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I ask that men make no reference to my name; let them call themselves Christians, not Lutherans. . . . But if you are convinced that Luther’s teaching is in accord with the gospel . . . then you should not discard Luther so completely, lest with him you discard also his teaching, which you nevertheless recognize as Christ’s teaching. You should rather say: Whether Luther is a rascal or a saint I do not care; his teaching is not his, but Christ’s.

—Martin Luther, 1522 (AE 45:70–71; 36:265)

In an age that encourages nondenominationalism, using the name “Lutheran” may seem out of place. Some might even charge that it is wrong or sinful to use the name. But to my thinking, it is important to say clearly what you believe about Jesus Christ and His Word. The name “Lutheran” is shorthand for getting to those facts. It simply means, “I agree with Luther,” whose teaching has been well-known for nearly five hundred years.

Calling yourself “nondenominational” became popular in the late twentieth century. But the idea stems from nineteenth-century movements that encouraged people to call themselves simply “Christians” in the hope of uniting all of Christendom. Those efforts failed and actually resulted in an increased number of denominations!

Ironically, nondenominationalism is likewise causing an increase in the number of denominations. Ed Stetzer, director of Lifeway Research, notes that as today’s nondenominational churches grow, they form memberships and associations that have many of the characteristics of existing denominations (e.g., the Willow Creek Association, the Association of Related Churches, and the Acts 29 Network). Stetzer also points out that nondenominational churches may undergo rapid changes in doctrine, noting an example of a megachurch in Tulsa, Oklahoma, that quickly turned from charismatic beliefs to unitarian beliefs. While emerging

denominations are going through these changes, liberal denominations and organizations that formed from mergers in the twentieth century are now going bust. With all these changes, people today want the facts about Christianity, and they want to know why those facts matter. That is what this book is all about.

From Series to Book

This book began as a popular Bible Study series. We originally planned to cover some basic topics of Christian doctrine but found that people were so excited about the content and presentation that we extended the number to eighteen booklets. In this new work, we gather together all the rich content of the series, order it around the Nicene Creed, and present it in one accessible volume so readers can access the facts they need based on actual church documents compared with the teachings of Scripture.

As Lutherans interact with other Christians, they often find themselves struggling to explain their beliefs and practices. Although many Lutherans have learned the “what” of the doctrines of the Church, they do not always have a full scriptural foundation to share the “why.” When confronted with different doctrines or denominations, they sometimes cannot clearly state their faith—much less understand the differences.

Because of insecurities about explaining particular doctrines or practices, some Lutherans may avoid opportunities to share what they have learned from Christ and His Word. The Lutheran Difference identifies how Lutherans differ from other Christians and shows from the Bible why Lutherans differ. Such information will prepare Lutherans to share their faith clearly; it will help non-Lutherans understand the Lutheran difference.

Lutheran Focus

The first church built on the basis of Luther’s teaching from Scripture provides a powerful illustration of the Lutheran difference: the Castle Church at Torgau, Germany. The Reformation stands at the end of the medieval or Gothic period, when most churches were ornately decorated as though the designers were trying to fill every surface with illustration or ornament. The churches often had numerous altars dedicated to a variety of saints. The Baroque era follows the Reformation with a similar florid style. These styles give the eye and mind little rest. In stark contrast, iconoclasts of the sixteenth century hacked away the medieval designs, destroyed the imagery, and tore out the organs. They went from one extreme to the other.
Amid these extremes, Luther gave instructions for the design of the Torgau church. The ornamentation is focused on the pulpit and the altar from which one learns of Christ in the words of Scripture and in the blessed Sacrament of His body and blood. The eye and mind can focus and rest on Christ and His Word. The design is brilliant in simplicity and emphasis. This became characteristic of Lutheran devotion and art.

