

**WE HAVE A COMMON MESSAGE:
We Are Forgiven Through Jesus Christ**

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All of us gathered here can agree that the theme of this paper represents a biblical truth. It seems to be self-explanatory that you would think that there would be no need to write a paper on it. But alas! The need is there. Many denominations and theologians no longer preach this truth as a fact. Many believe that forgiveness comes through work righteousness. And those of us working in Africa are aware of studies going on in which the focus is on how African culture can be fused into the work of Christ in order to bring forgiveness that can be appreciated by the African Christian.

For the sake of bringing to your attention how serious our task is in this fellowship, we want to advocate for some false belief in this paragraph. We will explain our reason for doing so and then state, clearly, what we believe. Here we go: Forgiveness of sins is taught in the Bible, which was inspired in human language. This presupposes that man must be able to learn and understand the Bible. The Bible can be translated. Here we want to argue that words are language specific and as such their forms are not always transferable from one language to another. The art of translating involves decoding and transferring decoded information into ideas that are apprehensible in another language. Our argument is that in most cases only ideas are translatable; this means that the ability of the translator to work with source language becomes crucial. There is also a possibility that a translator can introduce non-biblical culture through his translation as he tries to reconstruct a source message into ideas intelligible to receptor language. We are saying that the Bible that a missionary came with was a reproduction of his culture, the culture that he imposed on the African.

What we have in the above paragraph is the argument that surrounds us from every side in Africa. There is a big push, by the so called "African theologians," in the direction of making the Bible understood in African culture and context. The literature that these "theologians" produce is accessible by our members. Here is what they say about Bible translation: Bible translation imbued (filled) local cultures with eternal significance and endowed (indigenous) African languages with a transient (excelling) range, while it also presumed (African languages) that the God of the Bible had preceded the missionary into the receptor—so the missionary needs to discover (God) in the new culture (*Christian Education in the African Context*, page 31).

Human reason tends to go along with the argument of these "theologians." If one were not to read the Bible correctly, say, even the Holy Spirit agrees with their argument. If you took the New Testament and examined it, you would find that almost all quotations are from the Septuagint which is a translation of the Hebrew text which we do not have (?), into Greek. Translators of the Septuagint almost always (?) did not translate Hebrew text literally. This assessment is reached upon by comparing their translation with the Hebrew texts that are available. New Testament writers almost always quoted the Septuagint and even paraphrased, combined a few quotations under the name of one prophet, and some people are called by different names from those that appear in available Hebrew texts.

Above we have advocated or promoted African culturization theology. In the next paragraph we want to state what we believe.

We believe that before one could argue for culturization of the Bible, one should be aware of what translators translate from. For example, we have already stated that we do not have (?) the text which Septuagint translators used. For one to argue that Bible texts are inconsistent and, therefore, can not establish the only norm and standard by which Christians, their conduct, and teachings should be judged is totally absurd. The other argument against them is the unity of the Bible from beginning to end, which suggests that despite variant readings there can only be one person behind all the statements of the Bible. That person is God. True Christian faith persuades us to teach divine authorship of the Bible. Yet another argument is what Jesus says about himself. He came to all people of the world because they would believe in him: Whosoever

believeth in him should not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16). All people in Jesus will have one culture and that is biblical/godly culture.

If we took translations of the Bible from different languages, would we find any translation that would not clearly and in simple language show God's plan of salvation? We are yet to find such a translation. Speaking of fundamental doctrines that speak of our salvation, E. W. A. Koehler says: Over against the view that the Scripture is obscure, waiting for priest and pope, the theologian and council, to demonstrate its real meaning, the Lutheran Church upholds the perspicuity (clearness) of Scripture, the clear word and teaching of the apostles, the pure, clear fountain of Israel (*A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, pages 13 and 14).

We are saying that the Bible is a book that should be understood in its own biblical context and not subject to any cultural bias. It can not and should not be understood or interpreted according to the culture of the reader because the Bible says thus of cultures that are not biblical: You shall break down their altars, and dash in pieces their pillars, and hew down their Asherim, and burn their graven images with fire (Deut. 7:5). The Bible is above any culture and other religions or beliefs. It is God's book to men which makes us, even though we are many and have different cultural back-grounds, one in Christ. What we have just stated should be understood in the light of the Augsburg Confession's description of Church: It is taught among us that one holy Christian church will be and remain forever. This is the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel. For it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the Gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word. It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that ceremonies, instituted by men, should be observed uniformly in all places. It is as Paul says in Eph. 4:4,5, "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one Baptism" (Article VII).

