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### **Here We Stand:** Confessing the Faith in Luther's Footsteps from Worms to Smalcald

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The scene is so familiar we take it for granted: a black-robed monk standing before an emperor, appealing to Scripture and conscience against the ecclesiastical and imperial powers of his day, confessing his faith in a simple, straightforward way. In fact, relatively seldom in the history of the church has a monk or priest or pastor been summoned to testify before the highest secular governmental power. Christians, clergy and lay, have often been confronted by junior officers of the mighty, and have often laid down their lives in that situation because of their faith.

The constellation of the authority placed in pope and emperor in the late middle ages in Germany made this particular face-off possible. It featured a professor from a small university on the eastern frontier, so new it had hardly begun to make a reputation for itself, and the most powerful political ruler in Europe between Charlemagne and Napoleon. Their encounter came about because Emperor Charles took seriously his responsibility as the Christian ruler of the people God entrusted to his leadership and care and because Luther's conscientious execution of his doctoral oath, to teach the Holy Scriptures faithfully to God's church, had earned him a European-wide reputation and given him the potential to cause serious social unrest across Charles's German empire and beyond.

#### *Luther's Anthropology: Two Kinds of Righteousness*

North Americans find this particular juncture of what they label "church" and "state" –both because of the emperor's interest in religion and because of the theologian's appearance before the legislature – so peculiar in part because they artificially "separate" what cannot be separated in human experience, the religious aspects of



life that define its meaning and purpose and the social conventions and organization of daily life, including its political forms and activities. Luther had a much more holistic view of what it means to be human. Not only because the political system of his time demanded his presence in Worms but also because he believed that emperor and pope both were servants of God, albeit with their own respective spheres of life, Luther placed himself in the midst of legislature of his empire to give answer to the political authorities and to testify to the Word of the Lord. Luther believed that the human creature, as the product of God's creative grace and imagination, is designed to live in two dimensions, in relationship with God and in relationship with other creatures. The reformer labeled his anthropology "the distinction between two kinds of righteousness," and he called this distinction "our theology" in 1535.

Already in 1518/1519 the Wittenberg professor had begun to experiment with the language of two distinct but inseparable "kinds of righteousness," that is, a definition of what it means to be God's human creature that embraced two quite different ways of fulfilling God's design for our humanity. Throughout his career Luther was searching for and testing new ways of expressing the biblical message that would serve to carry his new conception of who God is as our Creator and Savior, and who we are as his creatures and children. Medieval theologians, for all the variety among their positions, agreed that human beings are truly and fully human beings in their obedience to God's law, in their carrying out God's commands. God's grace became therefore an aid or means of helping sinners to overcome their sinfulness and produce the works that would prove their righteousness in God's sight. Luther found this view inconsistent with the Scriptural definition of what it means to be human. He believed that God's grace is his favor, his merciful disposition, his unconditioned will to love his human creatures. Explanations of why God is so disposed toward us defy all human rationalization. As Creator and Savior, God is Lord and Father, not a senior partner or a big brother, as medieval theologians seemed to imply by their focus on the human contribution to re-establishing the relationship with God broken by sin. Therefore, in Wittenberg the distinction was made between what it means to be a righteous human being in relationship to God and what it means to be a righteous human being in relationship to other creatures.

Luther's definition of what it means to be human was shaped by the distinction between the identity which God as creator gives to his creatures and the performance or activities with which that identity expresses itself within the this-worldly relationships God has fashioned for human life. Luther compared the righteousness of our identity to the earth as it receives the blessing of rain.

As the earth itself does not produce rain and is unable to acquire it by its own strength, worship, and power but receives it only by a heavenly gift from above, so this heavenly righteousness is given to us by God without our work or merit. As much as the dry earth of itself is able to accomplish and obtain the right and blessed rain, that much can we human creatures



accomplish by our own strength and works to obtain that divine, heavenly, and eternal righteousness. Thus we can obtain it only through the free imputation and indescribable gift of God.<sup>1</sup>

That leads the Christian conscience to say,

I do not seek active righteousness. I ought to have and perform it; but I declare that even if I did have and perform it, I cannot trust in it or stand up before the judgment of God on the basis of it. Thus I put myself beyond all active righteousness, all righteousness of my own or of the divine law, and I embrace only the passive righteousness which is the righteousness of grace, mercy, and the forgiveness of sins.<sup>2</sup>