Lutherans Confess Christ

All who worship the Holy Trinity and trust in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins are regarded by Lutherans as fellow Christians, despite denominational (or nondenominational!) differences. This is an exciting time to be Lutheran, given the remarkable growth of our churches in South American and Africa and the growing strength of traditional Lutheran bodies in the International Lutheran Council, which formed at a 1993 meeting in Antigua, Guatemala. Philip Jenkins, who is the Edwin Earle Sparks Professor of History and Religious Studies at Pennsylvania State University, has noted this rapidly increasing number of new Lutherans in The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity. Jenkins highlighted changes in East Africa, where Lutheran groups have grown by 9 to 15 percent each year.2 How exciting to see these new Lutherans boldly confessing Christ!

Lutheran churches first described themselves as evangelisch or “evangelical churches” (literally, “Gospel churches”). Opponents of these churches called them “Lutheran” after Dr. Martin Luther, the sixteenth-century German Church reformer. The general populace began to use the name too. It became so common and widespread that our churches have used the name Lutheran ever since. However, Lutherans are not disciples of Dr. Martin Luther, but disciples of Jesus Christ. They are, as Dr. Gene Edward Veith puts it, “the first evangelicals.”3 They proudly accept the name Lutheran because they agree with Dr. Luther’s teaching from the Bible, as summarized in Luther’s Small Catechism (1529), which is the most widely and continuously used summary of Christian teaching since the ancient creeds.

In Christ,
Rev. Edward A. Engelbrecht, STM
Senior Editor of Professional and Academic Books and Bible Resources
Concordia Publishing House

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Law, Gospel, and Justification

Though justice be thy plea, consider this,
That in the course of justice none of us
Should see salvation.
—Portia, in Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice

“I was perfectly justified!” Such is often the cry of those seeking to escape punishment. The claim—in the courtroom as well as in popular use—is a legal claim, an appeal to the laws of the state or to commonly accepted ideas of right and wrong. A lawyer, for example, may argue that his client committed no murder; rather, it was “justifiable homicide.” That is, it was legal homicide, an act not condemned by the law. Quite frequently we attempt to justify our actions by appealing to the law. That is, though we understand why others think we have committed some wrong, we argue that technically—according to the letter of the law—we are innocent.

Just an Observation

Although we may often think of justify and justification as technical theological language, they are in fact derived from the courtroom. They are legal terms. It is not surprising, then, that even in their theological use they have some relation to the Law. What may be surprising is the way in which the Bible speaks of justification in relation to the Law.

Although discussed in section 1, the Law’s inability to justify deserves mention again. In Galatians 2:15–16 (only two verses!) Paul says three times that justification is impossible according to the Law. He obviously does not want this point to be missed. And just to make sure it is not, he emphasizes this even more strongly again in the fifth chapter, saying that “You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace” (v. 4). This is no small matter. The Law of God is good and holy, but by it we cannot be made holy. Paul makes this point so strongly and so often that it could not be ignored by the Lutheran reformers. They wrote that “by their own strength, people cannot fulfill God’s Law. They are all under sin, subject to eternal wrath and death. Because of this, we cannot be freed by the Law from sin and be justified” (Ap IV 40; Concordia, p. 87). But this does not mean that the Law has no place in God’s plan for our salvation.

Although the Law is powerless to justify, the New Testament is also clear that the Law plays an important role in preparing people for the free gift of justification. Paul takes pains to insist that the Law is not opposed to the promises of God. What, then, is their relationship? Paul explains that
“the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith” (Galatians 3:24). Justification is by faith, not Law. But it was the Law that led us to Christ, in whom we place our faith. How did it do this? The accusations of the Law lead sinners to repentance. Concerning this the Lutheran Confessions state that “to repent means nothing other than to truly acknowledge sins, to be heartily sorry for them, and to stop doing them. This knowledge comes from the Law” (FC SD V 8–9; Concordia, p. 554). By this function of the Law man is prepared to receive the Gospel. Being made aware of his sins, man is made aware of his need for forgiveness. Thus the Law is sometimes referred to as God’s “alien” work, while the Gospel is called His “proper” work. The confessors make this distinction when discussing the relationship between the Law, the Gospel, and justification: “He must do the work of another (reprove), in order that He may afterward do His own work, which is to comfort and to preach grace” (FC SD V 11; Concordia, pp. 554–55).

