

Justification and Mission  
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What a wonderful birthday gift! First, I get to share my birthday with the illustrious Rev. Clint Poppe, famous for his good preaching and love for sound theology, who was also born on August 7. More than that, I get to talk about the topic closest to the hearts of us Evangelical Lutherans: our justification by God through faith alone, by grace alone, for the sake of the redemption we have in Christ Jesus our Lord.

No topic can rival this one. It is as God justifies us that he makes us fit to think and speak theologically. Unless God justifies you by his grace alone you will attempt to justify yourself. Those who are trying to justify themselves make rotten theologians, regardless of their erudition and intelligence, because those who are trying to justify themselves must needs manipulate the theological task toward that end. This twists and distorts all theology into a legalistic caricature of God's pure Word. Only when you are justified by God's grace alone, through faith alone, on account of the merits of Christ alone, are you free from the futile task of trying to justify yourself. Only then can you become a competent theologian.

We Lutherans tend to alternate between saying that justification is the chief topic of the faith and saying that Christology is the chief topic of the faith. All theology is Christology. The topic of Christology and justification are bound together. One cannot understand the one without the other. Christ is the revelation of the Father's grace, the Author of salvation, the propitiation by which God's anger against us sinners is taken away, and, of course, the object of justifying faith. Justifying faith believes everything God says, but it justifies by trusting in him who is the LORD, our righteousness.

But there is good reason to identify specifically justification through faith alone as the chief topic of our religion. We do so, not to assign an inferior status to Christology. Justification through faith alone depends on sound Christology. We insist for the sake of faith. We are justified through faith. We are justified through faith alone. Justification has to do with faith because justification is an oral, verbal, articulated, divine, verdict. God says so. Faith holds onto what God says.

The chief article of the faith is justification through faith alone. Justification through faith alone is impossible without objective justification. It is impossible without the Father sending the Son, the Son obeying the Father and fulfilling the law for us, offering himself up as the sacrifice to take away sin, dying for us, rising from the dead, ascending into heaven, and sending the Holy Spirit who comes into our hearts, removes the hearts of stone, and replaces them with hearts of flesh by means of the declaration of the forgiveness of all our sins for Christ's sake.

Our friends and neighbors known commonly as Evangelicals, perhaps better described by the recently coined compound noun, Methobapticostals, do not believe that justification is

the central truth of the faith. It is not the topic on which everything rests. For them, the central topic is faith as an experience. Some emphasize conversion, others a second blessing such as the baptism in the Holy Spirit. In either case, the central truth of the Christian religion is an experiential relationship with Jesus.

We Lutherans focus on what God says to us when he justifies us. He teaches. Doctrine is, by definition, what is taught. God teaches doctrine. Justification through faith alone is heavenly doctrine. The central topic of the faith is what faith receives, what it believes, on which it rests. It is doctrine.

We confess what we believe. We preach it, teach it, contend for it, publish it, hold onto it, and bear witness to it. The very idea of hiding the truth of justification under a bushel is repugnant to us – not just because this would be neglecting our duty to confess our faith before men – but because the nature of this gospel requires that it be proclaimed. One cannot do the gospel. One can believe it, proclaim it, and confess it. But it isn't something we do.

That we don't do the gospel doesn't mean we don't experience it. It means that we don't bring about this experience. The God who justifies us by Christ's blood, in bringing this forgiveness to us also makes his home in us. The gospel that justifies us grants us the new and abundant life. We experience God's love. We will not grant to the Methobapticostals that their personal relationship with Jesus Christ is experientially superior to ours. To be justified through faith alone, means that we have peace with God and access to the throne of grace. It means that the love of God is poured out into our hearts. We Lutherans experience the faith. We place the doctrine of justification above our experience of it because the doctrine, being revealed by God, is pure. No experience we experience can, in this life, be free from all sin. We place doctrine above experience because the foundation of our faith and thus for our experience is the truth that lies outside of our experience. To experience Jesus in the heart is to see Jesus outside of the heart: on the cross bearing the sin of the world. We place doctrine above experience because the doctrine of justification is a means of grace by which our faith is born. Our experience of faith is a result, not a cause, of faith itself. We place the doctrine of justification above our experience of it because God's pure doctrine will correct faulty and false interpretations of our religious experience.