He did not use the analogy of parent and child, but this analogy is appropriate to clarify what he meant with this distinction. God is the parent, who brings human creatures into existence without consultation or commitment from these children. Christ told Nicodemus that entry into the Kingdom of God is new birth, birth from above, not from the power or contribution of the new child of God. No human performance or accomplishment can cause human beings to exist or to die as sinners and be reborn as children of God. At the same time, like human parents, God has expectations of his children. He has a plan for human life, and he demands, for their own welfare, that they live according to that plan. Thus, Luther believed in the righteousness of human works, but he limited the validity of that righteousness to their life among other creatures. Trying to offer the heavenly Father some merit of his own in order to qualify as the Father's child would have been an insult to the Creator. It would have placed trust in his own doing instead of in the One who gave him life and who restored that life through the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ.

Luther believed that this distinction of two kinds of righteousness creates clarity regarding our relationship with God. It makes it clear that God acts only on the basis of his favor and his steadfast mercy. It aids in our understanding and description of God's acting through law and gospel in the vertical dimension of our lives, in which we receive his grace apart from all conditions and in which we respond with a trust that defines our being and bestows our identity upon us. This distinction also creates clarity regarding our relationships with other creatures, particularly other human creatures. It makes it clear that God has designed human life in interdependence with other creatures and that we are called by God to love others within the context of his design for human life, according to his prescriptions. It aids in our understanding and description of the service to God

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<sup>1</sup> *D. Martin Luthers Werke* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883-1996) [henceforth WA] 40,I: 43,18-25; *Luther's Works* (Saint Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1958-1986) [henceforth LW] 26:6.

<sup>2</sup> WA 40,I: 42,26-43,15; LW 26:6.



and neighbor that makes human life fulfilling within the structures the Creator fashioned for our existence on this earth.

Therefore, the memory of Luther's testimony before the emperor in Worms reminds us of one important element in Luther's way of practicing theology and the Christian life, this view of what it means to be human. The reformer stood before Emperor Charles V in Worms as a human being. He was confident that he was God's child simply because God had told him so in his baptism and in all the other means of grace that express God's promise in Christ. He confessed his faith to Charles and the other representatives of the German governments assembled in the diet because the confession of the faith is chief among the good works that trust in the Lord and Savior produces (cf. Rom. 10:8-15).

### *Martin Luther, Confessor and Martyr*

One of Luther's students, Ludwig Rabus, pastor in Strasbourg, composed the first Protestant book of martyrs, publishing the first volume of his martyrology in 1552, two years before those of the more famous martyrologists, the English Puritan John Foxe and the French-Genevan Calvinist Jean Crespin. Rabus numbered Luther among his martyrs because the Strasbourg pastor defined a martyr as a witness to the faith, first of all. Luther had suffered for the gospel, even though not fatally, but his suffering qualified him less for the title, in Rabus's view, than did the power of his witness. The scene at the diet of Worms reminds us that the public confession of our faith is an integral element in a Lutheran understanding of what it means to be human and what it means to bear the name of Christ. Baptism calls his chosen children to faith and to faithfulness. It defines us as those who have died as sinners so that we might be raised to walk in Christ's footsteps in new life (Rom. 6:3-11), and we who have died to sin are prepared in our baptisms to die physically for the faith if it serves the Lord's good purposes.

Western European, North American, and Australian Lutherans tend to forget that the martyr's face belongs to the profile of our confession. In the sixteenth century in German and Scandinavian lands there was relatively little martyrdom required compared to England, the Netherlands, and France. But by the end of the sixteenth and in the seventeenth centuries Slovak, Polish, Hungarian, and other central European Lutherans stood under severe persecution for their faith by Habsburg, Vasa, and other regimes. In this last century Estonian, Latvian, and Russian Lutherans suffered torture, deportation, and execution under Soviet tyranny, as did other Lutherans across Europe at the hands of the National Socialist and Soviet occupation forces. The persecution goes on today among our African and Asian fellow confessors. Martyrdom is a part of the history of all Christians, and a significant element of our Lutheran past.

That is a reason why it is vital for the Lutheran confession of our Lord in the twenty-first century that North American Lutherans, for instance, listen to and learn from those of you whose memories of martyrdom are recent and direct. As our



society becomes more and more openly and aggressively hostile to important elements of God's plan for human living, and as our governments become ever more erratically selective in which elements of that plan to which they give lip service, we must learn from you how to bear witness in an antagonistic and sometimes intimidating environment.