What, then, is the relationship between Jesus and the Law? All men are born under the Law. Jesus, being true man as well as true God, was not exempted from this condition of birth. Paul makes note of this when he mentions that the Son of God was “born of woman, born under the law” (Galatians 4:4). But, as he goes on to explain, Jesus was born this way for a particular purpose. He was born under the Law “to redeem those who were under the law” (v. 5). What exactly does the apostle mean by this? Remembering the chief purpose of the Law—to reveal man’s sin and to accuse him of his sinfulness—it would not be wrong to say that the Law announces a curse on us. It announces that we who have not fulfilled the Law deservedly face death and condemnation. The good news is that we do not face these consequences. Paul explains the reason for this. “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” (Galatians 3:13). Not only was Christ born like us, born under Law, but He was also born for us, to suffer in our place the curse that had been pronounced on us. Therefore, commenting on Galatians 3:13, the Confessions state that “the Law condemns all people. But Christ—without sin—has borne the punishment of sin. He has been made a victim for us and has removed that right of the Law to accuse and condemn those who believe in Him” (Ap V [III] 58 [179]; Concordia, p. 109).

Christ’s relationship to the Law—being born under it and having suffered its curse—radically affects the relationship between Christians and the Law. Although the Law formerly accused us, or, as Paul says, “stood against us with its legal demands,” its power to do so has now been nullified. Having both fulfilled the Law and suffered under it, our Lord canceled “the record of debt” (Colossians 2:14). With Christ’s very body the Law was taken away and nailed to the cross. We can therefore joyfully confess with
Paul that “Christ is the end of the law” (Romans 10:4). We can joyfully confess with the reformers that “since they [Christians] are counted righteous, the Law cannot accuse or condemn them, even though they have not actually satisfied the Law” (Ap V [III] 58 [179]; Concordia, p. 109). That final clause is important. We have not actually satisfied the Law. Our relation to the Law has not changed because of something we have done. It is only on account of Christ and His saving work that the Law no longer accuses or condemns. It is only on account of the Gospel that the curse of the Law has been removed.

Jesus’ relationship to the Law is intimately entwined with His relationship to the Gospel. While Paul tells the Romans that his Gospel is none other than “the preaching of Jesus Christ” (16:25), he also explains to the Corinthians that the Gospel saves (1 Corinthians 15:2). As he outlines the content of this saving Gospel message, he cannot but mention the central event of the Gospel, that “Christ died for our sins” (v. 3). That is, Christ died because we had broken the Law; Christ suffered the ultimate penalty of the Law’s curse. It might be said in a sense that Jesus’ relation to the Law is the Gospel. The news that He suffered the Law’s penalty in our place is the good news. This is the point Luther makes as he confesses the doctrine of justification in his famous explanation of the Creed’s Second Article: “I believe that Jesus Christ . . . is my Lord. He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil. He did this not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death” (SC II; Concordia, p. 329).

If, then, we were all born under the Law, what is our relationship with the Gospel? Paul informed the Colossians that, on account of Christ’s death, they have been reconciled to God and can now stand “holy and blameless and above reproach before Him” (1:22). They are told simply that this is “the hope of the gospel” (1:23). Indeed it is! Once being alienated, now being reconciled; once being evil, now being holy; once enemies, now free from accusation—these are the amazing effects of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. These are benefits not to be squandered. Paul therefore urges his audience to continue in their faith, to remain “stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard” (1:23). Paul’s exhortation to the Colossians remains relevant for each of us today. Having been redeemed from the Law and reconciled by the Gospel, let us continue joyfully and thankfully in the faith that lays hold of such good news. We can do so with the assurance that it is God’s own Spirit who has “called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith” (SC II; Concordia, p. 330).
Sons and Heirs

Thanks be to God, we have no need of appealing to the Law. Thanks be to God, we have been redeemed from the Law! Jesus Himself suffered what we lawfully deserved, giving us instead a free and unearned pardon.

