

# Scripture as the Real Presence of Christ

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## INTRODUCTION

I am both honored and very grateful for this opportunity to be present with you at your convention. Please know how deeply I appreciate so many of the efforts that Word Alone has undertaken and it has been a great privilege to work together with many of your members over the years. Surely a highlight in our cooperative efforts was the "Statement of Pastoral and Theological Concern" issued by 17 ELCA theologians critical of the 2005 sexuality proposals. This statement was signed by several theological giants associated with Word Alone, including Gerhard Fjorde. Being in their distinguished company reminds me of a true story concerning Karl Barth, the great reformed theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. When I was a graduate student at the University of Heidelberg I participated in Professor Barth's weekly Seminar at the University of Basel in 1966. We all knew that he had had a recent audience with Pope Paul VI, a rather unusual occurrence in that period and thus we asked him to share this experience with us. He indicated that he was with the Pope for some 45 minutes and that it was a most profitable dialogue. As the Holy Father was bidding him farewell he made a statement to the effect that he considered Prof. Barth a great theologian, in fact, he added, one of the most significant in the history of the Church! Barth, being totally startled, finally found words by which to respond: "Holy Father, for the first time in my theological career have I understood the enormous importance of the doctrine of papal infallibility!!!" Remembering that Gerhard Fjorde both approved and added his signature to our efforts at a moment of serious illness is but a small sign of the enormous personal and academic stature of this great theologian as well!

One of the compelling reasons that we gather here this evening to discuss the issue of biblical authority is because the ELCA has, for all intents and purposes, jettisoned Scripture as the anchor of our faith by removing it from its creedal and confessional context and because the ELCA has allowed those who reject this Lutheran context to be among its most prominent interpreters. Instead of proclaiming a Gospel of grace and redemption that calls sinful humanity to repentance and new life, the ELCA adamantly promulgates a message based on secular humanism that is fixated on issues of racism and sexism, and that is more concerned with establishing new rostered racial justice monitors than it is with feeding and nurturing the ordained pastors of this church. This alien and distorted Gospel, no longer drawing on the deep wells of Scripture as classically interpreted, is now actualized through a political agenda of good works that is hell bent on rectifying the injustices of a selfish and violent world with superficial language about "social justice" that seems to aspire to the highest levels of naiveté. At every corner exuberant banality appears to be the order of the day. When I read the all too frequent political manifestos emanating from Chicago I realize that they have become the graveyard of serious theology and the birthplace of empty and misleading promises. A wall of words covers up a deep spiritual emptiness. A well known Protestant theologian has argued that the clergy, and especially our bishops, "have neither a divine mandate nor authority nor special competence to articulate particular programs of politico-economic action and when they pronounce their fallible ideas with presumptive

piety they encourage public doubt about the church's possession of an authentic word of God in the theological and moral realm." (Carl F. H. Henry) This observation, I would urge, applies to all politicized preachers whether on the left or the right!

### **PART 1. Alien Hermeneutics: and the Falsification of God's Communication.**

#### ***When Scripture is not read in this context of faith***

All of us recognize that we live in a period of radically divergent and contradictory interpretations of the Bible – alien hermeneutics as I like to refer to them. More difficult is to get at the root cause of the problem. The ethicist Philip Turner makes a most helpful and useful distinction when he distinguished between two contrasting theologies that are at work in much of mainline Protestantism: a theology of acceptance and a theology of redemption. A theology of redemption accentuates sin as key to understanding the human situation and points to the death of Jesus on the cross as foundational for the liberation of humanity from the power of sin. A theology of acceptance, contrariwise, has reduced the mystery of God to one who simply wants us to love one another and this leads to an excessive emphasis on the affirmation of the other, especially those who have been marginalized by society. The practical consequence of this is to establish an equivalence between the Gospel of the Kingdom of God with a particular form of social justice. This, I would argue, is the theological paradigm operative in many of the official circles of the ELCA. The problem for Turner is that such a biblically ill-considered approach produces “a quasi-deist theology that posits a benevolent God who favors love and justice as inclusion but acts neither to save us from our sins nor to raise us to new life after the pattern of Christ . . . In a theology dominated by radical inclusion, terms such as ‘faith,’ ‘justification,’ ‘repentance,’ and ‘holiness of life’ seem to belong to an antique vocabulary that must be outgrown or reinterpreted.”<sup>i</sup>

