

“Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17).

“One holy Church is to continue forever. The Church is the assembly of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered” (Augustana VII).

The Church “has outward marks so that it can be recognized, namely, the pure doctrine of the Gospel, and the administration of the Sacraments in accordance with the Gospel of Christ” (Apology VII/VIII).

The Lord Jesus gives John a vision of the Church at the consummation of all things: “Behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’” (Rev. 7:9–10).

This one, holy, Christian and apostolic Church is here and now, wherever the Word of God is present. The Word of God will have believers; it will not return to God void!

The Church is created and lives by words — specific words, true words and every one of them God’s Words. “Let God be true though every one were a liar” (Rom. 3:4). As Jesus said, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away” (Luke 21:33).

## Series Schedule

September 2014 – Love (Pastor Jonathan Boehne, Trinity, El Paso, Ill.)

October 2014 – Gospel (Pastor Daniel Schoes-sow, Zion and Christ, Granton, Wis.)

November 2014 – Propitiation (Pastor Mark Surburg, Good Shepherd, Marion, Ill.)

December 2014 – Forgiveness (Pastor D. Richard Stuckwisch, Emmaus, South Bend, Ind.)

January 2015 – Salvation (Pastor David Rufner, New Hope, Hudsonville, Mich.)

February 2015 – Grace (Pastor Kurt Ziemann, St. Stephen and Immanuel, Adell and Random Lake, Wis.)

March 2015 – Faith (Pastor Jonathan Fisk, Bethany, Naperville, Ill.)

April 2015 – Righteousness (Pastor Herbert Mueller III, St. Peter and Grace, Westgate and Fayette, Iowa)

May 2015 – Holiness (Pastor Nabil Nour, Redeemer, Armour, S.D.)

**THE CHURCH IS COMMISSIONED** to bring life to the world through God’s Words, so that people may be baptized into eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ and be taught to treasure and observe everything Jesus has commanded.

In her quest for the lost, the Church is often tempted to adopt the words of the culture or society. To be faithful to the Lord who gave her His words, the Church must be faithful to the fullness of God’s Word. If the Church fails to do so, we can easily become like the friends of Job. Despite their love for their friend, their religious and godly talk with their friend, God says to them: “My anger burns against you and against your two friends, for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has” (Job 42:7).

The Great Commission’s charge to “[teach] them to observe all that I have commanded you” bars the Church from modified meanings of any of God’s Words, lest the hearers cease to hear God and never be brought to the faith through His Word.

Therefore, the Church gladly and boldly, with love for the lost, takes up this glorious commission. Her desire is nothing more than to speak “the truth in love” and “to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love” (Eph. 4:15–16).

*(Continued on next page.)*



As Lutheran pastors, we are committed to a specific confession of the faith because we have found that confession to be a true and faithful exposition of all of God's Word, namely, the Augsburg Confession, its Apology, Luther's catechisms and all the documents of the Book of Concord.

Why are the real textual/contextual meanings of God's Word so important to us? Because of our commitment to Christ and to His Scripture as God's Word and, most of all, for the sake of the Gospel of Christ. As the Scripture says, "Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual" (1 Cor. 2:12–13).

Lest the good and faithful words used to impart "spiritual truths" be taken captive to the redefining efforts of the culture, or be lost in often-heard clichés or incomprehensible jargon, it is critical that we return to the real substance of the words as the Lord has filled them in His Word and as they are faithfully explained in our confession. Only in this way shall we be able to receive in faith the fullness of things freely given to us by God and joyfully give them away to others. In other words, we pastors are called to "unpack" these words for our people, pointing to the objective realities revealed in and worked by Jesus Christ for us.

The goal of each study, then, is to examine one of the words of faith our Lord has given to us.





September 2014

# Love

Word of Life for the Church and for the World  
2014-15 LCMS Circuit Bible Studies

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## LEADER'S GUIDE

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## FOCUS

“So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him” (1 John 4:16).<sup>1</sup>

Therein lies the focus and goal of this study: “coming to know” God’s love. Of ourselves, we do not know it or believe it. Only through the gift of faith in Christ do we know God’s love and abide in it. This is our prayer.

**The leader may here offer a prayer from 1 John 4:16 to begin the study.**

### The Problem

If we assume that all people will be delighted to hear that God loves them, we are sorely mistaken. The problem is, as C.S. Lewis states it in *The Problem of Pain*, that God’s love is “the intolerable compliment” that God pays us. The problem isn’t just that we don’t know that God loves us. The problem is that we don’t want Him to love us. As Lewis puts it, it’s not that we want more of God’s love, but less. It’s the child who would like his parents to love him a little less (so he could do more of what he wants) or the husband who would be quite content if his wife’s love weren’t there at times. Instead of a father, it’s desiring a grandfather who just wants us to enjoy ourselves.<sup>2</sup>

It’s a problem of definitions. If we define love only in human terms of affection, admiration, empathy, kindness, compassion and the like, then we won’t have any problem with a God who loves us. However, if we define love as all of that and much more — the way God defines it and, more importantly, the way He does it — then we have a problem. God loving us the way He truly does in Christ is the intolerable compliment. It is a love, as Luther teaches, seen in the cross and suffering of Christ.

Read and discuss these following thoughts on love:

**The leader may take as much time as desired for discussion on the paragraphs before and on the following quotes. The emphasis should be on the difference between the love of God and that love commonly defined among men.**

Luther’s *Heidelberg Disputation*, Thesis 28:

*“The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it.”*

*The love of man comes into being through that which is pleasing to it.”*<sup>3</sup>

G.K. Chesterton in *Heretics*, distinguishing between admiration and love:

*“He admires England, but he does not love her; for we admire things with reasons, but love them without reasons. He admires England because she is strong, not because she is English.”*<sup>4</sup>

Chesterton in *Orthodoxy*, again on what happens when love is without a reason:

*“Men did not love Rome because she was great. She was great because they had loved her . . . The man who is most likely to ruin the place he loves is exactly the man who loves it with a reason. The man who will improve the place is the man who loves it without a reason.”*<sup>5</sup>

C.S. Lewis in *The Problem of Pain*:

*“To ask that God’s love should be content with us as we are is to ask that God should cease to be God: because He is what He is, His love must, in the nature of things, be impeded and repelled by certain stains in our present character, and because He already loves us He must labour to make us lovable.”*<sup>6</sup>

*“Human love, as Plato teaches us, is the child of Poverty — of a want or lack; it is caused by a real or supposed good in its beloved which the lover needs or desires. But God’s love, far from being caused by goodness in the object, causes all the goodness which the object has, loving it first into existence and then into real, though derivative, lovability.”*<sup>7</sup>

### Questions

1. In your ministry, where do you see sinners resisting the intolerable compliment of God’s love?

Examples might include resistance to preaching Law and Gospel in sermons, in counseling, etc. Examples outside the congregation might be modern evangelicalism’s abandonment of the cross or the secular world’s resistance to biblical marriage and family.

3 Harold J. Grimm, ed. “Heidelberg Disputation,” *Luther’s Works*, American Edition, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1957), 31: 57.

4 Gilbert K. Chesterton. *Heretics*. [www.ccel.org/ccel/chesterton/heretics.iii.html](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/chesterton/heretics.iii.html)

5 Gilbert K. Chesterton. *Orthodoxy*. (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1908). [www.ccel.org/ccel/chesterton/orthodoxy.viii.html](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/chesterton/orthodoxy.viii.html)

6 Lewis, p. 574.

7 Ibid., p. 576.

1 All Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. Copyright 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers, Wheaton, Illinois.

2 C. S. Lewis *The Problem of Pain* in *The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics*. (New York: Harper Collins, 2002), 567–578.

2. (Luther) What does it mean that the love of God creates pleasing people? Where does He do that?

**We see God's creative love in the cross of Jesus, delivered to us in Word and Sacrament.**

3. (Chesterton) How do we answer the question, "Why does God love me?" In what sense does He love us without a reason?

**God finds no reason in us to love. (It's unreasonable.) Otherwise, His love would not last. He loves because He is love.**

4. (Lewis) Why would it be contradictory for a God who loves us to simply do nothing with us?

**He would not be God or loving. His own love and goodness impels Him to create us good and lovable.**

As a helpful exercise, list as many words as possible that are used to define love and discuss how each is insufficient to fully define the love of God (e.g., affection).

**Possibilities will include kindness, compassion, sympathy, feelings of pleasure, admiration, sexual desire, a virtue, friendship, self-giving, etc.**

What then is sufficient to describe the love of God? Luther's thesis above is the completion of his entire argument on being a theologian of the cross in the Heidelberg Disputation. Only through the cross can we know and speak the truth of God's love — that intolerable compliment. Without the cross, all definitions of God's love will lead to a false theology of glory.

In light of the fact that God's love is unique, why is it significant that the writers of the New Testament chose to primarily use the word *agape*, a word not commonly used for love in Greek, instead of the usual *eros* or *philia*?

**The Spirit inspired a word that transcended the limits of *eros* and *philia*. The primary use of *agape* in the New Testament signifies that this love of God in Christ can only be defined as God defines it (John 3:16).**

## SCRIPTURAL AND CONFESSIONAL UNDERSTANDING

Through God's Word, sinful man finds a new and greater definition of love and a new language of love. It centers on Jesus Christ and His cross, and this love involves the cross and suffering.

It might help to realize that philosophies of love, including those of Plato and Aristotle, generally involve an ascending or elevation of man's love to the highest object of love through contemplation or reflection. The love of man (*eros* or *philia*) is a vehicle or ladder through which we may ascend to God. This limited and human concept of love continues to infiltrate theology. For example, Jacob's ladder has been, and is still, seen by many as this ascension of man (Gen. 28:10). Gregory the Great uses Jacob's ladder and Paul's "ascension to Paradise" in 2 Cor. 12:2–3 to say:

*"Lo, [Paul] is already initiated into heavenly secrets, and yet through the bowels of condescension he searches into the bed of the carnal; and the same eye of the heart which in his elevation he lifts to the invisible, he bends in his compassion upon the secrets of those who are subject to infirmity ... being joined at once to the highest and to the lowest by the bond of charity ... true preachers not only aspire in contemplation to the holy head of the*

*Church, that is to the Lord, above, but also descend in commiseration downward to His members."*<sup>8</sup>

Another example of this ascent of man's love to God is seen in the idolatrous temple prostitution so prevalent in the Old Testament. St. Augustine summarizes this in his Confessions by saying that he was "in love with love."

From the Apology, Article II:

*"If human nature has such powers that by itself it can love God above all things, as the scholastics confidently assert, then what can original sin be? What need is there for the grace of Christ if we can become righteous by our own righteousness? What need is there for the Holy Spirit if human powers by themselves can love God above all things and obey his commandments? ... The scholastics mingled Christian doctrine with philosophical views about the perfection of nature and attributed more than was proper to free will and to 'elicited acts.'" <sup>9</sup>*

<sup>8</sup> Gregory the Great. James Barmby, trans. *The Book of Pastoral Rule and Selected Epistles of Gregory the Great*. [www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf212.iii.iv.iii.v.html](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf212.iii.iv.iii.v.html)

<sup>9</sup> T. G. Tappert, ed. "Apology of the Augsburg Confession" in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2000), II, 10–13.



Before looking at the scriptural record, discuss how their love is used by sinners as a ladder to ascend to God. Include in your discussion Koberle's distinction of moralism, mysticism and speculation as the three attempts of man to ascend to God.<sup>10</sup> How is the love of man used today in an attempt to reach God?

Countless people think the route to heaven is to “love everybody and love life.” Discussion here might also include man's love of creation and nature. For example, trying to look through a sunrise or plant a tree to speculate on God's love. It might include the mysticism of megachurch worship that drives the emotions higher and higher to feel God's love. You might talk about philosophy (love of knowledge), new age religions, modern spirituality and the like.

## Love Came Down

Note to the leader: Do as many of the following Scripture readings as time will allow.

1. John 1:9–14. When God's love became flesh and blood in Jesus, how did the world and His own people receive His love? What specifically happened to those who did receive His love (v. 12–13)?

**We crucified Him. We do not like God's love on His terms. We prefer the darkness (our false idea of God's love) to the true light of Christ. To those who did receive Him, they were born of God. That is, they were put to death and raised to life in Baptism.**

2. John 3:1–16. John 3:16 is the classic text for understanding God's love. God loved the world (in this way): He gave His only Son. Yet we ought to keep that verse in context with Nicodemus. Did Nicodemus receive Him at first? What kind of love did Nicodemus want from Jesus? In contrast, the “intolerable” love of God required what for entrance into the kingdom?

From Luther's *Heidelberg Disputation*: “He who has not been brought low, reduced to nothing through the cross and suffering, takes credit for works and wisdom and does not give credit to God. He thus misuses and defiles the gifts of God. It is this that Christ says in John 3, ‘You must be born anew.’ To be born anew, one must consequently first die and then be raised up with the Son of Man.”<sup>11</sup>

**Nicodemus was attracted to the signs that Jesus had done and expected Jesus to love him and his works of love.**

<sup>10</sup> See Bryan Wolfmuehler's “Three Broken Ladders” at [wolfmuehler.wordpress.com/2011/02/03/three-broken-ladders](http://wolfmuehler.wordpress.com/2011/02/03/three-broken-ladders)

<sup>11</sup> Harold J. Grimm, ed. “Heidelberg Disputation,” *Luther's Works*, American Edition, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1957), 55.

**Instead, Jesus said Nicodemus must start over. He must suffer the death of all his works. He must be born again from above to trust solely in the work of Jesus. God didn't send His son because Nicodemus was such an attractive, lovely man that God wanted His Son to meet him.**

3. Hosea 2:19–3:3. In Hosea, marriage is used as the metaphor of God's love. God makes His “marriage promises” to Israel in 2:19–20. How do Gomer and Israel want “less love”? In spite of God's love and promise to Israel, what did Israel love (3:1)?

God's promises in 2:20–23 sound similar to the pledges in the marriage rite: “I pledge you my faithfulness.” God promises they would know Him, would receive mercy and would be their God. Gomer is the wife, however, who wants less love. She, like Israel, would prefer her husband to leave her to find pleasures elsewhere. Israel loved cakes of raisins and sacrificed to pagan gods. Israel loved the pleasures of idolatry and adultery.

4. Hosea 11:1–9. Here God's love is pictured as father and son. Did the son (Israel) desire the father's love? How does this entire chapter teach the intolerable compliment of God's love? What fatherly things did God's love do with Israel? How do the words of verse 9, “For I am God and not a man,” distinguish the love of God from the love of man? Finally, how does Jesus not only fulfill verse 1 (Matt. 2:15) but also verse 9?

Even though God's love created Israel to be His son, they desired less love and wandered away. God continued to be their Father. He taught them to walk like any good father does and took them up into His arms. He healed them time and time again, yet they were like ungrateful children that didn't even acknowledge or know His love. God's love isn't based in feelings and attraction. His love creates a people pleasing to Him. In verse 9, Jesus is the Holy One in our midst, who did not come to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him.

## God's Love and the Beloved of God

The Scriptures and the Confessions teach that the love of God cannot be understood apart from faith in Christ and His cross and suffering. The love of God in Christ creates love of God in Christians.

Apology, Article IV, 141–142: “In fact, we add that it is impossible to separate faith from love for God, be it ever so small. For through Christ we come to the Father; and having received the forgiveness of sins, we become sure that we have a gracious God who cares about us, we call upon him, give thanks to him, fear and love him. So

John teaches in his first epistle (4:19); ‘We love,’ he says, ‘because he first loved us,’ that is, because he gave his Son for us and forgave us our sins. So he indicates that faith precedes while love follows. The faith of which we are speaking, moreover, has its existence in penitence; that is, it is conceived in the terrors of a conscience that feels God’s wrath against our sins and looks for forgiveness of sins and deliverance from sin. This faith ought to grow and be strengthened in these terrors and in other afflictions.”<sup>12</sup>

According to this quote: From where do faith and love find their creation and existence?

**“In penitence . . . in the terrors of a conscience.” In other words, in suffering. The love of God is seen in the cross and suffering. In feeling the wrath of God against our sins, faith and love of God are born anew in the forgiveness of sins.**

Apology, Article IV, 45–46: “Therefore, when a man believes that his sins are forgiven because of Christ and that God is reconciled and favorably disposed to him because of Christ, this personal faith obtains the forgiveness of sins and justifies us . . . it regenerates us and brings us the Holy Spirit, so that we can finally obey God’s law, love him, truly fear him, be sure that he hears us, and obey him in all afflictions. It mortifies our lust. By freely accepting the forgiveness of sins, faith sets against God’s wrath not our merits of love, but Christ the mediator and

propitiator. This faith is the true knowledge of Christ, it uses his blessings, it regenerates our hearts, it precedes our keeping of the law.”<sup>13</sup>

What does faith in Christ do to our lust, and what love does it give?

**Here we plainly see that the love of man must be “mortified,” put to death with Christ, that the love of God might be worked in our heart to keep His law.**

1. Deut. 6:4–5. Why is verse 4 necessary for the command to love in verse 5?

**The Old Testament command to love is always grounded in the Lord’s love for His people.**

2. John 21:15–17 (The example of Peter). How did Peter understand the love of God before Good Friday? What was the nature of his love for Jesus? (Give examples.) What is different here in chapter 21? What does Jesus command him to do with the love he has received and the love he now has for Jesus?

**Peter was a theologian of glory and tried with all His might to resist and avoid the love of God shown in the cross and suffering of Jesus. After the resurrection, Peter knows the love of God in forgiveness. Jesus commands him to feed His sheep with the very love that he has received from Christ.**

## TEACHING AND PREACHING LOVE

The temptation for pastors is to attempt to make the love of God in Christ appealing to the sinner by making it something that is “do-able” for the sinner. By doing so, our sinful hope is that He will become the object of man’s love. Why is this backward, and where do you see this happening in the Church today?

**Examples are plentiful but should include the overall church growth movement and marketing of the Church.**

1. Consider the parable of the lost sheep (Luke 15:4–7).

Why was the one sheep lost (Is. 53:6)? Who is rejoicing: the lost sheep or the Shepherd? How does the Shepherd bring the sheep back home? Who is the object of love first: the sheep or the Shepherd?

**The sheep is lost and astray because he conceived and born so and has continued in his lostness by his own**

**choosing and sin. He has gone his own way. The Shepherd rejoices because He loves the sheep. At first, the sheep may or may not rejoice to be found. It doesn’t matter. The Shepherd puts the sheep on His shoulders and carries him home (the cross and suffering of Jesus). Everything centers around the Shepherd’s love for His sheep. The sheep’s love of the Shepherd is purely a response.**

2. “God is love.” What does this mean? All sinners have their own idea. Forde answers from the theology of the cross: “Knowledge of God comes when God happens to us, when God does Himself to us.”<sup>14</sup>

Where does God *do* His love to us, and where and when is He doing that in the congregation(s) you serve?

**Don’t allow a quick, flippant “Word and Sacrament”**

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Gerhard O. Forde. *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 90.

