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Errata

Due to a production error, a few characters were omitted from page 6 of the print edition of Glenn K. Fluegge, “How Is Theology a *Habitus*? Voices from the Past and Why It Matters Today,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 89, no. 1 (January 2025). The first sentence on the page should conclude, on the third line, with “ture.”¹¹

The Editors

“How Shall God Judge the World?”: The Bible and Theology as a Correction to Slogan Drift¹

Gifford A. Grobien

I. The Place of Aphorisms in Theology

It is common and helpful to summarize the beauty, goodness, and truth of God and his mighty redeeming works in aphorisms, slogans, or brief explanations. We all use them: justification by grace alone; the law always accuses; all theology is Christology; where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation. Such statements encapsulate doctrinal meaning with ramifications for piety and serve as shorthand in theological discourse when assumptions and agreement need not be revisited. Sometimes these slogans also serve as summaries of catechesis for Christians easily to remember their faith and to remind them of the fuller content of a topic.

Nevertheless, faithfulness and piety require that such sayings be visited periodically to correct drift in their assumed meaning that may creep in through ignorance, error, or obstinacy. Misunderstanding and misuse over time skew meaning and undermine robust catechesis, confession, and faithful living. We think of truth-telling as vital for the protection of reputation; truth-telling is also vital for true understanding, belief, confession, and action.

The occasion for this topic is the periodic conversion to Roman Catholicism (or Eastern Orthodoxy) by biblical, confessional Christians, conversion that often occurs because of a perceived reverence for worship and sacraments in these communions supposedly protected from frivolity by an unchanging liturgical rite; because of a perceived unity in these communions protected by a magisterial teaching authority; because of a perceived consistent character of these communions (I have heard converts explain that they can find a church anywhere they travel and know what to expect); or because of a perceived fiction in Protestant soteriology: that a declaration of righteousness dismisses the need for holy living clearly taught in the Scriptures.

¹ This essay was first presented to the faculty and students of Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana, on October 2, 2024, on the occasion of Gifford Grobien's promotion to full professor and to the David P. Scaer Chair in Biblical and Systematic Theology. —Ed.

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On top of this background, this lecture is also precipitated more immediately by a recent encounter with the 2019 book *Never Doubt Thomas: The Catholic Aquinas as Evangelical and Protestant* by Francis Beckwith, Professor of Philosophy at Baylor University, who left neo-evangelicalism in 2007 to return to the Roman Catholicism in which he had been raised.² In this book, in part, Beckwith takes up one line of recent arguments from some Reformed Christians who claim that there is theological continuity between the church fathers, Thomas Aquinas, and Reformation theology. Beckwith counters this argument both by selective quoting of church fathers and by depending on equivocation, thereby making it appear that the Council of Trent (1545–1563) and modern Roman Catholicism—not Reformation theology—do in fact show better continuity with Thomas. At face value, the book makes a convincing claim that if Protestants want to recognize in themselves the true spiritual progeny of Thomas, then they should convert to Rome.

Some Christians have failed to see the equivocation in arguments like Beckwith's or have imagined that Reformation soteriology has direct continuity with Thomas; this bears witness to the "drift" that has occurred with respect to fundamental aphorisms of the evangelical faith. I found *Never Doubt Thomas* to be particularly irksome because it exemplifies the way confused Protestant thinking can be manipulated and co-opted by apologists of other communions to pave the way for departures from biblical confessionalism. As will be shown, Thomas Aquinas' theology is not reliable, and you should not allow his intellect to impress you into thinking that he is correct on any number of topics.

By considering this case of Beckwith's engagement with the Reformed, I will highlight the importance of biblical reading and systematizing in order to undergird the terms, sayings, and simple explanations of our faith. This case study will show how overreliance on terms and sayings where understanding is assumed but does not in fact exist not only can lead to entrenchment in misunderstanding but also opens the door for the ignorant to be misled by a co-opting of the terminology. On the contrary, Evangelical Lutheran dogmatics confesses with a clarity that depends not on philosophical, traditional, or historical institutions or frameworks of thought but on the meaning of biblical language. Such meaning relies on terminological, grammatical, and contextual interpretation, which in some cases requires diligent and persevering reading but which is best served by such continuous reading and rereading of the Scriptures themselves. Such scriptural reading clarifies, explains, and invigorates biblical-confessional understanding, faith, and piety.

