

“Who Do You Say That I Am?”

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE
CHRISTIAN FAITH PROFESSED AT
ASCENSION LUTHERAN CHURCH,
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Week 1: What is the “Lutheran” Church?

The shortest definition of a “Lutheran” is this: one who agrees with the 16th century monk and priest Martin Luther on the following important points of doctrine:

1) Apart from the working of the Spirit and the merits of Christ Jesus, no one can be saved, because everyone is unholy in the presence of a holy God. This is not only because of the things we’ve done and haven’t done, but because of the fallen nature we all inherited from our first parents. Therefore we reject...

- c) That anyone can be saved because of their works or morality
- d) That anyone can be saved by making a choice or decision to follow Jesus

When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, “Who then can be saved?” Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible. (*Matthew 19:25-26*)

No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the Prophets: ‘They will all be taught by God.’ Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me. No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only he has seen the Father. I tell you the truth, he who believes has everlasting life. (*John 6:44-47*)

2) Christ founded a Church on earth into which all who are being saved are drawn by the work of the Holy Spirit, through the preaching of the Gospel and the gift of the Sacraments.¹ Therefore we reject...

- a) Any way of finding unity apart from the Gospel of Jesus Christ
- b) Any way of salvation apart from Christ, his Gospel and his sacraments

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (*Ephesians 4:3-6*)

Jesus said, “Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.” (*John 15:4-5*)

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned! Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ. (*Galatians 1:6-10*)

¹ “Sacraments” are those created “things” through which Christ works by the power of his Word.

3) The Church has always existed and will continue to exist until Christ's return. Therefore any "reinvention of the theological wheel" is suspect, as is any blind adherence to "tradition."² The earliest tradition of the Church, the Holy Scriptures, trumps any later tradition, and any interpretation of the Holy Scriptures completely at odds with tradition is treated with great suspicion. Therefore we reject...

- a) The belief that "tradition is always right" and can overrule Scripture.
- b) The belief that tradition has no value and that all approaches to Scripture are correct.

Although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saint. (*Jude 3*)

Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures. (*1 Cor. 15:1-3*)

4) The salvation and knowledge of God is not found through the study of the world, through success, through glory, power or money, but solely in the death of Christ at the cross, where our sin was atoned for, and our redemption achieved. Therefore we reject:

- a) The belief that healing, success, money or power are proof of God's love
- b) That the Church can be grown by any message other than the cross of Christ

We preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength. When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power. (*1 Cor. 1:23-24, 2:1-5*)

The teaching of the evangelical catholic, or Lutheran, church can be summarized like this:

LUTHERANS BELIEVE IN SALVATION...

In Christ alone – there is no other one who can save us from our unholiness

By faith alone – only by trusting Christ is there salvation, not by our efforts or personality

Through his Church alone – not as individuals, but as part of Christ's body

By grace alone – because Christ has called us by the Holy Spirit, not by our decision.

² "Tradition" includes the practices of the Church (how we worship) and the teachings of the Church's pastors through the centuries (who and why we worship).

Week 2: What is the Bible?

The Bible is varied terrain. Although every word of the Word of God is equal, one could say that some words are more “equal” than others. For example, when Christians stand for the reading of the Gospel or singing of the Gospel Canticle, it is to recognize that the words of our Lord demand special attention. In his 1522 Preface to the New Testament, Luther wrote:

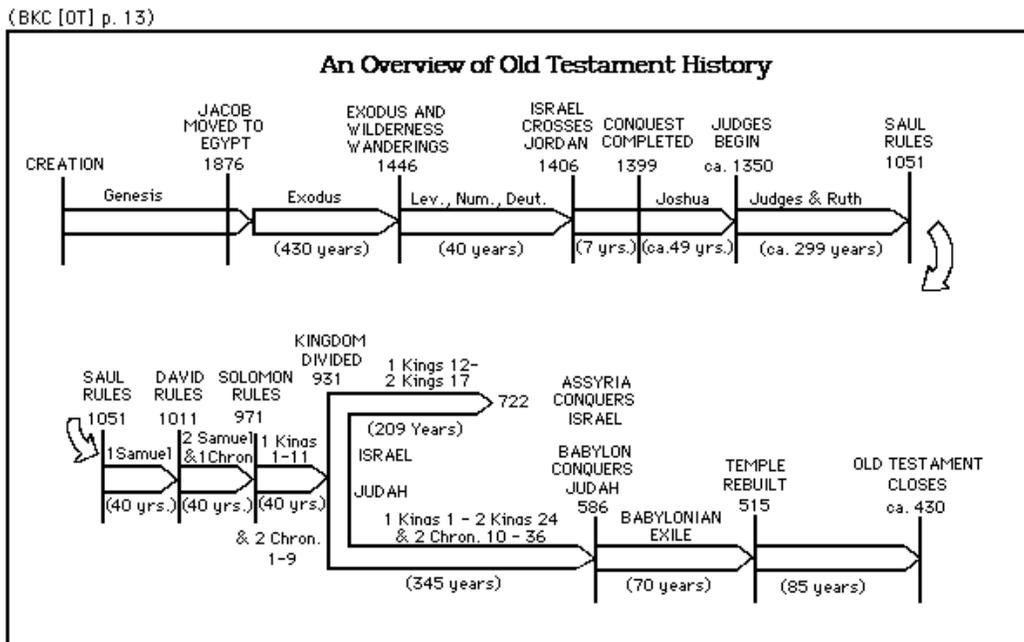
St. John’s Gospel and his first epistle, St. Paul’s epistles, especially Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians, and St. Peter’s first epistle are the books that show you Christ and teach you all that is necessary and salutary for you to know, even if you were never to see or hear any other book.

