

# JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 54

JUNE 2014

NUMBER 2

## CONTENTS

From the Editor .....	Frank Gantt
Ordination Sermon: John 21:15-17 .....	Steve Sippert
Sermon on Ephesians 1:3-14.....	Paul G. Fleischer
Concerning Justification ... ..	David Lau
The Synergistic Controversy.....	Paul G. Fleischer

### Book Reviews:

*Prepared to Answer: Telling the Greatest Story Ever Told* and  
*More Prepared to Answer* (a sequel)

By: Mark A. Paustian..... Reviewer: David Ude

The JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY is published at Immanuel Lutheran College, 501 Grover Rd., Eau Claire, Wisconsin 54701-7199, by authorization of the Church of the Lutheran Confession. U.S. subscriptions: \$14.00 per year, \$27.00 for two years, \$40.00 for three years (Canada: \$18.00, \$35.00, and \$52.00; overseas: \$28.00, \$55.00, and \$82.00), payable in advance. Issues are dated as the months of March, June, September, and December.

Editor: Frank Gantt (ganttdf@sdplains.com)

206 11th St. East

Lemmon, South Dakota 57638

Assistant Editors: Elton Hallauer, Steve Sippert

Circulation Manager: Benno Sydow (bennosydow@yahoo.com)

2750 Oxford Street North

Roseville, Minnesota 55113

Staff Contributors: N. Greve, T. Kesterson, D. Lau, P. Naumann,

J. Pfeiffer, D. Reim, M. Roehl, D. Schaller, P. Tiefel, Jr.

Correspondence regarding subscriptions, renewals, changes of address, etc., should be directed to the circulation manager. Correspondence regarding material published in the JOURNAL should be directed to the editor.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

## From the Editor

Frank Gantt

*“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways,” declares the LORD. “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa. 55:8-9 ESV).*

While the words above, spoken by the Lord through His prophet, are focused chiefly on the Lord’s forgiving nature toward those who repent (vv. 6-7), they also have a more general application. Because He is the holy, perfect, omniscient God, the Lord’s thoughts and ways are superior to ours in every way. Even before sin had entered the world, God’s thoughts and ways were superior to man’s, even though man’s thoughts were holy at that time. Since the intrusion of sin into God’s perfect creation, man’s thoughts and ways have been corrupted. Where once there was only a difference in degree, now there is a difference in regards to direction.

Through the miracle of conversion God has begun to renew the thoughts of believing sinners by forgiving their sins through the blood of His Son (Eph. 1:7), transferring them from the power of darkness into the kingdom of His Son (Col. 1:13), and giving them the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16). While conversion itself is instantaneous, so that he who is converted has the fullness of God’s forgiveness, stands in the kingdom of God, and possesses the mind of Christ, Holy Scripture also speaks in such a way to indicate that it is possible to grow in these things. The new man that is created at the moment of conversion is perfect, but the Christian, insofar as he is both old man and new man, is not. This side of eternity, there will always be a need for continued growth in our thoughts and understanding.

To bring about this growth, our God has given us His Word, in which He conveys to us His thoughts. *Theology* (a combination of  $\theta\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$  and  $\lambda\omicron\gamma\omicron\varsigma$ ) is the study of God’s Word—His revealed thoughts and ways. No, the Bible doesn’t contain the totality of God’s thoughts and ways, but it does communicate to us God’s thoughts that He wants us to know on the important matters of sin and death and of righteousness and life. God has communicated His thoughts to us on these matters with the intent that we learn to think as He does about them. Theology, then, is learning to think like God according to His revelation given to us. As said previously, this is, for us, a matter of ongoing growth.

It has been the purpose and intent of the *Journal of Theology* to present, as clearly and accurately as possible, God’s thoughts as He has revealed them to us in the pages of Holy Scripture. At the same time, recognizing that there is ongoing room for growth in our understanding of what is revealed, it will occur that questions arise concerning matters published in this journal—sometimes due to a weakness in understanding or expression on the part of the author of an article, together with the editor; sometimes due to a weakness in the understanding of the reader; sometimes both.

**Two articles published in the *Journal of Theology*, both of which are noted below,\* have prompted renewed questions related to God’s revealed thoughts concerning marriage, divorce, and remarriage—questions which are being studied further. These two articles should be viewed from within the context of this ongoing study and as part of that study, rather than as a declaration of doctrine and practice within the Church of the Lutheran Confession.**

May God bless this ongoing study, and may He through His Word make us all true theologians.

\* “The Proper Understanding of Matthew 5:32, Matthew 19:9, and Luke 16:18 in Their Relation to Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage” (*Journal of Theology* 52:4, December 2012).

\* “Use and Misuse of the Term ‘In God’s Eyes’” (*Journal of Theology* 53:4, December 2013).

---

## **An Ordination Sermon: *Christ puts the power in your ministry***

Steve Sippert

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The Word of God selected for this occasion of the ordination of Pastor-elect Chad Seybt [July 13, 2014—Cheyenne, WY] is taken from Gospel of John, chapter 21, reading verses 15-17.

***So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?” He said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.” He said to him, “Feed My lambs.” He said to him again a second time, “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?” He said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.” He said to him, “Tend My sheep.” He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?” Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, “Do you love Me?” And he said to Him, “Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You.” Jesus said to him, “Feed My sheep.”***

In Christ Jesus, whom we all serve as Lord and Head of the Church, dear fellow redeemed, fellow workers in His kingdom:

We’ve heard the comments before, I think, and even made the comments ourselves. In the course of conversation someone mentions the name of Pastor so-and-so, and there’s a quick response: “Oh, he’s such a fine preacher. I really like his sermons.” Or they’re talking about a certain day school teacher, and the comment is made: “She handles the children so well. All the students really like her.” It’s human nature to do this—to rate the abilities of our called workers—but we need a word of caution. While the comments can be made and are made in the right spirit, they can also lead to a shortsighted, human-centered view of the ministry. We cannot secularize the work of the pastor and think of it as we do the work of our mechanic or the family doctor. The work of Christian ministry goes beyond the points of human contact and involves things that escape our observation. The Gospel ministry has a heavenly source with a heavenly goal, and divine intervention at every point. The pastor and the teacher always work among us as God’s own representatives, and God Himself is working through them.

This is a great truth with great implications, not only for the members of the congregation, but also for the servants. We don’t do the work according to our specifications. Nor can we look to ourselves for the results that God is seeking. If we did, we’d make the same mistake as Simon Peter. Notice how Jesus had to step in and take him through a painful yet important lesson. Peter had to see the folly of relying on himself and rely, rather, on the Savior’s strength. May the same lesson ring out to us, as we put ourselves in Peter’s shoes and remember: It is *Christ who puts the power in your ministry*.

When I say “ministry,” let’s think of many things beyond the scope of conducting the worship service and preaching in the pulpit. After all, any believer who has the Word of God and delivers it to one other person is acting as a minister of Christ, and rightly so. If you teach a Bible story to your child or to a Sunday School class, if you serve as elder in the congregation or lay reader in the service, if you share the Gospel with a friend or use the Word of God to comfort a fellow Christian in time of need, you are serving as a minister of Christ according to the universal priesthood of all believers. Christ gave this ministry to all of us in His Great Commission when He said, “*Make disciples of all the nations.*”

Now that’s a different thing than the public ministry. I have a divine call as ILC professor in the domain of the public ministry, extended to me from God according to the needs of a church body, the CLC. One result of my work is the training of future pastors, such as the one being ordained here today. Your pastor, likewise, has a divine call in the same public ministry, extended to him from God according to the needs of a congregation. Either way, the work assigned by Christ begins with the call from Christ. What Jesus said to Peter He says to us as well. We are His shepherds, placed among the flock by His decree. It’s a position of great honor because the call comes from the Lord Himself. It’s a position of great importance because the work has spiritual impact and everlasting consequences. It’s a position of tremendous grace because, frankly, none of us deserves to have it.

We take Peter as the glaring example. We know the story well. On the night before the Savior’s death Peter denied the Lord three times in spite of clear warnings. Well, how could a man like that ever

serve as an apostle of the New Testament Church? Wouldn't his fear, wouldn't his self-centered nature and his lack of faithfulness automatically disqualify him? Couldn't we pose the same kind of questions to ourselves? Our numerous sins stand out as reason enough for immediate dismissal, reason enough never to be called in the first place. But the Lord saw it differently. He took Peter, the unworthy disciple whom He forgave, and placed him into the office of apostle. Likewise, He takes you and me, unworthy sinners whom He forgives, and puts us into the office of pastor or professor, teacher in the congregation or elder, as well as being His Christian witnesses.

That is our ministry, and it's a great privilege—although we don't always think of it that way, especially when the stress and strain build up. From experience we can think back to the long hours of preparation, the difficult situations to contend with, the duties that are not in the ballpark of our personal talents. What are we going to do with the more strenuous or trying part of our work? Grit our teeth and muddle through yet again? Or is there a better way? Remember: *Christ puts the power in your ministry.* That includes every aspect of it. When He calls you to preach and teach the whole counsel of God to the congregation, He does not say, "Farewell. You're on your own. I hope it goes alright." No, He stays with you. He leads you through His Word. He steers you through the trouble spots. He's there to answer your prayers. He's the reason why you can say with the apostle Paul, "*I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.*" When difficulties arise in your work, you can always go back to your Master and say, "Lord, you put me here. You gave me this work. Help me to handle this situation? Help me to serve faithfully."

The help will come because the Good Shepherd has a vested interest in the results of your work. Consider the people you are serving. They're not just members of a congregation or students in a class. They are individuals who belong to Christ. You can expect His power to work in your ministry, therefore, because your ministry serves the spiritual needs of His flock.

The language of our text applies to every type of minister in the New Testament era: pastor in the parish, the professor at the synodical school, the teacher in the day school or Sunday School. To Peter and to us Jesus said, "*Feed My lambs,*" and "*Tend My sheep.*" Let's fill in the blanks of the word picture. Christ is the Shepherd who owns the flock. The pastor and teacher are the under-shepherds. The adult Christians that we serve with the Word are the sheep. And the children who believe are the lambs. God has placed the same high premium on every believer, including the child, just as Jesus said: "*Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me.*"

Naturally, Christ does not want to lose any part of His flock. He paid dearly with His blood to bring them into the pasture of His grace. He sacrificed His life on the cross to keep them free and safe from the guilt and condemnation of sin. They are blood-bought people, destined to be His forever. He does not want to lose a single one.

I imagine that sounds daunting. Guarding the valuables of another can be a risky endeavor. In fact, we all need to realize that it is a tremendous stewardship on a very high order. In this case, however, the owner of the property is very much hands-on. The owner of the flock is also its competent manager working from the top down. We help Him take care of what is His, that is true; but at the end of the day we are mere tools in His hands. As you serve the Lord and His flock in your call, you can expect Christ to be working in you and working through you.

After all—and this is so important to keep in mind—the ministry is never about the minister, who is the messenger. It's all about the message. It may sound simplistic, but it's still true: You speak to your fellow Christians what you hear from the Lord—like an echo. You teach them what you learn from Him in His Word. That's where the power is: in that soul-saving Gospel, which comes to us ready to dispense in the form of Word and Sacrament. Christ has given us the perfect tool to feed His lambs and tend His sheep.

In fact, it's a tool that we should keep using on ourselves. I could stand here and talk some more about the role of shepherds and the needs of sheep, but a glaring fact remains. We shepherds are also sheep. We are people with souls in need of spiritual care. We are sinners who struggle with the weaknesses of human nature. As we carry out our calling, there will be moments when we stumble like

Peter, moments when we give into fear, or take the wrong type of shortcut, or exercise poor judgment. Yes, there is plenty of blame to go around when it comes to failing in the work of ministry. But strangely enough, we don't have Jesus shaking His head in disgust or wagging His finger in judgment. The Lord has a different approach. He takes that Gospel message of forgiveness and gives it, first of all, to you, His messenger. Where sin has blackened your heart, your life, your work, Christ has washed it clean. Christ has turned all of our guilt into a spot-free innocence, a clean sheet with God to be claimed by faith. This gives you and me a sort of reset button, a reliable way to start over every day refreshed by His cleansing grace.

Yes, Jesus knows how burdensome, how damaging our guilt can be. It even interferes with the work of ministry. Peter, for instance, could never function as an apostle until he received the pardon of his Lord. Once that word of forgiveness came, he was set free to serve. We can expect the same treatment. The Good Shepherd declares you not guilty by virtue of the fact that He has paid for all of your sin. With this pardon comes a reaffirming of your call. The Good Shepherd sends you back into the field with no debt to pay, no probationary period, nothing at all hanging over your head.