² Francis J. Beckwith, *Never Doubt Thomas: The Catholic Aquinas as Evangelical and Protestant* (Waco, TX: Baylor Univ. Press, 2019).

II. Francis Beckwith's Reworking of Reformed Theology

Beckwith presents Norman Geisler, R. C. Sproul, and John Gerstner as examples of Protestants who argue for continuity in the doctrine of salvation in the church fathers, Thomas Aquinas, and the reformers, while rejecting the Council of Trent for introducing the rift in soteriology, a rift which continues with the errors of modern Roman Catholicism. The two broad points of similarity between the fathers, Thomas, and the reformers, say these Reformed theologians, are that good works are a consequence of, not a condition for, salvation, and that justification by faith means that regeneration precedes faith, not that regeneration follows on faith.

It is important to notice already how the debate focuses on equivocal topics that can be emphasized or oriented in a way that serves either side of the debate. To say that good works are a consequence of and not a condition for salvation can be championed by the Reformed to argue that justification precedes good works, but it can also be received by Roman Catholics, who see salvation as a process, the beginning of which has no prerequisite of good works, but the completion of which very much does. Likewise, to agree that regeneration precedes faith gives almost no substance to the conversation if regeneration itself is not defined, described, and explained. In any case, however, let us see how the debate plays itself out.

The Reformed theologian Gerstner asserts that Thomas Aquinas speaks first of the justification of the sinner—a reckoning of righteousness—followed by the sinner being made just—a process.³ Similarly, Geisler asserts that Thomas' system of merit and good works depends on operative grace, not cooperative.⁴ (These categories are mostly used by Roman Catholics, for whom operative grace refers to God's power of converting a man's sinful heart and keeping the heart converted. Cooperative grace is God's power that works with a converted heart to do good works.) Works come forth from justification and faith, which themselves result from regeneration; salvation thereby precedes good works. Yet even these subsequent good works are due to God's grace and should therefore be attributed to him, and not to personal merit, or so say the Reformed. In this sense all grace, at least with respect to salvation, is really operative, not cooperative.

In making his argument, Geisler quotes four early church fathers to support the imputation unto righteousness by faith (Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 4.8.1, quoting Rom 4:3), the reception of grace through faith (Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lecture 1*), justification through faith apart from works (Chrysostom, *Homily 4* on Eph

³ Beckwith, *Never Doubt Thomas*, 90–91.

⁴ Beckwith, *Never Doubt Thomas*, 89.

2:8–10), and grace not as the result of works but so that works may be done (Augustine, *On the Spirit and the Letter*).⁵

As Beckwith begins his response, he offers four other quotes by these same fathers to try to argue for justification through cooperation: the crown of life is acquired only through struggle (Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 4.37.7), the Christian needs to abide in the vine and bear fruit worthily (Cyril, *Catechetical Lecture* 1.3.4), Christians offer prayers for the dead so that they be “render[ed] favorable” (Cyril, *Catechetical Lecture* 23.9–10 and Chrysostom, *Homily 41* on 1 Cor and *Homily 3* on Phil), Christians cooperate with the grace of God in good works for the perfection of salvation (Augustine, *Man’s Perfection in Righteousness* 20).⁶ Again we can see the problematic methodology: both sides present quotations from centuries earlier, but each interprets the quotations through a lens shaped by theological slogans.

Beckwith continues to develop his position: while both the Reformed and Roman Catholics agree that regeneration precedes faith, Rome, in continuity with Thomas, asserts the twofold work of grace: operative grace, which infuses the habit of righteousness—which they call justification—and cooperative grace, which works with the actions that come forth from this habit and which earn merits.⁷ But what Beckwith fails to highlight is that for the Reformed, justification is the declaration of righteousness, while for Beckwith, justification means becoming righteous, eventually arriving at perfection, or full, inherent righteousness.⁸ Beckwith instead focuses on the Roman Catholic point that all merit attributed to works remains a gift, concluding with the rhetorical query “Does that really sound like ‘grace plus good works’?”⁹ Of course, even if you buy into the Roman system, merit attributed to works *does* sound like “grace plus good works.”