In other words, for Lutherans, the Central Point of the Bible is the redemption of humanity – God at work in the world saving us from our separation from him. The “climax” of the story is found in the four Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The “climax” of the climax is the passion (suffering) and crucifixion of Christ. It’s at the cross that God’s work of forgiveness is at last revealed:

For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. (1 Corinthians 1:22-25)

The Old Testament

The 39 books written prior to Jesus are called the “Old Testament.” Most of these books were originally written in Hebrew, although some have portions in Aramaic (a kind of ‘slang’ Hebrew that Jesus would have spoken) and in Greek. You can see a brief overview of the history covered by the Old Testament below.



The Old Testament can be divided into 4 “kinds” of writings (see Luke 24:44). These are:

- 1) **The Law:** also called “The Books of Moses,” the Torah, and the Pentateuch
 - a. Genesis
 - b. Exodus
 - c. Leviticus
 - d. Numbers
 - e. Deuteronomy
- 2) **The Prophets:**
 - a. Historical Prophets
 - i. Joshua
 - ii. Judges
 - iii. Ruth
 - iv. 1 and 2 Samuel
 - v. 1 and 2 Kings
 - vi. 1 and 2 Chronicles
 - vii. Ezra
 - viii. Nehemiah
 - ix. Esther
 - b. “Preaching” Prophets
 - i. Major Prophets
 1. Isaiah
 2. Jeremiah
 3. Ezekiel
 4. Daniel
 - ii. Minor Prophets
 1. Hosea
 2. Joel
 3. Amos
 4. Obadiah
 5. Jonah
 6. Micah
 7. Nahum
 8. Habakkuk
 9. Zephaniah
 10. Haggai
 11. Zechariah
 12. Malachi
- 3) **The Wisdom Books:**
 - a. Job
 - b. Psalms
 - c. Proverbs
 - d. Ecclesiastes
 - e. Song of Songs (or Song of Solomon)

The New Testament

The New Testament consists of four “Gospels”, or accounts of Jesus’ life, one history book (Acts), several letters/sermons, and one “apocalypse” or revelation of the suffering of the Church in the world (Revelation). All of these books were written in the half century after Jesus death and resurrection, by eye-witnesses of

his life. They were all written in “common Greek,” the language of business east of Italy at the time of Jesus. For an overview of the content of all these books, see the attached “How to Read the Bible.”

1) The Gospels

- a. Matthew
- b. Mark
- c. Luke
- d. John

2) The Acts of the Apostles

3) Paul’s Letters

- a. Romans (to Rome)
- b. 1 and 2 Corinthians (to Corinth)
- c. Galatians (to “Turkey”)
- d. Ephesians (to Ephesus)
- e. Colossians (to Colossae)
- f. 1 and 2 Thessalonians (to Thessaloniki)
- g. 1 and 2 Timothy (to Pastor Timothy)
- h. Titus (to Pastor Titus)
- i. Philemon (on a behalf of the slave Onesimus)

4) General (Catholic, or Universal) Letters

- a. Hebrews
- b. James
- c. 1 and 2 Peter
- d. 1,2 and 3 John
- e. Jude

5) Apocalypse (or “a spiritual explanation of history”)

- a. Revelation

The Story

Two doctrines are taught through the Scriptures. The first is the Law – the “rules for the world,” which if we *could* follow them would give us a perfect life in this world and eternal life in the next. But the Law can truly do only one thing – take away our hope of creating a perfect world or earn eternal life on our own, by our own power. We can’t obey God’s Law! When we realize this, we can appreciate the second doctrine of the Scriptures: the Gospel. The Gospel is the Lord graciously saving his people, forgiving sins, and granting eternal life. Both Law and Gospel are found in the Old and the New Testament. Always be on the lookout for the Lord’s “Law” and his “Gospel” throughout the Bible.

The following verses point out how God’s plan of redeeming humanity in Christ Jesus flows throughout the whole Bible, from Genesis to Revelation:

The Creation and the Fall

(Genesis 1:27) So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

(Genesis 3:1-5) Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, ‘You shall

not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’ ” But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

(Genesis 3:15) [God to Satan:] I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.”

The Promise to Abraham

(Genesis 15:3-6) And Abram said, “Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir.” And behold, the word of the Lord came to him: “This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.” And he brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

The Promise to Judah, Abraham’s Great-Grandson

(Genesis 49:10) The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.

The Call of Moses, 400 Years after Judah’s Death

(Exodus 3:13-15) Then Moses said to God, “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “**I AM** who **I AM**.” And he said, “Say this to the people of Israel, ‘**I AM** has sent me to you.’ ” God also said to Moses, “Say this to the people of Israel, ‘The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.

(Exodus 20:1-21) [The 10 Commandments] And God spoke all these words, saying, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. “You shall have no other gods before me. “You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments...”

(Numbers 24:17) [The pagan prophet Balaam sees Jesus:] I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel; it shall crush the forehead of Moab and break down all the sons of Sheth.

(Deuteronomy 18:15) “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen—

The Promise to King David

(2 Samuel 7:16) And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.’ ”

Job's Exclamation Regarding Jesus

(Job 19:25-27) For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me!