### *Confessing the Word of the Lord*

Such witness, in our deeds but in its native form in our words, reflects Luther's definition of our humanity as created in the image of God. For Luther recognized that the Bible reveals God as the Creator who speaks, who has brought all reality into existence by speaking. In his Genesis commentary he observes regarding Genesis 1:20, "If the Word is spoken, all things are possible." He called the creatures of God "nothing but nouns in the divine language," and he defined God's Word as the instrument of God's power. That power expresses itself in promises to his people, the professor told his students: "We must take note of God's power that we may be completely without doubt about the things which God promises in his Word. Here full assurance is given concerning all his promises; nothing is either so difficult or so impossible that He could not bring it about by his Word."<sup>3</sup>

Reality rests on God's Word alone, but the new reality of the Christian life rests on the word spoken from the cross. That word is God's wisdom and his power, but it seems like a weak and foolish word, Luther recognized in formulating his theology of the cross. It is a word which reveals God as a God whose essence is mercy and steadfast lovingkindness. It is a word that creates trust in him and submits to no human attempt to tame it by experiment and sign or by reason and logic. Like Paul, we should not rely on wise and persuasive words of our own but rather count on the Holy Spirit to demonstrate his power as we confess our faith, so that the faith of others may not rest on our wisdom but on God's power (1 Cor. 2:4-5). That does not mean that Luther did not use the advances in communications theory formulated by his colleague Philip Melancthon in his research and writing on God's gift of human rhetoric. It does mean that both men acknowledged that when we have exercised all the dominion God has given us to aid the gospel, the Holy Spirit still uses the means of grace and these human gifts and skills when and where and how he wills through the means of grace (CA V,2).

Those means of grace, Luther recognized, come in oral, written, and sacramental forms. They direct the gospel of Jesus Christ, as God's power to deliver the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation to sinners, as God comes to speak new life into his people by sharing with them the benefits of Christ's death and resurrection. Luther's concept of the "living voice of the gospel" reminds us that this word that bestows life and salvation is a word that God addresses directly to his people. The distinction that Gerhard Forde makes between "proclamation" and

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<sup>3</sup> LW 1:49; WA 42:37,5-24.



"explanation" captures Luther's dynamic understanding of how the Holy Spirit works within and through human language.<sup>4</sup> "Proclamation" is direct, primary discourse which engages two persons in a conversation, with the language of "I" and "you." "Explanation" is third person, secondary discourse, in which you and I may stand back as observers, often with the illusion that we are in charge of what we are observing. Theologians indeed must engage in explanation as they assess and analyze the words of Scripture in order to formulate proper teaching and proclamation of God's Word. But the native form of God's address to us comes, according to Luther, when he uses our words to tell sinners directly, "Your sins are forgiven," "Christ died and rose for you and says, 'I claim you for my Father,'" "God is telling you, 'I love you in Christ and have made you my child.'" In this "for us," "for me," "for you" Luther heard God speaking from his heart and re-creating and renewing his chosen children.

### *The Smalcald Articles as Luther's Written Confession of Faith*

Luther did not confess his faith in detail in Worms. There he simply held to what he had explained and asserted in earlier writings. Fifteen years later he was called upon to confess his faith in writing. He had actually written his own "confession" of the entire creedal faith in 1528, at the end of his *Confession on Christ's Supper*, according to the outline of the Apostles Creed.<sup>5</sup> In 1536/1537 his prince, Elector Johann Friedrich of Saxony, called on his leading theological professor to compose another such personal confession. Luther complied as he fulfilled another request from Johann Friedrich, to set an agenda for the witness of the Evangelical governments of the empire at the papally-called council that finally took place in Trent.

Luther knew that those to whom God has given his truth have responsibilities to confess it ecumenically as well as evangelically. Melancthon had done that at Augsburg, and the elder colleague gave himself willingly to a task in spite of doubts about the probabilities of measurable success. At a meeting in the Hessian town of Smalcald in February 1537 the Lutheran governments decided not to use Luther's new confession. They preferred the Augsburg Confession, with the addendum of Melancthon's "Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope," as this agenda. Nonetheless, the theologians at this diet of the Protestant estates decided to subscribe Luther's Smalcald Articles as a personal confession of faith. During the 1540s and 1550s many Lutheran churches adopted this document as an official statement of their faith.

