinate only in soil that has been tilled with the sharp blade of the law. . . . To prepare the soil properly the plow must go down deep” (Elmer Kettner, *CTM*, May 1953, p 326). So when we quite correctly teach that we must not be afraid of God since he is our kind, merciful, and forgiving heavenly Father, we should not think that we are to stop saying that we are to stand in fear of the holy God, for he remains a consuming fire (He 12:28).
- A somewhat different but still related blunting of the desired impact of the law is found in using only vague generalizations and making reference only to general evils of the day while exposing sin.

*Turning the law into “another gospel” or
a supplement to the gospel (legalism; moralizing)*

- “Legalism” is a broad term that refers to some misuse of the law. It may refer to identifying morality with strict obedience of legal codes (aside from inner motives), using law to motive people to modify their behavior, or assuming that obedience to law gains divine favor. In Christian circles it usually expresses itself with a blending of “obedience” to gospel *and* law.
- This approach to salvation theology is popular in our society due to Reformed as well as Roman Catholic dogma (especially seen in sacramental theology and in Rome’s definitions of saving grace and faith). Cults with Christian veneer follow

suit. The universal “opinion of the law” in mankind (in us!) heartily endorses the concept.

- Relying on a “law-to-law” progression or line of thought in our presentations is one way to misuse God’s Word. “The preacher begins by condemning me for my poor showing in sanctification. That’s fine. . . . The problem is that from there he goes directly to the third use of the law and invites me to start doing a better job for Jesus’ sake. No matter what the preacher’s good intentions might be, this law-to-law approach leaves me looking at myself and implies that I should start doing better (for Jesus’ sake, of course)” (James Westendorf, *Preach the Word*, July 2001, p. 2).
- “Moralizing” is a term used for one aspect of legalism, that of teaching people to be or do good by the threats or promises of law. The goal here is moral conduct or the improvement of morals, period. “What does moralizing have to do with [the proper use of Law and Gospel in our ministries]? We can best answer in two words: Absolutely nothing! . . . Such an end has nothing in common with our goals in the Christian church, whether we are talking about our primary or secondary aims. Let us etch this thought deeply in our minds: There is no point of contact between moralizing and the Christian ministry! There may be some, though, that take exception with that assertion—at least with putting it so strongly. Don’t we affirm, they may wonder, that one of the aims of our ministry . . . is to promote sanctification? And isn’t it also true that instructing people in righteousness . . . is the same as making someone moral? There is just one answer we can give to these questions: Absolutely not! . . . In our ministry we are concerned with effecting a real change of heart (*metanoia*); we want to replace a sinful heart with Christ’s own heart. Manners, outward appearance, hands and feet—these are the only concerns of moralizing” (Silas Krueger, p 14).
- Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. . . . Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit (Mt 7:17-18, 12:33).

Continuing to present law and delaying to present the gospel for wrong or inadequate reasons

- Sometimes this is done “to make the Gospel more dramatic” and sometimes it is done to “ensure a certain degree of remorse” prior to an announcement of absolution. Those fearful of the specter of “cheap grace” are tempted to get people “good and terrified” and those with a streak of pietism often seek to bring one’s fear of God to a certain predetermined level before seeking to awaken hope and joy through the gospel.

- “This is found nowhere in God’s Word. This is man meddling in God’s work and wanting to improve on his method of conversion” (August Pieper, *TWT*, II, p 55).
- A personal review of Bible sections like Isaiah 43:22-25 and Mt 23:13-37 will serve us well in this matter.

Justification, which is pure gospel, is to be understood and presented as such. Inadequate or improper uses of the gospel are also to be avoided in our teaching. Among these are:

Turning the gospel into a law to be obeyed

- The pervasive influence of the human heart’s opinion of the law coupled with the mindset of much Reformed and Roman Catholic thought are again factors to be reckoned with in our cultural setting. We freely acknowledge the legitimacy of the phrase “obey the gospel” (2 Th 1:8; 1 Pe 4:17) but admit some confusion in thought may result from the vocabulary. The wider context of Scripture and the many clarifications given in the Bible forbid turning the gospel into a law or Jesus into another “Lawgiver.”
- “Gospel-beating” is similar to the previously mentioned “law-to-law” line of thought, and is a misuse of the gospel. The preacher or teacher again begins by condemning the unsatisfactory way I live my life for Christ. Then “he reminds me that Christ has showered his love upon me in so many ways and in such great amounts. . . . The only problem is that he is telling me this, not primarily to assure me of God’s forgiveness in Christ, but to shame me into doing better for Christ. This is beating me over the head with the Gospel, and it is not gospel at all. . . . Perhaps the preacher thinks he has preached the Gospel, but he leaves me once again looking at myself in despair” (J. Westendorf, *Preach the Word*, July 2001, p 2).

*Making the gospel conditional on something
(especially personal repentance, faith)*

- “In defining the essence of the gospel, everything depends on whether it is a conditional or an unconditional message of grace” (A. Pieper, *TWT*, II, p 41). A misunderstanding of what the gospel is and unwise wording in presenting the gospel too easily turn it into a conditional promise. Most frequently, a person’s repentance and/or faith are made the condition upon which forgiveness and fellowship with God depend.
- A major culprit in this matter is the word “if” used or understood in a legal and causal sense. Theologians as well as linguists in general observe that conditional clauses may or may not denote cause or origin of something. “The particle ‘if’ is either etiological [causal] or syllogistic [indicating a

logical conclusion but not a cause-and-effect relationship]; it names either the cause or the result. In legal statements: If you do that, you will live, the particle ‘if’ is etiological, since the obedience is the cause because of which eternal life is given to those who observe the Law. But in evangelical promises: If you believe, you will be saved, the particle ‘if’ is syllogistic, for it denotes the divinely constituted mode of the application for which faith alone is fitted” (J. Gerhard, in F. Pieper, *CD*, II, 36).

