

MEDITATIONS ON THE CHIEF ARTICLES OF THE FAITH



Essays Commemorating the
500th Anniversary of the Reformation

By Pastors of the LCMS Kansas District

Abbreviations

AC = Unaltered Augsburg Confession

Ap = Apology of the Augsburg Confession

SC = Small Catechism

LC = Large Catechism

SA = Smalcald Articles (exclusive of the Tractate)

Tr = Tractate on the Power and Primacy of the Pope

Ep = The Formula of Concord, Epitome

SD = The Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration

Cat = Catalogue of Testimonies

NOTE: Articles and sections/paragraphs in the *Book of Concord* are denoted in Arabic numerals, separated by a period.

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Introduction

In 1873, while addressing the Western District in convention, C.F.W. Walther made the observation that the chief aim of true religion is to give all glory to God alone. To put this another way, the aim of true religion is to place all the focus on Jesus, who He is and what He does, as that is where the glory of God is revealed to us (Jn 1:14).

144 years after Walther addressed the convention, we find ourselves again asking what it means for us to be bold and faithful in our confession of the faith. As many have realized, nothing has really changed. The grass withers and the flowers fades but the Word of the Lord endures forever! (Is. 40:8)

The Synod's logo for the 500th anniversary of the Reformation notes, quite boldly, that it's *still* all about Jesus (see back cover). That's what the Reformation was about, and that's what these essays are about. They're about the person and work of Jesus for you! They endeavor to give all glory to God alone.

These 12 essays, commemorating the 500th anniversary and appearing throughout the *Workers Together* newsletters in 2017, are presented here in their entirety, along with accompanying Scripture passages and prayers for use in meditating upon these chief articles of the Christian faith.

It is our hope that they will continue to encourage all in giving all glory to God and fixing our eyes upon Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, as it's *still* all about Him!

May God bless you as you continue to study and hear our Lord's Word, receive His gifts, and serve your neighbor in love.

SOLI DEO GLORIA!

(To God Alone be Glory!)

Pastor Sean Kilgo

Saturday of Ad Te Levavi, AD 2018

~ THE HIDDEN GOD ~

Man's Problem

Isaiah 64:1-9: Oh that You would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at Your presence—as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil—to make Your name known to Your adversaries, and that the nations might tremble at Your presence! When You did awesome things that we did not look for, You came down, the mountains quaked at Your presence. From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God besides You, who acts for those who wait for Him. You meet him who joyfully works righteousness, those who remember You in Your ways. Behold, You were angry, and we sinned; in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved? We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. There is no one who calls upon Your name, who rouses himself to take hold of You; for You have hidden Your face from us, and have made us melt in the hand of our iniquities. But now, O LORD, You are our Father; we are the clay, and You are our potter; we are all the work of Your hand. Be not so terribly angry, O LORD, and remember not iniquity forever. Behold, please look, we are all Your people.

Identifying *sins* is an easier task than identifying *sin*. To identify *sins*, take up the Ten Commandments. “I don’t always trust God as I ought. I’ve cursed with His name. There are Sunday mornings when I refuse to gather with His saints around pulpit and altar.” Those are sins against the First Table of the Law. Identifying sins from the Second Table would be even more personal and pointed. With a review of the Ten Commandments, you come to Private Confession and Absolution.

Yet the Ten Commandments, as our Lutheran Confessions teach, are meant to reveal something worse than actual *sins*.

Our being in *sin* (being sinful, original sin, hereditary sin) is what gives rise to *sins*. If there were no sin of origin, no sin of being, there would be no actual sins. Original sin is the disease, the leprosy, the inherited corruption, the fatal illness

of our being. "It seeks not only the pleasure of the body, but also fleshly wisdom and righteousness" (Ap 2.26). Your church and pastor teach what "our churches" have taught since 1530 in the words of AC 2.1: "Since the fall of Adam (Rom 5:21), all who are naturally born are born with sin (Ps 51:5), that is, without the fear of God, without trust in God and with the inclination to sin."

Even worse, original sin hides God from us. "It is not being able to believe God and not being able to fear and love God" (Ap 2.26).

Was there opposition to this teaching? You bet there was. First, the Roman Church (now Roman Catholicism). On that, read Ap 2.1-51. Also opposed were the so-called Reformed churches, i.e., the churches of Zwingli and the Anabaptists, who denied that unbaptized children are sinners; they rejected the entire doctrine of original sin. Take a look at SD 1.1-62 for more on that.

