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Unity of Spirit—Bond of Peace

Essay #5—

The Distinctive Blessings in Which the Lutheran Church Rejoices and Lives

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During these days together, we certainly have been amazed by what we are enjoying and experiencing. It is truly amazing to be gathered here, since we come from so many different places, with different languages and customs. Only true faith can unite us. Certainly in our discussions we have seen how different we can be culturally and how we work in different ways. How good it is that we can get to know each other and also grow! We have traveled thousands of miles to be here, to rejoice in what we have and what we enjoy. God has made us his special disciples. He has given us an understanding that distinguishes us from others, that offers us joy and peace.

I would like us to think about what we *are*; nonetheless we cannot pass over what we *were*. The Bible describes it in a clear and precise manner: We were fleshly people without the capacity to understand and receive the things of the Spirit of God, considering them to be foolish. We could not see what was good, much less take hold of grace from on high or turn ourselves to the Lord.

Our reformer fathers, in the Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord, show this: “In spiritual and divine things, however, which concern the salvation of his soul, man is like a pillar of salt, like Lot’s wife, yes, like a log or a stone, like a lifeless statue which uses neither mouth nor eyes nor senses nor heart.”¹

The Bible says it this way: “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned (1 Corinthians 2:14).² It is Paul who declares that man is unable to understand the things that God has given; they simply seem to be foolishness. He said this in the context of life in Corinth. With the pagan religions and religious influences of the time, it was necessary to make it very clear how foolish man is in his understanding of the Lord. Jesus declares, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:44). Thus the Lord shows us that man is lost without him, that natural

¹ Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article II:20, *The Book of Concord*, translated and edited by Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 525.

² All Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, New International Version*, 1984.

man does not have any correct motivation to approach the divine—an unfavorable condition that is nevertheless still not understood by carnal man.

This leads us to think about what the Lord says: “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins” (Ephesians 2:1)—dead, without life, without the possibility of living on our own, without even the intent to make an effort or to want to do so, and, in addition, with the burden of condemnation and guilt by nature. This leads, then, to what the apostle Paul says: “All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one” (Romans 3:12). Thus all people, in their natural state, are opposed to God—are hostile—and this causes them to be far away from God, completely separated, and with a guilty verdict from God. We all need to be right with God, free from guilt and declared innocent—in other words, declared justified. The Bible says, ‘Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord’ (Hebrews 12:14).

It is this sad condition that some theologians, both past and present, have always denied, thinking that man is only a little damaged. Thus these heterodox theologians show how easy it is to form opinions that are contrary to clear Scripture.

Therefore the consequence of sin is death, eternal death, the absolute and irreversible separation of the sinner from God and his love. “Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned” (Romans 5:12). Only the perversity and blindness of the fallen nature of man leads him to talk about this need as if it were irrelevant.

The Augsburg Confession highlights the activity of God’s grace in justification:

It is also taught among us that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merits, works, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ’s sake, through faith, when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness, as Paul says in Romans 3:21-26 and 4:5.³

But even now we enjoy the fact that the Lord made a complete change in us. In his eyes, we have gone from being guilty to being acceptable before him. We never paid any price to be in this new condition, because we would always have to remember what our works are: “All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away” (Isaiah 64:6).

Thus God, in one external act, has given us what we needed. The wisest theologians have called this objective justification, because what happens in man comes directly from the Lord, from a verdict that is uniquely his, in which man is not at all involved.

³ Augsburg Confession, Article IV:1-3, *The Book of Concord*, p. 30.

This justification of man is caused by the grace of God and the merits of Jesus Christ. Neither of these two causes has anything to do with the participation of sinful human beings. Both causes exist completely in the sphere of God. Truly God has given us the greatest gift that man can receive: justification, the main principle of the Reformation, the heart of the Reformation, the center on which true religion rests. Justification frees us from the burden of condemnation and leads us to freedom; in it God's mercy is shown toward men. Thus justification is the focus of the Christian life. Our reformer fathers insisted on teaching this, because this doctrine is the gospel through which the Christian church in every place lives. Mankind will not live close to God by being more good, or trying to be better than others, or comparing themselves to others. Keeping God's law will only make one despair even more from anguish of conscience; people will not be closer to God through the pious fruit found in their lives. But believers receive forgiveness of sins and the declaration of innocence, and it is beneath that declaration that the simple, weak faith rests, because it points to Christ, who says: "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me" (John 5:39). Our reformer fathers raised up this truth before everyone, when the church was passing through one of the worst moments in its history. Thus we, too, lift up this doctrine for the life of the church and for our mission as the church.

As we approach the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, what a great tribute we pay to our reformer fathers by continuing to live under this teaching. Luther put his life into this message, and trusted in the hope of what the Bible teaches when it says: "A man is justified by faith apart from observing the law" (Romans 3:28). Thus, since this teaching is the center and the heart of our church, it has been called *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*, the article by which the church stands or falls. Clearly all other teachings revolve around this one. Yet at the same time this is the teaching that has been attacked most throughout the centuries.

