

LUTHERAN SYNOD QUARTERLY



VOLUME 51 • NUMBER 1
MARCH 2011

2010 Reformation Lectures:

Lecture One: Justification and Baptism In Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Theology

Lecture Two: The Sacrament of Holy Baptism: Well-Seasoned Water in Lutheran Theology

Lecture Three: Baptism in the Camp of the Reformed

**Articles and Sermons:
The Norwegian Hermeneutic**

Sermon on Ephesians 2:13–22 for the Dedication of the Peruvian Seminary

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Book Review and Note

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Foreword

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IN THIS ISSUE OF THE *Quarterly* we are pleased to share with our readers the 2010 annual Reformation Lectures, delivered October 28–29, 2010, in Mankato, Minnesota. These lectures are sponsored jointly by Bethany Lutheran College and Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary. This was the forty-third in the series of annual Reformation Lectures which began in 1967. The format of the Reformation Lectures has always been that of a free conference and thus participation in these lectures is outside the framework of fellowship.

This year there were three presenters. The first lecture was given by Dr. Robert Koester, who is serving at Northwestern Publishing House in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He graduated from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in Mequon, Wisconsin and holds a D.Min. degree from Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. Prior to coming to Northwestern Publishing House, he served in the parish ministry, including congregations in California, Montana, and Moorhead, Minnesota. He is the author of *Law and Gospel: The Foundation of Lutheran Ministry* and *Gospel Motivation*, as well as numerous Bible studies. Currently he is working on a book entitled *A Lutheran Looks at the Eastern Orthodox*, which is scheduled for release in 2012. He resides with his family in West Allis, Wisconsin.

The second presenter was the Rev. Thomas Rank, pastor of the Scarville and Center Parish in Scarville, Iowa. He graduated from Bethany Lutheran College in 1977. He received a B.A. in Ancient Near

Eastern Studies from the University of Minnesota (1980), an M.Div. from Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary (1985), and an S.T.M. in Pastoral Theology from Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana (2009). He has served parishes in northwestern Minnesota and northern Iowa. He has served on the Board for Evangelism and the Doctrine Committee of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod. He teaches as an adjunct professor of religion at Bethany Lutheran College, and is an associate editor for *Logia*. He resides with his family in Scarville, Iowa.

The third presenter was Dr. Lawrence Rast, who is the Academic Dean and professor of American Christianity and American Lutheranism at Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne, Indiana. He received a B.A. from Concordia College, River Forest, Illinois, an M.Div. and S.T.M. from Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana (1990, 1995), and earned a Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee (2003). He serves as associate editor of book reviews for *Concordia Theological Quarterly* and as seminary archivist. He is a member of the Board of Editorial Advisors for *Lutheran Quarterly* and of the editorial committee of the *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly*. In addition to this work, he is a faculty representative to the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod and serves as chairman of that commission.

The theme of the lectures was “Baptism in the Three Reformation Camps.” The first lecture, given by Dr. Koester, was entitled “Justification and Baptism in Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Theology.” The second lecture, presented by Rev. Rank, was entitled “The Sacrament of Holy Baptism—Well-Seasoned Water in Lutheran Theology.” The third lecture, given by Dr. Rast, was entitled “Baptism in the Camp of the Reformed.”

The Reformation Lectures were a study of the doctrine of Baptism during the Reformation era. Baptism is a glorious creative act of the entire Trinity, in which we became the adopted children of God the Father by faith in the Savior. All our sins were washed through Messiah’s blood, and we were incorporated into Christ’s body, the church, receiving the Spirit and all His blessings. This biblical doctrine Luther maintained in contradistinction to the errors of both the Romanists and the Reformed. Contrary to Rome, he taught that Baptism is not an infusing of grace which was to help the individual live a holy life thus winning salvation. Rather it is a distribution of the full forgiveness of Jesus won for all on the cross. In opposition to the teaching of the Reformed, Luther confessed that Baptism is God’s own act. It is

not a mere human action done in obedience to Christ nor is it only a picture of what occurred when an individual was brought to faith, but it is a powerful, creative act of God which distributes all the blessings of Christ's cross and works the faith to receive them.

The hermeneutical method of the Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Evangelical Lutheran Synod is based on the confessional principle of *Sola Scriptura* along with a deep appreciation for the Lutheran symbols and the historic practices of the Lutheran Church. This method is the subject matter of the essay entitled, "The Norwegian Hermeneutic," by the Rev. Paul Meitner, who is pastor of Mt. Olive Lutheran Church in Iron Mountain, Michigan. This essay is taken from his master's thesis, "From Strangers to Sisters: The Growth of the Fraternal Relationship between the Evangelical Lutheran Synod and the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod Between 1917-1955," prepared for Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.

Sunday, September 19, 2010, was a special occasion for our brothers and sisters in the Peruvian Evangelical Lutheran Confessional Church. The new seminary building was dedicated. For the first time, a national pastor was installed as president of the seminary. His name is the Rev. Segundo Gutierrez. The Rev. David Haeuser, who was the previous president, will continue in Lima serving as a mentor for the seminary. The Rev. Paul Fries, chairman of the Board for World Missions, served as the guest preacher for the occasion. He based his sermon on Ephesians 2:13-22, with the theme "The Strong Foundation." The seminary in Peru can stand only if it is built on the strong foundation of the Holy Scripture, the chief message of which is this: Jesus Christ lived the perfect life demanded of us, in our place; He suffered the agony of hell in our place; He offered His own life as the sacrifice for our sins, so that we, forgiven by God and justified by His grace, can now be called "fellow citizens" and "members of God's household."

We often find ourselves struggling with our guilt over our sins of idolatry or shunning the words and invitation of God. And yet God tells us that in our repentance we leave our sin behind us, not at the foot of Sinai but at the foot of Calvary, at the cross. He invites us to hear His promise of forgiveness in His Son and to feast on His Gospel. This is the point of the Rev. Alexander Ring's sermon on Psalm 115.

Also included in this issue are a review of *The Lutheran Study Bible* by the Rev. Thomas Rank, and information concerning the triennial convention of the CELC in New Ulm and Mankato, Minnesota.

Justification and Baptism In Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Theology

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I WOULD LIKE TO THANK the assignment committee for the direction they gave this paper. Their suggestion to evaluate Luther's theology of Baptism, not just in the context of the Catholic theology of his day but also in the context of the Orthodox Church, opened up a much wider and more productive scope of study. Drawing the Orthodox Church into the theological mix forces us to soar higher as we survey the landscape in which Luther worked. It also allows us to draw in the post-Reformation churches and explore why the Lutheran understanding of Baptism differs from theirs.

The ability to see the whole picture of two thousand years of Christianity is somewhat easier now than it was even 50 years ago. Help comes from a rather unusual source, the ecumenical movement.

The ecumenical movement, of course, seeks common points of doctrine among churches and works to build on those commonalities to foster cooperation and union among churches. Perhaps most significant from the standpoint of church history is the ecumenists' attempt to establish a reunion between the Orthodox and the Roman Catholic churches. Dialogue between the Catholics and the Orthodox continues.¹

But work is being done on an even wider front. Lutherans, Wesleyans, Pentecostals and others are looking for a common

¹ See Aiden Nichols, *Rome and the Eastern Churches*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010).

theological theme running through all denominations. If such a theme could be identified, union might be possible, so it is hoped.

We are all familiar with the ELCA/Roman Catholic agreement on justification. This agreement was important because it effected a consensus on a doctrine that was considered to be a major barrier between Lutherans and Catholics and paved the way for further ecumenical discussions. This, however, is dwarfed by the topic currently under discussion by many modern ecumenists, namely, whether the teaching of *theosis* as it is taught in Eastern Orthodoxy can perhaps be the common theme running through all denominations.

This is a rather odd turn of events. The Eastern teaching of *theosis* (which, in many respects is the heart of Eastern Orthodox theology) had fallen off the radar screen since the final collapse of the Byzantine Empire in the 15th century. It was recently resurrected by a group of influential Russian Orthodox theologians who fled Russia after the revolution and settled in France. These theologians reintroduced the teaching of *theosis* as the central teaching of the Eastern Orthodox church.

For centuries neither the Roman Catholic Church nor Protestantism had much to do with Eastern Orthodoxy. But in the last 40 or 50 years, this church has become the darling of the ecumenical movement and their teaching of *theosis* has become the doctrine that holds the most promise of providing a common base for church union.

Whether the teaching of *theosis* actually leads to a united Christendom is impossible to say. But the teaching of *theosis* can, I believe, provide a starting point and a foundation for evaluating the Christian world for the two millennia of its existence. Such an evaluation will serve to show us the amazing thing that Luther did and continues to do through confessional Lutheranism. He did not just raise the church above the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, but he raised the church above what all other churches to a greater or lesser extent share as the foundation of their theology. Understanding this foundation will help us evaluate the Lutheran teaching of Baptism and how this teaching is taught in other denominations.

This short paper can only hope to provide us with a framework for further study. We will sketch out four topics. In the first part of this paper we will explore the various ways Christian groups over the centuries have taught justification by *theosis* or something similar, and we will describe what these alternate views of justification have in common. Second, we will note how Luther restored the meaning of justification

to its original scriptural definition. Third, we will touch on how Luther's insights into the gospel of justification transferred over to his teaching on baptism. Finally, we will examine how alternate views of justification translate into alternate views of baptism.

The Orthodox Doctrine of Theosis

Luther, of course, worked within the context of Roman Catholicism. But his world was also filled with influences from an earlier time. Luther had immersed himself in Augustine. And in spite of the huge Latin/Greek language barrier that existed between Augustine and the great Eastern theologians of his day, Augustine was part of the larger religious world of his day. Although today we consider the Orthodox Church to be a separate church body from Roman Catholicism, in Augustine's day and for the next six or seven centuries, the Eastern and Western churches were two geographic areas of the same church. Norman Russell, in his thorough treatment of *theosis*, tells us that the term *theosis* was not used much by the Latin church fathers with the exception of Augustine.² Considering what a large percentage of Western theology rests on Augustine, *theosis* may not be that foreign to the Catholic Church.

Theosis is the act of becoming God. Deification is a good synonym of *theosis*. Deification is never understood as becoming God in the strict sense of the term, like God is God. Rather, it involves becoming united with God by sharing in the qualities of God, beginning with love. It means becoming divine "to the extent it is possible for human beings to do so" — which is a recurring qualification in all discussions of *theosis*.

The Eastern church considered the goal of Christianity to be the deification of the human race. A quotation from Basil the Great (330–379) will get us started:

When a sunbeam falls on a transparent substance, the substance itself becomes brilliant, and radiates light from itself. So too Spirit-bearing souls, illumined by Him, finally become spiritual themselves, and their grace is sent forth to others. From this comes knowledge of the future, understanding of mysteries, apprehension of hidden things, distribution of wonderful gifts, heavenly citizenship, a place in the choir of angels, endless joy

² Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 329–332. Interestingly, according to the Wikipedia article on Peter Lombard, Lombard also taught *theosis*, but his ideas on this topic were not pursued by Western theologians.

in the presence of God, becoming like God, and, the highest of all desires, becoming God.³

It is doubtful that the average believer experienced all these things, but this was the goal. Eastern monks strove for all these things. Many are considered to have acquired them in a rich measure. A few are remembered in icons, through which “their grace is sent forth to others.”

Neoplatonism was the predominant philosophy of the Eastern world, and we should not underestimate its influence on the Eastern church. No one would accuse the Eastern church of teaching Platonism, but it is generally accepted that early Christians adopted Platonic categories even as they carried on their defense against it. Neoplatonism taught that souls emanated from a Source and that they are drawn back to the Source. Neoplatonists taught practical methods for achieving reunion with God, *theosis*, so to speak. The truly happy person rejects self-destructive lusts and through various practices advances toward God.

Christians were called on to define their faith in this context. Instead of simply defining their faith in scriptural terms, however, church leaders—in order to better communicate with their heathen neighbors—began talking in Neoplatonic terms. Instead of simply talking about creation, the fall into sin, and redemption through Christ’s atonement, Eastern church leaders began talking in terms of becoming divine. They argued that what Platonists were trying to do through philosophy, apart from God, Christians could accomplish in Christ. Christianity alone was the way people could become divine and return to their source. Even before the term *theosis* came into wider use, Clement of Alexandria (150–215) countered the assurance of illumination promised by the mystery religions with his own images of joy and self-forgetful union with God in Christ.⁴

To some Eastern theologians, “Deification is the fulfillment of creation, not just the rectification of the Fall.”⁵ In other words, they view *theosis* as the method God is using to restore to himself not just human beings, but the entire created order—and that this was his plan even before Adam and Eve fell into sin. One writer describes God’s goal in terms of two arches. Think of an arch stretching from creation

³ Quoted in Michael Christensen and Jeffery Wittung, eds., *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 23.

⁴ Russell, 34.

⁵ Andrew Louth, in *Partakers of the Divine Nature*, 35.

to the final deification of all creation. This represents God's goal for his creation. Through humankind, the creation is destined to share in the divine life, that is, to be deified. Progress toward this goal has been frustrated by humankind, beginning with Adam. Adam's act of resistance is the fall, which needed to be put right by redemption in Christ. From the fall to Jesus' act of redemption can be thought of as a lesser arch underneath the larger arch. Christ's redemption of humanity is God's final goal, but the tool by which the final goal (deification of the creation) will be realized. When we lose sight of the larger arch, which begins with creation and ends with deification, we tend to focus on the smaller arch that begins with the fall and ends with redemption. This is the main fault of the Western Church, so argue the Eastern theologians. The Eastern church claims that it avoids this error, keeps its focus on the larger arch, and sees the incarnation as God's tool not just to save us but to deify us and the world.⁶ Not every Orthodox theologian goes this far. But deification of human beings is always part of Orthodox theology.

Although the earlier Eastern church fathers did not use the term extensively, "by the fourth century, the concept of *theosis* had become a matter of popular Christian theology, perhaps resembling in its practical application the 'born again' evangelical theology of today."⁷ The same writer cautions against exaggerating the popularity of the term, but adds that when the term was used, the writers assumed it to belong to the "common knowledge of the Christian community."⁸

Athanasius used the term. In fact, he penned what is perhaps the most famous statement on *theosis*: "He [the Word] became human that we might become God." We applaud Athanasius, and rightly so, for resisting Arius and helping the church teach Jesus' full divinity and humanity. However, we sometimes interpret him perhaps too strongly in the context of forensic justification. Lutherans say, "Jesus was a perfect Savior. Only the true God could take the world's sins on himself and die for them. Only a true man could suffer and die for our sins in our place." Although this truth is not absent in Athanasius' thought, Athanasius wrote, "For if the works of the Word's divinity had not taken place through the body, humanity would not have been deified; and again, if the properties of the flesh had not been ascribed to the Word, men would not have been delivered completely from them [i.e., the properties

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Vladimir Kharlamov, "Rhetorical Application of Theosis in Greek Patristic Theology," in *Partakers of the Divine Nature*, 115.

⁸ Ibid., 116.

of the flesh].”⁹ Vladimir Kharlamov says that Athanasius’ affirmation of Jesus’ true divinity and humanity may have been spoken more to affirm “the incarnation of God than of the deification of human beings.”¹⁰ But he continues: “In Athanasius, deification not only gains momentum as a convincing force in his fight against the Arians but it also acquires profound significance in Christian spirituality.”¹¹ The doctrine continued to be developed from Athanasius to Gregory Palamas (1296–1359), who gave the teaching its final expression.

For the sake of this paper, however, we merely want to show the effect of this teaching on the spirituality of the common Christian. Once Christianity turned from the apostle Paul’s message of God’s forgiveness of the world in Christ and the church came to describe justification in terms of deification, its emphasis shifted from grace as God’s favor in Christ to the grace necessary to advance toward perfection. Grace became the power to be deified, or viewing *theosis* as a process, it became the power to do what is necessary to become deified.

For the Eastern Orthodox, Christ’s incarnation produced an objective effect—in a sense, an Eastern corollary to objective justification. All people were deified when Christ assumed a human body. Yet because deification is a process that leads to a goal, Christ’s deification of all human beings can only be described as an act that makes our deification potentially possible. For deification actually to happen, a person must appropriate to himself Christ’s act of deifying humanity by striving to keep God’s commandments.

Andrew Louth defines grace in this context:

This reconstitution of human nature is something impossible without the grace of God, without everything implied in God the Word’s living out what it is to be human, and thereby on the one hand showing us what it is to be truly human, and on the other experiencing and overcoming the accumulated power of evil that has manifested itself in human nature and human affairs — ultimately experiencing and overcoming the power of death itself.¹²

Vladimir Kharlamov writes,

⁹ Russell, 173.

¹⁰ Kharlamov, 120.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹² Louth, 37.

The virtuous life, as a necessary requirement for the imitation of God in relation to deification, has a prominent place in Gregory [of Nazianzus]. In this sense, a human person becomes “god” by moral purification, for a human being has the natural capability for such purification. ... However, possessing only a natural inclination toward God is not enough to overcome the consequences of the Fall. Thus, deification is a twofold process that goes simultaneously through a human’s natural inclination toward God and the salvific activity of God.¹³

Louth defines the twofold process: “This reconstitution of human nature is something impossible without the grace of God. ... It is not a change in which we will be passively *put right*—some sort of moral and spiritual surgery—it is a change that requires our utmost cooperation, that calls for a truly ascetic struggle.”¹⁴

The Orthodox’s goal of *deification* cannot help but lead to an emphasis on *works*, which can only be accomplished by God’s *grace*. This way of viewing salvation receives constant emphasis in Orthodox theology, not just in the past but in modern Orthodox churches as well. Orthodox church services generally end with a short homily, and in all the homilies I have heard, the priest offers no gospel but simply exhorts his people to good works if they want to experience what God intends for them to have.

The Roman Catholic Approach: Faith Informed by Love

Western church life and theology is largely based on the life and writings of Saint Augustine (354–430). Often the history of Roman Catholicism begins with Augustine and does not take into account the fact that Augustine lived in the mainstream of contemporary Christianity. From our 21st-century vantage point, we see a radical distinction between the Eastern church and Roman Catholicism. But that distinction was not there when Augustine lived. In fact, in many ways Augustine’s early life encapsulated the life and spiritual outlook of the church at large.

As noted previously, Augustine used the concept of deification: “We experience mortality, we endure infirmity, we look forward to divinity (*divinitatem*).”¹⁵ Augustine looked forward to eternity when “our divinity will only be achieved with the beatific vision, when the promise

¹³ Kharlamov, 125.

¹⁴ Louth, 37 (emphasis mine).

¹⁵ Russell, 332.

of the serpent, 'You shall be a god' is brought to its true fruition by God 'who would have made us gods, not by deserting him, but by participating in him.'¹⁶ Augustine's early religious upbringing was steeped in the law emphasis that accompanies this teaching.

Augustine's early life and struggles make him a kind of "every man," which goes a long way to explaining his appeal, not just to church theologians but to common Christians as well. Augustine's mother was a Christian, and his father was an unbeliever. Augustine rebelled against his mother's Christianity. During his school years, he said he was trifling, inattentive, lazy, and an enemy of Greek.¹⁷ During those years he took a mistress. At age 19 a major change occurred in his life. While reading Cicero's *Hortensius*, he decided to give up everything in pursuit of the truth. Soon afterward he became a Manichean and would remain a disciple of that cult for nine years. He became disillusioned with Manichaeism and at 29 began studying Platonic philosophy. That would be his point of reference the rest of his life and largely shaped the content of his early apologetic writings. Augustine's disillusionment with Manichaeism coincided with his drift back into the Catholic fold under the influence of Ambrose, Bishop of Milan.

During this time Augustine considered himself to be a Christian, but he was still plagued with his earlier sins, especially his sexual desires and his life with a second mistress. In 386 Augustine had his famous conversion experience. To understand his conversion, we need to realize that it was not a conversion to Christianity but a conversion of his will within the context of his Christian faith. In other words, Augustine had already come to an intellectual faith in the truth of Christianity, but he had not experienced a conversion of his will. He could not control his lusts. Considering the nature of the Christianity of his day, where the emphasis was on moral transformation—becoming divine—there was great pressure to become righteous, and sensitive sinners like Augustine would invariably live under a great amount of pressure.

What Augustine considered to be his true conversion was not a conversion effected through faith in God's salvation in Christ, but an experience of profound love and joy that enabled him to rid himself of sinful desires. The Scripture passage that launched his conversion had little explicit gospel: "Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not

¹⁶ Ibid., quoting De Civ. Dei, 22:30.

¹⁷ Eugene Portalie, *A Guide to the Thought of St. Augustine* (Chicago: Henry Regency Co., 1960), 6.

in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature” (Romans 13:13–14).

This sequence of events, which transpired in the midst of the prevailing understanding of Christianity, contributed heavily to the development of the whole Western theological system. In general, the Catholic Church’s theology—its definition of faith, grace, and justification—developed along lines shaped by (1) the believer’s intellectual agreement (faith) with the teachings of the church and (2) the hope that this faith would in time become informed with love as one grew to know God’s love better.

The system that developed in line with Augustine’s conversion opened the question of *how* a person’s faith became informed by love, or *how* a Christian moved from the initial desire to serve God to a full-fledged active and ongoing state of Christian life, a *habitus*, to use a later term. Over the centuries, Western scholastics discussed and debated this process.

At first, Augustine held a more positive view of the seeker’s spiritual potential to initiate and move the process along. But the Pelagian controversy forced Augustine to clearly define the role of God’s grace in the process of Christian life. His conclusion was that we owe everything to God’s grace and can do nothing without it.

Lutherans often hold up Augustine as the man who enabled Luther to understand grace. Yet this was only partially true. What complicates Luther’s relation to Augustine is the way Augustine used the word “grace.” Luther appealed to Augustine in his fight against those in his day who taught that if people just did the best they could with the good remaining in them, God would bless them. Luther saw nothing good within himself, and he found comfort in hearing Augustine tell Pelagius that it was God’s grace alone that enables a Christian to live a God-pleasing life. This was a tremendous help to Luther.

But Augustine’s view of grace, consistent with the deification theology held by the church of his day, was that grace was a power that God infuses in Christians. This is the point at which Luther had to wrestle with Augustine and where he and the other reformers moved beyond him and restored a true biblical Christianity. Chemnitz, who is otherwise very gracious toward Augustine, must confess,

The use of the word “grace” to describe the *gifts of renewal* is so common in Augustine and others that the grace of remission

of sins or free acceptance by God is rarely mentioned in these discussions. ... Indeed, there is no point in hiding the fact that Augustine in his conflict with the Pelagians used the word "grace" *only in the sense of gifts*.¹⁸

Combined with the ambiguities of Augustine on the nature of grace, there are equally serious ambiguities on the doctrine of justification. Augustine viewed justification as the process by which God makes us just and makes us heirs of eternal life. Here also he was merely being consistent with the prevailing thought of the day. Lutherans are used to defining justification as the righteousness God imputes to us in Christ, which is the reason why he accepts us as his children and heirs of heaven. Augustine, however, considered justification to be a moral state that Christians must achieve. Consistent with the teaching of deification, Augustine taught that Christians become actual sons of God through moral perfection.¹⁹ True, this moral state comes by God's grace alone, but it is still a state of being. Francis Pieper comments, "Luther and Melancthon were aware that the obscurities of Augustine on this point had to be cleared away. Augustine stressed not so much the gracious disposition of God in Christ as rather the renewal, which results solely from God's grace, and this he made the ground of justification."²⁰

Consistent with his own experience of wanting to become righteous but not being able to achieve what he wanted, Augustine maintained *both* grace and free will in the process of justification. Augustine never gave up the teaching of human free will so prominent in the church of his day. Rather, he stressed the fact that free will was held completely captive until it was freed by grace. When grace came, the will was freed and the process of justification could proceed. Within the framework of this teaching, one's ability to keep the law, which was only possible once human free will was freed from its captivity, was the basis of justification. Alister McGrath puts it like this: "In justification, the *liberum arbitrium captivatum* becomes the *liberum arbitrium liberatum* by the action of healing grace."²¹

All medieval theology is Augustinian to a greater or lesser extent. The Latin fathers were left to discuss the relation between grace and free

¹⁸ Martin Chemnitz, *Loci Theologici*, Vol. 2, trans. J.A.O. Preus (St. Louis: Concordia, 1989), 522 (emphasis mine).

¹⁹ Alister McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 31,32.

²⁰ Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. 2 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1951), 15.

²¹ McGrath, 27.

will. With them we observe the beginnings of speculation on the nature of original sin and the implications of this for man's moral ability.²² The process of justification was further defined. The Latin theologians developed a fourfold process by which a person is justified in the Augustinian sense of the term: infusion of grace, movement of free will, contrition, remission of sins.²³ Theologians argued that if a person did what he was able to do using his natural powers, God would give him merit in line with his actions (*meritum congruum*), and if he continued to progress, the Christian would receive *meritum condignum*, or the ability to live a continuously righteous life. It is no wonder that equating justification with forgiveness was such a monumental jump for the Reformers.

The bottom line is that the Eastern concept of deification and the Latin understanding of justification both forced Christians to seek out a righteousness that bypassed the righteousness we have in Christ, which avails before God, and rely on a righteousness inherent in themselves. Both Eastern and Western theology is cut from the same cloth. In fact, one modern scholar, A. N. Williams, concludes that the great Catholic scholastic Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) and the Eastern Orthodox theologian Gregory Palamas (1296–1359), who explained and defended the Eastern teaching of deification, were actually basing a Christian's union with God on the same basic spiritual principles, even though their terminology was different.²⁴

Luther departed from the Augustinian definition of justification. Justification is God's declaration that Christians are not guilty though faith in the forgiveness and righteousness of Christ that is there for the whole world. Hence, justification is an act of God's gracious pardon, not an infusion of his gifts. This is not to deny that our service to God is also a gift of his grace. It is. But our entire relationship with God begins with faith in what Christ did for all people. What is more, on the basis of Scripture, without trying to define some philosophical (ontological) relationship as is done in the Orthodox and Catholic churches, Luther made it clear that in Christ we come to live in God and God comes to live in us.

²² Ibid., 19.

²³ Ibid., 44.

²⁴ See A.N. Williams, *The Ground of Union: Deification in Aquinas and Palamas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

Post-Reformation Churches

Sad to say, the teachings of the Eastern and Western churches quickly found their way back into the Christian church. One can pretty much run down the list of influential non-Lutheran (and a good number of Lutheran) theologians and Protestant denominations to find evidence of this. The Lutheran Andreas Osiander believed that salvation comes through the righteousness of Christ that Christians possess *because Christ lives within them*. Later, the Lutheran devotional writer Johann Arndt reintroduced the Lutheran church to an inner spiritualism (one might even call it mysticism) by way of his devotional books.

What Ted Campbell calls “the religion of the heart” (note the singular) spread through various groups in the two hundred years after the Reformation.²⁵ Notable is August Francke, who introduced the Augustinian type of conversion experience into the Lutheran church. Francke, like Augustine, spent years yearning to be what he called an “upright Christian.” Thoroughly versed in Lutheran theology but unable to overcome his sins of pride and ambition, he yearned for God’s direct intervention in his life. In 1687 he received his conversion experience, no less intense than Augustine’s. Francke introduced a new spiritual emphasis into the Lutheran church, which caused Lutherans to look within themselves for evidence of God’s grace—grace in the sense of an infused quality. The knowledge of God’s favor in Christ was not enough.

John Wesley was perhaps the greatest proponent of infused grace in post-Reformation Christianity. In Wesley, we see the same intense struggle to overcome sin as we saw in Augustine. Wesley’s early life in the Church of England was spent trying to become a real Christian. Faith in Christ’s righteousness was not enough, or even the main thing he was searching for. “Wesley was less interested than Reformation theology in the permanent justification of the sinner and more interested in the process of a moral renewal.”²⁶ Wesley’s heavy emphasis on good works left him empty and questioning his own status before God. One of his friends, Peter Boehler, convinced him that conversion was an instantaneous act, and Wesley anxiously awaited the time when he would experience it.

²⁵ Ted Campbell, *The Religion of the Heart: A Study of European Religious Life in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Columbia, SC: South Carolina University Press, 1991).

²⁶ Veli-Matti Karkkainen, *One With God: Salvation as Deification and Justification* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, The Order of Saint Benedict, 2004), 76.