Finally, there's nothing more concise than SA 3.1.1-11; 3.2.4. Why do we need the Ten Commandments, the Law? So we can make good private confessions of real sins? Yes. Of course. But, first and foremost, so that we can confess the chief sin, the root of all *sins*, original *sin*; to reveal original sin with all its fruit. All evil deeds originate from original sin, and all sin has but one remedy, the blood of Jesus shed. "The magnitude of Christ's grace cannot be understood unless our diseases are recognized" (Ap 2.33).

Further Reading Summary—AC 2, SC The Creed, SD 2.9; Deeper—Ap 2, SA 8, LC 2.25-33, SC The Lord's Prayer; Scripture—Rom 1:17, 3:9-21, 4:13-25, 5:17-19, 8:33; Eph 2:4-10, Gal 3:11, Heb 11

Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden, cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of Your Holy Spirit that we may perfectly love You and worthily magnify Your holy name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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~ GOD REVEALED ~

The Creed and the One True God

Deuteronomy 6:4-9 — “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

So perplexed by what he found when he rubbed the lamp, Aladdin asked the genie to explain what was going on. The genie replied, “PHENOMENAL COSMIC POWER! Itty bitty living space.” Sometimes our understanding of God might seem just as preposterous, or, at times, terribly inadequate.

Perhaps you’ve wondered how to apprehend God and His nature, not only as an entity, but as a power, force, or impetus for existence. Maybe you’ve tried to explain it to your children or students. Thankfully, this doctrine of the Faith is one of the earliest settled upon by the church.

To know God, we look to the inspired Word (2 Pet 1:20-21), which testifies to who/what/how God is. The (Spirit-led) Old Testament prophets proclaimed the God-Man (see Deut 18:15, Is 7:14, 9:5-6, 11:12, 53:5, Mic 5:2) and His work, just as Jesus proclaimed Himself a Person of the Godhead (Jn 6:51, 17:5, 24). After Jesus ascended into heaven, His Church began the task of proclaiming Christ, the Son of God (Mt 16:16), to the world. Because to tell of the Son Jesus is to relate also the story of the Father Creator and the Sanctifying Holy Spirit (see Jn 1:18; Mt 28:19-20), their proclamation was thoroughly Trinitarian. In short, *in Christ, who comes with grace and mercy, God reveals His true nature.*

Roman Christians summarized this proclamation with the Apostles’ Creed

(final form late 2nd cent.), followed by others, of which the Nicene (A.D. 381) and Athanasian (c. A.D. 500) Creeds expound the nature of God with more detail. As we celebrate Reformation 500, it's important to know that Luther (SC The Creed, LC 2) and the other Lutheran confessors (Ep 12.20-31, SD 12.28-40) relied upon this cornerstone of Christianity not only to cement their ties to the church catholic—this historic Christianity which crosses time, borders, principalities, and the rule of men—but to proclaim the Gospel of Christ, the forgiveness of sins through faith in Him.

When confessing the Faith before Charles V in Augsburg (1530), the Reformers used the Creed to separate themselves from the heretics who came before (AC 1.3) and, again, when preparing for the council to be held at Mantua (delayed to Trent, 1545), the SA began with a treatment of the shared doctrine of the Trinity in four numbered points (SA 1), its *telos* in Christ (SA 2) and our responsibility to the Trinity as His creatures (SA 3.1).

This confession of Christ and the Triune God, far from being a historical relic, has remained and continues to remain relevant and vital for the Church even today. For example, the centerpiece of the Christian resistance to Hitler in Germany was the confession that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (and not Hitler) are God and that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—a confession that Christians even lost their life for.

Further Reading AC 1; SA 1, 2, 3.1; SC The Creed; LC 2; Ep 12.20-31; SD 12.28-40

Almighty and everlasting God, You have given us grace to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity by the confession of a true faith and to worship the Unity in the power of the Divine Majesty. Keep us steadfast in this faith and defend us from all adversities; for You, O Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, live and reign, one God, now and forever. Amen.