As you consider Jesus’ relationship with the Law, what comfort can you take in the circumstances of His birth, life, and death? Christians familiar with both the Scriptures and their own behavior will be acutely aware of their inability to keep the Law. This should never lead one to despair of salvation, however. The good news of the Gospel is that Jesus Himself was born under the Law, that He perfectly fulfilled the Law’s demands in His earthly life, and that He suffered the condemnation of the Law in His atoning death. These things He did in our place, for our sake. This is the Christian’s great comfort: all that we cannot do, Christ has done for us.

How can we, like the Colossians, “continue in the faith, stable and steadfast” (1:23)? Just as we have been saved through faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, so, too, does the ministry of the Gospel continue to strengthen and preserve our faith. This, in fact, is the reason behind the writing of so many of Paul’s New Testament Letters. He knows that his audience has received salvation by grace through faith in Christ. In many cases it was Paul himself who first proclaimed the Gospel of Christ to them. Yet he writes to remind them of this Gospel, to comfort, to encourage, and to strengthen the faith of those who already believe. These same benefits are received when we read the Scriptures or hear them proclaimed. Likewise, we receive these benefits through the administration of the Gospel by means of the Sacraments. So long as we remain in this world, afflicted by sin and our lingering sinful nature, we will eagerly seek to make use of these gracious gifts of God.

All about Christ

The Christian can indeed proclaim, “I was perfectly justified!” This claim can be made confidently even in the court of God Himself. But it is not made with an appeal to the Law. The Christian instead appeals to Christ, whose perfect life and perfect death are the basis for our perfect justification.

All of this is indeed comforting good news. But the question remains: How do we respond to a friend who believes that both believing the Gospel and obeying the Law are necessary for salvation? How do we clarify the distinctive purposes of Law and Gospel? As the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions frequently make clear, the mingling of Law and Gospel is a dangerous and harmful thing. One way in which they are mingled or confused is by appointing to one the work of the other. To be sure, as we will review in the next section, Christians do follow the Law of God; but
this in no way affects the justification that has been freely received by faith in the Gospel of Christ. Perhaps the best response to those who believe that keeping the Law is necessary for salvation is to review with them the numerous passages in which Paul declares that the Law cannot justify. Galatians 5:4 is a particularly strong statement on this matter: “You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.” Galatians 3:3 is also relevant; here the Galatians are asked, “Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?”

Comparisons

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<td>Eastern Orthodox</td>
<td>Stained soul; will able to cooperate with grace.</td>
<td>Show God’s will for our lives.</td>
<td>Provide empowering grace, yielding</td>
<td>Ultimately depends on the Christian’s</td>
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<td>obedience.</td>
<td>obedience.</td>
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<td>Lutheran</td>
<td>Thoroughly corrupted soul; will turned completely against God.</td>
<td>Point out our sin, restrain evil, and show God’s will for our lives.</td>
<td>Provide forgiving grace through Word and Sacrament.</td>
<td>Assured to all who believe in Christ’s perfect obedience and sacrifice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reformed/ Presbyterian</td>
<td>Thoroughly corrupted soul; will turned completely against God.</td>
<td>Point out our sin, restrain evil, and show God’s will for our lives.</td>
<td>Provide forgiving grace, symbolized by Word and Sacrament.</td>
<td>Never sure, as it is given only to the elect, those whom God has pre-chosen.</td>
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<td>Roman Catholic</td>
<td>Corrupted soul; will able to cooperate with grace.</td>
<td>Show God’s will for our lives.</td>
<td>Provide empowering grace, yielding</td>
<td>Ultimately depends on the Christian’s</td>
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<td>obedience.</td>
<td>obedience.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>Thoroughly corrupted soul; will greatly impaired.</td>
<td>Show God’s will for our lives.</td>
<td>Provide grace so that will chooses salvation.</td>
<td>Ultimately depends on the Christian’s decision.</td>
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<td>CHURCH BODY</td>
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<td>WESLEYAN/</td>
<td>Thoroughly corrupted soul; will greatly</td>
<td>Show God’s will for our lives.</td>
<td>Provide grace so that will chooses</td>
<td>Ultimately depends on the Christian’s decision.</td>
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<td>METHODIST</td>
<td>impaired.</td>
<td></td>
<td>salvation.</td>
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<td>LIBERAL</td>
<td>Primarily a psychological experience.</td>
<td>Man-made for life in community.</td>
<td>Model of Jesus’ ethical life.</td>
<td>Pertains only to betterment of this life.</td>
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**Point to Remember**

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*

**Law, Gospel, and Sanctification**

Is that which is holy loved by the gods because it is holy, or is it holy because it is loved by the gods?