Lutherans consider Wesley's Aldersgate Street conversion to be a feather in the Lutheran cap. On the evening of May 24, 1738 his heart was "strangely warmed" when he heard a group of Christians reading about justification by faith in Luther's preface to the *Epistle to the Romans*. But Wesley biographer Stanley Ayling questions how much Luther's teaching changed Wesley's life. He writes, "But that there is any clear boundary between Wesley's life before a quarter to nine on the evening of 24 May 1738, and his life after that point, is a proposition which accords neither with the apparent facts nor even with a good deal of Wesley's own subsequent testimony." In fact, it is clear from Wesley's writings that "he had already moved away from his earlier belief in salvation through righteousness and good deeds,"²⁷ and so it was not necessarily a new insight that we are justified by faith that warmed his heart. Wesley indeed taught salvation by faith in the Lutheran Reformation sense, but consistent with his goal of inner renewal, he also stressed the necessity of a conversion experience of some sort—a point in time that a person could claim was the true beginning of his Christian life.

In line with the ecumenical agenda, Karkkainen writes,

Even though his own spiritual journey was not marked by anything desperate like that of Luther's [desire to be rid of guilt] — for Wesley the agony was over the "deeper life" rather than guilt as such. ... In this insistence on the need for a real transformation of the believer's life, Wesley not only approaches the ethos of the Eastern Orthodox tradition but also that part of Western spirituality that has been marked by Roman Catholic theology.²⁸

The denominations that developed in a line from John Wesley—Methodism itself, the American Holiness bodies, Pentecostalism, and the mainstream charismatic movement—are all inward-looking religions that stress a believer's concrete awareness of divine power and inner righteousness. Salvation by faith is taught, but there is a strong element of the age-old spirituality of the pre-Reformation church, as Karkkainen points out.

This discussion is not a matter of intensity of faith, personal experience of relief from the guilt and power of sin, heartfelt joy in the gospel, and living for God. All Christians have these qualities and grow in them throughout their lives. Rather, it's a matter of a different spirit,

²⁷ Stanley Ayling, *John Wesley* (New York: Collins, 1979), 92-94.

²⁸ Karkkainen, 75.

which has been around from the beginning of Christianity, manifesting itself in various ways within the visible Christian church. It is the matter of the meaning of justification. Franz Pieper makes no overstatement when he writes, “Substituting grace in the sense of *gratia infusa*, or a good quality in man, for the *gratuitus favor Dei*, or combining the two, is the fundamental error of all who within Christendom depart from the pure Christian doctrine.”²⁹

The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther

Before moving on to Baptism, let’s return to the work of the modern ecumenical movement, where we began. As we mentioned, there is an active effort to find a common element—some suggest *theosis*—in all Christianity, which can serve as a foundation for church union.

One of the important ecumenical efforts is the work of Tuomo Mannermaa. Mannermaa is professor emeritus of systematic and ecumenical theology at the University of Helsinki, Finland. Being a neighbor of Russia, he initiated ecumenical discussions with various priests and church leaders across the border. He undertook a reading of Luther and concluded that Luther’s theology, “unfiltered” through the Lutheran Confessions, bore similarities to the Eastern Orthodox teaching of *theosis*. In 1981 Mannermaa published *In Faith Itself Christ is Really Present: The Point of Intersection Between Lutheran and Orthodox Theology* in Finnish. In 2005 his work was published in English by Fortress Press under the title *Christ Present in Faith: Luther’s View of Justification*. Prior to that, in 1993 ELCA professors Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson had met Mannermaa at the Luther Conference, held at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. A few years later they published the essays presented at that conference by Mannermaa and three of his colleagues. Braaten and Jenson served as editors of *Union With Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther*, published by Eerdmans in 1998.

This Mannermaa movement is important because it challenges Lutheran theology at its core. Instead of viewing Luther’s understanding of justification and faith as unique in the first 1,500 years of Christianity and to a large extent afterward, it seeks to draw Luther into the Eastern Orthodox camp. In their “Preface: The Finnish Breakthrough in Luther Research,” Braaten and Jenson write,

²⁹ Pieper, 11.

Mannermaa and his colleagues went behind the disputatious history of the Lutheran doctrine of justification and reread Luther's texts. There they found that for Luther faith is real participation in Christ, not only in a nominal and external way, but really and inwardly. According to the forensic model of justification, it is *as though* we are righteous, while in reality we are not. But if through faith we really participate in Christ, we participate in the whole Christ, who in his divine person communicates the righteousness of God. Here lies the bridge to the Orthodox idea of salvation as deification or *theosis*.³⁰

We will briefly touch on the position of the Mannermaa school and offer a few comments.

The Mannermaa school draws many of its observations about Luther from Luther's early writings. The Lutheran church has always acknowledged that Luther gradually moved from the Augustinian concept of justification to his mature, "Lutheran," position. Mannermaa's contention, however, is that the later Luther was essentially no different from the early Luther. To his credit, he bases his argument in *Christ Present in Faith* on Luther's 1535 *Commentary on Galatians* and not on quotations from the young Luther.

Mannermaa contends that "the Formula of Concord and the mainstream Lutheran tradition has incorrectly separated the remission of sins (justification) on the one hand and the inhabitation of God in the believer (sanctification) on the other."³¹ Mannermaa writes, "Thus, the concept of *deificatio* is at the very heart of the Reformer's doctrine of justification. On this basis, it is evident that the doctrine of justification and the idea of sanctification constitute one whole in Luther's theology."³² He says, "The logic of the Reformer's thinking is as follows: *In faith, human beings are really united with Christ. Christ, in turn, is both the forgiveness of sins and the effective producer of everything that is good in them.*"³³

One of Mannermaa's colleagues, Kirsi Stjerna, writes, "Using the language of divinization and union with God and talking about a new

³⁰ Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson, eds., *Union with Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), viii (emphasis original).

³¹ <http://theologyforum.wordpress.com/2008/08/18/tuomo-mannermaa-on-union-with-christ-and-the-christian-life/> (accessed October 2010).

³² Tuomo Mannermaa, *Christ Present in Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 46.

³³ *Ibid.*, 49 (emphasis his).

reality that comes with justification, Luther's theology sounds mystical and essentially in tune with both the Orthodox and Romans Catholic views on what happens to human beings in their grace-initiated, faith-based relationship with God in Christ."³⁴

Mannermaa focuses on passages from Luther like the two that follow, and, indeed, Luther speaks like this quite often in the 1535 Galatians commentary. Quoting Luther:

But if it is true faith, it is a sure trust and firm acceptance in the heart. It takes hold of Christ in such a way that Christ is the object of faith, or rather, not the object but, so to speak, the One who is present in the faith itself. ... *Therefore faith justifies because it takes hold of and possesses this treasure, the present Christ.* ... This is the formal righteousness on account of which man is justified; it is not on account of love as the sophists say. In short, just as the sophists say that love forms and trains faith, *so we say that it is Christ who forms and trains faith or who is the form of faith.*³⁵

Here it is to be noted that these three things are joined together: faith, Christ, and acceptance or imputation. Faith takes hold of Christ and has Him present, enclosing Him as the ring encloses the gem. *And whoever is found having this faith in the Christ who is grasped in the heart, him God accounts as righteousness. This is the means and the merit by which we obtain the forgiveness of sins and righteousness.*³⁶

A couple quotations from Mannermaa's colleagues will illustrate where Mannermaa takes us based on how Luther talks in the above two quotations. Simo Peura writes:

The self-giving of God is realized when Christ indwells the sinner through faith and thus unites himself with the sinner. This means that the Christian receives salvation *per Christum* only under the condition of *unio cum Christo*. Luther's conviction on this point leads to the conclusion that a Christian

³⁴ Ibid., "Editor's Forward" by Kirsi Stjerna, xiii.

³⁵ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, 26, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, American Edition (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House), 129-130 (emphasis mine).

³⁶ Ibid., 132.

becomes a partaker of Christ and that a Christian is in this sense also deified.³⁷

Here the conditional nature of salvation strikes us.

According to Peura, the objective reason why we can be blessed with having Christ in us is God's love. He writes, "What does all of this say about the beginning point of this paper, Luther's great question? To find a merciful God is nothing other than to find God as pure love. But we cannot find this merciful God until we become partakers of God, who, according to his nature, is pure, self-giving love."³⁸ Mannermaa speaks the same way: "Contrary to this, God wants, out of pure and sheer love, to grant God's forgiving righteousness—that is, Godself—to human beings and to be their 'love and blessedness.'"³⁹ But on what is God's love for sinners based? The Lutheran starting point of "Christ for us" provides an answer. The Mannermaa school's dependence on "Christ in us" leaves a sinner wondering.

The Mannermaa school's reinterpretation of Luther does not satisfy us for several reasons. First, in the quotations from Luther's 1535 commentary on Galatians referred to above, Luther is writing in the context of the Catholicism of his day. In the context of the teaching of "faith formed by love," Luther's point is that faith is formed not by a growing ability to love, but by Christ himself, who dwells in us not partially, but fully. That way of speaking, through which Luther makes a crucial point to the people of his day, can give many of his statements an inward-looking direction. But even a cursory reading of the discussion surrounding these statements shows that Luther's faith is not based on God's bare love, but on God's love poured out on the entire world by giving his Son to die for our sins. On the very page from which the second of the two previous Luther quotations was taken, Luther says this:

Now he [the Christian] begins to sigh: "Then who will come to my aid?" Terrified by the Law, he despairs of his own strength; he looks about and sighs for the help of the Mediator and Savior. Then there comes, at the appropriate time, the saving Word of the Gospel, which says: "Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven" (Matt. 9:2). Believe in Jesus, who was crucified for your sins. If you feel your sins, do not consider them in yourself

³⁷ Braaten and Jenson, "Christ as Favor and Gift," by Simo Peura, 51.

³⁸ Braaten and Jenson, 95.

³⁹ Mannermaa, 31.

but remember that they have been transferred to Christ, “with whose stripes you are healed” (Isaiah 53:3). . . .⁴⁰

Christ and his righteousness is the “form” of faith, and faith can be formed with Christ himself because he died for the sins of the world—not merely because God is loving. Objective justification is the heart of Scripture and Luther’s theology.

It is also a stretch when Mannermaa pits Luther against Lutheran doctrinal theology as it developed under Melanchthon and the Formula of Concord. To be convincing, Mannermaa would have to produce some evidence of a conflict between Luther and Melanchthon to counter the words of praise Luther heaped on Melanchthon’s *Loci* of 1521, or he would have to counter Luther’s pleasure with Article IV of the Augsburg Confession. Perhaps the Pietistic background of Finnish Lutheranism is instrumental in leading the Mannermaa school to its conclusions.

The purpose of this discussion is to show that the battle over the basis of justification and, indeed, over its very definition, is far from over. The new Finnish Lutheran interpretation of Luther has taken the battle to the very heart of Lutheranism. It has supplied ELCA theologians and others with ammunition for their theology of infused grace. It is working to take confessional Lutheranism back into the theology held by the church in the 1,500 years before Luther—a church based on grace as the power to become a God-pleasing person rather than as God’s gift of pardon in Christ.

Luther’s Understanding of Justification and Baptism

Justification

Luther raised the Christian church out of the theological desert in which it had wandered for centuries, and he continues to bless us today. The gospel, so clearly taught by St. Paul, was revived for the church through Martin Luther and is our treasure today.

There is no need to go into any depth on how Luther and the Lutheran church viewed justification. Luther focused first and foremost on the work Jesus did for the entire world when he died in our place and took on himself the full guilt—the debt we owe to God—of our sin. This teaching for Luther was not an “also ran,” nor did he even establish a parity between forgiveness and the power to become more God-pleasing.

⁴⁰ LW 26, 132.

Luther knew the many gifts God gives to believers, and he certainly experienced *gratia infusa* in his own life. But when it came to his status before God, it was faith alone in God's pardon that was the heart of his Christian life. It was the knowledge that God was at peace with him, even when he was running from God, that enabled him to reconcile himself to God. This was his righteousness. This was his justification. Luther reveled in the fact that God was living in him, imparting to him strength, wisdom, courage, faithfulness, and the ability to live for God. But that had happened because of what Christ did for him, and he received Christ's forgiveness simply by believing it was true. Because the whole world had been justified in Christ, Luther knew he had been justified too. This message defines the purpose of the Christian church.

Whenever we evaluate other church bodies, we must always keep in mind Luther's words about the presence of false teaching in the church. We share his sadness but also his confidence that in spite of it all, God's elect are being found.

I have wondered a great deal that with these destructive heresies persisting for so many centuries the church could still endure amid such great darkness and error. There were some whom God called simply by the text of the Gospel, which nevertheless continued in the pulpit, and by Baptism. They walked in simplicity and humility of heart; they thought that the monks and those whom the bishops had ordained were the only ones who were religious and holy, while they themselves were profane and secular and therefore not to be compared with them. Since they found in themselves no good works or merits to pit against the wrath and judgment of God, they took refuge in the suffering and death of Christ; and in that simplicity they were saved.⁴¹

Here Luther defined his teaching of justification, which has been treasured in the hearts of all believers since Christianity began.

Baptism

Luther's experience of justification through faith—and it was an experience no less intense and defining than the various kinds of experiences that spiritual people have had in the past and that we see all around us today—leads to a scriptural understanding of Baptism. No longer was Baptism the gate to an infusion of God's grace for Christian

⁴¹ Ibid., 140.

living. Rather, it is the way in which God washes our sins away, the means through which Christ's forgiveness and righteousness are imputed to us.

Indeed, this is how Scripture speaks about it. Every passage in Scripture that speaks about Baptism relates it to forgiveness. John preached "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4). Jesus said, "No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit" (John 3:5). Baptism saves us by giving us "the pledge of a good conscience toward God" (1 Peter 3:21). On Pentecost, Peter urged the people to "be baptized ... for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:38). Ananias urged Paul, "And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name" (Acts 22:16). All who have been baptized have been "clothed ... with Christ" and now are "heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:27, 29). Paul said that Jesus cleansed the church "by the washing with water through the word," and in this way forgave our sins so that we are "a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless" (Ephesians 5:26-27). This is clearly not through an infusion of virtue but by washing away our sins. God "saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5), clearly putting the initial emphasis on forgiveness—he "saved us."

Baptism certainly results in a new, guilt-free life of service to God (Romans 6:4), "the putting off of the sinful nature" (Colossians 2:11), and "a new life" (Romans 6:4). These blessings always accompany the gospel. But Baptism is never a direct conduit for these blessings. These blessings come to us through Baptism because Baptism joins us with Christ and cleanses us from sin.

There are many quotations from Luther in which he describes Baptism, but here we will not go beyond the simplicity of his Large Catechism. Baptism is a washing that receives its power because it is connected with God's Word, that is, the word of the Gospel. To those who stressed an inner spirituality and looked down on Baptism, Luther said,

Now, they are so mad as to separate faith, and that to which faith clings and is bound, though it be something external. Yea, it shall and must be something external, that it may be apprehended by the senses, and understood and thereby brought into the heart, as indeed the entire Gospel is an external,

verbal preaching. In short, what God does and works in us He proposes to work through such external ordinances [*solche aeuszerliche Ordnung*]. Wherever, therefore, He speaks, yea, in whichever direction or by whatever means He speaks, thither faith must look, and to that it must hold.⁴²

The message of justification in Christ is external, and baptism is just as external. Luther was ashamed of neither fact. It was how he could be sure of his salvation, and it was the basis for everything that happened internally—in his heart.

Baptism in Context

Now that we have reviewed the distinction between churches that seek grace as the “power to become” and those that appreciate grace as God’s favor in Christ’s forgiveness, we can return to the other churches we examined earlier and observe how their teaching on justification shapes their teaching on baptism.

Our contention is that a church body’s life is made up of three basic elements working in concert with one another: experience, doctrine, and practice. Each of these defines and influences the others.

Experience is a very powerful force, often acting as the very foundation of a church’s theology, and it can strongly affect a church’s practice. Doctrine spells out what a church body believes, which in turn can lead to distinct experiences and also shape practice. Practice, in turn, can lead church members into various types of experiences, and over time it can shape what church members believe: *lex orandi, lex credendi*.

When a church teaches justification as a process of renewal rather than a declaration of “not guilty,” a theology develops around that idea. First, the meaning of salvation invariably shifts in the direction of inner renewal rather than peace in God’s presence. Because justification is viewed as a process, a person cannot really be sure where he is along the continuum, and when the thought of one’s status before God comes up, there is invariably a certain amount of uncertainty. An Augustinian or Franckean “born again” type experience is sought to assure that true renewal has taken place. In this context, the church’s understanding of human spiritual potential is shifted radically. After all, it is observed, everyone wants to be a better person (which now has become the goal in justification). This natural yearning is interpreted as a divine impulse

⁴² Martin Luther, *Concordia Triglotta*, “The Large Catechism” (St. Louis: Concordia, 1921), 739.

people have by nature. Once that idea adopted, it is easy to teach that God gives his grace to those who act on that impulse. Therefore churches can teach free will and “by grace alone” at the same time. Yet now they must struggle to define theologically the relationship between a person’s natural divine impulse and God’s grace. Invariably, because natural human powers are involved, the emphasis of these churches shifts in the direction of law—what Christians must do before God will give his grace. Practices such as altar calls and methods for awaiting God’s grace spring up. Church services are structured to prompt the search for God and to lead people to receive Christ into their hearts. Those who haven’t yet “got it” question their status before God, leading to an even greater emphasis on works. You get the picture.

The shift in one’s understanding of justification will also shape how that church teaches baptism.

Baptism in Eastern Orthodoxy

The general teaching on deification simplified Eastern Orthodox teaching in general. In fact, Eastern theologians often criticize the West because of its propensity to analyze everything. The idea that we need to understand the exact way in which we become deified or that we must engage in careful definitions of doctrines in general is viewed by the Eastern church as unnecessary. As mentioned earlier, this is not because Eastern theologians are not learned enough to carry on such discussions but because their experiential theology renders that discussion unnecessary.

When we understand *theosis*, Orthodox worship and teaching fall into place. The liturgy is an experience of the divine, through which God gives us his grace. Communion is a way by which we receive divinizing grace. Icons are a source of grace, not because they convey forgiveness but because they are the means through which the grace of deification is communicated. To the Orthodox, baptism is the beginning of deification through the Holy Spirit.

This is not to say that forgiveness was never a part of the early church’s teaching on baptism or that it is completely absent in the modern Orthodox teaching of baptism. But that emphasis has been subsumed under *theosis*. A few quotations will give a feel for this.

Very early, Clement of Alexandria (150–215) wrote, “Being baptized, we are illuminated; illuminated, we become sons; being made sons, we are made perfect; being made perfect, we are made immortal.”⁴³

One of the earliest hymn writers, Ephraim the Syrian (ca. 306–373), compares God to a mother bird teaching her young to fly, “Opening its wings in the symbol of the Cross.”⁴⁴

Michael Christensen explains: “The human soul grows in stages into divinity; from the physical birth to the spiritual birth (baptism), from mother’s milk to the meat of the Gospel; by learning to ‘sing’ (praise) and feed on divinity (Eucharist), the purified soul soars and returns in flight to God in the form of the Cross.”⁴⁵

Norman Russell explains Athanasius’ view of baptism. The flesh was deified when the *Logos* took on human nature and through this union he exalted human nature. When Christ deified human nature, he actually assumed all human beings into himself and deified them. Russell writes, “But this deification, which in principle is a deification of all men, has to be appropriated by individual believers. It is through baptism that the Son is encountered as the deifying and enlightening power of the Father.”⁴⁶ He continues:

We are deified in principle by baptism, but we have to make this efficacious in our lives by moral effort. To actualize participation in the divine nature, the believer must imitate him who was divine by nature: the *Logos* of God. The realistic [the actual deification we receive in baptism] and ethical aspects of deification must be kept in balance.⁴⁷

It soon becomes clear that when baptism becomes the beginning of deification rather than the point at which we receive God’s forgiveness, Baptism becomes merely the starting point of keeping the law rather than the point at which we are adopted into God’s family. Elena Vishnevskaya describes the teaching of Maximus the Confessor (580–622) on baptism: “For Maximus, God penetrates the human order by communicating grace through the sacraments. ... The sacramental grace is conferred upon all; its appropriation, however, is a matter of

⁴³ Michael Christensen, “The Problem, Promise, and Process of *Theosis*,” in *Partakers of the Divine Nature*, 25.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Russell, 177.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 186,187.

individual response and, particularly, one's spiritual perspicuity."⁴⁸ In line with this, the Eastern church has a high view of mankind's spiritual powers, much higher than the Western church came to have under Augustine's influence.

A modern description of baptism underlines the Orthodox emphasis on the mystical union between God and the person being baptized, as well as the transformative nature of baptism.

If at a baptism, the priest or bishop takes the part of St. John the forerunner, the person being baptized takes the part of Jesus Himself. This is not a mere symbol, nor is it sacrilegious in any way. On the contrary, the whole point of Christian baptism is that the person being baptized should find his or her identity in the Savior. ... Later, this identity grows to become the dominant and eternal part of the person's complete identity. This is the indelible mark of baptism: a person is given a new identity within the Body of Christ and starts a new, eternal life. ... St. Paul ... likens the font of baptism to the grave. ... This is a death of transition, in which, independent of our level of awareness, God effects a lasting change in our nature, and we are transformed from one thing into another—from children of this world into children of the kingdom of heaven.⁴⁹

We agree with some of the author's statements, but absent in his complete discussion is any reference to baptism as a means of forgiveness. No matter how many glowing terms the Orthodox use to describe the effects of baptism, their overall understanding of salvation makes baptism but a tool to provide a person with the potential to become deified, which in turn leads to a religion dominated by works.

Baptism in the Western Church

In turning to the Western church's teaching on baptism, we must not too quickly separate ourselves from the Eastern church. As we have seen, the Western teaching on justification was largely shaped in the world that taught the transforming process of deification, which was mirrored in the Western understanding of justification as infused grace.

⁴⁸ Elena Vishnevskaya, "Divinization as Perichoretic Embrace," in *Partakers of the Divine Nature*, 138.

⁴⁹ Archimandrite Meletios Weber, *Bread & Water, Wine & Oil: An Orthodox Experience of God* (Chesterton, IN: Conciliar Press, 2007), 117-119.

The infused grace model of justification certainly influenced the development of the theology of baptism in the Western Church. In the Western Church, things were not as simple as they were in the East. Augustine, whose thinking was foundational to the Western Church, taught infant baptism and that baptism washes away sins. But his understanding of grace as something God infuses into us made it difficult for medieval theologians to define how or what kind of virtues God instills, particularly in infants.⁵⁰

Following in Augustine's intensely analytical mindset, the Western Church worked to resolve the relationship between justification and baptism. McGrath describes some of the opinions:

The relationship between justification and the sacraments of baptism and penance was to preoccupy most, if not all, of the theologians of the twelfth century. How can infants or imbeciles, who are incapable of any rational act, be justified by baptism? No general solution to the problem may be said to have emerged during the period. ... Anselm of Canterbury taught that infants are treated *quasi iustu* on account of the faith of the church. In this, he was followed by Bernard of Clairvaux, who noted that, as it was impossible to please God without faith, so God has permitted children to be justified on account of the faith of others. This was given some theological justification by Peter Manducator, who argued that as children are contaminated by the sins of another (i.e. Adam) in the first place, it is not unreasonable that they should be justified by the faith of others. Peter Abailard was skeptical as to whether an infant was capable of an act of faith: given that this possibility appeared to be excluded, he derived some consolation from the idea that infants who die before maturity are given a perception of the glory of God at their death, so that charity may be born within them.

The origins of the generally-accepted solution to this difficulty date from the closing years of the twelfth century, with the introduction of the Aristotelian concept of the *habitus*. Thus Alan of Lille, one of the more speculative theologians of the twelfth century, distinguished between *virtus in actu* and *virtus in habitu*. An infant may be given the habit of faith in baptism as the *virtus fidei in habitu*, which will only be manifested as the

⁵⁰ McGrath, 91.

virtus fidei in actu when the child reaches maturity and becomes capable of rational acts. The lack of agreement which characterized the twelfth century is well illustrated from the letter of Innocent III, dated 1201, in which he declined to give any definite positive statement on the effects of baptism, merely noting two possible opinions: (1) that baptism effects the remission of sins; (2) that baptism effects the infusion of virtues as habits, to be actualized when maturity is reached.⁵¹

Martin Chemnitz, in his examination of the Council of Trent's canons on baptism, reflects McGrath's comments. He says that the scholastics made the teaching about baptism

complex by various arguments... that in baptism no powers are infused in children who are not yet using their reason, neither by way of an act, nor by way of an ability, nor by way of a beginning, but that only in adulthood... are these conferred; or, that if they die in infancy and have been baptized, the powers are conferred on them at the separation of soul and body. Others argue that in baptism neither abilities nor actual powers are conferred, but a root of these, which is a grace. Others make this root the mark (character) of baptism, and say that with increase in age the branches from this root become abilities or powers out of which the acts follow at the proper time. A third group is of the opinion that a quality of powers is infused in baptized infants, not, however, the act or the use of these powers.⁵²

Teachers in Luther's day were still trying to accommodate infused grace in the teaching of baptism.

Lutherans confess that the grace of forgiveness may be lost, but that it is always restored through faith. But when the focus is on infused grace, if that grace is driven from one's heart through sin something happens that cannot be corrected simply through repentance and faith. Using Catholic terminology, the ship of baptism is broken up, and "the power, strength, or grace of baptism is totally lost and made invalid" so that another plank must be sought, which, of course, is penance.⁵³

⁵¹ Ibid., 92,93.

⁵² Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent, Part II*, trans. Fred Kramer (St. Louis: Concordia, 1978), 174.

⁵³ Ibid., 144, on Canon VI.

Canon VII of the Council of Trent says that the baptized are obligated to obey the whole law. Chemnitz sees through this. He says that Lutherans do not make *the validity* of baptism depend on our keeping the law but on the forgiveness of sins that baptism conveys. But when the grace of baptism becomes infused grace, that is, the power to keep the law, keeping the law belongs to the very essence of baptism.⁵⁴

But when the grace of baptism is forgiveness based on God's covenant of pardon in Christ, it is not hard to see how a Christian can remember his baptism and draw comfort from it. But when the grace of baptism is viewed as the power to keep the Law, a person's sin makes it irrelevant whether he or she has been baptized or not. Baptismal grace is lost and must be restored in some other way than simply by remembering one's Baptism.⁵⁵

And as we noted above, when the justification given in baptism is viewed as an infusion of power, it is difficult for Catholics to explain what happens in children when they are baptized, even though the Catholic Church believes in infant baptism. This, however, is not a problem for those who see baptism as the Gospel of God's forgiveness, as Scripture teaches. And we might add the thought that when grace becomes an infused power, the number of sacraments are easily increased in order to provide the grace necessary for various other times and situations in life. (Even a cursory look at the current Catechism of the Catholic Church will show that the Catholic Church today teaches about grace, justification, and baptism in precisely the same way as they taught it in Luther's day.⁵⁶)

Baptism in Post Reformation Churches

We can merely touch on how the teaching of infused grace has affected the theology, experience, and practice of post-Reformation churches. Their teaching on baptism is conditioned on their understanding of grace, justification, and renewal. This is especially true in regard to the movements that started in 17th-century Germany (Pietism) and in 18th-century England under John Wesley (Methodism).

The early Pietist leaders all understood the Lutheran teaching of justification. But because the preaching of justification by faith did not produce the desired results, the Lutheran teaching of justification

⁵⁴ Ibid., 147-149, on Canon VII.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 155-159, on Canon X.

⁵⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church, With Modifications From the Editio Typica* (New York: DoubleDay, 1994). See the discussions on Baptism (342-353) and on Law and Grace (526-545).

essentially had to be altered. On paper, the definition of justification was not changed, but something had to be added to it — an infusion of virtue, life, zeal, or whatever — something that could be seen and felt.