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~ GOD'S ALIEN WORK ~

The Condemnation of the Law

Romans 3:9–20 — What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written: “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.” “Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive.” “The venom of asps is under their lips.” “Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.” “Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known.” “There is no fear of God before their eyes.” Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in His sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

It strikes the ear strange: God does what He doesn't want to do. “Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord GOD, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?” (Ezek 18:23) When God does what He doesn't want to do (kill and eternally condemn the sinner; cp. 1 Tim 2:4), it's called His *alien work* or His *strange work*. When He does what He wants to do (save the sinner), it's called His *proper work*.

But His *alien work* isn't for that reason unimportant. In fact, it's critical to His *proper work*. Paul says that “God ‘locked up’ all people unto disobedience in order to have mercy on all” (Rom 11:32; see also Rom 5:20, 3:19-24). The *alien work* must precede the *proper work*. Salvation must be *from* something. And it's from God's just condemnation not just of *sin*, but of *sinner*s.

To do both His *alien* and His *proper* work, God uses the same tool He always does: His own words. He accomplishes His *proper* work through the word of the Gospel. Through the word of the Law He accomplishes His *alien* work. Of that latter Luther says, “This is God's thunderbolt. By the Law ... He declares no one to be in the right, but drives all together to terror and despair” (SA

3.3.2). The Law brings “nothing but death and hell, and one must despair, as Saul and Judas did” (SA 3.3.7). That’s the Law’s proper job and God’s *alien work*.

At the time of the Reformation, however, there was great confusion on the Law’s job. Although “the Law intervened in order to increase sin” (Rom 5:20), Roman Catholic theology regarded the Law as effecting God’s *proper work*—His justifying and saving work.

It all hung on the concept of *love*, the sum of the Law, which demands that we love God and neighbor. It’s very hard to love the neighbor; it’s impossible to love an accusing God. And herein lies the rub. If the Law is the source of justification (Ap 5.55 [3.176]), and if the Law always accuses and makes you hate God (Ap 5.45 [3.166]), it’s impossible to be right with Him. “We are not righteous before God as long as we flee God’s judgment and are angry with God” (Ap 5.55 [3.176]). Why? Because how can you “fear, love, and trust in God above all things” (SC The Ten Commandments) when you hate Him? You can’t even fulfill the First Commandment, much less any other. In fact, it only enhances “disobedience”—“ignorance of God, hatred of God, without fear of God and faith toward God, inability to love God” (Ap 2.14).

And it can mean only death—a death God does not want, and which He redresses in His *proper work*, the work of Christ for us.

Further Reading SC The Ten Commandments; LC 1; Ap 4.75ff.; SA 3.2, 3.3; Ep 5; SD 5

O Lord, our God, we acknowledge Your great goodness toward us and praise You for the mercy and grace which our eyes have seen, our ears have heard, and our hearts have known. Pardon our offenses, correct and reform what is lacking in us, and help us to grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Inscribe Your law upon our hearts, and equip us to serve You with holy and blameless lives. Amen.

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~ THE GOD WHO IS MAN ~

The Person of Christ

Hebrews 2:9–18 — But we see Him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone. For it was fitting that He, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering. For He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source. That is why He is not ashamed to call them brothers, saying, “I will tell of your name to My brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise.” And again, “I will put my trust in Him.” And again, “Behold, I and the children God has given Me.” Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death He might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. For surely it is not angels that He helps, but He helps the offspring of Abraham. Therefore He had to be made like His brothers in every respect, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because He Himself has suffered when tempted, He is able to help those who are being tempted.

“I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord” (SC The Creed).

We believe it. We teach it. We confess it. At times, we doubt it. At times, we can easily become focused on the troubles, hardships, and suffering of this life and ask, “Why doesn’t God care?” “Where is God in all of this?” “Why does God seem so distant?” We may even conclude that God just doesn’t understand. Yet, “I believe that Jesus Christ, ... and also true man....”

Jesus truly is God and He is also truly Man. Jesus “was born of the Virgin Mary, truly suffered, was crucified, died and was buried” (AC 3). He is truly human. “The properties of the human nature are to be a bodily creature, to be flesh and blood, to be finite and physically limited, to suffer, to die, to ascend and de-

scend, to move from one place to another, to suffer hunger, thirst, cold, heat and the like” (Ep 8.8).