<sup>12</sup> Tappert, p. 113.

answer to this question. This is the most important stuff! God does His love in the sermon. God does His love in private confession and absolution. God does His love in the Lord's Supper. God does His love in the study of His Word at home and in Bible Study. If we have members who aren't receiving any of the above, will they know the true nature of God's love?

When you minister to those suffering, how do you teach and confess God's love to them (That "intolerable compliment" kind of love)?

**Pastoral visits are opportune times to teach and bring God's love. They are also opportune times to deliver His love in absolution and in the Lord's Supper.**

In the normal routine of your life as a pastor, where and when is God doing His love to you?

Scripture, the Confessions, prayer and private confession and absolution are the regular routine of a pastor's life. If they aren't, what is the plan to make them a routine, and what's the next step to get started on that? Leaders should take this time to encourage the brothers.

3. Luther: *"This is the love of the cross, born of the cross, which turns in the direction where it does not find good that it may enjoy, but where it may confer good upon the bad and needy person."*<sup>15</sup>

How is love born of the cross for our neighbor an "intolerable compliment," a "love without a reason," and a "love that causes goodness"?

**Love of the cross doesn't love the neighbor with any reason. It loves even when the neighbor would prefer "less love." It looks to bring joy and goodness and not just to receive enjoyment from the neighbor. Each neighbor is created lovely to us by God's love for them in Christ.**

In the families and lives of those in your congregation(s), do you see a need for this virtue of love that turns to where it may confer some good and not just where it may enjoy good?

**There is mass confusion in families today regarding love. Husbands and wives, siblings, parents and children all need to be trained in the love of the cross that looks to confer good.**

4. Peter tells us that *"love covers a multitude of sins"* (1 Peter 4:8b). Sinful nature often takes this to mean that love can be a "cover-up" for anything and everything. Secular society drills the Church for being "unloving." Even within the Church, love is used as an excuse for ignoring sin.

Sasse: *"This peace [of Christ] can be destroyed by lack of brotherly love, which again is a supernatural gift of the Holy Spirit. This love must not be confounded with what the world calls love, human sympathy and fellowship. The love of Christ can use also the sword (Matt 10:34). True Christian love — agape, caritas — does not shrink from speaking. No, [it does so] where it is necessary, while natural love — eros, amor — abhors everything which might cause uneasiness and, therefore, says yes, even to error and heresy. In the NT love and truthfulness belong inseparably together."*<sup>16</sup>

How does the love of God in Christ actually cover sins?

**Forgiveness in the blood of Christ shed on the cross.**

<sup>15</sup> Luther, p.57.

<sup>16</sup> Hermann Sasse. "The Crisis of Lutheranism" in *The Lonely Way* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002), II:285.



## DISCUSSION POINTS

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1. When do you find the opportune time to teach the true nature of God's love? Sermons? Bible Study? Confirmation? Pre-marital counseling? Private confession and absolution?
2. We've heard it said or even said ourselves that the key to the ministry is "love your people." While this may be understood correctly, Jesus asks Peter a different question in John 21. How can we better explain the key to the ministry in terms of love?
3. Why do love and promises go together? How is love quite naturally a promise?
4. What temptations does the devil especially use against pastors to confuse the true nature of God's love?

## SUMMARY

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The love of God isn't simply a matter of kindness or admiration. It's a matter of the cross. In the cross, we are created lovely to God through forgiveness. Through His love delivered in Word and Sacrament, we learn to love as He has loved us.

Inscribed upon the cross we see

In shining letters, "God is love."

He bears our sins upon the tree;

He brings us mercy from above. (*LSB* 429:2)



October 2014

# Gospel

Word of Life for the Church and for the World  
2014-15 LCMS Circuit Bible Studies

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## LEADER'S GUIDE

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## FOCUS

We are constantly bombarded with bad news and depressing headlines in our sin-infected world. Stories of war, crime, natural disasters, tragic accidents, political disputes and economic hardships dominate the evening news. Although most newscasts try to end with a “feel-good” story, the proportion of bad news to good news is often lopsided. Consequently we may choose to avoid the newscasts altogether and settle instead for a re-run of “The Simpsons.”

This lopsided proportion of bad news to good news takes place in our spiritual lives as well. Personal conflicts, family tragedies and financial hardships weigh heavily on our minds. Guilt and shame linger and fester deep down in our hearts. Our consciences are disturbed by the news the Law written in our hearts brings to us and news heard by our ears and experienced in our lives.

## SCRIPTURAL AND CONFESSIONAL UNDERSTANDING

1. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word “BASAR” means “to convey good news.” It is used for general good news of political or military victory:

1 Kings 1:42 *“And Adonijah said, ‘Come in, for you are a worthy man and bring good news.’”*<sup>1</sup>

It later takes on a more spiritual sense, describing the coming of the Lord to His people:

Is. 52:7 *“How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns.’”*

Is. 61:1 *“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound.”*

2. Read Luke 4:18–21 and examine how and why Jesus quotes Isaiah 61.

**Jesus shows that this Good News is now being fulfilled with His coming.**

<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. Copyright 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers, Wheaton, Illinois.

How desperate we are for good news! This is what the Christian church (and only the Christian church), has to offer the world: the Good News of the Gospel. This Word that we use so frequently and take for granted so easily is actually packed with the richest blessings God has to offer the world.

How would you define the word “Gospel”?

**When Christians use the word “Gospel,” we are referring to the Good News that Jesus Christ died to pay the penalty for our sin and make us heirs of heaven through faith in Him.**

The Greek word “*euangelion*” means “good news.” It is a combination of the prefix “*eu*” (good) and the noun “*angelos*” (messenger). The noun “*euangelion*” (Gospel) and the verb “*euangelizo*” (to bring good news, to evangelize) occur 130 times in the Greek New Testament. St. Paul uses the noun “Gospel” most often in his letters (60 times).

3. According to the following verses, how would you define the “Gospel” in the wide sense?

Matt. 26:13 [Jesus said] *“Truly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her.”*

Mark 1:1 *“The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”*

**Used in the wide sense, the word “Gospel” covers the entire message of Scripture.**

4. Read the following texts and discuss how each defines the “Gospel” in the narrow sense?

› Rom. 1:1–5

› 1 Cor. 15:1–5

**In the narrow sense, the word “Gospel” is specifically the Good News of Jesus, the Son of God, dying on the cross to win salvation for the world.**

According to these passages, what is the heart and soul of the Gospel message?

Christ's death and resurrection are the heart and soul of the Gospel message. Paul described these truths as "of first importance." He reminded the Corinthians of this.

5. Look at Peter's preaching in Acts 2–5. How did he include Law and Gospel in proclaiming Christ's death and resurrection?

In Peter's sermon on Pentecost (Acts 2), in his second sermon after healing the lame man (Acts 3), while on trial before the high priest (Acts 4) and again on trial before the Council (Acts 5), he proclaimed Christ crucified and resurrected. He consistently confronted them with strong Law: "You put Him to death." Naturally they would expect Christ's wrath and judgment, but in each instance Peter then connects Christ's death to God's offer of forgiveness:

*"Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38).*

*"Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out" (Acts 3:19).*

*"And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).*

*"God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins" (Acts 5:31).*

The Gospel is the Good News that Jesus died on the cross for our sins and rose again for our justification (Rom. 4:25). Every single sin of every single sinner of every single second in history has been paid for completely by the sufferings of Christ in our place. It goes against all human logic and fairness, yet it is the only way we can have God's righteousness; it has to be completely done for us and then distributed to us by God Himself. And so in the Gospel proclaimed (Word) and the Gospel applied (Sacraments), God the Holy Spirit gives what He promises: forgiveness of sins and a place in heaven, all as His free gift received by faith.

The Bible is full of Gospel in both the Old and New Testaments. But it is more than just a general message of God's goodness and blessing; it is a specific promise of grace conveyed through the substitutional sacrifice of God's Son for our sins. Through His death and resurrection, God offers a lost world rescue and redemption simply by believing the message!

## CONFESSIONAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORD

The Lutheran Confessions were written in defense of the Gospel, while they rarely define the word "Gospel."

1. How do the following excerpts still serve well to defend the Gospel from the abuses of from within and without the Church yet today?

*"The Gospel, however, is that doctrine which teaches what a man should believe in order to obtain the forgiveness of sins from God, since man has failed to keep the law of God and has transgressed it, his corrupted nature, thoughts, words, and deeds war against the law, and he is therefore subject to the wrath of God, to death, to temporal miseries, and to the punishment of hell-fire. The content of the Gospel is this, that the Son of God, Christ our Lord, himself assumed and bore the curse of the law and expiated and paid for all our sins, that through him alone we re-enter the good graces of God, obtain forgiveness*

*of sins through faith, are freed from death and all the punishments of sin, and are saved eternally." (FC SD, V, 20 T. G. Tappert, *The Book of Concord*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2000, p. 561).*

2. Consider what Robert D. Preus about FC SD, V, 20:

*"This statement may well be considered one of the most important and formative statements in our Lutheran Confessions. Why? Because it is the most complete and beautiful definition of the Gospel to be found in them. And that is what our Confessions are all about – the Gospel! Our great 24 Lutheran Confessions were written for the sake of the Gospel. The Augsburg Confession, Luther's catechisms, the Formula of Concord were not written just to blast or correct abuses in the Roman Church, or to defend Lutheran theology against the attacks of papists, or to perpetuate party spirit. These Confessions were all prompted by a faith in the Gospel, a love for it, and a determination to teach and confess it according to the*

Scriptures.” (Robert D. Preus, *Getting into The Theology of Concord*, St. Louis: CPH, 1977, pgs. 24–25.)

The main article of contention with the Roman Catholics — Article IV of the Augsburg Confession concerning justification — is a defense of the Gospel message itself. Its author, Philip Melancthon, explains in the Apology why this article is so critical: “*The Gospel (that is, the promise that sins are forgiven freely for Christ’s sake) must be retained in the church. Whoever fails to teach about this faith we are discussing completely destroys the Gospel*” (Apology IV, 120, T. G. Tappert, *The Book of Concord*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2000, p. 124).

3. Immediately after the chief article on justification, the Augsburg Confession in Article V states:

*“To obtain such faith God instituted the office of the ministry, that is, provided the Gospel and the Sacraments. Through these, as through means, He gives the Holy Spirit, Who works faith, when and where He pleases, in those who hear the Gospel. And the Gospel teaches that we have a gracious God, not by our own merits but by the merit of Christ, when we believe this.”* (AC, V, The Office of The Ministry, T. G. Tappert, *The Book of Concord*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2000, p. 31).

4. Consider the Smalcald Article’s brief article “The Gospel:”

*“We shall now return to the Gospel, which offers counsel and help against sin in more than one way, for God is surpassingly rich in His grace: First, through the spoken word, by which the forgiveness of sin (the peculiar function of the Gospel) is preached to the whole world; secondly, through Baptism; third, through the holy Sacrament of the Altar; fourth, through the power of the keys; and finally, through the mutual conversation and*

*consolation of brethren. Matt. 18:20: ‘Where two or three are gathered together,’ etc.”* (SA, part III, article IV, T. G. Tappert, *The Book of Concord*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2000, p. 310).

This article follows an article on “The Law” and a lengthy article on “Repentance,” all of which (in part III) are directed not so much at the Roman Catholics (“*The pope and his court do not care much about these things; they are not concerned about matters of conscience but only about money, honor, and power.*” [Introduction to part III, T. G. Tappert, *The Book of Concord*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2000, p. 302]), but are intended for discussion among the reformers themselves.

5. This distinction between Law and Gospel was a breakthrough teaching for Lutherans, and the discussion of their roles provides the context for the word “Gospel” to be defined in the Confessions. Consider again in the Formula of Concord:

*“But the Gospel, strictly speaking, is the kind of doctrine that teaches what a man who has not kept the law and is condemned by it should believe, namely, that Christ has satisfied and paid for all guilt and without man’s merit has obtained and won for him forgiveness of sins, the ‘righteousness that avails before God,’ (Rom. 1:17, II Cor. 5:21), and eternal life.”* (FC, Epitome V, “Law and Gospel,” T. G. Tappert, *The Book of Concord*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2000, p. 478)

6. The Lutheran Confessions were written as a defense of the Gospel from the abuses occurring within Catholicism and within the Lutheran Reformation. Why are these essential tools in preserving the Gospel from the modern abuses?

## TEACHING/PREACHING USAGE OF THE WORD

This distinction between Law and Gospel remains a peculiar message and strength of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. We hold on strongly to this precious “evangelical” label, even though the “evangelical movement” around us threatens to re-define and take this good word from us.

1. Discuss how the various ways that message of the Gospel is shifted from the pure saving work of Christ to the work/experience of man?

Various strains of modern evangelicalism, despite the meaning of the term, are shifting their focus from the pure Gospel work of Christ to the works and feelings of man. In the evangelical movement, salvation comes by one’s own decision and commitment. The Gospel message is replaced with lists of do’s and don’ts for successful living. Sacraments (Gospel) are turned into ordinances (Law), a sign and pledge of our allegiance to God. They “re-gift” God’s grace by getting it from Him, re-wrapping it as their own personal project and offering it back to God as their



gift to Him. When we do this with a Christmas sweater or fruitcake, it's an embarrassing social faux-pax. When we do it with God's gifts, it's a sad diminishing of the precious soul-saving Gospel into human hubris, thinking we are doing God a favor by agreeing to be His children.

## 2. What drives this shift for believers?

People like law. This is why cults and legalistic false religions and evangelicalism grow so easily. Satan appeals to our human pride and urges us to compare ourselves with others. If we see that we are doing more for God than others, we assume we are more deserving of His grace and favor.

## 3. Having a strong heritage and claim upon the preaching of Law and Gospel, are Lutherans as susceptible to shifting our focus away from Christ's righteousness and onto our own?

It is equally tempting for Lutherans to shift our focus from Christ's work to our own works. According to a survey of 5,000 Lutherans, 59 percent believe that *"the main emphasis of the Gospel is on God's rules for right living,"* and 50 percent of Lutherans agree that *"God is satisfied if a person lives the best life he can"* (A Study of Generations, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1972, p. 369). These statistics tell pastors that we can never take for granted that our people understand and embrace the Gospel message of free salvation through faith in Christ alone.

## 4. What may inhibit pastors from preaching the Gospel clearly and consistently in their congregations?

Perhaps we hesitate to preach the Gospel clearly and consistently because, as they say in the GEICO commercials, "Everybody knows that." We fear we are repeating ourselves and boring our people. The Gospel is easily short-changed and skipped over because we assume people already know it. Satan loves this trick, because he knows this is the message that delivers us out of his chains. So he attacks and distracts and replaces the Gospel treasure with any shiny trinket that will get our attention away from Christ. St. Paul laments to the Galatians, *"I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ"* (Gal. 1:6–7). Pastors need to be on guard against this temptation and continue to proclaim clearly and consistently Christ's death and resurrection for the forgiveness of our sins.

Preaching about the Gospel is not preaching the Gospel. Mentioning "the Gospel" without mentioning Christ, assuming people know what He did and why He did it, doesn't forgive sins or build up faith. Like a well-trained doctor, Lutheran pastors are equipped to apply the specific soul-soothing salve of Gospel to the sin-infected heart that has been cut open with equally skillful use of the Law scalpel.

Consider the following gifts of the Gospel that the Holy Spirit provide through the Gospel message?

› **PEACE:** The Gospel eases our sin-burdened consciences and lets us rest in confidence that our salvation is sure. It is not in our hands to accomplish, but is done already, 100 percent completed, by Christ on the cross.

Through Luther's "tower experience," we gain insight and understanding that God's righteousness is not something we have to measure up to ourselves, but rather is accomplished by Christ and given to us by faith. Of this realization Luther writes:

*"Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the 'justice of God' had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven."* (Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand*, Nashville: Abingdon, 1980, p. 49–50)

Luther had been trying feverishly to live up to God's righteousness, but he was crushed with the constant realization he could never measure up to the holiness that God's Law demanded. The more he tried, the more he failed, and the more the Law accused him. With St. Paul he stood condemned and cried out, *"Who will rescue me from this body of death?"* (Rom. 7:24). The answer comes in the Gospel: "Fear not! You have a Savior! You are rescued from the crushing burden of the Law. Christ lifted it off you and carried it Himself." This *"Gospel of peace"* (Eph. 6:15) gives relief and peace: peace of our conscience, peace from our fear of judgment, peace with God and peace with one another.

› **PAYMENT:** The Gospel also assures us that full payment has been made for our sins. Christ has redeemed us, paid for our salvation in full, proclaimed *"tetelestai!"* ("It is finished!") Our ransom is paid in full.

The sacrificial system of the Old Testament shows God's Gospel plan to allow substitute payment for sin. The sin offerings allowed an animal to pay the wages of sin (death) so the people could live free and forgiven. Of course the

life of an animal, or even a million animals, is not enough to pay for a single sin. But these sacrifices were like a credit card payment, allowing people to receive the “merchandise” (forgiveness) immediately, with promise of a future payment to be made. Christ paid off that credit card debt on the cross: *“For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.”* (Heb. 10:14). And we too, by faith, have Christ’s righteousness credited to our account: *“Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness”* (Gen. 15:6, Rom. 4:3).

› **POWER:** The Gospel is more than a message of historical information. The Gospel actually conveys God’s power. It has the power to create faith and give salvation to those who receive it.

Rom. 1:16 *“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.”*

1 Thess. 1:5 *“Our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.”*

Heb. 4:12 *“For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”*

The Gospel is not just human words, but God’s Word that is powerful and able to work miraculously in us. Just as God’s Word was powerful enough to create the universe, that same authoritative Word creates faith and brings salvation to those who hear it. Luther says, *“The Gospel doesn’t need our help.”*

This Gospel Word is also powerful to bring forth the fruits of faith in our lives. Through the Gospel, the Holy Spirit causes our faith to grow and change our hearts and lives.

Col. 1:5–6 *“Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing — as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth;”*

1 Thess. 2:13 *“And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.”*

Lutheran pastors trust the Gospel to produce the fruits of the Holy Spirit and conform our lives to Christ. We don’t need to badger and coerce good works of sacrifice and service and stewardship out of our members; we see the power of the Gospel causing them to mature and grow and want to glorify and give back to God out of sincere gratitude for His grace.

## DISCUSSION

1. Why is it that so many biblical verses of Law (i.e. “Submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ” [Eph. 5:21]; “This is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another” [1 John 3:11]), which speak of a good outcome or virtue, are often referred to as Gospel?

Because the outcome is deemed good, any means by which it may be reached is often considered Gospel. In this case, the end defines Gospel, not the means.

2. What are some other names for the Gospel in Scripture? (The Word, the seed, the message, the truth, the power of God for salvation, etc.)

3. How can you more effectively preach the Law so people are eager and hungry to hear the Gospel?

(Peter pointed out their responsibility in Christ’s death with second-person terms (“you crucified”) and pointed out the perverse generation from which they were to separate themselves [Acts 2:23, 40].)

4. How can you more effectively preach the Gospel, so people understand and appreciate this priceless gift?

(Do not hesitate to repeat the Gospel news clearly, and apply it also with second-person terms like “for you.”)

5. What are your favorite “Gospel in a nut-shell” verses?

*“Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”* (John 1:29).

*“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life”* (John 3:16).