This meeting is a forum where we can: Give outward expression to the unity of spirit and oneness in faith and confession that binds us together (CELC Provisional Constitution). Together we can say confidently that we are forgiven through Jesus Christ. We can say this because we know that: This is the true Christian faith. Unless a man believes this firmly and faithfully, he cannot be saved (Athanasian Creed).

We are forgiven through Jesus Christ. This statement leaves us with no doubt that there is sin. If there was no sin, why would we speak of forgiveness? This leads us to another question, "What is sin?" J. T. Mueller says: Every departure from the norm of the divine law is sin no matter whether it consists in a state or condition or in actual deeds. Considered etymologically (according to the meaning of the word), sin is, in the first place, a negative concept (anomia), and as such it denotes man's lack of conformity with the divine law. So Scripture defines sin as lawlessness (1 John 3:4). But sin is also a positive concept, and as such it denotes opposition to, or transgression of the law, so that positively sin is a violation of the law (*Christian Dogmatics*, pages 210-211).

When we define sin as above, we must be careful that we do not, wrongly, understand sin to be only those acts that are done deliberately. According to the Bible not only deeds are sinful as shown in 2 Samuel 12:13, but that there are also sins of thoughts, desires, and those committed ignorantly (James 1:15; Romans 7:17; Matthew 5:8; Romans 7:19; 1 Timothy 1:13). Anything, therefore, which fails to measure up to the standard of God's law or is opposed thereto, whether it seems horrible to man or not, is sin and wickedness (*Abiding Word*).

We have defined what sin is according to Scripture. Now we need to see how sin affects man. In other words, we need to say something about the nature of man. By nature man is sinful from birth (Psalm 51:5). In his flesh dwelleth no good thing (Romans 7:18). His old Adam is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts (Ephesians 4:22). The Augsburg Confession explains this nature of man this way: Since the fall of Adam all men who are born according to the course of nature are conceived and born in sin. That is, all men are full of evil lust and inclination from their mothers' wombs and are unable by nature to have true fear of God and true faith in God.

Man by nature is helpless and hopeless. He has no power to save himself. He needs someone to get him out of this mess. He needs Jesus Christ. The theme of this paper confirms this fact by stating that we are forgiven through Jesus Christ.

Now we need to see how God carried out the plan of salvation through forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ.

When we state that: We are forgiven through Jesus Christ, we are thinking about his redemptive work which made it possible for us to have forgiveness of sins through him. What is redemption? When one hears of redemption, he thinks of (a) promise of deliverance, (b) act of buying back something that was one's but was lost, (c) release on the part of one who was in bondage, (d) payment of debt in full. Man is a lost and condemned creature; he deserves to die eternally (Romans 6:23). But the will of God is that all should be saved (1 Timothy 2:3,4). For this reason God has redeemed man through the blood of Jesus which was shed on the cross as payment for man's sins (1 John 1:7). God did this out of love to all people (John 3:16).

The truth of redemption is the underlying cause of our salvation. In so saying we should be careful that we do not limit redemption only to the church, the believers or the elect. The Bible is very explicit in stating that Christ redeemed all men. John the Baptist calls him the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). Jesus is the propitiation for the sins of the world (1 John 2:2; 1 Timothy 2:6). He reconciled the world unto God (2 Corinthians 5:19). The redemption of Christ was also for those who rejected him and are, by their own fault, ultimately lost in hell (2 Peter 2:1). The death of Jesus was not only for a few, for he tasted death for every man (Hebrews 2:9). The redemption of Jesus is also for fallen man. In 1 Timothy 1:15 we read: This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

Yes, Christ has redeemed us from sin, from death, and from the power of the devil. This is why we say: We are forgiven through Jesus Christ. We need to guard against those who would have us not believe in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ as the Bible teaches it.