All that sounds fancy, but what does it mean? It means that Jesus as true Man actually experienced everything I experience in this life and world. He thirsts (Jn 19:28). He weeps (Jn 11:35). He has no place to lay His head (Mt 8:20). He is hungry (Mk 11:12). He has flesh (Jn 1:14). The list could go on and on. We confess that Jesus is truly human.

It also means that God does care. It means that God is not distant. He came down to earth. He became flesh for me (Jn 1:1-18). Jesus is fully Man—fully human. Some people believe that He is only man. They think of Jesus as a good moral teacher and nothing else. Yes, Jesus is truly Man. But as we stated above He is also truly God. He is both! God does understand. He understands me and my pain, sorrow, struggles and hardships. God knows everything I go through in this life. Only He can because He is God and He is Man.

Jesus is truly God and truly Man. Because Jesus is both, He is able to “reconcile the Father to us and to be a sacrifice, not only for original guilt but also for all actual sins of mankind” (AC 3.3). Thanks be to God!

Further Reading AC 3; Ap 3; SA 2, 1; SC 2nd Article; LC 2:25-33; Ep 8; SD 8

O God, our Maker and Redeemer, You wonderfully created us and in the incarnation of Your Son yet more wondrously restored our human nature. Grant that we may ever be alive in Him who made Himself to be like us; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

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~ THE SAVING GOD ~

What God in Christ Has Done for Us

Romans 5:1–11 — Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through Him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by His blood, much more shall we be saved by Him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by His life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

As we learned in “The God Who is Man,” Jesus is not only Man, but is also God. This means that Jesus is my Lord.

But who Jesus is cannot be separated from what Jesus does. The *person* and *work* of Jesus go hand in hand. He is not just any Lord, but He is *my* Lord “who has redeemed me ... purchased and won me” (SC The Creed). This is what it means for Jesus to be *your* Lord. It means that He has redeemed you from sin, the devil, death, and all evil. For before Christ, our Lord was the devil, since we were “captive under the devil’s power, condemned to death, stuck in sin and blindness” (LC 2.27).

But Jesus, seeing our wretched state, and moved by His immeasurable goodness, “had compassion upon our misery and wretchedness. He came from heaven to help us” (LC 2.29). His compassion is found in His blood shed for us on the

cursed tree as payment for our sins, a payment which God accepts since that which is shed is more precious than gold or silver (1 Pet 1:18-19 & SC The Creed). We confess that God in Christ is truly our Great High Priest (Heb 2:17) who has come into the holy places with His own blood (Heb 9:12) in order to be not only the one who offers up the sacrifice but who is indeed Himself the Propitiation (Rom 3:25; Heb 2:17; 1 Jn 2:2).

In the creeds we confess the incarnation of Jesus: that He truly came into the flesh. We do not confess merely an empty incarnation, but an incarnation that leads directly to His suffering and death which is done “to reconcile us and to be a sacrifice, not only for original guilt, but also for all actual sins of mankind” (AC 3.3). For this reason, we confess that not only the Man Jesus suffers and dies, but also that God suffers and dies on our behalf (cf. Ep 8.9).

This is the central and turning point of all Christianity, and the primary point of our preaching and teaching: that Jesus is my Lord, which means nothing else than that He is my Redeemer. “Yes, the entire Gospel that we preach is based on this point, that we properly understand this article as that upon which our salvation and all our happiness rests. It is so rich and complete that we can never learn it fully” (LC 2.33).

Further Reading Apostles’, Nicene, & Athanasian Creeds; AC 3; Ap 3; Ap 4; SA 1; SA 2.1; SC 2nd Article; LC 2.25-33; Ep 8; SD 8

Merciful and everlasting God, You did not spare Your only Son but delivered Him up for us all to bear our sins on the cross. Grant that our hearts may be so fixed with steadfast faith in Him that we fear not the power of sin, death, and the devil; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

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~ THE JUST AND JUSTIFIER ~

Salvation through Faith Alone in Christ

Romans 3:21–31 — But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by His blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in His divine forbearance He had passed over former sins. It was to show His righteousness at the present time, so that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. Or is God the God of Jews only? Is He not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one—who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith. Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.

Salvation through faith alone in Christ—this teaching, which is expressed succinctly in AC 4, is the chief and central article. On it the whole Christian church stands or falls. To justify means “to declare righteous.” It involves an external word, a declaration. It is legal and binding and not subject to appeal. God declares us righteous for the sake of Christ, without any merit or worthiness in us. Through the gift of faith we hear this Gospel and believe it.