So on a daily basis we are to follow the formula of success—we take the Gospel message from Christ, apply it to ourselves, and then pass it on! That will be the power in our ministry, and what a tremendous power it is! It has the power to renew the messenger, as well as the power to convert the unbeliever. It has the power to instruct the student, comfort the bereaved, reclaim the lost, and usher God's people, with their faith intact, all the way to their heavenly rest. Truly the Gospel of Christ is *"the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes."*

When Christian ministry keeps the focus on the Christian message, then the power of God is going to work. We, for the most part, have heard this many times. We make a point of emphasizing this fact in our commitment to confessional Lutheranism. But still, it's easy to forget on a personal level. We fall into the same trap that plagued Christians before us. Peter thought he could stand up to pressure and remain faithful by his own sense of commitment. He had a blind spot to his weakness, which Jesus had to expose. It's the same problem that pastors, teachers, and church members face today. We focus too much on ourselves. Maybe we get wrapped up in our own gifts from God and try to rely on some talent as the key to success. Or we get down on ourselves because we seem to lack the abilities that we see in other people. Either way, we're forgetting the way things work in the kingdom of God.

The Lord does not make the ministry depend on you or me. He's going to take credit for the results because He makes them happen. He orchestrates the final outcome and carries out each step. And He does it in such a way that people can notice His involvement, His power at work. Just think if the Lord were to use only the most gifted and talented as the ministers and the messengers of His Word. People would conclude that the human spokesman matters and makes some kind of difference. But that's not the pattern we see in Bible history or the Christian Church today. Christ has taken people in their broken state of weakness, fortified them with His strength, and then turned them into effective dispensers of His saving Word. The apostle Paul is a prime example, who wrote about himself and every minister of the Gospel: *"We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us."*

As members of this congregation you are not only on the same team; you also have a hand in the work of the congregation's ministry. That includes shepherding the flock of Christ, feeding His lambs, gathering around His Word, hearing it and spreading it to others, supporting the Gospel ministry with your prayers and offerings. Your ministry as Christian witnesses and your ministry as their Christian pastor will follow the same blueprint, based on a power source that is so dependable. The power comes from Christ Himself. He's the one who called you into His service. He's the one who owns the flock that you serve. He gave you the right tool for the job. And He offers His strength—His cleansing grace—as the sure answer to our weakness.

You see, Christ has a way of taking people who can't or won't and turning them into ministers who do. He did that with Moses, the man with the excuses. He did that with Jonah, the man with resentment issues. He did so with Peter and his problem of having a frail self-reliance. He worked through Paul, the one-time fanatic and self-righteous persecutor. I suspect He will do the same with you and me,

whatever our shortcomings happen to be. Therefore in our respective callings let us look to Christ, who puts tremendous power, His Gospel power in your ministry and mine. Amen.

---

## Sermon on Ephesians 1:3-14

Paul G. Fleischer

\* The following sermon was preached in August of 2009 at Redeemer Lutheran Church in Cheyenne, Wyoming. It was included as an addendum to the essay on the Synergistic Controversy that appears later in this issue of the *Journal*.

Grace to you, mercy, and peace from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

In our text from Ephesians 1, with its soaring gospel truths proclaimed to us, the Lord would have us consider again the astounding truth that our eternal salvation was begun by God already before the foundation of the world. May the Spirit of God bless our consideration of verses 3-14.

***Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved.***

***In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace which He made to abound toward us in all wisdom and prudence, having made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself, that in the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth—in Him. In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will, that we who first trusted in Christ should be to the praise of His glory.***

***In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory.***

These are the holy words, and so we pray: “Sanctify us, O Lord, through Your truth; Your Word is truth.” Amen.

In Christ Jesus, dear fellow redeemed:

You may recall that one of the letters from the exalted Lord Jesus in the early chapters of Revelation was addressed to the Christian congregation in Ephesus. It’s the letter in which a warning is given to the congregation, since it had lost its “first love.” Though the congregation was commended for its good beginning, its patience, and its perseverance under testings and trials for the faith, for the most part they had lost their first-love zeal for God and His Word of truth.

Our Redeemer congregation observed its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2002 and is joining its sister CLC churches in celebrating the synod’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary at this time [2009]. I suggest that we will admit to knowing something about what time can do to that “first love,” that one-time brightly burning flame—how that used-to-be white-heat love and zeal for God’s Church and His gospel inevitably loses heat energy, becoming at best lukewarm. I say “inevitably” since the enemies of our Christian faith—the devil, the world, and our sinful natures—keep throwing cold water on us, dousing us with the flame retardants of worldly fame and popularity, materialism, human reason, fleshly lusts and pleasures, and all the rest of a host of sins and sinful attitudes, which war against the faith. It’s safe to say that it was just such a thing happening in the one-time fortress of Christianity in first-century Ephesus in Asia Minor. Paul had

planted the gospel seed in that city, the apostle John (for one) had watered that seed, and God had given the increase (1 Cor. 3:6). But now the congregation stood in need of a desperate call to repentance lest the flickering candle of its “lampstand” become entirely extinguished.

The gospel truths that Apostle Paul had preached to them and which they were in danger of losing were these soaring truths of our text. In these opening verses Paul would have them and us see life from a *cosmic* perspective, if you will. He would have Christians—so easily tempted to have a short-sighted view of life, tied so closely as we often are to the things of this world—see their lives in the light of eternity. He would have us see that our present faith, our faith in the here-and-now time frame, has an eternal cause, an eternal effect! Isn't it so, Christian friends, that the stresses of everyday life in this sinful, evil world can almost trap us in life's uncertainties? Trapped in the here and now, isn't it true that we can lose a forward vision, an eternal vision? In that connection one commentary says that Paul here proclaims a “vision broader than the oceans.” In the midst of life's uncertainties, then, may the Spirit of God bless our consideration of the soaring truths of this text under the theme: *By God's Grace I am . . .*

### ***1. Chosen by God the Father (vv. 3-6).***

This section of Ephesians 1 has been called “a Great Doxology,” and it begins: **“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”** First, notice well that the God spoken of here is not some generic Supreme Being. The God being extolled, worthy of our full and complete worship, honor, and praise, is **“the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ.”** St. Paul calls attention to our spiritual blessings—blessings which stand in stark contrast to the passing, temporal blessings of this dying world. Those blessings are the assurance of complete forgiveness of all sins, and with that certain forgiveness come such things as Christian comfort, peace, and joy in face of any trials that come our way.

Paul goes on to show the sure and certain foundation of our holy faith. In time of temptations to doubt and despair, we can look to the stupendous truths and foundation of faith set forth in the next verses: **“Just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will.”** This refers, dear friends, to our eternal ELECTION OF GRACE. By faith and faith alone we are God's own special people. We have heard that countless times in the past, but it bears repeating again in the face of the cold water of satanic doubts and human reasoning, determined to douse the flame of Christian faith. We are God's children by GOD's doing, GOD's decree, GOD's choosing—His picking (electing) us from **“before the foundation of the world.”** That's tough for us finite mortals to grasp, for sure. BEFORE the world was even created, back before time began, back in the eternal fore-counsel of God Himself, He chose us to salvation, to be His own adopted children! Talk about mind-boggling!

What the apostle would have these first-century Ephesian believers and us twenty-first century believers consider here is that all this was done **“to the praise of the glory of His grace.”** We've also heard countless times from this pulpit what “grace” is: undeserved, unmerited love. Grace deserves the praise when we are talking about election. It couldn't be any other way, could it? I mean, if this is true that God chose us to be His own dear children BEFORE we were born, BEFORE the world was even created, what ounce of room is left for our taking credit for any of it! Fellow believer, if you understand this blessed teaching, you see why the true Christian religion will ever remain at opposite poles with and complete odds with any and all religions that count as God's children those who supposedly merit or earn that distinction by what they do, by their own good works. Rather, Scripture teaches and true Christianity teaches that our entire salvation from beginning to end is based on God's mercy, God's grace **“in the Beloved,”** that is, in His well-beloved Son, Christ Jesus, our only Savior!

### ***2. By God's Grace I am . . . Set free by God the Son (vv. 7-10).***

Yes, God's own beloved Son made all of this possible! God could not and would not save sinners simply by overlooking their sins. Sin had to be dealt with. Since man could not deal with it himself, God sent His own Son to redeem us from our sin by His innocent suffering and death on the cross of Calvary. Thus, as the text says, **“in Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins,**

**according to the riches of His grace.”** Note, please, that we have this redemption—nothing is said about our needing to earn or merit it. Again, how could it? For our redemption too was planned by God, in Christ, before time began! So there is no reason to doubt for a minute that all our sins have been forgiven through the riches of God’s grace in Christ Jesus. All depends on what Christ did, not on our doings!

In this connection the apostle praises the “**wisdom and prudence (understanding)**” of God and His determination to save us. Arrogant twenty-first century man, of course, likes to think he knows better and understands just about everything, or at least that he will sooner or later figure it out—even those things dealing with the human condition. Science has long been playing around with the beginning and origin of life (surrogate motherhood, life in a test-tube, cloning human beings, body parts from fetuses, and all the rest) and attempts to discover how the aging process—and death—can be slowed down, if not eradicated. For all the good science does, it still fails to consider the facts set before us in Holy Scripture. Fact: God created all things, including man, through the power of His spoken word. Fact: Man was created holy, but disobeyed God and fell into sin. Fact: From Adam on the soul that sins is the one that will die. Fact: The Almighty knew things as they truly are and planned accordingly; among the things God knew is that man could not restore himself to holiness to save himself, so God chose to come to us Himself in the person of His Son clothed in our humanity to accomplish man’s salvation. Jesus, the Christ of God, died innocently on the cross to redeem sinners. Fact: The foolishness of the cross is the means—the ONLY means—of salvation for sinners!

All of this is “**the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself, that in the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth—in Him.**” What is a mystery to the wisest of men has been made known to us through the Word of the apostles, such as we are hearing again today. One man calls this Word “the delivery system by which God gives to us in time what He planned for us in eternity.” God brings all things together “**in Christ.**” Think of that! Jesus Christ is the sum and substance of history. Christ is, as the same man says: “the final crashing chord uniting all (history’s) dissonant strains into perfect harmony. In a world of confusion, where things do not add up, Christ makes sense of everything.” And this is true for people of all races and all nations. This is also why genuine Christianity is the least prejudicial religion on the face of the earth, for the Christian religion joins all people, Jew and Gentile alike, black, brown, yellow, red, and white together in Christ. All alike have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all alike have been set free by the Son!

### **3. By God’s Grace I am . . . Sealed by God the Spirit (vv. 11-14).**

Whenever and wherever the Word as the “delivery system” of the gospel is proclaimed, there the Holy Spirit is at work changing hearts, creating faith, strengthening and nourishing faith. Note how our Doxology references this with regard to the Spirit: “**In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will, that we who first trusted in Christ should be to the praise of His glory. In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory.**” Again, what powerful words and promises are there in these concluding words!

First, notice how it is said that God “**works all things according to the counsel of His will.**” What comfort to us in the so-called “uncertainty” of our everyday lives in this world of sin. Whether you are facing a surgery or some other serious physical condition, or some kind of difficult family problem, or some financial crisis in these days of a down economy—whatever it is, nothing can or will happen to us outside of God’s loving will! Our loving God will mold, fashion, shape everything that happens—even, may we say, the wicked plans of evil men—so that His gracious will is carried out for us.

Secondly, notice how Paul speaks of “**the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation.**” Let an unbelieving world with its many liberals and Bible critics throw the cold water of scorn and skepticism at the reliability of the Word. You and I know this book is the “**word of truth**” through which the Spirit seals us, holds us firmly, in the faith which saves. Yes, notice how the Holy Spirit is called the “**Spirit of**



*promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession to the praise of His glory.”* You want certainty in life, dear friends? The Spirit of God is Himself the guarantee, the pledge, the absolute certainty of our salvation in Christ. By giving us the Holy Spirit, God has obligated Himself to release the full inheritance to us on the Last Day!

Dear Christian believer, praise God’s glorious grace! May each of us have caught a renewed glimpse this day of the surpassing glory of our God and His precious gospel, so that we retain a “first love” zeal for serving our God. To that end let us make our calling and election sure by faithfully using the means of grace in Word and Sacrament—that is, the delivery system of God’s marvelous grace whereby the Spirit keeps us in the faith and helps us live a life of faith to the glory of our Savior-God. As we now shall sing (TLH 411:1):

*From eternity, O God, In Thy Son, Thou didst elect me;  
Therefore, Father, on life’s road Graciously to heav’n direct me;  
Send to me Thy Holy Spirit That His gifts I may inherit.*

Amen.