The idiosyncrasies of the Reformed are also apparent, however, in the dispute over grace. Sproul’s complaint about grace in Tridentine theology is that it is resistible, such that the resistance or reception of such grace depends on the will and is Semi-Pelagian.¹⁰ Thus, for the Reformed, grace is an irresistible power of God, not favor that is wrought through Christ’s merits, so that by “grace alone,” they really mean “by God’s sovereign power alone.”

⁵ Beckwith, *Never Doubt Thomas*, 92.

⁶ Beckwith, *Never Doubt Thomas*, 93–95.

⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1-2.111.2.

⁸ Beckwith, *Never Doubt Thomas*, 96–98.

⁹ Beckwith, *Never Doubt Thomas*, 102.

¹⁰ Beckwith, *Never Doubt Thomas*, 99.

III. The Stalemate

This brief case study reveals some doctrinal differences between the Reformed and Papists. Although both can claim that regeneration precedes faith, they do so in divergent ways. For Rome, regeneration precedes faith through Baptism, working grace in the soul so that a person may cooperate with this grace in works to merit justification. For the Reformed, on the other hand, grace precedes faith as an unmediated power that overrides the will.

However, more importantly, this disagreement reveals an entrenchment in denominational shibboleths that makes it difficult or impossible not only to deal with the real errors but even to recognize them. Rather than attempting to overcome equivocation and to clarify scriptural meaning, the disagreement plays off of idiosyncratic ways of understanding grace and regeneration. For Rome, we see how the adjustment of terms like “grace,” “charity,” “merit,” and “justification” leads to a system of salvation by merit through works. On the Reformed side, having disconnected election from the atonement and the means of grace, they are unable to express the operation and fruits of grace, and they become deceived by papistic terms and ways of thinking. Beckwith is able to co-opt the Reformed arguments as praise of Roman Catholic teaching. If one believes Beckwith, we are all really in agreement about the priority of grace; the church fathers and Thomas all speak of grace as operative and cooperative, a habit of charity, and a substance infused; and so Protestants should have no trouble embracing justification as a process and should come home to Rome. Most fundamentally, neither side addresses justification comprehensively, and therefore both sides avoid addressing its integral relationship with christological merit, grace, and faith, as these are all understood biblically.

IV. A Demonstration of Evangelical Theology

A comprehensive account of truth and reality depends therefore on the clarity of terms and on how these terms are related scripturally. This case study illustrates the ramifications of failing to ground theology in careful, biblical thought. The extent to which some from a biblical, evangelical faith have gone the way of Rome (or Constantinople) suggests, at least in those cases, a stagnation in confessional and dogmatic theology or in catechesis in it. Rather, in true evangelical theology, the terms “promise,” “grace,” “merit,” and others are explained according to their relation to each other (Ap IV 53–56). Such a system of dogmatics asserts and explains the truths of Scripture and rejects false understandings. Systematic theology is not philosophical speculation about theological ideas, nor is it an attempt to show the superiority of one school of thought over another, but it is a comprehensive confession of the truth and refutation of error. To explain and clarify the truth and to refute

error is not fruitless but informs, strengthens, and guards the soul against lies and deception. Knowing and speaking the truth is the beginning of faith and love. Far from being a merely ideal exercise, dogmatics rightly practiced and expressed energizes the Christian life. Let me demonstrate these claims about the Bible and dogmatics with a correction of terms from our case study—such as “justification,” “faith,” “grace,” and “merit”—by an interpretation of Romans 3–4 and some related passages.

In Romans 3, not only does Paul ask how men could become righteous, but he also asserts that God himself is righteous.¹¹ The judgment against sin is a justification of God, for in judging sin, he demonstrates himself righteous in view of his holiness vis-à-vis the world: “Against you, you only, have I sinned . . . so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment” (Ps 51:4 ESV). The judgment silences and condemns evildoers.