Jesus is the Just. Only He has lived the just life, expressed by His obedience under God’s Law. This Obedient One comes to us rebels as one of us, truly human. His obedient and just life is offered to God the Father on our behalf. And this truly human Brother is also truly divine. Thus, all humanity is represented in His own obedience. True God. True Man. The only obedient one (Rom 5:19; Ep 3.3 and SD 3.9—a wonderful summary).

He has lived the life we should have lived and has died the death we deserved.

In Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, we have been saved by the judgment of a just and gracious God.

He is our Justification. An external word was spoken from this Man who offered himself as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world—"It is finished" (Jn 19:30).

What hope and comfort does this chief article offer us? First, it clearly defines the work of Jesus Christ for our salvation and makes very clear—as in declaring it so—that the work of your salvation "is finished." Second, it offers us comfort in that it removes doubt and uncertainty over our salvation. Since it's God's work alone, and we can offer nothing in addition to it, we trust that God has completed—"finished"—His work. There are no conditions yet to be met. Third, the more we settle into this blessed rest of having been saved, the glory of God and His riches toward us are made more apparent. God becomes not Judge, but Savior, and we become more blessedly aware of His grace and our daily sustenance in it through His Word and Sacrament. We rest in God and find our joy in Him just like you do at the end of hard day that has been "finished." "When [the chief article] is understood correctly, it illumines and amplifies Christ's honor. It brings necessary and most abundant consolation to devout consciences" (Ap 4.2).

Further Reading Summary—AC 4, SC The Creed, SD 2.9; Deeper—Ap 4, SA 8, LC 2.25-33, SC The Lord's Prayer; Scripture—Rom 1:17, 3:9-21, 4:13-25, 5:17-19, 8:33; Eph 2:4-10, Gal 3:11, Heb 11

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, because of Your tender love towards us sinners You have given us Your Son that, believing in him, we might have everlasting life. Continue to grant us Your Holy Spirit that we may remain steadfast in this faith to the end and finally come to life everlasting; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

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~ THE WORD OF GOD ~

Gift Given, Delivered, and Received

2 Timothy 3:10–17 — You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra—which persecutions I endured; yet from them all the Lord rescued me. Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

A friend surprises you on your birthday with exciting news. He's bought you a very nice present—something you'll be delighted to receive, something you want and need. The present is paid for and wrapped. Your name is on the tag. There's just one problem: your gift is currently located in some far off place, thousands of miles away. Having explained all this, your friend walks away. And you're left pondering the harsh reality that a gift, no matter how valuable, is of little benefit unless it is delivered and received.

God has given a gift to the whole world. The gift is His Son, sent to suffer and die for the sins of all people and to rise again in victory over death and hell. By this gift, your sins are paid for and forgiven. By this gift, you have new and eternal life.

But God gave this gift two thousand years ago, which means there's a great distance between you and the gift. You weren't there when Jesus was crucified. You weren't there to witness the empty tomb or see the risen Jesus in person. So how is this gift of salvation to be delivered to you across such a distance of time and space? How are you to receive and enjoy today this gift that God gave so long

ago?

Some would point us to our own human wisdom as the place to find and receive God's gift. Or to our feelings. Or to our decisions or deeds. But all these are insufficient because our sinful nature cannot comprehend the things of God.

Thankfully, God in His mercy has provided not only the gift of salvation but also the means by which that gift is delivered and applied to you. God delivers His Good News to you through the Word of the Gospel, as it is preached, heard, written, and read. "These are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (Jn 20:31).