### **Concerning Justification**

David Lau

To *justify*, in the language of Scripture, means to declare or pronounce someone righteous and innocent, to acquit someone or consider and treat someone as just. We should think of a judge and a defendant in court. When the judge justifies the defendant, it means that after careful investigation the judge acquits and releases the defendant as a free man; he declares the defendant to be not guilty of the charges made against him.

In earthly affairs and human courts a just judge is one who condemns the guilty and acquits the innocent. As the prophet Isaiah says, “*Woe to men. . . , who justify the wicked for a bribe, and take away justice from the righteous man!*” (Isa. 5:22-23). The same truth is expressed quite strongly in Proverbs 17:15: “*He who justifies the wicked, and he who condemns the just, both of them alike are an abomination to the LORD.*”

It is the miracle of miracles, then, that the same God who forbids earthly judges to condemn the innocent and acquit the guilty has devised a way to justify sinners that is true to His holy nature and in accord with His grace. This He did by imputing their sins to His innocent Son. Having made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21), God was able to condemn Jesus while remaining holy and just in His pursuit of declaring sinners to be not guilty. This amazing turn of events we learn from passages in Romans, which also declare that what God did was fully in line with His own justice. What happened at the cross of Calvary—God condemning the innocent Jesus to justify the wicked world—Paul explains in Romans 3:23-26: “*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.*”

Therefore because of God’s justice dispensed at the atonement of Christ in place of sinners, Paul in Romans 4:5 can refer to the supreme Judge of all as “*Him who justifies the ungodly.*” God justifies the ungodly because all their guilt and condemnation have been transferred to Jesus, as Isaiah foretold: “*The LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.*” And so the righteous God acquits the guilty sinner because the Sinless One has been condemned and punished in his place. This is the amazing truth of the Gospel, without which we could not be saved. And so we sing:

The sinless Son of God must die in sadness;  
The sinful child of man may live in gladness;  
Man forfeited his life and is acquitted—  
God is committed. (TLH 143:5)

Romans 5:12: “*Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin,*

*and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned.”* The sin of Adam in disobeying the command of God brought sin into the world and also death as God’s judgment upon sin. The whole world was equally afflicted by Adam’s sin. Adam’s sin has brought it about that we are condemned sinners even before we come into the world. The germ of death is present from the beginning of our lives. But there is another truth in Romans 5:18: *“Therefore, as through one man’s offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man’s righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life.”*

This verse is difficult to translate, and our version of the Bible adds a few words to clarify the meaning. Literally it can be laid out like this, in recognition of its parallel structure:

<u>As</u>	<u>So</u>
<i>one man’s trespass</i>	<i>One Man’s righteousness</i>
<i>to condemnation</i>	<i>to acquittal and life</i>
<i>for all men</i>	<i>for all men.</i>

Though the wording is brief and lacking in verbs, the meaning is clear. Adam’s sin brought about condemnation and death for all men. But in a parallel way Christ’s righteousness brought about acquittal or justification and life for all men. God says to each and every sinner: I acquit you, I pronounce you not guilty, because Christ took your place; I forgive you your sins. The Judge carefully investigates the defendants and sees that their sins have been fully covered. In church language this teaching is called universal or objective justification.

Romans 5:19: *“For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man’s obedience many will be made righteous.”* As the sin of Adam was counted against the many and made them all sinners, so is the obedience of Christ imputed to or counted for the many. Of course, it’s important to determine from the context that the “many” of verse 19 is equal to and the same as the “all men” of verse 18. In his commentary on Romans George Stoeckhardt says: “The only way we men since Adam’s fall can stand before God and be saved is that we, who are destitute of and free from all righteousness, who have as our sole possession transgression and sin, clothe ourselves with a foreign righteousness, with Christ’s blood and righteousness” (74, *emph. added*).

2 Corinthians 5:18-21: *“Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ’s behalf, be reconciled to God. For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”* This marvelous passage also teaches the universal justification of sinners. It is the same thing to say that God counts all men righteous for Christ’s sake as to say God does not count men’s sins against them for Christ’s sake. In Romans 5:18 the truth is stated positively: acquittal for all men through one Man’s righteousness. Here it is stated negatively: God through Christ does not count the sins of the world against them. God has forgiven the sins of all people through Christ. And the reason for this fact is stated in the last verse. God made Christ to “be sin for us,” although He personally was sinless. Thus we, who are nothing but sinful, are made to be “the righteousness of God in Him” or through Him.

Romans 4:25: *“[Jesus] was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification.”* It was our sins that brought upon Jesus His suffering and death. It was the removal of sin, our justification that brought about His resurrection. If God had not declared the world righteous through Christ’s death, He would not have raised Him from the dead in glorious victory. God raised Christ from the dead to show the world that all people were acquitted before the court of God’s justice; all were justified because of what Christ did in their place. The Judge has examined the evidence and declared His verdict of not guilty, acquitted, and it applies to all.

On the basis of these three passages we find and agree with this confession in the *Brief Statement*

of 1932: “Scripture teaches that **God has already declared the whole world to be righteous in Christ, Rom. 5:19; 2 Cor. 5:18-21; Rom. 4:25. . .**” (9, ¶17, emph. added).

It is necessary to stress this teaching of universal justification. Only in this way can our faith be placed on a firm foundation. God has forgiven the sins of all men. All men have been acquitted before God’s court. This is, by God’s own doing and decree, the kind of positive, unconditioned Gospel that will create faith in people’s hearts. This is the kind of Gospel message that will make people certain of their salvation and justification before God. This kind of Gospel preaching will make people dependent not on their faith, but on the object of faith, i.e., on what Christ has done. They will put their trust in the message that God in Christ has reconciled the world to Himself and has forgiven the world their sins. They will say: “If God has already in Christ justified all men and forgiven them their sins, then I also have a gracious God and the forgiveness of all my sins.”

Consider also these sound words from a conservative Lutheran tract:

It is true, of course, and necessary for the completion of our picture to remind ourselves that this astounding verdict of God’s justifying grace is received by faith alone. Not all, unfortunately, accept God’s verdict of acquittal. Whether man accepts or rejects it, however, does not change the truth of justification itself, just as little as the prisoner can change any judge’s verdict of acquittal by refusing to accept it. The declaration of the judge still stands. That is also the point to be emphasized whenever we speak of justification. By his faith man does not add to the power of God’s justifying act. . . . Faith, which God’s Holy Spirit alone can work in man, is simply the hand which receives or accepts a declaration which God has made to the entire world. (Tr. #3, 3, emph. added)

**God has already declared the whole world to be righteous in Christ.** This astounding verdict of God’s grace can be received by faith only.

Romans 3:20: “*Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin.*” God has forgiven the sins of all men through Christ Jesus. No one, however, who seeks to earn or merit God’s pardon by keeping God’s holy Law or any man-made law will receive the benefit of God’s pardon in Christ Jesus. For every work and every deed of man that intends to earn justification implies that Christ and His death are unnecessary or insufficient. The Law of God, one must realize, has another purpose: to reveal how sinful we are and how unable we are to earn any favor from God.

Romans 3:21-22: “*But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference.*” God has forgiven the sins of all men through Christ Jesus. The only way God bestows us this forgiveness is as an entirely free, unmerited gift of grace. The person who will not accept EVERYTHING FOR NOTHING and will not live UNDER GRACE actually rejects the universal pardon of God in Christ. Forgiveness, justification, the righteousness of God are “*apart from the law.*” Nevertheless, “*the Law and the Prophets,*” that is, the Old Testament Scriptures also proclaim the grace of God in Christ, as Peter said in Acts 10:43: “*To Him [Jesus] all the prophets witness that, through His name whoever believes IN HIM will receive remission of sins.*” It is important to stress: IN HIM. It is not said in this way: Every believer receives forgiveness. No, but in this way: Every believer IN HIM receives forgiveness.

Romans 3:23-24: “*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.*” God has forgiven the sins of all men through Christ Jesus. It is something God has done, not we. So also this faith which trusts in Christ’s redemption is something that God has created in us by the power of His pardoning verdict, not by something we have done. For Paul says we are *justified, or forgiven, freely by His grace*. We must not look upon Christ’s redemption as God’s contribution towards our salvation, and upon faith in Christ as our contribution. That would be making of faith a human work, and we ourselves would become our own saviors. We would then think this way: “I” am forgiven, because “I” believe. That is a kind of man-centered egotism, not Christian faith. It is part of the nature of faith to forget itself and to look to CHRIST ONLY and GOD’S

PROMISES ABOUT CHRIST. Faith says: "I am forgiven, because Christ died for me, a miserable sinner who is not able even to believe. The Holy Spirit called me through the Word and has made me a Christian. I am justified, forgiven, BY GRACE."

In an introduction to their translation of Luther's *The Bondage of the Will*, Packer and Johnston state:

'Justification by faith only' is a truth that needs interpretation. The principle of *sola fide* [alone by faith] is not rightly understood till it is seen as anchored in the broader principle of *sola gratia* [alone by grace]. What is the source and status of faith? Is it the God-given means whereby the God-given justification is received, or is it a condition of justification which it is left to man to fulfil? Is it a part of God's gift of salvation, or is it man's own contribution to salvation? Is our salvation wholly of God, or does it ultimately depend on something that we do for ourselves? . . . [T]o rely on oneself for faith is no different in principle from relying on oneself for works, and the one is as un-Christian and anti-Christian as the other. (Luther 59)

Romans 3:28: "Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law." God has forgiven the sins of all men through Christ Jesus. This justification can be received only by faith. All men have been pardoned, but not all men actually receive the benefit of the pardon. Those who receive the benefit of the pardon are "**all those who believe in Christ, that is, believe, accept, and rely on, the fact that for Christ's sake their sins are forgiven**" (*Brief Statement* 9, ¶17). This aspect of justification is sometimes called in church language subjective justification.

It is for the purpose of creating and strengthening such faith that the Holy Spirit works through the preaching of the Gospel of God's pardon and in the administering of the Sacraments, which dispense God's forgiveness. Faith in Christ is also despair of self. Faith in Christ admits one's utter inability to do or think or even to believe. Faith in Christ casts self on the mercy of God in Christ Jesus: "*Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!*" (Mark 9:24).

Having considered the key passages from the Scriptures on justification, we turn again to the article "Of Justification" contained in the *Brief Statement* of 1932.

17. Holy Scripture sums up all its teachings regarding the love of God to the world of sinners, regarding the salvation wrought by Christ, and regarding faith in Christ as the only way to obtain salvation, in the article of *justification*. Scripture teaches that God has already declared the whole world to be righteous in Christ . . . ; that therefore not for the sake of their good works, but without the works of the Law, by grace, for Christ's sake, He *justifies*, that is, *accounts* as righteous, all those who believe in Christ, that is, believe, accept, and rely on, the fact that for Christ's sake their sins are forgiven. . . .
18. Through this doctrine alone Christ is given the *honor* due Him, namely, that through His holy life and innocent suffering and death He is our Savior. And through this doctrine alone can poor sinners have the abiding *comfort* that God is assuredly gracious to them. We reject *as apostasy from the Christian religion* all doctrines whereby man's own works and merit are mingled into the article of justification before God. For the Christian religion is the faith that we have forgiveness of sins and salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.
19. We reject as apostasy from the Christian religion not only the doctrine of the *Unitarians*, who promise the grace of God to men on the basis of their moral efforts; not only the gross work-doctrine of the papists, who expressly teach that good works are necessary to obtain justification; but also the doctrine of the *synergists*, who indeed use the terminology of the Christian Church and say that man is justified "by faith," "by faith alone," but again mix human works into the article of justification by ascribing to man a co-operation with God in the kindling of faith and thus stray into papistic territory. (9, ital. orig.)

From a Unitarian pamphlet this writer found an example of what is referred to in ¶19 above: "Unitarianism is the religion of faith in man. [This, by the way, is the kind of faith that many writers today talk about.] . . . Instead of being fundamentally sinful, man has an upsurging moral and spiritual nature of such positive strength and courage that, when coupled with the underlying spiritual forces of the

universe, he can meet and solve his own problems.” An example of papist teaching referred to in ¶19 is this: “But we could never believe that we were altogether wrecked by that perverseness of our first Father. No, there was something good left in us—something lovable—so attractive that it drew down the Son of God to live with us and suffer a torturous death by crucifixion. The Catholic Church takes that little bit of good and works with it, developing and strengthening it, building on it, slowly, carefully, a structure of heavenly strength and beauty. . . . The poor fellow can believe that if he prays hard enough and works hard enough, he will be able once again to turn that little bit of good in him against the selfishness which is now eating him up” (Ginder 7-8).