By an alien hermeneutic, that is, an alien interpretation of Scripture, I mean a hermeneutic that rejects or distorts a Trinitarian emphasis on sin and redemption by advocating instead an agenda that emphasizes (1) the *ambiguity* of Scripture, (2) the *dissonance* of Scripture, that is, its contradictory nature, the goal of which is (3) *antinomianism*, namely, that one is not necessarily bound by the moral categories of Christian Scripture as interpreted by the Church Catholic throughout its history. For these practitioners of alien hermeneutics, typical of their *ambiguity* is the frequent use of vague terms like mystery, love and justice, typified especially in the work of former Lutheran, turned agnostic, now Episcopalian, Marcus Borg; further, a major characteristic is, generally, to draw attention to the *dissonance* of Scripture, namely, the “what it meant then is not necessarily what it means today” syndrome, so typical of the work of Prof. Craig Nessan who teaches at Wartburg Seminary. Here I simply remind you of the important comment by the late Raymond Brown: “What the biblical text said to its first readers should be related to what the text says to me, because I am a Christian heir to the people of Israel and the people of the early church, and *not independent of them.*” And, thirdly, by *antinomianism* these advocates of an alien hermeneutic frequently censure folks like you and me for the misusing Scripture as a legalistic textbook only for them, in turn, to severely limit its exhortative function to a mere “informing” or “guiding” function, characteristics of an agenda that allow for easy manipulation of the biblical texts.

Philip Turner is quite correct: the religious left has replaced a Trinitarian “theology of redemption” with an alien secularized and feminized “theology of inclusion.”<sup>ii</sup> The former is biblical, insists on “costly grace,”<sup>iii</sup> recognizes the power of sin, acknowledges that evil can only be overcome through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and accentuates the call to discipleship, i.e., the “exclusive inclusivity”<sup>iv</sup> of Jesus Christ, as a call to holiness. A “theology of inclusion” characterized by “cheap grace,”<sup>v</sup> understands the Incarnation as some vague expression of divine love that results in the inclusion of all, and it “produces an ethic of tolerant affirmation that carries with it no call to conversion and radical holiness.”<sup>vi</sup> It is precisely this alien theology of acceptance that stands behind both the call for transformation in the biblical understanding of sexuality as well as the increasingly vociferous call for the inclusion of all at the Lord’s Supper, whether baptized or not, Hindu, atheist, Buddhist or Jew.

The hijacking of Scripture by the liberal left is surely a major contributor toward the current crisis of faith spreading like a cancer throughout the ELCA. Since biblical studies stand at the forefront of our current predicament, some stand ready to blame the historical critical method of biblical study that came to the fore in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as the root cause of this crisis. But here I would differ and be quite cautious; before we jettison a precious set of tools in the heat of the current controversy I would remind us of the worthy adage *abusus non tollit usum* (Wrong use does not preclude proper use).

Precisely because Lutherans recognize the guiding rule of the Holy Spirit in the formation and the decision making by the early church both with regard to creedal and doctrinal formulations as well as in shaping the canonical form and context of Scripture, we – in contrast to the fundamentalism of the right – are free to employ historical biblical criticism as an effective means, *when properly used*, to determine with greater insight the power of God’s presence in Jesus Christ. By using all the available critical tools we are in a far better position to comprehend what the biblical author wished to convey to the original audience for which he wrote. *Since all Christians, including especially preachers and theologians, must be subject to the control of the written, canonical text, and not to spiritual or ideological speculations unrelated to the text, historical biblical criticism, properly used, becomes an indispensable tool.* Therefore it is important to acknowledge with much gratitude the enormous advances and contributions that have been made by biblical scholars throughout the world over the last two centuries toward a better understanding of what the biblical authors intended to communicate to their original audiences<sup>vii</sup> despite the not infrequent misuse of historical biblical criticism by the revisionists and others.