So then, is our difference with the Methobapticostals but a difference in emphasis? We emphasize the faith that is believed while they emphasize the experience of believing? It may appear to be so, but the difference in emphasis is in reality a difference in doctrine. We insist on the pure doctrine. They insist on the authentic experience. By subordinating doctrine to experience, they denigrate doctrine in principle, and in practice relegate it to an inferior status.

One thinks of Joel Osteen's comments about Mitt Romney when Romney was the Republican candidate for president of the United States. Romney is a Mormon. Osteen was asked whether Romney was a Christian. Osteen replied that since Romney claimed to have a personal relationship with Jesus it was not up to him to question that. That the "Jesus"

Romney had the relationship with is not the Jesus that Christians confess apparently escaped Osteen's attention. You can be a Christian if you deny the Holy Trinity and the true deity of the Lord Jesus Christ as long as you have a personal relationship with Jesus – whatever that means.

If the central topic of the Christian religion is justification through faith alone, then the mission of the church must be to preach the gospel purely and to administer the sacraments according to Christ's institution. These are the means by which God justifies sinners through faith alone. The sinner cannot fly back to Calvary and the open tomb. The sinner cannot justify himself. The sinner who is justified through faith alone cannot contribute anything at all to his justification. He must be the passive recipient. He must hear the gospel proclaimed. He must receive the washing of water and the word. He must eat and drink the body and blood of Jesus, given and shed for the forgiveness of sins. The mission of the church is to speak on Christ's behalf those words by which the Holy Spirit will justify sinners through faith alone. When justification through faith alone is the chief topic of Christian teaching, we must be content to see the success of the church's mission, not in the results of preaching, but in the preaching itself. Where the word of God is purely proclaimed, there the mission of Christ's church is being fulfilled. What we see, feel, experience, measure, test, or touch cannot be considered when determining whether the church is carrying out her mission. The question is: How does God justify sinners? The answer: Through his gospel. Where the gospel is purely proclaimed is where the mission of the church is taking place.

If having a personal relationship with Jesus is the central topic of the Christian religion, then the question of what is preached becomes less pressing. What matters is a personal relationship. Pure doctrine takes a back seat to visible, thriving, discernable, relationships. This is one reason why Methobapticostals ordain women sooner or later, even when they remain culturally conservative. Women care more about relationships than men do. The democratization of Christianity is the feminization of Christianity. The defense of sound doctrine gives way to the nurturing of meaningful relationships. Ministers are no longer pastors with calls from God to teach the saving doctrine. They are facilitators of relationship building.

We Lutherans believe in the authority of God's word, not only its normative authority because it is God's word and therefore the only standard for Christian teaching, but also its power to achieve the purpose for which God sends it. Since God's word has authority, the ministry of the Word has authority. Ministers exercise authority when they preach and teach. This is doctrinal authority. God says it and that settles it. We Lutherans have always stressed the importance of indoctrinating and training men to be faithful preachers. Pure doctrine matters. The chief activity is preaching. Preachers preach.

But this is highly undemocratic. Preachers aren't the only gifted people in the church! Surely, the mission of the church includes preachers preaching. But are we not all ministers? Isn't this what we are saying when we speak of the priesthood of all believers? And wasn't it to all of the Christians that Jesus gave his Great Commission?

It's been over forty years since the publication of Don Abdon's, Organizing around the Great Commission. Abdon was a pastor in the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod who devoted many years of his life to showing congregations how to establish congregational government based on the Great Commission. While there are four accounts in the four Gospels of the crucified and risen Lord Jesus commissioning his disciples to preach the gospel, the one most commonly understood to be the Great Commission is recorded in St. Matthew's Gospel where Jesus says,

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. (Matthew 28:19-20a)

Abdon's reasoning was simple. Since all Christians were to engage in the task of making disciples it made sense to come up with congregational polity based on that activity. How was this to be done? Each member of the body would use whatever spiritual gifts he or she had received from God to assist in the task of making disciples.