*“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”* (John 14:6).

*“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 3:23–24).*

*“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1).*

*“The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost” (1 Tim. 1:15).*

*“For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the Spirit” (1 Peter 3:18).*

## SUMMARY

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To the Christian, the Gospel is our lifeline! It is the good news of God’s salvation, the cause of our faith, the source of our peace, the promise of God’s payment for our sins and the power to help us live for Christ. It is the only cure available for the bad news of sin, death and hell that are otherwise inevitable for us. The Christian, especially the Christian pastor, should never be ashamed of the Gospel nor hesitant to speak it to anyone crying out (usually silently), *“What must I do to be saved?”* The Rev. Dr. C. F. W. Walther’s last thesis in *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel* (St. Louis: CPH 1986, p. 4) states: *“The Word of God is not rightly divided when the person teaching it does not allow the Gospel to have a general predominance in his teaching.”*

The task is not easy. The world is blinded to the importance of the gospel by Satan, who wants to keep us enslaved in death and darkness forever. One of Martin Luther’s greatest frustrations was that after the Gospel was brought back to the Church and preached to the people, it seemed they soon grew tired of hearing it, and like the Children of Israel rescued from Egypt, they wanted to go back to slavery. Satan does not give up his prey easily. And his lies continue to tempt people to come back under his slavery. The battle is never over; the task of preaching Law and Gospel is never done. We face many obstacles: Satan, the selfish, stubborn hearts of men and our own frustrations and feelings of futility. But let Luther encourage you:

*“I will learn and teach this [Gospel] as long as I live. It shall be diligently presented in my sermons, for I see well enough what it does where it is present and what harm is caused when it is absent.” (E. M. Plass, *What Luther Says*, St. Louis: CPH, 1959, p. 564).*



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# Propitiation

Word of Life for the Church and for the World  
2014-15 LCMS Circuit Bible Studies

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## LEADER'S GUIDE

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## FOCUS

“Propitiation” is a relatively rare word in the New Testament. It only occurs twice as a noun (1 John 2:2; 4:10) and twice as a verb (Luke 18:13; Heb. 2:17), along with one other occasion when a different word is used that is often interpreted to mean propitiation (Rom. 3:25). However, its conceptual importance for Scripture as a whole far outstrips the frequency with which it appears. This truth is confirmed by the manner in which the Lutheran Confessions discuss it.

It is also a word that is often unknown or unfamiliar to our congregation members. It is not a term that they encounter often in everyday life. The familiarity they do have with it may include ideas that appear to contradict the Gospel.

The leader may initiate a brief discussion about how pastors think the word is understood by their congregation members.

This study will emphasize the importance of the word “propitiation” for understanding Scripture as a whole and consider how its importance goes beyond the handful of verses where it occurs in the New Testament. In the course of doing so, we will see that “propitiation” highlights two truths that are central to understanding the Gospel: (1) The wrath of God against sin, and (2) The exclusive and comprehensive sufficiency of Christ’s sacrifice for our sin.

## SCRIPTURAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF PROPITIATION

### Basic considerations

Webster’s dictionary defines “propitiate” as “to make favorably inclined; appease; conciliate.”<sup>1</sup> It describes the act of gaining a favorable disposition from another, usually when something has been done against him or her that threatens this disposition.

1. Based on this definition, in whose direction does propitiation move and who is doing the action when dealing with God?

**Under the normal meaning of the word, propitiation is something that people do in order to make God favorably disposed to them in spite of some wrong they have committed.**

Propitiation assumes that something has happened that threatens God’s favorable disposition toward us. Normally this is some wrong that an individual has done. This wrong must be addressed in an appropriate manner so that God will be propitiated. This action is normally designated using the word “expiate.” Webster’s dictionary defines “expiate” as “to atone for; make amends or reparation for” where “atone” is “to make amends or reparation, as for an offense or crime.”<sup>2</sup>

2. What problems of vocabulary arise when we begin talking about propitiation?

**The vocabulary of “propitiation” and “expiation” describe closely related ideas. Propitiation is directed towards God because of an offense. Expiation is directed towards an offense because God has been offended. The act of propitiating God will involve expiation; sometimes the former term is used when the latter one is really in view. Discussion of propitiation will usually involve expiation.**

### Hebrew Old Testament

The Old Testament basis for understanding propitiation is the Hebrew root *kpr*. It is used in the Piel to mean “atone.” This verb is used in conjunction with sin (using *min* and *’al*), people (using *’al* and *ba’adh*) and things (using *’al*).<sup>3</sup>

1. Lev. 4:26; 16:32–33 In these verses, we see atonement addressed to sin, people and things. What does this tell us about the Old Testament’s understanding of sin and the answer needed for it?

**The Old Testament understands sin to involve not only offense to God, but also pollution. Atonement addresses the sin for which the individual is guilty, and it also cleanses all that sin has defiled.**

<sup>1</sup> Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language (New York: Portland House, 1989), 1153.

<sup>2</sup> Webster’s 502; 95.

<sup>3</sup> F. Brown, S.R. Driver, and C.A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford, 1907), 497.



2. Ps. 5:4–6 What is the consequence of sin for the individual as he stands in relation to God? What is necessary to change this situation?

**Sin is an affront to the holy God and evokes God's wrath. It ruptures the fellowship between God and man, and the offense must be addressed in order to restore fellowship with God. Atonement must be made in order to remove the sin that is blocking fellowship with God.**

God provided the sacrifices that took place at the tabernacle and then the temple as the means of providing atonement to Israel. Through these sacrifices, He removed the sin that was blocking fellowship with God. The three kinds of sacrifice that involved the death of an animal were the whole burnt offering (*olah*) (Lev. 1:1–17), the sin offering (*khata'ah*) (Lev. 5:1–13) and the guilt offering (*'asham*) (Lev. 5:14–6:7). They are all described using the verb *kpr* in the Piel.

3. Lev. 1:4 In each of these animal sacrifices, the individual bringing the animal was directed to place his hand on the head of the animal to be sacrificed. What did this action mean?

**The person bringing the sacrifice placed his hand on the animal's head to indicate the substitutionary character of the death.**

4. Lev. 17:11 How does this verse explain the substitutionary character of the animal sacrifice?

**In this verse we find clear evidence that the sacrifices were substitutionary. Lev. 17:11 says that life is in the blood and that through the use of the blood, an animal is given in place of the individual. Through the death of the animal in the place of the individual, God's wrath was averted. Atonement was made for sin, and God was propitiated.**

5. Lev. 4:20 (see also 4:26, 31, 35) What was the outcome of sacrifice and the atonement it accomplished?

**Leviticus is explicit in stating that the sacrifice atoned for sin, and that as a result of this, the person bringing the sacrifice received forgiveness.**

The Old Testament sacrifices expiated sin. The life of the animal was given in place of the individual who had sinned as a death occurred in punishment for sin. This averted God's wrath and propitiated God. It caused God again to have a favorable disposition toward the individual. Language of propitiating the gods was common in Near Eastern religion as man sought to win the favor of his gods through sacrifices.

6. What made the Old Testament's sacrifices different from those of paganism?

**They were different because Yahweh was the One who had provided them as part of the covenant into which He had taken Israel. They were the means He had provided and so were a matter of Gospel. They pointed forward to Christ and found their fulfillment in His death on the cross, which is the source of God's forgiveness.**

The word *kipurim* provided the noun that expressed this idea (such as "day of atonement" in Lev. 23:27). The term *kaporeth*, "mercy seat," was used to refer to the cover of the Ark of the Covenant (Ex. 25:17–18).

7. Lev. 16:11–16 What role did the mercy seat (*kaporeth*) have in maintaining Israel's relationship with Yahweh?

**Once a year, the high priest entered the Holy of Holies and sprinkled the blood of sacrificed sin offerings (one for himself and one for the people) on the mercy seat as he made atonement for himself and his house (Lev. 16:11–14) and for the holy place because of Israel's sins (16:15–16).**

## Septuagint (LXX)

In the vast majority of instances, the LXX used *echilaskomai* to translate the Piel of *kpr*, and it conveys the same basic meaning. The noun *echilasmos* is used to translate "atonement," "to make a sin offering" and "sin offering." The verb *ilaskomai* occurs much less frequently. It translates "forgive" and the Piel of *kpr*. The noun *ilasmos* is used to translate "atonement," "sin offering," "guilt offering" and "forgiveness." With the exception of three verses in Ezekiel, every instance of "mercy seat" (*kaporeth*) is translated by *ilasterion*.<sup>4</sup>

Based on this evidence, what shift do we find in the way *echilasmos* and *ilasmos* are used to translate the Hebrew?

**Both *echilasmos* and *ilasmos* demonstrate a broadening as they refer not merely to atonement, but also to specific sacrifices.**

## New Testament

1. Heb. 2:17; 9:11–12; 10:11–18 The writer to the Hebrews draws heavily upon the Old Testament background of

<sup>4</sup> *echilasmos* for "atonement" (*kipurim*; Ex. 30:10; Lev. 23:27–28), "mercy seat" (*kaporeth*; 1 Chron. 28:11), "to make a sin offering" (Piel of *kht*; Ezek. 43:23) and "sin offering" (*khata'ah*; Ezek. 43:23); *ilaskomai* on five occasions translates "forgive" (*slkh*; 4 Kgdms 5:18; 24:4; 2 Chron. 6:30; Ps. 24:11; Lam. 3:42) and three times translates the Piel of *kpr* (Ps. 64:4; 77:38; 78:9). *ilasmos* for "atonement" (*kipurim*; Lev. 25:9; Num. 5:8), "sin offering" (*khata'ah*; Ezek. 44:27), "guilt offering" (*'asham*; Am. 8:14) and "forgiveness" (*silikah*; Ps. 130:4).

the tabernacle/temple and the sacrifices. Based on the material we have looked at, how would the statement in Heb. 2:17 normally be understood? How do Hebrews 9–10 completely change this?

Heb. 2:17 talks about Jesus as the high priest making propitiation for the sins of the people. The language is the same as the Old Testament's animal sacrifices. But in Hebrews 9–10 we learn that this forgiveness was won by Christ offering Himself in a single sacrifice that is the once and for all sacrifice for sin.

2. 1 John 2:2; 4:10 How does the Old Testament background shape our understanding of these verses? What new information does 4:10 add?

These verses lead us to understand that it is the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross in our place that averts God's wrath against sin and provides forgiveness. 1 John 4:10 adds that God the Father sent the Son to be the propitiation for our sin. Thus God Himself provides the sacrifice by which the offense of our sin is addressed.

3. Rom. 3:25 Paul says that God set forth Christ as an *ilasterion*, which in the LXX translates *kaporeth* or "mercy seat." What are the challenges for interpreting this verse? What is Paul saying?

In the LXX, the word *ilasterion* almost always refers to the lid of the Ark of the Covenant itself. Paul seems to be using the word in related sense of "means of propitiation." Paul is clearly describing Jesus Christ based on Old Testament sacrificial theology, just as seen in questions 1 and 2.

4. The suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 provides the most important means by which the New Testament understands the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ (53:4–5). In 53:10, the Servant is described as a guilt offering (*'asham*). While the word "propitiation" occurs only a few times, how does the concept provide the basis for understanding verses that discuss Jesus' death such as the following: 1 Peter 1:18–19; 1 John 1:7–9; Eph. 5:2; Mark 10:45?

The concept of propitiation underlies the New Testament language about Jesus Christ's sacrifice for us. Although the word itself only occurs a few times, the Old Testament theology associated with it provides the means for understanding what happened when Jesus Christ died on the cross.

## CONFESSIONAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF PROPITIATION

1. "Thus because faith, which freely receives the forgiveness of sins, sets against the wrath of God Christ as the mediator and propitiator, it does not offer up our merits or love" (Apology 4.46).<sup>5</sup>

What presupposition do the Confessions hold about the sinner's situation before God (*coram Deo*)?

**The Confessions express the biblical truth that the holy God exhibits wrath toward those who sin. Such wrath will condemn and destroy the sinner if nothing is done to avert it.**

2. "Therefore whenever we speak about justifying faith, we must understand that these three elements belong together: the promise itself; the fact that the promise is

free; and the merits of Christ as the payment and atoning sacrifice (*pretium et propitiationem*). The promise is received by faith; the word "free" excludes our merits and means that the blessing is offered only through mercy; the merits of Christ are the payment (*pretium*) because there must be some definite atoning sacrifice for our sins (*certam propitiationem*)" (Apology 4.53).<sup>6</sup>

According to the Confessions, what is necessary in order to avert the wrath of God from the sinner and receive forgiveness and salvation? To what does this stand in contrast?

**The merits of Christ who was sacrificed serve as the price that turns aside God's wrath. Christ and His saving work on the cross alone can do this and stand**

<sup>5</sup> Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, eds. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), p. 127.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 128–129.

in contrast to every other merit that human beings may try to offer on their own behalf.

3. “But wherever works are mentioned, the opponents attach their own ungodly opinions: that we merit the forgiveness of sins through good works; that good works are the atoning sacrifice and payment (*propitiation ac pretium*) on account of which God is reconciled to us; that good works conquer the terrors of sin and death, that good works are acceptable in God’s sight on account of their own intrinsic goodness; and they neither need mercy nor Christ as the propitiator” (Apology 4.244).<sup>7</sup>

How did the opponents of the confessors think they were able stand before God? Did they reject the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ? What does this tell us?

The opponents were always pointing to their own works as the means and merits by which they could stand before God. They did not reject the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, but instead invented various ways by which Christ became the reason they were now able to perform works that had merit before God. This fact reminds us that fallen sinners who claim to be Christians do not explicitly reject Christ’s saving work. Instead, they find ways to interpret His work so

that they can insert themselves into a position of doing things to merit salvation.

4. “We are debating about an important matter, namely, about the honor of Christ and the source from which the faithful might seek a sure and certain consolation — whether we place our confidence in Christ or in our own works. But if we put it in our works, Christ will be robbed of his honor as our mediator and propitiator. And, faced with God’s judgment, we will discover that such confidence was futile, and consciences will then plunge into despair” (Apology 4.156-157).<sup>8</sup>

According to the Confessions, what two issues are at stake when we consider the word “propitiation”?

First, the honor of Christ is at stake because to attribute to our own works the ability to stand up before the judgment of God is to rob Christ of honor that He has earned. He was sent by God to carry out this role, and He alone has accomplished it in a way that saves from God’s judgment. Second, when we focus upon the merits of Christ as our propitiator, we have comfort and consolation because His fully accomplished work is reckoned to us as righteous by God’s grace through faith.

## TEACHING AND PREACHING PROPITIATION

1. Consider the following sets of words: (1) holy, just, wrathful and (2) loving, gracious, merciful. Which set is emphasized in our world today? What will our teaching and preaching need to do with these two sets in order to help congregation members understand propitiation?

Our world wants a God who is described only by the second group. The biblical teaching about propitiation cannot be understood without both groups. Pastors will need to emphasize the biblical presupposition that God is holy, just and wrathful. Christ is the propitiation given in God’s grace and mercy in order to answer His just wrath.

2. Propitiation involves averting God’s wrath and causing God to be favorable. The idea of changing God’s disposition is sometimes described as being contrary to Christianity. What explanation must be provided?

In discussing propitiation, we can never fail to emphasize that it is God who offers the sacrifice of His Son in order to expiate our sin and thereby allow Himself to be propitious. It is all God’s initiative and God’s doing.

3. The New Testament’s teaching about propitiation assumes what the Old Testament says about the sacrifices of the tabernacle/temple. What challenge does this present to us today? How can we address this?

We live in a time of rapidly declining biblical literacy. Many people do not know the basic Old Testament narratives, much less specific details about the temple/tabernacle and the sacrifices. Since these things

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 157–158.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

provide the foundation for understanding propitiation, it will be necessary to explain them in teaching and preaching. We cannot make assumptions as to what the New Testament writers assumed, but instead must regularly explain them for our hearers.

## DISCUSSION

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1. Christians often say, “God hates sin but loves the sinner.” Based on Scripture’s teaching about propitiation, how would you respond to this?
2. When talking about propitiation, the confessors responded to the fact that their opponents, while believing in Christ’s death, included their own efforts in obtaining salvation. Discuss the following statement: In a different way, American evangelicalism does the same thing as the Roman Catholic Church by including human effort in the process by which we are saved.
3. The Lutheran Confessions repeatedly describe Christ as “mediator and propitiator” (Apology 4.46, 81, 387; 12.43, 76; 24.57). What is the relationship between these descriptions? How can these descriptions be used to bring comfort to Christians?



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# Forgiveness

Word of Life for the Church and for the World  
2014-15 LCMS Circuit Bible Studies

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## LEADER'S GUIDE

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## FOCUS ON FORGIVENESS

What is forgiveness? What does it mean, and what does it do? It is foundational and central to our Christian faith and life, both before God and in relation to our neighbor. It's also one of the few theological terms that gets used routinely in everyday life. It even surfaces in pop culture, no doubt because it is simply impossible to navigate life in the world without some means of dealing with offenses, getting over hurts and insults, and bearing the burdens of daily aggravations. Relationships depend on some manner of forgiveness or else they fall apart. Yet it may be that forgiveness has such a common place in our discourse that we take it for granted without really considering what it is and does. Defining the term is challenging because it seems self-evident, even though we also recognize how difficult it is to practice forgiveness or to live without it.

In looking at forgiveness as it is revealed in the Holy Scriptures and taught by the Lutheran Confessions, we learn forgiveness from the Lord who loves us and forgives us. He is the author of forgiveness. It is in love and mercy that He deals with us poor sinners at His own expense, not counting our trespasses against us, but reconciling us to Himself in Christ Jesus. He repairs the brokenness in our relationship with Him and with each other, and He brings us into His own divine life in faith and love. He obtains this for-

giveness by the sacrifice of the Son of God upon the cross and by His resurrection from the dead. He bestows this forgiveness upon us in His Church on earth by the ministry of His Gospel. So do we also learn from Him to forgive one another as He daily and richly forgives us for Jesus' sake.

It is clear, in considering this Gospel of Christ Jesus, that such genuine forgiveness of sins offers a significant contrast to the world's concept and use of the term.

**The leader may initiate reflection and conversation as to the ways forgiveness is used, understood and practiced in pop culture, the news media and social networks, in the workplace and in everyday relationships (among Christians and non-Christians).**

In the forgiveness of the Gospel, we are not dealing with something done for the sake of self, nor with bargains, conditions, excuses, flattery or manipulative maneuvers, but with the atonement, redemption and reconciliation that Christ our Lord has accomplished for us and all the world by His divine grace without any merit or worthiness on the part of the sinners whom He saves. What He alone has achieved for us and gives to us by His Word of the Gospel, we receive solely by repentant faith in Christ Jesus

## THE REVELATION OF FORGIVENESS IN THE HOLY SCRIPTURES

The basic terminology of forgiveness (*slh* and *ns'* in Hebrew, *aphiemi* and *aphesis* in Greek) is used significantly, but not frequently, in the Holy Scriptures. Classical usage of the Greek terms identifies the remission of financial debt or release from some legal obligation. This background informs a theological understanding and usage of the same terms for the removal of sin: to cover the debt of faith, love and obedience owed the Lord and to set free from the bondage of death. But the terms must be interpreted by the way they are used by the Lord in speaking to His people, and other terms must also be considered, which convey His forgiveness in a variety of ways.