Luther structured this confession in three parts. He began by confessing his faith in the historic confession that God is Trinity and Jesus Christ is one person, with two inseparable but totally distinct natures, divine and human. The creeds require that much of those who wish to be saved, those who hold to the universal

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<sup>4</sup> Gerhard O. Forde, *Theology is for proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> WA 26:499-509, LW 37:360-372..



faith delivered to believers by God's Word. This served as the common foundation and fundamental definition of what it means to be Christian. Those who deny this confession cannot be regarded as believers in God.<sup>6</sup>

As he drafted this section, Luther wrote that the papal party "believes and confesses" this doctrine, as did his own followers, and then crossed out "believes," leaving "confesses" standing alone.<sup>7</sup> Luther seemed to be saying that in the arena of public confession the public statement determines the discussion, and evidence to the contrary must be combated through our confession of the truth, not by our accusation and attempts to persuade others that they are not teaching what they say but rather what we think they really mean. Our call to witness to fellow believers of other confessions places us under the same rules as our witness in evangelism and edification. We do not persuade by "wise and persuasive words" but with the simple confession of the trust that demonstrates the Holy Spirit's power (1 Cor. 2:4). The ecumenical responsibility God imposes upon his church calls for confession of the faith independent of our hopes for success.

Luther's second item on the agenda for the council treats what he holds to be "the first and chief article of faith." It speaks of Christ's "office and work," or our redemption. Luther needs only a few passages from Scripture to set forth the heart and core of his faith. He begins by asserting that Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, died for our sins and rose for our justification (Rom. 4:25). In his death he has buried our sinful identity; in his resurrection he has restored our humanity, brought us into the new life, and set us on the path of this new life following in Christ's footsteps (cf. Rom. 6:3-11). His next three passages recognize Christ as "the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29), the one "on whom God has laid all our sins" (Isa. 53:6), through whose blood, apart from all human merit, on the basis of God's grace the liberation of sinners from their sin has been accomplished (Rom. 3:23-25). In line with his elimination of the worthiness of any and every human act or performance or obedience to the law from our relationship with God, our passive righteousness in his sight, Luther insisted that only faith constitutes the righteousness of the human creature before God. For Paul had said, "We maintain that a human being is justified by faith apart from the works of the law through faith," for "he alone is righteous and the one who makes those who have faith in Jesus righteous" (Rom. 3:28, 26). If this much is not clear and clearly confessed, there will be confusion and doubt instead of consolation and assurance among the people of God. Luther laid down his definition of God's saving action in Jesus Christ and his definition of true human righteousness in relationship to God as the article of faith regarding which "one cannot compromise or concede even if heaven and earth or whatever is not to stand collapses, for there is no other name through which we can be saved, as Peter says (Acts 4:12). Through his wounds we

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<sup>6</sup> *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1930, 1991) [henceforth BSLK], 414-415, *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 300.

<sup>7</sup> BSLK, 415, *Book of Concord*, 300-301.



are healed (Isa. 53:5)." Luther believed that his entire Reformation, "everything we teach and live against the pope, the devil, and the world," rested upon this foundation. Everything is lost, he claimed, if we do not remain certain of this, if we doubt it.<sup>8</sup>

The Lutheran understanding of what makes us righteous in God's sight and how God makes us righteous in his sight remains our first and foremost contribution to ecumenical conversation, for it is the most important gift we have to give brothers and sisters in the faith. Martin Chemnitz regarded it as the chief difference between Lutherans and Roman Catholics. In his *Examination of the Council of Trent* he wrote:

It is regarding the good works of the regenerate, or the new obedience, that there is now the chief controversy between the papalists and us, namely, whether the regenerate are justified by that newness which the Holy Spirit works in them and by the good works which follow from that renewal, that is, whether the newness, the virtues, or good works of the regenerate are the things by which they can stand in the judgment of God that they may not be condemned, on account of which they have a gracious and propitiated God that they may not be condemned, on account of which they have a gracious and propitiated God, to which they should look, on which they should rely, in which they should trust when they are dealing with that difficult question, how we may be children of God and be accepted to eternal life.<sup>9</sup>

In offering the Lutheran counter-definition of what makes the regenerate righteous in God's sight, Chemnitz contended that Paul's „excluding phrases," the *particulae exclusivae* -- such as „without the works of the law" and „by grace alone" -- required defining the trust that God creates as the response to his love for the human creature as that which makes believers righteous in God's sight. Abraham was his example. Paul talked about him in Romans 4 both before and after his conversion from idolatry.

