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The
Comfort
of
Lutheran
Doctrine



MATTHEW C. HARRISON



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Introduction

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You should be Lutheran. I don't say that as the president of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. I don't say that as a pastor in a *Book of Concord* Lutheran denomination. I say that as a sinner with an often troubled conscience.

You should be Lutheran, not so you can pat yourself on the back and feel smug or self-righteous for having a more correct theological worldview than your neighbors. You should be Lutheran so you can have absolute comfort, absolute certainty, absolute guarantee of your salvation, your eternal standing before God the Father for the sake of the death of Jesus on the cross in your place.

Only Lutheran theology can fully offer this comfort.

Against the notion that Jesus only died for some people, that God only offers salvation to His elect, and that He creates some people in order to damn them, Lutheran doctrine teaches the biblical reality that “God so loved the world” (John 3:16) that God “desires all people to be saved” (1 Timothy 2:4) and that hell wasn't made for any human being (Matthew 25:41).

Against the notion that you must do something—cooperate with God in some way—either by works or by making faith a product of human will—in order to have salvation, Lutheranism teaches the biblical reality that salvation is God's pure and perfect work alone (Ephesians 2:8–9; John 15:16). He does it all. Jesus' death on the cross was sufficient to pay for the sins of the whole world. And He delivers the benefits of His death on the cross in personal, perceptible means. He baptized you. He preaches His Word to you. He declares you forgiven. He feeds you with the body and blood of Jesus in His Supper. It's all His work. So if it is His work, then you can stake all your confidence in it, because He doesn't leave anything to uncertainty or chance.

There should be no Lutheran insomniacs, no one who has to stay awake at night worrying about salvation, worrying about whether God can love or forgive us. Consoling the troubled conscience that could never find certainty of salvation, Luther said, “God did not come down from heaven to make you uncertain about predestination, to teach you to despise the sacraments, absolution, and the rest of the divine ordinances. Indeed, He instituted them to make you completely certain and to remove the disease of doubt from your heart.”¹ Good doctrine is to be a salve to anxiety and worry. The Bible always points outside ourselves, to find full comfort and consolation in Christ’s completed work on the cross and in His ongoing work in His Word and Sacraments.

Almost all the essays in this volume have been adapted from the “Letter from the President” as it has appeared in *The Lutheran Witness* over the past few years. I hope you find in the doctrine they confess the same comfort I need and I find in the consolation of genuine *Book of Concord* Lutheranism.

YOURS IN CHRIST,
PRESIDENT MATT HARRISON

1 *Lectures on Genesis*, AE 5:45.

Comforted by the Death and Resurrection of Jesus

The perfect work of Jesus on the cross is our full confidence and perfect comfort. His death is my comfort in the face of the devil's accusations. And His resurrection is my comfort in the face of death and suffering. This is the beating heart of Lutheran doctrine. Jesus was crucified *for you*. He rose from the dead *for you*. Have you ever noticed how many first-person singular pronouns are all throughout the Small Catechism's meaning of the Second Article of the Apostles' Creed? "*My Lord . . . redeemed me . . . purchased and won me . . . that I may be His own.*"

Part I

The death and resurrection of Jesus is not abstract; it's not for someone else. It is for me, for you!

St. Paul says the very death and resurrection of Jesus become yours in the waters of Holy Baptism. There, in those otherwise placid waters, probably drawn from the tap water of your municipality, is a drowning deluge in the death of Jesus for you and a wellspring of life in the resurrection of Jesus for you. This is your comfort and confidence every day!

We Preach Christ Crucified

.....

Paul confronted numerous problems in his mission congregation in Corinth. He'd spent a year and a half with them after founding the congregation in A.D. 51. Despite all his time there, a host of challenges erupted. That's comforting, knowing that even with apostolic leadership things went awry. No surprise when we have challenges. He wrote to them barely four years later in the spring of A.D. 55.

In his letter, Paul chastises them for divisions in Corinth. They were lining up behind individuals they perceived were supporting their views.