Although Origen, Jerome and Luther, to name only a few, employed the tools that the biblical criticism of their day made available to them, enormous additional advances in the field were made during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in Germany a predominantly Christian context; initially Lutheran in influence, with the announcement of the papal encyclical, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, in 1943, however, the Roman Catholic Church also approved the use of this heavily German Lutheran dominated field of historical biblical study and in this way Lutheranism helped shape parts of the second Vatican Council. When I did my doctoral work at the University of Heidelberg in the 1960’s each of the faculty regularly preached in the Peterskirche, and a similar situation existed at Harvard Divinity School where I had studied earlier. But this Christian framework for the

critical study of the Bible changed dramatically in the 20<sup>st</sup> century. Contributing to this loss of a Trinitarian, Christian hermeneutic as the contextual basis for the interpretation of the Bible was the dramatic increase of religion departments in secular colleges and universities in the second half of the last three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Beginning certainly by the 1970's the Trinitarian and Christological basis of interpretation for the historical critical method began to be abandoned in many academic contexts, eventually to be transformed and grossly distorted by the various ideologies of the left, whether claiming to be Christian or not. This is the sorry situation that we find ourselves in today.

## **PART 2. Scripture as the Communication of God to Sinners**

***THESIS: If Scripture is to be heard and experienced as the real presence of Christ, it must be encountered in the context of Trinitarian Faith.***

Given the gross distortion of Scripture that surrounds us at so many points in today's churches, it is urgent for us to return to the principles of biblical interpretation that guided the Lutheran reformation and, before that, the classic heritage of the Church Catholic.

Together with the early church and the Reformers I would assert that Scripture, that is, the Bible understood as a unified whole from Genesis through Revelation and finding its interpretative center in the Christ event, is the true presence of God in Jesus Christ. Every page refers to God's great plan of salvation and the reference to the cross allows all texts, "even those that at first glance have little to do with this message" to be related to this "unifying mystery . . . ." <sup>viii</sup> Jesus, his earliest followers, and the writers of the New Testament understood such an intimate relationship to the Old Testament story to be self-evident whether the references were to Moses, Jonah, David, Isaiah, Melchizedek or to the Psalms. In the New Testament, God's revelation to his people Israel remains foundational and is now actualized anew through his self-giving in the incarnation of Jesus of Nazareth.

The Creeds of the Church and the Lutheran Confessions assert with clarity that an authentic interpretation of Scripture presuppose both the prior redeeming action of the glorious Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit as well as their continuing presence within the interpreting community. In the first place such a Trinitarian interpretation recognizes, together with the church's earliest theologians, that Jesus is the definitive revelation of God. His life and ministry, his suffering, crucifixion, death and resurrection is not only a word about God, He *is* the Word of God incarnate, the Word made flesh, the *humanation* of God. <sup>ix</sup> The continued presence of the Risen Jesus through the Spirit in the community that worships Him leads to the affirmation of a Trinitarian theology as the most adequate manner in which to understand the revelation of God in creation, in the history of Israel, in Jesus and in the church.

Because "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb 13:8), a Trinitarian hermeneutic must of necessity be a hermeneutic of consistency and coherence. It cannot mean one thing to one generation of believers and something radically different to the next. Vincent of Lerins, a 5<sup>th</sup> century theologian, put the matter well: "Now in the Catholic Church itself we take the greatest care to hold that which has been believed everywhere, always and by all." These words cohere well with the earlier citation from Brown that it is illegitimate for some in the contemporary church to claim independence from

the great tradition of the Church Catholic which the Lutheran Confessions themselves so adamantly confirm. This assertion of independence from anything *but* myself is a troubling sign of a post-modern secular culture to which we as Lutherans must be alert because the threat of this virus is very much present in our midst.

When Lutherans speak of the Bible they do so in a very specific way, a way that is substantially different from the religious left, the religious right and from many academic interpretations. Because of our baptism into the Body of Jesus Christ we have, according to the Lutheran Confessions, also pledged fidelity to the apostolic witness and teachings transmitted by the orthodox expressions of the church catholic. Thus it is not by chance that the Augsburg Confession opens with a recitation of the three great symbols of the universal church, the Apostles Creed, the Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed, all formulated by the early church meeting in Council through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is precisely to this catholicity of the church that the authors of the Augsburg Confession appeal at the end of Article XXI when they summarize their teaching in this way: "This is about the sum or our teaching. As can be seen, there is nothing here that departs from the Scriptures or the catholic church or the church of Rome, in so far as the ancient church is known to us from its writers " (p.47L). Can the ELCA today make the same affirmation?