Psalm 85:1–7 and Col. 2:13–14 are particularly rich in describing the forgiveness of sins. According to these two passages, what does forgiveness entail, both positively and negatively?

**Forgiveness includes the setting aside of anger, the covering of sins, the canceling of debts, a release from captivity**

**and rescue from hostile enemies, a restoration of peace and harmony with God and the granting of His life and salvation.**

Consider the following passages as well, and identify some of the other terms and images that are used in the Holy Scriptures to explain and extol the Lord's forgiveness of sins:

Is. 43:25; 44:21–23; 55:6–7; Jer. 31:34; 33:4–9; Ps. 25:7; 41:4; 51:1–13; 78:38; 79:8–9

**See also Ezek. 36:22–35 (37:23); Zech. 3:3–5**

**Using a variety of Hebrew terms, the passages describe the Lord's forgiveness of sins as healing, as mercy, as purification or cleansing, as covering or atonement, as removing or transferring sin from one to another and as not remembering past sins.**

In the Septuagint (LXX), *aphesis* (forgiveness) is used for the release and liberty of the Jubilee (Leviticus 25). This is noteworthy in view of our Lord's preaching at the synagogue of Nazareth (Luke 4:16–21). He there identifies

Himself and His Word as the fulfillment of the Jubilee, “the favorable year of the Lord” (Luke 4:19; see also Is. 61:1–3 and Jer. 34:8–17). He releases the people from bondage and restores them to the place the Lord appointed for them.

**This point can be compared to Luther’s familiar explanation of the second article of the creed.**

As time permits, consider and discuss Augsburg Confession XX.15–34.<sup>1</sup> The Gospel of Christ is the Jubilee that releases terrified consciences from the bondage of sin and death and brings the Christian into Sabbath rest with God and newness of life in Christ.

How might Luke 15 be understood as a paradigm for the Lord’s forgiveness of His people?

**The Lord seeks out the lost, rescues them from the consequences of their sin and welcomes them to Himself. He does not hold their past transgressions against them, but rejoices in their reconciliation. He calls and gathers them by His Word to live in fellowship with Himself.**

In order to understand forgiveness, it is necessary to know that it originates with the Lord, not by any necessity or compulsion, but out of the divine goodness of His being. It is His nature always to have mercy on account of the Father’s eternal love for His Son, and the Son for His Father in the Holy Spirit. The Lord creates all things for the sake of this love, and so does He also forgive His fallen creatures for the sake of His own divine and holy love (1 John 4:7–10).

A pivotal word of the Lord identifying His essential character as a compassionate and forgiving God is given to Moses at Mt. Sinai, following the apostasy of Israel with the golden calf. Study Ex. 34:5–9.

**You might also compare Num. 14:17–21; Daniel 9:7–19; and Neh. 9:16–23.**

**After the people sinned with the golden calf, God threatened that He would not go up with them, lest He destroy them, because they were such an obstinate people (Ex. 33:3). Moses, however, on the basis of the Lord’s self-revelation — according to His Word and promise and for His own name’s sake — pleaded with God to go up with the people, lest they perish. Precisely because they are such an obstinate people, they cannot survive without the Lord’s forgiveness.**

As Moses, Daniel and the Levites prayed and interceded for Israel on the basis of God’s mercy, so then do His people confess His name and praise Him for the mercy and forgiveness He has shown. For example, see Micah 7:18–19

and Ps. 103:2–13.

The same Lord God reveals Himself in mercy in the incarnation, cross and resurrection of the Father’s beloved Son. Take note of Rom. 1:16–17; 3:21–26; Titus 3:4–7; and 1 Peter 1:17–21.

**Consider, too, the prayer of Psalm 130.**

**The forgiveness of God is not simply what He does, but a gracious self-revelation of who and what He is, and a manifestation of His own righteousness by which He justifies the ungodly.**

Forgiveness originates with God and flows from His mercy and love. But it is not accomplished by a simple act of His will. He repairs the ruptured relationship between Himself and man from the inside-out. He enters into the brokenness in order to establish reconciliation, faith and love. There is a putting to death of sin with its underlying causes (unbelief) and its consequences (death and damnation). There is the sacrifice of God Himself, whereby He opens up the way of repentance and faith for His people. There is the absolute trust of the Son in His Father and the glorification of the Son by the Father, that the world might be reconciled to God in Christ Jesus.

In preparation for the coming of the Christ, the Lord catechized His people through sacrifices of atonement as the means of His forgiveness (Lev. 16:2–22, 29–34; Is. 53:4–6, 10–12). As the blood of bulls, goats and lambs was shed for the sons of Israel, so has the blood of Christ, the Son of God, been shed upon the cross for the atonement and redemption of the whole world. He has taken upon Himself the sins of all people and borne them away in His own sacrificial death (John 1:29; 1 Peter 2:21–24; 1 John 2:1–2, 12; Heb. 9:11–22).

**There is no forgiveness of sins apart from the shedding of the blood of Christ.**

The fact that His cross has obtained the forgiveness of sins is confirmed and manifested in His resurrection from the dead in which the Father vindicates and glorifies His Son on our behalf. Therefore, His cross and resurrection are proclaimed together as the Gospel of our salvation (Acts 5:30–31; 10:38–43; 13:29–39; 1 Cor. 15:3–5, 13–20; Rom. 4:25).

**The preaching of the cross and resurrection is the preaching of repentance and forgiveness.**

In the Old Testament, the Lord instituted various rites and ceremonies of sacrifice as the means of grace and forgiveness for His people (Lev. 4:1–7). He also caused His name and His glory to dwell in the temple as the locus of His forgiveness (1 Kings 8:27–53; Is. 6:5–7).

1 Tappert, T. G., ed. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), 45–45.

The priestly ministry of the Old Testament pointed forward to the coming of the Christ, who is our merciful and great High Priest in all things pertaining to God (Heb. 2:17). He has also provided new ways and means of grace and forgiveness in the ministry of His Gospel by which He now distributes and bestows the fruits and benefits of His cross and resurrection. Examine the following passages with a view toward the centrality of forgiveness in the pastoral ministry: Luke 1:76–79; 24:46–47; 2 Cor. 5:18–21; Matt. 18:12–20; 26:27–28.

**For further study, look at Luke 3:3–6; Mark 1:4; 1 Peter 3:21; Acts 22:16; Matt. 9:1–8; 28:18–20; Acts 26:15–18; John 20:19–23; Matt. 16:17–19; Matt. 20:20–28; Heb. 10:8–25.**

**The special authority that Christ has obtained by His cross and resurrection, which He gives to His Church on earth in the ministry of the Gospel, is the authority to forgive sins. It is with that authority that pastors are called and sent to preach repentance in His name unto faith in His forgiveness of sins. It is the foundation of the Church and the center of her life in Christ, the gift of Holy Baptism to which she daily returns and the first benefit of the Holy Supper, from which all of the other benefits of life and salvation in Christ derive.**

As the forgiveness of sins is freely distributed by grace alone, for Jesus' sake, so is it freely received in repentance and faith. It is not that God's forgiveness is contingent upon a human response but that His reconciliation of the world in Christ Jesus can only be embraced by faith. He does not compel us with brute force, but He woos us to Himself in love through the Gospel that we might be turned away from our sin and death to fear, love and trust in Him as our God.

Identify the way that repentant faith receives the forgiveness of sins in the following passages: Ps. 32:1–7; Rom. 4:1–9; Mark 1:14–15; Acts 2:37–40; Luke 18:9–14; 1 John 1:5–10.

**As time permits, discuss the difficult case of the “unpardonable sin” (Matt. 12:31–32; Mark 3:28–30). A persistent refusal to repent hardens the heart against the Holy Spirit and thereby refuses and rejects the forgiveness of sins that He offers in the Gospel of Christ.**

Forgiveness is not just the setting aside of anger and bitterness. Nor is it simply a release from legal obligation and punishment. It also entails reconciliation and the restoration of fellowship. As God has reconciled the world to Himself in Christ Jesus (2 Cor. 5:18–19), so are His Christians reconciled to one another through faith in His forgiveness of sins. How do the Holy Scriptures describe the new relationship of peace that we now have with God and each other?

Matt. 5:23–24, 38–48; Luke 17:3–4; Col. 3:12–13; 2 Cor. 2:5–11; James 5:14–16

**For further study, look at Mark 11:24–26; Matt. 6:9–15; 18:21–35; Eph. 4:32; Rom. 5:8–11; 1 John 5:15–17.**

**As we stand before God in need of His forgiveness and seeking it from Him in the ministry of the Gospel, so then do we forgive our neighbor and seek to be reconciled to him. We also pray for our neighbor and, in a spirit of gentleness and peace, make every effort to restore the fallen. In such love for one another, we demonstrate our gratitude to the Lord who forgives us. See, too, Luke 7:40–50 and Apology IV.152–154 and XII.57–58.<sup>2</sup>**

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 127–128, 189–190.

# THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS IN THE LUTHERAN CONFESSIONS

In the Lutheran Confessions, the forgiveness of sins is a prominent way of defining the Gospel, and it is often equated with justification, redemption and reconciliation with God. In this case, the full and proper sense of forgiveness is gathered from the contexts in which it is used.

In considering “the righteousness of faith before God,” the Formula of Concord confesses that, “According to the usage of Scripture, the word ‘justify’ means in this article ‘absolve,’ that is, pronounce free from sin” (FC Epitome III.7).<sup>3</sup> What does this mean for us?

As central and foundational as the doctrine of justification is, it is noteworthy that our Lutheran Confessions identify justification with the forgiveness of sins. We are set right with God, therefore, not by our own merits or righteousness, but by the Lord’s gracious absolution.

Note the same identification of our righteousness before God and His forgiveness of our sins in the Augsburg Confession: “We believe that Christ suffered for us and that for His sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us” (AC IV.2 [German]).<sup>4</sup>

It is by His suffering and death that He made satisfaction for our sins. God credits our faith in Christ as righteousness when we believe that we are forgiven and received into favor on account of Christ. See also the Formula of Concord Epitome III.3–4 and V.5 and Solid Declaration III.15 and V.20–2.2.<sup>5</sup>

Between the sacrifice of Christ and the faith that relies upon His sacrifice for righteousness, the Lutheran Confessions stress the ministry of the Gospel by which the forgiveness of the cross is distributed throughout the world and bestowed upon the Church.

*Further we believe that in this Christian church we have the forgiveness of sins, which is granted through the holy sacraments and absolution as well as through all the comforting words of the entire Gospel. Toward forgiveness is directed everything that is to be preached concerning the sacraments and, in short, the entire Gospel and all the duties of Christianity. Forgiveness is needed constantly, for although God’s grace has been won by Christ, and holiness has been wrought by the Holy Spirit through God’s Word in the unity of the Christian church, yet because we are encumbered with our flesh we are never without sin.*

*Therefore everything in the Christian church is so ordered that we may daily obtain full forgiveness of sins through the Word and through signs appointed to comfort and revive our consciences as long as we live. Although we have sin, the Holy Spirit sees to it that it does not harm us because we are in the Christian church, where there is full forgiveness of sin. God forgives us, and we forgive, bear with, and aid one another. ...*

*All this, then, is the office and work of the Holy Spirit, to begin and daily to increase holiness on earth through these two means, the Christian church and the forgiveness of sins. Then, when we pass from this life, he will instantly perfect our holiness and will eternally preserve us in it by means of the last two parts of this article. (Large Catechism)<sup>6</sup>*

What does Luther identify as the Church’s purpose?

According to Dr. Luther, everything in the life of the Church is so arranged for the forgiving of sins through the various ways and means of the Gospel that God has graciously provided. See also Smalcald Articles III.V–VIII, Large Catechism II.37–38, Large Catechism V.31–32, Augsburg Confession XXV.1–4, Apology XII.39–43 and 99–105, Apology XIII.4–5 and FC Solid Declaration II.50–54.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast to all manner of legalism and the righteousness of works, the Lutheran Confessions emphasize that we receive the forgiveness of sins and are justified through faith in the Gospel:

*“Faith is the only means and instrument whereby we accept Christ and in Christ obtain the ‘righteousness which avails before God.’” However, “This faith is not a mere knowledge of the stories about Christ, but the kind of gift of God by which in the Word of the Gospel we recognize Christ aright as our Redeemer and trust in Him, so that solely because of His obedience, by grace, we have forgiveness of sins, are regarded as holy and righteous by God the Father, and shall be saved eternally” (Formula of Concord Epitome III.5, 6)<sup>8</sup> ; Tappert, p. 473).*

Faith neither earns the forgiveness of our sins nor adds to our righteousness before God, but it simply receives and relies upon the gift of forgiveness that is distributed from the cross and resurrection of Christ in His ministry of the Gospel. These three things belong together in our salvation by the grace of God in Christ. The forgiveness obtained by Christ on the cross is given through the Gospel and received by faith. So do we rest in the Word and work of Christ.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 127–128, 189–190.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 473, 478, 541, 561–562.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 417–418.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 310–313, 415, 450, 61–62, 187, 197, 211–212, 530–531.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 473.



Further discussion of repentant faith in the forgiveness of sins may be found in the following: Augsburg Confession XII.1–6, Apology IV.40–51, Apology IV.75–86, Apology XII.35–36, Smalcald Articles III.III.4–8 and FC Solid Declaration V.5–9.<sup>9</sup>

Because the faith by which we are justified is a lively trust in the Lord's forgiveness of our sins, it also brings forth a new life in Christ: *"Good works follow such faith, renewal, and forgiveness. Whatever is still sinful or imperfect in these works will not be reckoned as sin or defect for the sake of the same Christ. The whole man, in respect both of his person and of his works, shall be accounted and shall be righteous and holy through the pure grace and mercy which have been poured out upon us so abundantly in Christ"* (Smalcald Articles III.XIII.2).<sup>10</sup>

In the confidence of faith, we live in love for God and for our neighbor without fear of failure and without the self-interest of legalism. Whatever is lacking or amiss in our efforts and good works is forgiven and filled up by Christ. Because we are freely forgiven for the sake of Christ, we also freely forgive and readily do good to those who sin against us (Large Catechism III.85–98).<sup>11</sup> By contrast, a refusal to do good or to forgive our neighbor is a denial and rejection of the faith and of the forgiveness that we need. See also Apology IV.270–276<sup>12</sup> and Luther's challenging comments in Smalcald Articles III.III.42–45.<sup>13</sup>

## THE TEACHING AND PREACHING OF FORGIVENESS

At the time of the Reformation, people were seeking forgiveness in meritorious works, human traditions, the intercession of the saints, relics, indulgences and the sacrifice of the Mass (see Smalcald Articles II.II.1–8, 18–24 and Apology XV.4–5).<sup>14</sup>

Where and how do people seek forgiveness in our day? How do they perceive and practice it?

In the world's estimation, forgiveness may be understood in one or more of the following ways: (1) Excusing, rationalizing or explaining wrongdoing as okay or acceptable under the circumstances, (2) A certain number of chances, passes or strikes that are let go or permitted without consequences, (3) Conditional toleration of wrongdoing in exchange for an apology or for some amends or restitution, (4) Accepting and bearing with a wrong in order to avoid conflict or to preserve a relationship by ignoring the grievance or (5) Perhaps as a benevolent act of charity, in order to be the bigger person, to look good or to assuage one's conscience.

Misunderstandings of forgiveness may create an expectation that Christians will simply wink at sin, excuse it or ignore it. However, the Gospel-forgiveness of Christ takes sin seriously. For this reason, the preaching of repentance precedes and accompanies the preaching of forgiveness.

Repentance is not a condition or contingency on the Lord's forgiveness of sins, but a receiving of His forgiveness in the humility and confidence of faith. His forgiveness is offered solely on the basis of the cross and resurrection of Christ (Eph. 1:5–8; Col. 1:13–14).

When forgiveness is viewed as a negotiation or rationalization or as cutting slack, there will be a line in the sand at some point beyond which even Christians will be tempted to think or say, "I just cannot find it in my heart to forgive so-and-so." When it is understood that forgiveness is never earned or deserved on the part of any sinner, but that it flows freely and fully from the heart of God the Father in our Lord Jesus Christ, then it is extended objectively and unconditionally.

The exercise of mutual repentance and forgiveness among Christians, as well as the Christian forgiveness of others, rests upon this forgiveness of God in Christ Jesus. As the Lord our God gives Himself to and for us in mercy to rescue us from sin and to reconcile us to Himself, so do we learn from Him to give ourselves to and for our neighbor, even to those who sin against us, in Jesus' name and for His sake. Consider the examples of our Lord Himself (Luke 23:34) and of His servant, St. Stephen (Acts 7:60), who prayed for the forgiveness of those who killed him.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 432–433.8 Ibid., p. 145.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 432–433.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 432–433.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 147–148.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 309–310.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 293–296, 215.



Because we are set free from the bondage of sin and death by the forgiveness of the Lord, we are also free to forgive those who trespass against us; their sins, too, are unable to enslave us. We give freely of ourselves, and we show ourselves to be gracious, because the Lord has been gracious and merciful to us in the giving of Christ Jesus, even unto death upon the cross.

As time permits, it would be well to consider Melancthon's treatment of the statement, "Love covers a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8) in Apology IV.238–243.<sup>15</sup>

The objective certainty of our forgiveness and of our righteousness before the Lord our God is permanently established in the cross and resurrection of Christ Jesus. It

is just as surely given to us and made our own through the ministry of the Gospel. In particular, how do Holy Baptism and the Holy Communion convey the forgiveness and righteousness of Christ to His Christians?

As we are baptized into His death, so are we also raised with Him in His resurrection through His free and full forgiveness of all our sins (Large Catechism IV.83–86).<sup>16</sup>

Christ established the new covenant of forgiveness by the atoning sacrifice of His cross. He establishes and seals that covenant unto us by giving us His Body and His Blood to eat and drink for the forgiveness of all our sins (Large Catechism V.20–30.)<sup>17</sup>

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER AND DISCUSS

Discuss the familiar saying, "To err is human; to forgive is divine" with respect to the Christian life (Luke 6:27–38). As our life depends upon God's forgiveness of our sins, so do we share in His divine life and participate in His giving of life to others by forgiving their sins against us.

What about forgiveness in cases of abuse? What will that look like?

How do we understand the free and full forgiveness of sins alongside the continued suffering of temporal consequences? What about punishment for crimes? Consider the case of King David, especially 2 Sam. 12:13–14 and 24:10–25, in light of Apology XII.161.<sup>18</sup>

The Lutheran Confessions identify forgiveness as the particular work and office of the Gospel and as the organizing principle and purpose of the Church (see Smalcald Articles III.IV; Large Catechism II.55).<sup>19</sup>

- › What implications does that suggest for the way that we approach, think about and carry out the ministry of the Gospel?
- › What is our definitive office and work as pastors?
- › How will that shape our preaching, our practice of confession and absolution, our pastoral care and catechesis of the Church and our daily and weekly schedule?