For the traditional Lutherans, the central topic of the faith is justification through faith alone. For the Methobapticostals the central topic of the faith is the experience of faith in the personal relationship with Jesus. What is the central topic of the faith in Don Abdon's "Organizing around the Great Commission"? It is not justification through faith alone. It is the experience of faith – not the experience of the individual – but the experience of the congregation as she organizes around the Great Commission.

The central article of the faith and the chief activity of the faithful is organizing. Organizing is the "Metho" of Methobapticostalism. Methodism has always elevated method over doctrine. How we do it matters more than what we do. The method of Abdon's organization introduced Lutherans to such new measures as spiritual gifts inventory tests as Lutherans tried to use these gifts in such a way as to bring about the growth of the church. Throughout the 1980s and 90s, Lutherans throughout America moved away from justification as the central topic of the faith to mission, described as the Great Commission, taking its place.

The method of Methobapticostalism is organizing the laity to carry out the Great Commission. Lutherans have always valued and made use of contributions to the work of the church from God's people throughout the church. The laity are the people. That's what the word means. Lutherans have also emphasized the preached word preached by men apt to teach and rightly called to do so. There is no natural conflict or tension between the ordained ministerium and the laity. In fact, their natural relationship is mutually supportive. The teaching in the pulpit is the teaching around the dinner table and to the children when they are tucked in at night. The centrality of justification cannot be maintained unless the pure doctrine reigns supreme over both the preachers and the people.

This is what it means to be confessional in the Lutheran sense. It's not a church-political party one joins so that he knows who to vote for in synodical elections. It is rather to place

the pure confession of the pure doctrine of the pure gospel over the pastors and the people. Nothing they do can be put on the same level as God's justification of the ungodly. The mission of the church will always be subordinated to this central topic of the faith.

But what happens when mission itself becomes the central topic of the faith? The central topic of the faith moves from what God does to what we do. What God does is hidden. What we do is seen. You cannot measure justification. You cannot see it. Mission is measured. It is seen. Statistics are gathered together and interpreted so that we can assess the progress we are making, giving due credit to God, of course. Visible experiences and relationships that are clearly identifiable and measurable are placed above the pure doctrine of the gospel. What we do is then what the church is all about. We are the church.

When mission becomes an end in itself, the result is a displacement of the means of grace that work unseen within the human heart and their replacement with visible, earnest, busy-body activism. The substance is replaced with the form. The form becomes the substance. Since a ministry of mercy is by nature more visible and measurable than the ministry of the Word, the mercy we show to others overshadows God's grace in Christ. The former you can see. The latter you cannot see. You can see and videotape the ministry of comfort dogs. You cannot see faith.

Lutheranism has been perverted. It has been replaced by a form of Methobapticalism. These pseudo-Lutherans indignantly lay claim to Lutheran authenticity. Since confessional Lutherans place the preaching of Christ crucified above everything else done in and in the name of the church, the Lutheran Methobapticals accuse them of elevating preachers and denigrating the witness of the laity. That some of the most vocal critics of Methobapticalism among us are also part of the liturgical renewal movement that often emphasizes the difference between pastors and the laity provides further proof to those captivated by Methobaptical dogma that their judgment of confessional Lutherans is correct. We're a bunch of stuck up sacerdotalists!

We should take no pleasure in pointing out that the church growth goals of the Lutheran Methobapticals yielded little lasting fruit. Their new measures fueled by organizing around the Great Commission, discovering and using spiritual gifts, relevant preaching, preferably without a pulpit, upbeat music, and informal style of worship did not cause the church to grow. The baby boomers, having been spoiled rotten by the greatest generation of indulgent parents, bequeathed nothing of spiritual value to the millennials who left the church completely.