Although August Francke never insisted that every Christian have the same experience that he had, the Pietists viewed some kind of recognizable conversion as a necessary part of Christian life. The Orthodox Lutherans often accused Pietists of tampering with the Lutheran teaching on baptism, but they had a hard time proving their claim — at least in regard to mainstream Pietist churches. The Pietists continued to baptize their children, and they believed that a child's sins were forgiven in baptism. But there was always a tension between baptism and the necessity of a subsequent conversion experience. Pietism scholar Gary Sattler perhaps best captures this tension. He writes, "It is, so to speak, as if the church member's baptism and confirmation did not 'take' until he or she underwent a period of repentance and rebirth."⁵⁷

John Wesley, who directly or indirectly has had the most influence on American Lutheranism, had the same concern as the Pietists over sanctification. Wesley was serious about his own sanctification or lack of it. He lamented the great number of nominal Christians in his church who depended on their church membership and baptism as their source of hope, in spite of the fact that they lived as unbelievers. Wesley's theology, largely based on the perfectionist experience, came into conflict with baptism. We can sympathize with Wesley's rebuke of those who depended on baptism in a carnal way. Consistent with the Anglican Church, he practiced infant baptism, but his approach no doubt made it seem to his congregation members that baptism didn't really "take" until they had experienced conversion.

In a book that discuss eight views of baptism, Russell Haight entitles his chapter on John Wesley "Baptism Is, and Is Not, the New Birth," which pretty much spells out Wesley's approach to the sacrament. He asks,

Does Wesley believe that infant baptism and its regeneration are sufficient, provided people live holy lives from infancy through all their adult years? Or is he saying that everyone, whether baptized as infants or not, must have a new birth whereby one

⁵⁷ Gary Sattler, *Nobler Than the Angels, Lower Than a Worm* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989), 29.

is conscious of the “inward work of God” that brings forth authentic faith?⁵⁸

He answers, “Even if Wesley sees the first option as a theoretical possibility, the reality of postbaptismal sin makes the second option the only secure course for nearly everyone.”⁵⁹

Although Wesley could speak of justification in Reformation terms, he had essentially changed the meaning of the term. As with all Christian church bodies before him, with the exception of confessional Lutheranism, justification had become something observable in the life of the believer, and in the process, baptism had suffered.

This trend would become even more apparent in the United States and throughout the world through the growth of revivalistic Methodism, Arminian “decision theology” Baptists, Holiness bodies, and especially Pentecostals. These groups elevated experiential grace and justification to such a high degree that believers’ or adult baptism following a conversion experience became for them the only option.

Conclusion

Luther’s scriptural understanding of justification and baptism is a breath of fresh air in the midst of the confusion over justification and baptism that pervades the Christian church. The scriptural heritage we have received as confessional Lutherans keeps us anchored in the gracious forgiveness we have in Christ. It gives us a clear, scriptural view of the sacrament of baptism, through which we have been adopted into God’s family and daily receive his forgiveness. LSQ

⁵⁸ Russell Haitch, *From Exorcism to Ecstasy: Eight Views of Baptism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 125.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

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Works by ecumenists:

Braaten, Carl E., and Robert W. Jenson, eds. *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998.

In 1993 a Luther Conference was held at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. At this conference the leading theologians of the University of Helsinki presented papers on their new interpretation of Luther. This book is a collection of the papers presented at this conference and some reactions by Braaten and Jenson.

Karkkainen, Veli-Matti. *One with God: Salvation as Deification and Justification*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press (The Order of Saint Benedict), 2004.

This book treats the Eastern teaching of *theosis* and relates it to Luther's theology and to post-Reformation Protestant theology. It urges the reader to consider *theosis* as a common theme among church bodies. The author is a professor of theology at Fuller Theological Seminary.

Kimbrough, S. T., ed. *Orthodoxy and Wesleyan Spirituality*. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002.

This book explores possible common themes between Wesleyan and Orthodox theology. It is series of articles approaching the topic from a variety of angles. The editor is "Associate General Secretary of the General Board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church." Of interest is that the book was published by St. Vladimir's Press.

Mannermaa, Tuomo. *Christ Present in Faith: Luther's View of Justification*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005.

Mannermaa examines Luther's 1535 Lectures on Galatians. His claim is that for Luther, justification is effected by Christ coming to live within us. This is Mannermaa's early work on the subject and considered the classic work of the Mannermaa school.

Christensen, Michael J. and Jeffery A. Wittung, eds. *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007.

This book contains a series of articles on the development of the doctrine of *theosis*. Articles attempt to trace the presence of this teaching in the Catholic Church, the various branches of the Reformation, and in contemporary theology. If you only want to read a single book on this subject, this is a good choice. It presents a

comprehensive view of the entire ecumenical argument in regard to *theosis*.

Nichols, Aidan. *Rome and the Eastern Churches*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press. Second Edition, 2010 (First Edition, 1992).

Nichols is at the center of Catholic/Orthodox doctrinal discussions. He gives a good history of the division between the Eastern and Western Churches and a very detailed look at Roman Catholic ecumenical overtures to the various branches of Eastern Orthodoxy. His conclusion is that the two churches could conceivably join except for the issue of the papacy.

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The author compares the Orthodox and Pentecostal churches on the teaching of Salvation. In this estimation, both churches have moved beyond a traditional understanding of salvation. He first covers Orthodox theology, and then, using chapters with similar titles, he compares and Orthodoxy and Pentecostalism. The author grew up a home where one parent was Pentecostal and the other Orthodox, hence his personal interest in this subject. Rybarczyk is a graduate of Fuller Seminary.

Williams, A. N. *The Ground of Union: Deification in Aquinas and Palamas*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Williams is assistant professor of theology at Yale Divinity School. This book is a scholarly treatment of Palamas and Aquinas based on a thorough reading and explanation of primary material. The book is not an easy read, but her conclusions are helpful in understanding the similarity between the Eastern and Western churches, and that in spite of their differences, they have a similar theological base. She concludes that although Aquinas did not use the terminology of deification, his entire theology is directed toward that goal.

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McGrath, Alister E. *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification, 2 Volumes (I. Beginning to 1500; II. 1500 to the Present)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

A must read for understanding the history of the teaching of justification. A scholarly work (Latin quotations are not translated) based on what seems to be a complete reading of the primary sources in the original. Although McGrath sees Luther as closer to Calvin than we might like, he has a solid understanding of the difference between the Lutheran and Catholic understanding of justification.

Portalie, Eugene. *A Guide to the Thought of St. Augustine*. Chicago: Henry Regency Co., 1960.

Russell, Norman. *Fellow Workers with God: Orthodox Thinking on Theosis*. Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2009.

(Not cited) This is a condensation of Russell's study on deification (below). If you only want to read one book on *theosis*, you can't go wrong with this superb study. But if you want to understand this book better, read Russell's longer book first.

———. *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

This book is the result of a 20-year study of the Greek church fathers in the original. It is the most extensive treatment of the history of the doctrine of *theosis* to date. The author gives a complete rundown of how the Greek fathers used the term *theosis* and its synonyms, which provides a realistic understanding of common or rare the use of the term was.

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The Sacrament of Holy Baptism: Well-Seasoned Water in Lutheran Theology

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WE WILL FAIL TO UNDERSTAND the sacrament of holy baptism as understood, taught, and confessed by Martin Luther and the Lutheran church if we fail to understand the truth that baptism is the gospel. Dr. Hermann Sasse's conclusion to his book *This Is My Body: Luther's Contention for the Real Presence in the Sacrament of the Altar* applies also to holy baptism:

Just as the church stands or falls with the Gospel, so she stands or falls with the sacrament of the Altar. For the sacrament is the Gospel. This is the conviction not only of Luther, but of the New Testament: "For as often as ye **eat** this bread and **drink** this cup, ye do **shew the Lord's death till he come.**"¹

To confess that baptism is the gospel is to confess the truth stated in the Small Catechism, that this sacrament "effects forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, just as the words and promises of God declare." These blessings of baptism are the heart of the gospel: sin, death, and devil are all targeted by and defeated by the waters of holy baptism. As Martin Chemnitz confessed:

¹ Hermann Sasse, *This Is My Body* (Adelaide, S.A.: Lutheran Publishing House, 1977), 329 (emphasis original).

The promise of Baptism offers and bestows the “grace of God” (Titus 3:7), “the forgiveness of sins” (Acts 2:38), “an appeal to God for a clear conscience” (1 Peter 3:32), “regeneration in the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5), entrance into the kingdom of heaven (John 1), salvation (Mark 16:16), the inheritance of “eternal life” (Titus 3:7) through and on account of the death and resurrection of Christ (Rom. 6:3-4; 1 Peter 3:21).²

Any limitation of baptism insofar as its depth (forgiving all sin, original and subsequent) or its breadth (for all nations: adults, children, infants) is a limitation of the gospel. This is the truth that put Martin Luther’s confession of baptism at odds first with the Roman Catholic Church and later with the Enthusiasts³ who arose in opposition to Luther’s supposedly incomplete de-Romanization.

Luther’s confession of the sacrament of baptism is based on three primary texts on baptism in Holy Scripture: Matthew 28 (divine institution), Mark 16 (the promise and faith), and Matthew 3 (the Trinity). Regarding the institution of the sacrament by the Lord Jesus Christ in His post-resurrection words recorded in Matthew 28:19, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” Luther confesses:

Our baptism, thus, is a strong and sure foundation, affirming that God has made a covenant with all the world to be a God of the heathen in all the world, as the gospel says. Also, that Christ has commanded the gospel to be preached in all the world, as also the prophets have declared in many ways. As a sign of this covenant he has instituted baptism, commanded and enjoined upon all heathen, as Matt. [28:19] declares: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of

² Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, vol. II (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1978), 147-48.

³ The term “Enthusiast” will be used somewhat more narrowly (excluding for the purposes of the paper the Roman Catholics and the Muslims) but otherwise in agreement with the definition given in the Smalcald Articles, III, 8: “In these matters, which concern the spoken, external Word, it must be firmly maintained that God gives no one his Spirit or grace apart from the external Word which goes before. We say this to protect ourselves from the enthusiasts, that is, the ‘spirits,’ who boast that they have the Spirit apart from and before contact with the Word. On this basis, they judge, interpret, and twist the Scripture or oral Word according to their pleasure.” (*The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert [Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000], 321.) Other terms that may be used synonymously with Enthusiast are Sacramentarian, Schwärmer, radical reformer, fanatic, and, in a more limited way, Anabaptist.

the Father,” etc. In the same manner he had made a covenant with Abraham and his descendants to be their God, and made circumcision a sign of this covenant. Here, namely, that we are baptized; not because we are certain of our faith but because it is the command and will of God. For even if I were never certain any more of faith, I still am certain of the command of God, that God has bidden to baptize, for this he has made known throughout the world. In this I cannot err, for God’s command cannot deceive. But of my faith he has never said anything to anyone, nor issued an order or command concerning it.⁴

The primacy of the promise given in Mark 16 was addressed in one of Luther’s early works against the papacy:

Now, the *first* thing to be considered about baptism is the divine promise, which says: “He who believes and is baptized will be saved” [Mark 16:16]. This promise must be set far above all the glitter of works, vows, religious orders, and whatever else man has introduced, for on it all our salvation depends. But we must so consider it as to exercise our faith in it, and have no doubt whatever that, once we have been baptized, we are saved. For unless faith is present or is conferred in baptism, baptism will profit us nothing; indeed, it will become a hindrance to us, not only at the moment when it is received, but throughout the rest of our lives. That kind of unbelief accuses God’s promise of being a lie, and this is the greatest of all sins. If we set ourselves to this exercise of faith, we shall at once perceive how difficult it is to believe this promise of God. For our human weakness, conscious of its sins, finds nothing more difficult to believe than that it is saved or will be saved; and yet, unless it does believe this, it cannot be saved, because it does not believe the truth of God that promises salvation.⁵

Matthew 3:13-17 (and the parallels in Mark 1 and Luke 3) is the biblical account of the baptism of Jesus:

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying,

⁴ Martin Luther, *Concerning Rebaptism*, *Luther’s Works*, American Edition, vol. 40 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), 252.

⁵ Martin Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, *Luther’s Works*, American Edition, vol. 36 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 58.

“I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”

The connection between baptism of Jesus and the presence of the triune God at that event and in each subsequent baptism was made clear by Luther in one of his sermons on baptism:

Hence, not only are sins forgiven in baptism, but we are also made sure and certain that God is so well pleased with it that he, together with Christ and his Holy Spirit, proposes to be present when it is administered and he himself will be the baptizer; although this glorious revelation of the divine majesty does not now occur visibly, as it did at that time on the Jordan, since it is sufficient that it occurred once as a witness and a sign.⁶

Therefore we should diligently accustom ourselves to look upon these things with eyes of faith and to interpret this glorious revelation and divine radiance and splendor which shone forth above the baptism of Christ as happening to us; for all this did not happen and all this was not recorded for Christ's sake, for he himself did not baptize [John 4:2], but rather for our comfort and the strengthening of our faith, for the sake of which he also accepted baptism. Therefore wherever anybody is being baptized according to Christ's command we should be confidently convinced that God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is present there, and that there is pure delight, pleasure, and joy in heaven over the fact that sin is forgiven, the heavens opened forever, and that now there is no more wrath but only grace unalloyed.⁷

These passages⁸ compelled Luther to state, “Baptism is not just water, but it is the water used according to God's command and

⁶ Martin Luther, *Sermon at the Baptism of Bernard von Anhalt*, *Luther's Works*, American Edition, vol. 51 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), 318.

⁷ *Sermon at the Baptism of Bernard von Anhalt*, LW 51:319.

⁸ Martin Chemnitz includes the following passages as those which give clear scriptural testimony regarding the efficacy of the sacraments, and in particular, of

connected with His word”; that baptism effects forgiveness of sins; and to sing in his catechetical hymn for holy baptism:

In Jordan’s water God’s own Son
 In sinless manhood bending,
 The Spirit, too, from heaven’s throne,
 In dove-like form descending.
 This truth must never be denied,
 Our faith must never waver,
 That all Three Persons do preside
 At Baptism’s holy laver,
 And dwell with each believer.⁹

Clearly, for Luther, as for the genuine Lutheran church, the word of God is the foundation for the sacrament. Otherwise it is no sacrament.

In the first place, we must above all be familiar with the words upon which baptism is founded and to which everything is related that is to be said on the subject, namely, where the Lord Christ says in the last chapter of Matthew [28:19]: “Go into all the world, teach all the heathen, and baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Likewise, in the last chapter of Mark [16:16]: “The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned.”¹⁰

The Theology of the Cross

Before a more substantial examination of baptism is undertaken, it is helpful to examine another key reformation theme of Luther’s teaching, namely, the theology of the cross. The theology of the cross lies at the heart of Luther’s teaching on the sacraments, and, indeed, at the heart of all theology. The theology of the cross is the paradoxical working of God through means that to human reason appear foolish. God works under apparent opposites. To bring life to all there is death. To free mankind from the slavery to sin One must become the most sinful and be bound. To bring glory there must be shame. To provide

baptism: Titus 3:5, Eph. 5:25-26, John 3:5, Acts 2:38, Acts 22:16, 1 Pet. 3:21, Rom. 6:3-5, Gal. 3:27, and Mark 16:16 (*Examination of the Council of Trent*, Vol II, 71).

⁹ *Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary* (St. Louis: MorningStar Music Publishers, Inc., 1996), 247:4.

¹⁰ K/W, LC Baptism, 457.

victory there is defeat. All of these find their point of intersection at Good Friday where He who knew no sin was sin for us; where He who is Resurrection and Life, died; where the Glory of the Father was despised and rejected. The death of Jesus Christ, He who is the Word made flesh, is the theology of the cross. The Christ on the cross, to the eyes of humanity, looks like defeat; but to faith it is victory. The same is true of the Incarnation. At the birth of Jesus Christ to the Virgin Mary human eyes see a small baby. But faith sees as Simeon did when he held the small child just a few days later and confessed: "Lord, now let Your servant depart in peace... for my eyes have seen Your salvation."

He whom the sea
And wind obey
Doth come to serve the sinner in great meekness.
Thou, God's own Son,
With us art one,
Dost join us and our children in our weakness.¹¹

The theology of the cross looks at things seemingly weak, insignificant, and valueless, and sees in them power, victory, and the treasures of heaven. Why? Because the word of God tells us and by faith alone it is understood.

The crowd in John 8 which heard Jesus say, "Before Abraham was, I AM," took up rocks to throw at Him for blasphemy, for daring to claim Himself *YAHWEH*, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Stubborn unbelief blinded the eyes and plugged the ears. The mourners for Jairus' dead daughter, recorded in Mark 6, laughed at Jesus when He declared the little girl to be sleeping. But with the words, "Little girl, I say to you, arise," the Lord, despite His meek and lowly appearance brought life. The theology of the cross confesses "Yes" to all of this, for it knows by faith that in such lowly and despised ways we find the working of God. Sasse points out how the theology of the cross impacts how the Christian views all things:

Always it is from the cross that everything is understood, because hidden in the cross is the deepest essence of God's revelation. Because this is so, Luther's *theologia crucis* (theology of the cross) wants to be more than just one of the many theological theories that have appeared in Christian history. It stands against its opposite, the prevailing theology in Christendom,

¹¹ *ELH*, 161:2.

the *theologia gloriae* (theology of glory), as Luther calls it, and claims to be that right and Scriptural theology with which the church of Christ stands and falls. Only of the preaching of this theology, Luther maintains, can it be said that it is the preaching of the Gospel.¹²

In contrast to the theology of the cross, the theology of glory judges not by faith but by sight. The theology of glory opposes that which is “fleshly” with what is considered higher and more profound: the “spiritual.” In this way the theology of glory downplays and even denigrates the sacramental realities of the washing of water that forgives sin and the eating and drinking of the Body and Blood of Christ “for the remission of sins.” Water, bread, and wine, are nothing to the theology of glory for they are seen only in their natural substance, not through faith which apprehends the word of God.

Zwingli and others like him said that the Holy Spirit does not need a wagon. (*Dux vel vehiculum Spiritui non est necessarium*. F. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. III, p. 146) They sarcastically implied that the Holy Spirit does not need a cart to carry the blessings of redemption to humanity. He does not use the Word, absolution, baptism and the Lord’s Supper to work faith, strengthen faith, and preserve faith. Rather God works in man directly by His almighty power.¹³

In addition to this, various opponents of Luther decried his continued reliance on the sacraments, accusing him of not going far enough with the reformation of the church, and of being “too” Roman Catholic.

Nowhere outside the accounts of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the theology of the cross proclaimed so forthrightly as in St. Paul’s letter to the Corinthians:

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age?

¹² Hermann Sasse, “The Theology of the Cross,” *We Confess: Jesus Christ* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1984), 39.

¹³ Gaylin Schmeling, *God’s Gift to You: The Means of Grace*, Essay for the 1989 Annual Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 2.

Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. (1 Corinthians 1:18–25)

It is this theology of the cross which Luther understands lies hidden in the works of God. It is both a hiding and a revealing.

Stumbling block, foolishness—these are the realities, because God conceals His majesty and, against all expectations, hopes, and convictions, transforms it into its opposite: weakness on the cross. The idea is intolerable to the world; it must be eliminated as blasphemy, even godlessness. It was consistent for the Church in imitation of Christ to have to attest to its faith with the blood of martyrs.¹⁴

In one of Luther's most significant works against the Enthusiasts (*Against the Heavenly Prophets*), he stated the distinction that must be understood in order rightly to understand the ways by which God brings salvation here and now. The distinction is between the victory won, and the benefits distributed. We are not and were not present at the birth, the crucifixion, or the resurrection of the Son of God. Yet the blessings achieved through those events are available here and now even in the early years of this 21st century.

So that our readers may the better perceive our teaching I shall clearly and broadly describe it. We treat of the forgiveness of sins in two ways. First, how it is achieved and won. Second, how it is distributed and given to us. Christ has achieved it on the cross, it is true. But he has not distributed or given it on the cross. He has not won it in the supper or sacrament. There he has distributed and given it through the Word, as also in the gospel, where it is preached. He has won it once for all on the

¹⁴ Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 258.

cross. But the distribution takes place continuously, before and after, from the beginning to the end of the world.¹⁵

God brings his mercy to us through the sacraments in order to provide an objective, certain place at which we can receive by faith the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Luther understood the pangs of conscience that would gnaw away at faith, undermining trust in God, and leaving sinners in despair. That is why he treasured so highly and defended so strongly the word and sacraments, the ways instituted by God for bringing salvation. We do not “grope in vain,” but attend to the external signs provided by God in His concern for our salvation:

Nevertheless, at the same time the dear God is so concerned for us that we do not go astray and grope for him in vain, that he has given us outward, visible signs upon which we are to fix our eyes and ears. Otherwise we might object that we did not know how or where to find him, or go wandering and fluttering hither and yon after our own thoughts, as was done in time past in the papacy, some running to St. James, others to Rome, and so on.

Therefore he well provides us with such signs, so that we do not need to search hither and yon. He says: Look to the word, baptism, the sacrament, the keys [absolution]. True enough, he says, all this is external, but it is necessary and helpful to you, in order that you may have a definite image by which you can take hold of me, for you will never reach me in naked majesty; therefore I must present myself to you in these external images, in order that you may grasp me.¹⁶

Despite the apparent meagerness of the outward signs that accompany the sacraments (the water used in baptism, the bread and wine in the Holy Supper), there is a hidden power and promise, the word of God itself. Luther, both in his instruction and his preaching, insists that the word of God reveals to us what otherwise is unknown, and unable to be known, by us merely through the application of our physical senses and reason.

Therefore, we constantly teach that we should see the sacraments and all external things ordained and instituted by God

¹⁵ Martin Luther, *Against the Heavenly Prophets, Luther's Works*, American Edition, vol. 40 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), 213.

¹⁶ *Sermon at the Baptism of Bernard von Anhalt*, LW 51:327.

not according to the crude, external mask (as we see the shell of a nut) but as that in which God's Word is enclosed.¹⁷

[W]e should learn from God's Word in order that every Christian may know what baptism is; for hitherto there have been many sectarians and heretics, and they will always be present, who attack holy baptism. This comes from the fact that they view baptism as being only water, as our eyes tell us it is. With such a stupid view a man can never judge any differently of baptism or know any more about it than a cow. Therefore a Christian must be differently and better instructed in this matter.¹⁸

Therefore in baptism do not look to the minister's hand, which takes simple water, and his mouth, which speaks a few words over it, which is a trivial act that only fills the eyes and ears and otherwise accomplishes nothing, as blind reason permits itself to think. But rather look to the Word and act of God, by whose command baptism was instituted, indeed, who is himself the baptizer. That's why it has such power.¹⁹

The Sacrament of Holy Baptism

In the Christian teaching on baptism we find the intersection of many of the main teachings of Holy Scripture: original sin, free will, justification, faith, and repentance. As Martin Luther dealt with the teaching of baptism he was faced with the need to unravel many doctrinal threads that had become knotted tightly together over the previous centuries. Additionally he was faced with a growing protest against anything resembling Romanism by the Enthusiasts, and this protest was directed in part against baptism and, in particular, infant baptism. These two fronts (Romanism and Enthusiasm) of Luther's defense of the gospel caused him to emphasize different aspects of the scriptural teaching of baptism, and in the case of the Enthusiasts there was further differentiation needed due to the differences emerging among them (the Anabaptist denial of infant baptism in particular).

As was often the case, Luther's was the lonely way between Rome and the Enthusiasts. Over against the Enthusiasts, among whom he lumped Zwingli and his followers, as he

¹⁷ K/W, LC Baptism, 459.

¹⁸ *Sermon at the Baptism of Bernard von Anhalt*, LW 51:320.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 323.

would also have done with the Calvinists had they been part of his experience, he firmly held to the sacrament of baptism and everything that belongs with it: infant baptism, necessity for salvation, and regeneration. Over against Rome he firmly held to the *sola fide*: Forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are given only to faith.²⁰

Lutheran and Anabaptist differences emerged over the question of who could be baptized, but opposing views of man, God, grace, and conversion were the real issues, and these perspectives indicated that each had a fundamentally different view of Christianity.²¹

The promise of the forgiveness of sins given in baptism is received by faith alone. The blessings of baptism are not received simply through the action of the speaking of the word and the pouring of the water. While the word of God is always efficacious, it is not always believed. That holds true for the word added to water to make baptism. There is a great mystery involved with baptism, the mystery of the working of God the Holy Spirit through the means given to the Church to create and sustain faith. This is a mystery because, as the Augsburg Confession 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.²²

Note the “when and where he [the Holy Spirit] pleases.” Dr. Hermann Sasse, in a letter to Lutheran pastors in 1960, noted a variety of ways in which we seek the Holy Spirit where He is not to be found. Included among these was the attempt to use evangelism and stewardship programs which borrowed methods from American businesses and believed that with just the right type of training people could win other people for the church.

²⁰ Hermann Sasse, “Holy Baptism, Letters to Lutheran Pastors, No. 4,” *We Confess: The Sacraments* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1985), 44.

²¹ David Scaer, *Baptism* (St. Louis: The Luther Academy, 1999), 174.

²² Theodore G. Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 31.

There is of course talk of the Holy Spirit, but one no longer knows who He is. It seems He can be measured and quantified. Such evangelism produces results. Thousands are won for church membership. On the other hand we may recall the failure of the Biblical prophets and of our Lord Himself. When one considers the latter, one begins to understand the full earnestness of the "where and when it pleases God." Jesus said: "...so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand; lest they should turn again, and be forgiven" (Mark 4:12; cf. Is. 6:9-10). Whoever is not awed by what is hidden deep in these words will never truly know the Holy Spirit.²³

Faith is not something conjured within us through magic, nor through psychological or sociological programs and techniques. Without faith the gospel is not received. "He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him" (John 3:36). "Faith, in so far as it justifies, functions solely as the medium of apprehending the absolution pronounced in the Gospel."²⁴ The creative power of God's word, the efficacious gospel, is therefore also decisive for Luther's understanding of the sacrament of holy baptism.

It is God's creative Word that produces this renewal through baptism. Baptism is not just instituted by God. The words of institution are not only words of command that carry out an ordinance of God; they are creative words of grace. That is expressed in the Trinitarian baptismal formula, which brings the event of baptism within the Trinitarian process of salvation, tying it to the [Augsburg] Confession's central statements on salvation. Faith makes that creative event its own. The act of confession is receptive rather than typically "active." The person *is* baptized; it does not matter who does it or under what authority it is done. This is the point on which the contrast between the Anabaptists and the basic Reformation position becomes most sharply evident. The evangelical understanding of the sacraments becomes clear: the action of the sacrament

²³ Hermann Sasse, "On the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit," *We Confess: The Church* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986), 23.

²⁴ Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. II (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 422.

rests on the power of the words of institution; hence the passive attitude of the person baptized.²⁵

The discussion of the role of faith in baptism²⁶ is one which brought Luther into conflict both with the Roman *ex opere operato* and some of the Enthusiasts.²⁷

God's way is always to join a sign to the word of promise. Luther identifies the errors of his various opponents as attempts to separate what God has joined. The papists separate the word from the sacrament by failing to pay attention to the word; they make the sacrament an *opus operatum*. The Sacramentarians separate the word from the sacrament by making the uselessness of externals for salvation into a cardinal principle of their theology—they forget that some of these externals have been commanded by the joining of God's word to them. The core of Luther's theology of "masks" and "veils" of God is a warning against the dangers of separating word and sign in yet another way, by seeking the unveiled God apart from the appointed externals....²⁸

In the Large Catechism Luther takes great care to keep the external element, water, connected with the promise, the word of God. To separate these is to confuse faith by creating doubt about its object.²⁹

²⁵ Wilhelm Maurer, *Historical Commentary on the Augsburg Confession* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 401.

²⁶ "The only theologically legitimate question, on which the rightness or wrongness of infant baptism depends, is who is to be baptized, people who are able to confess their faith in Jesus Christ, that is, adults and older children, or also minor children, that is, infants in the proper sense of the term." Sasse, "Holy Baptism, Letters to Lutheran Pastors, No. 4," 37-38.

²⁷ The Enthusiasts of Luther's day were divided over the faith of infants in Baptism. In fact both Zwingli and Bucer wrote in defense of infant Baptism in opposition to other radical reformers. For an excellent presentation on the rise of Anabaptism in the years 1521-1525, and Luther's response, see "On Baptism, The Challenge of Anabaptist Baptism and the Lutheran Confession" by Arnold J. Koelpin, *No Other Gospel* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1980), 255-277.

²⁸ Jonathan Trigg, *Baptism in the Theology of Martin Luther* (Boston and Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, Inc., 2001), 73.

²⁹ One of the Enthusiasts in the early 1520s is recorded as stating: "We should not pour water on any child nor bring it to church for baptism, because the water is the same water as evaporates into moisture and which we see daily. And if one were to douse a dog with it or dunk him in it, he would be bathed as nicely as when we sprinkle a child with it" (Koelpin, 260).