For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ." Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? (1 CORINTHIANS 1:11-13)

These divisions were serious indeed. Some were denying even the resurrection of the dead. Paul responded with the glorious resurrection chapter. "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins" (1 Corinthians 15:17). Thank God we don't have such serious problems.

Had the Apollos party come to despise those with a less eloquent or philosophical approach to the faith? Had the Cephas party insisted upon elements of the Jewish ceremonial laws as Peter had done, contrary to the Gospel? We'll never know for sure. Paul responds, "Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the

debater of this age?” (1 Corinthians 1:20). Could these be in order, the Christ party, the Cephas party and the Apollos party?

Paul hits them all and brings it back to basics. “Since . . . the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe” (1 Corinthians 1:21).

Make no mistake, the message of Christ’s crucifixion is complete folly to the world and has been ridiculed from the beginning. That God the Son assumed flesh, lived the perfect life no human could live, fulfilled all the righteous requirements of the Law, died a substitutionary death for all sinners and all sin, was rejected and condemned by His own Father, was raised on the third day for the reconciliation and justification of all (2 Corinthians 5:19; Romans 4:25) is a scandal to faulty human reason. It offends every natural inclination of human self-righteousness. That the blessing of eternal righteousness, this justification, comes to benefit me personally only when the Spirit creates faith in this Christ and His cross is the height of absurdity and injustice to the natural, sinful human mind. “For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the Scripture says, ‘Everyone who believes in Him will not be put to shame’” (Romans 10:10–11).

Paul also writes:

How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in Him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” (ROMANS 10:14–15)

Paul is speaking here of ordained pastors and missionaries. But there is also a vital witness laypeople perform in the course of their myriad vocations in life. Consider the woman at the well. She witnessed to her neighbors, and “many Samaritans from that town believed in Him because of the woman’s testimony” (John 4:39). Our church follows the Scriptures (1 Peter 2:9) and joins Martin Luther in strongly asserting that Christ has “commanded all Christians to confess their faith publicly and to bring others to the faith” (WA 12:521.36f.).

“Christ crucified” is the content of the message we proclaim. Just read Peter’s preaching in the early chapters of Acts:

Let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead . . . This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved. (ACTS 4:10–12)

The crucifixion was a blood atonement that was made for the sins of the world. “The blood of Jesus [God’s] Son cleanses us from all sin” (1 John 1:7). It was a sacrifice “once for all,” says the writer of Hebrews. “He entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of His own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption” (Hebrews 9:12). Jesus calls His death a “ransom” (Mark 10:45). The New Testament often calls it a “redemption,” a purchase price, a buying back, the price of a slave’s freedom.

“The Crucified One” is a special grammatical construction. “Crucified” is in the perfect tense. It conveys that an action in the past is accomplished but the results of that action continue. Christ was crucified once, but He remains ever “the Crucified One.” Indeed, no resurrection, no Christianity. But note that after the resurrection, Christ presents Thomas His wounds and tells him to see and touch. Thomas responds: “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28). The Crucified One is alive.

The deed is done. “It is finished!” said Jesus before He died. Paul taught that this crucifixion, like Christ who remains the Crucified One, puts this crucified reality right into believers’ lives. In Baptism, “I am crucified with Christ.” I daily return to my baptismal crucifixion via repentance. Like Jesus, I live daily with the cross. “We know that our old self was crucified with Him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin” (Romans 6:6).

God answers our prayers, but He often answers them like He answered Paul: “My power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). Like Paul, we must learn to boast in weakness: “But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Galatians 6:14).

The very crosses I suffer in this life drive me to Jesus. I may look weak, but I’m Christ’s. I shall follow Him into death. Because I’m baptized, I shall follow Him into life eternal to await a blessed physical resurrection just like His. Meanwhile, I live under the cross by faith and in joy. “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me” (Galatians 2:20). That’s divine power and divine wisdom under the cross.

We preach Christ crucified, the power and wisdom of God.