But God’s promise of salvation to the children of Abraham is already in view: “[W]hat advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God” (Rom 3:1–2 ESV). So, the question is raised whether the promise somehow nullifies judging the wicked. If salvation is based on the promise, then is condemnation of wickedness no longer possible for God? Saint Paul rejects this line of thinking: “Is God unrighteous who taketh vengeance? . . . God forbid: for then how shall God judge the world?” (Rom 3:5–6 KJV).¹² Rather, Saint Paul points out that the judgment is just not because God is unfaithful but because of the presumption and indulgence of the wicked, because of the unbelief of those judged (Rom 3:3–8). Indulgence and presumption are not to be confused with faith. Indulgence and presumption are the opposite of faith: they indicate disdain for God’s promise, which is available only because he is rightly able to judge the world. He can forgive because he has the authority to judge. Justification, then, has to do with the authority of God to issue judgments in the first place: he can offer the promise of salvation because he is the judge of the world. Likewise, his judgment in view of presumptive indulgence is consistent with his authority to judge. It is not a breach of the promise that is received through faith.

What do we make of the promise? God appears to be in a dilemma: he has promised salvation, yet both Jew and Gentile have disdained this promise in their pursuit of evil. Saint Paul demonstrates in verses 9–20 that God’s wrath against both Jews and Gentiles is truly just, because all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. In his role as judge of the world, it would seem he must condemn those who

¹¹ My thinking in this paragraph was influenced by Paul K. Moser, “God Has Something to Prove: Vindication in Biblical Theology,” *Theology Today* 80, no. 3 (October 2023): 250–260.

¹² Unless otherwise noted, all following Bible quotations are from the KJV.

have turned toward evil, yet this seems to go against the promise of salvation to the children of Abraham.

If justification were merely about declarations that could turn reality on its head, there would be no dilemma here. God could declare the whole world righteous, even those who have embraced evil in rebellious mockery. There would be no concern about the justification of God, whether he actually judges in a righteous way. Yet such a scenario is rejected by Paul as self-evidently false and ironic: “Their condemnation is just” (Rom 3:8 ESV).

It is no wonder, then, that four times in verses 21–26 Saint Paul asserts the justice of God by emphasizing work that he does; but now, the work is redemptive and makes possible just, vindicating judgments of sinners, which are at the same time in harmony with the promise of salvation: “Apart from the law the justice of God has been manifested” (χωρίς νόμου δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ πεφανέρωται) (Rom 3:21, my translation). God “presents” Jesus Christ “as the mercy seat offering . . . as a demonstration of his justice because he passed over sins previously committed” (προέβητο ὁ θεὸς ἱλαστήριον . . . εἰς ἔνδειξιν τῆς δικαιοσύνης αὐτοῦ διὰ τὴν πάρεσιν τῶν προγεγονότων ἁμαρτημάτων), “for the demonstration of his justice . . . so that he be just and the justifier of those who have faith in Jesus” (πρὸς τὴν ἔνδειξιν τῆς δικαιοσύνης αὐτοῦ . . . εἰς τὸ εἶναι αὐτὸν δίκαιον καὶ δικαιοῦντα τὸν ἐκ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ)” (Rom 3:25–26, my translation).

The justification of the sinner is itself a just act. Because justice is accounted for in Jesus’ redemption, it is required by justice that sinners be justified—that is, reconciled to God as righteous. Justification is not merely a declaration different from reality, nor even is it a speech-act that accomplishes the justice it declares apart from God’s action for justice. The demonstration of God’s justice in the offering of Jesus itself proves God’s justice and demands that those who have faith also be justified—not merely declared righteous but actually made righteous. This is Melancthon’s argument: “And because ‘to be justified’ means that out of unjust men just men are made, or born again, it means also that they are pronounced or accounted just. . . . Accordingly we wish first to show this, that *faith alone makes of an unjust, a just man, i.e.,* receives remission of sins” (Ap IV 72).¹³ Further: “by faith alone we are justified, *i.e.,* of unrighteous men made righteous, or regenerated” (Ap IV 117).¹⁴ Remission of sins is not merely a statement of innocence or of lack of guilt. Through faith, sin is actually taken away and the Holy Spirit given, so that a person becomes righteous through faith.