When the Augsburg Confession speaks of the authority of Scripture it is precisely that Scripture in which the Triune God who has spoken the true Word in Jesus Christ continues to encounter us with His present Word, that very Scripture which was shaped and given final canonical form by the early church and Councils through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Because of these conciliar decisions that Lutherans affirm and adhere to, we are Trinitarian and not Gnostic, we hold that the gospel of Matthew is authoritative and the Gospel of Peter is not, and that the writings of Paul are normative and the Acts of Thecla are not. It is not as if the Bible appeared out of nowhere and that its interpretation is up for grabs; the Bible is the book of the Church and it is the church universal empowered by the Holy Spirit, and not self-established ideological movements, that have the right and authority to interpret Scripture according to a Trinitarian hermeneutic that recognizes both the priority and the finality of the crucified and Risen Lord, and therefore the ultimate claim of Jesus Christ, upon the interpreter.

### ***PART 3. The Empowerment of Alien Hermeneutics in the ELCA***

What drives the non-Trinitarian, alien hermeneutic that empowers much of the ELCA's secularist tendencies? Here we need to have a brief but honest conversation about "feminism" and how this secular ideology has infiltrated churches, academic institutions as well as others in the cultural elite.

Precisely because the term "feminism" is so ambiguous and malleable, it is fraught with enormous danger since it may signify one thing to certain audiences (e.g., advocating the just cause of women) yet have a far more sweeping and intentional agenda to others (i.e. the transformation of traditional sexuality). Having devoted 37 of my teaching years to the education of women and having had a hand in educating the first wave of women to go to seminary (one of whom is currently an ELCA bishop and another a seminary president) I stand firmly behind the substantial advances that allow women to contribute their God-given gifts to the benefit of both particular societies as well as to the

larger world community. I have been deeply privileged to participate in these dramatic and positive steps forward for women, resulting in an enormous benefit for all in the human family.

Having taught almost four decades at Smith College, the largest women's college in the US, I have become sensitized to the broader implications of the term "feminism," both through our graduates (eg., Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, etc.), through my colleagues - particularly in women's studies, queer studies, philosophy - and by my students. As a result of this intense exposure to feminist thought and practice I have come to realize that, at its core, one must view feminism as an atheistic ideology. Many of its advocates argue that gender roles and identity as well as sexuality, especially heteronormativity, are social constructs that must be questioned and critiqued. Such feminism is often closely aligned with gay, lesbian and transgender studies and many feminists support the transgender movement since it defies the traditional distinction between 'man' and 'woman.'

Further, many feminists argue that justice involves the elimination of diverse structures of authority and power that legitimate male prerogatives; androcentric bias must be eliminated. This frequently results in the encouragement of "egalitarian lifestyles" such as cohabitation, open marriage and other forms of what is referred to as "responsible non-monogamy." The goal for some is the replacement of the traditional family since marriage is perceived as a form of slavery for women. It is often insisted that every woman must be willing to be identified as a lesbian in order to be completely feminist.

The practitioners of feminist ideology frequently use their newly found power within religious establishments to develop new structures of belief that more appropriately cohere with their non-Christian philosophical orientation, including neo-pagan and goddess spirituality. When this feminist ideology attempts to merge with remnants of classical Christian theology, heterodoxy, also known as a theology of inclusion or acceptance, emerge. This very theology of acceptance and inclusion, however, is neither inclusive nor tolerant of those with whom it disagrees.

As a Lutheran Christian I continue to unequivocally support the right of women to use their God-given talents to the fullest and in overcoming all cultural barriers hindering such advancement while simultaneously rejecting the non-Christian philosophical presuppositions that permeate much of the "feminist" movement.

If we had more time at our disposal I would be eager to exchange ideas with you concerning the theological crisis in our seminaries. But for the moment it will suffice to say that since most of our current seminary professors received their graduate training at secular institutions like Harvard or Union, my own alma maters, these alien and feminist ideologies quickly make their way into the life of the church via many of our seminary faculty. With incredible speed Trinitarian hermeneutics are being replaced by an alien hermeneutic that touts secular justice as the new canon within the canon - whatever that ambiguous and slippery term "justice" may mean - a canon that advocates above all the rightness of gay marriage as a key dimension of a theology of acceptance.