I therefore admonish you again that these two, the Word and the water, must by no means be separated from each other. For where the Word is separated from the water, the water is no different from the water that the maid uses for cooking and could indeed be called a bath-keeper's baptism. But when the Word is with it according to God's ordinance, baptism is a sacrament, and it is called Christ's baptism. This is the first point to be emphasized: the nature and dignity of the holy sacrament.³⁰

Once more the outside-of-us nature of the divine sacraments allows faith to be sure of its object, and not be confounded by some mysterious, internal workings manufactured by the human heart.

Now, these people are so foolish as to separate faith from the object to which faith is attached and secured, all on the grounds that the object is something external. Yes, it must be external so that it can be perceived and grasped by the senses and thus brought into the heart, just as the entire gospel is an external, oral proclamation. In short, whatever God does and effects in us he desires to accomplish through such an external ordinance. No matter where he speaks—indeed, no matter for what purpose or through what means he speaks—there faith must look and to it faith must hold on.³¹

Thus you see plainly that baptism is not a work that we do but that it is a treasure that God gives us and faith grasps, just as the LORD Christ upon the cross is not a work but a treasure placed in the setting of the Word and offered to us in the Word and received by faith. Therefore, those who cry out against us as if we were preaching against faith do commit violence against us. Actually, we insist on faith alone as so necessary that without it nothing can be received or enjoyed.³²

Just as in the Lord's Supper, Luther will not allow the separation of word and element. It is significant that for both sacraments Luther

³⁰ K/W, LC Baptism, 459.

³¹ K/W, LC Baptism 460.

³² K/W, LC Baptism 461.

provides the quotation from Augustine: *accedat verbum ad elementum et fit sacramentum*. Regarding baptism³³ he wrote:

Therefore it is not simply a natural water, but a divine, heavenly, holy, and blessed water—praise it in any other terms you can—all by virtue of the Word, which is a heavenly, holy Word that no one can sufficiently extol, for it contains and conveys all that is God's. This, too, is where it derives its nature so that it is called a sacrament, as St. Augustine taught, "*Accedat verbum ad elementum et fit sacramentum*," which means that "when the Word is added to the element or the natural substance, it becomes a sacrament," that is, a holy, divine thing and sign.³⁴

It is the word of God which gives the sacrament of baptism its content and faith its object. The word of God is powerful, effective, it does not return void, but accomplishes the purpose for which God sends it (Isaiah 55:11). It is the power of God for salvation (Romans 1:16).

Luther also discovers this performative word ["an active and effective word"] in the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, as well as in the Christmas story ("To you is born this day a Savior!"), the Easter story, and many other biblical passages. As we said before, he regards these sentences as promises (*promissiones*). They are the concrete way in which Christ is present, and his presence with us is clear and certain: it clearly liberates us and makes us certain. I cannot remind myself of this freedom and certainty in isolation; I cannot have a monologue with myself. These gifts are given and received only by means of the promise spoken by another person (and not only by the official priest or preacher), who addresses it to me in the name of Jesus. I cannot speak the promise to myself. It must be spoken

³³ Here is the quotation in its use in the section on the Lord's Supper: "It is the Word, I say, that makes this a sacrament and distinguishes it from ordinary bread and wine, so that it is called and truly is Christ's body and blood. For it is said, '*Accedat verbum ad elementum et fit sacramentum*,' that is, 'When the Word is joined to the external element, it becomes a sacrament.' This saying of St. Augustine is so appropriate and well put that he could hardly have said anything better. The Word must make the element a sacrament; otherwise, it remains an ordinary element. Now, this is not the word and ordinance of a prince or emperor, but of the divine Majesty at whose feet all creatures should kneel and confess that it is as he says, and they should accept it with all reverence, fear, and humility." K/W LC Sacrament of the Altar, 468.

³⁴ K/W, LC Baptism, 459.

to me. For only in this way is it true. Only in this way does it give freedom and certainty.³⁵

Yet because God Himself has joined His word to water, therefore the water and its use are not to be despised, but to be used as God instituted. There is no “baptism” of the Spirit without water and word, just as there is no communion with the Body and Blood of Christ apart from the eating and drinking of the bread and wine. Any spiritualizing of the external means of the sacraments in such a way that the externals are considered unnecessary or even harmful is, to Luther, a denial of God’s institution of the sacraments and His clear word which puts external element with word. The grave danger which Luther detects in the denigration of the external means is evidenced by the potent choice of vocabulary he uses to lay bare way such faith-destroying assertions (“wickedness,” “blasphemy,” “idolatry,” “magic,” “slander”).

Therefore it is sheer wickedness and devilish blasphemy that now, in order to blaspheme baptism, our new spirits set aside God’s Word and ordinance, consider nothing but the water drawn from the well, and then babble, “How can a handful of water help the soul?” Yes, my friend! Who does not know that water is water, if it is considered separately? But how dare you tamper thus with God’s ordinance and rip out his most precious jewel, in which God has fastened and enclosed his ordinance and from which he does not wish it to be separated? For the real significance of the water lies in God’s Word or commandment and God’s name, and this treasure is greater and nobler than heaven and earth.³⁶

You see, then, that this is the most necessary thing which we must learn and know about baptism—that here we have the Founder from heaven, who gives us both the command to baptize and also the form and the manner of baptism. In the first place God himself must command it. Then afterwards he must himself name the creature or element, and then also prescribe the words which are to be used with it, in order that all may be done according to his command, not according to

³⁵ Oswald Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), 130.

³⁶ K/W, LC Baptism 459.

human choice or devotion, which everywhere in the Scriptures the Holy Spirit condemns and calls idolatry and magic.³⁷

The Anabaptists and fanatical spirits today say that baptism is nothing more than ordinary water. May the devil take these slander mouths! Dogs, sows, and cows also see nothing in the water but its taste. But a Christian ought not go by the taste, but by the Word. For it is not just plain water but God's Word and power. Just see what Christ's baptism portends: God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all present, along with the holy angels! Therefore it is not powerless water but water in which God's Son is washed, over which the Holy Spirit hovers, and upon which God the Father preaches. For that reason baptism cannot be insignificant, but a gracious water sanctified and consecrated by God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That is shown by the words which Christ spoke when he commanded baptism, "baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." Without these words it is poor water, but when these words, "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit," are connected with the water, then it is not impotent water, but baptism.³⁸

Dr. Oberman summarizes well the extent of this sacramental way of understanding the working of God in the theology confessed by Martin Luther. As noted at the beginning of this paper, for Luther it is the very gospel itself which is at the center of discussions regarding baptism, as well as the Lord's Supper. And wherever the gospel is dismissed, distorted, or diminished there will be found the lurking of the devil.

Trust in the alien Word determined the way Luther experienced, interpreted, and defended the sacraments of baptism and holy communion. The Devil, that master of subjectivity, lurks in the heart and the conscience, but he is powerless in the face of the alien Word. Baptism and communion are the pledge that God is present in the turmoil of the fight for survival against the Devil. These two sacraments constitute the visible, tangible prop that makes it possible to resist the Devil in God's name. Thus baptism and holy communion are the solid ground on

³⁷ *Sermon at the Baptism of Bernard von Anhalt*, LW 51:322.

³⁸ Martin Luther, *Sermons of Martin Luther: the House Postils*, Epiphany, Third Sermon—1534, vol. I (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 220-221.

which the certainty of a Christian's faith rests. It is therefore clear that there can be no greater danger than the undermining of these two sacraments. Making baptism and holy communion into the work of man destroys the foundation of the Christian life because it makes God's truth and reality dependent on the powers of persuasion of the individual, subjective conscience.³⁹

In his early criticism of the Roman Catholic teaching on baptism, Luther wrote against the limitation placed on baptism in the life of the believer by the Roman claim that once a person sins after baptism the promise of baptism must be replaced by the sacrament of penance. This sacrament of penance is the so-called "second plank" which takes over where baptism no longer is able to help in the fight against sin. "What he here attacks so vehemently is not the superstitious overestimation of baptism, but its faithless undervaluation in Christian life in favor of penance and penitential good works."⁴⁰ Luther extols the ongoing power and certainty of God's institution and command of baptism over against any attempt to downplay its value for the Christian life.

We must therefore beware of those who have reduced the power of baptism to such small and slender dimensions that, while they say grace is indeed in-poured by it, they maintain that afterwards it is poured out again through sin, and that then one must reach heaven by another way, as if baptism had now become entirely useless. Do not hold such a view, but understand that this is the significance of baptism, that through it you die and live again. Therefore, whether by penance or by any other way, **you can only return to the power of your baptism**, and do again that which you were baptized to do and which your baptism signified. Baptism never becomes useless, unless you despair and refuse to return to its salvation. You may indeed wander away from the sign for a time, but the sign is not therefore useless.⁴¹

For just as **the truth of this divine promise, once pronounced over us, continues until death**, so our faith in it ought never to cease, but to be nourished and strengthened until death by the continual remembrance of this promise made to us

³⁹ Oberman, 227.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 231.

⁴¹ *Babylonian Captivity*, LW 36:69 (emphasis added).

in baptism. Therefore, when we rise from our sins or repent, we are merely returning to the power and the faith of baptism from which we fell, and finding our way back to the promise then made to us, which we deserted when we sinned. **For the truth of the promise once made remains steadfast**, always ready to receive us back with open arms when we return.⁴²

Therefore baptism remains forever. Even though someone falls from it and sins, we always have access to it so that we may again subdue the old creature [sic]. But we need not have the water poured over us again. Even if we were immersed in water a hundred times, it would nevertheless not be more than one baptism, and the effect and significance would continue and remain. Repentance, therefore, is nothing else than a return and approach to baptism, to resume and practice what has earlier been begun but abandoned.⁴³

Martin Chemnitz, the great theologian of the second generation of the Reformers, reiterated this critique in his comprehensive examination of the Roman Catholic response to the Reformation formulated during the Council of Trent (1545-1563):

Therefore the preaching of repentance, the proclamation of the gospel, the office of the keys, and the use of the Lord's Supper do not set before us even after a fall another and new plank for reconciliation with God and for salvation, different from that which was offered, given, and sealed to us in baptism through the promise of God, but they are merely means through which we are either confirmed in the grace of Baptism or return to it after a fall.⁴⁴

For this doctrine that Baptism should not be repeated must be taught in such a way that it is not merely argued that it is not to be repeated, but that Baptism is shown to be a fountain of comfort, that even after a fall, when we are again converted, even though we are not again baptized, we nevertheless have access to the treaty of peace and the covenant of grace which has been entered into with us and sealed through Baptism.⁴⁵

⁴² Ibid., 59 (emphasis added).

⁴³ K/W, LC Baptism 466 (emphasis added).

⁴⁴ Chemnitz, 158.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 162.

Luther is intent to focus on the fact of God's promise in baptism, a promise which one's own sin cannot nullify. In other words, our sins, our denial of God, our turning away from Him to false gods certainly are a rejection of the promise. But the promise itself does not disappear simply because we refuse to believe it. Our lack of faith does not de-potentiate the promise of baptism, that is, the gospel, the forgiveness of sins.

But a baptism on the Word and command of God even when faith is not present is still a correct and certain baptism if it takes place as God commanded. Granted, it is not of benefit to the baptized one who is without faith, because of his lack of faith, but the baptism is not thereby incorrect, uncertain, or of no meaning. If we were to consider everything wrong or ineffectual which is of no value to the unbeliever, then nothing would be right or remain good. It has been commanded that the gospel should be preached to all the world. The unbeliever hears it but it has no meaning for him. Are we therefore to look on the gospel as not being a gospel or as being a false gospel? The godless see no value in God himself. Does that mean he is not God?⁴⁶

And certainly, after every fall faith in repentance seeks the reconciliation of the conscience to God, and this on account of the death and resurrection of Christ. These are the essential things in the promise of Baptism, which is offered and sealed to us once in Baptism, that it may be a perpetual seal and testimony that we have been admitted and received into communion and participation in the benefits of Christ and of the grace of God, for the remission of sins, salvation, and life eternal, if we lay hold of the promise by faith and cling to it, according to the saying, "He who believes and is baptized will be saved, but he who does not believe will be condemned."⁴⁷

To marginalize baptism by confining it to the past is to destroy the gospel, because the gospel of forgiveness through faith in Christ and the covenant of baptism are one and the same.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ *Concerning Rebaptism*, LW 40:252.

⁴⁷ Chemnitz, 157.

⁴⁸ Trigg, 148.

Faith simply receives the promise, it does not give the promise its substance. Only God does that.

For God does not deal, nor has he ever dealt, with man otherwise than through a word of promise, as I have said. We in turn cannot deal with God otherwise than through faith in the Word of his promise. He does not desire works, nor has he need of them; rather we deal with men and with ourselves on the basis of works. But God has need of this: that we consider him faithful in his promises [Heb. 10:23], and patiently persist in this belief, and thus worship him with faith, hope, and love. It is in this way that he obtains his glory among us, since it is not of ourselves who run, but of him who shows mercy [Rom. 9:16], promises, and gives, that we have and hold all good things.⁴⁹

[The papalists teach] that the power, strength, or grace of Baptism is totally lost and made invalid so that faith can in no way and at no time ever return and go back to it in true repentance but that now another plank must be looked for, namely, the plank of our own contrition and satisfaction, through the power of which we are carried to the harbor of salvation. This doctrine, which restricts the grace and power of Baptism to only that single moment when we are baptized, so that it has no further use later throughout our whole life, Luther shows to be false and wicked.⁵⁰

This rejection of the Roman limitation on baptism insofar as its inability to remain a lifelong source of comfort and object of faith is continued, but in a different dimension, with the Anabaptists. The Anabaptists rejected infant baptism and insisted on re-baptizing those who had been, in their opinion, wrongly baptized as babies. Baptism was not to occur until a time in life when a person had been instructed and confessed his faith; then, and only then, could baptism be administered.

Luther saw in such insistence on faith prior to baptism a grave weakness and a denial of the promise of God in baptism. In the Anabaptist view of baptism, the sacrament becomes little more than obedience, and

⁴⁹ *Babylonian Captivity*, LW 36:42.

⁵⁰ Chemnitz, 144-45.

an outward sign, with no efficacious nature to it.⁵¹ Luther's most significant writing opposing the teachings of the Anabaptists is "Concerning Rebaptism." Here is a sampling of his argumentation:

For whoever bases baptism on faith and baptizes on chance and not on certainty that faith is present does nothing better than he who baptizes him who has no faith. For unbelief and uncertain belief are one and the same thing, and both are contrary to the verse, "Whoever believes," which speaks of a sure faith which they who are to be baptized should have.⁵²

Since there is no difference in baptism whether lack of faith precedes or follows, baptism doesn't depend on faith.⁵³

God grant that whether my faith today be certain or uncertain, or I think that I believe and am certain, nothing is lacking in baptism. Always something is lacking in faith.⁵⁴

Luther wonders what the difference is between baptizing an infant, whose faith is unknown to us, and baptizing an adult, whose faith also is unknown to us (after all, who truly can see, or measure, faith in anyway?). The faith of any individual, of whatever age, never can be a basis for a valid baptism. All such baptisms, by the very fact of the unknown quality or quantity of faith, are from the very beginning uncertain. "Always something is lacking in faith."

This is the forgiveness of sins; it does not occur without payment or satisfaction; but this payment is not yours. It cost Christ his body, life, and blood. It will be of no use even if you, indeed, the whole world, were to offer up your body and blood, for no offering is acceptable to God to pay for sin, says the Scripture,

⁵¹ For a contemporary teaching on baptism from such a theological viewpoint, here is the explanation of baptism given at Willow Creek Community Church: "Just as a wedding ring is an outward expression of marriage, Baptism is an outward expression of a commitment to follow Jesus Christ. If you have made a commitment to follow Christ as your Savior and leader of your life, then Scripture demonstrates that Baptism is a vital next step for you. Celebrate your relationship with Christ in the company of your friends, family, and others who have decided to declare what Christ has done for them. Willow offers indoor immersion Baptism on select weekends throughout the year, and a special outdoor Baptism service in the lake on campus each June." (From: <http://www.willowcreek.org/baptism>.)

⁵² *Concerning Rebaptism*, LW 40:240.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 248.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 253.

except the one sacrifice of Christ. It is his sacrifice of himself for your sin and the whole world's sin and his giving to you his innocence and righteousness that comes to your help and drowns your sin and death. And when you are baptized in this faith you are putting on Christ, who washes away your sins in baptism and gives you the Holy Spirit, etc. So you see, do you not, that this forgiveness is not brought about through your penance, but rather that Christ bears the sins of us all and kills them in his body, and that we take hold of this by faith and let ourselves be baptized according to his command.⁵⁵

Baptism is an actual offer of grace. If this is disputed, then baptism is impoverished and remains nothing more than the sign of individual righteousness of those who are baptized later in life. In the case of a child it simply expresses the hope that the child will someday become righteous. A baptism of that sort thus has nothing directly to do with grace and forgiveness of sins; it is no more than a sign of membership in the Christian community. Luther correctly understood this evisceration of the sacrament of baptism as the expression of an ethical optimism that basically denied the sacrament. From a rational point of view, baptism would be a work one performed or had done to oneself. But the promise of baptism is not bound to human deeds, not even to the presence of faith. In baptism someone other than I is acting: I am baptized; that is, I receive and undergo an act from without. Baptism is a divine work. And therein lies its sacramental character.⁵⁶

Baptism—Daily Contrition and Repentance

What does such baptizing with water mean? Such baptizing with water means that the old Adam in us should, by daily contrition and repentance, be drowned and die with all sins and evil lusts; and that a new man daily come forth and arise, who shall live before God in righteousness and purity forever. *Where is this written?* St. Paul writes, Romans 6, 4: "We are buried with Christ by baptism into death, that just as He was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life."

⁵⁵ *Sermon at the Baptism of Bernard von Anhalt*, LW 51:317.

⁵⁶ Maurer, 397.

“I walk in the danger all the way.”⁵⁷ That hymn title conveys the truth of the existence of believers in this world. Luther’s final questions on baptism in the Small Catechism instruct the catechumen (and all of us, all our days) that we daily will struggle with the old Adam, our sinful nature, our sinful flesh, the world, and Satan. This struggle is one which burdens the conscience of the Christian who does not want to do the things he does, but desires to live in Christ. For such a one Luther’s counsel is: return to your baptism.

Thus a Christian life is nothing else than a daily baptism, begun once and continuing ever after. For we must keep at it without ceasing, always purging whatever pertains to the old Adam, so that whatever belongs to the new creature may come forth. What is the old creature? It is what is born in us from Adam, irascible, spiteful, envious, unchaste, greedy, lazy, proud—yes—and unbelieving; it is beset with all vices and by nature has nothing good in it. Now, when we enter Christ’s kingdom, this corruption must daily decrease so that the longer we live the more gentle, patient, and meek we become, and the more we break away from greed, hatred, envy, and pride.⁵⁸

It is in this daily struggle with sin that the pastoral wisdom and comfort of directing souls to baptism shines forth. Here we are not directed to our own struggles or efforts, but to the work of Almighty God who has acted for us.

In baptism, therefore, every Christian has enough to study and practice all his or her life. Christians always have enough to do to believe firmly what baptism promises and brings—victory over death and the devil, forgiveness of sin, God’s grace, the entire Christ, and the Holy Spirit with his gifts. In short, the blessings of baptism are so boundless that if our timid nature considers them, it may well doubt whether they could all be true.⁵⁹

In the baptism prayer written by Luther, this same pastoral care is evident as the great “water” events of Scripture are related and applied to the one being baptized:

⁵⁷ ELH 252.

⁵⁸ K/W, LC Baptism 465.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 461.

Almighty, eternal God, who according to your strict judgment condemned the unbelieving world through the flood and according to your great mercy preserved believing Noah and the seven members of his family, and who drowned Pharaoh with his army in the Red Sea and led your people Israel through the same sea on dry ground, thereby prefiguring this bath of your holy baptism, and who through the baptism of your dear child, our LORD Jesus Christ, hallowed and set apart the Jordan and all water to be a blessed flood and a rich washing away of sins: we ask for the sake of this very same boundless mercy of yours that you would look graciously upon N. and bless him with true faith in the Holy Spirit so that through this same saving flood all that has been born in him from Adam and whatever he has added thereto may be drowned in him and sink, and that he, separated from the number of the unbelieving, may be preserved dry and secure in the holy ark of the Christian church and may at all times fervent in spirit and joyful in hope serve your name, so that with all believers in your promise he may become worthy to attain eternal life through Jesus Christ our LORD. Amen.⁶⁰

The “present tense” of baptism is one of the key aspects of the on-going value of baptism in the life of the believer. Another hymn teaches this in a wonderful way: “God’s own child, I gladly say it, I am baptized into Christ.”⁶¹ This is the Christian’s identity in this world. It is an identity that on the one hand paints a bright red “bull’s eye” on the Christian, making him a target for the actions of Satan. Certainly, in the weakness of our human flesh, being on the receiving end of the devil’s hatred gives us pause. On the other hand, through baptism one is connected by faith in the promise of God to the very actions which brought defeat to Satan: the crucifixion and resurrection of the Son of God, Jesus Christ (Romans 6). Christ, in human flesh, was baptized, in human flesh suffered and died, and in human flesh rose from the dead. The apparently weak form of the one who became flesh is the way to victory over all that sets itself in opposition to God and His people.

For just as the truth of this divine promise, once pronounced over us, continues until death, so our faith in it ought never to cease, but to be nourished and strengthened until death by the

⁶⁰ K/W, SC, Handbook, Baptismal Booklet, 373.

⁶¹ ELH 246.

continual remembrance of this promise made to us in baptism. Therefore, when we rise from our sins or repent, we are merely returning to the power and the faith of baptism from which we fell, and finding our way back to the promise then made to us, which we deserted when we sinned. For the truth of the promise once made remains steadfast, always ready to receive us back with open arms when we return.⁶²

The Christian has to die a daily death. But paradoxically he must never seek opportunities to put this into practice. If he continues in a life of obedience within his allotted callings these opportunities will come soon enough. Luther's theology of vocation is predicated upon the *significatio* of baptism.⁶³

The present tense of baptism arises from the fundamental principle of Luther's theology—the word of the Lord on which baptism is predicated, “He who believes and is baptized shall be saved.” This word is always to be heard in baptism; it is never silenced.⁶⁴

Baptism is the gospel, and therefore is a divine gift for souls burdened by sin and all its accoutrements in this world. In the struggle with sin and the lies of the devil the Christian dare not rely on personal achievements of any kind—only Christ and His benefits serve to silence the fears, doubts, and despair which the enemies of the Christian bring upon him. This means that against all attempts to de-potentiate baptism the sacrament is to be guarded—at stake is no less than the certainty of salvation in a world of uncertainty. “When Luther encounters those who doubt, or who fail to appreciate the wonder of God's grace, his pastoral response calls them to attend to the signs, places and means of grace.”⁶⁵

This is the great gift of the teaching on baptism. “No greater jewel, therefore, can adorn our body and soul than baptism, for through it we become completely holy and blessed, which no other kind of life and no work on earth can acquire.”⁶⁶

Who, now, would despise the word of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit? Who would call the baptism of the Father, the

⁶² *Babylonian Captivity*, LW 36:59.

⁶³ Trigg, 97.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 202-03.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁶⁶ K/W, LC Baptism 462.

Son, and the Holy Spirit powerless water? **Do we not see what seasoning God throws into the water?** When a person adds sugar to water then it no longer is mere water but a delectable claret, or something like that. Why then would we want to separate the word from the water here and call it poor water, as though God's word, yes, God himself were not in and with that water?⁶⁷

The sacrament of baptism is truly well-seasoned water: a simple element in and of itself, yet connected to and filled with the work of the salvation won by the Son of God through His suffering, death, and resurrection. Who, indeed, would want to separate this blessed seasoning from the water? No, keep water and word together, and rejoice in the great gift of the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation, from God to you. Satan hates it. The world does not understand it. Our sinful flesh hopes we will forget it. And each of these unwittingly, by their despising of God's great gift, help us to see the beauty of this sacrament.

So let us hear and ponder well
 What God creates in Baptism.
 What He would have us all believe,
 Who error shun and schism.
 That water at the font be used
 Is surely His good pleasure,
 Not water only, but the Word
 And Spirit without measure—
 He is the true Baptizer.⁶⁸ [SQ]

⁶⁷ Luther, *Sermons of Martin Luther: the House Postils*. Epiphany, Third Sermon—1534, 221 (emphasis added).

⁶⁸ ELH 247:2.

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Baptism in the Camp of the Reformed

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FIRST OFF, MY THANKS TO your esteemed committee for the gracious invitation to be with you today for the 43rd Annual Reformation Lectures; it is good to be here with you again at Bethany.¹ Also many thanks to my colleagues Revs. Koester and Rank for their excellent papers. However, I must admit my curiosity has been piqued as to *how* and, yes, even *why* the committee divided the task up as they did. To put it more bluntly, I'm wondering how I managed to wander into the "Camp of the Reformed" on the subject of baptism. If I have done so, I surely need to find my way out!

Perhaps it has to do with my deep interest in "American Lutheranism," as exemplified by Samuel Schmucker (1799-1873) and Benjamin Kurtz (1795-1865), "Lutherans" whose position on baptismal regeneration left Lutheranism behind.² Or perhaps it has to do with my deep interest in the work of Presbyterian born, Westminster Shorter Catechism trained theologian John Williamson Nevin (1803-1886).³

¹ My last visit produced the following: Lawrence R. Rast, Jr., "Franz August Otto Pieper (1852-1931): 'A Connecting Link between the Present Age and that of the Fathers and Founders of Lutheranism,'" *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 45 (March 2005): 5-31. Available on the internet at <http://www.blts.edu/lsq/45-1.pdf>.

² Lawrence R. Rast, Jr., "The Triumph of 'Schmuckerism,'" *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 62 (April 1998): 148-51.

³ Lawrence R. Rast, Jr., "Battling a 'Whole Babel of Extravagance: Confessional Responses to American Revivalism,'" *Modern Reformation* 7 (July/August 1998): 18-23. Available on the internet at <http://www.modernreformation.org/default.php?page=articledisplay&cvar1=ArtRead&cvar2=611&cvar3=issuedisplay&cvar4=IssRead&cvar5=62>.

After teaching at the Presbyterian Seminary in Pittsburgh for a decade, Nevin emerged a leader in the Reformed Confessional Awakening of the mid-nineteenth century here in the United States through his professorship at Mercersburg Seminary of the German Reformed Church. As a member of the German Reformed (and a fellow faculty member with his better known colleague, Philip Schaff [1819-1893]), Nevin was deeply committed to the Heidelberg Catechism. As an articulator of the Mercersburg Theology, Nevin helped reintroduce classic Reformed thought to the American Reformed church, which had become largely Zwinglian in its theology. Beyond this, however, he had a significant impact on Lutherans in America as he reintroduced them to the Lutheran confessional tradition.⁴ Yet Nevin's primary interest was in the "Mystical Presence," what he sometimes called the "spiritual *real* presence" of Christ in the Lord's Supper, and so perhaps this is not the reason for my invitation either.⁵

Whatever the reason for my invitation, I am happy for it. So let us delay no longer and move on to consider the topic of "Baptism in the Three Reformation Camps: The Camp of the Reformed."

The Problem of *the* Reformed Camp

As a doctoral student at Vanderbilt University, I was one of few Lutherans in the Graduate Department of Religion. Most of my fellow students—and most of the faculty as well—had theological connections to the Reformed Camp. However, they camped across the spectrum of the Reformed tradition. Indeed, one of our regular endeavors was to argue about whether there was even such a thing as *the* Reformed tradition.

It was a valid question—it still is. Where Lutherans have, at the very least, pointed to the Augsburg Confession as the foundational confession of our tradition, and while we have our Book of Concord 1580, which embraces "the Symbolical books," the Reformed tradition is far more varied in its confessional witness and has a variety of texts, which reflect its theological development.

Because there are so many different confessions in the Reformed tradition, it is somewhat difficult to set the limits of the tradition. Indeed, as we've already noted it is rather difficult to speak of *the* Reformed

⁴ For the larger story, one may see Lawrence R. Rast, Jr., "The Influence of John Williamson Nevin on American Lutheranism to 1849," M.Div. thesis, Concordia Theological Seminary, 1990.