## SUMMARY

From His great fatherly heart of love, with divine compassion and steadfast love, the Lord has redeemed us from the bondage and consequences of our sins. He does not count them against us, but takes them upon Himself and bears them in the body of the incarnate Son, Christ Jesus. His death has broken the hold of death upon us, and His resurrection has become our righteousness. Therefore, we are no longer estranged from God and at enmity with Him, but we are reconciled to the Father in His beloved and well-pleas-

ing Son. By the ministry of this Gospel, He calls us into this reconciliation through His preaching of forgiveness. As we thereby have peace and rest with Him through faith in His Gospel and life and salvation forever in Christ Jesus, so are we at peace with one another in His Church. Insofar as it depends on us, we live in peace with all our neighbors through the exercise of His forgiveness for those who trespass against us.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 140–141.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 238–243.

<sup>17</sup> Tappert: (pgs. 449–450).

<sup>18</sup> Tappert: (pg. 208). <sup>19</sup> Ibid., 238–243.

<sup>19</sup> Tappert: (pgs. 310; 418).



January 2015

# Salvation

Word of Life for the Church and for the World  
2014-15 LCMS Circuit Bible Studies

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## LEADER'S GUIDE

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## FOCUS ON SALVATION

“And Moses said to the people, ‘Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will work for you today’” (Ex. 14:13). Here lies our focus: “the salvation of the Lord.” We seek to foster not simply salvation talk, but to see, celebrate and proclaim the Lord’s work of salvation. May the Spirit of the Lord open our eyes to see the Lord’s work of salvation by which we “Fear not” and “Stand firm.”

### THE PROBLEM:

#ICYMI (In Case You Missed It): Several news services reported just one more sign-of-the-times that seems less than promising. The good folks at Oxford Dictionaries (you know, the “language matters” folks) have now published their list of 2014 additions. These additions include, among others, *adorbs*, *binge-watch*, *hate-watch*, *smartwatch*, *humblebrag*, *hench*, *aquihire*, #YOLO and *vape*. To such a list, I simply #SMH (Shake My Head) at the rise of both trivial language and hashtag shorthand.

In his book, *Digital Discourse*, author Crispin Thurlow offers a helpful name for this phenomenon — banal globalization. The language born of juvenile culture and communication shorthand is being adopted as culturally normative. Put another way, those things that are trite and vapid (or banal) are concretized and universalized (and, therefore, globalized). We do well to make note of such things in language. But we also note what appears to be another trend at work in language. It is related, but inversely so, and it is a trend to which we as ministers of the Gospel do well to pay attention. It is this; much of the language that was once concrete has become culturally threadbare and empty. This includes much of the language of the Christian faith.

Take, for instance, *faith* itself. It was once clearly known that faith has an object. Such knowledge shaped how we thought, talked and even wrote about faith. Yet in re-

cent years it is more and more common to hear *faith* talk employed in language in ways that suggest that it need not have an object. It is its own commodity. A local radio station, for instance, has a 30-second commercial for Faith Hospice in which they pitch their services for “people of faith.” Okay, but faith in what?

*Salvation*, the topic of this study, also suffers linguistic and theological loss at this time. It is easily recognized as religious language. Christians instantly recognize it and are often more comfortable with the language of soteriology than they are with any number of other Christian doctrines, including ecclesiology and eschatology. Yet when asked where in the Scriptures the exact topic of salvation is explicitly taken up, many will have no response. Some may be able to recall that salvation is a frequent topic in the Psalms, yet the same folks will rarely be able to think of more. Most know it is centered on Jesus, but are unsure which portions of the Word expound this. In short, even when it comes to such a comfortable word as salvation and salvation language, there is much to be discovered, recovered and confessed.

### QUESTIONS:

1. Have you witnessed the loss of language in the lives of those to whom you minister? Name specific examples.
2. As you exegete not only the word, but also the communities in which you live, what force and weight, or what use and utility, is given to *salvation*?
3. What might your own people be capable of confessing concerning the word *salvation*?
4. If you were asked today what the Scriptures (or even the Confessions) have to say about *salvation*, what answer would you give?

# SCRIPTURAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORD

## OLD TESTAMENT STUDIES

While *salvation* is clearly God's concern throughout the Scriptures, still we find in the Old Testament that the specific language of *salvation* (צָלַם and its cognates) resides most heavily in the Psalms (78 instances) and in Isaiah (28 instances). Together, Isaiah and the Psalms comprise 83 percent of all OT usage of *salvation*.

In each case, it is the assertion of this author that the thick language of rescue and *salvation* in all of Scripture gives rise to a three-fold confession of *salvation*.

- › *The (1) rescuer affects (2) a rescue and leads man into (3) a state of being rescued.*
- › *Or there is a (1) savior who (2) by a saving act ushers man into (3) the state (or estate) of salvation.*

The majority of what follows in this study will test this claim in both scriptural usage and the Lutheran Confessions.

1. Read Ps. 18:1–12. How does the suggested three-fold confession of salvation arise in these verses?

In the first place, we are easily drawn to this text as it names the Lord as “the horn of my salvation.” But more fully still, we see that the Psalmist calls upon the Lord (savior), acknowledges the Lord's work of salvation (saving acts) and enjoys his deliverance (the estate of salvation).

2. Read Isaiah 12. How do even these short 6 verses demonstrate a robust confession of salvation?

And again, we receive here a robust confession of salvation. All thanks is due to the Lord (savior), whose deeds of salvation are known and being made known (saving acts) with the result of comfort for His people who drink ‘water from the wells of salvation’ (the estate of salvation).

## NEW TESTAMENT STUDIES

We shift our gaze to the New Testament. We find here that such a robust view of salvation is not only upheld, but is absolutely centered on the person and work of Christ. Furthermore, we find not only significant usage of *salvation* (σωτηρία), but we also find an eagerness to lay that salvation at the feet of Christ the *Savior* (σωτήρ). However, we also find a third thing. Matthew never once mentions salvation or Jesus as *Savior*, yet he decisively points to Jesus as the one who *will save* (σώζω) while also pointing attention to the name by which this saving one will be named.

REMINDER: The threefold confession of salvation outlines (1) *savior* who (2) *by a saving act* ushers man into (3) *the state (or estate) of salvation*.

1. Read Matt. 1:18–23. How is the threefold confession of *salvation* highlighted here? While we focus on the action of Jesus *who will save* (σώσει), how does the name *Jesus* also tie into our study of *salvation*?

You will call His name Ἰησοῦς, the Greek form of Joshua, “He who saves.” The threefold confession: He who saves (the savior) will save them by the forgiving of sins (His saving act) in order that they may live in God's salvation (the estate of salvation).

2. In Luke's opening chapter, we hear the prophetic words of Zechariah, whose mouth has just been opened at the birth and naming of his son John who is to be the forerunner of the Messiah. Read Luke 1:67–79. How is *salvation* robustly confessed here?

Moved by the Holy Spirit, Zechariah prophesies that his son John will go ahead of “[the] horn of salvation” (the savior), who saves God's people from her enemies and for “the forgiveness of their sins” (His saving act) that they might “serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all [their] days” (the estate of salvation).

3. We are served by a Pauline example also. Read Eph. 5:26–33. Though we may not think of this as a primary text when studying salvation, we do well to note that Christ our Savior is explicitly mentioned here. How does this text also serve as a wonderful example of a robust confession of *salvation*?

The bridegroom Jesus (savior) leaves father and mother and takes to Himself his bride, the Church (saving act), with the result that she is purified, and they are united in marriage (the estate of marriage — the estate of salvation).

## CONFESSIONAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORD

*Salvation* in Christ is at the very heart of our Lutheran Confessions. From the Apology of the Augsburg Confession to the Solid Declaration, we are given a great deal, at great depths, to know, rejoice in and confess. Yet Dr. Luther also put all of these riches on the lips of fathers, mothers and children. In his explanation to the Second Article of the Creed, Luther leads us to confess:

*I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as He is risen from the dead, lives, and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true.*

(Martin Luther, *Luther's Small Catechism* [Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986]).

1. While there is in this explanation no explicit mention of salvation, how does our threefold confession of *salvation* arise here also?

**We note that even with no explicit mention of salvation, this is nevertheless salvation. For in Christ Jesus (savior), we have the begotten one of God redeeming and purchasing sinners at the cost of His own blood and life (saving act). Furthermore, He arises. And the result is that I am His own, living in His kingdom, both now and “to all eternity” (the estate of salvation).**

2. In his Small Catechism, Dr. Luther does mention *salvation* explicitly in two instances, concerning Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

*What benefits does Baptism give? It works forgiveness of sins, rescues from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare.*

*What is the benefit of this eating and drinking? These words, ‘given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins,’ show us that in the Sacrament forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are given us through these words. For where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.*

To many in Christian circles, this is perceived as a strange and utterly offensive teaching: to locate salvation in Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Indeed, it is not uncommon for such a person, approaching the Lutheran pastor and theologian in an effort to engage dialogue about Baptism to begin with the *a priori*, “I'd like to talk with you about Baptism. I know it's not a *salvation* issue, but . . .”

Yet Luther and the confessing Lutheran church place Baptism and the Lord's Supper squarely in the domain of salvation. Baptism and the Lord's Supper do not exist as salvific acts apart from the cross of Christ, but as rites commanded and gifted by the Word of God.

The Apology states, “For these rites have the command of God and the promise of grace, which is the essence of the New Testament. For surely our hearts ought to be certain that when we are baptized, when we eat the body of the Lord, and when we are absolved, God truly forgives us on account of Christ... The word and the rite have the same effect. Augustine put it well when he said that the sacrament is a ‘visible word,’ because the rite is received by the eyes and is, as it were, a picture of the Word, signifying the same thing as the Word. Therefore both have the same effect” (Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. [Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000], Ap. XIII, 4–5).

How do Baptism and the Lord's Supper both give and enact the threefold confession of *salvation* in the midst of the Church today?

**On account of Christ (savior) and His atoning work (saving act), we are clothed, fed and declared righteous through the forgiveness of all our sin (enjoying the estate of salvation).**

3. Honing in further still on the precise use of language that Luther employs: How does Luther's tight confession of “where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation” serve as both a rich and a winsome catechetical teaching? How might we make more use of this particular language than we do?



Concerning both Baptism and the Lord's Supper, Luther has already made the point that each is instituted by the command of Christ (the Savior). And he has again tied each to the forgiveness of sins as the Word instructs us (the saving act). Therefore, he gladly moves us forward to confess that such a person who has both a Savior and the forgiveness of sins also then has salvation (the estate).

This language should not only form the catechesis of our own people, especially regarding the Sacrament, but it should also inform our evangelism! It appears that Philip in Acts 8 made such a move in his evangelism of the Ethiopian eunuch. His proclamation of the salvation of Christ did not stand apart from Baptism. Rather, it gave the eunuch a hunger for Baptism by which we receive the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation in Jesus the Savior.

## TEACHING/PREACHING USAGE OF THE WORD

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1. A parishioner comes to you to inquire about Baptism. He is uncertain about Baptism but is certain that there are differing confessions amongst some of his extended family members. In an effort to both understand and to close the gap in divergent confessions, he begins, "Pastor, I know it's not a salvation issue for me or for them. I know that Jesus secured my salvation on the cross, and theirs too, so I know this isn't a salvation issue. But can you please help me better understand Baptism?" How might you proceed?

**Discuss the different approaches a pastor may take at such a moment. They may include beginning with Scripture, the Confessions (Small Catechism as a wonderful starting place) and even confronting a forced logic that makes demands on our Lord and His gifts from the outside.**

2. Consider the question, "Are you saved?" How is this a helpful or unhelpful question? How does answering of it often go sideways? How can we instill in our hearers, through both teaching and preaching, an appetite for more helpful questions and confessions concerning *salvation*?

**Unhelpful!** It presents *salvation* as an inoculation that one either has or does not have. Furthermore, it seems to put the weight on the hearer to go out and be inoculated. We would do better to point to the Savior, His labors and the wages He earns from those labors. In so doing, we both confess fully the work of our Savior and give people an appetite for the same.

3. Concerning our liturgical Church Year, while we confess the full and rich saving work of Christ each and every Sunday, are there parts of our liturgical Church Year uniquely situated to draw particular attention to Christ, His saving work (salvation) or His kingdom? If so, how might we make the best use of these occasions? What might we uniquely confess at Christmas, Transfiguration, Good Friday, Easter and Pentecost?

**While the Gospel is given fully to every Sunday and every season, it may be the case that Christmas and Epiphany point us to the person of Christ, Lent and Easter point us to the work of Christ and Pentecost points us most fully to His kingdom.**

## DISCUSSION

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1. We are sometimes so focused on the cross and salvation as *penal atonement* that we fail to celebrate that “[I am] His own and live under Him in His Kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.” Do you find this to be true? How is this flawed confession corrected?
2. How might we better celebrate the Lutheran Confession of *salvation* in and through Baptism and the Lord’s Supper as a basis for our own people to comprehend the weak and even harmful confessions of other Christian confessions concerning the same?
3. It is said that on a monastery wall there hangs a sign that reads, “Everybody wants a revolution, but nobody wants to wash the dishes.” While that quote could launch a thousand conversations on vocation, let us take it as a framework to come up with our own quote about salvation: “Everybody wants God with us, but nobody wants a Savior.” Needing the Savior and having the Savior goes hand in hand with confessing unpleasant things about you, me and all people in all places. Yet for those of us in Christ, “There is therefore now no condemnation” (Rom. 8:1). Therefore, we often conceive of *salvation* language as language that always and only provides comfort. Yet the language of salvation may just as easily cause some hearers to bristle. How does the language and usage of *salvation* require that here too we need to carefully delineate Law and Gospel?

## SUMMARY

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Outside of Christ, all days and all lives are ruled by scarcity. Jeremiah writes, “For my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water” (Jer. 2:13). Not only have we chosen lives that don’t hold water, but having chosen we are bound. Or at least we were bound outside of Christ.

But from God in Christ through His life given over and taken up again, we have life, forgiveness and salvation! Christ has made us His own. And so, “With joy [we] will draw water from wells of salvation. And [we] will say in [this] day:

‘Give thanks to the LORD, call upon his name, make known his deeds among the peoples, proclaim that his name is exalted. Sing praise to the Lord, for he has done gloriously; let this be made known in all the earth. Shout, and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel!’ (Is. 12:3–6).



February 2015

# Grace

Word of Life for the Church and for the World  
2014-15 LCMS Circuit Bible Studies

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## LEADER'S GUIDE

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## FOCUS ON GRACE

“Grace.” I’m sure I heard the word preached dozens of times. I considered it a “pastor word,” the kind of word spoken only by pastors. It popped up in sermons. It sometimes made an appearance in children’s messages. Many times I heard a pastor say: “Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.” Grace to me? Really? What could it mean?

Then I remembered where I learned about the word “grace.” It was confirmation class. I was taught that grace meant God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense, something I would never forget. In fact, I used that same acronym as a Lutheran

school teacher, and again when I became a pastor too. Sad to say, I fear it was still just another pastor word to those who learned it. After all, what were “God’s riches?” What was “Christ’s expense?” Most importantly, what did the pastor actually mean when he said, “Grace to you”?

Thankfully, grace is much more than just another pastor word. It is a unique, personal word that speaks of God and His richest treasure given for you. So let’s use the word again as we begin this study. “Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.”

## SCRIPTURAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORD

### INTRODUCTION

Most people think of grace as only a New Testament word, a view that arises from a misunderstanding of the meaning of the word. While the acronym above teaches a meaning of the word, it really misses the depth and power of the word in our lives. Grace is a gift. It is unmerited favor or approval of God given to believers.

Think of families at meal time as they begin by saying grace. Why would they call their prayer before their meal “grace”? Consider the origins of the food and drink before them. Both were most likely purchased with funds from a paycheck. They were sold in a market. They were grown or produced by a farmer. But whomever worked to provide this meal, as well as the recipients, must understand that it is still God’s provision from His hand. It certainly wasn’t earned by those who partook of it. The kids who were fighting and lying around watching TV moments before obviously don’t deserve it. Their parents, who worked either at an outside job or at home, probably didn’t model Christ-like attitudes and behavior every moment of their days. Yet there is the meal before them. They all eat! That’s grace.

Grace is God’s undeserved favor or blessing upon you. You didn’t earn it. It was God’s doing; He made the payment. Understood in this way, you can’t help but marvel at God’s grace. What does He see in us? Doesn’t He know what we are really like? Doesn’t He know we owe Him? In fact, He does know. He knows we can’t pay the bill even if we tried. Yet there it is ... grace to you. What a gift!

### OLD TESTAMENT CONSIDERATIONS

Technically speaking, grace does appear in the Hebrew Old Testament. In many translations, the Hebrew word, “*chen*” is translated as favor, graciousness or mercy. You don’t need the ability to read Hebrew to see it. God’s grace appears over and over again.

1. Read Gen. 1:1–2:3. Where is grace found in creation?

**God’s gracious hand was in everything He made. We see this especially when He calls everything “good.” Then when He had finished His work, God declared it “very good.” We see it in the creation of man created in God’s image. We see it in the creation of woman for man. What had Adam done to deserve such a gift? Nothing. God gave her anyway. We see it in the creation of the Sabbath. It was God’s good and gracious provision for rest. It was all grace — created and lived by Adam and Eve — and for us.**

2. Read Gen. 3:8ff. Why would God make such a promise? Grace?

**The promise of a Savior is found in Gen. 3:15. Where did this come from? Adam and Eve certainly didn’t deserve it. They were trying to hide their sin and nakedness. Yet there is God promising grace through a Savior. God even clothes them. A sacrifice was made to cover their nakedness. Think of all the grace here. Why would God do such a thing? It was gift. It was grace.**

3. Consider other Old Testament people. Pick some below and identify the grace given to each. Hebrews 11 is often considered the “Hall of Faith” chapter. Maybe it could be called the “Evidence of God’s Grace” chapter too. Parallel the following with this chapter.

- A. Cain and Abel – Genesis 4
- B. Noah – Gen. 6:5–22
- C. Abraham – Gen. 12:1–3
- D. Lot – Gen. 19:14–22
- E. Israel – various texts apply
- F. David – Psalm 51
- G. Nineveh – Jonah
- H. Others

Answers will vary depending on which person you look up. Look for God’s undeserved favor toward each recipient. The argument that God’s grace was earned by faith is indicative of a wrong understanding. Faith **RECEIVES** God’s grace. Repentance is very much a factor, but this is still God’s doing.

4. God is a God full of grace. This is clear in many of the Psalms. How is God gracious in Psalm 103? Note especially verses 8–10.

God is gracious when it comes to our sin. He doesn’t treat us as our sins deserve. This is pure grace. If there’s time, review Psalm 30 and 51 as well.

5. Even the prophets acknowledge God’s grace. Read Isaiah 53 and Joel 2:11–13. How is God’s grace shown in these verses?

Isaiah: The suffering servant (Jesus) takes our punishment. By His wounds we are healed. This doesn’t make any sense in the world. Who does this? Jesus does. Why? It is grace or God’s undeserved favor upon the world. Joel: Joel echoes Psalm 103. God is “gracious and compassionate, slow to anger.” We should be condemned and lost in our sin. But somehow God reaches out with His grace.