¹³ In *Triglot Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Ev. Lutheran Church, German-Latin-English*, [ed. and trans. F. Bente and W. H. T. Dau] (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), 141.

¹⁴ In [Bente and Dau], *Triglot Concordia*, 155.

How is actually taking away sin different from the mere statement that one is not guilty anymore? The key distinction is in the act of reconciliation (Ap IV 40–42, 71–72). The blood of Jesus actually reconciles a just God. “Justice” in the Roman church today has come to mean an inward character of righteousness, a character that weighs all of its virtues appropriately and acts well toward others. While this is part of justice, its core component is corporate. Δικαίω, δίκαιος, and δικαιοσύνη are concerned with common behavior that is right, good, and moral for a community, which maintains the community members in good relation with each other. The features of individual moral uprightness are not separate from public justice, judgment, verdict, and relationship. A person ought to act in accordance with moral righteousness in order to maintain good standing in the community.¹⁵

But what if somebody does not? What if I violate what is good and right? There is no going back and somehow erasing and making right what has happened in the past, as though history or memory could be changed. Yet love, that other great community virtue, also seeks some way of restoration. I have injured the community and deserve punishment, not as though the offense can be erased, but as a kind of restitution to demonstrate sorrow, repentance, a desire to do better, and a desire to be restored mercifully. In communities with merely human standards, there is a sense in which I can merit this merciful restoration through my punishment. But with respect to God, God is the one injured—“Against you, you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight” (Ps 51:4 ESV)—and the offense is against holiness and purity. As unholy and impure, no extent of suffering on my part can merit my restoration. Instead, the wrath of God bars what is unholy from what is holy. God’s wrath is not petty or arbitrary but is my just exclusion from the fellowship of God for violating his goodness. In view of the holiness of God, how can I, a sinner, ever be trusted? Although God’s love desires restitution, how can any man merit it? This is Paul’s argument through Romans 1–3. The wrath of God is justly due against all men, and he would abandon his own righteousness and role of judge if he were not to punish sin.

Thus, Jesus refers to his sacrifice as a “ransom” (Mark 10:45). His shedding of blood is the mercy seat, the propitiation, our restitution, our restoration, our reconciliation. His offering is not simply a punishment of justice that weighs good and evil in a balance and ends up outweighing the evil of sin. Nor is his offering merely a demonstration of how much he loves us, a love that is taken advantage of by wicked men and results in his death, which yet has no consequence, as though eternal life were merely by fiat without reference to a particular act of reconciliation. Rather,

¹⁵ Horst Robert Balz and Gerhard Schneider, eds., *The Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990–1993), s.vv. δικαιοσύνη, sec. 2; δίκαιος, sec. 2; δικαίω sec. 2.

the offering of the Son is an act of community restoration, because by it the Son demonstrates that he loves mankind so much that he will take on the guilt, shame, and just punishment of transgressions, the rebellious transgressions of man that alienate him from God and cast him outside of his kingdom. “[Y]e were . . . aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world: But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who hath made both one. . . . And that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby” (Eph 2:12–16).¹⁶ Jesus is alienated in our place; he is cast out; he is the scapegoat; he suffers the wrath, the condemnation, the rejection of the Father for the sin of humanity. His suffering is enough, so that you are restored. We are restored. Mankind is restored. God’s righteous stance against evil is clearly demonstrated in the crucifixion and condemnation of Jesus, but it is also satisfied in it. We are reconciled.

Furthermore, Jesus cannot be held by this condemnation or death, because of his purity. Because of his righteousness—and here we can appreciate the pure, holy, righteous character of the person Jesus Christ—and because of his divine power, he rises from the dead, bringing with him in vindication all who were dead in their trespasses but have been reconciled by his offering. “[Y]ou, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses” (Col 2:13). We no longer suffer in the condemnation of death but have been made alive, regenerated, reconciled, and righteous. Thus Melancthon confesses, “To attain the remission of sins is to be justified, according to Ps. 32, 1: *Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven. . . . [B]y faith alone we are justified*, understanding justification as the making of a righteous man out of an unrighteous, or that he be regenerated” (Ap IV 76–78).¹⁷ Justification is not a legal fiction. It is a relational reality. It is not a mere statement different from reality, but justification is accomplished by the propitiation of sin and received through faith, thereby requiring the just judgment of God to speak in accordance with this reconciliation that has been accomplished (Rom 4:14, 11:6; Ap IV 40–42). That is, you are forgiven. You are reconciled. You have life. You are judged righteous.