In stark contrast consider what Martin Luther has declared in the Smalcald Articles to be “the first and chief article”:

That Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, “was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification” (Rom. 4[:25]); and he alone is “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1[:29]); and “the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa. 53[:6]); furthermore, “All have sinned,” and “they are now justified without merit by his grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus . . . by his blood” (Rom. 3[:23-25]). . . . Nothing in this article can be conceded or given up, even if heaven and earth or whatever is transitory passed away. . . .

On this article stands all that we teach and practice against the pope, the devil, and the world. Therefore we must be quite certain and have no doubt about it. Otherwise everything is lost, and the pope and the devil and whatever opposes us will gain victory and be proved right. (Kolb-Wengert 301)

### Works Cited

- Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod.* St. Louis: Concordia, 1932.
- Ginder, Richard. “After All. . . It’s Really Up to You” (Pamphlet No. 52). New York: The Catholic Information Society, no date.
- Kolb, Robert and Timothy J. Wengert, eds. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000.
- Luther, Martin. *The Bondage of the Will.* Trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1997 (1957).
- Stoeckhardt, George. *The Epistle to the Romans.* Trans. Erwin W. Koehlinger. St. Louis: Concordia Mimeograph Co., 1943.
- Tract No. 3: “*Every Sinner Declared Righteous.*” *Continuing in His Word* series. Conference of Presidents, Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States, 1954.

---

### The Synergistic Controversy

Paul G. Fleischer

\* The following was originally presented in 2009 to the CLC West Central Pastoral Conference. The content and theme of the essay are noted in the two-part subtitle below. The essay has been revised to include editorial endnotes. Citation of quoted material is documented parenthetically per MLA guidelines. See Works Cited on page 45. The essay also includes selected excerpts from Walther’s *Law and Gospel* as an addendum.

**A Review of Article XIV, The Synergistic Controversy,  
in Bente’s *Historical Introductions to the Book of Concord*  
or  
THANK GOD—ANTI-SYNERGISM RULES!**

## Introduction

In order to watch the impressive United States Air Force Thunderbirds Air Show during Cheyenne Frontier Days, we got as close as we could by car for the best vantage point. We found that the closest spot to ground zero to view all the twists, turns, and precise formation flying was the parking lot of Fellowship Baptist Church on the outskirts of the city. Those choosing to use this vantage point were handed some religious tracts, one of which was titled “*God’s Simple Plan of Salvation—a Matter of Life or Death.*” It began: “I am asking you the most important question of life. Your joy or your sorrow for all eternity depends upon your answer. The question is: Are you saved? It is not a question of how good you are, nor if you are a church member, but are you saved? Are you sure you will go to Heaven when you die?”

To this admittedly prejudiced observer the contents that followed were clearly of the Arminianist bent.<sup>1</sup> The first of many Bible passages listed in the tract was Jesus telling Nicodemus, “Ye must be born again” (John 3:7). To this writer at least, it was significant that nothing was said of water baptism until near the end when a legalistic requirement was made: “You should be baptized in obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ as a public testimony of your salvation. . . .”<sup>2</sup> In between, the Bible passages given set forth that all people are sinners (Rom. 3:23), condemned to death (Rom. 6:23), redeemed by God’s Son (2 Cor. 5:21), called upon to repent (Acts 17:30) and to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 16:30-31). And this follows: “Simply believe on Him as the one who bore your sin, died in our place, was buried, and whom God resurrected. His resurrection powerfully assures that the believer can claim everlasting life when Jesus is received [emph. mine] as Savior. ‘But as many as received Him, to them gave He power [emph. theirs] to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name’ (Jn. 1:12).”

Yes, Jesus must be “received.” Yet there is one kind of receiving—when the sinner is taught that he can and must initiate the process by which he takes it on himself to do what must be done to be on the receiving end of a donor’s gratuity; and there is another kind of receiving—when, as Luther says, the sinner but accepts with a beggar’s hands what the donor is doling out freely. I once sought to illustrate the latter to my small-town (Roman Catholic) barber with whom an empty waiting room allowed a religious interchange. As he took my place in the barber chair, I put my wallet in his lap and said, “It’s all yours, friend! Now you can receive it gladly and thankfully, or throw it back at me.” With an inquisitive smile he returned the wallet, but future trips to the shop enabled further discussion of the biblical concept of God’s free grace in Christ Jesus—an objective quality of a merciful God rather than a quality infused into a believer’s heart. Put simply, the John 1:12 passage teaches that faith is receiving, and even a so-called ability or step taken to “receive Jesus as Savior” is, like faith, 100% God’s doing! As far as we are concerned, Scripture cannot be more clear when it teaches that “*the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned*” (1 Cor. 2:14). In summation we point to the Catechism confession of the Third Article: “*I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him*” (Kuske 5).

As has been suggested, a careful examination of the conversion theology in the above-mentioned tract leaves no doubt that its composers are disciples of and/or heirs of Jacob Arminius. What comes across is that—to mix a metaphor—Pilot God needs to enlist the help of “dead in trespasses and sins” (mummies in the cockpit) co-pilots to get their salvation off the ground; or putting it another way, having provided the means of salvation, Pilot God must proceed to put novice, dead-in-sin mummy co-pilots at the controls to (synergistically) steer their respective planes on a safe course to span the surly bonds of Earth for a hoped-for smooth landing on the heavenly landing strip. The question in controversy might become: Does God choose to or need to—as far as Scripture is concerned—enlist sinners as His co-pilots to get their salvation off the ground? Does He who created man of dust holy the first time need man’s cooperation to recreate him holy-and-fit-for-heaven the second time?

At any rate, how always timely is Article II of the Formula of Concord, “Of Free Will,” which *settled* the Synergistic Controversy. “Settled” is highlighted for the simple reason that human reason—

urged on by Satan and the sinful nature—has sought from (and will seek for) time immemorial to insert itself into the salvation picture. So notes a user-friendly book on the topic, *Getting into The Formula of Concord*:

*“Synergism” means “a working together.” Human reason argues that if the way back to God is to be found or worked out, it will have to include something of man’s own doing.*

Then this is said:

*Christianity has never succeeded in wiping out the synergistic streak even in regenerate man. Although the Bible stresses that man is saved alone by the grace of God, without the works of the law, the trail of Christian history is littered with the remains of synergistic intrusion on God’s Gospel and on the lives of people in whom that Gospel has kindled faith and renewal. (Klug 29)*

In this connection we recall that it was Erasmus’ *Diatribes* that moved Luther to write his classic opus. Called “the manifesto of the Reformation,” Luther’s *The Bondage of the Will* was, in the estimation of an endorsing review, *more than a reply to Erasmus. Luther’s 1525 treatise “is fundamental to an understanding of the primary doctrines of the Reformation. In these pages, Luther gives extensive treatment to what he saw as the heart of the gospel” (Bondage back cover).* You may recall that Luther even came to thank Erasmus for zeroing in on the crucial issue rather than on peripheral matters, such as the papacy, purgatory, indulgences, etc. More on Luther’s position follows as we endeavor to capsulize Bente’s *Historical Introductions* on the subject at hand.<sup>3</sup>

### **151. Relation of Majorism and Synergism**

Majorism, which declared good works to be necessary for salvation (a heresy addressed in Article IV of the Formula of Concord), and synergism, says Bente, are theologically “*much closer than is generally realized. Both maintain that, in part, or in a certain respect, salvation depends not on grace alone, but also on man and his efforts.*” “*The burden of both, Majorism and synergism, was the denial of the sola gratia. . . . Both derived their doctrine, not from any clear statements of the Bible, but by a process of anti-Scriptural and fallacious reasoning” (124-5).* Bente asserts, however, that “*the more subtle, veiled, and hence the more dangerous of the two, no doubt, was synergism, which reduced man’s cooperation to a seemingly harmless minimum. . .*” (125).

Philip Melancthon, long-time friend and co-worker of Martin Luther, needs to be mentioned in this discussion. Sad to say, it was Philip who would carry the banner for synergism (even as he had sided with Major in that controversy!). Not surprisingly, I suppose, is that Philip (and his supporters, known as the Philippists) became more bold in his (and their) synergistic assertions, beginning in 1548 after Luther’s death in 1546.

### **152. Luther’s Monergism**

*Bente writes: “According to Lutheran theology, the true opposite of synergism is not Calvinism with its double election, irresistible grace, denial of universal redemption, etc., but the monergism of grace. . .” (125).* Doubtless, we would agree that no doctrine more defines genuine Lutheranism than does the “monergism of grace.” Bente continues with various quotes from Luther such as: “*It is characteristic of God to make something out of nothing. Hence God cannot make anything out of him who is not as yet nothing. . .*” (125-6). And: “*In every single man God precedes with grace and works before we pray for grace or cooperate.*” The witness of St. Augustine is referenced when he said: “*Free will without grace can only sin.*” “*Thus,*” says Bente, “*Luther, from the very beginning of the Reformation, stood for the doctrine of justification, conversion, and salvation by grace alone. Most emphatically he denied that man, though free to a certain extent in human and temporal affairs, is able to cooperate with the powers of his natural, unregenerate will in matters spiritual and pertaining to God” (126).*

The above correctly characterizes also Luther’s holy arguments in his *De Servo Arbitrio* against Erasmus (1525). Bente asserts that “*if ever this blessed doctrine [of grace alone] was firmly established, successfully defended, and greatly glorified, it was in Luther’s book against Erasmus” (127).* A quote from Luther’s *Large Catechism* (1528), in which the Reformer extols grace, is given: “*I reject and*

*condemn as nothing but error all dogmas which extol our free will, as they directly conflict with this help and grace of our Savior Jesus Christ” (qtd. in Bente 127).*

In the golf course clubhouse I shared this, my assignment, with a long-time golfing buddy, a conservative Anglican. Purporting to be a Bible student, my friend soon discovered that Luther’s—and the Bible’s—teaching of the bondage of the human will was foreign to him. In hopes of shedding light, I mentioned my exchange with my friendly barber—the question as to whether Pilot God needs a co-pilot to “get the plane off the ground,” as well as the following experience that I had. Years ago when employed for a time at a cemetery, working side by side with a female custodian in a mausoleum, the conversation somehow turned to Billy Graham’s “man must make a choice” decision theology—a belief shared quite widely by many modern-day Arminians. I proffered something like: “The Bible says man by nature is, spiritually speaking, ‘dead in trespasses and sins’—as dead as all the remains around us. What at all can the dust and/or ashes around us contribute to their coming anew to life?” I don’t recall the lady’s response, but my golfing buddy said that he needed to think, study, and pray about the subject.

Dr. Siegbert Becker has much good to say on all this: “*Luther held firmly and unreservedly to the doctrine of the complete bondage of the will. Man is never free.*” He then gives Luther’s classic words: “*The will of man is set in the middle, as a beast of burden. If God sits in the saddle, he wills and goes where God wants. If the devil sits in the saddle, he wills and goes where the devil wants. Nor is it in the power of man’s will to run to or to seek either rider, but the riders themselves fight to obtain and to possess him*” Becker then adds: “*Man is a captive slave either to the will of God or to the will of the devil. Thus man sins by the necessity of his nature. This doctrine, Luther held, must stand firm against every attempt to make total depravity in any way less than total. He said that he did not want to know of two kinds of free will, one like mud and the other like wax. There is the same will in all men, and this will is equally incompetent in all cases. Thus we are all ‘necessarily damnable.’*” (Becker 132)

Later on, in a section titled “Antirationalism in the Lutheran Doctrine of Conversion,” Becker has the classic quote from Article II of the Formula of Concord which denies that man is “*able to prepare himself to a certain extent for grace, and to assent, although feebly.*” He goes on to quote the *Formula* where the assertion is made that “man is so corrupt and blinded that”:

*in spiritual and divine things the intellect, heart, and will of the unregenerate man are utterly unable, by their own natural powers to understand, believe, accept, think, will, begin, effect, do, work, or concur in working anything, but they are entirely dead to what is good, and corrupt, so that in man’s nature since the Fall, before regeneration, there is not the least spark of spiritual power remaining, nor present, by which, of himself, he can prepare himself for God’s grace, or accept the offered grace, nor be capable of it for and of himself, or apply or accommodate himself thereto, or by his own powers be able of himself, as of himself, to aid, do, work, or concur in working anything towards his conversion, either wholly, or half, or in any, even the least or most inconsiderable part. (qtd. in Becker 210)*

The monergism of grace, defined as “In opposition to synergism, the teaching that the grace of God is the only efficient cause in beginning and effecting the conversion of men” (*Lutheran Cyclopedia* 712), allows for absolutely no—and needs no—conversion “co-piloting”!