Christ's Resurrection Is Yours

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Not long before being elected to the presidency of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS), while working for LCMS World Relief and Human Care, I was involved in a rather significant car crash. A colleague was driving, and cars in two oncoming lanes stopped to allow us to cross in front of them into the drive of our LCMS International Center. As my friend crossed the two lanes, we were hit hard on the front right passenger side by an oncoming Cadillac Escalade. Ka-BOOM! The airbags deployed. Our vehicle spun 180 degrees and a third vehicle was hit. I don't know if you've had such a jarring experience, but even without significant injury it takes a few moments to recover your senses. Right away, I felt chest pain from the airbag, even as I heard my friend moaning in pain. Thankfully, no one was seriously injured.

After recovering our senses, the three drivers and I—the lone passenger—got out of the cars and waited patiently for the police to arrive. I was within earshot as the oncoming driver gave his version of the events to the police officer. “I was just driving normally in the far lane and this car [ours] drove right in front of me.” Then there was silence. He fumbled. “I can't lie. I hit a pregnant woman and a priest.” I had my collar on, and thanks to his confession I found out that the third driver was expecting.

His initial report was not entirely truthful. The two oncoming lanes had come to a stop. The two front cars allowed some separation, then waved us through. Just as that happened, he had driven

his Cadillac onto the shoulder and was barreling toward an exit to the right several hundred yards ahead. He was driving illegally on the shoulder when he hit us.

Wow, I thought, he's not having a good day. The law struck him hard. He tried to lie, but couldn't pull it off. He admitted his guilt. As he stood alone in shame, I walked up to him and put my hand on his shoulder. "Friend," I said, "I've had days like this too. We all screw up. I certainly do. This is what Jesus is for. You're forgiven."

Neither altruism nor high-minded ideals motivated me to forgive him. More than anything, I saw myself in that guy. As I looked at him—glad no one was injured—it struck me as a comic sight. "I can't lie. I just hit a pregnant woman and a priest." I still laugh about it! I've done stuff like he did. I've taken chances driving while in a hurry. I've lied or been tempted to lie. I immediately thought I could have been him a hundred times over. In fact, I have been. Lord, grant me repentance, faith in Jesus, and friends and loved ones to tell me what I need to hear, when I need to hear it.

I thought about this incident after reading through the Gospel accounts of Holy Week. I've often noted that we read the Gospels best by seeing ourselves in each and every character. I'm the believer Mary or Martha, disappointed with Jesus: "If You'd been here, my brother would not have died." I'm the simultaneously courageous and pusillanimous apostle Peter. I'm the establishment leader who's irked when my power is threatened or disrespected. I'm blind Bartimaeus, crying out, "Have mercy on me!" I'm the apostles in Gethsemane, too tired to pray. I'm the apostle who can't understand Jesus' words about the necessity of dying. I'm Judas, lover of money, betrayer of Jesus. I'm Herod, who wants a miracle. I'm Pilate, who wants to save his own interests more than doing what's right. I'm the thief ridiculing Jesus on the cross. I'm the thief, ashamed of my sin, looking to Jesus, "Remember me when You come into Your kingdom" (Luke 23:42). I'm the apostles, scattered and afraid. I'm the women expecting to find a dead Jesus in a tomb. I'm Peter and John hearing of the resurrection and running. I'm the apostles behind locked doors for fear. I'm unbelieving Thomas, who said he wouldn't believe unless he put his fingers into Jesus' wounds (John 20:25). I am the sinner

for whom Christ lived and died and rose again. I am the one whose sin is a curse, one borne by Jesus. I am “the righteous” one of God, because Christ was put to death for my transgressions and raised for my justification (Romans 4:25). As Luther loved to preach, it is as though I were born of the virgin Mary! As though I were sinless! As though I had fulfilled all Law. Christ did it for all, and thus, worm that I am, Christ’s resurrection is mine.

Therefore, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me” (Galatians 2:20).

In repentance and faith, this is true—perhaps most true for all of us—precisely on the worst of days.