Finally, let us briefly address the place of faith in this question. If Christ atones for the world, why are only those with faith saved? Because the subjective criterion for salvation, so to speak, depends on acknowledging the authority of God to judge.

¹⁶ I recognize that in the immediate context of this passage Saint Paul is referring also to the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles: Gentiles are no longer excluded from the saving fellowship of Israel. But, more fundamentally, this occurs because all are reconciled to God through the Passion of Jesus.

¹⁷ In [Bente and Dau], *Triglot Concordia*, 143.

Judgment depends on righteousness, but a righteousness that bears the guilt and shame of the world yet persists in purity, holiness, and immortality and thereby is vindicated. “Mercy and truth are met together; Righteousness and peace have kissed each other” (Ps 85:10). Christ takes upon himself the sin of the world; the world is relieved of its sin. Christ is judged righteous and is restored to life. Men, no longer having sin—not by works, but as a gift, an act of reconciliation—also live. “Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt. But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness” (Rom 4:4–5). The criterion for man’s judgment is no longer personal righteous acts but the holy reconciliation of Jesus Christ.

Thus, God’s authoritative judgment occurs through mercy. “For the promise, that he should be the heir of the world, was not to Abraham, or to his seed, through the law, but through the righteousness of faith . . . that it might be by grace; to the end the promise might be sure” (Rom 4:13–16). To deny the judgment of mercy in Christ is to deny the judgment of God and the criterion by which he judges. Redemption depends on Christ’s ministry. Christ’s ministry, his Passion, is a demonstration of God’s justice in forgiveness. Unbelief rejects this just forgiveness and resorts again to the law of individual righteous acts rather than to the mercy of Christ’s offering. “For if they which are of the law be heirs, faith is made void, and the promise made of none effect” (Rom 4:14). Through faith we recognize and trust the justice of God. Faith is the recognition, the assurance, the trust that God has redeemed us. Without faith one actually denies the justice of God, because one is denying the very work that God did in Jesus Christ to redeem mankind. It is the ultimate act of blasphemy and rebellion, a blasphemy against the testimony of the Holy Spirit, and marks one as outside the community of God.

True faith, however, which is comforted by the promised propitiation of Christ, is regeneration. Neither faith nor regeneration precedes the other (Ap IV 45). Melancthon points out that faith brings the Holy Spirit, who, by remitting sin, makes us acceptable to God (Ap IV 116). Faith is itself confidence in the promise (Rom 4:16; Ap IV 44, 50). It comforts and encourages in the face of the terror of judgment, and such comfort and encouragement is itself regeneration, a new life (Ap IV 48). Rejoicing in the just judgment of God—in the forgiveness of sins through Christ—can come only through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and through his gifts, which is regeneration.

This understanding also excludes the slack presumption to sin, an attitude that would say that all is forgiven, so one need not be concerned with pursuing holy living. Such an attitude also is unbelief, for it denies that the judgment of God has restored a person to the holy community, to the holy body of Christ. “But if, while we seek to be justified by Christ, we ourselves also are found sinners, is therefore Christ

the minister of sin? God forbid. For if I build again the things which I destroyed, I make myself a transgressor" (Gal 2:17–18). Here Saint Paul is saying that when we recognize sin in ourselves even though Christ has forgiven us, this does not make Christ a "minister" of sin—that is, one who facilitates, encourages, or authorizes it. Such a presumptuous attitude toward sin is to build on what has been destroyed—that is, to build up sin again where it has actually, really, and truly been removed through propitiation. Presumption here is a lack of faith, because it approves and pursues again the evil that had been judged in Christ's offering.