### **153. Luther’s Doctrine Endorsed**

Flacius (Illyricus) was one of the leading spokesmen against synergism. He and other Anti-Synergists endorsed Luther’s monergism of grace, being forced to declare their position publicly at a 1557 colloquy in Worms with representatives from Rome. Thank God that the Anti-Synergists would not condemn Luther’s doctrine of the complete bondage of the human will.

May I say, when using the word “anti-synergism” (including in our subtitle), I intend it as a synonym of monergism? Yes, the subtitle can be taken in two biblically based ways. For one, “Thank God—Anti-Synergism Rules!” stands as a theological assertion that sinners, who by themselves are indeed lost and condemned creatures, have no ability to save themselves or to apply their wills, bound in sin, to conversion or salvation. Rather, Pilot God by pure grace—without any human contribution or cooperation whatsoever—must and did take in hand to rescue sinners. That is, by His Word and by His



Spirit God effects conversion.<sup>4</sup> Yes, let us in true Lutheran confession and Christian worship gladly say: “Thank God for all He has done!”

1. *How can I thank Thee, Lord, For all thy loving-kindness,  
That Thou hast patiently Borne with me in my blindness?  
When dead in many sins And trespasses I lay,  
I kindled, holy God, Thine anger ev’ry day.*

2. *It is Thy work alone That I am now converted;  
O’er Satan’s work in me Thou hast Thy pow’r asserted.  
Thy mercy and Thy grace That rise afresh each morn  
Have turned my stony heart Into a heart new-born.* (TLH 417:1-2)

A second way to take our subtitle would be as a prayer of thanksgiving that—as often as false teachers arise to insert and assert man’s cooperation (co-piloting) in some fashion into the salvation picture—God has caused faithful men like the Reformers to arise and proclaim the *sola gratia* principle regarding conversion and justification. “*Thank God—Anti-Synergism Rules!*” For only in and through the monergism of grace can poor sinners find comfort and peace—godly security—with a holy God!

Bente puts it like this: “*And of all the controversies after Luther’s death the synergistic controversy was most momentous and consequential. For the doctrine of grace with which it dealt is the vital breath of every Christian. Without it neither faith nor the Christian religion can live and remain.*” “*Genuine Lutheranism would have been strangled if synergism had emerged victorious from this great controversy of grace versus free will*” (128).

#### **154. The Father of Synergism; 155. Unsound Statements of Melancthon**

Early on we find Melancthon on the same page with Luther as far as the monergism of grace was concerned. As late as 1530 in the Augsburg Confession, he expressed himself as concurring with Luther. Cracks started to appear, however, in letters of 1532 and 1533 and in his *Loci* of 1533 and 1535, until in 1537, as the evidence shows, he had drifted from his monergistic moorings toward Erasmian theology. Bente quotes Tschackert as saying about the *Loci* of 1535:

*“Melancthon wants to make man responsible for his state of grace. Nor does the human will in consequence of original sin lose the ability to decide itself when incited; the will produces nothing new by its own power, but assumes an attitude toward what approaches it. When man hears the Word of God, and the Holy Spirit produces spiritual affections in his heart, the will can either assent or turn against it. In this way Melancthon arrives at the formula, ever after stereotype with him, that there are three concurring causes in the process of conversion: ‘the Word of God, the Holy Spirit, and the human will, which, indeed, is not idle, but strives against its infirmity’” (520). (qtd. in Bente 128)<sup>5</sup>*

Those are the “three causes” alluded to earlier in an endnote. Adding the third cause is just so rational, along the lines of Jacob Arminius and, five centuries later, Billy Graham and his crusade calls-for-decision. Bottom line then or now, it’s a theology that reserves some credit and/or responsibility for man in bringing about his conversion. It is just so like humans—and going right along with the *opinio legis* after the Fall—to insert that third cause which has to do with (fallen) mankind’s supposed residual spiritual powers. My well-intentioned golfing buddy went right along with everything I was telling him from Scripture on this subject, although he yet had trouble discarding the idea that the will of man must play some decisive role in conversion. And so he said, “If you put your wallet in my lap, the accepting of it is a choice I have to make, right?” A la Melancthon?! Bente notes in his “Father of Synergism” section: “*According to the later Melancthon [after Luther’s death]. . . , man’s eternal salvation evidently does not depend on the gracious operations of God’s Holy Spirit and Word alone, but also on his own correct conduct toward grace*” (129).

Philip Melancthon, may I say, is one of the best examples of the sad and sorry fact that man by nature, even after his regeneration, tends to be a synergist. As noted by Eugene Klug: “*Melancthon*

could never completely put down the tendencies of his humanist background. Implicit in his thinking were the inherent capabilities of the human will and its freedom to act. Again and again he posited the nonresisting will of man as a factor in conversion. The later editions of his *Loci . . .* show him stressing man's assenting will as a third cause, besides the Holy Spirit and the Word, in conversion" (Klug 30-1). In the section "Unsound Statements of Melancthon" Bente gives copious other quotes of his theology on this point and a warning (from Schmauk) about how insidious it can be: "Melancthon found 'the cause for the actual variation in the working of God's grace in man, its object. This subtle synergistic spirit attacks the very foundation of Lutheranism, flows out into almost every doctrine, and weakens the Church at every point' . . ." (qtd. in 130). Thank God for the Anti-Synergists of the Reformation era, who saw the dangers of false doctrine inherent in a supposed "third cause" of conversion.

This is what instills a holy fear among us who are concerned about upholding the whole counsel of God against the leaven of doctrinal error. What on the face of it appears to some as a minor straining-at-gnats point has the result that we end up standing again in the Roman camp with its infused grace, or in the Arminian Semi-Pelagian camp as set forth by Billy Graham.<sup>6</sup> Graham's synergistic doctrine reads like this: "In order not to be condemned you must make a choice—you must choose to believe. . . . The Holy Spirit will do everything possible to disturb you, draw you, love you—but finally it is your personal decision . . . whether to accept God's free pardon or to continue in your lost condition. . . . If you are willing to make this decision and have received Jesus Christ as your own Lord and Savior, then you have become a child of God in whom Jesus Christ dwells" (qtd. in Leppien-Smith 231). This is similar to "Law Four" of Dr. Bill Bright and his Campus Crusade for Christ ministry: "We must individually receive Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord; then we can know and experience God's love and plan for our lives. . . . We receive Christ by personal invitation. . . . We receive Jesus Christ by faith, as an act of the will" (qtd. in Leppien-Smith 232, ital. orig.). Once again, of course, we think of Luther's "I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him" (Kuske 5).

It's noteworthy that this subject receives considerable attention in the work of Leppien and Smith, *What's Going on Among the Lutherans?*—the source of the two previous quotations. In a chapter called "The Reformed Approach to Scripture" the authors warn against enthusiasm, the "doctrine of the inner word," in which the Spirit supposedly works without means. The first proponent of this idea was a contemporary of Luther, Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531). In what is called "an overreaction to the beliefs and practices of the church of Rome," Zwingli, who pursued his Reformation efforts mainly in Switzerland, "decided that God did not need any external means in his dealings with man and declared, 'The Holy Spirit needs no vehicle.'" The following conclusion is drawn by the authors: "Thus [Zwingli] created the Reformed doctrine, which teaches that the Holy Spirit works directly on man *apart* from, or independent of, the Word and the Sacraments—a doctrine that John Calvin built upon" (229, ital. orig.).

Fellow heirs of Dr. Luther—God spared our forefathers! May He spare us! A la synergism, what enthusiasm ultimately does is cause a person to look inside himself, to one's own feelings, emotions, dreams, revelations, for certainty of faith, forgiveness, salvation! The *monstrum incertitudinis* ("monster of uncertainty") hangs over one like a cloud so that the person wonders: Have I in the past and am I now cooperating sufficiently to bring about and sustain my conversion? Over against any and every incursion of enthusiasm (Pentecostal, charismatic) into Lutheran ranks, may God help us ever to uphold the bottom line: "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God" (Rom. 10:17)! Thank God—Anti-Synergism Rules, and thus He preserves the child-like certainty of faith in every exigency: "For I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day" (2 Tim. 1:12). The Bible passage I left with my well-meaning Anglican friend, who contended that "it's your choice to accept," is the Savior's word: "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last" (John 15:16 NIV).

Well said is the following from the Epitome in the Formula of Concord about "Free Will":

God the Holy Spirit does not effect conversion without means, but he uses the preaching and the hearing of God's Word to accomplish it, as it is written (Rom. 1[:16]), the gospel is a "power of God" to save. Likewise, faith comes from hearing God's Word (Rom. 10[:17]). . . . In this Word the Holy Spirit is present and opens hearts that they may, like Lydia in Acts 16[:14], listen to it and thus be

converted, solely through the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, who alone accomplishes the conversion of the human being. . . . As Christ says, “Apart from me, you can do nothing” [John 15:5]. With these brief words he denies the free will its power and ascribes everything to God’s grace, so that no one has grounds for boasting before God (1 Cor. [ 9:16]). (Kolb-Wengert 492)

**156. Pfeffinger Champions Synergistic Doctrine; 157. Statements of Pfeffinger; 158. Strigel and Huegel Entering Controversy; 159. Weimar Disputation; 160. Strigel’s Rationalistic Principle; 161 Strigel’s Theory**

In 1555 John Pfeffinger (1493-1573), professor at the University of Leipzig, published “Five Questions Concerning the Liberty of the Human Will.” He defended the synergistic doctrine of Melancthon, saying that man cooperates by preparing himself for God’s grace and by not resisting when grace comes to him. We turn again to Eugene Klug for a summary of the considerable Pfeffinger/Strigel connection:

*Now the controversy was out in the open, especially when [Pfeffinger] cited Melancthon as his supporting authority. To Pfeffinger’s side came Strigel, professor at Jena. By 1559 the controversy was so intense that Duke John Frederick II of Saxony applied the arm of the state and imprisoned some of the protagonists, including Strigel.*

*These harsh measures were generally deplored, and there was general appeal for an open meeting. This prompted the Weimar disputation (1560), at which Flacius and Strigel became the two leading participants. The topic was to center on free will and the part that the human will played, if any, in the conversion of the sinner. Strigel managed to shift some of the onus from himself and his fellow synergists by successfully leading Flacius into erroneous statements concerning the nature of original sin. . . . Meanwhile he himself used persuasive, rationalistic power to show how the will of man is actively involved in conversion, how it is not spiritually dead, and how, once original sin’s power is broken, the natural powers of the will are free to respond and assent on their own. (Klug 31-32)*

Bente brings out that Strigel’s guiding principle was not Scripture, but “philosophy and reason”: “His real concern was not, *What does Scripture teach concerning the causes of conversion? but, How may we harmonize the universal grace of God with the fact that only some are converted and saved?*” (135). Notice how the tentacles of synergism strive to attach themselves also to the admitted “mysteries” of the doctrine of election and the question asked often, “Why some and not others?” More on this later. Bente continues: “Over against this rationalistic method of Strigel and the Synergists generally, *the Lutherans adhered to the principle that nothing but a clear passage of the Bible can decide a theological question. They rejected as false philosophy and rationalism every argument directed against the clear sense of a clear Word of God*” (135-6). May God preserve to us in our day such a deep and abiding reliance upon the clear and plain teachings of the Word—even if the gendarmes come to haul us to the prison house!