In preparing this paper we took time to read through *Christian News*. In Vol. 29, No.5 page 5, this is what we found: Many contemporary Christians do not believe that Jesus died to satisfy God's requirements of payment or punishment for sin. They do not like to say that we are saved by the blood of Jesus. The writer of this article quotes a Catholic priest by the name of Robert J. Daly. This priest wrote in his book, "The Origin of the Christian Doctrine of Sacrifice," that: Jesus' death did not assume that God's forgiveness was effected or influenced by the offering of the blood sacrifice. On the contrary it is precisely an incarnational spiritualization of sacrifice that is operative in the New Testament and the early church. In other words, it was not the material blood or body of Jesus that constituted the sacrifice acceptable to God. It was the internal dispositions of obedience and love toward God, and of self-sacrificing love and service to and for the brothers and sisters.

Other western literature that we read records a sharp change in the western church's stand on the Gospel and person of Jesus Christ. We cite two of these. The first are those of the party of "Critical analysis in modern academia" who deny the virgin birth of Jesus. They claim that the nativity stories were not part of the earliest Christian traditions. They say that the virginal conception of Jesus was a myth and assert that Jesus may have been born to a sexually violated girl. They cite historical differences between the account of when Jesus was said to have been born, what events took place. They take pleasure in finding what they call discrepancies between the record of Matthew and Luke. They also compare what is recorded in world history and archaeological discoveries to what is recorded by the two evangelists that talk about the birth of Jesus (THE FIRST NOEL, *U.S. NEWS AND WORLD REPORT*, DECEMBER 2, 1992). Second we cite a church historian E. Glenn Hinson who classifies all those who believe like us as fundamentalists. In a paper called "CHRISTIAN FUNDAMENTALISM: HOPE OR DISASTER FOR EUROPEAN CHRISTIANITY" (Lecture given on November 20, 1991, in the Ruschlikon Baptist Church, Ruschlikon, Switzerland) he says, "Fundamentalism originated out of a series of Bible conferences held at Niagara, New York, during the late nineteenth century. It represented a

reaction against developments in critical interpretation of the Bible entering the United States from Germany, the social gospel movement, and the application of Darwin's theory of evolution to Christian theology. Fearful lest the very foundation of Christianity be shattered, conservative theologians singled out what they considered to be the "foundation" of Christian faith. Originally in 1878 they listed fourteen points. In 1895 they narrowed these to five: 1) plenary verbal inspiration of Scriptures, 2) literal virgin birth, 3) substitutional atonement of Christ, 4) physical resurrection, and 5) literal Second Coming.

People like these are slaves of sin. By the grace of God we are no longer like them, even though once we were also slaves to sin. Now we are liberated and free by the redemption of Jesus Christ. We know this because the Bible says in John 8:36, If the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed. Yes, we can say: We are forgiven through Jesus Christ.

We have a common message: We are forgiven through Jesus Christ. We would not do justice to the theme of our paper if we did not touch on justification. Webster's New World Dictionary gives the theological meaning of the word justification as follows: The act by which a sinner is freed through faith from the penalty of his sin and is accepted by God as righteous or worthy of being saved. New Bible Dictionary says this about justification: It is a forensic term meaning acquit, declare righteous. It is the opposite of condemn (Deuteronomy 25:1; 1 Peter 17:15; Romans 8:33). In Scripture, God is the judge of all the earth (Genesis 18:25) and his dealings with man are constantly described in forensic terms. Righteousness, (i.e., conformity with his law) is what he requires of men, and he shows his own righteousness as a Judge (Psalm 7:11; Isaiah 5:16; 10:22; Acts 17:31; Romans 2:5; 3:5).

Through Christ, God has forgiven sins of all people. God did this by sending his Son to suffer and die for the world. Because of the redemption of Christ, God no longer imputes sins of people (2 Corinthians 5:19). Instead of charging their sins against them, he credits them with the merits of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 5:21). Because Christ satisfied God's demands, God, through Christ, has justified the ungodly (Romans 4:5). E.W.A. Koehler states this clearly when he says: They who by nature and by their own works were altogether ungodly, were because of the work of Christ declared and pronounced just and righteous. Therefore, by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life (Romans 5:18).