As we confront the failure of the mission of those who made mission the central topic of the faith, we need to take stock of ourselves. We, who call ourselves confessional Lutherans, are facing hard times. Our congregations are aging and shrinking. While we can parry the criticism of those who have abandoned the pure doctrine for the pure method and ending up with neither, we may not absolve ourselves of our failures. When we teach that God's justification of sinners is the chief topic of Christianity, we are saying that what identifies us as Christ's Church is not what we do for God, but what God does for us. This does not mean that we may dismiss the visible decline of our congregations as somehow the inscrutable

will of God over which we have no power to do anything at all. We must do what confessional Lutherans do. We must confess. We need to apply to confessional Lutheranism in our day a more severe examination than what our critics are able to do.

We must confess. Preachers must teach the doctrine. Catechizing the laity is your lifelong duty. A sermon that does not teach the divine doctrine isn't worth preaching. The reason for teaching is learning. A disciple is not made. A disciple is taught. Pastors aren't formed. They're indoctrinated so that they can indoctrinate others. The truth, the substance, the teaching of the Holy Scriptures is our greatest treasure, and teaching this doctrine is the first and greatest duty, not only of every pastor, but of every father and mother.

If you want to understand what a pastor's job is in regard to the teaching of the central topic of the faith and all other articles of Christian doctrine learn what the underlying presuppositions of the educationist establishment are and reject them all. Classes and degrees in education are based on a fallacy that there is such a thing as the discipline of teaching in the abstract. There is not. What is taught determines the manner of teaching it. Teaching is always specific and personal. You must know your topic and you must teach it to real people. The teaching and preaching office requires its incumbents to love the divine Word and to love those to whom it is taught. The central topic of the faith is justification. Justification is God's love. It is literal, focused, and personal love. Love is a verb. Justify is a verb. This is what God does.

If God loves you, he forgives you. Let's abandon this nonsense about God loving the sinner and hating the sin. God hates sinners. The Psalmist says to God, "You hate all workers of iniquity." (Psalm 5:5b) Solomon writes:

These six things the LORD hates,  
Yes, seven are an abomination to Him:  
A proud look,  
A lying tongue,  
Hands that shed innocent blood,  
A heart that devises wicked plans,  
Feet that are swift in running to evil,  
A false witness who speaks lies,  
And one who sows discord among brethren.  
(Proverbs 6:16-19)

Note that God hates the deed and the doer equally. Since God hates sinners, the Psalmist hates them, too. David writes in Psalm 139:21-22,

Do I not hate them, O LORD, who hate You?  
And do I not loathe those who rise up against You?  
I hate them with perfect hatred;  
I count them my enemies.

When God loves sinners he forgives them. He reckons them to be righteous. God is not a man that he should lie. There is no falsehood, no insincerity, and no deceit in God. When God reckons the sinner to be righteous the sinner is righteous. God does not reckon a righteousness that does not exist. It is as real as Jesus. The preacher preaches Jesus. When he does, he preaches God's love for sinners.

But I just said that God hates sinners. He does. When he says, "Depart from me into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matthew 21:41) he is not loving them. Sin brings God's wrath. The reconciliation effected by Christ's crucifixion is not the change of the human heart – that is brought about by the Holy Spirit in the preaching of the gospel – but the change in God's heart. For Christ's sake, in Christ, God has reconciled the world to himself.

This is God's love. There is no other kind of divine love. There is no love of God that leaves sinners unjustified. The doctrine of justification isn't just an optional motif or metaphor to illustrate God's love. There is no love without it. Love, propitiation, forgiveness, reconciliation all go together. If God loves us he must be propitiated and Jesus must be the propitiation. This is how St. John defines love. He writes:

In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. 1 John 4:10-11

The preacher preaches doctrine. The topic of justification is a topic of biblical, Christian, divine doctrine. In preaching this doctrine he preaches God's love. If he fails to preach this doctrine he fails to preach God's love and he leaves sinners trapped and damned in their sin. Woe to the preacher who doesn't preach justification through faith alone in the merits of Christ! Woe to the preacher who doesn't preach the blood and righteousness of Jesus! It would be better to have no preachers at all than preachers who preach a love of God that doesn't justify sinners through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