- “If you [repent and] believe you will be saved” . . . “Jesus will love you if you are obedient”.

*Failing to present the gospel in explicit ways,
with clear reference to Christ’s work*

- 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. . . . He was delivered over to death for [because of] our sins and was raised to life for [because of] our justification . . . Just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. . . . God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. (Ro 3:22-24, 4:25, 5:18, 2 Co 5:19). The truth of universal or objective justification is not complicated or difficult to declare. But all too often the message doesn’t get to people.
- “Explicit gospel” is a term often used with reference to Christ’s active and passive obedience and the resultant truth of universal justification or forgiveness. An adequate presentation of Christ’s substitutionary life and death will help restrain those who would downplay the importance of the law or distort the unconditional nature of the gospel. The message of divine love and Fatherly compassion, when divorced from Christ’s work, is too easily misunderstood and invites confusion regarding both law and gospel. Our call is to proclaim forgiveness of sins in Christ’s name, not simply to talk about forgiveness.
- “Juxtaposition is a good word to remember in sermon preparation. Put the individual alongside of Christ. Then describe them as they trade places, the sinner as though he had done all that Christ did, and Jesus as though he had done all that the sinner did. Let us not merely refer to the Gospel, but dwell on it, develop it, repeat it, emphasize it, and apply it that our hearts may catch it” (Elmer Kettner, *CTM*, May, 1953, p 322).

Resolving to withhold or obscure the gospel in some circumstances

- “Don’t be stingy with the Gospel” (Walther, p 240). Some withhold the gospel because they feel someone’s expression of

contrition over sin is inadequate. Let us beware of such a path in our ministries.

- “The brotherly admonition based on Matthew 18 is neither an admonition nor brotherly if it operates only with the law, if it condemns sin but does not appeal for or invite a return with the grace of God. No one should consider Nathan’s words of repentance to David (2 Sa 12) a pure preaching of the law. Before Nathan announces the sword of the Lord, he has held up all the special grace God has shown him, which naturally included universal grace and the adoption as sons of God. Nathan places David’s frightful punishment in relation to the gospel from the outset. In this way he brought the king to the confession, I have sinned against the Lord” (A. Pieper, p 56).

Justification deserves our best thought and preparation. So we do well to review and clarify our goals and purposes as we teach.

- We are here to declare law and gospel, to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted. Our commission is to preach the gospel, make disciples, and be witnesses on behalf of Jesus. We serve the cause of justification and, in doing so, also serve the cause of sanctification. “Christian doctrine can be summarized in these three sentences: (1) You are damned! (2) Your sins are forgiven! (3) Therefore go and sin no more! The first part is the bare law, the second the bare gospel, the third the gospel admonition. Preaching [and teaching] each part in its proper order is called the correct division and combination of law and gospel and saves many souls” (A. Pieper, p 71).
- As stated earlier, this has nothing to do with moralizing or legalism. We are “ministers of the gospel” and know that the title is not an empty or inaccurate one.
- We must look to the task of cultivating an accurate “tone” in our classrooms that serves as the environment for the use of law and gospel in their respective roles and purposes. Somewhat obviously this requires hearts that bow before all of God’s Word, law and gospel. “Apply yourself to the word, apply the word to yourself, then apply the word to others.” And let the gospel of justification predominate.
- We also seek to employ evangelical admonition according to the needs of our students. This means that we will honor and respect our students as God’s holy people and will always be alert to their spiritual needs. Then we may best serve as “paracletes” (counselors, comforters) according to the need. Even then, it’s not simply a matter of formulaic words. “Whoever believes will be saved,” can, by itself, be understood as law or gospel. The wider context of our message and the tone we set will indicate if we are using the words to oppose salvation by one’s own works. “From inexact speech springs heresy” (Jerome).

Justification is a truth to be trusted, as is the message of sin and condemnation. We are called to trust the law and gospel as God's chosen tools.

- Perhaps it is already obvious. Much of the misuse of law and gospel stems from a distrust of their power or efficacy to accomplish what God wants them to accomplish. Lack of confidence in the Lord's chosen tools leads to our tampering with them.
- Again, to quote Luther, we are not to play carpenters in these matters. The Father knows best. "Since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. . . . The foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength" (1 Co 1:21, 25).

Conclusion: What, then, is our continuing primary task?

"My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice. . . Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it" (Lk 8:21, 11:28). "What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth" (2 Tm 1:13; 2:15).

Let me offer you a quotation from Luther that you ought to commit to memory and of which you should make diligent use. It is found in his *Preface to the Epistle to the Galatians* (St. L. Ed. IX, 9) and reads: "In my heart there reigns, and shall ever reign, this one article, namely, faith in my dear Lord Christ, which is the sole beginning, middle, and end of all spiritual and godly thoughts which I may have at any time, day or night." Luther might as well have said "in my sermons and writings," instead of "in my heart," for his sermons and writings conform to the above rule. It is of paramount importance that your heart be full of this subject and that you speak of it from personal experience, so that, when you reach this point in your sermons, you are forced to confess to your hearers that you cannot fully express all that you have experienced, that it baffles all efforts to describe it in words, and that you can merely stammer forth a few inadequate words about it. A preacher of this sort will soon notice that streams of the Holy Spirit are being poured out upon his congregation (Walther, 408, 409-410).

This is equally true for all of God's people, teachers, staff ministers, and lay leaders alike. Only then will we be getting (and enjoying) the Right Message, getting it out to others, and getting it out the right way.

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