⁵ John W. Nevin, *The Mystical Presence: A Vindication of the Reformed or Calvinistic Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1846).

tradition; perhaps the plural *traditions* or *a part of* the Reformed tradition is more appropriate language. A listing of the Reformed Confessions illustrates this point. The following, which is not exhaustive, will suffice:

1. Zwingli's Short Christian Instruction (1523)
2. Zwingli's Sixty-seven Articles (1523)
3. The Ten Theses of Berne (1528)
4. Zwingli's *Fidei Ratio* (1530)
5. The Tetrapolitan Confession (1530)
6. The First Confession of Basel (1534)
7. The First Helvetic Confession (1536)
8. The Lausanne Articles (1536)
9. The Geneva Confession (1536)
10. The Consensus Tigurinus (1549)
11. The Confession of the English Congregation at Geneva (1556)
12. The French Confession of Faith (1559)
13. The Scottish Confession of Faith (1560)
14. The Belgic Confession of Faith (1561)
15. The Second Helvetic Confession (1566)
16. The Heidelberg Catechism (1563)
17. The Second Scotch Confession of Faith (1580)
18. The Thirty-nine Articles (1562)
19. The Anglican Catechism (1549/1662)
20. The Lambeth Articles (1595)
21. The Irish Articles of Religion (1615)
22. The Articles of Arminianism (1610)
23. The Canons of Dort (1618-19)
24. The Westminster Confession of Faith (1644)
25. The Westminster Shorter Catechism (1647)
26. The Westminster Larger Catechism (1647)

Of course, some of these confessions have a higher standing and are more important than others. Indeed, Sinclair Ferguson and, especially, Joel R. Beeke, pastor of Heritage Netherlands Reformed Congregation and president and professor at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan, have provided an invaluable resource for study of the Reformed confessions in their volume *Reformed Confessions Harmonized*.⁶ However, even in this endeavor Beeke and Ferguson limit their harmony to only seven of the historic Reformed confessions:

⁶ Joel R. Beeke and Sinclair B. Ferguson, eds., *Reformed Confessions Harmonized* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999).

1) the Belgic Confession of Faith; 2) the Heidelberg Catechism; 3) the Second Helvetic Confession; 4) the Canons of Dort; 5) the Westminster Confession of Faith; 6) the Westminster Shorter Catechism; and 7) the Westminster Larger Catechism. Even with a limited list, however, Beeke and Ferguson struggle to harmonize the various confessions. Part of the reason for that is rather simple: they are harmonizing different types of literature (catechisms and confessions) that have different audiences (laity, clergy, nobility) that were written for different purposes (catechesis, confessions, politics). However, the result is that harmony comes with difficulty to the various confessions; indeed, perhaps it would be even more accurate to say that they must *synthesize* the confessions. And that leaves the editors open to some questions: are they faithful to the intended senses of the original texts? Are they foisting foreign theological constructs on to the older confessions? To put it another way, because the various confessions are no longer allowed to present their arguments in the theological order that they originally appeared, are we really getting the logic or the “theology” as the original texts intended. To put it still another way, article order in confessional presentation is important. By harmonizing, i.e., rearranging, the articles do we lose the import of their original meaning? For my part I believe the editors do an admirable job. But others may not agree.

This last question becomes especially important this morning in relation to the doctrine of baptism in the Reformed camp. The manner in which the Reformed Confessions deal with the subject of baptism affects the theological import of the doctrine in significant ways. What emerges, however, demonstrates the different emphases and accents of the broader Reformed tradition.

Baptism in the Reformed Confessions

As we begin, let us look first at how some of the major Reformed confessions address the question of the nature and character of the sacraments, as this will then drive how they frame their understandings of baptism.

Article 14 of the Geneva Confession (1536) is short and to the point, as it states the following:

We believe that the sacraments which our Lord has ordained in his Church are to be regarded as exercises of faith for us, both for fortifying and confirming it in the promises of God and for witnessing before men. Of them there are in the Christian

Church only two which are instituted by the authority of our Saviour: baptism and the Supper of our Lord; for what is held within the realm of the pope concerning seven sacraments, we condemn as fable and lie.⁷

The Belgic Confession (1561) has this to say about the sacraments:

We believe that our good God, mindful of our crudeness and weakness, has ordained sacraments for us to seal his promises in us, to pledge his good will and grace toward us, and also to nourish and sustain our faith. He has added these to the Word of the gospel to represent better to our external senses both what he enables us to understand by his Word and what he does inwardly in our hearts, confirming in us the salvation he imparts to us.

For they are visible signs and seals of something internal and invisible, by means of which God works in us through the power of the Holy Spirit. So they are not empty and hollow signs to fool and deceive us, for their truth is Jesus Christ, without whom they would be nothing.

Moreover, we are satisfied with the number of sacraments that Christ our Master has ordained for us. There are only two: the sacrament of baptism and the Holy Supper of Jesus Christ.⁸

The Heidelberg Catechism (1563) addresses the nature and character of the sacraments in questions 65 to 68.⁹

Question 65. Since then we are made partakers of Christ and all his benefits by faith only, whence does this faith proceed?

Answer: From the Holy Ghost, who works faith in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel, and confirms it by the use of the sacraments.

Question 66. What are the sacraments?

Answer: The sacraments are holy visible signs and seals, appointed of God for this end, that by the use thereof, he may the more fully declare and seal to us the promise of the gospel,

⁷ <http://www.creeds.net/reformed/gnvconf.htm>, accessed October 27, 2010.

⁸ <http://www.reformed.org/documents/BelgicConfession.html>, accessed October 27, 2010.

⁹ <http://www.reformed.org/documents/heidelberg.html>, accessed October 27, 2010.

viz., that he grants us freely the remission of sin, and life eternal, for the sake of that one sacrifice of Christ, accomplished on the cross.

Question 67. Are both word and sacraments, then, ordained and appointed for this end, that they may direct our faith to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross, as the only ground of our salvation?

Answer: Yes, indeed: for the Holy Ghost teaches us in the gospel, and assures us by the sacraments, that the whole of our salvation depends upon that one sacrifice of Christ which he offered for us on the cross.

Question 68. How many sacraments has Christ instituted in the new covenant, or testament?

Answer: Two: namely, holy baptism, and the holy supper.

The Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) addresses the sacraments in chapter 27:

- I. Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace, immediately instituted by God, to represent Christ and his benefits, and to confirm our interest in him: as also to put a visible difference between those that belong unto the Church, and the rest of the world; and solemnly to engage them to the service of God in Christ, according to his Word.
- II. There is in every sacrament a spiritual relation, or sacramental union, between the sign and the thing signified; whence it comes to pass that the names and effects of the one are attributed to the other.
- III. The grace which is exhibited in or by the sacraments, rightly used, is not conferred by any power in them; neither doth the efficacy of a sacrament depend upon the piety or intention of him that doth administer it, but upon the work of the Spirit, and the word of institution, which contains, together with a precept authorizing the use thereof, a promise of benefit to worthy receivers.
- IV. There be only two sacraments ordained by Christ our Lord in the gospels, that is to say, Baptism and the Supper of

the Lord: neither or which may be dispensed by any but a minister of the Word, lawfully ordained.

- V. The sacraments of the Old Testament, in regard of the spiritual things thereby signified and exhibited, were, for substance, the same with those of the New.¹⁰

There is discernable movement in the confessions noted above from the early confessions to the fuller articulation of Reformed thought in the Westminster Confession. Where the Geneva Confession concludes with a blunt condemnation of Roman Catholic theology and practice, the Heidelberg Catechism sees them as external signs that point us to Christ, while Westminster stresses the how the sacraments visibly set the individual apart from the world, but don't necessarily place him formally into the church. All of them see the sacraments as signs—but more than signs. This last point, of course, will be the distinguishing characteristic of the Reformed and will later serve to differentiate them from the Baptists.

So also, when it comes to baptism, different emphases emerge. In earlier Reformed confessions, the approach to baptism is simple and straightforward. The Geneva Confession, again, is rather blunt in its language:

Baptism is an external sign by which our Lord testifies that he desires to receive us for his children, as members of his Son Jesus. Hence in it there is represented to us the cleansing from sin which we have in the blood of Jesus Christ, the mortification of our flesh which we have by his death that we may live in him by his Spirit. Now since our children belong to such an alliance with our Lord, we are certain that the external sign is rightly applied to them.¹¹

The Belgic Confession is more nuanced. Its article 34 defines baptism at great length:

We believe and confess that Jesus Christ, in whom the law is fulfilled, has by his shed blood put an end to every other shedding of blood, which anyone might do or wish to do in order to atone or satisfy for sins. Having abolished circumcision, which was done with blood, he established in its place the sacrament

¹⁰ http://www.reformed.org/documents/westminster_conf_of_faith.html, accessed October 27, 2010.

¹¹ <http://www.creeds.net/reformed/gnvconf.htm>, accessed October 27, 2010.

of baptism. By it we are received into God's church and set apart from all other people and alien religions, that we may be dedicated entirely to him, bearing his mark and sign. It also witnesses to us that he will be our God forever, since he is our gracious Father.

Therefore he has commanded that all those who belong to him be baptized with pure water in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

In this way he signifies to us that just as water washes away the dirt of the body when it is poured on us and also is seen on the body of the baptized when it is sprinkled on him, so too the blood of Christ does the same thing internally, in the soul, by the Holy Spirit. It washes and cleanses it from its sins and transforms us from being the children of wrath into the children of God.

This does not happen by the physical water but by the sprinkling of the precious blood of the Son of God, who is our Red Sea, through which we must pass to escape the tyranny of Pharaoh, who is the devil, and to enter the spiritual land of Canaan.

So ministers, as far as their work is concerned, give us the sacrament and what is visible, but our Lord gives what the sacrament signifies—namely the invisible gifts and graces; washing, purifying, and cleansing our souls of all filth and unrighteousness; renewing our hearts and filling them with all comfort; giving us true assurance of his fatherly goodness; clothing us with the “new man” and stripping off the “old,” with all its works.

For this reason we believe that anyone who aspires to reach eternal life ought to be baptized only once without ever repeating it—for we cannot be born twice. Yet this baptism is profitable not only when the water is on us and when we receive it but throughout our entire lives.¹²

The Heidelberg Catechism addresses baptism in questions 69 to 74. Due to its historical circumstances, about which I'll have more to say momentarily, it worked very hard at carefully defining baptism in a way that would be acceptable to Lutherans.

¹² <http://www.reformed.org/documents/BelgicConfession.html>, accessed October 27, 2010.

Question 69. How art thou admonished and assured by holy baptism, that the one sacrifice of Christ upon the cross is of real advantage to thee?

Answer: Thus: That Christ appointed this external washing with water, adding thereto this promise, that I am as certainly washed by his blood and Spirit from all the pollution of my soul, that is, from all my sins, as I am washed externally with water, by which the filthiness of the body is commonly washed away.

Question 70. What is it to be washed with the blood and Spirit of Christ?

Answer: It is to receive of God the remission of sins, freely, for the sake of Christ's blood, which he shed for us by his sacrifice upon the cross; and also to be renewed by the Holy Ghost, and sanctified to be members of Christ, that so we may more and more die unto sin, and lead holy and unblamable lives.

Question 71. Where has Christ promised us, that he will as certainly wash us by his blood and Spirit, as we are washed with the water of baptism?

Answer: In the institution of baptism, which is thus expressed: "Go ye, therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost", Matt.28:19. And "he that believeth, and is baptized, shall be saved; but he that believeth not, shall be damned.", Mark 16:16. This promise is also repeated, where the scripture calls baptism "the washing of regenerations" and the washing away of sins. Tit.3:5, Acts 22:16.

Question 72. Is then the external baptism with water the washing away of sin itself?

Answer: Not at all: for the blood of Jesus Christ only, and the Holy Ghost cleanse us from all sin.

Question 73. Why then does the Holy Ghost call baptism "the washing of regeneration," and "the washing away of sins"?

Answer: God speaks thus not without great cause, to-wit, not only thereby to teach us, that as the filth of the body is

purged away by water, so our sins are removed by the blood and Spirit of Jesus Christ; but especially that by this divine pledge and sign he may assure us, that we are spiritually cleansed from our sins as really, as we are externally washed with water.

Finally, the Westminster Confession takes up baptism in chapter 27:

- I. Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament, ordained by Jesus Christ, not only for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible Church, but also to be unto him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of his ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life: which sacrament is, by Christ's own appointment, to be continued in his Church until the end of the world.
- II. The outward element to be used in the sacrament is water, wherewith the party is to be baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, by a minister of the gospel, lawfully called thereunto.
- III. Dipping of the person into the water is not necessary; but baptism is rightly administered by pouring or sprinkling water upon the person.
- IV. Not only those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one or both believing parents are to be baptized.
- V. Although it be a great sin to contemn or neglect this ordinance, yet grace and salvation are not so inseparably annexed unto it as that no person can be regenerated or saved without it, or that all that are baptized are undoubtedly regenerated.
- VI. The efficacy of baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered; yet, notwithstanding, by the right use of this ordinance, the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited and conferred by the Holy Ghost, to such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongeth unto, according to the counsel of God's own will, in his appointed time.
- VII. The sacrament of Baptism is but once to be administered to any person.

Consistent with their understanding of the sacraments generally, baptism is a sign for the Reformed—but more than a sign. Careful distinctions between what baptism signified and what it actually effected would continue to challenge the Reformed, as we will note below. For, as Reformed theology developed over time, baptism increasingly held a precarious place—a point that the Baptists would finally challenge and successfully exploit. However, and let me be as clear as possible here, the Reformed would certainly reject the charge that Baptist theology and practice is a logical outgrowth of the Reformed position.

Indeed, in respect to the mode of baptism, the Reformed tradition as expressed in its historic confessions has largely allowed for a variety of practice, i.e., sprinkling, pouring, or immersion are allowable, with sprinkling preferred. Only when immersion was demanded, did the Reformed begin to resist it.

This shows the resistance of the Reformed to Anabaptist claims. The Reformed tradition as expressed in its historic confessions has largely followed the practice of the historic church in respect to the subject of baptism, i.e., infants and adults may both legitimately receive baptism. A profound antagonism emerges at times with the Anabaptist tradition, which is seen as clearly breaking with biblical order and practice, particularly as it relates to the command to baptize only once and to welcome children into the covenant via baptism. As the Belgic Confession says:

For that reason we detest the error of the Anabaptists who are not content with a single baptism once received and also condemn the baptism of the children of believers. We believe our children ought to be baptized and sealed with the sign of the covenant, as little children were circumcised in Israel on the basis of the same promises made to our children.

And truly, Christ has shed his blood no less for washing the little children of believers than he did for adults.

Therefore they ought to receive the sign and sacrament of what Christ has done for them, just as the Lord commanded in the law that by offering a lamb for them the sacrament of the suffering and death of Christ would be granted them shortly after their birth. This was the sacrament of Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, baptism does for our children what circumcision did for the Jewish people. That is why Paul calls baptism the “circumcision of Christ.”¹³

The Heidelberg Catechism is more gentle in its affirmation of infant baptism.

Question 74. Are infants also to be baptized?

Answer: Yes: for since they, as well as the adult, are included in the covenant and church of God; and since redemption from sin by the blood of Christ, and the Holy Ghost, the author of faith, is promised to them no less than to the adult; they must therefore by baptism, as a sign of the covenant, be also admitted into the Christian church; and be distinguished from the children of unbelievers as was done in the old covenant or testament by circumcision, instead of which baptism is instituted in the new covenant.

The outcome of this variety of emphasis in the various Reformed Confessions allowed for the doctrine to develop in different ways. On the one hand, there were those who strongly emphasized the initiatory character of baptism as the individual was brought into the covenantal community where, hopefully, eventually he would experience the effectual call of the Holy Spirit. The German Reformed tradition in particular maintained this emphasis even as it made its way to the United States. There theologians like the aforementioned John Nevin and Philip Schaff emphasized the working of the Holy Spirit through the signs, which are means of grace. Nevin particularly extolled the Heidelberg Catechism’s “church feeling”—what we might call its “catholicity”—as he wrote:

The sacraments [in the Heidelberg Catechism] are held to carry with them an objective force. Their constitution includes grace, for all who are prepared to turn it to account. Thus Baptism is not only a symbol of the washing of regeneration, (Qu. 73), but a solemn authentication of the fact itself—the proper body of its inward soul—in all cases where the requisite conditions of the presence are at hand. Children too, born of believers and so entitled to the privilege, must be admitted into the Church by

¹³ <http://www.reformed.org/documents/BelgicConfession.html>, accessed October 27, 2010.

this ordinance, (Qu. 74), as the seal and pledge of their saving relationship to Christ;...¹⁴

Just how well the Heidelberg Catechism, along with the other Reformed Confessions, carried this off, has been a point of debate for some 450 years.

Baptism and Reformed History

The Heidelberg Catechism is perhaps the most intriguing of the Reformed Confessions. It emerged from a curious circumstance that gave it a particular character. Simply put, the problem of a politically disunited Germany had serious theological effects, as well.

The Reformation made its way into the Palatinate around the time of Luther's death (1546). This, of course, was a time of profound controversy between Lutherans and Roman Catholics, with the impositions of the Interims. Chaos soon ensued among the Lutherans as they responded to the challenges in one of three ways: 1) they returned to Rome; 2) they resisted violently (e.g., in Magdeburg); 3) they became Reformed. It is the last of these that is important for the Reformed tradition. For, when the Peace of Augsburg was concluded in 1555, it stated that "the Estates espousing the Augsburg Confession shall let all the Estates and Princes who cling to the old religion live in absolute peace and in the enjoyment of all their estates, rights, and privileges. However, all such as do not belong to the two above named religions shall not be included in the present peace but totally excluded from it."¹⁵ The question, of course, was whether the German Reformed's acceptance of the Augsburg Confession was sufficient to allow them to be "legal," if you will. The Gnesio Lutherans said, No! The Heidelberg Catechism was designed to say, Yes!

When Frederick III came to power in the Palatinate in 1559, he came out publically in favor of the Reformed tradition. He then gave Zacharias Ursinus, a pupil and friend of Melancthon, and Caspar Olevianus the task of authoring a catechism that would serve sufficiently to affirm the Reformed understanding of the sacraments, while at the same time being broad enough to "agree" with the Augsburg Confession. Presented in 1562, it was approved in 1563 and quickly became the official doctrinal standard of the German Reformed tradition. As such, the

¹⁴ John W. Nevin, *History and Genius of the Heidelberg Catechism* (Chambersburg, PA: Publication Office of the German Reformed Church, 1847), 152.

¹⁵ "The Religious Peace of Augsburg (1555), in Eric Lund, ed., *Documents from the History of Lutheranism 1517-1750* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 170.

Heidelberg Catechism goes out of its way to “sound” Lutheran, at times parroting the language of Luther’s Small Catechism and the Augustana. However, when it comes to the sacraments, its emphasis on sign and especially its affirmation of the spiritual character of the Lord’s Supper clearly makes it a Reformed document.

Baptism and Reformed Theology

Heidelberg’s both/and approach to baptism, however, created theological challenges for the Reformed as the tradition developed. The Geneva Confession had said, “Baptism is an external sign by which our Lord testifies that he desires to receive us for his children, as members of his Son Jesus.” However, as John Riggs notes, “But the question remained what, if anything, baptism could do for infants *at the actual moment* of administration.... Calvin readily admitted the obvious: Infants could not understand and thus could not grasp God’s promise of grace, which was the substance of the sacrament. The faith of the infant, therefore, could not be supported by the sacramental sign.”¹⁶ Compounding Calvin’s problem was the increasing emphasis the Reformed tradition placed on what we typically call double predestination—particularly in its supralapsarian form.

Best exemplified by theologians such as William Perkins (1558–1602), supralapsarian double predestinarian Calvinism had a brief reign as a dominant theological position.¹⁷ Perkins’ “Golden Chain” is perhaps the best example of the theology of supralapsarian double predestination at work. The inherent problem is perfectly captured by Riggs:

This shift in emphasis toward baptism as the seal of a salvation otherwise imparted then helped Reformed orthodoxy deal with the problem that Calvin had to address so carefully: whether predestination to reprobation prohibited baptism from having sacramental efficacy, since the reprobate who received baptism could not have received the reality that the sign signified. Rather, the reprobate would have received the outward baptism

¹⁶ Cited in Donald K. McKim, *Introducing the Reformed Faith: Biblical Revelation, Christian Tradition, Contemporary Significance* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 138; John W. Riggs, *Baptism in the Reformed Tradition: An Historical and Practical Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 67.

¹⁷ For biographical information on Perkins, see <http://www.apuritansmind.com/WilliamPerkins/WilliamPerkins.htm>, accessed October 27, 2010; Ian Breward, “The Life and Theology of William Perkins, 1558–1602,” Ph. D. thesis, University of Manchester, 1963.

that took place only where there was faithful reception and thus not received by the reprobate.¹⁸

The system tempered the idea of baptismal efficacy (since it was only efficacious for the elect and it was impossible to know who those are) and effectively removed baptism from the application of salvation, as Perkins' "Golden Chain" shows.¹⁹

Where, then, would Reformed theology turn? As the Reformed tradition continued to develop, Perkins's thought was considered, massaged, and applied by other Reformed theologians. A century's worth of Reformed orthodoxy gave the world remarkable works by François Turretini (1623–1687) and other lesser known systematizers.²⁰ In the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Puritan divines like Thomas Shepherd developed the implications of covenant theology as he and others improved upon one of the most "air tight" theological systems available.²¹

That all said, however, no greater mind appeared in the Reformed tradition—at least until Karl Barth (1886–1968) in the 20th century—than that of Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758). John Gerstner, confessional Reformed theologian and expert on the thought of Edwards, raises a crucial question.

If, I repeat, there is no essential difference among the Reformed traditions on the status of the child of the covenant, it is passing strange that there should be this difference in their estimation of him. How does one account for the fact that Jonathan Edwards considered his own children and the children of his congregation as unregenerate, though baptized, until there was clear evidence of the new birth?²²

Gerstner's answer, as you might expect, is that one cannot. Baptism does not regenerate. In this he is right in his estimation of Edwards' theology, and with it we see the playing out of Reformed thinking on

¹⁸ See Riggs, *Baptism*, 90.

¹⁹ An electronic sample may be viewed at <http://www.apuritansmind.com/WilliamPerkins/PerkinsGoldenChainChart.htm>.

²⁰ See Riggs, *Baptism*, 87–90.

²¹ Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954) and Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953).

²² John Gerstner, *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 3 (Orlando, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 1991), 428ff.

the linkage of baptism, initiation into the covenant, the effectual call of the Holy Spirit, regeneration, faith, and justification. Several years ago I published an article titled “Jonathan Edwards on Justification by Faith” in which I argued that the key to understanding Edwards on justification was his understanding of faith. In that article I did not have to deal with baptism in any significant way. Rather, borrowing the language of Anri Morimoto, I stated that for Edwards, “What is real—the act of faith—is the basis of what is legal—the imputation of Christ’s righteousness and forensic decree of ‘not guilty.’” Expanding on that point, I wrote:

Edwards shifted Calvinism’s traditional stance by stressing the human act of faith. While he saw justification as the forensic imputation of Christ’s righteousness to the sinner, he stressed that it was logically consequent to the real union of the Christian with Christ by faith. In other words, justification as a forensic declaration on the basis of the imputed merits of Christ is based on the volitional union of the Christian with Christ, which occurs by faith. Edwards wanted to maintain both the primacy of God’s act and the integrity of the human will. He based justification on God’s grace infused into the believer but then required the real consent of the human act of faith.²³

This made the willful act of faith a condition of justification—a point that worked in Edwards’ theology, but in popular thought likely led his hearers toward the Arminianism he was trying to avoid. As I put it:

There is a *reception* and this reception is *of Christ* by means of the faculties of the soul. Man exercises faith as an instrument and actively receives Christ first by understanding the message of the gospel and second by willing to make Christ his own. As the disposition is turned from evil to good the soul consents to the grace of God, unites itself with Christ, and receives the benefits of Christ’s obedience. *Thus justification is dependent upon faith and is logically consequent to it.* “It seems manifest that justification is by the first act of faith, in some respects, in a peculiar manner, because a sinner is actually and finally justified as soon as he has performed one act of faith; and faith in its first acts

²³ Lawrence R. Rast, Jr., “Jonathan Edwards on Justification by Faith,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 72 (October 2008): 348.

does, virtually at least, depend on God for perseverance, and entitles to this among other benefits.” In short, what is real—the union between Christ and his people effected by faith—is the foundation of what is legal—imputation of Christ’s righteousness. It is Christ and his righteousness “in us,” received by faith, that is the “bottom stone” of the justification of the sinner before God.²⁴

Now for us, the question is what role does baptism play in all this? The answer is, logically, none. Baptism merely places the child in the right setting for the influences of the Holy Spirit to come upon him through which, hopefully, an effectual call will come. This is the practical application of the “sign theology” of the early Reformed confessions and the “covenant” of the later Reformed confessions. In both cases, baptism is not really necessary beyond the fulfillment of a command. In both cases, as well, however, the truly gracious character of baptism is obscured and its comforting effects are at best in the background and at worst hidden.

Conclusion

“Indeed, if I had the matter under my control, I would not want God to speak to me from heaven or to appear to me; but this I would want—and my daily prayers are directed to this end—that I might have the proper respect and true appreciation for the gift of Baptism, that I have been baptized.”²⁵

For Martin Luther baptism is inextricably linked to the chief doctrine of Christianity—justification by grace for Christ’s sake through faith. Baptism is the means through which the Holy Spirit applies the merits of Christ’s suffering, death, and resurrection to sinners. For Luther baptism is Christological, it is where the saving righteousness of Christ is applied to sinners. In that sense it is integrally necessary to Lutheran theology. For it is God’s act through water and the word of God that works “forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and grants eternal salvation to all who believe.”²⁶ Indeed, in considering baptism Luther is scarcely able to contain himself: “Ah, dear Christians, let us not value and administer this unspeakable gift so indolently

²⁴ Rast, “Edwards on Justification,” 360.

²⁵ *Luther’s Works*, 3:165.

²⁶ Small Catechism, Tappert edition, 348-9.

and indifferently; for baptism is our only comfort and admits to every blessing of God and to the communion of the saints.”²⁷

Where for Luther baptism is God’s work alone, and therefore its effects are sure and certain, for the Reformed tradition, baptism’s initial efficaciousness and ongoing effects seem distanced from the regenerating waters of baptism. We are pointed to other places for comfort, assurance, and the application of the Gospel. At its best, baptism is simply the beginning of the process of salvation; at its worst, it is unnecessary.

For Luther, baptism works salvation and is therefore necessary. Why? At the risk of being redundant, it is God’s doing. Commenting on Psalm 110:3, Luther notes:

Here Christ presents a parable or picture of the spiritual birth. The wind illustrates the same thing as the dew at dawn. Both pictures beautifully present the operation whereby Christians, or children of God are made—not by the power or intellectual capacity of men but only by the heavenly operation of the Holy Spirit, and yet through the Word, the preaching of the Gospel, and Baptism. . . . You can see the water of baptism as you can see the dew. . . . but you cannot hear or understand the Spirit, or what He accomplishes thereby: that a human being is cleaned in Baptism and becomes a saint in the hands of the priest, so that from a child of hell he is changed into a child of God. Nevertheless this is truly and actually accomplished. One has to say, in view of the power which attends it, that the Holy Spirit was present at the event and was making believers by means of water and the Word. No human power can possibly accomplish this.²⁸

In contrast to the Reformed tradition’s emphasis on initiation into the covenant and the personal act of faith, Luther clearly teaches the divine character and necessity of baptism—it is God’s work! Baptism is pure grace—God’s gift in Christ that gives everlasting life, as Luther himself confesses in his 1526 baptismal order: “The almighty God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath regenerated thee through water and the Holy Ghost and hath forgiven all thy sin, strengthen thee with his grace to life everlasting. Amen.”²⁹ **LSQ**

²⁷ *Luther’s Works*, 53:103.

²⁸ *Luther’s Works*, 13:303.

²⁹ *Luther’s Works*, 53:109.