—Plato

Even the pagan philosopher Plato was greatly concerned with the issue of holiness. In our modern society, however, *holy* has become a four-letter word in more than the literal sense. Although we are inundated with aids and advice for self-help and self-improvement, holiness, it seems, is not something to which our world aspires. To the contrary, being “holier than thou” is an accusation with which no one wants to be charged.

**A Faith That Works**

Sanctification is perhaps one of the most frequently misunderstood, and therefore most hotly debated, topics in the Christian Church. As with the interpretation of Scripture and the doctrine of justification, to arrive at a correct understanding of sanctification it is necessary to properly
Engaging This Topic

“Why doesn’t your church teach about sanctification?”
“We do teach about sanctification.”
“Then what steps are you taking to become a better Christian?”

The words *justification* and *sanctification* weigh in at five syllables each, which make them technical terms. Yet they are not just jargon; rather, they are central for understanding the Christian life. Sin and its guilt are removed. Faith is given. Faith is maintained. Believers die, are raised, and live forever with God. This is the best happy ending that God has to offer, and it is a true story.

Different approaches to the biblical witness about these topics define relationships and differences among Protestants, between Protestants and Roman Catholics, and between Western and Eastern Christianity. The concepts themselves come from the Bible in such representative passages as Romans 3:22–25; Romans 4:25; James 2:24; and elsewhere. Controversy about these terms arose when Augustine, bishop of Hippo in North Africa, contended with Pelagius, a popular lay theologian from Rome. Augustine gave us these big words to describe how God removes sin and guilt from a person and how that person grows in right faith and behavior.

One often hears talk about justification and sanctification in Western Christianity, whereas Eastern Orthodox Christians speak of *theosis*, of becoming like God in Christ. There the emphasis remains on the incarnation and entire life and work of Christ, from which flow the stages of purification, illumination, and sainthood in the lives of believers. It is for this reason that Orthodox Christians commune infants after Baptism. The cross does not play a central role here.

Western Christianity has a more specific focus on sin and guilt, thereby seeing a primary place for the cross and Christ’s atonement for sinners.
Roman Catholics speak of initial and final justification, between which is a life in which one is gradually made more holy in a cleansing manner through the sacraments. Since the Reformation, Lutheran and Reformed Protestants have generally agreed that the doctrine of justification as God’s total declaration of righteousness is the foundation and cornerstone of the Christian Church and its faith, though differences about how one is given faith and maintained in faith affect their respective understanding of the doctrine of justification. Arminians and Methodists, on the other hand, have placed greater emphasis on sanctification and the human will.

Since the time of Augustine, few have agreed upon the definition and content of justification. Especially among Western Christians, debates arise about whether God justifies by declaring sinners holy or by actually making them holy. Does God alone effect justification, or must we in some way cooperate with or assent to God’s action? Furthermore, how does God maintain believers in faith?

Remaining in faith is a concern that shifts the focus from justification to sanctification, again depending on one’s definitions. This area of concern is perhaps even more hotly debated. What is the definition of sanctification, the means by which it takes place, and the reasons for retaining or losing it? Such questions are especially worth exploring from a Lutheran perspective because, while they are widely recognized to have a strong doctrine of justification, Lutherans are often accused of downplaying—or even ignoring—the doctrine of sanctification.

This chapter aims to clarify the contributions of Lutheran theology to the discussions about how one’s sins are forgiven, how one remains in faith, and how one finally goes to heaven. These discussions are important because Christians do more than believe teachings for the sake of just believing. Christian faith ultimately is caught up in the great saving work of God, the passing away of the old creation, and the creation of the new, eternal heaven and earth.