I would argue that whether it is part 3 of the Sexuality Study, "Free in Christ to Serve the Neighbor: Lutherans Talk about Human Sexuality", or Nesson's 2006 lecture to the Conference of Bishops, "The Authority of Scripture," both represent an anti-Trinitarian hermeneutic in which a theology of

acceptance has been substituted for a theology of redemption. The starting point for both is a vague and secularized view of “justice” which assumes that sexual activity between gay partners is permissible and should be not only acceptable within the Christian Church but also that such partnerships should be officially blessed by the community in Christ. Once these documents are read through the hermeneutical lens of a theology of acceptance and inclusion, driven heavily by atheistic feminism, one begins to understand the unusual selection of Galatians as well as the rationale for what is emphasized, distorted and omitted.

**PART 4. Question: HOW DO ALIEN HERMENEUTICS FUNCTION WITHIN ELCA DOCUMENTS?**

Let us begin with the selection of Galatians as the foundational text for the new part III of the Sexuality Study. How is it possible within a Christian Trinitarian understanding of the canon to treat the theme of sexuality and never discuss Matthew or 1 Corinthians, biblical books that actually treat the theme at some length? By selecting Galatians the ELCA writers are “playing first century bible land” (Stendahl) – picking and choosing what best fits their agenda even if Galatians, for the most part, is a largely irrelevant text for the issues at hand. But such ideological selectivity is exactly how the fundamentalism of the left as well as the fundamentalism of the right function. One will only understand the unusual choice of Galatians as a basis for the study of sexuality when one realizes what operational criteria are at work: viz., a secularized theology of acceptance.

Since a theology of acceptance has become normative, one must, as a consequence, limit justification to acceptance and eliminate from it all moral demands. In order to accomplish this goal, one removes Galatians out of its historical and canonical context. Then, over and over again, the law is hammered as something detrimental to the Christian life without ever defining or discussing the concept. Nesson, in the lecture previously referred to, moves in a remarkably parallel manner and one that fully misconstrues the Pauline understanding of justification. Nesson is not only unable to relate the moral demands of the new life in Christ to justification but he also drives a wedge between justification and justice – which I would argue is an integrated and cohesive concept in the Bible – and, as a result of these fundamental misunderstandings, calls for “justice” to replace “justification” as “a new canon within the canon” (p. 18).

But let us return to the use of Galatians in part 3 of the sexuality study. At this point I would also ask how it is possible to read what Galatians says about the law in complete isolation from Romans. If we take seriously that Pauline theology is both contingent – that is, addressed to specific and unique situations – and also coherent, that is, having a logical unity, then at a minimum a Pauline letter must be read within the context of all of Paul’s letters. Recognizing the coherency of Pauline theology and also accepting as helpful Bornkamm’s designation of Romans as “Paul’s Last Will and Testament,” ought we not to factor in what Paul has to say about the law in his final letter? Given all the negativity about the law in the Sexuality Study and in Nesson’s lecture, let us listen carefully to these words:

*--Rom 3:31: “Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.”*

--**Rom 7:11-12**: "For sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. 12 So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good."

--**Rom 8:3-4**: "For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, 4 so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."

Also note the specific and reciprocal relationship between love and the commandments in Romans:

-- **Rom. 13:8**

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. 9 The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." 10 Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

In light of these statements we can see how fundamentally flawed the perspective in the sexuality study part 3 really is. In describing an evangelical hermeneutic simplistically "as a gospel way of interpreting," this study cleverly manipulates the theme of "law and gospel" in such a way as to strip the call to holiness from the Gospel as well as to convert the Gospel's call for the continuing transformation of the new life in Christ into some bland, vague and incoherent love of the neighbor. The clear meaning of justification as both "gift" and "responsibility," to which I will turn in a moment, is rejected because for Nessan that is "law" and not "gospel" and anyone moving in that direction is simply a "literalist." An antinomianism and Gnosticism of the most insidious kind is at work here that completely misunderstands the full and rich meaning of 'justification' and fails to see the close interplay and unbreakable link between the **indicative** and the **imperative** inherent in the Gospel of the New Testament.