But when he had obeyed God in faith for a number of years from the very beginning of his call, from Genesis chapters eleven through fifteen, then he was certainly renewed in the spirit of his mind and adorned with many outstanding works and fruits of the Spirit, according to Hebrews 11:8-10. In the very middle of the course of the good works of Abraham, Moses in the Old Testament and Paul in the New Testament put the question: "What then was the justification of Abraham before God for the inheritance of life eternal?" It is to this already regenerate Abraham, adorned with spiritual newness and with many good works, that Paul applies these statements: "To

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<sup>8</sup> BSLK, 415-416, *Book of Concord*, 301.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Chemnitz, *Examen concilii Tridentini*, ed. Eduard Preus (1861; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1972), 153; *Examination of the Council of Trent, Part I*, trans. Fred Kramer (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1971), 481-482.



one who does not work but trusts Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness." To this Abraham he applies also this statement:

"David pronounces a blessing upon the man to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works." But that at that time the already regenerate Abraham was certainly not without good works but had performed many truly good works through faith, the Epistle to the Hebrews testifies in chapter eleven. And yet the Holy Spirit through Paul clearly removes and takes away from the operation and works of the renewed Abraham the praise and glory of justification before God to life eternal.<sup>10</sup> ...

The same could be said of Paul himself, according to Chemnitz.

The apostle Paul says of his works which he performed while he was a Pharisee, before his conversion, Philippians 3:4-7: "If any other man thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more; ... as to righteousness under the Law blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ." However, of the works which he did after his renewal, when he had labored more than the others, what, I say, does he say concerning them with respect to the article of justification? Let the reader examine the passage, and he will find that Paul not only uses the past tense of hgoumai [I counted] for the works that preceded his conversion but that he also by means of the particle alla menoun moves forward and uses the present tense hgoumai to show that also after his renewal he does not attribute to his works his justification before God to life eternal. On the contrary, when trust in righteousness before God to life eternal is patched on these works, he declares them to be refuse and loss. And he shows at the same time what was his righteousness before God to life eternal at the time when he wrote this epistle from prison, yes, what will be his righteousness, when he attains to the resurrection of the dead. . . .

That righteousness Chemnitz defined as „that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God which depends on faith.“<sup>11</sup> Chemnitz knew but one source and cause for the righteousness which human creatures bring before God: God’s favor, his unconditional and undeserved mercy, and in this definition he was only echoing what Luther had taught.

The challenge for our confessing the biblical message and for our contributing to the ecumenical conversation on the biblical teaching regarding salvation lies in faithfully repeating these insights from the confessors that set the Lutheran tradition in motion more than four hundred years ago. The places in which this confession need to take place are clear. The *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of*

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<sup>10</sup> *Examen*, 154; *Examination*, I: 483.

<sup>11</sup> *Examen*, 155; *Examination*, I: 486.



*Justification* does not even recognize that this definition of what constitutes human righteousness is an issue. The document places it neither among critical differences or points on which there is agreement. This particular Lutheran witness to our tradition falls silent at the point at which Luther and Chemnitz, among many others among our forebears, thought we had the most to offer to the conversation among Christians about the very heart of the biblical message. For even the theologies which emphasize prevenient grace do not accurately and adequately convey the biblical message of salvation when they fail to capture the fact that our righteousness in God's sight rests alone upon his mercy and does not consist in grace-wrought works. Even as his reborn children who practice new obedience, our identity as God's children in his sight does not consist of this new obedience which his grace produces in us. It consists alone in his favor and steadfast loving kindness and in the response of trust that love creates in us. To teach that our works constitute any part of our merit in God's sight, even if they are works produced by grace, denies the Scripture's teaching regarding God and what it means that he is Creator; to teach this denies the Scripture's definition of what it means to be human and how sinners are restored to that humanity.