## NEW TESTAMENT CONSIDERATIONS

While the Old Testament clearly illustrates God’s grace, the New Testament personifies it in the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus is the very definition of grace. The Greek word *charis* is the word for grace in the New Testament. It is used about 150 times. It means (a) a gift or blessing brought to man by Jesus Christ, (b) favor, (c) gratitude, thanks or (d) a favor, kindness (Strong’s Concordance).

1. One of the clearest and most familiar passages about grace would be Eph. 2:8–9. Why is this passage a good description of grace?

**It bears all the marks of the definition. It is a gift of God. It is not earned. It gives us God’s favor, or in this case, saves us. Insert “Jesus” in the place of the word “grace,” and you will see how Jesus completes its definition. Look up John 1:14 and Titus 2:11 for further study.**

2. St. Paul was afflicted with a “thorn in his flesh.” He wanted it removed. Read about it in 2 Cor. 12:7–10. What was God’s answer? What did this mean?

**God’s answer was “my grace is sufficient.” St. Paul would learn to be dependent on Jesus. In his weakness, he was strongest because of Jesus.**

3. Look up the following passages. Who is the receiver of grace? What is the importance of grace in each?

- A. Rom. 1:1–5      B. Acts 6:8
- C. Eph. 4:7–16      D. James 4:6–10

**All are examples of the effect of grace.**

- A. Paul, the chief of sinners, receives grace (1 Tim. 1:12–17), which led to the Gospel being proclaimed to the Gentiles. The Gentiles were not worthy to receive grace as evidenced by disdain shown by the Jewish leaders.
  - B. Stephen was filled with the grace of God that enabled him speak God’s Word and to do wonders and miracles among the people.
  - C. The grace of God given to you creates unity in faith, knowledge and maturity in the body of Christ, even as it unites you to Christ and to all who are baptized.
  - D. Grace is given to those who are humbled. The humble are brought low but in grace, God lifts us up.
4. Read Heb. 4:14–16. How is God’s throne described? What is significant about this?
- God’s throne is a “throne of grace” because it is the seat of the God of all grace. This passage shows that the work of Jesus was sufficient. Because of Jesus and the grace He won for us, we can now approach the throne and not be condemned and killed. We can be confident even in time of need.**
5. What does Rom. 11:1–6 say about grace?
- Israel, despite its rebelliousness and sin, was not totally rejected. A remnant of believers remained. There were still some under God’s grace or favor. This was not their doing; it was God’s. They didn’t earn it or deserve**



it. This is what God's grace is like. It was given to both Jew and Gentile. Faith receives this grace.

6. Review again Eph. 2:8–9. Then read verse 10. What does God's grace help us to do? Read Rom. 6:11–15. Considering both passages, what is the effect of grace on our lives?

## CONFESSIONAL UNDERSTANDING OF GRACE

In the "Belief and Practice" page of the LCMS website, the following is posted:

*"Our congregations accept and preach the Bible-based teachings of Martin Luther that inspired the reformation of the Christian Church in the 16th century. The teaching of Luther and the reformers can be summarized in three phrases: Grace alone, Faith alone, Scripture alone." Grace is described as SOLA GRATIA — Grace Alone. God loves the people of the world, even though they are sinful, rebel against Him and do not deserve His love. He sent Jesus, His Son, to love the unlovable and save the ungodly. "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Eph. 2:8–9). (Learn more at [lcms.org/belief-and-practice](http://lcms.org/belief-and-practice).)*

Clearly the teaching of grace is one of the key doctrines in the Church. This is for good reason. It is front and center in understanding the Gospel. It should come as no surprise that much is written about it in our Confessions, far too much to cover in this study. So let's look at just two statements from the Lutheran Confessions regarding this biblical word "grace:"

1. What does the following say about grace? What is it not saying about grace?

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

*God's grace frees us to a life of good works. These works, which God planned out in advance for us to do, flow from God's grace. It is purely by the grace that God gives, that we are set us free to do good works. The only way that this can be true is that grace of God in Christ first frees us from sin and a life under its dominion. A child of God's grace is a renewed and transformed creation.*

*error or heretical spirit. (WA, 31I:255) And St. Paul says specifically of this doctrine that a little leaven ferments the whole lump. (1 Cor. 5:6) Therefore he stresses the exclusive terms, that is, the terms by which all human works are excluded, such as "without the law," "without works," "by grace alone."<sup>1</sup>*

**The teaching of justification by faith goes hand in hand with grace. We must preach and teach it. We must not compromise with the teaching that our works can in any way justify us. We are saved purely by God's undeserved favor or grace.**

2. Where do good works fit? The Confessions address this in relation with grace. Read and discuss the following:

*Good works follow such faith, renewal, and forgiveness. Whatever is still sinful or imperfect in these works will not be reckoned as sin or defect for the sake of the same Christ. The whole man, in respect both of his person and of his works, shall be accounted and shall be righteous and holy through the pure grace and mercy which have been poured out upon us so abundantly in Christ. Accordingly we cannot boast of the great merit in our works if they are considered apart from God's grace and mercy, but, as it is written, "Let him who boasts, boast of the Lord" (1 Cor. 1:31). That is to say, all is well if we boast that we have a gracious God. To this we must add that if good works do not follow, our faith is false and not true."<sup>2</sup>*

**We are given grace as a gift. It is God's doing. Good works naturally follow grace and faith.**

<sup>1</sup> Theodore G. Tappert. Formula of Concord: Solid Declaration, art. iii in *The Book of Concord*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2000, c 1959).

<sup>2</sup> Tappert. Smalcald Articles: III, art. Xiii.

## TEACHING AND PREACHING GRACE

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1. What does the hymn, “By Grace I’m Saved” proclaim about God’s grace? (See hymn on last page.)

**There are other hymns as well. In fact, according to the *Lutheran Service Builder*, the word “grace” appears in 250 hymns. This says a lot about its emphasis in the Church. Discuss your favorites. You might consider the “Justification” section (555–577). Some suggestions might include hymns 555 and 566.**

2. Evaluate the acronym God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense. Have you used this in your preaching and teaching? Should it continue to be used in our churches and schools? Is there another way to bring out its meaning?

**Answers will vary.**

3. St. Paul had a thorn in the flesh. Do you have a “thorn in the flesh?” Discuss your particular “thorn.” What is God’s answer to your thorn? Is this what we want to hear? Why or why not?

**Answers will vary. As with St. Paul, God says, “My grace is sufficient.” It is not normally what we want to hear. You might also discuss why grace is sufficient.**

4. Why begin a service or sermon with the words, “Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ?”

**Answers will vary. However, the leader might lead participants to think about what follows those words, basically the administration of God’s grace and the preaching of God’s grace.**

5. Are we as pastors too quick to preach grace? Discuss. What must be preached along with grace? How can we help our hearers to understand that grace is not just a nice-sounding pastor word but something personal and meant for all believers as a gift?

**We should never tire of preaching grace. However, without the preaching of the Law, grace is largely meaningless. We must understand that we are wretches and sinners. We must understand we have done nothing to deserve God’s favor. So it is with our hearers. As each is condemned through the Law, the power of God’s grace comes shining through like a beacon in our dark world.**

6. Is grace just a Lutheran word? Why or why not? How might others define it?

**Grace is a biblical word. While it could be said that Luther and the reformers rediscovered it, Lutherans cannot claim it as their teaching alone. It is God’s teaching meant for the world. As Lutherans, we do a great job of emphasizing it, as well we should, for there is a great temptation to begin with grace and move on to works as the basis of our salvation as if to say, “Well, God’s grace got you in the boat to heaven. If you want to get there, you had better start rowing ... and row well.”**

## CONCLUSION

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“Grace to you” are the words Paul uses in the intro to his letter to the Romans, Corinthians (1 and 2), Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians (1 and 2) and Philemon. These words are not spoken for the sake of saying something, but they are words that both give and state a reality in Christ for the believers in each of these cities and all believers today. These are not merely words pastors use in their sermons and in their teaching. Grace is God’s word for you. It is His gift. When days are long and the work unbearable, when you feel like you are not making any progress, when you feel unworthy and guilty, then read these divine words of Paul and say to yourself, “Grace to me.” Know that it is God’s want and will to give it to you pure and free. Then say it to your flock, “Grace to you.” For truly this word is for all people. It is God’s gift for the world. What an amazing word!

Conclude by singing “By Grace I’m Saved” (*LSB* 566).

- 1 By grace I’m saved, grace free and boundless;  
My soul, believe and doubt it not.  
Why stagger at this word of promise?  
Has Scripture ever falsehood taught?  
No! Then this word must true remain:  
By grace you too will life obtain.
- 2 By grace! None dare lay claim to merit;  
Our works and conduct have no worth.  
God in His love sent our Redeemer,  
Christ Jesus, to this sinful earth;  
His death did for our sins atone,  
And we are saved by grace alone.
- 3 By grace God’s Son, our only Savior,  
Came down to earth to bear our sin.  
Was it because of your own merit  
That Jesus died your soul to win?  
No, it was grace, and grace alone,  
That brought Him from His heav’nly throne.
- 4 By grace! This ground of faith is certain;  
As long as God is true, it stands.  
What saints have penned by inspiration,  
What in His Word our God commands,  
Our faith in what our God has done  
Depends on grace—grace through His Son.
- 5 By grace to timid hearts that tremble,  
In tribulation’s furnace tried,  
By grace, in spite of fear and trouble,  
The Father’s heart is open wide.  
Where could I help and strength secure  
If grace were not my anchor sure?
- 6 By grace! On this I’ll rest when dying;  
In Jesus’ promise I rejoice;  
For though I know my heart’s condition,  
I also know my Savior’s voice.  
My heart is glad, all grief has flown  
Since I am saved by grace alone.



March 2015

# Faith

Word of Life for the Church and for the World  
2014-15 LCMS Circuit Bible Studies

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## LEADER'S GUIDE

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## FOCUS: UNDERSTANDING THE CHRISTIAN FAITH AS A MATTER OF ITS OBJECT

*“Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the Word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17).*

In his ground-breaking *Heidelberg Disputation* in which Dr. Luther lobbed theological grenades at the Reformation-friendly Roman scholastic Erasmus of Rotterdam, the great Reformer writes:

*The law says, “Do this,” and it is never done. Grace says, “believe in this,” and everything is done already. (Thesis 26)*

In this study, we will explore how this insight, which sparked the evangelical Reformation, remains both the foundational theology of the Bible and the most imperative doctrine for relevant preaching in our ever-chaotic post-modern age.

## SCRIPTURAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORD

At the heart of Dr. Luther’s reforming rediscovery of the distinction between grace and good works lies “faith,” a word that in both Old and New Testament expresses the heart of the Christian religion. Faith is both the thing that was first lost in Adam’s active fall and the thing that God immediately restored by enacting the covenant promises.

Read Gen. 3:1–7.

1. Adam and Eve fell by placing faith in the serpent’s words and so were actively doubting God’s Word. How does this give us insight into the devil’s tactic for continuing to deceive people today?

**The devil always uses words to attack words, seeking to undermine what God has clearly said by calling it into question. The serpent always asks, “Did God really say?” or “Does the text really mean this?” and the like.**

Dr. Luther, in his commentary on Genesis 3, writes:

*Satan here attacks Adam and Eve in his way to deprive them of the Word and to make them believe his lie after they have lost the Word and their trust in God. ... Unbelief is the source of all sins; when Satan brought*

1. What is Dr. Luther’s Thesis 26 getting at?

**Dr. Luther is getting at the heart of Law and Gospel, which is the distinction between salvation by grace through faith (Scripture) and salvation by faith made active through good works (Rome).**

2. What is the difference between “do this” and “believe this”?

**“Do this” implies that something is not finished, whereas “believe this” proclaims something is already done.**

3. Isn’t “believe this” just another kind of “do this”?

**Grammatically, yes, but theologically, no. Trusting a promise is not a work. Trust is the absence of a work. It is passive. Pure faith is not an act, but reliance on the acts of another. Skepticism and unbelief require effort. Faith only requires a trustworthy object of faith.**

*about this unbelief by driving out or corrupting the Word, the rest was easy for him. ... Satan staked everything on this one effort to draw them away from the Word and faith, that is, from the true to a false god.” (Luther’s Works 1:147, 153.)*

Read Gen. 3:14–15, 20–21.

What is the result of God’s curse of the serpent?

For humanity, the result was a return to faith. This is seen especially in Eve’s new name, the Hebrew word “life.” Adam calls her this, recognizing that though they had been cursed with death, from her would come the Seed who would bring them all back to life. This is later also seen in Eve’s naming of Cain, in which she confesses her belief that he may be the Savior.

2. The covenant promises continue to be a matter of faith throughout the Old Testament. Read Gen. 15:1–17. There are many fine things in this text, but for our study there are two important questions:

- a. What is the result of God’s promise?



b. According to the covenant, who is responsible for fulfilling the promise?

A) The result of the promise is faith. Abraham believes God. He does nothing. That alone is counted righteousness. All good works that follow, including the sacrifice of Isaac, are the result of Abraham's trust in the promise made here.

B) The solitary "walking of the line" of the cut covenant by God demonstrates God's assertion that He, and He alone, will be responsible for bringing about the fulfillment of His salvation.

In the New Testament, St. Paul picks up on this theology

and asserts that it is the very definition of the Gospel message of the Church. Read Rom. 4:1–5 and Gal. 3:1–9.

3. How does Paul's use of language reveal the life or death necessity of this theology/doctrine for a living Christian spirituality?

The language in Galatians 3 shows that Paul is at his wit's end. You can hear him yelling "You fools!" He is at once terrified that those he loves will lose the faith altogether, and at the same time, filled with zeal to restore them to the true hope.

## CONFESSIOAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORD

There can be little question that the Lutheran Confessions were forged in a spiritual warfare centered around the defense of the word "faith." The great Articles IV and V of the Augsburg Confession are weapons of righteousness fused with God's divine power for demolishing the strongholds of human arguments and lofty opinions raised against the pure knowledge of God, promised to mankind in the person of Christ.

*Furthermore, it is taught that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God through our merit, work, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God out of grace for Christ's sake through faith when we believe that Christ has suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness in his sight, as St. Paul says in Romans 3 and 4.*

*To obtain such faith God has instituted the office of preaching, giving the Gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit who produces faith, where and when he wills, in those who hear the Gospel. It [the Gospel] teaches that we have a gracious God, not through our merit but through Christ's merit, when we so believe. (The Book of Concord, Kolb/Wengert, p.38–40)*

These words are not Holy Scripture, but they are a pure re-stating of the inspired and inerrant Word of God that

is taught in Holy Scripture. In this way, these words are a normative boundary for the true Church of God in every age, reminding us both why we are who we are and how we are to seek to bring others to a knowledge of the truth.

1. The words of the Augsburg Confession were written in another time and place, where people were different than they are today. Doesn't this mean that while the Confession was true for its time, it is not necessarily true for all times and places?

While that is indeed the Calvinist, or Union, view of confessions and creeds, it is nothing but a clever denial of the very concept of truth. Scripture says, "Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today and forever" (Heb. 13:8). The Day of Pentecost demonstrated that God's Word is not bound by human language, but it has overcome its frailties with an eternally declared meaning that never changes, whether you are Parthian, Scythian, slave or free. If Scripture contains any truth, then that truth can be spoken by even sinful humans in such a way that it contains no lie and is, in fact, the power of God for salvation to all who believe it.

2. How then does God now consider men to be righteous?

He declares them to be so in the name of Christ and by the confession of who He is and what He did. This promise alone, and the rituals that Jesus Himself bound to this promise, are given to all nations as a

free gift. It is a divine fact that, when spoken, results in believers. Some people who hear *will* believe, and in that faith, receive all the merits of the cross of Christ by imputation. While yet mysteriously combined with

their sin in this life, they are also entirely righteous (*simul justus et peccator*) — restored to that original identity/relationship Adam lost in his fall — by the simple believing of God’s declaration that it is so.

## TEACHING/PREACHING USAGE OF THE WORD

One of the greatest challenges for the churches of the Augsburg Confession has always been the art of distinguishing the preaching/confessing that is “about faith” from the preaching/confessing that “creates faith.” The biblical reality is that “faith comes from hearing,” but not from hearing about “faith.” Faith comes from hearing about Jesus. It is not that one must never preach or teach “about” justifying faith or good works. But that teaching “about” justifying faith and good works does not justify the sinner into belief. Only preaching about Jesus’ person, deeds and promises does that.

As Luther writes,

*This Gospel of God or New Testament is a good story and report, sounding forth into all the world by the apostles, telling of a true David who strove with sin, death, and the devil, and overcame them, and thereby rescued all those who were captive in sin, afflicted with death, and overpowered by the devil. Without any merit of their own, he made them righteous, gave them life, and saved them. ... A poor man, dead in sin and consigned to hell, can hear nothing more comforting than this precious and tender message about Christ; from the bottom of his heart he must laugh and be glad over it, if he believes it is true. (Luther’s Works, 35:361)*

Read through a few of the recorded sermons in Acts:

Acts 2:14, 22–29, 36; Acts 5:29–32; Acts 10:34–43; Acts 13:26–32; Acts 14:21–22; Acts 17:2–4; Acts 17:16–18, 22, 30–34

1. What is the common content that holds together all this preaching?

It is not “faith” but the “author of faith,” Jesus the Christ, who is preached. “Faith” is consistently *the result* of such preaching. This result is always attributed to the work of the Holy Spirit through the words about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

2. How might a misunderstanding of this point affect the faith and life of today’s churches?

If this Gospel is not preached in its purity, nor the Sacraments administered in harmony with the creation of faith in the trustworthiness of Jesus’ promises, then natural men have only one alternative: to become idolaters, seeking some other object in which to put their empty trust. Whether misguided Christian preachers point to blessings in this life — good works, holiness or even faith itself — if they are not pointing foremost to the works and merits of Jesus, authentic faith must always sputter and slowly die. For congregations, this could mean either a slow emptying of the pews or a vast explosion of new members whose idolatrous ears are being itched by half truths. In every case, the result will be a clash of worldviews between those whose object of faith is the Gospel alone and those who seek other objects to set alongside the works and merits of Jesus.

3. How might a right/biblical understanding of faith’s place in the salvation of God enhance our life together?

As the Augsburg Confession restates so clearly in Article VII, “The true unity of the Church [is] that there the Gospel is preached harmoniously according to a pure understanding and the sacraments are administered in conformity with the divine word.” In other words, there is no other point about which the Church must ultimately contend, confess and preach, and there is no other point around which the Church is guaranteed to find harmony, life and blessedness. Understanding the Christian faith as empty trust in the perfect object of that faith, Christ Jesus — who He is, what He did and what He will come again to do — is the ultimate formula for concord among preachers, life among the parishes and the Holy Spirit’s growth among church bodies.

## FURTHER DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In her sojourn toward the last day, the Church is often tempted to adopt the words and thinking of the culture or society around them. How is this temptation similar to the Pharisaic position in Acts 4:15–17 and 5:27–29?