The Prophecies of the Psalms

(Psalm 22:1, 30-31) My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning? Posterity shall serve him; it shall be told of the Lord to the coming generation; they shall come and proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn, that he has done it. A Psalm of David.

(Psalm 16:10) For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption.

The Nature of Sin and Salvation

(Psalm 51:1-5) Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment. Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.

(Ecclesiastes 7:2-4) It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of face the heart is made glad. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.

(Jonah 3:10-4:2) When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it. But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. And he prayed to the Lord and said, "O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.

(Malachi 2:17) You have wearied the Lord with your words. But you say, "How have we wearied him?" By saying, "Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and he delights in them." Or by asking, "Where is the God of justice?"

Proverbs Speaks of Jesus

(Proverbs 8:22-24) "The Lord possessed me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth. When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water.

Other Prophecies About Jesus

(Isaiah 7:13-14) And he said, "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

(Isaiah 53:4-12) **Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows**; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But **he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed.** All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people? **And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death**, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth. Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand. Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; **by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.** Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, **because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors**; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.

(Jeremiah 31:31-34) “Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”

(Ezekiel 37:1-7) The hand of the Lord was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. And he led me around among them, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry. And he said to me, “Son of man, can these bones live?” And I answered, “O Lord God, you know.” Then he said to me, “Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the Lord.” So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I prophesied, there was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone.

(Daniel 7:13-14) I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.

(Joel 2:28) “And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions.

(Micah 5:2) But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.

(Zechariah 9:9) Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

Jesus Speaks of His Own Mission

(Matthew 20:28) even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

(John 8:58) Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, **I AM.**”

(Revelation 22:14-17) Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates. Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood. “I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you about these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.” The Spirit and the Bride say, “Come.” And let the one who hears say, “Come.” And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price.

Week 3: The Lord's Law and His Gospel

“Before receiving the comfort of forgiveness, sin must be recognized and the fear of God's wrath must be experienced through the preaching of the Law, that people may be driven to sigh for grace and prepared to receive the comfort of the Gospel. Therefore one should by all means most severely admonish and drive to repentance with threats and intimidation those who as yet are without any fear of God's wrath, are secure, hard, and unbroken. That is, no Gospel but only the Law should be preached to them.

On the other hand, where there are hearts in which the Law has performed its work, so that they are frightened by the knowledge of their sin, are timid and fugitive, no Law should be preached and proclaimed any more, but pure Gospel and comfort. For this is the proper work of Christ, which is why he came and commanded the Gospel to be preached to poor sinners and urged them to believe it, that might abolish and remove all charges, frightenings, and threatenings of the Law and might give the purest comfort instead.” (What Luther Says, p.738)

The Law

THE LAW ALWAYS ACCUSES

LAW AS CURB

LAW AS MIRROR

LAW AS GUIDE

But we can't choose HOW the Law will work on us, or on someone else. The Holy Spirit will direct

The Gospel

“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life, for in this way **God loved the world**. He gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:14-17)

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that **God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ**, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Corinthians 5:17-21)

THE GOSPEL IS UNIVERSAL

See bold typeface in the Scripture quotes. In Christ, all sins are forgiven. In Christ, we see that God loved the whole world. Because of Christ, the world is reconciled to God. No person is excluded from this promise, no sin is excluded from this promise except unbelief:

Jesus said, "Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come." (Matthew 12:32)

THE BENEFITS OF THE GOSPEL ARE PERSONAL

See underlined typeface in the Scripture quotes. Though Christ died for the sins of the world, to receive the *benefits* of Christ's work, we must believe. That belief is created in us by the Holy Spirit. That's why rejecting faith is the sin against the Holy Spirit, and will not be forgiven.

LAW OR GOSPEL?

In the following verses, are we hearing God's Law or his Gospel?

John 14:21 "Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me."

1 Peter 3:15 "But in your hearts, set apart Christ as Lord."

In the following cases, does the person asking the question need to hear Law, or Gospel?

1. I know what I'm doing is a sin, but I know God doesn't really care. And besides, Jesus has forgiven all my sins so why does it matter? (Romans 6:1-2)
2. I've done so many horribly things in my life, there can't be any way God could forgive me. I'm a failure and God knows it. (1 Timothy 1:15)
3. I'm probably the best Christian in the world. I go to church every Sunday, I give 15% of my salary away, I don't swear and I'm faithful to my wife. (Luke 18:9-14)
4. Pastor, if God didn't want me to do this, he wouldn't have put me in the circumstances where I had to sin: he wouldn't have given me these desires! (James 1:12-15)

Conclusion

"The Law is a directive of what we are to do, but the Gospel treats of that which God wants to give. The first we cannot do, but the second we can accept by faith. However, note what people are like: the first, which they cannot do, they want to do, but the second, which they should accept, they do not want to believe." (What Luther Says, p.741)

THE LAW DESTROYS THE OLD SINFUL CREATURE. THE GOSPEL CREATES AND SUSTAINS THE NEW PERFECT BEING WITHIN EVERY CHRISTIAN. THE OLD CREATURE MUST DIE A HUMAN DEATH. THE NEW CREATION WILL LIVE ON FOREVER, IN A NEW UNCORRUPTED BODY, IN THE WORLD TO COME.

Week 4: What is Prayer?