The Large Catechism explains it this way: "The work of redemption is done and accomplished. Christ has acquired and gained the treasure for us by His suffering, death, resurrection, and so on. But if the work remained concealed so that no one knew about it, then it would be useless and lost. So that this treasure might not stay buried, but be received and enjoyed, God has caused the Word to go forth and be proclaimed. In the Word He has the Holy Spirit bring this treasure home and make it our own." (LC 3.38-39)

Through the Word, God delivers the gift of Jesus and strengthens Christian faith. Therefore, "let the word of Christ dwell in you richly!" (Col 3:16)

Further Reading AC 4, 5, 12, 13; Ap 4, 12; SA 3.3, 3.4, 3.8; SC The Ten Commandments; SC The Creed; LC 1.50-77; 2.34-70; Ep 2; SD 2

Lord God, bless Your Word wherever it is proclaimed. Make it a Word of power and peace to convert those not yet Your own and to confirm those who have come to saving faith. May Your Word pass from the ear to the heart, from the heart to the lip, and from the lip to the life that, as You have promised, Your Word may achieve the purpose for which You send it; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

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~ GOD'S FEDEX TRUCK ~

The Sacrament of Holy Baptism

Colossians 2:6–15 — Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. For in Him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in Him, who is the head of all rule and authority. In Him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised with Him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised Him from the dead. And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This He set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in Him.

Wouldn't you agree that deliveries are important? I don't know about you, but when I have an important package, I want to make sure that it's delivered safely and expediently. The delivery business has always been an important business. Today, it's a very competitive business, so different package companies often use a catchy slogan to encourage you to trust them for all your delivery needs.

FedEx gives you their "purple promise": "I will make every FedEx experience outstanding." Well, it just so happens that God is in the delivery business as well, but He doesn't need a catchy phrase to garner our trust. Because of Jesus Christ (2 Cor 1:20), we can count on all of God's promises, including His promise in and through Baptism. Baptism, simple water included in God's command and combined with God's Word, has the power to forgive sins, rescue from death and the devil, and give eternal salvation to all who believe ... (SC Baptism).

However, unlike FedEx, the experience of Baptism isn't all that important. It may seem like a pretty dull and anticlimactic moment to merely say a few words and sprinkle some water on someone's head. It may seem like a pretty stressful and difficult moment trying to baptize a kicking and screaming child who wants nothing to do with that water or pastor! And yet, despite the dull or stressful experience, by the power of the Holy Spirit that child still receives a "washing in the Word" (SA 3.5). Despite our feelings about it, God delivers something outstanding every time in Baptism!

Although the title of this article is "God's FedEx Truck: The Sacrament of Holy Baptism," I would be remiss if I didn't give a hat tip to the company my dad has worked at for over 30 years, UPS. I always liked their old phrase, "What can Brown do for you?" And that's really what God's gift of Baptism is about, isn't it? God wants to do something for you. Over the years, many people have mixed this teaching up and turned Baptism into something we do for God. But God's Word and our Lutheran Confessions have always been very clear on this matter. "Baptism, however, is not our work, but God's work (for, as was said, you must distinguish Christ's Baptism quite clearly from a bath-keeper's baptism)" (LC 4.35). God is certainly in the delivery business, and thanks be to God for His wonderful package of Baptism!

Further Reading AC 9, 13; Ap 9, 13, 24; SA 3.5; SC Baptism; LC 4

Merciful Father, through Holy Baptism You called us to be Your own possession. Grant that our lives may evidence the working of Your Holy Spirit in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control according to the image of Your only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.

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~ HOLY COMMUNION ~

God Delivers the Goods of the Cross

1 Corinthians 11:17–28 — But in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized. When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not. For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when He was betrayed took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it, and said, "This is My body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of Me." In the same way also He took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes. Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.

When I order a book on Amazon, I own that book. It's mine, but it isn't doing me a lot of good sitting there in the warehouse. Instead I need that book delivered to me. That's when it goes from me simply owning it as an abstract truth to actually possessing the book in a real, personal way. It's also the first time I'm able to take advantage of owning my book—I can finally read it.

These same advantages are ours in the Lord's Supper (along with the other Means of Grace) because it delivers the goods, the blessings of the cross, to us. In the Sacrament, we receive Christ's very body and blood that was given and shed on the cross for us for the forgiveness of our sins. Luther says that in that one blessing, "forgiveness of sins," is also found all of God's blessings, for, as

Luther says, “Where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation” (SC Sacrament of the Altar).

This is only the beginning, though. Where there is forgiveness of sins, there’s not only life and salvation, but also peace, joy, hope, faith, love and so much more. Every good thing that God would give us is ours because of Christ’s death on the cross (Ap 4.90-101). And in the Sacrament all of that is delivered to you, put on your very lips, and comes into your body.