Some of this chapter speaks to debates internal to the Lutheran Church. To some Lutherans who may be tempted to downplay sanctification, they will see the rich biblical and confessional testimonies to the importance of sanctification. Likewise, the biblical doctrine of justification emphasizes to those possibly influenced by Methodism the truth that justification is indeed “the article on which the church stands or falls.” In fact, we will see just how intimately related justification and sanctification are.

Lutheran Facts

The Lutheran Church, following Scripture, considers the doctrine of justification the central teaching of the Christian faith. By inheritance from
Adam and Eve and by thought, word, and deed, people are transgressors of God’s Law, subject to His wrath, and condemned to eternal death. However, God is moved to justify us unworthy sinners by grace. He did this through Christ, who fulfilled God’s Law and through His sufferings and death satisfied divine justice. In Christ, God reconciled the world to Himself.

Through the Gospel and the Sacraments, God gives us Christ’s righteousness and offers, gives, and seals to us His forgiveness for Christ’s sake. These are apprehended by faith, which itself is a divine gift given through the Means of Grace. All human merit is excluded.

Sanctification is the spiritual growth that follows justification. By God’s grace, a Christian cooperates in this work. Through the Holy Spirit’s work in the Means of Grace, faith is increased, love strengthened, and the image of God renewed. Lutherans believe that sanctification will be complete only in heaven.

The Curse and the Cure

Houston, we’ve had a problem.
—Apollo 13 astronaut James Lovell

The near-fatal Apollo 13 mission of 1970 has become part of America’s national memory. It gripped people’s attention at the time. Its events were later turned into a successful film, and Lovell’s statement has become a proverb. The Apollo 13 mission had a happy ending. Since that narrowly averted disaster, however, the world has witnessed tragedies on an enormous scale: genocide, terrorism, and natural disasters, to name just a few. Anyone who looks at the television, browses the Internet, or opens a newspaper will almost surely conclude that, indeed, we have a problem. As Christians, we know that the fundamental problem with the world is bondage to sin.

Diagnosing the Disease

After describing the creation of the world and the plant and animal life to populate it, Scripture records God’s crowning act of creation: man and woman. But Moses not only records this fact, he also highlights the great distinction between God’s creation of man and all that came before. Unlike all other creatures, “God created man in His own image, in the image of
God He created him” (Genesis 1:27). A precise definition of God’s image is difficult to summarize, since God in Himself remains beyond the grasp of fallen man’s reason. On the basis of what He has revealed in Scripture, however, the reformers were able to conclude that “man was made in the image and likeness of God. What else was this image and likeness other than that man was created with wisdom and righteousness so that he could apprehend God and reflect God?” (Ap II [I] 18; Concordia, p. 78). In this light, it is hardly surprising that God would look upon His human creation and declare it “very good” (Genesis 1:31).

Genesis 3 records man’s first act of disobedience. In response to man’s disregard for the one command he had received, God pronounced a new judgment upon His creation. Speaking first to the serpent, which had deceived the woman, God said, “Cursed are you” (Genesis 3:14). Speaking to the man, God also said, “Cursed is the ground because of you” (Genesis 3:17). The created world, which God had previously called “very good,” fell under a curse, the consequences of which God’s human creation cannot avoid. The woman will experience pain in childbirth, the man will toil and sweat to support his family and life, and finally, in accordance with the warning pronounced in Genesis 2:17, both will die. Not only does this curse involve physical death, but, apart from redemption in Christ, it also involves spiritual and eternal death, as Luther summarized: “For when we had been created by God the Father and had received from Him all kinds of good, the devil came and led us into disobedience, sin, death, and all evil [Genesis 3]. So we fell under God’s wrath and displeasure and were doomed to eternal damnation” (LC II 28; Concordia, pp. 401–2).