According to the presuppositions at work in part 3 of the sexuality study passages like **1 Thess 4:1-8** and the role of exhortation for the new life in Christ evidently have no relevance:

Finally, brothers and sisters, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that, as you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God (as, in fact, you are doing), you should do so more and more. 2 For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. 3 For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from fornication; 4 that each one of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honor, 5 not with lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; 6 that no one wrong or exploit a brother or sister in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, just as we have already told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. 7 For God did not call us to impurity but in holiness. 8 Therefore whoever rejects this rejects not human authority but God, who also gives his Holy Spirit to you.

Given this overall discussion, allow me to make a suggestion, namely, that we should consider a temporary moratorium on the use of the phrase "law and gospel" given its radical misappropriation and misinterpretation in much contemporary theology and explain what we mean using alternative language. Increasingly used by the revisionists or, as I prefer to call them, the sectarians, this terminology is being successfully used to undermine both the biblical meaning of gospel as well as justification.

***PART 5. Reaffirming the Gospel of Justification in its Fullness.***

Given the simplified and distorted views of justification prevalent today, not least Nesson's separation of justice from justification, we need to take a brief look at Paul's understanding of this theological concept. In fact, I would argue that the more Lutherans rigidify and narrow the dynamic concept 'justification' from its far more expansive meaning in Paul and Luther, the more we have opened the door to the revisionists and their ideological reframing of the moral life.

This is an urgent moment to go back to our biblical roots and ask once again what we mean by the term "justification"? If we agree that it refers to sinful human beings who have accepted God's gracious and merciful gift of reconciliation, how does this new reality realize itself in terms of a renewed moral life? Further, one needs to ask in what ways this new life, resulting from God's justifying action to the sinner through Christ, is able to discern and to do the will of God?

The Lutheran-Roman Catholic *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ)*, agreed to and signed by these churches in Augsburg, Germany, on October 31, 1999, stands among the clearest articulations of the meaning and consequences of "justification":

In faith we together hold the conviction that justification is the work of the triune God. The Father sent his Son into the world to save sinners. The foundation and presupposition of justification is the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ. Justification thus means that Christ himself is our righteousness, in which we share through the Holy Spirit in accord with the will of the Father. Together we confess: *By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works.*<sup>x</sup>

As a working definition one might say that justification brings to health the diseased, broken relationship between God and humanity, between the Creator and his creation. This healing, this bringing to wholeness, is a completely unmerited gift on the part of God through the blood of Jesus Christ (e.g. Rom 5:9). But what is the intention of this healing power that takes place in the act of justification and reconciliation? What is the relationship of God's gift to his "equipping and calling us to good works"? And, finally, one must ask: if there is a gift, an indicative, is there not also a responsibility, an imperative?

The conclusion of the paragraph cited from the *JDDJ* speaks about an irrevocable interrelationship between grace and good works, specifically, that the reception of God's reconciling grace leads to a renewal of the heart and calls us to good works. Particularly in light of polemics at the time of the Reformation, many in the Protestant tradition have become allergic to the term "good works" as if it were some Roman Catholic invention. In fact, the term goes back to Jesus and to the New Testament. "You are the light of the world," says Jesus. "A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your *good works* and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Matt 5:14-16).<sup>xi</sup> Paul rephrases this thought as "faith working through love" (Gal 5:6) and to further help his congregations understand more fully their new life in Christ he uses three terms in overlapping yet distinct ways: justification, sanctification and salvation.

Although analogies are always imperfect, they may provide, at least to some extent, helpful clarifications. The relationship of "grace" and "good works," so encumbered by the Protestant/Roman Catholic hostilities since the sixteenth century Reformation and the subsequent Council of Trent, might be viewed in terms of a medical analogy. Following a medical checkup one may be told that a serious disease has set in, perhaps breast or prostate cancer, and that only some form of radical intervention, such as chemotherapy or surgery, will resolve the problem. One can receive this gift or one can deny the need for such radical intervention and opt instead for a self-improvement program that might perhaps include swimming, a significantly altered diet as well as mega-doses of vitamins and herbal formulations. As important as these good efforts, these "good works," may be, they will not resolve the fundamental health problem; only a radical medical intervention from outside oneself contains the potential for healing. This radical entry into the human condition from beyond ourselves can, by analogy, be referred to as "grace," as "free gift."