Likewise, from our circles should come a clear reaffirmation of Luther's definition of salvation and righteousness, of who God is and of what it means that we are his human creatures, in response to the widespread suggestion that Luther's doctrine of justification can be best represented through the concept of "theosis," "divinization." Luther's strong doctrine of creation and his deep conviction that the Creator is totally other than his creatures, even though he comes near by taking on human flesh, led him to teach that the forgiveness of sins through Christ's death and resurrection restore our humanity rather than lift us above it. We do not become "like God," but rather we become the creatures God made us to be in the first place, in regard to our relationship with him. To look for signs of the divine in ourselves leads us into a false view of reality that diminishes the biblical divide between Creator and creature. God crossed that divide in the incarnation, but there is no reason in a biblical view of reality to posit a similar crossing of the divide that brings human beings into some form of divinity. We were created to be human, and we are restored to that humanity through Christ's death and resurrection, which buries our sin and raises us up as his new creatures. In recent comments on the *Joint Declaration* Dominican theologian Albert Schenk calls for a new period of "ecumenical honesty" in discussing the unresolved tensions that frame contemporary Christian thinking about God's saving act in Christ through the Holy Spirit's delivery of his benefits. This is a call which theologians in our circles must answer positively. We must leave behind tendencies inherited from another era that left us too often into our own corner and betrayed the model of Melancthon at Augsburg, where his contemporaries described his confession as comparable to that of Daniel in the lions' den.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Robert Kolb, *Confessing the Faith, Reformers Define te Church, 1530-1580* (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1991), 54-55.

Luther reinforced this view of salvation by discussing three areas of medieval teaching and practice that ran counter to and thus undermined this view of salvation through the bestowal of the righteousness of faith. He knew that our positive teaching is vulnerable to misinterpretation if we do not point out to our hearers that certain ideas in our cultural world of thinking are opposed to the biblical truth we confess. The rejection of false conceptions of reality must accompany our sharing of God's revelation regarding himself and the reality of our humanity. The first of the areas which Luther showed were undermining trust in Christ embraced a number of sacred or religious activities. Medieval popular Christianity had urged believers to practice these sacred activities in order to merit God's favor. They included the mass above all, and a series of beliefs and rituals that stemmed from the abuse of the Sacrament of the Altar, including purgatory, heeding spirits that appeared with special instructions, pilgrimages, pious organizations that prayed for the dead, relics, indulgences, and the invocation of dead saints. In addition, Luther warned against the perversion of the Christian faith worked by confidence in monastic vows as an aid to salvation and by submission to the papacy, which had corrupted rather than promoted God's Word.<sup>13</sup> Luther had placed his own faith in each of these, and the weight of his guilt had caused these false expressions of religion to collapse and let him fall into the hell of despair. His anger at such devilish deceptions sounds through in the critique of the Smalcald Articles.

In the third section of his Smalcald Articles Luther confessed his faith regarding fifteen topics that were falsely understood in much of medieval theology but which, he believed, could be profitably discussed with learned, reasonable people or even within the Wittenberg circle itself. In these brief treatments of these topics Luther related the subject at hand to the life of the believer or the life of the church. His presupposition of two kinds of righteousness underlies much of his discussion.

The first two topics, on sin and on the law, flow into the third, on the life of repentance. Luther's preaching and teaching aimed at aiding believers in the struggle that results from the mystery of the continuation of sin and evil in the lives of the baptized. He pointed out that original, inherited sin, cannot be imagined until Scripture has brought the revelation of God to the sinner. As he listed what Adam's sin had visited upon us, the first five fruits of that original disobedience concern the righteousness of faith, or the unrighteousness of human doubt of God's Word and denial of his lordship: "unfaith, false faith, idolatry, mistrust toward God, being without fear of God, presumption, despair, blindness and, sin summary, not knowing or paying attention to God." From that defiant orientation toward life flow the actual sins that break God's other commands: "lying, swearing by God's name, not praying or calling on God, not paying attention to his Word, being disobedient to parents, murder, adultery, stealing, deceive, and so forth."<sup>14</sup> When trust in God

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<sup>13</sup> BSLK, 415-433, *Book of Concord*, 301-310.

<sup>14</sup> BSLK, 434, *Book of Concord*, 310-311.



does not lay the foundation for life, then the righteousness of human love also gets twisted out of shape, both in relationship to God in praise and worship, in relationship to other creatures in care and concern for all their needs.