Although God’s curse was first announced to the serpent and those whom he had tempted, Scripture also makes clear that the curse and its effects are not limited to these individuals. Adam and Eve were cursed because they refused to obey God’s command. The same is true of their descendents. Something similar to God’s dialogue with Adam and Eve occurs when He speaks to the people of Israel: “I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God . . . and the curse, if you do not obey” (Deuteronomy 11:26–28). In the New Testament, Paul makes clear that this remains no less true. “Cursed,” he says, “be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them” (Galatians 3:10). That word all is worth emphasizing, as James also states: “Whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it” (James 2:10, emphasis added). For this reason, the Lutheran Confessions rightly conclude: “By their own strength, people cannot fulfill God’s Law. They are all under sin, subject to eternal wrath and death. Because of this, we cannot be freed by the Law from sin and be justified” (Ap IV [II] 40; Concordia, p. 87).
It is understandable that, just as Adam sinned and was punished, so should all who willfully break God’s Law be punished. This, however, does not tell the whole story of sin and its effects. We all commit actual sins. But we are also infected with original sin, a sinful nature. By this we mean that “even if a person would not think, speak, or do anything evil (which, however, is impossible in this life, since the fall of our first parents), his nature and person are nevertheless sinful. Before God they are thoroughly and utterly infected and corrupted by original sin, as by a spiritual leprosy. . . . So we are by nature the children of wrath, death, and damnation, unless we are delivered from them by Christ’s merit” (FC SD I 6; Concordia, p. 512). This is precisely what Paul teaches when he writes that sin and its consequences reign “even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam” (Romans 5:14), which was a willful breaking of God’s command. This is why, for example, the psalmist confesses that he was conceived in sin (Psalm 51:5). That even those who commit no sin should be judged guilty of sin may be difficult to accept, even to understand. But this is why Luther stressed that “this hereditary sin is such a deep corruption of nature that no reason can understand it. Rather, it must be believed from the revelation of Scripture” (SA III I 3; Concordia, p. 270).

As is evident from the creation account, in which man was created and declared “very good,” God did not desire His people to be sinful. The fall into sin, and our continual sinfulness, is in direct contradiction of God’s will. In fact, He explicitly states as much when He commands His people to “be holy, for I am holy” (Leviticus 11:44). This command is repeated in the New Testament by Peter, who encourages the Christian to “be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’” (1 Peter 1:15–16).

It is depressingly obvious that left to our own devices we are hopelessly lost. Our first parents introduced a curse upon creation. We inherit original sin. We commit actual sins. We are not holy as God demands. Therefore, we are all subject to the just penalties for sin: death and condemnation. In light of all this, what hope is there for human beings living under the curse of sin and death? Despite the severity of this message, all is not hopeless. We have not been left to our own devices. We have not been left under a curse, but we have been redeemed from it. As Paul announces in Galatians 3:13: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree’—so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.” In His suffering and death, Christ experienced the full effects of God’s curse upon sin. Because He underwent this suffering on our behalf, we need no longer fear the eternal consequences of our sin. As the Confessions summarize: “The
Law condemns all people. But Christ—without sin—has borne the punishment of sin. He has been made a victim for us and has removed that right of the Law to accuse and condemn those who believe in Him. He Himself is the Atonement for them. For His sake they are now counted righteous’ (Ap V [III] 58 [179]; Concordia, p. 109).

Rejoicing in the Cure
Scripture is explicit in its diagnosis of human sinfulness: it is not only inherited from our first parents, but it also comes forth in our own thoughts, words, and deeds. Scripture is clear in its presentation of the deadly consequences of sin. Thankfully, however, Scripture is equally explicit in proclaiming that our problem has been solved in the person and work of Jesus Christ, the Savior who removed the curse of sin with His atoning death and resurrection.

Recognizing our inherent sinfulness, how will we daily approach our Lord in prayer? Let’s compare the two approaches in Luke 18:9–14. This parable epitomizes two ways in which sinners might approach God. The Pharisee shows the approach that is unacceptable in the Lord’s sight. Rather than freely admitting his sinfulness, the Pharisee attempts to excuse himself; literally, he declares himself just or righteous by pointing out the good he does and the evil he avoids. But even if his claims are true, he is mistaken in believing that such obedience can compensate for other faults or for that original sin that even he has inherited. By way of contrast, we read that the tax collector “went down to his house justified” (Luke 18:14). Yet all he did was approach God to pray, “Be merciful to me, a sinner!” (v. 13). Recognizing his sinfulness, the tax collector also recognized that God alone is capable of justifying him, of declaring him righteous.