We rejoice because God responded to our greatest need, the need to be freed from sin and the condemnation that it brings. Yet even now we could be quite sad because, in world Lutheranism, the doctrine of justification is not important. Many of those liberal Lutherans are so eager to make agreements with anyone, no matter if this doctrine is ignored. God in his love has pronounced the not guilty verdict that comes from his rule, far from the will or effort of man. This leads us to remember that the cause of this declaration is the grace of God and the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior who said from the cross, "It is finished" (John 19:30), the Savior who did this work for all mankind.

Of course, Scripture teaches that Jesus died for all. Since Jesus completed his work, no one needs to do anything to pay for his sin. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). It also says: "He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:2). Scripture declares to us that God has *reconciled* the world to himself and paid for the sins of the world in Christ. The Bible reveals the marvelous truth that, through the life, death, and resurrection of his Son, Christ Jesus, God has *justified* the world. "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus (Romans 3:23-24). The term "justification" is applied universally when Paul writes: "He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification" (Romans 4:25).

Salvation is for “whoever believes” (John 3:16). God’s righteousness is “by faith from first to last” or “from faith to faith.” “The righteous will live by faith” (Romans 1:17). Universal righteousness, objective justification, is mine through faith. Trusting that God has done what the gospel says he has done, I have it.

God, therefore, reconciles us. Paul says that it is by grace: “All . . . are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus (Romans 3:23,24). His grace is an active love that brings us salvation. The many had died because of one man, and his love led him to give his one and only Son (John 3:16) to give us salvation. In his grace, he forgives us through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus; it is that redemptive work that constitutes the foundation of this forgiveness—atonement for our sins. In his death, he was expiating our sins and paying the debt that we had with the Father. The Father, in his love, accepts this perfect sacrifice. By his complete mediation and his innocence, we are on the receiving end of that which is most holy and perfect: his righteousness.

As confessional Lutherans in the midst of heterodox theological storms, we continue announcing the benefits of the declaration that we are justified: We now have peace with God; our Father tells us that we are reconciled. We have peace, knowing that we are not under the wrath of the Father, that we are forgiven, that his promises accompany us, that no punishment hangs over us; and we know that this is not based on our accomplishments but on the death of Jesus on the cross.

We arrive at the above conclusions because we see it clearly in the Scriptures; in them our redemption is described. However, that theological conclusion does not come by chance, but rather by having and experiencing and enjoying a solid system of interpreting the Scriptures. Throughout the years, the Christian church has been affected by systems of interpretation, from allegory to existentialism, pietism, and demythologizing, which have caused believers to suffer. God has been good; in spite of this, he has maintained the correct teaching of his Word in the midst of the snares of the enemy. Today, as theological uncertainties are not diminishing but rather increasing, it is obviously important to remember what Scripture says: “All Scripture is God-breathed” (2 Timothy 3:16). This drives us to guard the hope that we have. The greatest distinction that we have is the study and interpretation of his Word, the historical-grammatical method, which has come to strengthen our conviction about Scripture. Accompanying our study with the presuppositions of faith and a sure exegesis assures us that we are believing on a solid foundation; the Word is our guide. “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path” (Psalm 119:105). It is through that Word that we then comprehend the many blessings that he has given. Jesus says, “These are the Scriptures that testify about me” (John 5:39), and that testimony sows certainty in our hearts, as we recognize that “prophecy never had its origin in the will of man” (2 Peter 1:21).

In two senses, the church has grown in this blessing: Sharing this concept in its theological universities, in which seminarians grow in their love of Scripture, and in the churches, where it is taught that the Word comes from God and believers go home with the certainty of putting their hope in God, loving and trusting him above all things. It is thanks to diligent study that we have avoided falling into the errors that lead one to wander from the faith.

By loving the Word and considering it our only source of faith, we are led to seek and strengthen ties with other believers that see the Bible in the same way. Our evangelical Lutheran church lives and rejoices in the unity that it has and promotes. One of the joys that the believer can enjoy is Christian fellowship, as Psalm 133:1 says: “How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!” We encourage each other to preserve this fellowship and guard our unity.⁴ We express that bond of unity when we are concerned for the believer that is threatened by error and sin, when we help our brothers in their needs, and when we strive to grow in Jesus as his disciples.⁵ This teaching therefore moves us to strengthen our ties of fellowship in order to build up our defenses against error. We show respect for this unity also by appreciating those teachers who support the truth; but, at the same time, we emphasize our responsibility toward the weak in faith. It is sad that, in the present moment, one of the greatest problems is ecumenism; groups that were once serious about the Word have fallen slowly into being weak in this aspect.