Prayer is so basic to every world religion, so present in everyone's life that hardly anyone ever stops to ask: "what IS it, exactly?" What is prayer? If you visit www.dharma-haven.org/tibetan/digital-wheels.htm, you will read:

Tibetan Buddhists believe that saying the mantra (prayer) *Om Mani Padme Hum*, invites the blessings of Chenrezig, the embodiment of compassion. They also believe you can produce the same effect by spinning the written form of the mantra around in a prayer wheel (called "Mani wheels" by the Tibetans). The effect is said to be multiplied when more copies of the mantra are included, and spinning the Mani wheels faster increases the benefit as well. His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, has said that having the mantra on your computer works the same as a traditional *Mani* wheel. As the digital image spins around on your hard drive, it sends the peaceful prayer of compassion to all directions and purifies the area.

A few years ago Pastor Bruce Wilkinson's book, "The Prayer of Jabez" was at the top of the best seller lists. The prayer of Jabez can be found in 1 Chronicles 4:10, and is buried in the middle of a long genealogy of Old Testament people. The jacket of Wilkinson's book states:

Are you ready to reach for the extraordinary? To ask God for the abundant blessings He longs to give you? Join Bruce Wilkinson to discover how the remarkable prayer of a little-known Bible hero can release God's favor, power and protection. You'll see how one daily prayer can help you leave the past behind—and break through to the life you were meant to live.

At another website called www.islamonline.net, a writer asks why God does answer her prayers of supplication? The Imam, or Muslim teacher, answers the question this way:

[Prayers seeking refuge with Allah] are like a weapon, and a weapon is only as good as the person who is using it; it is not merely the matter of how sharp it is. If the weapon is perfect and free of faults, and the arm of the person using it is strong, and there is nothing stopping him, then he can lay waste the enemy. But if any of these three features is lacking, then the effect will be lacking accordingly... There are... things that may prevent the *supplication* reaching God or being answered – these things must be removed from the person making the *supplication* and from the *supplication* itself. When all of these conditions are fulfilled, then the *supplication* may be answered.

What Prayer is Not

In all these cases, the effect and power of prayer is dependent on the *pray-er*: in other words, for prayer to be "effectual" we must:

- a) be of the right state of mind and character,
- b) have the correct words, and
- c) repeat them often enough.

Most world religions believe that the power of prayer rests in fulfilling these three conditions. Sadly, as can be seen from the Bruce Wilkinson quote above, many Christians believe exactly the same thing. Consider the following quotes from well-known "Christian" authors, preachers, and media personalities:

a) Being of the right state of mind and character:

If your prayers have clouds of doubt hanging over them, they won't get anywhere. ⁱ
The only thing that can break this cycle of abundant living is sin, because sin breaks the flow of God's power." ⁱⁱ

B) Having the correct words

I want to teach you how to pray a daring prayer that God always answers. ⁱⁱⁱ
The prayer of Jesus *revolutionized* (the disciples) lives. It can *revolutionize* yours too! ^{iv}

C) Repeating them often enough

Much of our prayer lacks the kind of fervency God requires for effective results. ^v
Without prayer, the full purpose God has for you can't happen. ^{vi}

None of these, unfortunately, are the Biblical understanding of prayer. Christian prayer is, in many respects, the opposite of the above. Let's look at a little of what the Scriptures teach about Christian prayer:

1) PRAYER IS NOT DEPENDENT ON YOUR CHARACTER

Prayer is not dependent on your "state of mind" or on your "character." If sin, doubts, or anything in us could stand between us and prayer, NO prayers would EVER be heard. In fact, it is because of our sinful nature and our doubts that Christ came to suffer and die, to be the guarantee that our prayers will now most CERTAINLY be heard! Because of our baptism ("hearts sprinkled...bodies washed with pure water") we now enter into the presence of God through Jesus Christ.

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. (Hebrews 10:19-22)

Our prayers are dependent on GOD'S character. This is made abundantly clear by a passage that is often misinterpreted by Christians who believe our prayers must be "constantly repeated:"

Then Jesus said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and he goes to him at midnight and says, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him.' "Then the one inside answers, 'Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children are with me in bed. I can't get up and give you anything.' I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet **because of his sense of shame** he will get up and give him as much as he needs. (Luke 11:5-8)

The bold words have been notoriously mistranslated in the past, usually as **because of the man's boldness**. But the translation above is the one that makes the most sense in the Greek. The point of the parable is that the man asking for bread will get it, because for the sleeper not to give him bread would shame the man in front of his children and his whole community. In other words, Jesus is saying "Don't you think God will hear your prayer, if only to preserve his honor?"

2) PRAYER IS NOT DEPENDENT ON THE CORRECT WORDS

Obviously, as maturing Christians, we want to study our faith and become more "mature" prayers. Nevertheless, the answer to our prayers is not dependent on our "eloquence" or the wording of our prayers.

We can't pray as we ought to, anyway, whether we are theologians or brand new to Christianity. Consider Paul's words to the Church in Rome:

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will. (Romans 8:26-27)

3) PRAYER IS NOT DEPENDENT ON REPETITION

Lastly, prayer is not dependent on how many times the prayer is repeated. Nothing could be further from the teachings of Christ! In fact, Jesus was very much against long, drawn out and repetitive prayers. Furthermore, there is no "secret" set of words that will unlock "God's favor, power and protection." When he was teaching his disciples, Jesus said:

And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. (Matt 6:5-8)

What Prayer Is

Prayer is the response of the Christian to the faith created in him or her by the Spirit. If faith is breathed into us by the Holy Spirit, prayer is what is breathed out. That's why Paul reminds Christians to "pray continually." (1 Thess. 5:17). Prayer is, in a sense, a synonym for "trust" or "faith." To pray to God is to express out trust that only God can provide what we need.

