

Dear members and friends of St. John,

There is nothing more important in the life of a Christian than to correctly understand how **God justifies** (or saves) **sinners like you and me**. As Lutherans, we refer to this as the doctrine of Justification. Listen to Rev. Dr. Carl F. W. Walther, the first president of our synod, as he describes **three very common false teachings** found in **other churches**:

First, [these churches] imagine that, **now that Christ has done His share, man must still do his — and man is not reconciled to God until both efforts meet**. These [churches] picture reconciliation to mean that the Savior made God willing to save people — provided they, on their part, are *willing* to be reconciled. But that is the complete reverse of the Gospel. God is reconciled—not man. Accordingly, the apostle Paul calls to us: “Be reconciled to God” (2 Corinthians 5:20). This means that since God has been reconciled to you by Jesus Christ, grasp the hand that our Father in heaven extends to you... Righteousness is ready and waiting. Humans must **not** first achieve it. If we were to attempt to do so, that would be an awful crime, a battle against grace and against the reconciliation and perfect redemption accomplished by the Son of God.

Second, [these churches] teach **false doctrine concerning the Gospel**. They regard it as nothing but a set of **instructions for man**, teaching **what man must do to secure the grace of God**. In reality, the Gospel is **God’s proclamation to people**: “You are redeemed from your sins. You are reconciled to God. Your sins are forgiven.” ...

Third, [these churches] teach **false doctrine concerning faith**. They regard faith as a quality in people that “improves” them, that increases their *sanctification* [i.e., holiness before God]. This is why they consider faith to be such an extraordinarily important and beneficial matter.

It is true indeed that **genuine faith does change a person completely**. It brings **love** into a person’s **heart**. Faith can be without love just as little as fire can be without heat. But the fact that **faith contains love is not why faith justifies us** and gives us what Christ has acquired for us and what is thus already ours and only needs to be received by us. These people do **not** teach what Scripture teaches in response to the question “What must I do to be saved?” [see Acts 16:30]. Rather, the correct response to that question is: “You must believe, that is, you do not need to do anything yourself.” Because when the apostle answers the jailer’s question by saying, “You must believe in the Lord Jesus Christ,” [Acts 16:31] that is the same as saying, **“You do not need to do anything. Just receive what God has already done for you. That is all. Now you are saved.”** ⁽¹⁾

Then, Walther pens these words about God’s wonderful gift of **being Lutheran**:

Since we have this doctrine [of Justification], what **exceedingly happy and blessed people we Lutherans are!** This teaching takes us directly to Christ — without any detours. It opens heaven to us when we feel hell in our heart. It enables us to obtain grace at any moment—

without losing time by following a **wrong way as we work for grace** by our own effort, as we sometimes do, even with the best intentions. We can approach Christ directly and say: "Lord Jesus, I am a poor sinner. I know it. I have known this in the past, and when I reflect on what is going on in my heart now, I must say, that is still my experience. But You have called me by Your Gospel. I come to You just as I am. For I can come no other way." **That is the saving doctrine that the Lutheran Church has learned from Christ and the apostles.**⁽¹⁾

I often wonder if Lutherans truly grasp the wonderful (and increasingly rare) teaching of salvation by faith alone, through grace alone, in Jesus Christ alone. Indeed, as Walther states, our troubled hearts are taken "directly to Christ – without any detours." We have the purest doctrine, the greatest comfort – and it all originates in Christ Jesus' words, for you and me. May we forever cherish the clarity of the Gospel that our church provides through the doctrine of Justification.

Pastor Travis

(1) Walther, Carl F. W., *Law & Gospel: How to Read and Apply the Bible*; Walther's Fourteenth Evening Lecture: Jan. 16, 1885; c. Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis. Bracketed comments and highlights by Pastor Travis.