In his Epistle, John states even more explicitly what is illustrated by the parable in Luke 18. He warns, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves.” But he also offers this comforting promise: “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:8–9). That is why we do not enter worship as if we have a right to stand before God. Instead, we come into His presence confessing our sins and asking that He “cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” In His great mercy, this He does, proclaiming our forgiveness in the words of Absolution, words that are spoken “in the stead and by the command” of Christ Himself.
THE LAST WORD?

The doctrine of original sin is impossible to grasp without the aid of divine revelation. However, for many people, it is also extremely offensive. But the proclamation of the Gospel—the forgiveness of sin—only makes sense if one is first made aware of one’s own need for forgiveness. That is why the Law—which accuses individuals of sin—must also be proclaimed. The Law is never to be the last word; nevertheless, only after the curse has been diagnosed can the cure be appreciated in all its sweetness.

Knowing that, how do we respond to a friend who tells us, “We all make mistakes sometimes, but at heart people are basically good”? The doctrine of original sin, as Luther explained, “must be believed from the revelation of Scripture” (SA III 13; Concordia, p. 270). We can point out to such friends, as C. S. Lewis does in Mere Christianity, that we are incapable of perfectly obeying even our self-imposed moral codes. How much less will we then believe we can fulfill the commands of a holy God? Ultimately, we must stress that actual sins are but symptoms of the deeper problem of a sinful nature, which prevents us from being “basically good.” Then we must follow the proclamation of human sinfulness with a proclamation of Christ’s saving work.

COMPARISONS

**Eastern Orthodox:** “What is necessary in order to please God and to save one’s own soul? In the first place, a knowledge of the true God, and a right faith in Him; in the second place, a life according to faith, and good works” (The Longer Catechism of the Eastern Church, Question 3).

**Lutheran:** “Our churches teach that people cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works. People are freely justified for Christ’s sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake” (AC IV 1–2; Concordia, p. 33).

**Reformed/Presbyterian:** “Those whom God effectually calleth He also freely justifieth; not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins . . . for Christ’s sake alone” (The Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 21.1).

**Roman Catholic:** “Whereas all men had lost their innocence in the prevarication of Adam . . . free will . . . was by no means extinguished in them” (Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, Session 6, Decree on Justification).
Baptist: “We believe that the great gospel blessing which Christ secures to such as believe in him is Justification; that Justification includes the pardon of sin, and the promise of eternal life on principles of righteousness; that it is bestowed . . . solely through faith in the Redeemer’s blood” (*New Hampshire Baptist Confession*, article 5).

Wesleyan/Methodist: “We are accounted righteous before God only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ by faith, and not for our own works or deservings” (*Methodist Articles of Religion*, article 9).

Liberal: “The traditional soteriology presupposed the historicity of Adam’s fall and started from the assumption that mankind needs to be saved primarily from the taint inherited from Adam. But modern anthropology has discredited this way of determining the nature of man and of sin” (Gerald Birney Smith, ed., *Guide to the Study of the Christian Religion* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1916], p. 519).

**Point to Remember**

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.” *Galatians 3:13*

**Stumbling Stone and Cornerstone**

Justify my love.

—1980s pop star Madonna

Despite their occasional protestations to the contrary, pop stars are not typically those we would consider to be “just like us.” But, frequently, musicians and entertainers achieve popularity precisely because they so accurately reflect the thoughts and feelings of a great many people. Madonna’s quotation might be taken as a case in point. How often are we given to believe that love must somehow be justified? That is, love must be earned, merited, or deserved by the one who receives it. Of course, this partially reflects that our society rarely thinks of love except in terms of romance. But think for a moment about other—and, arguably, higher—forms of love.

Are there people in your life for whom you simply cannot justify your love yet whom you love nonetheless? If you are a parent of young children, you likely recognize that infants are a good example of those who are loved