Dr. C. H. Little in *Lutheran Confessional Theology*, page 149, states: Justification properly consists of the non-imputation of sins, or their forgiveness, to the sinner, which is the negative side; and the imputation (giving) of Christ's perfect righteousness, as though it were his own, which is the positive side.

The facts we have presented on justification are biblical and can be said to be beyond cultural boundaries. However, when we try to explain, in our own words, and with our own examples, what justification is, we could have some cultural or traditional implications, and even sometimes be misunderstood. On page 148 of *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, Koehler gives an example of an emancipation (setting free) of all slaves by Lincoln. But as we go on in the history of the U.S., we find movements like the Civil Rights Movement. If one would apply the example that Koehler has given, it would mean that Christ made it possible for man to complete the process of his freedom/justification which Christ had started by his suffering and death. This would make justification another of liberation theology doctrines and not an accomplished fact.

In *Christian Education in the African Context*, page 33, the writer says: The task of elaborating a Christian approach to culture emerges in earnest, not at the point of historical missionary transmission of the faith, but rather in the process of the indigenous reception and assimilation, with which the historical process itself becomes meaningful. The Christian approach to culture grows out of the process whereby the questions and problems raised by local cultures find their solutions and answers latent (hidden) in the Gospel, mediated through an indigenous hearing of the Word of God received within the culture. Such a process can take place effectively only in and through the terms and categories of the culture. The process comes into its own vernacular.

What we see in the above paragraph is the danger of trying to find cultural equivalents for a doctrine of Scripture no matter which.

Apart from cultural problems that we can introduce as we try to explain the doctrine of justification with our examples, there is also a danger (if we are dependent solely on a translation and are not able to refer to the original in some way) of whether the translator was able to capture the forensic meaning of justification with the choice of the word he used to translate justification. There is also a possibility of a translator not thinking of justification as a forensic term (Catholic translator).

In *Christian Education in the African Context*, page 32, the writer points out a problem that we should be watchful about. He says: Thus the critical role of Bible translation points to the significance of local religions providing the idiom for Christian apprehension and this confers on pre-Christian religions a theological significance which has often been denied to them.

(To highlight this problem we say that some knowledge of the historical background of theological key terms used in a translation is very important. Certain terms that are prominent in traditional religion should be avoided, if at all possible. Using such words Christianizes traditional religion. What some have called syncretism (which according to Webster's New World Dictionary means "the combination or reconciliation of differing beliefs in religion") is simply naturalization of Christianity by using idioms or key words borrowed from traditional religion. We do not believe in syncretism, which implies deliberate harmonization or combining of Christianity with indigenous/traditional religion beliefs.)

Saying publicly, "We have a common message: We are forgiven through Jesus Christ," ties us together with one aim and purpose, namely, that we will let people know that our common message is that sins have been forgiven through Jesus Christ. We will also want to make sure that the fact of forgiveness is understood in biblical culture and not in any other.

We have no choice but to work together and help each other in proclaiming and defending the pure and true teachings of the Word of God. To do this we will have to know what is invading what region of our fellowship. For us in Africa papers and lectures have been presented at various places that raise serious doubts as to whether an African Christian knows what he is converted to. It has been argued that whatever European denomination came in one's area that became a true-teaching church for him. The African has been plunged into divisional theology which is a reproduction of European church politics, it has been argued. The African is forced to argue over ideologies and words which do not mean much to him at all. This divisional theology has no regard for clan, tribe, or any social unity. It is a theology of divide and rule, where the role of an African Christian is to perpetuate European traditions and cultures which are said to be biblical theology.

Such kind of sentiments require us to define what one is converted to. In other words, what is conversion? We are in agreement with what F. Pieper says in his *Christian Dogmatics*, Volume II, page 454. We quote: The conversion of man, or his return to God, does not consist in his attempt to reform his life or to arouse some sort of "religious" feelings in himself. The favor of God has been fully secured for us through Christ's work and is offered to all men in the Gospel (2 Corinthians 5:19). The sinner's return to God, that is, his conversion, is effected in the moment when, turning away in despair from his own morality or his own righteousness, he accepts the grace of God offered to him in the Gospel, or believes the Gospel. Acts 11:21: A great number believed and turned unto the Lord. To turn to the Lord means to believe in Christ as our Mediator, through whom we have eternal life. Therefore it is necessary, if you would be converted, that you became terrified and die, that is, that you have an awakened and trembling conscience. Then, when this condition has been brought about, you must grasp the consolation. You will find this consolation not in any work which you have done, but in the work of God, who sent His Son into the world to proclaim to the terrified sinners the consoling compassion of God, His grace, which is given freely. This is how conversion is effected; others ways are wrong.