Allow reference to another one of Strigel’s comments, which says: “*I do not say that the will is able to assent to the Word without the Holy Spirit, but that, being moved and assisted by the Spirit, it assents with trepidation. If we were unable to do this, we would not be responsible for not having received the Word*” (qtd. in Bente 135). Just as the concept of “receiving” can have a couple of different meanings (cf. earlier in this essay), so the phrase “moved by the Spirit.” To this writer that phrase—as it is wont to be used in our preaching and teaching—has long demanded or begged a proper Christian understanding. Strigel’s comment is evidence that the phrase can and often does seem to imply that some residual spiritual powers within only need to be spurred to action by the Holy Spirit. Careful! This writer has been helped much by the archived essay “Walk by the Spirit in Christ,” written by Missionary Fred Tiefel. Among the many quotable quotes, I share this one: “*One day, answering a knock at the door: ‘Does Dr. Martinus live here?’ asked a man. ‘No,’ Luther answered, ‘he died. Christ lives here now.’ Christ’s Spirit is the divine ‘dynamic’ in the life of the Christian. The new man has no dynamism in his own right whatsoever. ‘If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.’*”

Missionary Fred expands in considerable detail on the holy truth that the Holy Spirit “moves and leads in the sense of draws and drives.” In other words, it is always and only the Spirit who is the “rider”—as we know, a truth clearly confessed in the *Formula’s Thorough Declaration on Free Will*:

*From this, then, it follows that as soon as the Holy Ghost, as has been said, through the Word and holy Sacraments, has begun in us this His work of regeneration and renewal, it is certain that through the power of the Holy Ghost we can and should cooperate, although still in great weakness. But this [that we cooperate] does not occur from our carnal natural powers, but from the new powers and gifts which the Holy Ghost has begun in us in conversion, as St. Paul expressly and earnestly exhorts that as workers together with Him we receive not the grace of God in vain, 2 Cor. 6, 1. But this is to be understood in no other way than that the converted man does good to such an extent and so long as God by His Holy Spirit rules, guides, and leads him, and that as soon as God would withdraw His gracious hand from him, he could not for a moment persevere in obedience to God. But if this were understood thus. . . , that the converted man cooperates with the Holy Ghost in the manner as when two horses together draw a wagon, this could in no way be conceded without prejudice to the divine truth. (Trig. 907, ¶65-66)*

Also, it is quite apparent that this our confession has in mind Luther’s familiar words from *The Bondage of the Will*:

*In a word: if we are under the god of this world, strangers to the work of God’s Spirit, we are led captive by him at his will, as Paul said to Timothy (2 Tim. 2.26), so that we cannot will anything but what he wills. . . . And we acquiesce in his rule willingly and readily, according to the nature of willingness, which, if constrained, is not ‘willingness’; for constraint means rather, as one would say, ‘unwillingness’. But if a stronger appears, and overcomes Satan, we are once more servants and captives, but now desiring and willingly doing what He [ital. orig.] wills—which is royal freedom (cf. Luke 11.18-22).*

*So man’s will is like a beast standing between two riders. If God rides, it wills and goes where God wills: as the Psalm says, ‘I am become as a beast before thee, and I am ever with thee’ (Ps. 73.22-3). If Satan rides, it wills and goes where Satan wills. Nor may it choose to which rider it will run, or which it will seek; but the riders themselves fight to decide who shall have and hold it. (103-4)*

Luther and the other Reformers knew nothing of flying planes. Yet couldn’t our analogy of piloting an airplane be comparable to riding a horse? The plane will go where the one at the controls steers it. If Satan is pilot, it goes where Satan wills. Nor may the plane choose who its pilot is, but the pilots (the Holy Spirit or Satan) themselves fight to decide who will be at the controls. Knowing this to be the case, the so-called “cooperation” of the Christian (inasmuch as he is new man) shows itself in his putting himself in a position where the Spirit is at the controls—“walking in the Spirit” by faithfully employing the means of grace, the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. On the other hand, despising those means, the Christian needs to remember, allows Satan to shape the flight plan, ultimately steering the plane straight to an eternal abode in hell.

## **162. Strigel’s Semi-Pelagianism; 163. Strigel’s “Cooperation”; 164. Objections Answered**

As Bente points out, Strigel’s position in the bitter controversy was “based on the error that a remnant of spiritual ability still remains in natural man” (138). That, in effect, denied that man by nature is truly spiritually dead, but reserves some spark of spiritual life. Flacius took vigorous exception, asserting that Strigel’s position was essentially a form of Pelagianism all over again. In his presentation of the dispute Bente notes: “Pelagius held that man, by his natural powers, is able to begin and complete his own conversion; Cassianus, the Semi-Pelagian, taught that man is able merely to begin this work” (138). Resorting to analogies, Strigel suggested that man’s natural powers are as “garlic-juice [that] is applied to a magnet,” causing the latter to lose its power of attraction. Bente calls attention to the fact that the Formula of Concord appears to respond to that analogy when it “rejects as a Pelagian error the teaching ‘that original sin is not a despoliation or deficiency, but only an external impediment to these spiritual good powers, as when a magnet is smeared with garlic-juice, whereby its natural power is not removed,

*but only hindered; or that this stain can be easily washed away, as a spot from the face or a pigment from the wall*' (865, 22)" (qtd. in Bente 138).

A contention of Pfeffinger and Strigel—and, I'd guess, many current-day Semi-Pelagians—was that the Lutheran position made man purely passive, "like a block or a stone." Their argument, of course, would be a return to the (rational) position that man has to receive credit for controlling at least one of those buttons on the pilot's instrument panel. It was Flacius again who took up the scriptural cause, stating that he was, in fact, willing to distinguish between cooperation *before* and *after* conversion. That, however, was not good enough for Strigel, who "protested again and again that man is not like a block or stone when he is converted." In defense of his position Flacius "explained that in his conversion man is able to cooperate just as little as a stone can contribute to its transformation into a statue" (Bente 140—to this writer the response is well put and akin to the helplessness of that "mummy in the cockpit"). Luther, by the way, also taught that "regarding his conversion" man "is *mere passive* or completely passive (Weimar ed., 18, 697)" (Klug 32, ital. orig.).

### **165. Teaching of the Anti-Synergists;**

### **166. Attitude of Formula of Concord**

*Thank God—Anti-Synergism Rules!*; but we see that it wasn't without a holy and mighty struggle within the ranks of our confessional Lutheran heritage. Again from Bente: "While the Philippists, also in the Synergistic Controversy, endeavored to supplant the authority and doctrine of Luther by that of Melanchthon, their opponents, *Amsdorf, Flacius, Wigand, Hesshusius, and others . . . stood four-square on Luther's teaching of the sola gratia, which, they were fully convinced, was nothing but the pure truth of the Gospel itself*" (142). In section 165 we find Bente's summation of the Anti-Synergists' position—a portion especially interesting for the *caveat* it contains: ". . . *that only after his conversion man is able to cooperate with the Holy Spirit; that such cooperation, however, flows not from the innate powers of the natural will, but from the new powers imparted in conversion; that also in the converted the natural sinful will continues to oppose whatever is truly good, thus causing a conflict between the flesh and the spirit which lasts till death; in brief, that man's conversion and salvation are due to grace alone and in no respect whatever to man and his natural powers*" (142). In this regard consider an aside: In Romans 7 St. Paul is speaking of himself *after* conversion. And by the way, at his spiritual "take-off" on the road to Damascus, what did Paul, the Christian killer, do to contribute to the launching of his new life and career as a Christ-follower and Gospel-proclaimer?

## **Conclusion**

Yes, THANK GOD—ANTI-SYNERGISM RULES! Still, the confessional Lutheran Church dare never drop its guard against synergistic tendencies. As we are now [2009] focusing on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the CLC—and with that tracing back over the controversies that would lead to the formation of the CLC as well as to the dissolution of the Synodical Conference—we find grave concerns expressed by our forefathers touching on our subject. We refer in closing to two of the Tracts issued by the Conference of Presidents of the Wisconsin Synod in 1954; these are Number 4, "Not by My Own Reason or Strength" and Number 6, "Chosen by Grace from Eternity"—both being part of the eleven-tract series called *Continuing in His Word*.

Tract Number 4 begins by referring to and quoting from the *Common Confession*, which was to settle "long-standing differences" between the Missouri Synod and the American Lutheran Church "in regard to the doctrine of Conversion":

*The sinner's conversion takes place when God brings the contrite sinner to faith in Christ as his Savior. This change of heart with respect to sin and this reliance upon Christ for salvation from sin is the work of God the Holy Spirit, without any cooperation whatsoever from sinful man. "No man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost," 1 Cor. 12, 3b. (qtd. in Tract #4, 1)*

While this statement sounds good, the Tract argues that it does not go far enough to settle "past differences." In the early 1900s the Ohio and Iowa Synods, in trying to answer the question "Why is it then that some are converted and others not?", had begun speaking of "two kinds of resistance in man:

natural resistance, which will be overcome by the Holy Spirit with the result that man is converted; and willful resistance, which cannot be overcome by the Holy Spirit, with the result that he is not converted” (3). The Tract writers set forth that from both Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, “we can speak of only one kind of resistance, namely, willful resistance; and that man’s conduct, accordingly, in no way contributes toward his conversion. . .” (3). Reserving a supposed distinction in man’s conduct, it is argued, is ultimately a denial of the *sola gratia*. “We must oppose any teaching which even in the slightest degree makes our conversion and our salvation dependent upon anything we do” (7)

The principle that confessional Lutheranism has always championed (cf. the “we reject/condemn” statements of the Lutheran Confessions) is then also stressed: “In view of past controversies on this subject a clear and correct presentation of the doctrine of Conversion must include a rejection of the untenable distinction between a natural and a willful resistance of man” (qtd. in 4).

Tract Number 6 on Election refers to the fact that there was no disagreement within the Synodical Conference on this subject, but that in 1880 there clearly was disagreement on the subject again within constituent synods of the ALC. The Tract warns about human reason entering the picture to answer the question about why some are saved and others not. We can easily see the connection to the subject matter of Tract Number 4, and its final assertions must be clearly held also here. Tract Number 6 states the false position as this: “In election this ‘refraining from willful resistance,’ foreseen by God, becomes the reason why God chose some and not others. Thus they taught an election in view of persevering faith” (5). Against this false teaching the following is written:

*To say that man can cooperate with God (even if only to the extent that he does not willfully resist but submits to God’s saving efforts) implies that there is by nature some good in him. This is a denial of original sin, a denial of the fact that man is totally corrupt, “dead in trespasses and sins.” To say that man can cooperate with God also implies that man has power to help in his own salvation, and is a denial that salvation is by grace alone, that it is “a gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast.” (5)*

Doubtless, there are those who would accuse us of straining at gnats and of splitting hairs. But Tract #6 aptly concludes with a paragraph setting forth that such errors as these need to be refuted “for our comfort.” It asserts that doctrinal error might rob us of the certainty of our by-grace-alone salvation and/or of the comfort God intends for His children who face the trials of this present life. Similarly, one can see how clearly another of our Confessions, the 1932 *Brief Statement* of the Missouri Synod, speaks on the companion subjects of Conversion and Election.

In a 2008 issue of the *Journal* Pastor David Schierenbeck reviewed *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions* and began with this introduction: “One of the pastoral challenges of our times is to instill in our members a deeper appreciation of both the Biblical and Lutheran confessional legacy that is theirs. . . . If the beginning of the CLC seems like ancient history to many today, can you imagine how the 428-year old, Reformation-era *Book of Concord* is typically viewed?” Then it is said with intended emphasis: “Yet it is doubtful that any human document more clearly and comprehensively summarizes, conveys, defines, and defends who we are and what we believe” (38-9).

We would heartily agree—which is one reason why our [West Central] pastoral conference has this series going on, “*Reviewing Bente’s Historical Introductions to the Book of Concord*.” But the question remains: How can we heighten the interest of the folks in our congregations to the treasure we have in our Confessions—including the comforting Formula of Concord’s Article II: Of Free Will? How better can we help them to see and exclaim with us: “THANK GOD—ANTI-SYNERGISM RULES!”?

Wonderfully supportive of the thrust of this study is the following hymn from our *Worship Supplement*:

1. Lord, ’tis not that I did choose You;  
That, I know, could never be,  
For this heart would still refuse You  
Had Your grace not chosen me.  
You removed the sin that stained me,  
Cleansing me to be Your own;

- For this purpose You ordained me,  
That I live for You alone.
2. It was grace in Christ that called me,  
Taught my darkened heart and mind,  
Else the world had yet enthralled me,  
To Your heav'nly glories blind.  
Now I worship none above You;  
For Your grace alone I thirst,  
Knowing well that, if I love You,  
You, O Father, loved me first.
3. Haste then on from grace to glory,  
Armed by faith and winged by prayer.  
All but heav'n is transitory;  
God's own hand shall guide you there.  
Soon shall end this earthly story;  
Swift shall pass the pilgrim days,  
Hope soon change to heav'nly glory,  
Faith to sight and prayer to praise. (776: Conder-Lyte)

Hallelujah! From beginning to end: SOLI DEO GLORIA!

**Addendum:**

The following are quotes, chosen by your essayist, on faith as a “feeling” or emotional thing—negatively and positively—from Dr. C. F. W. Walther’s *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel*. All the excerpts below are taken from Walther’s treatment of Thesis IX. Words underlined show emphasis added; use of italics is original.

**Thesis IX.** *In the fifth place, the Word of God is not rightly divided when sinners who have been struck down and terrified by the Law are directed, not to the Word and the Sacraments, but to their own prayers and wrestlings with God in order that they may win their way into a state of grace; in other words, when they are told to keep on praying and struggling until they feel that God has received them into grace. (127)*

“The doctrine which is denounced in this thesis is common to all the Reformed and to the sects of Reformed origin, including the Baptists, the Methodists, the Evangelical Alliance, the Episcopalians, the Presbyterians” (127).

Regarding Acts 2:42 and the apostolic church forming in Jerusalem: “Hence, theirs was not a transient fervor, such as that frequently produced by itinerant enthusiasts in our day at their revivals. No; their hearts had been profoundly stirred and completely changed. They rejoiced and cheerfully took upon themselves all ignominy and persecution, all sufferings which the Christians of that time had to endure” (129).