Luther's writings themselves display an understanding of prayer that is noticeably different from the views held by many contemporary writers, even within the Lutheran confession. The saving of the sinner by a righteous God in Christ Jesus is programmatic for Luther's understanding of prayer, as it is for all his theology. Prayer arises naturally out of the regenerated saint brought to faith in the Gospel through the preached Word and the sacraments. It is the response of the believer to the God who continues to save him from sin, the devil, and ultimately from death itself.^{vii}

For Christians, prayer is confession of sin and petition to do better. Prayer flows out of the Scriptures, which reveal the promise of God's salvation. When we pray, we remember that the God to whom we pray has already given us food, clothing, family, and faith: everything we have is a gift from him, and a promise from him that he will continue to look after us. We pray as people who believe that God hears our prayers, that his will is always done, and that he desires us to look on him as a father who wishes good for his children. To stop praying – to stop coming to God with our problems and needs – is to say to God, "I don't believe you care about me anymore." That's why the person who doesn't pray isn't really a Christian.

How to Pray

Pray anywhere, anytime, anyplace. Tell God your current problem. Thank him for the day, for being alive. Ask him how he's going to get you out of your current difficulty, and wait to see what he does. Tell him you trust him. When you're being more deliberate about prayer, the following **ACTS** might help you with what to say:

A – Adoration: Praise God for being YOUR God, and for who he is. A great way of praising God is to think through the Apostles’ Creed, and offer up each phrase as a prayer.

C – Confess: Confess that you have not been the obedient child the Lord would have you be. Confess specific sins, and ask for forgiveness. Ask for help in doing better.

T – Thanksgiving: Thank the Lord for everything he’s done for you, for prayers he’s answered, for salvation, and for specific things going on in the world.

S – Supplication: After these three, ask the Lord for those things you think you have need, and especially for help in being the kind of Christian he would like you to be.

Helpful Prayers to Know

The Lord’s Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven:

Hallowed be thy name,

Thy Kingdom come,

Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses

As we forgive those who trespass us.

And lead us not into temptation,

But deliver us from evil.

[For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory,

forever and ever, Amen.]

Morning Prayer (According to Luther’s Small Catechism)

In the morning, when you rise, make the sign of the cross and say, “In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.” Then, kneeling or standing, say the Apostles’ Creed and the Lord’s Prayer. Then you may say this prayer: “I give you thanks, heavenly Father, through your dear Son Jesus Christ, that you have protected me this night from all harm and danger. And I ask you to keep me this day, also, from all sin and every evil, that all my doings and life may please you. For into your hands I commend my body and soul and all that is mine. Let your holy angel be with me, that the wicked foe may have no power over me. Amen.”

Grace at Meal Times

The eyes of all look to You, O Lord, and You give them their food at the proper time. You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing (Psalm 145:15-16). Lord God, heavenly Father, bless us and these Your gifts which we receive from Your bountiful goodness, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good, His love endures forever. He gives food to every creature. He provides food for the cattle and for the young ravens when they call. His pleasure is not in the strength of the horse, nor His delight in the legs of a man; the Lord delights in those who fear Him, who put their hope in His unfailing love (Psalm 136:1, 25; 147:9-11).

Week 5: The Sacraments

The Missouri Synod's *Explanation to the Small Catechism* says this about sacraments: "A sacrament is a sacred act, a) instituted by God, b) in which God himself has joined his word of promise to a visible element, c) and by which he offers, gives, and seals the forgiveness of sins earned by Christ" (p.197).

What is a Sacrament?

The word "sacrament" comes from the Latin word *sacramentum*, meaning a sacred thing, which in turn translates the Greek word *mysterium*, meaning a hidden thing conferring salvation or leading to a special life. The sacraments are not, strictly speaking, "secrets" or "hidden things." They DO however mask under supposedly ordinary "things" the power of Almighty God to save and restore to life.

The sacraments are the post-Jesus version of the Old Testament sacrifices. God offered the forgiveness of sins in the rites and sacrifices of the Old Testament. Luther writes the following in his commentary on the Book of Genesis:

In order to reinforce the promise of our salvation, God had this in mind from the very beginning of the world: Men were to have signs by means of which they might comfort themselves in their sins and gain courage through their reliance on divine grace. It is not the worth of the work itself that is of value in the sacrifice; it is the mercy and power of the divine promise, because God prescribes this form of worship and promises that it will be pleasing to Him. Therefore what Baptism and the Lord's Supper are for us, sacrifice and offering was for Adam after the promise. God revealed His grace in the sacrifices and gave His approval of them by kindling and consuming them with fire. (Commentary on Genesis, 4:4)

Why would God give us Sacraments?

Sacraments are visible signs of the invisible power and mercy of the Lord. Why would God give us *visible* signs? Certainly most Christian churches prefer to think of the Lord working invisibly, "spiritually," without visible sacraments and even without audible words. But in Genesis we learn that God made heaven and the earth, and called them "good." We confess that God is "maker of heaven and earth." The Lord is a *creating* God, who makes *things*, and delights in them. For God to create the universe, but create a church and a means of salvation that is *not* created, would mean that he has denied who he has revealed himself to be. It is as if God is saying, "when I made earth, I was only kidding. It's a shame. Now let me show you invisibly what I'm *really* like." Luther again writes:

What Scripture calls "the face of the Lord" [are] those things by which God shows that He is with us. Thus in the Old Testament faces of the Lord were the pillar of fire, the cloud, and the mercy seat; in the New Testament, Baptism, the Lord's Supper, the ministry of the Word, and the like. By means of these God shows us, as by a visible sign, that He is with us, takes care of us, and is favorably inclined toward us. (Commentary on Genesis, 4:17)

Who can administer the Sacraments?