**The devil has only one plan: to get us to stop speaking about who Jesus is and what Jesus has done.**

2. Is the teaching about “faith alone” antinomianism? How should the biblical texts of Law be preached?

**Of course, the Law must be preached, but always with the understanding that the Law is not the primary message of the Church, nor does the Law create saving faith. The Law can force a person to do the right thing against his will, convict a person that he has done the wrong thing, encourage a Christian’s hunger for the right thing or it can do all three at once. But the Law never gives the power to do the right thing perfectly and faithfully. Preaching the pure Gospel without qualification is not Antinomianism. It is rightly distinguishing Law and Gospel. Antinomianism, according**

**to the Formula of Concord, Article VI, is the teaching that the Law is no longer true. Such teaching would say to Christians, “Live however you want. Commit adultery, steal and lie.” Lutherans say with Paul, “We have died to sin. How can we live in it?” (Romans 6). But we do this while believing that the doing of the Law is never done and while salvation is entirely done already in Jesus.**

3. Doesn’t today’s changing, radical context demand a changing, radical take on the Gospel?

**Leader Answer Summary: Scripture reminds us that the grass withers and the flowers fade, but the Word of the Lord endures forever. It is precisely because the sinful world is filled with the changing, radical contexts of the devil’s many lies that such times as ours demand a determined conviction to, like the apostles, know nothing but Christ and Him crucified for the forgiveness of our sins and not our sins only, but the sins of the entire world.**

## SUMMARY

Dr. Luther’s Thesis 25 in the Heidelberg Disputation serves as a marvelous summary of the biblical teaching on faith: *He is not righteous who works much, but he who, without work, believes much in Christ.*

Phillip Melancthon prayed for trust in this Gospel in the famous words of his great hymn, centered on the life of the churches who wait for our Lord’s return:

*Lord Jesus Christ, with us abide, for round us falls the eventide. O let your Word, that saving light, shine forth undimmed into the night. In these last days of great distress grant us, dear Lord, true steadfastness, that we keep pure till life is spent your holy Word and Sacrament. May glorious truths that we have heard, the bright sword of your mighty Word, spurn Satan that your Church be strong, bold, unified in act and song (LSB 585: 1–2, 4).*



April 2015

# Righteousness

Word of Life for the Church and for the World  
2014-15 LCMS Circuit Bible Studies

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## LEADER'S GUIDE

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## FOCUS OF THE STUDY

“Righteousness. What is it? Simply put, righteousness is moral rectitude, goodness, the quality of being morally right or justifiable. And with that last bit on justifiable, we enter into language of vindication and salvation. The term is broad in application and scope in the Scripture. The question, however, that is perhaps lurking behind the definition is this: Whose righteousness are we talking about? Who is righteous? What does it mean that God is righteous? What does it mean that man is righteous? What or who is our righteousness before God? What is our righteousness before men?

Martin Luther wrote perhaps the best introduction to any biblical study on righteousness in his great Galatians commentary of 1535:

*“First of all, we must speak of the argument, that is, of the issue with which Paul deals in this epistle. The argument is this: Paul wants to establish the doctrine of faith, grace, the forgiveness of sins or Christian righteousness, so that we may have a perfect knowledge and know the difference between Christian righteousness and all other kinds of righteousness.”*

*Over and above all these there is the righteousness of faith or Christian righteousness, which is to be distinguished most carefully from all the others ... . For these kinds of righteousness of works, too, are gifts of God, as are all the things we have. But this most excellent righteousness, the righteousness of faith, which God imputes to us through Christ without works, is neither political nor ceremonial nor legal nor works-righteousness but is quite the opposite; it is a merely passive righteousness, while all the others, listed above, are active. For here we work nothing, render nothing to God; we only receive and permit someone else to work in us, namely, God. Therefore it is appropriate to call the righteousness of faith or Christian righteousness ‘passive.’ This is a righteousness hidden in a mystery, which the world does not understand. In fact, Christians themselves do not adequately understand it or grasp it in the midst of their temptations. Therefore it must always be taught and continually exercised.”*<sup>1</sup>

## SCRIPTURAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

### Righteousness in the Old Testament

In general, righteousness in the Old Testament is used in the following ways:

- › What is fair: Deut. 33:19
  - › What judges and kings ought to be: Lev. 19:15; 2 Sam. 8:15
- God is righteous. He is morally upright and fair. We see this in conjunction with the following:
- › God’s gift of salvation: Is. 51:4–8
  - › God’s gift of deliverance: Ps. 40:9–10

God saves for His righteousness’ sake. This is especially clear in the Books of Isaiah and in the Psalms. Isaiah 51 is a beautiful poetic explanation of God’s righteousness for His people. His righteousness draws near, and His salvation goes out. God’s righteousness and God’s salvation will endure to all generations. Psalm 40 is where we see the closest

tie between righteousness, deliverance and salvation. In fact, the word “Tsedeq” is translated as deliverance in this Psalm. God’s righteous deliverance of His people is something to be proclaimed in the congregation.

1. But how is this salvation and deliverance delivered? The language of crediting, imputing and reckoning is closely related to the concept of righteousness. Read Gen. 15:4–7 and reflect.

**The famous passage in Genesis 15 is where we read how Abraham’s faith was reckoned as righteousness when Abraham believed God’s promise that God would bless the world through his descendants, that they would receive the land of promise and that they would number**

<sup>1</sup> Luther’s Works, volume 26, p. 4–5.



as the stars of heaven. We will certainly talk further of imputation in the New Testament.

2. The name of the Messianic king is deeply tied to the concept of righteousness and salvation. Read Jer. 23:5–6 and reflect on this concept of righteousness.

In Jeremiah 23, we return to the theme of a king executing justice and righteousness. This time, however, it is not David or Solomon or God's rule in the abstract, but the promised Messiah who performs these works. Again, salvation and security for Judah and Israel are proclaimed along with the wonderful name, "The Lord is our righteousness."

## Righteousness in the New Testament

1. As with the Old Testament, many uses of the word "righteous" and "righteousness" in the New Testament are those speaking of fairness, uprightness and justness. Read and discuss the following and the relationship of each with righteousness:

- › Qualification for overseers: Titus 1:8
- › One who practices righteousness: 1 John 3:7
- › Works done by us in righteousness: Titus 3:5

In Titus 1, it is a qualification for overseers that they are righteous. In 1 John 3, we read that the one who practices righteousness is righteous. In Titus 3, we see that righteousness is connected to works. Yet this righteousness is not the basis for our salvation, as Paul is very clear about in the verses following verse 5, as well as in many others. The uprightness that comes after the proclamation of the Gospel is mentioned elsewhere and will be a feature of further study.

2. Jesus Himself is described as "the Righteous One." Read the following and reflect in light of this: 1 John 2:1 and Acts 3:5.

In 1 John 2, we hear how Jesus' righteousness is tied to the forgiveness and propitiation of our sins. In Acts 3, Peter preaches in Solomon's Portico a sermon concerning Jesus, describing Him as the Holy and Righteous One whom they denied by asking for a murderer in His place.

3. The righteousness of God means that God dispenses justice equitably without reference to the Law by making salvation available to all humanity. Read the following and reflect in light of this:

- › Rom. 3:21

- › Gal. 2:21

- › Gal. 3:21

This salvation is available to all through faith in God's action in Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit reveals this kind of righteousness clearest in Paul's writings. First, it is necessary to deal with the opinion of the flesh, or the opinion of the Law, that states that a man is righteous before God by what he does. Jesus' death on the cross has everything to do with bestowing righteousness upon sinners apart from the Law, for if righteousness were by the Law, Paul says, Christ died for no purpose.

4. In Paul's argument in the Book of Romans, we see the clearest presentation of this idea of the righteousness that comes by faith in Christ. Read these two texts, and discuss the role of faith in the daily life of righteousness: Rom. 1:16–17 and Rom. 2:13.

As Paul introduces the epistle, he states his theme by speaking of a righteousness that comes by faith in Jesus Christ. Faith is God's gift created by the Gospel, and faith receives God's gifts in the Gospel.

5. Because both Jew and Greek have failed to keep the Law, they are all under God's wrath. Read the following and discuss this failure and the wrath it brings: Rom. 3:10; 3:21–26.

All need the righteousness of God, manifested apart from the Law, for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. All are declared righteous by His grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by His blood, to be received by faith. Here we see all those themes of God's righteousness in redemption and salvation coming together in Romans 3. God is just (i.e., righteous, that is, He is completely fair, impartial and equitable). God is also the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. He declares the one who has faith in Jesus as righteous. This is what Paul is talking about when he uses the phrase "righteousness of God."

6. In Romans 5, Paul goes on to make another wonderful case for righteousness by faith in Christ. Jesus Himself is our righteousness because He fulfilled all of the righteous requirements of the Law in our place and underwent the punishment we deserved for breaking that Law. Read Rom. 5:12–21 and Matt. 3:13–17, and then discuss the substitutionary role and righteousness of Christ.

We have been judged by an alien sin, a sin that is not our own. Adam's trespass condemns us all. But we also have an alien righteousness, the righteousness of another, namely Jesus. By His obedience, "the many will be made righteous." Sin reigns in death, but grace reigns "through righteousness leading to eternal life

through Jesus Christ our Lord." Jesus took up a place with the unrighteous sinners by saying, "Let it be so for now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." By being baptized in a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, Jesus showed solidarity with sinners.

## CONFESSIONAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

### Righteousness in the Augsburg Confession

In the Augsburg Confession, the righteousness that comes by faith is a central theme. This is first seen in AC Article IV on Justification, paragraph 3. *"For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness."*<sup>2</sup>

### Righteousness in the Formula of Concord

In the Formula of Concord, we find the clearest presentation of what the righteousness of faith is. This all came about through a controversy. Andrew Osiander attacked the proposition that God declares sinners righteous for Christ's sake. Justification, in his understanding, was not about how God declares sinners righteous, but about how God gradually makes a person righteous by dwelling in Him with Christ's divine nature. Justification, therefore, is a process whereby we actually become righteous because of Christ's indwelling righteousness. Francis Stoncaro, along with Peter Lombard, said that Christ is our righteousness only according to His human nature.

Against both parties in this debate, the theologians of the Augsburg Confession, most notably Martin Chemnitz, confessed that Christ is our righteousness, not according to the divine nature alone or the human nature alone, but according to both natures. By His perfect obedience, Christ, the God-man, redeemed us from all sins, justified us and saved us.

Note Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article III. *"Concerning the righteousness of faith before God we believe, teach, and confess unanimously, in accord with the summary*

*formulation of our Christian faith and confession described above, that a poor sinner is justified before God (that is, he is absolved and declared utterly free from all his sins, and from the verdict of well deserved damnation, and is adopted as a child of God and an heir of eternal life) without any merit or worthiness on our part, and without any preceding, present, or subsequent works, by sheer grace, solely through the merit of the total obedience, the bitter passion, the death, and the resurrection of Christ, our Lord, whose obedience is reckoned to us as righteousness."*<sup>3</sup>

The righteousness that comes from faith is not an indwelling righteousness, but it is Christ's righteousness, that is, His total obedience under the Law and His complete sacrifice for our sins on the cross. *"The result of this righteousness is that God forgives us and counts us as holy and right. He saves us forever on account of Christ's earlier obedience. This righteousness is offered by the Holy Spirit through the means of Grace, i.e. the Gospel and the sacraments."* (See Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration III, paragraphs 14–17.)<sup>4</sup>

This results in the complete separation of our good works from justification before God. Good works do not factor into our justification before God, even in the smallest bit. Also, faith is properly defined as the only way we obtain the merit of Christ in the promise of the Gospel. The good works that we do, the renewal and new life that we experience and the virtue that we pursue are not our righteousness before God. They ought not be mixed with the doctrine of justification. (See paragraphs 37–39.)<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Tappert, Theodore G., Trans., *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 30.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 540–541.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 541.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 546.

# TEACHING/PREACHING USAGE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

## Righteousness in the context of Law and Gospel, using biblical examples

Righteousness is a word used in both the Law and the Gospel.

Righteous requirements are those that God places upon us. We were originally created in righteousness and for righteousness, but we rebelled against God. Therefore, Rom. 3:10 states it clearly: “None is righteous, no, not one.”

Jesus clearly said, “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees you will not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:20) He then goes on to preach the Law in a spiritual manner (cf. vs. 21ff), that is, in a way to destroy all reliance on human self-righteousness before God and to leave only one righteousness open to us for our salvation. This is what the preaching of the Law is meant to do. Yes, it can inform. Surely it can guide a Christian. But the chief purpose of the Law is to destroy any pretention of our own righteousness, merit, worthiness or ability before God. It is to take away any prop that someone might cling to, any righteous scrap, to imprison all of that until Christ comes in the proclamation of the Gospel to set us free from sin, death and Satan.

Our righteousness, according to the Decalogue, will always be imperfect and wanting on this side of eternity. The Law of God fronts us up to this reality. Yet there is another righteousness that is pure Gospel. Here the preacher can change his whole demeanor concerning righteousness! This is no longer a demand placed upon us, but a promise given to us, a promise of redemption and salvation that the whole of Scripture speaks of. God is righteous. His righteousness is revealed apart from the Law, but given through faith in Jesus Christ. God shows His justice in Christ, that is, our sins find their just punishment in Him. There is no legal fiction here. There is simply one standing in place of another, the righteous one for the unrighteous. “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring us to God” (1 Peter 3:18).

It is of utmost importance for the Gospel preacher to help his congregation understand that the righteousness of faith is the same thing as forgiveness of sins, salvation, redemption and the non-imputation of sins. Simply put, they don't count anymore before God because God the Father has done away with the sins in His Son, Jesus. The one who believes this has that righteousness, forgiveness, salvation, non-imputation of sins and the like applied to him by grace for Christ's sake. There is simply nothing of ourselves in the Gospel promise; we merely receive it by faith in Jesus the

propitiator. The Gospel preacher can juxtapose works and faith, as Paul does in Romans 4, or the two Adams, as Paul does in Romans 5. Here there is much comfort!

The Gospel preacher can also look forward to the revelation of this righteousness on the Last Day. It is the eager hope and expectation of the Christian to attain to the crown of righteousness, the new heaven and the new earth where righteousness dwells, and to be found in a righteousness, not his own, but that belonging to Christ. This is our righteous robe before God. And it is all delivered to us solely by faith in Jesus Christ, the righteous one.

## False Understandings of Righteousness and the Implications

Read the following and discuss some of the implications to hearers if they have such false understandings of righteousness.

### 1. My Good Works Are Righteous Enough.

Since the biblical concept of righteousness has a general definition of what is right, just, normal and fair, one can clearly see how many Scripture passages preach the Law to us concerning our own unrighteousness before God. But Scripture goes deeper than a mere surface understanding of our unrighteousness. I remember having an extensive conversation with a fellow college student concerning good works. The topic of the conversation was simply this: Do we need Jesus' blood and forgiveness for our good works? Before men, our good works actually appear good. But before God, even our good works are as filthy rags. Even as we understand that civil righteousness and the righteousness of the Decalogue is what God desires and is attainable by us outwardly, we must clearly state that it is not our justification and salvation before God. Even that civil righteousness and righteousness of the Decalogue is acceptable before God only because of the righteousness of faith in Jesus Christ, our Savior. There is no part of a Christian's life that does not need the saving blood of Jesus, the propitiator.

This incorrect understanding of righteousness can have detrimental effects on our *koinonia* in Christ. It can lead to an understanding that, although we need the forgiveness of sins for those things that we believe are sinful, we do not need forgiveness and the righteousness of Christ for those actions which we have done that are not sinful. Any belief that we have actions that are not tainted with sin becomes a tool for the devil to take our focus off Christ and onto our own perceived uprightness. And with our eyes diverted

from Christ, it is easier for righteousness to become something of a measurement between people. Our causes become righteous causes. Our positions become entrenched. We no longer see our sinfulness and our need for mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren, but we see only the justice of our cause and our own righteousness in that cause. The righteousness of faith is manifested in the forgiveness of sins. Imagining ourselves to be without sins to confess, we become manifestly self-righteous and therefore unrighteous.

**2. How Do I Know I'm Saved? Jesus Dwells in My Heart.** Another detrimental misunderstanding of righteousness can be found in the Jesus in the “us v. Jesus for us” debate. Jesus does indeed dwell in us, but Jesus in us does not make for our justification and righteousness before God. Jesus in us does indeed impel Christians to live godly lives, but that does not make for our justification and righteousness before God either. That inchoate righteousness is not the righteousness that avails before God. The only righteousness that avails before God, that forgives sins and redeems sinners, is the righteousness of Christ, who lived a perfect life for us in our place and died on the cross for our sins. This is only appropriated by faith.

This incomplete understanding of righteousness can lead to much mischief when it comes to certainty of salvation. As Dr. Norman Nagel is fond of putting it, “Doubt is inimical to the Gospel.” Any focus on Christ in us, impelling us to do good works, as being the whole or a part of our justification before God, leads to uncertainty. In turn, that uncertainty leads to a misunderstanding of righteousness as being about good deeds balancing out evil deeds, and therefore, not about Christ’s suffering and death for sinners. Satan doesn’t care whether we end up leaving the Christian

faith in despair or becoming self-righteous pseudo-Christians. Either way, he wins. Either way, the certainty of salvation is robbed from Christians when they look to and trust their own righteousness before God, either in whole or in part, whether or not they perceive it to be impelled by Christ’s indwelling. Any focus on the heart is simply focus on our sin.

## Objective Realities

Identify the ways the proper understanding of the word serves to identify the objective realities revealed in and worked by Jesus Christ for the hearers.

The proper understanding of the righteousness of God would bless and enhance our *koinonia* in Christ. If we grow in our understanding that our righteousness before God is not the civil righteousness, nor the righteousness of the Decalogue, but the righteousness of faith in Christ, it becomes easier mutually to forgive one another. Our righteousness will not consist in defending particular practices or pointing to worldly success, but to simply and humbly trust in Christ, the propitiator.

A proper understanding of the righteousness of God would also lead to greater certainty in salvation. The righteousness of God in Christ is the greatest source of certainty and joy for the Christian.

A proper understanding of the righteousness of faith in Christ alone would also help both pastors and people better understand what church is for. Church is for the proclamation of Christ’s saving work for the world. It is for the delivery of the Word of God and the Sacraments. Through these, the Holy Spirit creates faith in Christ the propitiator, and this faith is reckoned as righteousness before God.

## DISCUSSION

Perhaps some of the best discussion questions produced concerning the righteousness of faith in Christ come from a book called *The Fire and the Staff* by the Rev. Klemet Preus. Preus helped us get at the debate between the objective accomplishments of Christ and the subjective feeling or heart situation in which we find ourselves. Read through, discuss and identify which is the objective accomplishment and which is the subjective. How can these best be addressed in Bible Class setting, sermons, Confession and Absolution and the like?