What a comfort this is. The amazing goodness of the cross of Christ is not something that I have to grasp or latch onto myself. I don’t have to find my way through time and space to the cross through some mysterious, ill-defined method. Instead God brings it to me, and I may be certain that it is mine because I ate Christ’s given body and drank Christ’s shed blood (AC 5.1-3).

My daughter, Elinor, always asks to smell my wife’s breath after Communion (which is something I did as child, too). She asks, “Can I smell Jesus’ blood?” It’s a beautiful confession from a young mouth about what the Lord’s Supper is all about. To smell the wine is to smell the blood of the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world (Jn 1:29). To smell it is to smell God’s mercy and forgiveness and salvation. In the Lord’s Supper I am forgiven. You are forgiven. It is delivered. It is certain!

Further Reading AC 10, 13, 22, 24; Ap 13, 24; SA 2.2; SC The Sacrament of the Altar; LC 5; Ep 7; SD 7

Almighty and everlasting God, we thank and praise You for feeding us the life-giving body and blood of Your beloved Son, Jesus Christ. Send us Your Holy Spirit that, having with our mouths received the Holy Sacrament, we may by faith obtain and eternally enjoy Your divine grace, the forgiveness of sins, unity with Christ, and life eternal; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

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~ GOD'S ARK ~

The Holy Christian Church and Her Ministry

Ephesians 3:1–13 — For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles—assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God’s grace that was given to me for you, how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God’s grace, which was given me by the working of his power. To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was according to the eternal purpose that He has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him. So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory.

What is the Church? Where is it? If you asked these questions to most people, they would say, “Well, over there is the Methodist church. Down that street is the Lutheran church.” Another way of thinking about “church” is to identify it with human institutions. After all, we call our synod the “The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.”

Certainly, though, there’s much more than each of these. We wouldn’t say that we have lost the church if our building is destroyed in a disaster. Nor would we say that only Lutherans are members of the Church, or that the only work of the church is done in synod conventions.

No, the Church is best understood as “the congregation of saints and true believers” (AC 8). The Church is the body of Christ, those whom “Christ renews,

sanctifies, and governs” (Ap 7.5). We believers are the Church, and we are united with all other believers in this body of Christ.

As we are in the body of Christ, He also sanctifies us in Baptism and guides us in our lives to the eternal life that he has prepared. Luther says, “Thank God, today a seven-year-old child knows what the Church is, namely, the holy believers and lambs who hear the voice of their Shepherd” (SA 3.12.2). What a beautiful picture, drawn from Jesus’ own language reflecting Psalm 23!

Just as Jesus himself guides us, He also sends undershepherds, pastors, to deliver his gifts of Word and Sacrament to the flock that has been entrusted to them.

Where is the Church? It is where the flock of God hears His words. It is where people are made holy by Baptism and Absolution and the Lord’s Supper. It is where “the Gospel is purely taught and the Sacraments are correctly administered” (AC 7). The Church gathers where Jesus says He will be. It is in this church, God’s ark, where we are brought through the floodwaters of sin to life eternal.

So how do you know that you are a member of Christ’s Church? Well, you come to a church building and sit with a congregation that is a member of the LCMS. Even better, you hear the Gospel, rejoice in your Baptism, and receive the Lord’s Supper. Now that is something to take comfort in!

Further Reading AC 7, 8, 14, 15, 28; Ap 7, 14, 28; SA 3.12; Tr

Merciful God, we humbly implore You to cast the bright beams of Your light upon Your Church that we, being instructed by the doctrine of the blessed apostles, may walk in the light of Your truth and finally attain to the light of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

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~ GOD'S MASKS ~

Christian Vocation

Ephesians 4:1–7 — I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift.

“Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him” (1 Cor. 7:17).

We like things big and spectacular. That's our entertainment culture, where Hollywood and the NFL are the largest churches in town. It's upward mobility—better pay, bigger name, more benefits. The ordinary is frowned upon. What fifth grader hopes to be an accountant or a stay-at-home mom? It's always astronauts and quarterbacks.

Not so with our Lord. For Him, it's not us climbing up, but Him coming down. That's Christmas: God stepping down from His heavenly throne into a manger. It's the cross: not what we do for God, but what He's done for us.

As His glory was hidden in suffering, so He hides Himself in vocation to give us all that we need to support this body and life. Luther said God wears *masks*. He hides Himself—behind a father changing his child's diaper; behind a farmer who sows the seed for your Saturday morning pancakes; behind a governor whose bill saves countless unborn children. God hides Himself in society, home, and Church, wearing the *masks* of various vocations.