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians that all pastors should be regarded as "servants of Christ and stewards of the *mysteries* of God," and he then points out that it is necessary for stewards to be found trustworthy. Like the *Stewards of Gondor* in the Lord of the Rings, pastors are not "kings," but merely carry out the orders given to them by the only and rightful king, Jesus Christ. A true pastor speaks only what Scripture speaks. When a pastor tries to become a *king*, to have people believe him simply because he says they must, he should be removed. Before a man becomes a pastor, he is "proven trustworthy" by seminary training, examination, ordination, and installation, all being carried out by the representatives of the whole church

and by a local congregation.³ We should not find this odd: even the people of God at Sinai cried out that the Lord would not appear to them in “fire and smoke” anymore, but only through ordinary means (Deut. 18:15-16).

To the patriarchs and the prophets God appeared in an extraordinary manner, in dreams, in a vision, or through the words of the patriarchs and sometimes even of angels. We do not long for such revelations or appearances; we are satisfied, and we thank God to the best of our ability for our own appearances and faces of God, which we behold in Baptism and in the entire ministry of the Word. It is there that a brother becomes an angel for his brother. He absolves him from sins, comforts, instructs, strengthens, warns, admonishes, etc.

What are the Church's Sacraments?

The Lutheran Church considers there to be 2 (in other words, 3) sacraments. Baptism and Communion, with Absolution being considered either a third sacrament or part of the sacrament of Baptism. When considering these sacraments, there are three questions that should be asked:

- 1) What is it?
- 2) What benefits does it give?
- 3) Who receives these benefits?

BAPTISM

1) What is it?

The application of water along with God's word: “in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Baptism in any other name is not a Christian baptism. Note that “baptism” is the Greek word for “washing.”

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. (Matt 28:19)

2) Why is it given?

Baptism gives the promised Holy Spirit, along with the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. It gives the promise that our death is the same now as the death of Christ. We will not die forever, but will be raised to new life.⁴

And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 2:38)

God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you. (1 Peter 3:20-21).

He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by *the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit*, whom he poured out on us richly

³ For example, it is a local congregation that recommends a man for the ministry, theologians who train and examine him, district presidents who endorse and ordain him, and a congregation that calls him to serve them as *steward of the mysteries*. More on this when we talk about the church.

⁴ [Luther writes the following, indicating that baptism and death are interchangeable terms:] Thus death engulfs and swallows up the entire human race; for without distinction the wrath of God goes over the good and the evil, over the godly and the ungodly. The Flood that Noah experienced was not different from the one that the world experienced. The Red Sea, which both Pharaoh and Israel entered, was not different. Later on, however, the difference becomes apparent in this: those who believe are preserved in the very death to which they are subjected together with the ungodly, but the ungodly perish. Noah, accordingly, is preserved because he has the ark, that is, God's promise and Word, in which he is living; but the ungodly, who do not believe the Word, are left to their fate. (Commentary on Genesis, 9:20)

through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. (Titus 3:5-7)

3) *Who receives the benefits?*

Only those who continue to believe in their baptism receive its benefits. If someone is baptized, and later on rejects that baptism, the *baptism is still valid*, but they no longer *receive its benefits*. If at some time in the future the baptized person returns to faith, they once again receive the benefits. “We believe in *one baptism* for the forgiveness of sins” – a Christian who has fallen away from the faith and then returned is *never* re-baptized.

[Jesus said,] “Whoever believes and is baptized shall be saved. Whoever does not believe will be condemned.” (Mark 16:16).

CONFESSION

1) *What is it?*

The confession of sins, especially to the pastor, and the receiving of Christ’s absolution – the forgiveness of all our sins that he merited by his suffering and death.

I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,” and you forgave the iniquity of my sin. (Psalm 32:5)

2) *What are its benefits?*

The chief benefit of confession is the knowledge that our sins are forgiven. Carrying around the guilt of unconfessed sin can cause a terrible burden. Our Lord would have that burden lifted.

Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. (Isaiah 1:18)

3) *Who receives the benefits?*

Those who are repentant, and desire the Lord to take away their sin, heal their lives, and help them to do better. Those who receive absolution while resolving to continue in some sin do not receive the benefits.

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. (Psalm 51:17)

COMMUNION

1) *What is it?*

Bread and wine, given with the Word of God that says this is also Christ’s body and his blood, given for us sinners to eat and to drink.

For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, “This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. (1 Cor. 11:23-26)

2) *What are its benefits?*

Communion gives the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation: “for where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.”

And [Jesus] took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. (Matthew 26:27-28)

3) *Who receives the benefits?*

Everyone who communes receives the Lord’s body and blood.⁵ Some receive it to their benefit, but others receive it, in Paul’s words, “to judgment”:

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. (1 Cor. 11:27-30).

For this reason Lutherans, Catholics, and the Orthodox have traditionally practiced “close” or “closed” communion. This means restricting communion to those who have a) made the confession of faith of the congregation their own and b) are not living a life of open and unrepentant sin.