What Pieper has said in so many words, Koehler in his *Summary of Christian Doctrine*, page 130, summarizes in a small paragraph. We quote: Conversion is wrought by the Holy Ghost in the hearts of a man. While conversion will inevitably manifest itself in the outward life of a person, it actually takes place in the heart, and consists in this that the heart, broken and contrite because

of sin, trusts in Christ for grace and forgiveness. It is, therefore, essentially the bestowal of faith. In order to effect this change of heart, the Holy Ghost works repentance, offers grace, and works faith.

On the doctrine of conversion, *Christian Education in African Context* on page 33 has: It is essential to understand a Christian approach implies that the cultures of the world are meant to be converted to Christ. The words of the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19) require that the various nations are to be made disciples of Christ, . . . it is the nations, not some people within nations, who are to be disciples. . . . Conversion is not about adopting someone else's pattern of life and thought. However ancient and however excellent, that is not conversion but proselytization. . . . Conversion involves the turning towards Christ of everything that is there already, so that Christ comes into places, thoughts, relationships and world views in which He has never lived before.

Over against what African theologians say we want to state categorically that conversion is the work of God the Holy Spirit who brings us to faith. It would be strange for God to convert people to a tradition/culture of another people. If God is going to convert us to a culture, it will be his own culture.

When early missionaries came to Africa, they came with the colonialists. In most cases the work of a missionary was wrongly associated with that of the so-called "oppressors," the colonialists, the work of deceitfully advocating change which would make an African submit to European authorities.

In *Christian Education in the African Context* on page 31, paragraph 2, we read: Cultural outsiders, though they may advocate changes, may never themselves make the changes that they advocate in another culture. Only insiders may make such changes.

Today, an African theologian sees his task as being that of defining theology in African context. Theology of the missionary isn't good enough anymore because it fails to address itself to the African situation. The work of a missionary is not that of bringing about change, it is that of one learning to work with the African situation as best as he can, it is claimed.

In defense of our founding fathers and the common, universal faith they taught us, we will do our best to bring people to the true teachings and meaning of God's Word as explained in the Book of Concord, 1580. We will show without reservation that the Bible is God's book to all people and that it is above any human culture. What it said to the Jew it is saying to the Gentile also.

We are not trying to be long in our presentation at all. We feel that to appreciate the theme of this paper one should be reminded of the grace of God by which we become beneficiaries of the forgiveness Christ won for us. We quote from *Abiding Word*: God's grace, as the term is used generally in the Holy Scripture, means God's attitude of love whereby he has loved all sinners who have not deserved his love. He has loved unworthy sinners to the extent that He gave his only begotten Son into the world for satisfaction of sins.

In grace all men were drawn to God (2 Corinthians 5:19). In this grace all are forgiven and eternal life is assured to all.

We have a common message: We are all forgiven through Jesus Christ. This is an accomplished fact.

In passing, we want to explain the role of faith in all we have presented in this paper. We like what Koehler says in connection with this matter. Therefore we quote his words found on pages 144-145 of his *Summary of Christian Doctrine*: Faith: In the first place, it clings to the promise of God and apprehends and appropriates to itself what this promise offers. In the second place, faith produces something; it renews the sinner. The life which I now live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me (Galatians 2:20). Faith sanctifies us in our lives because it first justifies us before God. The appreciation of the blessings received by and through faith prompts us to consecrate our lives to God.

For people of different nationalities, continents, languages and almost representing all colors of human race to have the kind of fellowship as this one, which binds us together, means that such people are agreed in their confession of faith and doctrine. WELS *Doctrinal Statement* on page

15, paragraph 2, helps us define Church fellowship: Church fellowship is every joint expression, manifestation and demonstration of a common faith in which Christians on the basis of their confession find themselves to be united with one another. And united we are! Together we will declare: We are forgiven through Jesus Christ.

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