The Norwegian Hermeneutic

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THE NORWEGIAN HERMENEUTICAL method that found active expression in The Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church in America was born as a reaction to the rationalism of the Norwegian State Church on the one hand and the pietistic preaching of Haugean revival on the other. The method brought back the true confessional principle of *Sola Scriptura* to the Norwegian State Church, along with a deep appreciation for the Lutheran symbols and the historic practices of the Lutheran Church. This hermeneutical method would be deeply instilled in the founders of the Norwegian Synod, men like Herman Amberg Preus, Jakob Aal Ottesen, and Ulrik Vilhelm Koren, who guided the Norwegian Synod through various doctrinal battles, especially the Election Controversy, with their clear, persistent call to the authority of Scripture.

After the demise of the Norwegian Synod with the Madison Settlement of 1917 the leaders of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS) began a careful re-examining of the events that led to the fall of their

beloved church.¹ During this time, men like H.M. Tjernagel, J.E. Thoen, Bjug Harstad, Norman A. Madson, C.A. Moldstad, Christian Anderson and S.C. Ylvisaker would not only show that they stayed faithful to the sound Lutheran hermeneutical principle *Sola Scriptura*, but they would also zealously bring it to the fore in sermons, theological essays, and personal correspondence. The Norwegian hermeneutic became all the more important given the tiny size of the re-organized synod. How would the pastors and teachers answer the question, “Are we alone wise among all the Norwegian Lutherans of this country?”

In this era of visible devastation caused by the Madison Settlement, the leaders of the ELS were led to study the Scriptures even more deeply. This hermeneutic not only caused them to fully appreciate their doctrinal heritage, but poised the ELS to see deceptions of the union movements that began to threaten and eventually destroy the Synodical Conference. They, like their fathers before them, realized that ecclesiastical chicaneries of false teachers can be unmasked only with sound scriptural theology.

Foundations of the Norwegian Hermeneutic: Johnson and Caspari

At the beginning of the 19th century, Norway was a country deeply divided religiously. On the one hand, the clergy of the state had become infected with the rationalism of continental Europe. Professors like Svend Borchmann Hersleb (1784–1836) and Stener Johannes Stenersen (1789–1835) had brought a moderate Lutheran orthodoxy tinged with scientific rationalism to the Norwegian State Church.² This only added to the popular perception of the state church and clergy as being aloof from the people they served, living in a privileged world with an untroubled conscience.³

¹ The Madison Settlement brought together the United Norwegian Lutheran Church and the Norwegian Synod, which had been historically separated over a number of issues, but most glaring was the doctrine of election. The United Norwegian Lutheran Church taught that man is elected *intuitu fidei*, in view of faith: that in eternity God saw those who would believe and elected those. The Norwegian Synod strongly rejected this because it undermines *Sola Gratia* and makes man in some way responsible for part of his salvation, which is a subtle form of synergism. The Madison Settlement glossed over this difference with the explanation that both synods really held to the same doctrine, but in different forms. Only the minority that went on to form the ELS insisted that the merger was against Scripture because it tolerated false doctrine.

² Michael Langlais, “Gisle Johnson and the Johnsonian Awakening: 19th Century Norwegian Lutheranism and its importance for America,” *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 36, no.2 (June 1996): 19.

³ *Ibid.*, 18.

With such popular discontent over the spiritual shepherding of the Norwegian State Church, Hans Nielsen Hauge (1771–1824), a revivalistic lay-preacher, found a ready audience throughout Norway. Although a layman, he preached a message of repentance and regeneration throughout Norway, reviving the backsliders and strengthening and encouraging the faithful.⁴ Yet this movement was not without its problems. First, Hauge greatly confused justification and sanctification. Hauge tended to be legalistic, condemning many things which Scripture had not. Also, the Haugean movement served to destabilize further the state church with lay-preaching that centered mostly on condemnation of the state church and the promotion of pietistic legalism, rather than the proper application of Law and Gospel.

In the midst of these forces of rationalism and pietism, there arose a number of professors at the University of Christiania (Oslo), led by Gisle Johnson (1822–1894), who provided a narrow, yet truly Lutheran, middle way between rationalism and pietism. Johnson and his fellow professor, Carl Paul Caspari (1814–1892), along with the great hymn writer and pastor, Magnus Landstad (1802–1880); Oslo pastor, Johan Christian Heuch (1838–1904); the teacher and Bible translator, O. Christian Thistedahl (1813–1876); and Professor of New Testament Isagogics, Fredrik Bugge (1838–1896), influenced not only the course of the state church of Norway for a number of generations, but greatly influenced the Norwegian Lutherans coming to America.

What came to be known as the Johnsonian Awakening actually began in the classroom of Thistedahl, who taught in the Latin school in Kristiansand.⁵ Thistedahl's interest in and encouragement of Johnson to study theology placed Johnson on the path he eventually took.

Johnson later credited Thistedahl with giving him the necessary encouragement and guidance, and accounted his teacher an admirable "sjalesorger" who has seen him through crises of difficulty and discouragement.... He was a non-speculative theologian with a deep respect for the Lutheran theological writings second only to Holy Scripture. He was in short a *Biblical* theologian whose motto was "*simpliciter standum esse in verbo divino.*" Johnson was to become, like Thistedahl, a Biblical and strongly confessional Lutheran theologian.⁶

⁴ Clifford Nelson, *Lutherans in North America* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 159.

⁵ Langlais, 12.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Johnson's academic prowess and theological acumen were recognizable also to the officials at the University of Christiania. Upon his graduation, he was offered a position as professor of theology. Instead of starting service right away, Johnson opted for a year of study in Germany. The year spent in Germany was fruitful on two accounts. The first is that Johnson's further study in Germany only confirmed his biblical, confessional stance. While in Germany, Johnson came into contact with all the important figures of the confessional revival. But perhaps of greater import was his meeting and subsequent fraternal and professional relationship with a young linguist, theologian, and church historian named Carl Paul Caspari. Their time as professors and lecturers at the University of Christiania would eventually come to define the Norwegian Hermeneutic.

Carl Paul Caspari is one of the greatest linguists that the Lutheran Church has ever known and yet sadly remains in relative obscurity to this day. To illustrate Caspari's gift for languages, Torald Teigen related the following story about Caspari.

Caspari was traveling incognito with some scholars who were conversing in Latin. When Caspari entered into the conversation in Latin, they switched to Greek; and still trying to throw him off they switched to Hebrew and then to several other less known languages, Caspari speaking the others more fluently than they. Finally one of the travelers said, "Either you are the devil himself or you are Professor Caspari of Christiania."⁷

Caspari, born in 1814 in Dessau, Germany of Jewish parents, received his earliest training in some of the Jewish schools around Dessau, but later matriculated through the University of Leipzig.⁸ His main area of study was Hebrew, but soon he became a master of all Oriental languages, as well as the study of Greek and Latin. When at Leipzig, he studied the New Testament for the first time (in Greek, no less), and his continued study led to his baptism and conversion to the Lutheran faith in 1838.

Upon his conversion, he decided to study theology, and therefore transferred to the University of Berlin, focusing on Old Testament exegesis and studying under Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg. In 1842 he earned his doctorate of philosophy at Leipzig. When offered a position

⁷ Torald Teigen, "A Few Notes on Professor Carl Paul Caspari" *Clergy Bulletin* 15, no.7 (September 1955): 59.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 61.

at the University of Königsberg, he turned it down because it would have meant that he would have had to join the Union Church of Prussia, something his conscience would not allow. While waiting for a position in Leipzig to open, Caspari met Johnson, who immediately offered him a position at Christiania. Caspari took the offer and remained at Christiania for the next 44 years.

The years of collaboration between Caspari and Johnson at the University of Christiania became known as the Johnsonian Awakening. The theological and religious gap between the rationalists of the state church and the anti-clerical pietists was filled in with sound, biblical, evangelical and confessional doctrine and practice. Not only was the Norwegian State Church affected, but especially the fledgling Norwegian Synod in America, whose founders—Preus, Koren and Ottesen—all sat at the feet of these men and took their theology and theological method with them to America.

What was the hermeneutical method of these men? Historian Clifford Nelson has described the method of Caspari and Johnson as “imbu[ing]... students with a spirit of orthodoxy which blended the passion and subjectivity of a revival preacher with the intellect of an orthodox systematician.”⁹ This author would argue that their method is simpler than the one that is described by Nelson. Caspari and Johnson, from their own personal and professional experience, knew that true confessional Lutheranism is born from the direct study of the Scriptures. Their method was nothing more than the method of Luther and his colleagues: *Sola Scriptura*.

The reverence for Holy Scripture as the sole authority for the establishment of articles of faith and the guidance of a Christian is clearly seen in the Johnsonian Awakening. Historian Gerald Belgum gives this glimpse into Johnson’s classroom lectures on the Holy Scriptures:

The accounts of his public lectures, those calm, scholarly expositions of Holy Scripture, were that those classes, some of which lasted for over two hours, were intensely moving. Welle reports that, “the whole assembly trembled when Johnson quietly and with his thin voice quoted the prophet’s words: ‘there is no peace for the ungodly, says my God.’”¹⁰

⁹ Nelson, 159–160.

¹⁰ Gerald Belgum, “The Old Norwegian Synod in America: 1853–1890” (PhD diss., Yale University, 1957), 38.

Or consider this snapshot of Caspari's lectures and classroom method, given by Andreas Brandrud, who succeeded Johnson to the chair of Church History at Christiania:

Caspari's orthodox view of the Bible did not allow him to investigate with complete freedom.... He was not a pietist... but he possessed at the same time a deep and child-like piety, which especially lived and breathed in the Bible, not least in the Old Testament, in the piety of the Patriarchs, Prophets, and Psalms. And he understood how to give it impressive expression. None of his hearers could ever forget Caspari as he often stood on the podium expounding upon the Hebrew Psalm or a portion of the Prophets, and with closed eyes and in a scarcely audible voice, as in an ecstasy, breathed the holy words out over his hearers.¹¹

The earmark of the theological education of the Johnsonian Awakening was the direct, exegetical study of the Scriptures as the source of all Lutheran doctrine and practice. Consider the twin mottos of Caspari and Johnson, which would also serve as the motto for the Norwegian Synod in America: "*gegraptai*" and "*verbum dei manet in aeternum*." The students who sat at their feet grew to appreciate and hold fast to the Lutheran symbols and Lutheran practice precisely because first they had been so solidly grounded in the study of Scripture, not as an academic exercise, but as a devotional practice by which the Spirit prepared them for their public office. In short, the students of Johnson and Caspari at Christiania received a classical, thoroughly Lutheran education rooted firmly in the study of Scripture.

In addition to this reverent study of Scripture, both Caspari and Johnson instilled in their students a great love and appreciation for the Lutheran symbols, church history, systematic theology and the historic forms of the Lutheran Church. Caspari and Johnson had the Book of Concord translated into Norwegian.¹² Johnson was the author of both a

¹¹ Teigen, 60–61. It should be noted that Brandrud was more "modernist" in his approach to Scripture than his predecessor; thus the criticism for the orthodox way Caspari expounded upon the Scriptures.

¹² *The Formula of Concord* was not an official confession of the Lutheran Church of Norway or Denmark at this time, though Sweden had officially accepted it as a public confession in 1593. Some attribute this to the political climate of Denmark at that time, which did not want to receive it due to political considerations with Reformed countries. Others have simply stated that the kind of disputes that happened in Germany after Luther's death were local German issues that did not really affect the Lutheranism

church history text, *Dogmehistorie*, and a dogmatics text, *Grundrids af den systemantiske Theologi*.¹³ Caspari also did important work investigating the source of the Apostles' Creed in order to react to the Grundtvigian assertions that so troubled the Scandinavian churches of his day.

One final note about the influence of Johnson and Caspari: even within the context of their devout piety and staunch orthodoxy, they zealously defended Christian liberty.

[Johnson]'s piety never lost sight of Christian liberty, and he never tended toward moralism or perfectionism in any form. He loved his pipe and was unwilling to condemn dancing, always avoiding legalism that some of his followers fell into, followers whom, by the way, were also frequently affected by Haugeanism. In those that were balanced, like Johnson himself, we discover a marvelous combination of Lutheran doctrinal orthodoxy with its concomitant devotional expression that can only be considered as being likewise orthodox.¹⁴

of the rest of Europe at that time. Yet, even though it was never officially accepted, it was nevertheless always considered a thoroughly Lutheran document by confessional Lutherans in the Scandinavian countries. Caspari and Johnson's translation of the entire Book of Concord into Norwegian is proof of that. It was, therefore, no great leap for the Norwegian Synod to subscribe to the *Formula of Concord* during the formation of the Synodical Conference. The Synodical Conference proceedings record the following:

But since the honorable Norwegian Synod has attached to its complete assent to the Constitution the question whether it could enter the Synodical Conference as a member, even though as an individual synod it pledged itself, as is well known, only to the Unaltered Augsburg Confession and Luther's Small Catechism, the explanation was given by the Synodical Conference that the Scandinavian Lutherans had always been regarded as orthodox, even though not all symbolical books had achieved official ecclesiastical recognition among them; nevertheless, the Synodical Conference naturally demands that the honorable Norwegian Lutheran Synod, in so far as it is a part of the Synodical Conference, pledge itself to all the confessional writings of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and in the event of doctrinal controversy to be guided and judged thereby. Since this was agreed to by the representatives of the honorable Norwegian Synod, the Conference found no impediment to its acceptance. (Edward Fredrich, "The Formula of Concord in the History of American Lutheranism," Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary On-Line Essay File, <http://www.wlsessays.net/files/FredrichConcord.pdf> [Last accessed July 7, 2010])

¹³ Erwin L. Lueker et. al. *Lutheran Cyclopedia* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1975), 431.

¹⁴ Langlais, 17.

The Norwegian-American pastors, Herman Amberg Preus, Ulrik Vilhelm Koren, and Jakob Aal Ottesen, inherited this evangelical balance of theology while sitting at the feet of Gisle Johnson and Carl Paul Caspari. S.C. Ylvisaker, in commemoration of the 90th anniversary of the Norwegian Synod, expressed the debt that the Norwegian Synod founders had to the men of the Johnsonian Awakening:

We thank God Who raised up men of faith and conviction and Christian courage to help stem the tide of error and unbelief, in recent times such men as Johnson, Caspari, Thistedahl, Bugge, Heuch, Landstad to mention only some.¹⁵

The Norwegian Hermeneutic in the Old Norwegian Synod (1853–1910)

A detailed examination of the history and writings of the great Norwegian troika (Preus, Koren, and Ottesen) reveals that for almost 60 years, the Norwegian Hermeneutic found active and agile expression in the sermons, theological writings, and doctrinal defenses of these men. One can understand the doctrinal contentiousness of the founding fathers of the Norwegian Synod only if one understands the deep reverence with which they held the Holy Scriptures.

The founders of the Norwegian Synod were from the beginning zealous for the truth of God's Word in all its parts and were not willing to compromise one iota of its teachings, whether they concerned the fundamental doctrines of salvation or matters of the law or of church polity. Their teachings were the teachings of the Bible, nothing more, nothing less.¹⁶

Herman Amberg Preus, the long-time president of the Norwegian Synod, clearly articulated this devotion to the Holy Scriptures in his 1869 presidential address to the Norwegian Synod convention.

The Word is not ours which we can do with as might please us. It is the Word of the holy, righteous God which He has in grace and indescribable love committed to us pure and unadulterated which we therefore are to proclaim pure and unadulterated, without addition, without suppression, without obscuring,

¹⁵ S.C. Ylvisaker, *Grace for Grace: A Brief History of the Norwegian Synod* (Mankato: Lutheran Synod Book Company, 1943), 8.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 135.

without distortion, and which we are to preserve unfalsified and unabridged as our most precious heritage to our descendants.¹⁷

The Holy Scriptures were the precious heritage delivered into their hands by God's grace without taint or error. The Norwegian men realized that the main theological task of the synod was to preach the revealed truth and defend against any deviations from that revelation. But to simply accede to the nature and power of Scripture was not enough. The synod's motto, "*gegraptai*," must not simply be a slogan, but it must find living expression among laity and clergy alike. The only way to avoid the pits of rationalism and pietism was the faithful use of the Holy Scriptures. They must never run from or compromise with error, but standing boldly on the Scriptures, defend the church from false doctrine.

The Norwegian Hermeneutic sought not only to understand and formulate correctly the doctrines revealed in the Scriptures, but also to apply them privately and publicly, both in law and gospel, so the enemies of the church might be thwarted, the lusts of the flesh killed, and the new man built up and renewed by the power of the Holy Spirit. Herman Amberg Preus, in the midst of the Election Controversy, called upon a divided Norwegian Synod to do just that.

O that we therefore, brethren, now that we come together here, might together with our congregations make a sincere, righteous repentance from the heart and in our deepest distress cry to him: "Return, O God of hosts! Look down from heaven, and behold, and visit this vine; and the vineyard which your right hand planted, and the Son, whom you made strong for yourself—so will we not go back from you; let us live, and we will call upon your name. LORD God of hosts! Turn us, let your face shine, so we are saved," Psalm 80:12–20.

So will we cling fast to the Lord more zealously and call upon his help since we know that the evil foe will do everything possible in order to demolish our church and to deprive us of the Word of truth. But if we thus lift up our eyes unto the hills from whence help shall come to us, then our meeting here shall not be in vain. Then the Lord himself shall be with us and bless

¹⁷ Herman Amberg Preus, Presidential address given to the 10th regular convention of the Norwegian Synod, Spring Grove, WI, June 17–27, 1869. <http://www.evangelicallutheransynod.org/publications/essays/hapreus-18a/5.html>. (Accessed July 19, 2008).

our decisions, let our work prosper, and preserve us in unity of the Spirit on the ground of truth because he has promised that *the way of the righteous shall prosper*. Let it be so, O God, for your mercy's sake in Christ Jesus! Amen.¹⁸

Among the pastors and theologians of the Old Norwegian synod, there was also a healthy spiritual desire to remove façade and get to the truth, to look past the physical and temporal to the spiritual and eternal. Only when one not only confesses properly but lives that confession, then, and only then, does true faith find expression. Koren, in his last synodical address, commented,

No, if we are Christians in the Scriptural sense, it is because we have actually come to Christ and to faith in him; from this again it follows that we will gladly help to draw others also to Him and to faith in him, in order that both we, ourselves and others with us may be enabled to abide with Him. This demands all our effort and all our attention. If this is not the purpose, then all our institutions and our churches, with what belongs to them, are meaningless or even worse—false pretenses; for we *say* this is what we want.

However, nothing is easier and more frequent in occurrence than that we sink into a careless habit which forgets the aim and lets itself be satisfied with the mere form. If we do this, the reason is that we have not considered seriously, much less, realized, what the Word of God is. If we try to explain what it really is, we shall find ourselves overwhelmed by the thought of its greatness. For the Word of God must be the expression or revelation of the thoughts of God and of the will of God. Hence, God's Word must be infallible as God himself....

The Word of God, then is a real thing, all that belongs to Christianity is practical. Nothing is merely theory or speculation. This condemns all Pharisaism which lets itself be satisfied with external form....

Now when the real value and content of the Word of God is forgotten, only the sound of it or the shell remains.¹⁹

¹⁸ Herman Amberg Preus. Presidential address given to the 20th regular convention of the Norwegian Synod, Minneapolis, MN, June 18–25, 1884. <http://www.evangelicallutheransynod.org/publications/essays/hapreus-18a/15.html>. (Accessed June 19, 2008).

¹⁹ U.V. Koren, "On Using the Word of God," final presidential address to the Norwegian Synod, 1909. <http://www.blts.edu/essays/korenUV/>

This desire among the Norwegians to remove orthodoxist artifice so that true orthodoxy can live and breathe can partly be traced to the effect Søren Kierkegaard's writings had on Scandinavian Lutherans. While Kierkegaard (1813–1855) is known today primarily as a philosopher, in his day he was a voice of protest against the blatant hypocrisy and rationalism that infected the Scandinavian state churches. Koren, in his reminiscences, comments on the effect Kierkegaard had on him and others:

His influence showed itself for the most part in the spiritual sphere and personal activity which he called forth in his readers; a more idealized view of life and man; in every domain, an intellectual consideration; a view of the disparity between the essence of Christianity and the world; an exposure of all kinds of “sham” and humbug... an unconditional obedience to God's Word and submission to it. Thereby emerged a view of the requisites for the pastoral office and a view of the pitiful caricatures so often to be found in the office, whether it be the good-natured clergyman who is spiritually asleep while he, however, eats and drinks and sleeps and carries on the functions of his office like any other business – or be it the gifted preacher who “with daring boldness of the speaker” draws his hearers along, in wonderment over the beautiful and touching words which neither he nor they have any use for as soon as the sermon has been concluded.²⁰

Koren sees Kierkegaard as one who helped form a fitting mindset when approaching the work of the church. Yet Koren also was quick to recognize that Kierkegaard's greatest weakness was that he never contributed any objective basis for his subjective views. But with the instruction of Johnson and Caspari, as well as a solid reading of Luther, the men of the Norwegian Synod were properly grounded in Lutheran theology as they began their ministry in America.²¹

The desire for pure Lutheran doctrine and practice is clearly seen already in the re-writing of the original constitution of the Norwegian Synod. The first Norwegian pastors in this country, Claus Clausen and J.W.C. Dietrichson, were heavily influenced by Grundtvig and the

On%20Using%20the%20Word%20of%20God.pdf. (Accessed July 21, 2008), 1–2.

²⁰ U.V. Koren, “Memories of My Youth and Early Times in America,” tr. C.M. Gullerud, *Journal of Theology* 32, no. 2 (June 1992): 4.

²¹ Ibid.

errors he advocated.²² They had inserted Grundtvigian language in the first draft of the Norwegian Synod's constitution:

The doctrine of the Church is that which is revealed through God's holy Word *in our baptismal covenant* and also in the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments, interpreted in agreement with the Symbolic writings of the Church of Norway.²³

Yet the arrival of new pastors in 1852, most notably Herman Amberg Preus and Jakob Aal Ottesen, along with Nils Brandt and H.A. Stub, and in 1853, Ulrik Vilhelm Koren, brought about an immediate change. These men were fully committed to confessional Lutheranism and the confessional principle "Sola Scriptura." They immediately recognized the Grundtvigian error and moved that the words "*in our baptismal covenant*" be stricken from the second paragraph of the constitution.²⁴

Furthermore, the Norwegian hermeneutical approach is seen in the synod's early fellowship with other Lutheran bodies in America. In 1855, Nils Brandt and Jakob Ottesen made inquiries for suitable Lutheran education to supply pastors and teachers for the rapidly growing settlements of Norwegian Lutherans in the midwest. Their confessional consciousness and faithfulness guided them in their search. Even though it had been a Buffalo Synod pastor who had ordained the first Norwegian Synod pastor in America, Brandt and Ottesen rejected the Buffalo Synod seminary due to its Romanizing view of church and ministry. Despite the Ohio Synod's warm offer of Capitol Seminary in Columbus for Norwegian use, the Synod turned down the offer due to an uncertainty of Ohio's doctrinal position. J.A. Ottesen wrote in *Maanedstidende*, October 1852,

²² Danish pastor and noted hymn-writer Nikolai Grundtvig (1783–1872), although he had broken from the rationalism of the Danish state church, had moved from the "Sola Scriptura" principle of the Lutheran Confessions. He sought to form an apologetic for orthodox Lutheranism on the basis of the "Living Word" that had been confessed down through the ages by the church in the form of the Apostles' Creed. He despaired of defending the faith through the use of the written Scriptures, feeling that it had been destroyed beyond repair by rationalism.

²³ Ylvisaker, 36.

²⁴ The first Norwegian Synod was organized in 1851. However, with the arrival of the anti-Grundtvigians and the removal of the error, thus changing one of the unalterable articles of the constitution, the first synod was dissolved in 1852. It was later reorganized with a new constitution in 1853.

If it is important for individuals who desire to enjoy church fellowship with one another to have one faith and confession, then the same must be the case in a still greater degree in the case of groups of individuals, of synods, since the opposing forces, if disagreement arises, are so much greater and thus the damage they could inflict upon one another correspondingly more dangerous.²⁵

But the Norwegians found a kindred spirit in the Missouri Synod. Soon the negotiations of Brandt and Ottesen with Walther produced an arrangement not only concerning fellowship, but also concerning the training of pastors for the Norwegian Synod. At the 1864 convention of the Norwegian Synod, with Walther, Craemer and Sihler representing the Missouri Synod, President Preus commented in his address,

We acknowledge with gratitude toward God that one German Lutheran synod, the Missouri Synod, has not been satisfied only to bear the Lutheran name, but has unhesitatingly brought forth the testimonies of the Lutheran fathers, without fear held aloft the banner of the Lutheran church, pure doctrine, zealously guarded it within the synod itself, and with boldness and courage as well as with learning, defended it against external enemies.... And when we rejoice in fraternal relations... we are certain that they, by the gracious help of God will remain, as they have been, as blessed consequence to us in our endeavor to know and hold fast the pure doctrine and to abide by the Word of God.²⁶

For a century (1855–1955) the Norwegian synod and its theological heirs enjoyed a warm, fraternal relationship with the Missouri Synod. ELS historian Theodore Aaberg even defined the relationship between the Missourians and the Norwegians as Jonathan-David like.²⁷ A feeling of sincere, mutual regard sprang up, all the more genuine because it was based on real unity of faith.²⁸

The Norwegian Synod would suffer mightily for their pure, Lutheran orthodoxy which flowed from their approach to Scripture. Sven Oftedal, professor of the Norwegian-Danish Conference, attacked

²⁵ Ylvisaker, *Ebenezer*, 264.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 266.

²⁷ Theodore Aaberg, *A City Set on a Hill* (Lake Mills: Graphic Publishing Company, 1968), 84.

²⁸ Ylvisaker, *Ebenezer*, 266.

the Norwegian Synod with as much venom as he could muster when he described them as “worm-eaten by Latinism, washed out by monarchism, frozen stiff with orthodoxism... swallowed by Missouri.”²⁹ But history has shown this accusation to be untrue and unjustified. Koren himself stated in response to these charges, “We have not learned anything new from them (Missouri), i.e., any new doctrine or any doctrine other than that which we had with us from the University of Christiania.”³⁰ Professor Erling Teigen of Bethany Lutheran College has further silenced these charges:

Several historical treatments have asserted that the Norwegian Synod first came under the spell of Walther and the Missourians, and then became hyperconfessionalists. This lie is quickly put to rest by the statement found in the 1851 and 1853 constitutions. In 1858, C.F.W. Walther read his paper on confessional subscription where he outlined the strict, unconditional subscription to the Lutheran Confessions in similar words, four years after the Norwegians and Missourians had officially discovered each other.³¹

The Norwegian Synod commitment to pure doctrine and sound practice was displayed in numerous controversies during the first

²⁹ U.V. Koren, “Why is There No Unity among the Norwegians? An Answer to Mr. Ulvsted and Many Others.” <http://www.blts.edu/essays/korenUV/No%20Church%20Unity.pdf>. (Accessed July 21, 2008), 14–15.

One of the proofs put forth by the Norwegian–Danish Conference and later the Anti-Missourian Brotherhood for this charge of the Norwegian Synod being a puppet of the Missouri Synod was its adherence to the *Formula of Concord*. However, as was shown above (footnote 12), the Norwegian men who had studied under Johnson and Caspari had already accepted the *Formula of Concord* as a thoroughly Lutheran document. Koren answers the charges of the critics of the Norwegian Synod in this way: “We have, therefore, many opportunities to see that those who attack the old Lutheran doctrine have no better defense than to say that *The Book of Concord* was not accepted in the Norwegian State Church. That it has always been accepted among all true Lutherans – that does not matter in the least. They wanted to have unbridled freedom for their own fancy and opinions.... The difference between *The Augsburg Confession* and *The Formula of Concord*...lies in this, that the hour-hand can never be as exact as the minute hand.” Ulrik Vilhelm Koren, “The Book of Concord” in *Truth Unchanged, Unchanging: Selected Sermons, Addresses and Doctrinal Articles by Ulrich Vilhelm Koren*, ed. The Evangelical Lutheran Synod Translation Committee (Lake Mills: Graphic Publishing Company, 1978), 168–169.

³⁰ Koren, *Why is There No Unity among the Norwegians*, 12.