“Making the confession of faith your own” means accepting that what is taught from a church’s pulpit, lectern, and in Bible classes is what Christ commanded be taught (Matt. 28:20). It also means rejecting churches that teach something else about Christ. For example:

The United Methodist Church says: “While we acknowledge the primacy of Scripture in theological reflection, our attempts to grasp its meaning always involve tradition, experience, and reason. Like Scripture, these may become creative vehicles of the Holy Spirit as they function within the Church.” (<http://www.umc.org/interior.asp?mid=1666>)

On the United Church of Christ website is posted this official statement: “In my church, we baptize children and adults in the presence of the entire congregation. The congregation doesn’t just watch, they get a chance to stand and make a promise to the person being baptized saying, “We promise our love, support, and care.” When I came out as an openly gay man, they proved to me that they keep their promises.” (<http://www.ucc.org/>)

On the Episcopal Church website is posted this statement about interfaith dialogue: “In dialogue and relationships with people of other faiths, we have come to recognize that the mystery of God’s salvation is not exhausted by our theological affirmations.” (http://ecusa.anglican.org/8252_ENG_HTM.htm)

A Baptist pastor writes: “Children are God's. Until they become accountable for their own actions and sins, they do not need salvation.” (<http://experts.about.com/q/954/3256541.htm>)

⁵ Note: except for the Lutherans and Episcopal churches, no other Protestant church believes this. The question “who receives the Lord’s Supper?” was once used to distinguish Lutherans from other Protestants. The Lutherans argued that it is Christ’s words that make the Lord’s Supper happen. Protestants argued that it is a person’s faith that makes it happen. Roman Catholics argue that it is a properly ordained priest’s use of the words that make the Supper happen.

Since so many churches have teachings that conflict so fundamentally with Scripture, it is not possible to be “in communion” with them. For a Christian to attend another congregation, to agree with what that congregation and pastor teaches, and still want to commune at Ascension, is like saying “I want to sleep with you, but I want to stay married to my wife. Why can’t I do both?”

Week 6: The Church

Martin Luther once quipped, “a seven year old child knows what the church is, namely holy believers and sheep who hear the voice of their shepherd.”⁶ This may have been one of his classical exaggerations. On the other hand, it may be very close to the truth. It all depends on what we mean when we say “church”. We can mean several things:

- 1) A building: as in 628 E. Chester Pike
- 2) A membership list: as in “I belong to Ascension Lutheran *Church*”
- 3) A ‘denomination’: or association of congregations/buildings
- 4) A confession: as in Jesus’ words, “On this rock I will build my church” (Matthew 16:13-20)

The Visible Church

The Augsburg Confession of the Christian Faith, one of the chief confessions of the Lutheran church, contains two articles defining the church. The first speaks of the visible, or “confessional,” church. This is the church as it can be known to the outside world. This is the church that a Christian can point to and say, “THAT is where the Holy Spirit is creating a holy people for God.”

Our churches also teach that one holy church is to continue forever. The church is the assembly of saints in which the Gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly. For the true unity of the church it is enough to agree concerning the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments. It is not necessary that human traditions or rites and ceremonies, instituted by men, should be alike everywhere. It is as Paul says, “One faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all,” etc. (Eph. 4:5, 6). (Augsburg Confession VII)

In other words, churches do not need to completely agree on *everything*. One church may use an organ while another may use a piano or guitars. One church may worship on Sunday mornings, another may worship Wednesday and Friday nights. Another church may have several bible readings, while another may have only two or three. Some may have communion every Sunday, some only once a month. They may have different constitutions, committees, and teams. But all are one in Christ, if they agree on the Gospel and the Sacraments.

The Hidden Church

The second speaks of the hidden church, which is present only before God and in his eyes. This is the communion of saints that only God knows. I can know *I* am a Christian, but I can only judge you by what you do and say. God knows your heart.

Properly speaking, the church is the assembly of saints and true believers. However, since in this life many hypocrites and evil persons are mingled with believers, it is allowable to use the sacraments even when they are administered by evil men, according to the saying of Christ, “The scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat,” etc. (Matt. 23:2). Both the sacraments and the Word are effectual by reason of the institution and commandment of Christ even if they are administered by evil men. (Augsburg Confession VIII)

In other words, it is impossible to point to any “congregation” and say they are the pure church. Gathered at ANY church on Sunday morning are faithful believers mixed with people who have successfully passed themselves off as Christians. To hope to create a “perfect” church of believers on this earth is simply impossible.

⁶ Smalcald Articles, Part 3:XII The Church, BOOK OF CONCORD

Church Discipline

However that does not mean we throw up our hands and not worry about who does and doesn't call themselves a Christian. The pastor and the whole congregation should be concerned that those who are *obviously* not Christians not be permitted to commune together with the rest of the congregation. First, it gives the church a terrible reputation and second, it asks the Lord to make one those who are clearly not interested in *being* one.

Agreement in Teaching

As we saw in the Augsburg Confession VII, the church is built on the pure teaching of the Gospel and the right administration of the sacraments. Therefore those who commune together are to strive to be "of one mind" about the Gospel. On this side of heaven we will never actually *be* of one mind. But we should be *striving* for it. If someone refuses to discuss their beliefs with the pastor or congregation, or belongs to a church or organization that teaches a different Gospel,⁷ they should not for their own good commune together with us. Paul himself writes in 1 Corinthians:

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. (1 Cor. 11:27-29 ESV)

Agreement in Morality

Those who are living in an *on-going, unrepentant* sin are to be excluded from communion with the church. These are usually sins that are obvious to everyone, and noted clearly in both the Old and New Testaments. For example, Paul writes in 1 Cor. 5 about a man living together with his stepmother. He pointedly says:

Let him who has done this be removed from among you...But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one... "Purge the evil person from among you." (1 Cor. 5:2b, 11, 13b)

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul strikes out at those who would suggest that it is by following the law that you are saved. But even so, he still tells his readers that...