Justification is through faith. Faith is personal. We teach that doctrine, not experience, not a relationship, is the central topic of the faith. Why? This is so because the genuine experience of faith and the fellowship we enjoy with God depends on God justifying us by his grace alone for the sake of Christ's vicarious obedience and suffering. It requires that this justification be ours, not by our doing good deeds to gain it, but through faith alone in the gospel promise that bestows it. The righteousness of God that is revealed in the gospel is revealed to faith and received through faith. Faith is always personal. The just shall live by his faith.

The church is the body of Christ. Individual Christians are part of the body. Outside of the church, which is Christ's body, there is no salvation. But it is not what the church is that saves us sinners from our sins. It's what the church has. What it has is the gospel. The gospel is received through faith, that is, personal faith, that is, individual faith.

We must not emphasize the churchly in such a way as to denigrate the personal and individual. What sets us apart from the sects and Methobapticostalism is not that we are churchly and they are individualistic. It is that we teach that God's act of justifying sinners and rescuing them from the perils of their sins is the most important topic for Christian discussion. Justification is always the justification of the individual.

Let me tell you a story my father used to tell. He taught a seminary course on justification for many years. He wrote extensively on the topic. He was devoted to the doctrine of objective justification. This is the teaching that God, for the sake of Christ's obedience, suffering, and death as the substitute for all sinners, declared the whole world to be righteous. Christ's resurrection from the dead is God's absolution of this whole world of sinners. This is the gospel of God's love that we believe, teach, and confess.

As you may know, the doctrine of objective justification didn't find complete acceptance among Norwegian Lutherans in America. Dad loved to tell the story about a certain Norwegian Lutheran pastor (I can't remember his name) who was preaching a sermon at a service where many other pastors were present. He began his sermon by saying, "I am righteous!" Then he paused, looked down at the pastors sitting before him, and asked, "Do you believe that?"

What a beautiful illustration of both the objective truth of justification and the personal faith that receives it. The pastor claimed to be righteous. Only someone justified through faith alone can make such a claim. But only God can see faith. How then can anyone who hears someone say, "I am righteous" know that he's telling the truth? He can know this is true when he knows that in Christ God has justified the whole world of sinners. Such a precious truth can never be merely academic. This isn't just an official doctrine of the church. This is the heart of the personal faith of every Christian, even those Christians who haven't been taught how to confess it.

This faith is personal. It is individual. The central topic of the Christian religion is not the means of grace. It is not baptism. It is not the Lord's Supper. It is not the preaching office. It is not the corporate identity of the Church. It is not the Divine Service. It is justification. God justifies. It is justification through faith alone. Faith justifies, not because it is so good a work or noble a virtue, but because it lays hold of Christ who is our righteousness.

This faith is the personal faith of every individual Christian. We identify the church as the church is gathered together. But we may not confine the church to where and when she is gathered together. The church that God calls together is always made up of individuals. Christians never shed their personal, individual identity. That an ear is not an eye and a hand is not a foot means that this Christian is not that Christian. Our corporate identity may not challenge our individual identity. The church cannot be the Communion of Saints unless every single member of the church is individually justified through his own personal faith. This personal faith is what makes him a part of the Communion of Saints.



When justification, and not religious experience, personal relationship, right organization, or mission is the central topic of the faith, the individual Christian is set free from corporate tyranny over his conscience and life. This is a freedom that we must guard jealously.

Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage. (Galatians 5:1)

Those who insist on religious experience as the central topic of the faith believe themselves to be competent to decide what that experience must entail. Those who insist on mission as the central topic determine the organization, parameters, and goals of the mission. But it is God who is in charge of our justification. Jesus Christ is God in the flesh. The righteousness by which the individual Christian is justified is his righteousness. It is God's righteousness. It is God's declaration. It is God's work of regeneration. God is doing the doing that needs to be done.