Our beloved Lutheran churches are not isolated. Our unity is due to the Holy Spirit, who unites us, and we express it as we maintain fellowship. Some denominations, in their fondness for wanting to be united and not feel alone in their countries, have tried to minimize the desire to maintain the doctrine of fellowship. It may be a very human desire to want to seek religious camaraderie, but it will be poison for the soul. Slowly it will destroy what the Lord has sown in hope in our hearts. The efforts of the CELC during these last years have served to allow conservative groups to see an opportunity to maintain brotherhood in a world that is moving toward secularism and globalization (in a negative sense). The CELC serves as a platform for brotherhood, a refuge for those who seek to be under the solid Word.

It is remarkable that, for other religious groups, unity is based on mere administrative ties and social connections, driving them to frequent error. Those heterodox groups that do not maintain unity in all aspects feel secure in the fictitious fellowship that they maintain. That may help the flesh, but it destroys faith.

It is important to remember that we maintain this unity thanks to the Lord himself, who gives us his Word and sacraments to sustain and strengthen faith. In his grace, the Lord uses the means of grace. God, in his omnipotence, works over, above, and around us. We are glad to enjoy these blessings. Sadly many others live in slavery to religiosity and their unity is based on human, fleshly efforts. Thus we could clearly deduce that this unity is a miracle of God’s grace and one more piece of evidence of his power to protect us against the constant attacks of the three enemies that attack us. Paul encourages us: “What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 1:13).

Our challenge is to preserve the unity that God has given us as believers. Jesus said, “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). We want to remember that it is not possible to maintain unity in the church by agreeing to disagree.

⁴ Ephesians 4:3: “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”

⁵ John 13:35: By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

It is remarkable that some false teachings arise from not understanding the concept of *adiaphora*, things that God neither commands nor forbids, where doing or not doing them is a matter of indifference. Paul highlights the character of Christian ethics as well as Christian liberty and concludes that observance in external things is immaterial in its relationship to the kingdom of God.⁶ Luther, in fact, defines the idea of *adiaphora* according to a legal criterion, when he distinguishes between things or works that are clearly commanded or forbidden by God in the New Testament and those that remain free, of which it can be said that omitting them is not wrong and observing them is not a good work. In our early history, Lutherans went through two adiaphoristic controversies, which had to do with matters of worship as well as disagreements with the Calvinists, which had to do with enjoying secular entertainment. In my country, denominations are founded on legalistic concepts as if they were true expressions of a faith relationship with God, using moral rules of their own conception to determine the proper exercise of faith and the purpose of life under the Lord. There is no worse slavery than when one chains himself; this happens when religious people assume that moral agreements are the same as divine directives when it comes to showing their piety. The point is that the evangelical Lutheran church enjoys worship with freedom and living a Christian life in the same freedom to which we were called.

God is with the confessional Lutheran church and makes her stand firm. He has given her the opportunity for understanding. Thus we have emphasized the challenges of remaining firm in that in which the Lord has made us take part. We are on the rock,⁷ and that is how we confess it. We live in difficult times; heresies have not gone away, the arrows of our enemies are always present, and sometimes it seems as if the enemy is winning. I come from a city in which violence presents itself every day; in a similar way, heterodox groups constantly present themselves and sell the idea that they are the only way to heaven. Nonetheless I can say with gladness that I am on the way to heaven. Jesus earned it for me; he paid my ticket. God announces to me clearly who I am: a redeemed child (Ephesians 1). The world still needs to hear all the more who the Savior is, and we want to communicate that even further than we have already been able. As we approach the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, we imitate and honor our reformer fathers by communicating God's Word in a hostile world—and we know that he will never abandon us. We have the truth and we live in the truth. Let us walk toward the future proud of what the Lord has done through his Lutheran messengers.

⁶ Romans 14:17: "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." 1 Corinthians 6:12: "'Everything is permissible for me'—but not everything is beneficial. 'Everything is permissible for me'—but I will not be mastered by anything." 1 Corinthians 8:8: "But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do." Galatians 5:6: "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love." Colossians 2:20: "Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules?"

⁷ Psalm 18:2: "The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge. He is my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold."

Discussion Questions

This essay identifies four distinct blessings of God in our Lutheran church:

- Our Lutheran church teaches the doctrine of justification properly and puts it at the center.
- Our Lutheran church interprets the Bible correctly as God's Word.
- Our Lutheran church practices the doctrine of church fellowship in a way that promotes true unity and protects against false doctrine.
- Our Lutheran church does not make legalistic rules about *adiaphora*.

1. Has one of these blessings been especially influential in guiding you to our Lutheran church fellowship or keeping you in it?

2. Does one of these blessings make our Lutheran church especially attractive in your country and culture—in contrast to the other Christian denominations?

3. If you had been assigned this essay, is there any other distinct blessing of God in our Lutheran church that you would have mentioned?

4. As we close this convention, what are you going to take away from this experience?

5. As we close this convention, what final encouragement do you have for your brothers and sisters in the faith in the CELC?