However, such a radical intervention of grace does not instantaneously complete the process of healing/reconciliation/salvation. When a surgeon, for example, shares the good news following surgery that she was able to remove all the cancerous cells, the patient is certainly not at that moment fully healed. Similarly one might say that evil, the power of sin and illness have been overcome, but only with the further aid of medication, rest, prayer and exercise is one able to be what one was meant to be, namely, a healthy human being. Two important points need to be emphasized: (1) that surgery as radical intervention does not lead *immediately* to a state of full recovery, although it does allow for that possibility; (2) recovering from illness results not only in being freed from disease and pain, i.e., from self-absorption, but also to be free to serve others.

Justification by faith is a little like this process. The presupposition is that human beings, in terms of their relationship with God, are in a state of ill health, sin. This is a theme that is emphasized throughout the Pauline letters (Rom 3:9-20). As a result of God's radical entry into human history through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the diseased state between the human and God can be healed, reconciled, justified.

God's radically gracious act of healing and reconciliation cannot be brought into being as a result of human capacity and can only be received as an entirely free gift; it has not been achieved through individual efforts, human actions or through the accumulation of "good works." Now, however, that reconciliation, justification, has become a reality, the disciple who has received this healing power for new life in Christ must continue to mature in Christ. This is what Paul has in mind when he speaks of "progress" (Phil 1:25), and "sanctification" (1 Thess 4:3) and "transformation" (2 Cor 3:18). Paul stresses that the new life moves toward completeness in Jesus Christ and that this persistent process of transformation is a gift that comes from "the Lord, the Spirit." But this growth in new life is not a private set of activities that takes place only between the believer and Jesus. Quite the contrary, this becoming more like Christ allows the disciple to actualize faith as an activity of love (Gal 5:6) toward the other, toward the neighbor. Supported and nurtured by the Body of Christ, the church, all activities, all such "good works," all such acts of love are intended to upbuild and encourage and console the entire community of faith (1 Cor 14:3).

Luther had it quite right: "Good works do not make a good person, but a good person does good works."<sup>xii</sup> Good works do not bring about healing but once healing has taken place one is now free to love the other with the same sacrificial love that characterized God's self-donation through the suffering and death of Jesus. As God was wounded for us, so must we in turn become wounded healers<sup>xiii</sup> to those who need to be embraced by the intimacy of Christ's love.

A major point that I am trying to emphasize is that one's understanding of justification will influence both one's biblical hermeneutic as well as one's understanding of the relationship of faith to the moral life. Although what follows can only be outlined very briefly this evening, we need to be alert to some of the ways in which the meaning of justification can be distorted:

In the first place, the gift given in justification does not have *automatic* consequences, i.e., some kind of lifetime immunization or guarantee. Rather, it remains a gift only as long as the gift is received with daily fidelity and obedience to Christ. Never to be overlooked is the fact that the believer *participates in* but does not thereby possess the righteousness of God.<sup>xiv</sup> Justification is both "*Gabe und Aufgabe*" [**"gift and responsibility"**] and because it contains not only a present but also a future dimension - it is "*a matter of promise and expectation.*"<sup>xv</sup>

Secondly, the gift given in justification calls all recipients to a *life of holiness* and by failure to recognize this essential component of justification many in the ELCA have pursued some alien and false ideological agendas, especially a political agenda that has more in common with a theology of good works than a theology of redemption. *What*, we must inquire, is the crucial connection between the already realized dimension of salvation experienced in justification and that future, consummated dimension of salvation if not "obedience"? For Paul faith always means obedience to the will of God above all else, and therefore it contains an active element as both believers and the communities in Christ respond to the gift as well as the claim of God.