³¹ Erling Teigen, “Jakob Aal Ottesen and the Enduring Legacy of Preus, Koren and Ottesen” *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 44, no. 1 (March 2004): 90.

decades of its existence: lay-preaching, sabbatarianism, the biblical understanding of slavery, absolutism, the gospel and objective justification, and election. What is important to note about each of these issues is that the founders of the synod always sought to answer the controversy by examining the Scriptures and holding up the pure doctrine that was found therein. Many times they insisted on biblical teaching despite a contrary mood of the vast majority of their congregations and at great personal cost to them.³²

Of the founders of the Norwegian Synod, it was Ulrik Vilhelm Koren who most succinctly and clearly elucidated the proper approach to the Scriptures that would come to define the hermeneutical approach of the Old Norwegian Synod. Three documents in particular lay out the spirit and the principles of the Norwegian hermeneutical approach to Scripture: Koren's *En Redegjoerelse* (An Accounting to the congregations of the Norwegian Synod); Koren's 1881 essay, *Can and Ought a Christian be Certain of His Salvation?*; and *What the Norwegian Synod Has Always Wanted* (1890).

The Norwegian Hermeneutic Defined

What is interesting about the above treatises by Koren is that each of them begins with some sort of extended address about proper hermeneutics. For instance, Koren writes in his introduction to *En Redegjoerelse*,

We do not accept as our own a single doctrine which is not clearly based on God's Word and which cannot be shown in the Confessions of the Lutheran Church. We owe our congregations an accounting for what we teach and confess; and although we dare to believe that our hearers both know our testimony and will judge it by what they hear of us and not by what others say, we have still considered it our duty to present to you now this our common complete accounting, in which we hope no essential question that concerns the disputed doctrines has been unanswered. We present this accounting to you, then, in the name of the Lord, for testing by the Word of God.³³

³² Take for example the physical deposition of Herman Amberg Preus and his son Christian Keyser Preus for their refusal to accede to the unscriptural "intuitu fidei" demanded by the members of their congregation. Only one standing firmly on the revealed Word of God could have sustained such an experience and made the comments recorded above.

³³ Ylvisaker, *Grace for Grace*, 173–174.

Similarly Koren comments in *Can and Ought a Christian be Certain of His Salvation?*

Men want to build on their own acceptance of the Word in addition to God's Word. They want to make their faith or their willingness to believe, of their own non-resistance, a basis for this confidence...but surely, thereby, faith has been mortally wounded. For whoever wants to build on something of his own in addition to the promise of God, does not have a true Christian faith which the Holy Ghost works. Because it is the essence and nature of faith to tolerate nothing alongside it in which man might trust except the Word of God alone, or the divine promise.³⁴

Koren is even clearer about a proper hermeneutical approach in *What the Norwegian Synod Has Always Wanted*. Koren marks two proper principles in scriptural interpretation which Scripture itself gives: first, Holy Scripture is the only sure and perfect rule of our faith and life; secondly, the great truth that Jesus Christ is the way to salvation for all believing souls.³⁵ If there is any interpretation of Scripture that does violence to either of these principles so clearly laid out in Scripture, the reader is allowing something other than the Holy Spirit to guide him in his interpretation, be it reason or tradition. Yet, Koren is quick to point out, these principles are not to be taken for granted or handled with arrogance.

It is of no use to put them down on paper as a heading and still act, write, and confess contrary to them. It is of no use to pretend that these two fundamental principles are so well known and so self-evident that we do not need to dwell on them any further. The one who does this shows thereby that he has not even begun to understand and appreciate them.³⁶

The two easiest ways in which these principles are abused show themselves in 1) a misuse of God's gift of reason, and 2) supplanting the authority of the Scriptures with the opinions of men ("fathers' theology"). Misapplied reason, Koren remarks, is shown most often

³⁴ U.V. Koren, "Can and Ought a Christian be Certain of His Salvation?" *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 43, nos. 2, 3 (June/September 2003): 163.

³⁵ U.V. Koren, "What the Norwegians Synod Has Always Wanted," *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 32, no. 3 (September 1992): 13.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

when one takes issue with God and presumes to pass judgment on his Word.³⁷

The Election Controversy was really a fight over the proper use of reason in the interpretation of Scripture. Schmidt's bold assertion that he had harmonized two seemingly contradictory passages had come at the cost of *sola gratia*. Therefore, Schmidt, with his *intuitu fidei*, had violated both principles of proper biblical interpretation. In the notes to his 1881 essay, Koren writes,

What is important is that we do not make our reason governess of the Word of God, and we do not reject a doctrine which is plainly taught in the Word of God because we cannot make rhyme or reason out of it. We know that the Word of God does not contradict itself, even if we cannot see the agreement.³⁸

But does not holding to two clearly revealed doctrines that seem to contradict each other cause a problem? In Koren's view, this is not at all a problem. Scripture is clear. The problem is not the clarity of the revealed doctrines, but our sinful self which keeps us from understanding them fully this side of eternity. That is why Koren especially calls forth the interpreter to pray to God for the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit.³⁹ It is a fool's errand for sinful man to attempt to resolve what he perceives to be two mutually exclusive doctrines revealed in God's Holy Word.

Finally we must be convinced that certainty of salvation cannot be obtained by brooding over or wanting to "investigate the secret, concealed abyss of divine predestination." Whoever makes this his beginning will fall either into arrogance or despair and will not attain to any certainty of salvation... for we must carefully distinguish between what God has revealed in His Word and what he has not revealed.

God has in Christ revealed to us all that we need in order to be certain of our salvation, but much of His secret counsel He has kept hidden. We are not to brood over this – and this admonition is needful in the highest degree. In our presumption we take much greater delight in concerning ourselves with matters which we cannot harmonize – in fact we have no

³⁷ Ibid., 21.

³⁸ Koren, *Can and Ought...*, 186.

³⁹ Koren, *What the Norwegian Synod Has Always Wanted*, 24.

command to do so – than with those aspects of the question which God has revealed in His Word.⁴⁰

With the persistent encroachment of rationalism in the Lutheran Church at large and even among the Norwegians, Koren kept sounding the warning against the magisterial use of reason in the interpretation of Scripture.

This is what the Norwegian Synod has contended for, and still contends for: Unwavering obedience to that “which is written” and a frank confession in accordance with it.... He who really believes, i.e. is convinced that the Bible is the Word of God according to which we are to be judged, cannot want to take issue with God and presume to pass judgment on His Word, to accept some and to reject some of it. He will not allow his own thought or reason, or “considered opinion,” or “conscience” or the thoughts, learning, or “scientific knowledge” of other men to sit in judgment on the Word of God and accept some and reject some of it.⁴¹

But rationalism can get into an otherwise orthodox church through the back door of “fathers’ theology.” This, too, Koren addresses. These three treatises show how the Norwegian Synod used and viewed the Lutheran symbols and the writings of the church fathers. *En Redegjoerelse* casts the Lutheran symbols as precious landmarks because they are drawn from and point directly back to Scripture’s clear teaching. Yet they are never, never to be placed on the same plane as the Scriptures themselves. The study of the confessions and the fathers, while important, is to never supplant or surpass the direct study of Scripture itself.

In the preceding, I have spoken about our Synod’s position with regard to the Lutheran Scriptural principle... from this it follows that we do not recognize “reason” as a source, rule or judge in matters of faith, neither “the Church,” nor any individual teacher in the church, nor any pastoral conference, nor any congregation, nor any synod, nor any majority, but only “that which is written.”⁴²

⁴⁰ Koren, *Can and Ought...*, 152–153.

⁴¹ George Lillegard, *Faith of Our Fathers* (Mankato: Lutheran Synod Book Company, 1953), 54–56.

⁴² Koren, *What the Norwegian Synod Has Always Wanted*, 27.

While Koren does not directly address “fathers’ theology” in *En Redegjrelse*, he demonstrates ably the pitfalls of it. If someone (like Schmidt, for example) uses the doctrinal writings of men without first studying the Scripture from which they are drawn and the Lutheran symbols which give testimony to the pure doctrine, then those writings can be easily misinterpreted and used to support a position the orthodox fathers never intended. This was clearly the case with F.A. Schmidt’s use of both Erik Pontoppidan⁴³ and Johann Gerhard⁴⁴ to support a doctrine which both these fathers would have objected to vehemently.

...we acknowledge, not indeed as a complete definition of the concept of election, but still as a correct presentation of the last part of it, the answer given to Q.548 of Pontoppidan’s *Sandhed til Gudfrygtighed*, which reads: “That God has appointed all those to eternal life whom he from eternity has seen would accept the grace proffered them, believe in Jesus and preserve in this faith unto the end. Rom. 8:28–30.” II Tim. 1:13.

This is to be understood in the manner in which it is developed by John Gerhard in the following quotation:

“The merit of Christ is the cause of our election. But since the merit of Christ does not benefit anyone without faith, therefore we say that the regard to faith (*intuitu fidei*) is a component part of the decree of election. We confess with a loud voice that we teach: that God has not found anything good in the man who was to be chosen to life eternal; that He has not taken into consideration either good works, or the use of free will, or, what is more, *not even faith itself in such a way that he was influenced by it, or that He elected some on account of it...* (emphasis mine).⁴⁵

⁴³ Erik Pontoppidan (1698–1764) was a Norwegian Lutheran pastor and professor who wrote a popular explanation of Luther’s Catechism for use in school and confirmation instruction entitled *Sandhed til Gudfrygtighed* (“Truth unto Piety”). In his explanation of election, Pontoppidan uses the phrase “in view of faith.” This long used phrase became improperly employed during the Election Controversy and was used falsely by Schmidt and other in the Norwegian Synod as a rallying point against the orthodox Lutheran position.

⁴⁴ Johann Gerhard (1582–1637), German Lutheran theologian, was the first to use the term *intuitu fidei* in connection to the doctrine of election. Gerhard employed the term in a way in which it could be properly understood, but later generations would take his meaning out of context and use it to support the heterodox position during the Election Controversy.

⁴⁵ Ylvisaker, *Grace for Grace*, 183–184.

Erling Teigen concurs:

...a deeper study of the biblical texts and Article XI of the Formula of Concord on election led to a sharper, more precise expression. For the Norwegians, that re-study led them to the point where they had to reject at least that page in Pontoppidan's Catechism in which they had relied on their orthodoxy. In that sense, they did not have a "Father theology."⁴⁶

A further demonstration that the Norwegian men were not slavishly tied to the expressions of the orthodox Lutheran fathers is found in a short treatise written by Koren concerning the concept of "mechanical inspiration." In this article, one finds that Koren is not only mindful of what the fathers have written, but also critical when he compares it to the clear revelation of Scripture.

Nothing has been revealed to us concerning the manner on which the fact of inspiration is realized. The various errors in this matter stem from the desire of many otherwise pious teachers who have had to explain how the Holy Spirit carried out this work. But we cannot understand that – anymore than we can understand the two natures in the Savior's one person – or even the union of the soul and body in our own person....

The mechanical explanation has, so far as I know, never been used to any extent by teachers of the Lutheran Church, although there are in some of them *expressions* which **we cannot approve** (e.g. Quenstedt in his *Dogmatics*).⁴⁷ (emphasis mine)

The Norwegian Synod lived its motto "*gegraptai*." They respected the fathers, but also were critical of them. They zealously cherished the Lutheran symbols, not as a substitute for Scripture, but as weapons forged from Scripture that unmasked the enemies without and within the Lutheran Church. However it was always to the Scriptures they went whenever a doctrinal battle was raging. And yet in 1917, a mere seven years after the death of Koren, the vast majority of the Synod entered into the un-scriptural Madison Settlement. What happened?

⁴⁶ Teigen, 109.

⁴⁷ U.V. Koren, "Mechanical Inspiration," tr. G. O. Lillegard. <http://www.blts.edu/essays/korenUV/Mechanical%20Inspiration.pdf>. (Accessed on July 21, 2008).

The Norwegian Hermeneutic in the re-organized Norwegian Synod (1917–1955)

The story of the Madison Settlement and the demise of the old Norwegian Synod has been told ably by the ELS historians Theodore Aaberg (*A City Set on a Hill*) and S.C. Ylvisaker (*Grace for Grace*) and need not be recounted fully.⁴⁸ What is of interest is how the Norwegian Hermeneutic was recovered and re-affirmed in the reorganized Norwegian Synod (ELS). One of the original ELS pastors, Christian Anderson, wrote a telling critique as to what he saw as the factors that led to the demise of the Norwegian Synod.

...it is true that in the controversy of the eighties Dr. Koren exposed clearly the errors of the anti-Missourian.... But after the complete break in 1887, the majority of our people had tired of the controversy... and neglected to continue to study the issues involved. Thus they became more and more ignorant of the issues, while the opposition by continuing their propaganda against our Synod kept the issues for which they had contended fresh in mind.

I feel that there was something lacking in the instruction of the issues of the controversies at our seminary. This was the case at least when I was a student there. There was too much taken for granted as to our knowledge of these things when they were occasionally mentioned....

This ignorance together with the fact that our Synod, contrary to Titus 3:10 and other passages, continued to negotiate with the opponents long after they had plainly shown that they would not listen to our testimony to the truth, was no doubt the main cause of the deterioration and breakdown of the old Synod.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ There is a large amount of evidence that makes it clear the Norwegian Synod would not have gone along with the merger had it not been for the ecclesiastical chicaneries of men like H.G. Stub and Rasmus Malmin. The omission of key statements by orthodox Norwegian leaders to the assembly of the Norwegian Synod, the lack of antitheses in the formulation of the Madison Settlement, cooperation in externals and a rising tide of Norwegian nationalism at the turn of the 20th century all led to give the impression to the rank and file pastor and parishioner of the Norwegian Synod that the key issues that had separated the Norwegians, the teaching regarding election and conversion, had indeed been resolved. However, it was nothing but smoke and mirrors, and in the end, the theology of glory won out over the theology of the cross.

⁴⁹ Christian Anderson, "The Underlying Causes of the Deterioration and Breakdown of the Old Norwegian Synod," *Clergy Bulletin* 13, no. 1 (September of

August Pieper's assessment of the Madison Settlement, given forty years earlier in the introduction to volume 10 of the *Quartalschrift*, is remarkably similar to Anderson's. Pieper asserts that the Madison Settlement is but the fruit of a synod that no longer stood directly on the rock of Scripture, but instead upon the malleable opinions of the fathers.

It did not help when we emphatically declared to the Norwegian delegates that the *intuitu fidei* in the doctrine of election is not only a ἄγραφον, but a ἀντίγραφον and that points 1–3 of the “Opgjør” are a denial of Scripture. Their only argument was and remained: Gerhard, Skriver and above all the Norwegian theologian Pontoppidan, have *intuitu fidei*; you yourselves formerly had it; Walther and you yourselves have not accused someone of heresy who used it the way Gerhard did; we Norwegians have not regarded it as heretical, even though we ourselves use the first doctrinal form and will continue to use it....

With great sorrow have we observed the proceedings in the Norwegian Synod. We have warned in private, debated in part, and requested faculty conferences; we have, when the faculty conferences were rejected, sounded our warning publicly. It was to no avail. Why not? The dear Norwegians are sitting, like ourselves, theoretically on Scripture, but practically, as we no longer do, squarely on the fathers.⁵⁰

In short, the very things that made the Norwegian Hermeneutic the vital force in the confessional Lutheran struggles of the 19th century—a pious devotional study of Scripture and a zealous defense of the truth in the face of error—were set aside. When one examines the Madison Settlement one is amazed that the successors of Koren, Preus, and Ottesen could be so far from the spirit of their predecessors, men who had zealously defended even minor points of doctrine with Spirit-given tenacity. Even Koren, in his final years, was troubled by this trend among the newer generation of pastors, teachers and young people. In a 1904 address speech at Luther College, Koren warns the young people assembled,

1953): 4–5.

⁵⁰ August Pieper, “Forward to Volume 10 of the *Quartalschrift*” in *The Wauwatosa Theology: Volume I*, ed. Curtis Jahn (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997), 113–114.

All too often the Christian faith is conceived as being a theory, a doctrinal system which, if one accepts it as being correct, then he is a Christian, a believer. The true Christian faith is not just something that one memorizes. It is not a theory. It is the most practical thing in the world. It is in itself a practice and where it is present there it moves a person in a definite direction – namely, to God. It rules a person and, as the Word of God says, it is active in love....

Now it is unfortunately true that counterfeit faith is very commonly an external acceptance without the heart.... Such faith accomplishes nothing.... It is the Word that we must cling to....

At this point I am thinking of the great neglect among our Norwegian people, namely, their infrequent use of the Word of God.... God's Word alone can teach us the difference between the true and the false confession of faith.⁵¹

Similarly he warns the synod in his last presidential address in 1909:

But when the essence of faith is changed and weakened, so that there remains merely an indifferent assent to the Word, without personal appropriation of what God has said and promised, then the kernel of faith is gone and only the shell remains. This kind of faith, dead faith, is never troubled by temptations and trials. Those who have it will not experience any spiritual conflicts and affliction because of their faith. But conflict always accompanies faith when it is genuine and real.⁵²

The fall of the Norwegian Synod to liberalism and unionism was the result of a great deal of indifference to the Word of God. Even after it became clear to many that the Madison Settlement had in effect denied true scriptural doctrine and the new course that had been set by its proponents was away from true Lutheran doctrine and practice, few left. S.C. Ylvisaker laments,

Even many who were in sympathy with the stand they had taken toward the Union (the protesting pastors who left to form the ELS) deplored the fact that they wanted to undertake the hopeless task of trying, with so few and humble workers

⁵¹ U.V. Koren, "Speech at Luther College May 1 1904," tr. C.M. Gullerud, *Journal of Theology* 31, no.1 (March 1991): 2.

⁵² Koren, *On Using God's Word*, 2.

and such small resources, to build again on the ruins of the old synod.⁵³

But spiritual steel is forged in the fire of trial. In the lobby of a St. Paul Hotel, a faithful remnant was struggling with their conscience as well as the clear Word of God. And in this small meeting, the smoldering coals of the Norwegian Hermeneutic were fanned back into flame. One year later at the first convention of the reorganized synod in Lake Mills, Iowa, Bjug Harstad called all those gathered to return alone to the Scriptures for guidance.

This must call forth strange thoughts and questions. Why do we meet alone? Why not together with so many near and dear ones who wish to believe and be saved, as well as we do? Why stand aloof against a current and rush for that great union which all the world is praising? These and similar questions we must earnestly consider, until we, by the power and light of God's Word, arrive at such a firm conviction, that we can, from the Scriptures, answer them properly every time the old Adam puts them in our mind....

The faith which the founders of our old organization these many years fearlessly professed, in speech and writing, and manifested in their church order, is given us by God. It was all prepared according to the Apostolic teaching of the Guide, the Holy Ghost, and all through bears the stamp of evangelical liberty, the truth and grace of God. We have a Christian right to retain it and cannot yield to false brethren, in order that the Gospel may continue with us. (Galatians 2:5) Most of the sages, by whose hand God gave it to us, have finished their course with honor, leaving their shields untarnished, We may be proud of them....

Let us abide strictly in the Word until our dying day.⁵⁴

Similarly, President George Gullixson, in a 1923 address to the ELS, concurs that the attention to Scripture and what it says is the sole authority.

In this holding fast to the biblical truth lies our hope of success in our work as congregations and as a church body.

⁵³ Ylvisaker, *Grace for Grace*, 117.

⁵⁴ Bjug Harstad, "Opening Sermon on Genesis 12:1-4," *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 43, nos. 2 & 3 (June/September 2003): 190, 192, 199.

Let us remember that just this position, on God's Word alone, gave Luther success as the one great reformer of the church. The "little speck" he stood on was the Word of God. For that reason he was also unassailable, invincible from all the powers which sought to overthrow him. May God give us wisdom and courage not to let ourselves be tempted by the many accusations of "Pharisaism" and "self-importance" which are rampant. People are asking how these few people can be right and the vast majority wrong.⁵⁵

The faithful pastors of the Norwegian Synod turned to Scripture for guidance. They knew all too well to avoid the path of glory that glossed over doctrinal aberrations for the sake of earthly peace. Bjug Harstad comments,

Let us humble ourselves under the chastisement of God which allowed our old house to be swept off, and us to remain standing on a bare hill. We know that we had deserved the chastisement because we did not treasure the Lord's Word....

We must rid ourselves of these marks [referring to the false Christianity of the state church and the merger church]. Since the opposing parties merged, the Synod is tempted to be in competition with them in size and strength. I wonder whether the Lord has now been able to cure us of this illness. In any case, we ought all, pastors and congregations, know that we are called not to be great and powerful before the world but only to everyone knowing for himself the power of grace to save souls. Then we must work against mass- and false-Christianity in our congregations.⁵⁶

The newly-reorganized Synod heeded this call. The Norwegian hermeneutical approach to Scripture that was practiced by Johnson, Caspari, Koren, Preus, and Ottesen was revived and instilled in the very marrow of the reorganized Norwegian Synod's pastors and also

⁵⁵ George Gullixson, Presidential address given to the 5th regular convention of the Norwegian Synod of the American Evangelical Lutheran Church, June 15–21, Princeton, MN. <http://www.evangelicallutheransynod.org/publications/essays/presaddresses/1923>. (Accessed July 19, 2008).

⁵⁶ Bjug Harstad, Presidential address given to the 3rd regular convention of the Norwegian Synod of the American Evangelical Lutheran Church, August 4–10, 1921, Albert Lea, MN. <http://www.evangelicallutheransynod.org/publications/essays/presaddresses/1921>. (Accessed July 19, 2008).

her parishioners. Stephen Nygaard, a parishioner from Hartland, Minnesota, made a telling remark to a neighbor who had referred to the reorganized Norwegian Synod as a plucked chicken: “Yes, that is true, but if she is healthy, she will soon grow her feathers again!”⁵⁷

Proper scriptural interpretation and application dominated the convention essays of the early years of the ELS. This was due to two major factors. The ELS recognized that poor, unscriptural hermeneutics that misused reason and tradition were the culprits behind the selling of the Madison Settlement. Secondly, during a time when there was no seminary, college, or synodical machinery of which to speak, the convention essays were the chief means of uniting the pastors and parishioners of the newly re-organized Synod together in a common confession based solely upon God’s Word. They are solid evidence of the conscious desire among the ELS pastors, teachers, and parishioners to expound and apply the Holy Scriptures properly. The following list of conference essays shows just how much proper scriptural hermeneutics were upon the minds of the ELS pastors, teachers, and laymen during their first decades of existence:

- 1919 – The Scriptural Principle – M.K. Bleken
- 1922 – The Bible and Evolution – J.E. Thoen
- 1924 – The Power of the Word of God – Christian Andersen
- 1933 – The Literal and Figurative Language in Scripture –
E. Ylvisaker
- 1936 – Our Heritage and Our Responsibility – J.A. Moldstad
- 1938 – The Clearness of Scripture – S.C. Ylvisaker
- 1940 – The Question of Non-fundamentals in the Light of
Scripture – S.C. Ylvisaker
- 1942 – The Scripture Cannot Be Broken – Torald Teigen; The
Importance of the Doctrine of Verbal Inspiration of the
Bible – C.M Gullerud
- 1943 – Sola Scriptura – J.A. Petersen
- 1952 – Ask for the Old Paths – Christian Anderson.

The first principle of biblical interpretation, that the Word of God alone is the sole source and norm of theology, and because of that it is also the only sure and perfect rule for faith and life, is clearly elucidated. Torald Teigen makes this point abundantly clear in his 1942 conference essay *The Scripture Cannot Be Broken*:

⁵⁷ Aaberg, *City Set on a Hill*, 129.

The inspiration of Scripture is what makes the Scriptures the Word of God. And since Scripture is God's Word from beginning to end, it is of the highest authority to which we can appeal. Because it is in every word the Word of God, it is a Word that cannot make a mistake... to concede that it is not the inspired Word of God in every word is to make the concession that it might contain error. To make such a concession is to rob God of the honor that is due him, making him a liar.⁵⁸

Similarly, John Moldstad in his essay *The Sacredness of the Ancient Landmarks*, remarks,

...the Bible is eternal, unchangeable, without any error, sure, perfect and complete. We need no additional revelation, there never has been any other and there never will be. It is the only sure perfect rule and infallible rule of faith and life, perfect, clear and plain in all that is necessary to know in order to be saved.

Scripture explains itself, has absolute authority in whatsoever it teaches and records, not only in doctrine, but also in all other things such as history, nature, science, etc. The Holy Ghost is always present in Scripture and works through it. He makes no mistakes.... The gospel is the pearl of great price, the source of grace and blessing and comfort in death as well as life.⁵⁹

The Lutheran principle *Sola Scriptura* is upheld again and again in these essays. But it is also noted that this principle is no dead letter, no empty word. For not only do these early convention essays uphold the principle of *Sola Scriptura*, but also the proper application of it by pastor, teacher, and layman alike. The essayists recognize that for a pastor or a parishioner to truly guard *Sola Scriptura*, they must not treat it like an historical antiquity of the Reformation, but to apply it actively both publicly and privately in the life of the church. M.K. Bleken comments,

But now someone could be perhaps inclined to think: "Yes, that is quite correct, God's Word ought to be explained correctly;

⁵⁸ Torald Teigen, "The Scriptures Cannot Be Broken" (paper presented at the 25th regular convention of the Norwegian Synod of the American Evangelical Lutheran Church, June 11–17, 1942, Northwood, IA), 23.

⁵⁹ John Moldstad, "The Sacredness of the Ancient Landmarks" (paper presented at the 27th regular convention of the Norwegian Synod of the American Evangelical Lutheran Church, June 9–14, 1944, Western Koshkonong, WI), 19.

but what does that have to do with us. We are not preachers and expositors of Scripture. That has to do with those who administer the office of the Word in the congregation, not us listeners.” Certainly it has to do with those who expound God’s Word publicly in a congregation, those who instruct the Word.... But it is a great and fatal mistake to think that it **only** has to do with them. No, it likewise has much to do with those who are instructed in the Word, all who want to be Christians.⁶⁰ (emphasis mine)

Bleken goes on to say that there are three forces that are always trying to corrupt the proper application of *Sola Scriptura* in the life of the church: rationalism, mysticism, and tradition, all of which erode the authority of the clear, simple words of the divinely inspired Scripture.⁶¹ These three dangers are expounded upon further by later essayists. In his 1943 convention essay *Sola Scriptura*, Justin Petersen expounds on the danger of the misapplying reason in biblical hermeneutics:

Reason has its place and use in the study of God’s Word. We need our reason to understand the meaning of the words used in Scripture. We must observe the fixed laws of language. And we must be able to think logically.... Reason makes a good *servant* of theology, but a very poor *master*.

When human reason would sit in judgment upon God’s Word, it is setting itself up as God, placing itself above God. Luther uses harsh language, but not too harsh, in describing this brazen effrontery of human reason. He calls reason “Satan’s *paramour*,” and the “enemy of faith.”⁶²

Similarly, S.C. Ylvisaker also warns against misapplying reason in biblical hermeneutics in his 1938 convention essay, “The Clearness of Scripture,” when he comments,

Reason is not there to make Scripture clear, as if it were unclear. Reason is not there to play master, as if the Word of God can be made a servant to the whims and fancies of reason. Reason

⁶⁰ M.K. Bleken, “The Scriptural Principle,” tr. Rev. Mark DeGarmeaux (paper presented to the 2nd regular convention of the Norwegian Synod of the American Evangelical Lutheran Church, Albert Lea, MN, May 29–June 4, 1919), 5.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶² Justin Petersen, “Sola Scriptura” *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 43, nos. 2&3 (June/September 2003): 235.

is not there to test Scripture in order to determine whether it speaks logically and reasonably or not; or to strain the words of Scripture as a prospector strains gold bearing sand in order to discover what nugget of truth may be there. It is not there to make Scripture say what it does not say, or to make it deny what it does say. It is not there to grasp what the Scriptures say, as if Scripture is a thing which must speak only that which may be fathomed by the mind of man and cannot go beyond the limits of that mind.

Reason has its place, but it is a very limited place after all. It is there to serve as the eye to read the words, thus: "In due time Christ died for the ungodly".... It is there to serve as the ear to hear, thus: "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."... It is there as the memory to call to mind and remind, as in the case of the prodigal son.... It is there to study the laws of language, so that we may clearly distinguish between expressions... or to study the laws of other languages, so that we may translate from one language correctly into another.⁶³

But there also is a warning against using tradition as the master interpreter rather than letting the Scriptures interpret themselves. The early ELS fathers had just as great a warning against *Vatertheologie* as did their German brethren in Wauwatosa. Bleken makes the following strong statement against appealing to the tradition rather than the Scriptures themselves:

It is naturally much easier to take it easy with this person or that person having said such and such, and being someone who worships authority; but if one is to have a firmly grounded conviction, then it must be built upon God's Word. And one cannot come to such a conviction without himself having searched the Scripture and knowing what it says. Only then can one say: "I believe this because it is written thus."...