1. A. I am righteous before God because Jesus lived for me in time. **OBJECTIVE**  
B. I am righteous before God because Jesus lives in my heart.
2. A. That righteousness that avails before God is inside of me.  
B. The righteousness that avails before God is outside of me. **OBJECTIVE**



3. A. God accepts me because my attitude toward God has changed.
- B. God accepts me because God's attitude toward me has changed. **OBJECTIVE**
4. A. I am saved because God counts the merit and worthiness of Christ to my credit. **OBJECTIVE**
- B. I am saved because God pours the merit and worthiness of Christ into my heart.
5. A. The righteousness that counts before God for me is the righteousness that Jesus always possessed as the Son of God.
- B. The righteousness that counts before God for me is the righteousness that Jesus earned through His life and death. **OBJECTIVE**
6. A. God accepts us only because of the forgiveness of sins. **OBJECTIVE**
- B. God accepts us also because Jesus lives in our hearts.
7. A. Justification happened 2,000 years ago and is received by faith. **OBJECTIVE**
- B. Justification depends on faith and did not happen 2,000 years ago.
8. A. I know Jesus lives because I feel Him in my heart.
- B. I know Jesus lives because of the Gospel.<sup>6</sup> **OBJECTIVE**

## SUMMARY

The most important thing that we should understand about the proper use of the word “righteousness” is that the proper use can give abundant comfort to the penitent sinner. The improper use robs pious consciences of this peace. Luther, in his Galatians commentary, has this beautiful way of emphasizing this point while commenting on Gal. 2:20, “Who loved me and gave Himself for me.”

*“Therefore let us learn to distinguish carefully between Christ and a lawgiver, not only in word but also in fact and in practice. Then, when the devil comes, disguised as Christ and harassing us under His name, we will know that he is not Christ, but that he is really the devil. For Christ is the joy and sweetness of a trembling and troubled*

*heart. We have this on the authority of Paul, who adorns Him with the sweetest of titles here, calling Him the one ‘who loved me and gave Himself for me.’ Therefore Christ is the Lover of those who are in anguish, sin, and death, and the kind of Lover who gives Himself for us and becomes our High Priest, that is, the One who interposes Himself as the Mediator between God and us miserable sinners. I ask you what could be said that would be more joyful and happy than this? If all this is true — and it must be true, otherwise the whole Gospel is false — then surely we are not justified by the righteousness of the Law, much less by our own righteousness.”<sup>7</sup>*

<sup>6</sup> Preus, Klemet I., *The Fire and the Staff: Lutheran Theology in Practice* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2004), p. 61–62.

<sup>7</sup> *Luther's Works*, vol. 26, p. 178–179.





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# Holiness

Word of Life for the Church and for the World  
2014-15 LCMS Circuit Bible Studies

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## LEADER'S GUIDE

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## Kadosh קדוש and ἅγιος

Holiness is a state of purity and moral integrity that is an essential attribute of the triune God (Is. 6:3). Through the gift of sanctification in Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit calls God's people to be saints, to be holy people (1 Cor. 1:2; Gal. 3:1–5). Nine times in Ephesians, St. Paul refers to the people of God as saints, as holy people.

When we think of holiness, two things stand out. First, this gift must ever and always be *extra nos*. It comes from *outside of us*. The holiness of Adam and Eve came from outside themselves as perfect creations of a holy God. Having forfeited that holiness in sin, they had no holiness of their own and no means to regain or gain it for themselves. As their descendants, no one born of the flesh has any holiness. It must forever come from outside ourselves as a *gift* from God (James 1:17). The Holy Son of God perfectly obeyed the Law of God for us to pave the way for the reception of this gospel gift (Matt. 1:17). As the sole mediator between God and man, Jesus is the one who makes this *gift* possible (1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 2:11). The Father is the author of this *gift*. Jesus is the agent of this *gift*. The Holy Spirit is the administrator of this *gift* (Eph. 1:3–14).

Second, the *gift* of holiness is a *gift* we have already and one that we continually receive. As people who are at the same time sinner and saint, it is part of the “now, not yet” tension in which we live. Through Jesus’ means of grace, the Lord of the Church bestows this gift upon His redeemed. Our need constantly to receive this gift of God is born of the fact that we are unable to manage the gift of holiness ourselves because our sinful nature is still with us, tainting and working against God’s gift. Daily we sin much, forfeiting this holi-

ness for the sake of sin and always standing in the need of the forgiveness of sins, by which we are renewed in this gift of holiness.

Through Holy Baptism, the Holy Son of God *clothes* us with holiness (Gal. 3:26–29). Through Holy Communion, the sinless Son of God renews us with holiness through the gift of forgiveness of sins (Matt. 26:28). Through Holy Absolution, the risen Savior *breathes* on His disciples His Holy Spirit (John 20:21–23). Finally, through the preaching of the Gospel, the Savior *unleashes* His saving power for justification, sanctification and restoration (Rom. 1:16).

In this study, we will, with the help of the Holy Spirit, ponder this *gift* and how it comes to us through Jesus Christ in time and space by grace! It is a gift that sets us apart for living and leading a life filled with hope because Christ has saved us, even though every day we still experience our sinful flesh, by nature a wretched and unholy sinner, that will be with us until we die (Rom. 7:14–25). Receiving His gift of holiness, we also receive from God a clearer picture of what true love looks like. Like love, holiness binds together all God’s gifts and attributes.

Growing up in Israel, our neighborhood was filled with synagogues. Often on the entrance of these synagogues, they would have these words inscribed: קדוש קדוש קדוש ה' הוֹאֲבֵדָה “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts” (Is. 6:3). Thus a person entering this place knew he was stepping unto sacred soil, holy grounds. They were coming into the presence of the Holy God of Israel — the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of the living and not the dead.

## SCRIPTURAL BASIS

The sacred Scriptures testify to God’s holiness on so many different levels. Moses, in the book of Leviticus, highlights the holiness of God: “For I am the Lord your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. You shall not defile yourselves with any swarming thing that crawls on the ground” (Lev. 11:44).

In Ex. 3:4, the Lord God tells Moses “Take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground” (Ex. 3:5).

Our Lord and Savior, Jesus, in His Sermon on the Mount, said: “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48).

### 1. What is holiness?

**Holiness: set apart, dedicated, revered, sacred, purity that provides the boundaries for true love. The holiness of God identifies Him as who He is in His essence and being. It is not something that is attached to Him or**

outside of Him, but that is His makeup; it flows from His heart and is revealed in His character and attributes. In the Old Testament, it appears 22 times, and in the New Testament it appears 12 times.

2. What is the distinction between sacred (holy) and secular (impure)?

When we speak of the “holiness” of God, we are identifying His intrinsic qualities apart from anything else. The ways God connects and commends to us His holiness are through the holy things. The eternal holiness of the triune God finds its expression in the Divine Service where the holy things are given to those who have no holiness of their own. These are made the holy ones as they receive the Father’s love through the finished work of the cross. The “secular,” on the other hand, is the absence of holiness and purity (the Word) and the presence of the other (separation, confusion, death). In the fallen world, man is corrupt, impure and unholy wholly other than holy as expressed in the Word.

3. We humans are not “holy” nor do we have “holiness” of our own.

The fall is so complete that we have indeed lost that sweet righteousness first breathed into Adam’s nostrils, that is, the breath of life (Gen. 2:7). Sadly, civil righteousness — the ability to be kind, caring and do for our neighbor, all of this apart from Christ — is often confused with the righteousness of faith given through the Word and in the Sacraments. Our holiness comes solely from the Holy One whose blood and righteousness makes us holy. This we all know, but it is important here as we discuss holiness because we must be careful to distinguish godly from civil righteousness. The holiness of God justifies the sinner while the holiness of man is anything but holy because of the sinfulness that still abides. As we discuss holiness, it is to be terms of the holy things of God that are given to make us the holy ones (the bride of the Lamb). All that is given is solely due to that which the whole of Scripture proclaims: the finished work of Christ on the cross.

Ever since the scheming of the evil foe tempted our parents to slip and fall into sin and death, nothing in all of creation is intrinsically holy. Solomon wrote: “Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins” (Eccl. 7:20).

4. What is it that makes us humans covered in His holiness?

Of our own, we have no holiness. That is outside of us. We become holy when we come into contact with the holy things: Yahweh’s Word, His Sacrament of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. This holiness is given us in the incarnation of the Son of God. Holiness becomes our dress and clothing.

We become holy by the pure Gospel given us by God Himself who makes us, as clearly stated in Ex. 19:6, קִדְּשׁוּ *“Holy nation.”* Peter captures this same thought saying, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation,” (1 Peter 2:9). Jesus, in His high priestly prayer said: “Holy Father... Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.” Πάτερ ἅγιε,... ἁγιάσον αὐτοὺς ἐν τῇ ἀληθείᾳ: ὁ λόγος ὁ σὸς ἀλήθειά ἐστιν (John 17:11, 17).

Holiness apart from Christ is dangerous to us. When the unholy comes in contact with the holy, it ceases to exist. But in Christ, things are different. In Christ, holiness is communicable. Holiness is passed from God to us when we are touched by the Word in the waters of Holy Baptism. We receive the Holy Spirit and are made holy. As in life, we are what we eat. When we ingest that which is holy in the Holy Supper of our Lord, Christ’s body and blood under bread and wine, we become holy as well. In neither case is holiness a creation of ours or about our effort. It is not a state that we can attain. It is always about Jesus and what He does for us.

Dr. Luther in his large catechism stated: “Where God’s name is, there must be life and salvation [Psalm 54:1]. So Baptism may certainly be called a divine, blessed, fruitful and gracious water” (Large Catechism IV 26–27). In this new life we become holy as we are dressed in the garments of holiness.

Furthermore Luther states: “*Christian holiness is not active; it is passive... You and I are holy, the church, city, and people are holy, not by their own but by an alien holiness, not by active but by passive holiness, because they have divine and holy things, to wit, the ministry, the Gospel, Baptism, through which they are made holy*” (What Luther Says, CPH, p. 657).

“*Yahweh (the Lord) is the Holy One of Israel*” (Is. 1:4). *He is “majestic in holiness”* (Ex 15:11).

Our ears are made holy by way of the *extra nos* as we hear the majestic call of the Lord Himself in the proclamation of His name. It sounds much like those to whom holiness has been imparted in Divine Worship. We dare not take it lightly. It is our fondest dream, our delight, our destiny in

Christ to sing of, to, with and about His Holiness! Now we understand why not all worship is acceptable.

The root meaning of “holiness” (הַשְׁוּדָה) is “separate.” The Hebrew verb “to be holy” (שָׁוֵה) first appears in the establishment of the Sabbath as a distinct day from the previous six days. Gen 2:3 states, “God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it” (וַיְבָרֶךְ יְהוָה אֶת-יוֹמֵי שַׁבָּת). (Study “Priesthood in the Pentateuch.”) Indeed, God blessed the seventh day, the worship day, the rest day and put in it the capacity to receive and sustain increase from Him, holiness.

Dr. John Kleinig shares his teacher Herman Sasse’s words: “The holy things of God were for the holy people of God.”<sup>1</sup> Kleinig adds: “Gerhard von Rad taught me that God’s holiness was a life-giving, life-sustaining power that was opposed to the deadly power of impurity. Holiness was communicated by physical contact with the holy things at the sanctuary.”<sup>2</sup>

God had instituted the Divine Service to share His holiness with Israel and the Church.

Kleinig paints a beautiful picture of this holy God who loves “His Treasure Possessions” הַלְלָהּ לִי סְתִימָתָיו and wanted to bless His people with this same holiness stating: “God did not keep his holiness to himself, nor did he use it to distance himself from his sinful people. Instead, he joined them on their earthly journey so that he could share his holiness with them. They didn’t sanctify themselves; he sanctified them. He made and kept them holy. They drew their holiness from him, and him only.”<sup>3</sup>

The Holy One makes and keeps us holy! In time Χρόνος and eternity καιρός. A holiness that occurs in one without the other is counterfeit.

C. S. Lewis helps us with understanding the holiness of God better in this brief paragraph.

“In Isaiah 6:1-8, we see Isaiah’s vision of God in the temple. He sees the Lord “sitting on a throne lofty and exalted” (vs. 1). Seraphim surround Him calling to each other, “Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory” (vs. 3). This triple repetition of a divine attribute is without parallel in the rest of the Bible. Scripture never says that God is “justice, justice, justice” or even “love, love, love,” but it does say that He is “holy, holy, holy.” The Hebrew does not have a grammatical way to express the comparative or the superlative (i.e., holier or holiest). The way it stresses the importance of something is by repetition.” (from the Fall 2008 issue of *Knowing and Doing*: [cslewisinstitute.org/The\\_Holiness\\_of\\_God\\_FullArticle](http://cslewisinstitute.org/The_Holiness_of_God_FullArticle))

It is impossible for us to understand the holiness of God on our own, because we are impure, not dedicated and unholy. Our finite minds can’t grasp or fathom something that sacred, something that would send Isaiah shivering and trembling with awe and fear, as He stands in the presence of the Holy God. However, the Holy Spirit opens our eyes and helps our feeble minds to get a glimpse of this, as we come in contact with the Holy things.

## CONFESSIONAL USE OF THE WORD HOLINESS

According to Kenneth E. Larson’s *Concordance to the Book of Concord* (NPH, 1989), there are only 26 references to the word “holiness” in the Confessions (p. 256). Of these most are talking of the false holiness of the errorists. But hidden within all of this, two gems revealed themselves. In the Large Catechism, in the discussion on the Creed, in the third article, paragraphs 47–59 speak of the holiness of

the holy Christian Church, the importance of the imputed holiness that comes to the Church through her means (see in particular par. 54–59) as the office and work of the Holy Spirit: to sanctify, to make one holy. In the Large Catechism, paragraphs 47–59 in the discussion on the Creed, the third article, speak of that holiness.

Then again, in the Large Catechism, on Holy Baptism (fourth chief part), right before going into the beautiful discussion on infant Baptism, Luther summarizes what the threefold gifts of forgiveness of sins, eternal life and salvation mean as they are poured over us in the 44–46th paragraphs.

<sup>1</sup> Kleinig, John W., *Concordia Commentary, A Theological Exposition of Sacred Scripture* Leviticus. St. Louis: CPH, 2003, p. XIV.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p XIV.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p 10.

We may also stay with the Large Catechism and turn to the Sacrament of the Altar wherein the benefits of what it means to be nourished and brought to new birth and the new life are good, even though the word “holiness” is not found here.<sup>4</sup>

The definition of the church in AP VII–VIII: “Therefore in accordance with the Scripture we maintain that the church is, properly speaking, the assembly of the saints who truly believe the gospel of Christ and have the Holy Spirit.”<sup>5</sup> This opens the discussion up to what the Church is as the holy ones, yes, those who do indeed receive the holy things.

## TEACHING/PREACHING

What is precious about God making us holy (incarnationally, sacramentally, scripturally imparting His holiness) is that this is not a onetime event, but our triune God’s continuous activity. He works through His means of grace to make us holy. Every time our hearts, ears and lips are touched by His Word and Sacrament we become holy unto the Lord, set apart to do good works (Eph. 2:10). That is the great blessings we have as we enter His holy place. We stand on sacred ground. In this place, the holiness of God continuously touches, purifies and sets apart those who are drawn into the worship to be holy, forgiven of our sins. Those who come to the Divine Service are declared as clean as was Isaiah when the coal from the altar of God touched his formerly unclean lips.

1. At what point is this “holiness” connected in the Divine Service?

**In our confession of faith, we confess: “I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy Christian Church; the communion of saints” (Third Article). At this point, heaven and earth are joined in this holiness. The Divine Service is the delivery of holiness! When the Word is proclaimed and administered in its visible form, holiness**

**is delivered. God’s holiness overwhelms our sin and puts it to death. Then God’s holiness breathes into us the breath of life through the Gospel and we are made, not just alive, but wholly and Holy.**

2. How can the pastor help his saints grasp the magnitude of God’s holiness?

**As the royal priest in the Holy Office, he demonstrates the value of being in the presence of God — the Holy One of Israel. When he in reverence and awe enters the holy of holies, handles the holy things and distributes these gifts to his saints, he reveals that this place is indeed a holy place. He does it in catechesis, Bible studies and the proclamation of the Word of truth and in administering the Sacraments.**

**He doesn’t take his office lightly, but holds it in high esteem. As such he remembers that he is an under-shepherd of God’s flock. As the Apostle Paul reminds us in Acts: “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood” (20:28). Therefore, the minister of the Gospel’s privilege, blessing and honor is to protect the holiness of God and God’s little sheep and provide them with the gifts — the holy things always.**

<sup>4</sup> Kolb, Robert, Wengert, Timothy J, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), para. 23–27, p. 469

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., para. 28, p. 178



## DISCUSSION

1. In relation to the imparting of the Holy One and the giving of His true body and blood for us (the holy things for the holy ones), how does this understanding of “holiness” work with our understanding of close(d) Communion?

By that we mean: If this is the *sacred* place and time, and these are the gifts of God, then how does this impact our welcoming to His holy table those who may not be properly prepared and/or those of another confession?

2. If the means of grace are indeed His means to make us and keep us holy, and these are found in the Divine Service, then how does that affect the criteria by which we evaluate liturgical innovations in the forms we use for the Divine Service?

These are but two examples, and many more could be used by the pastor with his people to show them that the holy life is fed and nourished, yes, even birthed, within the Divine Service by the thrice-hagion God of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

3. The holiness that is outside us is from heaven above. In the Divine Service, the One who is Holy gives His holiness, His full and free forgiveness, eternal life and salvation.

How might the pastor use the various parts of the common liturgy of the Divine Service (e.g., the Gloria in Excelsis, the Offertory, the Sanctus) to teach his people that the holy life is fed and nourished, yes, even birthed, in and through the Divine Service by the thrice-holy God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit?

### Further Discussion Questions:

1. First, holiness is not a concept or a thing. How does this help to understand Isaiah’s frequent reference to God as “the Holy one of Israel”? What does this mean as a foundation for the total message of Isaiah? How does Hosea 11:9 help in understanding holiness?
2. What is the difference between “holiness” and “glory”?
3. How can anyone tell what holiness is?
4. How many categories are there in the Bible: most holy, holy, sacred, revered, profane, clean, unclean, secular — Old Testament? New Testament?
5. How can we “keep something holy”?
6. Are there holy time, holy space, holy things? Are there degrees of holiness? Are some things holier than other things or people?
7. After conversion/Baptism, we are at one and the same time saint and sinner (*simul Justus et peccatur*), condemned by the Law of God, but fully redeemed in Christ, covered with His righteousness. How does holiness relate to sanctification? How does the Old Testament and New Testament define sanctification? How is it that Leviticus says both that God sanctifies you and that you are to “sanctify yourselves”?

## SUMMARY

Ultimately what God desires for us, His treasured possession, is to continue to remain holy. To help us remain in this state, He wants us to continue to be in contact with the holy things. The place to connect is then to be in His presence, in His temple, around His holy Word and Holy Sacraments. For this reason, worship life is beneficial, a blessing and beautiful thing for us. Here we receive the life-sustaining and life-strengthening gifts.

From His Word flows into our ears the forgiveness of sins, and from His pierced hands we receive His precious body and blood into our mouths. With love in His heart and holes in His hands, He offers us His holy things.

What a blessed people we are to belong to such a loving and holy God. Peter helps us appreciate what God has done for us: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Peter 2:9–10).

Holiness is ours because of His holy things. Thanks be to God that He has made us holy in the death and resurrection of His Son, Who covers us with His garments of salvation and His robes of righteousness.