Instead, through repentance, the Christian recognizes the mortification of sin that occurs in Christ, lamenting the sin that persists in one's temporal experience, yet also rejoicing in consolation that such sin truly is propitiated. "I through the law am dead to the law, that I might live unto God. I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me" (Gal 2:19–20). There is no rejoicing in sin; there is no toleration of the pleasure of sin; but there is a deep thanksgiving and rejoicing that sin has been taken away: "[T]he life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me. I do not frustrate the grace of God: for if righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain" (Gal 2:20–21). The life we live is neither one of legalism nor of presumption. Both legalism and presumption are unbelief—the former, because it seeks an alternative judgment to the judgment determined by God, the latter because it dismisses the judgment of God as mere words without propitiation and, if without propitiation, then without actually making righteous through death and regeneration and, if without actually making righteous, then simply as license to continue in sin that grace may abound.

V. A Sketch of the Method

In this brief treatment of Romans 3–4 and related passages, we see the importance of the content of terminology and their relation to each other. It is vital continuously to read and reflect upon Scripture to uphold the evangelical confession, especially as expressed in brief aphorisms or slogans. Without this vigilance, slogans can be co-opted and manipulated by heterodox teachers.

Finally, then, we can briefly sketch a method to this reading. Careful reading includes attention to vocabulary, syntax, and the organization of a text. Persistent, careful readers pay attention to the meaning of words in a language. "Meaning" includes the fundamental definition of the word as used in context but also connotation and figurative meaning as appropriate. Readers should not confuse contextual meaning and figurative language with amorphousness or shiftiness. Language can be difficult to understand. Context and assumptions may make meaning difficult to

discern, but this does not mean that meaning is fuzzy or subjective. It means that we should persevere in reading to understand more deeply the context, use, and figures of a text.

Meaning is determined also by syntax. Syntax has to do with sentence structure and logic: how words relate to each other. The logical relation of words helps discern the fundamental meaning of a word as it is used in context, as well as its possible connotative or figurative use. Syntax is most easily discerned through diagramming sentences or similar exercises. (The mature reader will not typically need to write out sentence diagrams but can use his understanding of diagramming to “parse” difficult sentences in his head.)

Textual organization, such as the placement of sentences, paragraphs, and larger sections in relation to each other, is the third main contributor to meaning. The unfolding of the story, account, or argument gives direction to a text, which significantly influences context and provides a framework for the larger purposes and themes of the text. Textual organization should not be confused with “narrative” interpretation. While narrative interpretation can be done well, when done poorly it devolves into selective reader impressions. Certain textual incidents, episodes, or rhetorical presentations strike the reader over others, leading the reader to construct themes out of such a selective reading. Reading that gives attention to all of the structural elements of a text, on the other hand, will recognize the comprehensive movement of the text and a full understanding of themes.

By paying attention to vocabulary, syntax, and textual structures, Christians of all ages and maturity can submit themselves to a careful and ongoing reading of the Bible. Similar reading habits can be used in reading other significant texts, such as the Lutheran Confessions and the church fathers. By returning to the Bible and other great texts with attention and care, Christians will continue to grow in their understanding of theology, be able to make a good confession of it, and also have a mental and heartfelt framework for acting in repentance, faith, and love.

VI. Conclusion

The promise of salvation has content: it depends on Christ’s ministry, work, merit, and propitiation. Without the biblical focus on Christ’s ministry, justification is abstracted either as character righteousness or as a forensic idea rather than reconciliation accomplished in propitiation and received through faith. Faith would further be confused as some kind of power source for regeneration, or the result of regeneration, rather than the actual, selfsame regenerative, consoling work of the Holy Spirit itself. The concept of grace, when isolated from Christ’s ministry and faith, can be misinterpreted as irresistible sovereignty, or as an infused spiritual

power to be exercised in order to achieve its full effect. Rather, we recognize that grace is primarily the reconciled favor of God toward men in view of Christ's ministry. This discussion shows that our slogans, such as "justification by grace through faith on account of Christ," express the meaning of Scripture, yet it is by continuous, deep reading of Scripture that our slogans are filled out, explained, and protected from drift, and that we ourselves are kept by the Holy Spirit from falling into error or condemnation.