...it is a convenient excuse for those who are so spiritually sluggish and foolish that they do not bother to investigate whether these things are so, but simply go along where it is

⁶³ S. C. Ylvisaker, "The Clearness of the Scriptures" (paper presented to the 21st regular convention of the Norwegian Synod of the American Evangelical Lutheran Church, Mankato, MN, June 10-15, 1938), 21.

easiest and most comfortable and let others think and believe for them, such as is the case in the Catholic Church.⁶⁴

Even the valued Lutheran Confessions, as valuable as they were, were never to be considered a source of doctrine alongside of Scripture.⁶⁵ The Norwegians revered the Lutheran Confessions as a true touchstone of orthodoxy. They honored greatly the writings of the Lutheran Church fathers. Yet, both these revered writings and the Lutheran symbols were strictly kept in their proper place. President Henry Ingebritson of the ELS writes in his 1940 presidential address,

...let us ever be mindful of the fact that our Lutheran Confessions are at best only a second line of defense. More than ever, we need to hearken to the exhortations of the Holy Spirit through the INSPIRED WORD OF GOD. Devotional literature and confessions of the church must not and cannot replace the inspired Word.⁶⁶

Finally, no “new” revelations can be used to obscure Scripture. First, Petersen states, we are neither promised them nor are we to expect them. Rather we are time and time again directed “to the Word of the apostles and the prophets.”⁶⁷

Perhaps the best summation of the Norwegian Hermeneutic is found in the final sermon preached by Norman Madson, long-time ELS pastor and the first Dean of Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary, which had the fitting title *Sola Scriptura*. The sermon’s parts were: I. The Bible is absolutely reliable; II. The Bible is clear; III. The Bible gives us the only saving message we have.⁶⁸ Madson’s sermon was based upon 2 Peter 1:19–21, and in discussing the text Madson makes this comment,

Now we know how tempting it is for human nature to wax eloquently upon some subject where the person in question has enjoyed a special privilege. You are familiar with preachers who

⁶⁴ Bleken, *The Scriptural Principle*, 3–4.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶⁶ H. Ingebritson, Presidential address given to the 23rd regular convention of the Norwegian Synod of the American Evangelical Lutheran Church, Minneapolis, MN, June 13–19, 1940.

⁶⁷ Petersen, *Sola Scriptura*, 238.

⁶⁸ Norman Madson, “*Sola Scriptura: The Final Sermon Preached by Norman Madson, Morning Bells at Our Savior’s*,” ed. Paul Madson (Mankato: Lutheran Synod Book Company, 2008), 402.

go abroad every so often, in order that they may have something to preach about—*their experiences*. Now Peter was human. We might expect therefore that when he mentions this unusual experience on the mount, he would go into greater detail about what happened there. But lo and behold, he has no more than mentioned it, when he immediately forgets himself in remembrance of something far more important, the everlasting Word.... It was as though he would say, “Forget Peter for the time being, and get back to your Bibles.”

To Peter the Holy Scriptures had become an inexhaustible storehouse of everlasting truth, from whence he could draw all which was necessary during his earthly sojourn. There he found the *Law* in all its crushing conviction, showing him how desperately he was in need of a Redeemer if he were not to perish in the midst of many heinous sins. But there he would also find the *Gospel*, a comfort for every sorrow and a balm for every wound, life itself in the very midst of death.⁶⁹ LSQ

⁶⁹ Ibid., 402–403.

Sermon on Ephesians 2:13–22 for the Dedication of the Peruvian Seminary

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Text: *But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father. Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. (Ephesians 2:13–22)*

MY BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN the faith, today we have gathered in celebration. A new building has been built, a new seminary, new offices. And as we dedicate this new building, we are reminded of Jesus' words in Matthew as He tells of a wise man who built his house on the rock and the foolish man who built his house on the sand. When the storms came, the house on the rock stood firm, but the house built on the sand was destroyed. A strong foundation has been laid for this new building. It has been built on rock.

I'm not speaking of concrete and bricks and what is under the ground, but of the same foundation on which this seminary and this church body has always stood. To remind us of that foundation, we hear the words the Apostle Paul wrote, by inspiration, to the Ephesian congregation in our text. In those words, we are reminded of **The Strong Foundation** of the Christian Church and of the One Who builds the Church.

I. The Strong Foundation. In my church in the United States, I have a prized possession. I received it here in Peru over 10 years ago. It's a small banner I was given when I visited the town of Chiquian in 1997 for a meeting of four congregations in the mountains. Four towns are listed on it: Chiquian, Pacllon, Llamac and Pocpa. The churches in each of those towns had sent members to the meeting. But the best part of that banner is the picture on it. There is a picture of a small church building. And the building is resting squarely on a Bible as its foundation. It so clearly illustrates what this text says, I have used it many times to teach children.

The foundation of the apostles and prophets, the Holy Scriptures—the words of God Himself, written down by the men He chose—that is the foundation of the Christian Church. It's the foundation of your church and of mine. And it is the strong foundation of God's Word, the Bible, on which this seminary is built.

Sometimes we may not like to open that Bible, that Word of God. Because in it we see all of the problems of our world and their cause. We look back to the beginning of time and see the paradise that God created and we wonder how Adam and Eve could have been so foolish as they disobeyed God. And because of that act of disobedience, we all suffer. We look back at those words in Genesis and we want to travel back in time and yell at Eve, "Don't listen to the serpent! Don't listen to Satan! He's lying to you!" But we can't do that. And so we see the sickness in our world, the diseases, the poverty, the broken marriages, the ruined lives and we see the wall of hostility Paul writes of.

Because of sin, a great wall stood between us and God. That wall was supported by the commands of God, the Law of God. It was a "wall of hostility," we're told. Maybe when you hear those words, you picture an angry God, hiding behind a wall waiting to strike you down if you tried to climb over it. But the opposite is true. On one side of that wall, God waits for us. He wants us with Him in His house. He loves us and wants to give us only good things. But on our side of the wall, our sinful minds fight Him. We don't like the Law, because it shows us how far

we are from God. On our own, without faith, we build up that wall of hostility. We're told in Romans, *the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so* (Romans 8:7).

What a horrible picture that "wall of hostility" is! Thank God that it has been torn down. It was torn down on a Friday afternoon outside the city of Jerusalem. It was torn down when Jesus, our Savior, hanging on the cross dying, spoke the words, "It is finished." Through His death, *he put to death their hostility*.

It is finished. Think of what that means! Picture that wall again: a loving Father on one side, waiting for His sons and daughters, but separated from them. And on the other, the whole world, suffering and dying in sin. And suddenly the wall is gone! And it isn't just a small hole in the wall we have to climb through. The wall itself is gone. The wall of hostility that separated sinful man from the loving God was destroyed by Jesus. And now we have unlimited access to our heavenly Father. *For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit*.

As Christians, as believers in Christ alone as our Savior from sin and eternal death, we are no longer separated from God. Instead of *strangers and aliens*, God considers us members of His household, *fellow citizens* with all of His people—all who believe in Him.

II. The Builder. What other foundation could you want for yourself, for your life, for your church, for your seminary, than the awesome, powerful, Word of God? What stronger foundation could any of us have than God's own Word?

And in that foundation we see the cornerstone, the Savior. All of the Scriptures point us to Him. And so it's no wonder that Jesus is described here as the cornerstone, the most important stone in a building. It's the cornerstone that builders used to make sure all the walls were straight. It was the cornerstone that had to be perfect if the building was to stand.

Here in the seminary building, we see beautiful walls, floors, windows and doors. We see the work of so many who labored to complete it. And thank God it is built on the correct foundation with a perfect cornerstone! This seminary is built on God's pure Word, supported and guided by the cornerstone, who is Christ.

It exists here to do one thing, especially: to train pastors. There are many other things which may take place in this building also, but the training of new pastors is the most important. Because here, within these walls, the story of man's sin and God's perfect love and grace will be taught over and over again. Within these walls, men will learn what

it means to proclaim the Word of God, to be servants of Him, to share the Good News of what Jesus has done for us.

Because it is through that Word of God that the Church grows. It's through the Holy Word of God, proclaimed by the pastors trained here, which will change hearts and minds and lead others to become members of God's household of believers.

Let this building always stand on that strong foundation! Let the pure Word of God be taught here for all generations to come. And let it be a beacon to those still keeping themselves behind the "wall of hostility," giving hope and comfort to all who need to hear the saving message of the Gospel: that Jesus Christ lived the perfect life demanded of us, in our place; that He suffered the agony of Hell in our place; that He offered His own life as the sacrifice for our sins, so that we, forgiven by God and justified by His grace, can now be called "fellow citizens" and "members of God's household." ^(LSQ)

Sermon on Psalm 115

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Prayer: Lord God, heavenly Father; we thank You that of Your great mercy You have called us by Your holy Word to the blessed marriage feast of Your Son, and through Him forgive us all our sins. But, being daily assaulted by temptation, offense, and danger, and being weak in ourselves and given to sin, we beseech You graciously to protect us by Your Holy Spirit, that we may not fall into sin; and if we fall and defile our wedding garment, with which Your Son has clothed us, graciously help us again and lead us to repentance that we fall not forever, and preserve in us a constant faith in Your grace; we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Text: *Not unto us, O LORD, not unto us, But to Your name give glory, Because of Your mercy, Because of Your truth. Why should the Gentiles say, "So where is their God?" But our God is in heaven; He does whatever He pleases. Their idols are silver and gold, The work of men's hands. They have mouths, but they do not speak; Eyes they have, but they do not see; They have ears, but they do not hear; Noses they have, but they do not smell; They have hands, but they do not handle; Feet they have, but they do not walk; Nor do they mutter through their throat. Those who make them are like them; So is everyone who trusts in them. O Israel, trust in the LORD; He is their help and their shield. O house of Aaron, trust in the LORD; He is their help and their shield. You who fear the LORD, trust in the LORD; He is their help and their shield. The LORD has been mindful of us; He will bless us; He will bless the house of Israel; He will bless the house of Aaron. He will bless those who fear the LORD, Both small*

and great. May the LORD give you increase more and more, You and your children. May you be blessed by the LORD, Who made heaven and earth. The heaven, even the heavens, are the LORD's; But the earth He has given to the children of men. The dead do not praise the LORD, Nor any who go down into silence. But we will bless the LORD From this time forth and forever more. Praise the LORD! (Psalm 115)

IN EXODUS 32 IS RECORDED the first time the people of Israel became impatient with Moses. Moses was on Mt. Sinai with God, and he was taking a long time. Forty days, to be exact. And the people of Israel knew what Moses was doing; they knew Moses was on the mountain and that God was there giving Moses His Law. But 40 days is a long time. And so Exodus 32 begins by telling us,

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, "Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him."

So Aaron said to them, "Take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. And they said, "[This is your god], O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"

Their solution seems rather odd to us, but it helps if you remember their impatience is more with Moses than God. The people of Israel wanted to worship God. They had come to Sinai for that purpose, but 40 days is a long time to wait for someone. Especially considering where they were. This was the mountain where they had seen fire and heard thunder, for all they knew Moses had been taken by God. Or, any number of accidents can happen to a person alone on a mountain, so he could even be dead; and again, having seen the fire and heard the thunder and having been told by God not to approach the mountain, they weren't about to send a search party, for that would have been wrong, right? So they are faced with a dilemma. How long were they to wait? They wanted to get on with their journey to the land God had promised them and enjoying their freedom. This is what God wanted them to do, right? And so, getting restless, the people approach Aaron

with what they believe is a pious request: “*Up, make us a god who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him*” (Exodus 32:1). In other words, Moses will be replaced by Aaron, and they will continue on their journey with a representation of God leading the way. Notice Aaron is very careful to say about the Golden Calf: “*This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.*” Aaron is trying to be clear that he does not intend the golden calf to be an idol, a representation of a false god, but simply a representation of the God who had brought them out of Egypt. The whole story of the Golden Calf is an illustration of the maxim, “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.” By their words and actions it is rather clear that everyone has the best of intentions. They will continue in their worship of the one true God. Just in a new and different way.

Turns out what they thought they were doing and they *were* doing were two different things. God is not happy with their new and innovative worship, and punishes the people of Israel for it, punishes it with the death of about 3000 people. “*The LORD sent a plague on the people, because they made the calf, the one that Aaron made*” is how Exodus 32 ends, a stern warning that God takes the sin of idolatry very, very, seriously.

Not that this was the last incident of this in Israel’s history, there would be many more. Israel is constantly battling the temptation toward idolatry, the temptation to give at least some allegiance to the gods of the peoples around them. Indeed, of all the commandments, it is the first commandment, “*You shall have no other gods; and you shall not make any carved images,*” which God repeats the most, and punished the most severely.

And this is understandable for many reasons. Israel’s worship practices were very different from those of the nations that surrounded them. Every other nation had physical representations of their gods, and it gave them a sort of reality, even impressiveness to their gods that the God of Israel did not seem to have. The idol worship of the peoples around them allowed them to feel spiritual without really putting too many limits on their behavior. In fact, they often encouraged people, or at least men, to indulge in sinful behaviors. Imagine being an Israelite around 1000 BC, around the time of David, and hearing a Philistine boast, “You should see the temple of our god Dagon; it is an enormous structure, and in the middle of it there sits Dagon with his big, fishy head. And Dagon lets us do pretty much whatever we want.” Or to

have a Phoenician boast, "That's nothing. You should see the temple of our god Baal where I live in Tyre. It's even bigger, filled with gold and beautiful artwork, and in the middle of it is Baal himself, a powerful warrior. And Baal not only lets us do what we want, he commands us to do some things my wife would never let me do otherwise." And then hearing, "Well, Israelite, what about you? Tell us about your god's temple. Tell us about your worship." And having to reply, "Well, it's this big tent. But it's a nice tent. And in the middle of it is a big box. Or at least, so I'm told; I've never actually seen it. And there's this list of ten things we're not to do, and the worship can be kinda complicated sometimes." It is not the most inviting or impressive picture; it is likely the people of Israel heard those mocking words "*Where is their god?*" quite often, even after the construction of the temple in Jerusalem. Because as impressive as it was, there was still no image, just this secret room in the middle of the temple. In the eyes of the world, the worship of Israel often seemed more like a funny little cult than a religion. It is hard to be different, especially when it means being looked down upon, snickered at, thought of as a little backward. We would much rather be part of something impressive, admired, acceptable, or at the very least, normal. Is it any wonder that the people of Israel were so often drawn to the idol worship of the peoples around them. It made them seem normal, it brought acceptance and respectability in the world, and truth to tell, those gods often seemed more potent, more real.

We know this, because we too hear that mocking question, "*Where is their god?*" directed at us. Like the people of Israel, we live surrounded by peoples whose god, or gods, are very different from ours. And the gods of this age often seem more inviting, more real and more impressive as well. The god of wealth, which promises us that money will solve all our problems. The god of popularity, which promises us that being liked and accepted will bring us happiness. The god of knowledge, which promises to explain all life's mysteries to us. The god of lust, which tells me that if I just was with the right person, or if I indulge myself in what will make me happy, I will feel satisfied and complete. The god of self, which tells me that looking out for me and all my needs is the most important thing in this life. All these gods have a reality and apparent potency that the one true God does not seem to have. They address desires and concerns in our life that the one true God seems to often ignore. And so like the people of Israel, we find ourselves looking at these idols, these false gods, with more than a little longing. Wondering how we might pursue those gods a bit more, let them have a bit more control in

our life. We even begin to rely on these gods more and more. Not that we want to change gods; like the people of Israel we tell ourselves we haven't really become impatient with God, we just want to be on our way and have all those good things that we seem to deserve, and maybe this is a better way to do it. Like the people of Israel we begin to secretly wonder if there isn't some validity to the question "*Where is their god?*" and begin to justify, rationalize our greed, our covetousness, and slowly give our devotion to idols.

Which is also why, like the people of Israel, we find ourselves praying Psalm 115:

*Not unto us, O LORD, not unto us,
But to Your name give glory,
Because of Your mercy,
Because of Your truth.*

The problem with idol worship is that it is really always self-worship. It is about me; what will make me happy, what makes sense to me, what will bring glory to me. The criticism "*Where is their god?*" stings because what it really says is, "You're not being taken care of the way you deserve to be. Your importance, your glory, is not being recognized." And thus we look for a god that will give us the glory we think we deserve, only to find that in the end, those so-called gods are mute, blind, and deaf. They can at times give temporary satisfaction, but in the end they are powerless to help us with that which really troubles us in this life: guilt, sin, and death. Psalm 115 is a reminder to that while the true God at times seems to be mute, blind and deaf, the truth is **The LORD Has Been Mindful of Us.**

The real reason why God was so insistent that Israel not make any images of Him was because God had in mind to give them an image, in the person of the Messiah, in the person of His Son. Jesus comes to show the world that God has not been deaf to their cries, blind to their needs, or silent in speaking to them. Indeed, here is the One who is the answer to our guilt, who dies to destroy our death, who is the very Word of the Father who calls us to the wedding banquet and dresses us with the blood and righteousness of His Son, so that we might be covered with love and forgiveness. Here is the One who brings glory to God by carrying out His will, embodying His mercy and truth, but in doing so He also raises us up and shows us just how important we are to God.

Right after the incident with the golden calf God tells the people to leave Sinai, so that He can fulfill the promise He had made to them to

bring them to the Promised Land. They were still feeling guilty for their sin, but God reassures them with the promise He made, and tells them that His presence will go before them to ensure that they get there and take possession of the land.

We too, often find ourselves struggling with our guilt over our sins of idolatry, or shunning the words and invitation of God. And yet God tells us that in our repentance we leave our sin behind us, although not at the foot of Sinai but at the foot of Calvary, at the cross. He invites us to hear His promise of forgiveness in His Son, to feast on His Gospel, and to know Him as our merciful Lord who blesses His people, both small and great. Who has not only invited, but chosen us as His very own.

*The dead do not praise the LORD,
Nor any who go down into silence.
But we will bless the LORD
From this time forth and forevermore.
Praise the LORD! LSQ*

Book Review and Note

LSQ Vol. 51, No. 1 (March 2011)

Book Review: *The Lutheran Study Bible*

The Lutheran Study Bible. Edward A Engelbrecht, General Editor. Concordia Publishing House: Saint Louis. 2009. 2372 pages.

The Lutheran Study Bible (TLSB) is a wonderful new resource. Its various study aids can aptly be described as a mini-dogmatics book, an introduction to isagogics, and a summary of biblical history. It provides the reader with an almost overwhelming number of helps that provide insight into biblical vocabulary, people, events, and teachings.

TLSB uses the English Standard Version translation of the Bible. I believe this is a good choice for a translation today. While both the New King James Version and the New International Version remain the standard translations for lectionary use in many confessional Lutheran

churches, the ESV, produced in this 21st century, is a very fine addition to the small family of Bible translations that are both accurate and readable. Even if the NKJV or NIV are in use in a congregation for various catechetical settings, TLSB is a recommended addition to any home library and Lutheran classroom. Its wealth of information is unmatched in a one-volume study Bible.

TLSB includes the following resources (and this is not a complete listing):

- Four color maps
- Thirty-four black and white maps
- Over two hundred twenty articles and charts (including engravings)
- Some examples: Genesis and the Theory of Evolution (in Genesis)
- False Prophets Then and Now (Deuteronomy)
- Divine Warfare (Joshua, from the Concordia Commentary)

on Joshua authored by A. Harstad)
 Isaiah's Triptych of Christ (Isaiah)
 Luther's Prefaces to the Apocrypha
 Passion Week (Mark)
 Conflict Among Christians (Acts)
 Law and Gospel Parenting (Ephesians)
 The Sacrament and the Church (Revelation – selection from H. Sasse)
 Topical Index with special reference to Law and Gospel notes
 Both the three-year and one-year lectionaries (from the Lutheran Service Book)
 Two-year reading plan of the Bible
 Small Catechism (including Luther's Preface)
 Bible Chronology and World History Timeline – eighteen pages

In addition to the above, each of the larger sections of Scripture receives its own general introduction: Books of Moses, Books of Wisdom and Poetry, The Holy Gospel, and The Pauline Epistles. These summarize the various larger sections, with discussion regarding the type of literature (letter, poetry, etc.), and other pertinent topics.

Each of the individual books of the Bible is given its own introduction. These introductions include a guide to reading that particular book, a portion of Martin Luther's introduction to the book, some aspects of the book that may prove challenging to the reader, and highlights of the book

titled "Blessings for Readers." Each book is also given a brief outline.

A book of the Bible is set up on the pages so that the top half or so contains the actual biblical text, while the bottom half of each page has various notes. The notes have introductions to sections, words or phrases of each verse explained, chapter summaries (which include short, one sentence prayers, sometimes hymn verses), occasional use of symbols (Theology Icons pointing to the Trinity, Word and Sacrament, or Mission passages), and a Law and Gospel symbol.

One unique strength of this study Bible, which makes it stand out among study Bibles in general, is its copious use of Lutheran commentators, quotations from the Lutheran Confessions (see Acts 1:8, both a Luther quotation and FC SD XI 56), and of pre-Reformation Church Fathers recognized by the Lutheran church as orthodox expositors of God's Word (for example, Cyril of Jerusalem on Jeremiah 2:21, Cyprian on Ezekiel 18:32, John of Damascus on Acts 1:11). In this way the modern reader is connected to the fathers who have preceded us in confessing the faith, helping one to see even in our private devotions that we are following a great cloud of witnesses who have gone before.

Of interest also to our ELS readers is that two professors from our seminary contributed to the TLSB. Prof. Adolph Harstad served as the primary consultant for Ezra, wrote some of the articles for the Old Testament, and also contributed portions of the text notes for Joshua. Prof. Michael

K. Smith contributed portions of the text notes for Acts and Revelation.

While the vast majority of notes and helps are biblically and confessionally solid, a couple of examples show that one still must read with care. Part of the note for Romans 16:17 reads:

As in Galatians, believers are to reject any false teachings and refuse to associate with those who advocate them. Some have applied this to any and every different teaching, but *here it refers specifically to issues that strike at the heart of the Gospel.* (TLSB, 1943; emphasis added)

This note is at best ambiguous, and could be rightly considered misleading. Here is the biblical text itself:

I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. (ESV)

Παρακαλῶ δὲ ὑμᾶς,
ἀδελφοί, σκοπεῖν τοὺς
τὰς διχοστασίας καὶ τὰ
σκάνδαλα παρὰ τὴν διδασχὴν
ἣν ὑμεῖς ἐμάθετε ποιοῦντας,
καὶ ἐκκλίνετε ἀπ' αὐτῶν·

The question is what the term “the doctrine” (τὴν διδασχὴν) means in this context. This was a key passage in the discussions among the members of the Synodical Conference in the 1940s and later. Attempts were made at that time to limit “the doctrine” to a subset of the teaching of Scripture.

Such a limitation could be used to allow a broader church fellowship, without the need for agreement on all of doctrine (similar to the attempt to limit the *satis est* of AC VII). The ambiguity of this note is unfortunate. As Dr. Robert G. Hoerber noted decades ago: “In Romans 16,17 the only limitation in the context of the phrase τὴν διδασχὴν is the relative clause ‘which you learned’” (*A Grammatical Study of Romans 16:17* [Mankato: Lutheran Synod Book Company, 1947, 1963], 30).

The second example of the need for careful, critical reading is found in the notes of Exodus 7 which describe the first plague brought upon Egypt, the water turning into blood.

Thus says the LORD, “By this you shall know that I am the LORD: behold, with the staff that is in my hand I will strike the water that is in the Nile, and it shall turn into blood.... And the LORD said to Moses, “Say to Aaron, ‘Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt, over their rivers, their canals, and their ponds, and all their pools of water, so that they may become blood, and there shall be blood throughout all the land of Egypt, even in vessels of wood and in vessels of stone.’” Moses and Aaron did as the LORD commanded. In the sight of Pharaoh and in the sight of his servants he lifted up the staff and struck the water in the Nile, and all the water in

the Nile turned into blood.
(Exodus 7:17,19-20; ESV)

The notes for this section include these speculative comments on verse 17:

turn into blood The same sense as in Jl 2:31, where the moon is to be turned into blood; thus it was not a chemical change into real blood, but a change in appearance, possibly because of red algae. The Admonitions of an Egyptian Sage (late third millennium BC) refers to the Nile as being turned to blood. (TLSB, 107)

Verse 18:

A natural chemical phenomenon was immediately intensified and precipitated by the hand of God. (TLSB, 107)

Verse 19

The appearance of “blood” here would prove that this was no ordinary natural event. (TLSB, 107)

It is more than a little disappointing to have such a rationalistic explanation of a miraculous phenomenon included in such an otherwise very fine study Bible. There simply is no need for such an attempt to explain the term “blood” here in its use by Moses. The reference to Joel’s prophecy is not persuasive, not least because certainly there is a difference of genre between the apocalyptic, prophetic utterance of Joel and the descriptive, narrative writing of

Moses. The word “blood” is a simple word here, without need of human amplification. (My old copy of the *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, a classic example of historical critical commentary, includes this: “After the Nile reaches the height of its inundation by August, it is said that the water often becomes a dull red from the presence of minute organisms, and at certain times the water can be worse than at others. This would appear to be the setting, at least, of the first plague [water turned to blood; 7:14ff]” [volume 3, p. 822].)

In a book of such comprehensive scope and detail there may be occasional differences between the exegetical conclusions of the editors and other theologians. However, this reviewer was impressed by the overall care, the precision, and the pastoral tone of the commentary used throughout the volume. It is a welcome resource for edifying, devotional study of Holy Scripture.

— Thomas L. Rank

LSQ

CELC Convention Invitation

The seventh triennial convention of the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference will be held June 4–6, 2011, on the campuses of Martin Luther College, New Ulm, and Bethany Lutheran College and Seminary, Mankato, Minnesota.



Delegates and guests from church bodies around the world will meet to study, share, and celebrate the fellowship we enjoy as confessional Lutherans.

The theme “Unity of Spirit—Bond of Peace” focuses our attention on the primary topic: the church. Essayists from around the world will lead our study of this timely subject:

1. The Church: Invisible and Visible – Bishop Dr. V’yacheslav Horpynchuk of Ukraine
2. The Mission of the Church – President Rev. Davison Mutentami of Zambia
3. The Governance of the Church – Rector Rev. John Vogt of Ukraine
4. Church Fellowship – Rev. Andreas Drechsler of Germany
5. The Divinely-blessed Distinctiveness of the Lutheran Church – Rev. Esequiel Sanchez of Mexico

You are invited to attend the sessions at Martin Luther College in New Ulm on Saturday, June 4, and Monday, June 6. The program features essay presentations and business meetings beginning at 8:30 a.m. Lunch and dinner are available with your registration.

You are invited to attend the session at Bethany Lutheran College and Seminary in Mankato on Sunday, June 5. The program features worship at Trinity Chapel at 11:00 a.m. with lunch served at noon. An afternoon essay presentation begins at 1:30.

– Steven P. Petersen,
CELC president

CELC Registration

Name(s) _____

Check all events that you plan to attend.

Saturday, June 4 – Martin Luther College, New Ulm

- 8:30 am – opening service
- 10:00 am – morning sessions
- 12:00 pm – lunch (\$5.50 at the door)
- 1:15 pm – afternoon sessions
- 5:15 pm – supper (\$6.00 at the door)
- 6:30 pm – evening church presentations

Sunday, June 5 – Bethany Lutheran College and Seminary, Mankato

- 11:00 am – Worldwide Fellowship worship service at Trinity Chapel,
Bethany Lutheran College
- 12:00 pm – lunch at Bethany dining hall (\$7.00 at the door)
- 1:30 pm – afternoon sessions

Monday, June 6 – Martin Luther College, New Ulm

- 8:30 am – morning sessions
- 12:00 pm – lunch (\$5.50 at the door)
- 1:15 pm – afternoon sessions
- 5:30 pm – banquet (\$10.00 at the door)
- 7:00 pm – closing communion service

Submit registration by May 20 to:

CELC Registration
6 Browns Court
Mankato MN 56001
or elsynod@blc.edu

CELC website: www.celc.info



Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary
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