For Paul, justification both initiates and enables the life in Christ from beginning to end. As human beings participate in the revelation of the sovereign creator in Jesus Christ by faith, or as the apostle alternatively describes such participation as "standing in the Gospel" (1 Cor 15:1 [RSV]), their broken relationship with God becomes whole and is restored. God now offers the believer in Christ, through the gift of his Spirit, the possibility of leading a new life that is both obedient to Him and responsive to the needs of the neighbor. The Spirit permits such a person to live "in holiness," frequently translated from the Greek as sanctification. The life of sanctification and transformation (2 Cor 3:18), a gift granted by God, will lead to the final fulfillment of that which God began in justification, namely, the gift of salvation to be consummated on the last day.<sup>xvi</sup>

To bring our discussion of justification to a close, I would suggest that we in the ELCA must guard against two serious distortions of this biblical teaching: one that trivializes justification in such radically individualistic and simplistic terms so that in the end it is stripped of its power; the other, largely in response to the emptiness of the first, creates a new works righteousness that believes that if we write enough political memos and do enough works on behalf of social justice we will save ourselves and the world in the eyes of God.

***PART 6. The School of the Word: Experiencing Anew the Life-Giving Power of Scripture***

Let me conclude our conversation by reminding us that alien hermeneutics, the captivity of Scripture to a theology of acceptance and inclusion, is not new to our day. Luther had to fight remarkably similar battles and it might be useful for us to hear what Luther has to say about the distortion of Scripture in his day:

“Wiles and evasions for the distorting of the Scriptures St. Paul, in Ephesians iv, calls in Greek *κυβεία* and *πανουργία*, that is, ‘sleight of hand,’ ‘jugglers’ tricks,’ ‘gamesters tricks,’ because they toss the words of God to and fro, as the gamesters throw their dice; and because, like the jugglers who give things new noses and change the whole appearance of them, they take from the Scriptures their single, simple, constant sense, and blind our eyes, so that we waver to and fro, hold fast to no sure interpretation, and are like men whom they have bewitched or tricked, while they play with us as gamblers with their dice.”<sup>xvii</sup>

With Luther we must fervently pray that all who bear the name of Christ may return to the life-giving power of Scripture so that we can discern their “single, simple and constant sense”, the presence of God in Jesus Christ who has redeemed us and called us to obedience through his death and resurrection. To do that I would suggest that we need to turn once again to the church’s ancient practice of *Lectio Divina*, a divine or holy way of praying the Scriptures, what I refer to as “the School of the Word” in my recent book. Such a way of Scripture study has four parts: (1) *Lectio*, discovering the original intention of the text as best we can; (2) *meditatio*, meditating on the relevance of the text for today; (3) *oratio*, praying for the Lord’s help in understanding and applying the text, and; (4) *contemplatio*, receiving the real presence of Christ in contemplation and receiving his guidance for the next steps in our life of discipleship. But more on that in one of tomorrow’s workshops.<sup>xviii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Turner, “An Unworkable Theology,” *First Things* 154 (June/July 2005) 12.

<sup>ii</sup> Turner, “An Unworkable Theology,” 10-12.

<sup>iii</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Collier, 1963), 45-47.

<sup>iv</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1987), 281.

<sup>v</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 45-47.

<sup>vi</sup> Turner, “An Unworkable Theology,” 11.

<sup>vii</sup> Exemplary among such contributions is Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*.

<sup>viii</sup> Martini, “The School of the Word,” *Worship* 61 (1987) 196.

<sup>ix</sup> See Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983) 15.

<sup>x</sup> *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification / the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), paragraph 15.

<sup>xi</sup> Italics mine.

<sup>xii</sup> Martin Luther, “A Treatise on Christian Liberty,” in *Three Treatises* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1943) 271.

<sup>xiii</sup> See here Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (Garden City, NY: Image, 1979).

<sup>xiv</sup> See further J. A. Ziesler, *The Meaning of Righteousness in Paul; a linguistic and theological inquiry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 160. What is

disappointing here is that Ziesler's rich insights are not carried through more consistently, especially with regard to the relationship between justification and last judgment.

<sup>xv</sup> Käsemann, "Righteousness of God," in *New Testament Questions of Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969) 170; italics mine.

<sup>xvi</sup> See further the discussion in George T. Montague, *Growth in Christ* (Fribourg: Regina Mundi, 1961).

<sup>xvii</sup> --"An Argument in Defence of All the Articles of Dr. Martin Luther Wrongly Condemned in the Roman Bull," *Works of Martin Luther*, Vol. III, pp. 32 f

<sup>xviii</sup> For a fuller discussion see chapter 3 in Karl P. Donfried, *Who Owns the Bible? Toward the Recovery of a Christian Hermeneutic* (New York: Crossroad, 2006).