Regarding the Philippian jailor, and also that the apostles administered baptism immediately: “They did not say: ‘We have to take you through an extensive course of instruction and expound to you accurately and thoroughly all the articles of the Christian creed. After that, we shall have to put you on probation to see whether you can become an approved Christian.’ Nothing of the sort” (131). On the same page Walther notes what the “Reformed” in his day would say of Lutherans: “If they were to see a Lutheran minister adopting the practise [sic] of the apostles, they would cry out: ‘How can that godless and lax preacher act that way? Why, he ought first to impress on the sinner that he must feel the grace of God in his heart. Instead of that he comforts him and even baptizes him’” (131-2).<sup>7</sup>

Regarding Paul’s conversion: “Ananias, then, does not say: ‘First you must pray until you have a sensation of inward grace.’ No, he tells him: Having come to a knowledge of the Lord Jesus, your first step must be to receive Baptism for the washing away of your sins. And then call upon the Lord

Jesus. That is the true order of saving grace: not praying first for the grace of God, but after one has learned to know the grace of God. Prior to that he cannot pray acceptably” (133-4).

Regarding souls that are “alarmed and in great anguish”: “They [the sects that have sprung from the Reformed Church] give them a long list of efforts that they must make in order, if possible, to be received into grace: how long they must pray, how strenuously they must fight and wrestle and cry, until they can say that they feel they have received the Holy Ghost and divine grace and can rise from their knees shouting hallelujahs. . . . If a sincere candidate confesses that he only feels his inability and is full of evil inclinations, he is told that he is still in a sorry condition and that he must continue to wrestle in prayer until he finally experiences a feeling of divine grace. Then he is told to praise God because he is rid of sin; all is well with him, the penitential agony is over, and he has become a child of God’s grace” (134-5). In assessing the “three awful errors” of “the sects,” Walther observes that they “neither believe nor teach a real and complete reconciliation of man with God because they regard our heavenly Father as being a God very hard to deal with, whose heart must be softened by passionate cries and bitter tears. That amounts to a denial of Jesus Christ, who has long ago turned the heart of God to men by reconciling the entire world with Him” (135).

As Walther rehearses for his students how “blessed we Lutherans are”: “It would be awful if one of you would have to retire this evening with the thought in his heart: ‘I do not know whether God is gracious to me, whether He has accepted me as His child, and whether my sins are forgiven. If God were to call me hence to-night, I would not be sure whether I should die saved.’. . .” “God’s disposition towards us is as we picture it to ourselves. If one believes that God is gracious to him, he certainly has a gracious God. If we dress our heavenly Father up as a scarecrow, as a God who is angry with us, we *have* an angry God, and His wrath rests upon us. However, the God that is angry with us has been removed by our Savior; we now have a God who takes pity on us” (137).<sup>8</sup>

Regarding Luther’s summing up against the fanatics: “The Spirit is not obtained except by simple trust in God’s Word. Even when void of any feeling, the person who declares: ‘God has said so, therefore I shall believe it,’ will find that the Holy Spirit has entered his heart, filling it with His peace and joy” (164).

Regarding what is behind the approach of the Pietists: “What may be the reason why the Pietists, who were really well-intentioned people, hit upon the doctrine that no one could be a Christian unless he had ascertained the exact day and hour of his conversion? The reason is that they imagined a person must suddenly experience a heavenly joy and hear an inner voice telling him that he had been received into grace and had become a child of God” (194).

Before taking up a discussion of the Methodist view, Walther warns “against a misunderstanding of the doctrine that a person must not base his salvation and his state of grace on his feeling. For this doctrine is abused by many. There are people who regard themselves as good Christians although they are spiritually dead. They have never felt a real anguish on account of their sins; they have never been filled with terror on account of them, have never been appalled by the thought of hell which they have deserved, have never been on their knees before God, bewailing with bitter tears their awful, damnable condition under sin. Much less have they wept sweet tears of joy and glorified God for His mercy. They read and hear the Word of God without being specially impressed by it. They go to church and receive absolution without feeling refreshed; they attend Holy Communion without any inward sensation and remain as cold as ice. Occasionally, when they become inwardly agitated because of their indifference in matters concerning their salvation. . . , they try to quiet their heart with the reflection that the Lutheran Church teaches that lack of spiritual feeling is of no moment. . . . No, indeed; a person who cannot say, in accordance with Ps. 34, 8, that he has *tasted* and seen that the Lord is good must not regard himself as being in a state of true faith” (195).

Regarding the joy of the apostles and saints, such as Paul and David: “The examples of the saints recorded in the Bible corroborate this point. We behold them continually aglow with the praise of God because of what He has done for them. That presupposes that their hearts were conscious of the mercy which the Lord had shown them. Could David, without an inward experience, have exclaimed,



‘Bless the Lord, O my soul; and all that is within me bless His holy name. . .’? He certainly had a very lively feeling of these matters when he spoke those words” (196).

“Note, then, that our statement that no one must base his salvation and his state of grace on his feeling does not mean that he can be a good Christian without having experienced any feeling in regard to religious matters. That is not what we teach” (196-7).

Using the testimony of Luther in his *Church Postil* on “feelings,” who was “commenting on the words: ‘Because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father’ (Gal. 4, 6)”:

At this point every one is to ascertain by self-examination whether he *feels* the Holy Spirit in his heart and *experiences* His speaking. . . .<sup>9</sup> Likewise, in Rom. 8, 15 he says: “Ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father.” This crying is felt when one’s conscience, without wavering and questioning, conceives a staunch boldness to be quite certain, not only that his sins have been forgiven, but also that he is a child of God, assured of his salvation and may with a cheerful and assured heart and with all confidence call God his dear Father and cry to Him. Of these things he must be more certain than of his very life and must be ready to suffer every kind of death, and hell in addition, rather than allow this assurance to be taken from him by yielding to doubt [St. Louis Ed. XII, 239-40]. (qtd. in 197)

Regarding the misery of the times in which Walther and his students lived: “The misery of our times is caused by the fact that the faith of which Luther speaks is rare. Either men are spiritually dead and therefore are unconcerned about their soul’s welfare, imagining that they will get to heaven anyway, or they are filled with anguish and uncertainty. Many who have spent their lives in their horrible ‘faith,’ which looks like faith, but is not, die with the thought in their hearts: What will become of me now? Am I going to heaven or not?” (199).

Regarding the commingling of Law and Gospel:

Law and Gospel are grievously commingled by those who assert that assurance of the forgiveness of sins requires praying, struggling, and wrestling until finally a joyful feeling arises in the heart, indicating to the person in a mysterious way that grace is now in his heart and that he can be of good cheer because he has forgiveness of his sins. Now, properly speaking, grace is never in man’s, but in God’s heart. First a person must believe; after that he may feel. Feeling proceeds from faith, not faith from feeling. If a person’s faith proceeds from feeling, it is not genuine faith; for faith requires a divine promise which it lays hold of. Accordingly, we can be sure that the faith of those who can say: ‘I regard nothing in all the world except the precious Gospel; on that I build,’ is of the right sort. The devil may terrify and harass such people until they have no pleasant feeling of grace, but they will sing nevertheless:

Though “No!” my heart should ever cry,  
Still on thy Word I shall rely

or:

I shall trust though void of feeling,  
Till before Thee I’ll be kneeling.

The principal proof-text for this point of doctrine is 1 John 3, 19.20: *Hereby we know that we are of the truth and shall assure our hearts before Him. For if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart and knoweth all things.* (200-1)

Regarding the hour of death:

Hebr. 11, 1 states: *Now, faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.* We have here a definition of faith. If faith is what is here stated: a firm, reliant confidence, not doubting, not wavering, it is self-evident that faith dare not be based on sight, feeling, and sense. If it is, it is built on sand, and the entire structure thus set up will soon collapse. Pity the person who has become accustomed to regarding himself as pardoned while he has pleasant feelings. As a rule, these pleasant feelings vanish in the hour of death, when the final agony drives them away. Happy the man who in that hour can say: —

I cling to what my Savior taught

And trust it whether felt or not.

He can depart in peace. Pity the poor, unhappy wretch who in that hour discovers that he is void of any feeling of grace and must die without Jesus dwelling in his heart. . . . When they [the “fanatical sects”] ask a brother of their communion, ‘How do you feel?’ and he tells them that he is not aware of any feeling, they begin milling with the poor wretch in prayer, struggling and wrestling until he gets the desired feeling. The feeling that he gets, however, is merely physical, not the feeling of the Holy Spirit” (203).

Regarding Luther on the ten lepers:

Luther continues: “Tell me, who had given these lepers the duly sealed and stamped letter assuring them that Christ would hear their prayer? Do you observe in them any sensation, any feeling of His mercy, any information, knowledge, or certainty of His goodness? None of these items can be discerned in them. Well, what do we see in them? A frank risking and cheerful daring that relies on His unsensed, untried, and unrecognized goodness. . . .” (qtd. in 205)

In quoting Luther in another place:

“. . . Why do you refuse to be satisfied unless you find Him in yourselves and have the feeling of being holy and without sin? You will never succeed; all your toil will be labor lost.” (qtd. in 206)

And finally, from Walther’s concluding paragraph on the substance of Thesis IX:

Here you hear a verdict condemning all fanatical sects. No matter what other false doctrines they may teach, they all have this grievous error in common, that they do not rely solely on Christ and His Word, but chiefly on something that takes place in themselves. . . . No; we are not to look back to our conversion for assurance, but we must go to our Savior again and again, every day. . . . I must return to the mercy-seat every day, otherwise I shall make my former conversion my savior, by relying on it. That would be awful; for in the last analysis it would mean that I make myself my savior.” (207)

## Works Cited

- Becker, Siegbert W. *The Foolishness of God: The Place of Reason in the Theology of Martin Luther*. Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1982.
- Bente, F. *Historical Introductions to the Book of Concord*. St. Louis: Concordia, 1965 (1921 in *Triglot Concordia*).
- Conder, Josiah and Henry F. Lyte. Hymn 776: “Lord, ’Tis Not that I Did Choose You.” *Worship Supplement 2000*. John C. Reim, ed. Eau Claire: Church of the Lutheran Confession, 2007 (2000).
- Klug, Eugene F. and Otto Stahlke. *Getting into The Formula of Concord: A History and Digest of the Formula*. St. Louis: Concordia, 1977.
- Kolb, Robert and Timothy Wengert, eds. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000.
- Kuske, David P. *Luther’s Catechism*. Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1982.
- Leppien, Patsy A. and J. Kincaid Smith. *What’s Going on among the Lutherans? A Comparison of Beliefs*. Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1992.
- Luther, Martin. *The Bondage of the Will*. Trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997 (1957).
- Lutheran Cyclopedia*. Erwin Lueker, ed. St. Louis: Concordia, 1954.
- Schierenbeck, David. Rev. of *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions—A Reader’s Edition of the Book of Concord*. Paul McCain et al, eds. *Journal of Theology* 48.4 (2008): 38-46.

Tract Number 4: “Not by My Own Reason or Strength.” *Continuing in His Word series*. Conference of Presidents, Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States. 1954.

Tract Number 6: “Chosen by Grace from Eternity.” *Continuing in His Word series*. Conference of Presidents, Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States. 1954.

*Triglot Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Ev. Lutheran Church*. F. Bente et al, eds. St. Louis: Concordia, 1921.

Walther, C. F. W. *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel: Thirty-Nine Evening Lectures*. Trans. W. H. T. Dau. St. Louis: Concordia, 1929.

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Recall the five points of Arminianism over against Calvinism: 1) God’s predestination is conditioned on man’s faith foreseen by God from eternity; 2) universal redemption in the sense that Christ has borne the sins of all, but not in the sense that God, by grace for Christ’s sake, forgives the sins of all; 3) salvation by grace, although since he is not totally depraved by nature, man can and must cooperate toward his conversion; 4) grace can be resisted, but used chiefly to explain why some are saved and others are not; and 5) a believer is able to fall from a state of grace.

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that Arminianism denies baptism as a means of grace.

<sup>3</sup> The following sections from Bente’s *Historical Introductions* retain the numbers and titles as they occur in Bente’s book.

<sup>4</sup> Note that conversion has two causes, not three—which Melancthon would eventually teach in espousing the “three concurring causes of conversion” as “the Holy Spirit, the Word, and the consenting will of man” (Bente 128).

<sup>5</sup> Words underlined indicate emphasis added by the writer of this essay; words in italics are original in Bente’s *Historical Introductions*.

<sup>6</sup> The Pelagian view: Man can convert himself to God. The Semi-Pelagian view: Man by virtue of his own powers could make a beginning of conversion, but could not complete it without the grace of the Holy Spirit.