“Vocation” isn't just for pastors. It's a *calling*—a *holy* calling—by which God gives us neighbors to serve with good works. Luther said God doesn't need your good works; your neighbor does. Our vocations identify our neighbors and what works are *good*—laid out nicely in SC Table of Duties: preachers and

hearers; governors and citizens; husbands and wives; parents and children; bosses and workers; etc. We've got many vocations. I'm a son, citizen, brother, Christian, husband, father, pastor, student, and teacher (and more!). God hides Himself behind me to serve my neighbors, and behind each of these neighbors, God serves me.

Seeing vocations as divine callings, *masks of God*, we approach them differently. Work gets filled with divine importance. The ordinary things—picking up kids from basketball, mopping floors, filing taxes—they're all *divine* works; the ordinary becomes the extraordinary place of God for man.

Truth is, we sin in our vocations. So SC Confession teaches us to examine ourselves “according to your station in life.” Thankfully, He hides Himself for sinners such as us! He uses the pastor-mask to proclaim forgiveness, and the widow-mask to sustain that preaching. He also feeds us with His own body and blood, by which we pray in the post-communion collect: “that of Your mercy You would strengthen us through the same in faith toward You and in fervent love toward one another.” That's vocation: God calling us into self-sacrificial service on behalf of our neighbor.

“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Cor 12:4-7).

Further Reading AC 6, 16, 18, 20; SC The Ten Commandments; LC 1; Ep 6; SD 6; SC Table of Duties; Eph 5-6; Rom 12-13; 1 Cor 7

Almighty God, look with favor upon Your people in their calling to serve in Christ's name. Give them courage and patience, and strengthen them in their Christian vocation of witness to the world and of service to others; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

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~ GOD'S MEASURING TAPE ~

Sola Scriptura

2 Peter 1:16–21 — For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For when He received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to Him by the Majestic Glory, “This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,” we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with Him on the holy mountain. And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

It is perhaps curious to reach the end of a series of essays on the Lutheran Confessions and discover that the true rule and norm is not in fact the Confessions themselves, but rather the Holy Scriptures. For what have we been studying, if at the very end we point you away from the Confessions and back to the Scriptures?

And yet, that’s hardly the case at all. To read the Confessions is to read the Scriptures, and to read the Scriptures is to read the Confessions. But which one comes out on top?

The Scriptures alone. That’s what the Confessions themselves say: “God’s Word alone should be and remain the only standard and rule of doctrine, to which the writings of no man should be regarded as equal. *Everything should be subjected to God’s Word.*” (SD Rule and Norm 9) We subscribe to the Confessions because they agree with the Scriptures. Should the Confessions conflict with the Scriptures in any place, it is the Confessions which step aside and allow the Word of God to stand supreme.

This stands in contrast to many other churches which operate quite the oppo-

site. Their own confessions may indeed conflict with the Scriptures, claiming a need to modernize, or a continuing revelation from God regarding teachings. Who wins in these cases? Not the Word of the Lord that has been revealed through the person of Christ, but rather the whims of man, seeking to please itching ears near and far, only to end up outside the scope of the one holy Christian Church.

The Scriptures are the plumb line, used not just by Amos in Amos 7, but by the Church today, where we measure all things, both old and new, against the measuring tape of God's authoritative Word. As the Confessions put it, "the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments" are "the pure, clear fountain of Israel. They are the only true standard or norm by which all teachers and doctrines are to be judged" (SD Rule and Norm 3).

And so what of the Confessions? What do we make of them? They are indeed important and authoritative in our lives today, for they have been measured not by popular vote or by executive fiat from on high, but they have been measured against the Word of the Lord and found to be good and proper for the people of God in the 1500s and for the people of God today. (SD Rule and Norm 5-13)

As you read the Confessions, studying their articles for a deeper understanding of our Lutheran faith, take note of the numerous quotes and citations of the full body of Scripture that this confession of faith is built upon.

Further Reading AC Preface and Conclusion; Tr 6, 25; Ep and SD Rule and Norm

Blessed Lord, You have caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning. Grant that we may so hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them that, by patience and comfort of Your holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

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