The law addresses human creatures who are ignoring God in this midst of their lives. Through threats of punishment and promises of benefits it attempts to keep order in sinners' lives. Often rather optimistic about civil righteousness and what the law in human hearts can produce by way of upright conduct, Luther here shows his pessimistic side. The law often produces the opposite effect than the restoration of outward order, instead causing the sinner to rebel and to sin the more to prove his independence from God. It may also produce false religion if sinners try to present the works it demands to God as a source of their own merit. But the law is designed to crush the sinner under its hammer blows. It thus arouses the repentant heart, which the Holy Spirit turns to the promise of the gospel. To it human beings are to cling in faith.<sup>15</sup>

Luther followed his description of the rhythm of repentance in the believer's daily life and his critique of the false practices of the papal party in cultivating a deceptive form of repentance with an article on "the gospel." It does not treat the content of the gospel of Christ but rather the "resources and aid" that the gospel of Christ gives to combat sin, namely, the means of grace. He includes oral proclamation, the forgiveness of sins, "the real function of the gospel," and then baptism, the sacrament of the altar, the power of the keys or absolution, and the mutual conversation among Christians that delivers the consolation of the gospel. Luther then expanded his agenda for council on the means of grace by treating baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the office the keys and absolution in separate articles.

In 1538 Luther revised the Articles that he had written more than a year earlier so that the document might be published. At that point he expanded the text of some articles, including that on confession and absolution. There he rejected the theology of the Schwärmer that wanted to find the Spirit of God and his wisdom within themselves, apart from the proclamation of the Word. God comes with his grace through the Holy Spirit only in that external Word, proclaimed or in Scripture. Satan deceived Adam and Eve by creating doubt in that external Word and turning them into their own inner thoughts. Proclamation and Scripture and baptism are God's avenues and tools for claiming his children as his own and causing them to grow in trust toward him.<sup>16</sup> A variety of forms of mystical searching for God and our true humanity have commanded public attention through what is loosely labeled the "New Age Movement." This attempt to find God by looking inside ourselves coincides with the individualism and the desire for personal independence of our times. It also coincides with mystical patterns of Christian piety, in hesychastic and other forms, that have too often led people away from the

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<sup>15</sup> BSLK, 435-438, *Book of Concord*, 311-313.

<sup>16</sup> BSLK, 453-456, *Book of Concord*, 321-323.

assurance of the forgiveness of sins and new life in Christ. Lutherans have struggled with the temptation to move away from God's conversation with them in the oral, written, and sacramental forms of his Word and to seek inner peace through inner means. True peace that passes our understanding comes from the words of Christ in preaching and conversation, in absolution and recalling our baptism, in receiving the Lord's Supper with other members of Christ's body, the church.

The Word of God shapes the life of the church or empowers his people in their wisdom under the Holy Spirit's guidance to shape their practices as the assembly of God's people. Luther believed that the council could attend to a number of concerns in the life of the church which had been subject to abuse in the late medieval church, according to the Wittenberg theologians: excommunication, ordination and call of pastors, clerical marriage, the definition of the church, the manner in which to preach of coming to righteousness in God's sight and good works, monastic vows, and humanly ordained customs in the church. Here he dealt with matters involved in proper trust in God, for instance, when he rejected monastic vows, but for the most part he considered matters pertaining to love for the neighbor and the order of life together in the church.

Luther got into the habit of confessing his faith at the Diet of Worms. He never lost the habit. He was certain that confessing the faith is a part of the call to be God's child that all believers have received in baptism. His new insights into the gospel of Jesus Christ compelled him to be experimenting with the best proper ways of expressing the biblical message within the context of the culture to which God had called him as a minister of the Word. The summons of Pope Paul III to council had provided him the opportunity to set forth his confession regarding proper teaching anew, and others had joined with him, he reported in the preface to the first printing of this document.<sup>17</sup> Many others have joined him in this confession of the faith in the intervening four and two-thirds centuries, and we are called to continue to use the words of the Smalcald Articles as a guide and foundation for our bringing the power of God in his Word to the people of our societies and cultures in the twenty-first century. The challenges of evangelistic, ecumenical, and edificatory proclamation of life and salvation make these the most exciting and challenging time in our history, and we must pray for the Holy Spirit's wisdom and power and the courage to meet his call to testify to life and salvation in Christ.

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<sup>17</sup> BSLK, 407-414, *Book of Concord*, 297-300.