<sup>7</sup> Regarding his use of “Reformed,” Walther says parenthetically: “I am referring to all the sects that have sprung from the Reformed Church” (131).

<sup>8</sup> Words in italics are original.

<sup>9</sup> At this point Walther inserts a parenthetical observation: “Mark you: the text says the Spirit *cries*, ‘Abba, Father.’”

---

### **Book Reviews**

**Mark A. Paustian: *Prepared to Answer: Telling the Greatest Story Ever Told*, Northwestern Publishing House, 2006 (2005, 2004), paperback, 212 pages.**

**Mark A. Paustian: *More Prepared to Answer: Telling the Greatest Story Ever Told*: Northwestern Publishing House, 2005 (2004), paperback, 242 pages.**

“Three steps to being more confident about your faith!” “8 ways to tell about Jesus!” “A foolproof method to share the gospel!” Such phrases are likely familiar to many of us. If you have been looking for books on evangelism for use in your congregation or for yourself, you’ve probably seen outlines like these for mission work. While I don’t want to disparage the good uses that such materials may potentially have or the positive effects which they may bring for some believers, I hope to present readers of the *Journal* with something different.

*Prepared to Answer*, the main book under review, and its sequel, *More Prepared to Answer*, both have as their subtitle: “Telling the Greatest Story Ever Told.” The author of both is Mark Paustian, professor of Communication and Hebrew at Martin Luther College (WELS) in New Ulm, Minnesota. Prof. Paustian’s purpose in writing is to take Bible stories from the life of our Savior and line them up with the questions, needs, and worldview of those who do not know Him. Herein lies the beauty of his

approach. It is not about a process, and there are no stock phrases to be rehearsed and repeated. This book and its companion simply seek to draw believers deeper into Christ by drawing them deeper into the truth of who He is and what He did. The author understands how the Spirit works—not by coercion, not by tricks, but through the gushing spring of the Word of life. Prof. Paustian connects Jesus with the needs of sinful humanity. As the title of the book implies, believers are truly “prepared to give an answer for the hope that is in them” (1 Pet. 3:15) when their focus is on Christ in all things. While the author does offer some useful apologetics, his focus is always on Christ, our hope.

Each chapter in *Prepared to Answer* (and also in its sequel) poses an answer to a question or assertion that one might commonly hear from those whom we meet in the world. I have found this approach to be very beneficial. Not only does it equip the reader to preach the gospel to others; it serves as a very useful resource in other ways too. In this review we will consider some of the ways that this book could well be put to use.

### **Content considerations**

Before considering potential uses of this book, however, let’s make sure that it is safe from the intrusion of error. While I do not believe there to be any false doctrine in it as such, there are a few things for the reader to take with a grain of salt.

In the introduction to *Prepared to Answer* Paustian tells the story of a woman named Kayla, to whom he had witnessed during a haircut at her salon. Kayla, who had a difficult childhood, told Paustian that when she was little, she believed Jesus had come and sat with her while her parents were fighting. Later on in the introduction Paustian refers to this related experience as a “tentative faith” (vi). When he eventually finishes the story in the book’s concluding chapter, it is clear that the author believes it was the message of justification in Christ alone that brought this woman to faith, and so I assume that by the previous “tentative faith” he is referring simply to her belief that Jesus existed. I don’t (and Paustian doesn’t) want to make a judgment about what she did or did not see. But care must be taken not to give any impression besides the scriptural truth that “*faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of Christ*” (Rom. 10:17 ESV).

Another potential source of confusion may be found on page 9, where Paustian writes:

What will your burning bush be? Will you be reading the “Jesus stories” in this book or staring up at the stars? Will you have the gospel of John lying open? Or will you be stroking your little girl’s hair when . . . click . . . you suddenly know that He Is? You know because he entered the barren world of the materialist and whispered his name: “I AM.”

In the last sentence Paustian seems to indicate that he is not suggesting that looking up at the stars creates faith. He is simply talking about the moment when the Word that the I AM whispered in Scripture is finally brought home to the person by the Spirit.

One of the things I enjoy about the author is his ability to draw you into the stories he is telling. He paints the picture to bring you there. But a possible pitfall with this feature is the temptation to sensationalize the Scriptures in some way. Paustian seems very careful not to do that. In fact, if you encounter some detail that he seems to have added to the story, after careful reflection you may realize that he did not add it at all. But on occasion he does seem to flirt with a possible adding to the Spirit’s Word. One example is on page 136. Speaking of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, Paustian writes, “Jesus stood there bathed in the light of a full moon, the expression on his face unchanged.” I realize that there certainly was a full moon on that night before His death, but what we do not know is if the sky at that moment was cloudy or clear. Neither do we know the state of His facial expressions from one moment to the next. It is not an important matter, admittedly, and we can grant that the author is merely painting a picture of what it might have been like. But there is, in the opinion of this review, the potential to cause a bit of confusion here.

On the positive side this book is packed full of good law and gospel-focused doctrine. Here are a few examples of what one can find throughout its pages:

“There is power in the words and deeds of Christ to show us the evil in ourselves, power to smash apart our godforsaken complacency and to reveal our desperate need for his grace” (vii).

In answer to the question “What is your God like?” (the title of one of the book’s chapters), Paustian writes: “There he would suffer inside the thunderclap, the meeting of God’s infinite holiness and his infinite love—God’s responsibility to judge and his mysterious impulse to save” (p. 37).

In the chapter called “The Christian faith is too negative,” Paustian responds to those who dismiss sin with the intent to think positive and avoid being “down on yourself.” In reference to verses in Joel 1 he writes: “When ugly grasshoppers had eaten everything in sight, devastating ancient Israel, the people asked the prophet Joel what they should do. His answer? ‘Weep!’ ‘Wail!’ ‘Mourn!’ His answer was not, ‘Look on the bright side.’ It was not, ‘Stay positive.’ In fact, no response was called for but that they open their eyes, see what they had become before God, and let the painful truth in” (p. 171).

Tying a Christian’s death to the death of Jesus, Paustian says: “When you die, it can be his life that flashes before your eyes, not your own” (p. 49).

Of course, one of the true tests of a writer’s grasp on the proper distinction between law and gospel is the way that he presents the topic of sanctification. Paustian shows his readers the heart of love that beats in our Savior’s chest, and by showing the grace that we have received in Him, he invites us to love the same way that He did.

He also does a remarkable job of bringing the reader to see people the way Jesus does, to love them, to be genuinely heartbroken over their sorrow, and at all times to be sensitive to their greatest need. This same insight he applies to the prospect of Christians having an evangelical view of the unbelievers they encounter in the world. In a chapter called “Why Stories?” he writes:

Friends, pause with me and survey this new territory, that is, the culture in which we now live. A college student reads the Sermon on the Mount and calls it “The most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard.” Do you know what that is? It’s an honest first-century-like response to the shocking Christ from a young woman who is meeting him for the first time. Another woman walks into a jewelry store to buy a cross, and the clerk asks, “Do you want one with the little man on it?” She has no idea! For Jesus’ sake, get over your being appalled at unbelievers just being unbelievers and see the opportunities. (p. 201)

This book is very well written. The author’s style is engaging, friendly, and compassionate. His language reminds me of a beautiful melody, and with it Paustian well adorns the gospel of Christ. He brings a mix of scripturally founded emotion and reason, which is moving and powerful because he brings Jesus’ own words to bear on the needs of people. Throughout the book one can sense that Christ’s own heart of compassion is beating.

### **Uses for the book**

The main use intended by the author is to prepare believers for evangelism by equipping them with Bible stories from the life of Christ. The format of the book is quite simple. Each chapter is headed by a question or a dismissive statement—a challenge to the Christian faith that has been raised from a skeptical or rationalistic or troubled point of view. In fact, a quick perusal of the table of contents will show that the author has chosen very relevant and familiar questions or statements, which he has arranged under these general headings: Christ in Prophecy; The Arrival of God; The Ministry of Jesus; Our Lord’s Passion; Resurrection and Ascension; and The Christian Church. He answers each question or objection based on an account or two from Scripture, usually from Jesus’ life. His narrative style can bring wonderful balance to our often dogmatic and analytic pursuits. There is great power in the true stories that the Gospels weave; they are meant to catch hearts.

Paustian is very specific, however, in saying that he does not intend to abandon step-by-step articulation of Bible doctrines. He greatly appreciates the importance of it and states as much in the Conclusion chapter “Why Stories?”:

It is not as though storytelling could ever replace the need for the clearest possible articulation of Christian teaching. I’ll admit that more and more people seem unprepared to deal seriously with doctrines as such. . . . To weigh the evidence of Scripture in order to accept or reject one truth claim or another—this just isn’t how they think. . . . People still need Christian doctrine, and they always

will. You see, in my experience, people often do not see with eyes fully opened to the meaning of the gospel until it is presented in a very explicit, formal presentation. . . . I am not ready to dispense with the pivotal role of clear witnessing that is done by means of clearly articulated teaching. . . . How can I speak openly and freely about Jesus no matter what jagged question mark hangs above the conversation? The beauty of casting the net of Bible stories is the way these stories apply the fodder for the numerous spiritual conversations you might need to have with a questioning soul before the truth breaks in. (p. 202)

This is also a great book for those Christians with questions as they are growing into their faith. We naturally think of our Christian youth. A great example of this can be found in the chapter “Whatever happened to tolerance?” Here Paustian answers a question so often struggled with by young people today. But first he banishes false ideas from the discussion: “When I write about the issues along the cultural divide—divorce, abortion, extramarital sex, homosexuality—and call them evil, you reply, ‘Isn’t God a forgiving God?’ Do you mean that? Do you want forgiveness? Are you acknowledging such things as the sins you personally abhor? Do you desire both God’s mercy and his help to overcome sin? Then I offer you the best possible news. I answer with an unequivocal ‘Yes, God forgives’ and say, ‘Let us speak further about Jesus’” (p. 108). He reminds Christians what it truly means to love those caught in sin: “Christians are the ones called to speak for him according to his inspired Word. I must not be the kind of Christian you approve, the pleasant coward who never dares to disrupt you on your way to disaster” (p. 109). “Just once consider the holiness of God without a flippant, ‘Yeah, but he forgives.’ As a little girl once said, ‘Jesus didn’t have to come, you know.’ She’s right, He didn’t” (p. 109).at the close he brings home the comfort of the gospel to those who repent:

“The soul that sins is the one that will die,” declares the Lord. That truth stares you in the face. Show me, please, some glimmer of recognition.

And I will give you gospel as if there is no law, for the law has been nailed to a cross.

I will hold out to you grace without a condition.

I will show you Jesus. (pp. 109-110)

This book may also be useful in an adult instruction class setting to supplement the more analytic approach of most instruction manuals. The chapters are short and enjoyable to read, and Paustian has a way of presenting things in simple and memorable ways. For example, in the chapter “What is your God like?” the author offers brief yet remarkable descriptions of God’s attributes:

God is omnipresent. This doesn’t only mean that he fills the vastness of the universe with his presence. That could make you think that in the quiet corner where you sit reading, there is some tiny part of him. God is not divisible into parts. The mystery of the God who is all-present is that God in his entirety is found in every place. The universe is contained in him who is contained in the single seed. Blessed be his name.

God is eternal. This does not merely mean he has lived for a long, long time. As Creator of time itself, he exists outside of it. There is no succession of events with him. He has no yesterday and no tomorrow. He lives in an eternal present, without beginning or end. “A day is like a thousand years” [2 Pet. 3:8]. My birth, my life, my death, and my glory are all right now to him. As an author lives independently from the stream of time in his novel, God lives forever in a single moment of ours. (p. 36)

Pastors may also enjoy this book on a personal level for a number of reasons. I have found that the constant Christ-centered nature of the writing encourages me in my own writing and preaching to keep the focus on Him. It is both a comforting reminder and a great resource. On numerous occasions I have turned to one chapter or another as a starting point for answering a question or preparing a Bible study or sermon.

Since the people of God will always need to be reassured of His love and reminded of His truth, families and individuals can also make good use of this book in their homes. Church members can use it in group settings. Some chapters or at least parts of some chapters could be read aloud as a devotion to those assembled. It is very accessible to people of any age. It communicates at a simple level and yet

challenges the most experienced.

### **Conclusion**

I have found this book to be quite valuable in several ways. Apart from a few questionable elements, the doctrine is sound. The application of law is unyielding. The articulation of gospel is refreshing. I definitely recommend *Prepared to Answer* to anyone. I also recommend the sequel, *More Prepared to Answer*, since it has the same engaging format and style, the same Christ-centered focus and themes, and the same edifying application of law and gospel to its readers.

David Ude