...the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. (Galatians 5:16-21)

The Office of the Keys

Ultimately, the pastor is responsible to God for ensuring the church is moving toward, and not away, from agreement in teaching and morality. His job is *never* to require some form of unattainable perfection, but to warn those who because of their behavior "will not inherit the kingdom of God" or who because of their beliefs are no longer clinging to Jesus, "The Christ, the Son of the Living God:"

⁷ Churches such as those that deny that the Scriptures are the Word of God (ELCA, United Methodist, Episcopal, UCC, PCUSA), that deny Christ's words about the Lord's Supper (Baptist, Pentecostal, Presbyterians, so-called "non-denominational" churches) and that deny we are saved by God's grace alone (Catholic or Eastern Orthodox). Organizations that deny the Gospel include the Blue, Scottish and York Lodges, the Eastern Star, and the Shriners. Churches in communion with us include all Missouri Synod congregations and her partner churches around the world, the Wisconsin Synod, and the Evangelical Lutheran Synod. Some churches whose pastors are members of the Society of the Holy Trinity may be excepted, and some Lutherans living where there is no partner church.

I believe that when the called ministers of Christ deal with us by his divine command, in particular when they exclude openly unrepentant sinners from the Christian congregation and absolve those who repent of their sins and want to do better, this is just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us himself. (*Small Catechism, "The Office of the Keys"*)

Week 7: The Christian Life

Over the last six weeks we've looked at some of the great mysteries, or paradoxes of the Christian faith:

God is one, yet God is also three persons, each fully God
Jesus Christ is one person, yet at the same time fully human and fully God
In Holy Communion, bread and wine are also Christ's body and blood

Today we look at the last great mystery of the Christian faith: what a Christian is:

A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.
A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.

These statements are taken from a work of Martin Luther called "On the Freedom of a Christian." He bases them on the New Testament, especially some of Paul's teachings: "For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them" (1 Cor. 9:19) and "Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law" (Romans 13:8).

Free Lord of All

First of all, a Christian who has been born again of the Holy Spirit is Lord of all. A Christian does not need to be told what to do – a Christian *knows*. What a Christian needs to hear is the pure Gospel of Jesus Christ: Jesus was born *for us*, he died *for us*, and he lives that we might live forever with him, even though we have done *nothing* to deserve all this.

Since faith alone justifies, it is clear that the inner man cannot be justified, freed, or saved by any outer work or action at all, and that these works, whatever their character, have nothing to do with this inner man...Wherefore it ought to be the first concern of every Christian to lay aside all confidence in works and increasingly to strengthen faith alone and through faith to grow in the knowledge, not of works, but of Christ Jesus, who suffered and rose for him. (Luther's Works, Vol. 31, 347)

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9, ESV)

Dutiful Servant of All

Second, though, we must recognize that we are not "just" Christians. We are also sinners. As Christians, we are Lords of all, perfectly holy, priests to God, kings in the kingdom of Jesus. But because we are also sinners, we must fight our sinful nature every day of our lives. This is done by service to God and to neighbor. Consider again Paul's words: "But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified" (1 Cor. 9:27) and "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (Gal 5:24).

We must, however, realize that these works reduce the body to subjection and purify it of its evil lusts, and our whole purpose is to be directed only toward the driving out of lusts. Since by faith the soul is cleansed and made to love God, it desires that all things, and especially its own body, shall be purified so that all things may join with it in loving and praising God. Hence a man cannot be idle, for the need of his body drives him and he is compelled to do many good works to reduce it to subjection. Nevertheless the works themselves do not justify him before God,

but he does the works out of spontaneous love in obedience to God and considers nothing except the approval of God, whom he would most scrupulously obey in all things. (Luther's Works, Vol. 31, 359)

How do we subdue the body? How do we then *live*, as Christians, in the world? This is a good time to summarize what we have learned so far in the Small Catechism.

A Christian...

Obeys: (The Ten Commandments)

Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires. (Romans 13:11-14 ESV)

Believes (The Creed)

Because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the Scripture says, "Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame." (Romans 10:9-11 ESV)

Worships (The Lord's Prayer)

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. (Heb 10:24-25 ESV)

So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:41-42, ESV)

Conclusion

What it's all about (or, back to the beginning!):

Jesus said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." (Matthew 16:15-18, ESV)

ⁱ Hybels, Bill. *Too Busy Not To Pray*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988) 94.

ⁱⁱ Wilkinson, Bruce. *The Prayer of Jabez*. (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2000) 85.

ⁱⁱⁱ Wilkinson, 7.

^{iv} Hank Hanegraaff. *The Prayer of Jesus*. (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2001). Cover.

^v Gothard, Bill. *The Power of Crying Out*. (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2002) 75.

^{vi} Omartian, Stormie. *Praying God's Will for Your Life*. (Nashville: Nelson Publishers, 2001) 81.

^{vii} St-Onge, Charles. *Not As We Ought*. (M.Div. Thesis, Concordia Theological Seminary, 2003) 1.