Individualism has a bad name among us. It is identified as rebellion against established authority, as a refusal to acknowledge churchly authority, as an excuse to sever oneself from the church. Folks attribute to individualism the carnal conceit that I can be a Christian all by myself and don't need to go to church or listen to a preacher.

But that's a misdiagnosis of the illness. This isn't individualism. This is unbelief. It is self-centered pride. It is the arrogance of those who think they know it all when all they know is what they glean by parroting the folly of fools like themselves.

The Christian, who is justified through faith alone, stands alone. Oh yes, he is a member of Christ's body. He belongs to the church. He is joined in a mystical union with God and through his fellowship with God enjoys fellowship with fellow Christians. The angels in heaven accompany him wherever he goes. But his faith is his. The church cannot believe for him. The notion that "faith" insofar as it justifies is Christ's faithfulness is really too silly to deserve refutation, and I am a bit embarrassed even to mention it, but since it is in vogue I thought I should at least mention it if only to dismiss it. No, it is not Christ's faith through which we are justified. It is the personal faith of every individual Christian.

What does this mean? It means that you are responsible for the care of your own soul! Why else did Jesus tell you to beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves? You may not submit to a heterodox pastor. You may not adopt a heterodox confession. You may not entrust your soul to anyone but to him who has purchased you, body and soul, with his own blood. Your membership in the church does not cede to the church as church your duty to judge doctrine and preaching. As surely as Jesus is the good shepherd, you his sheep have the duty, under pain of losing your salvation, to judge the preaching and teaching of your pastor and church.

All of us, as individuals, are called in our baptism to confess Christ before men and to give an answer to anyone who asks us a reason for our Christian hope. When our pastor and our church make this confession they are confessing for us, but not instead of us. Confessional Lutherans do not delegate confessing to others. They confess individually.

They confess, not only when gathered together with brothers and sisters on a Sunday morning or Wednesday evening, but wherever they are and whenever given the opportunity.

There is one more word that needs to be said about justification through faith alone as the central topic of our Christian religion. It is this. It is only when a sinner is justified by God's grace alone, for the sake of Christ's redemption, through faith alone, that he becomes a saint who is capable of doing good. We understand what Jesus means when he says,

Therefore be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful. Judge not, and you shall not be judged. Condemn not, and you shall not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. (Luke 6:36-37)

God has seen us in our sin. He saw perpetrators, not victims. He saw the guilty and he hated what he saw. In love, for the sake of love, for the sake of his beloved Son, he had mercy on us. His righteous wrath against sinners expressed in his holy and immutable law could not be his final word because God is love. Instead of judging us and condemning us, he forgave us. He laid on Jesus all our sin and guilt. He bore it, endured it, suffered it, and took it all away. Who can believe this? Whoever believes this knows what is important in life. It is hearing this gospel. It is showing to others the mercy God has shown to us. It is faith and it is love. When God's justification of the sinner by his grace alone, for Christ's sake, through faith alone is at the heart of our Christian religion, then and only then will we Christians be able to live the life of love that God has called us to live.

Legalism and pietism do not arise from orthodoxy as historians of Lutheranism have taught. Orthodoxy taught justification through faith alone. Legalism does not arise from the teaching of justification through faith alone. Legalism rises from the legal opinion of fallen humanity. Those of the legal opinion insist on using the law to justify themselves. The pure gospel quenches legalism.

Pietism is the effort to see and feel and experience faith. It is the seeking for assurance in an authentic spiritual experience and genuine relationship with God. It is of the same substance as Methodism. God gives us assurance. The assurance God gives provides us with an authentic spiritual experience and establishes a genuine relationship with God. God gives us this assurance by teaching us the pure doctrine of justification. Not only does this precious teaching capture our hearts so that we trust in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, but it transforms our lives, enabling us to love as we have been loved, to forgive as we have been forgiven, and to show mercy, even to those who do us wrong. In short, this precious teaching makes us children of God.