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## Justification: Set Up Where It Ought Not to Be

David P. Scaer

The more significant the person, the greater the disagreements about the value of his life's work, and in the case of Jesus, his existence. From a religious perspective the three greats are Jesus, Paul, and Luther, and if by measure of the number of books written about them, Luther is surpassed only by Jesus, a position of honor that will be re-enforced in the five-hundred year Reformation celebration. At issue with Jesus is how much do we know about him or whether we know anything at all. Should the latter be the case, the creators of the Gospels created, in the incredibly short period of twenty to forty years, the most successful and complex hoax of all times. Should the Gospels prove to be a hoax, yes, even fiction as David Friedrich Strauss proposed in the nineteenth century and more recently by Robert M. Price, the third quest for the historical Jesus should immediately be aborted so that it does not shift into fourth gear, and our attention should be diverted to a quest for the historical conspirators who came up with the Jesus idea.<sup>1</sup> To reference Paul, if Jesus did not exist, we are of all men to be the most pitied (1 Cor 15:19). In comparison to Jesus, Luther (as does Paul) has a more secure place in history. With Luther we have the near certainty that he is securely entombed in the floor of the church behind the doors on which once hung the ninety-five theses—and that's debated too.

Lest we think the quest for the historical Jesus is of no value, a faith focused on the God who became incarnated in the man Jesus requires that we first know him in history—what Paul calls knowing Jesus after the flesh (2 Cor 5:16). Resurrection is subsequent to incarnation, but from an evidential point of view, Jesus' resurrection is the touchstone for the veracity of Christianity. Without the resurrection having a fixed place in history, we are caught between agnosticism and fideism. Basing the existence of Jesus on faith comports with the doctrine of justification by

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<sup>1</sup> James K. Beibly and Paul Rhodes Eddy, eds., *The Historical Jesus: Five Views* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009). The radical view is offered by Robert M. Price, "Jesus at the Vanishing Point," 55–83.

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faith so that the one question is easily confused with the other. Matters are not helped by heralding that justification is the doctrine by which church stands or falls, the one doctrine that serves and interprets all others. So with good reason one suspects that some who reference Luther find in his doctrine of justification by faith an excuse for not coming to terms with what place Jesus has in history. Such Luther research allows for a self-contained Reformation neo-orthodoxy, a Barthianism of sorts, that does not bother to come to terms about what we can know about Jesus.

At the other end of spectrum from any skepticism about Jesus is the common piety that finds security in the doctrine of justification by faith. Any doubts about the place of Jesus in history can be resolved by faith. Fideism is the universal cure-all for uncertainty. Those who fear examining the historical data from what might be uncovered can find support in Martin Kähler, who held that “faith does not rely on guarantees created by external authorities.”<sup>2</sup> In this case Luther’s doctrine of justification not only defines the believer’s relationship to God through Christ but replaces concerns about his historical existence. Justification is made to exist in a self-contained bubble so that scholars are relieved of coming to terms with the origins of Christianity in the man Jesus. Justification becomes the one-size-fits-all doctrine. Problematic with this perspective is that faith is made to feed upon itself in a continuous recycling, never having to touch the historical reality set in motion by God becoming man.

Those who see faith as determinative for the content and certainty of Christianity belong to the heritage of Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher, who saw Christianity springing from the heightened religious self-consciousness of Jesus transmitted through the community of his followers. In making justification by faith the controlling indispensable theological principle, Christianity is gutted. Hence the title of this essay, “Justification: Set Up Where It Ought Not to Be” (Mark 13:14). It might have just as easily carried the title “The Overuse of Justification in Biblical Interpretation, Theology and Preaching.” Bringing the past into the present, the approach popularized by Karl Barth,<sup>3</sup> relieves us of coming to terms with the past and allows for multiple and even contradictory options of who Jesus was. Attempting to cross Gotthold Lessing’s ditch, that

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<sup>2</sup> Carl Braaten, “Martin Kähler (1836–1912),” *Lutheran Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (Winter 2014): 411.

<sup>3</sup> Karl Barth, *Christian Dogmatics*, trans. and ed. G.W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1961), 1/1:143–162.

historical truth cannot be demonstrated,<sup>4</sup> leads to despair, so it is better to stand on the side of faith, content with the “Word,” and avoid looking down into the abyss.

A faith-based piety as the foundation for Christianity in not coming to terms with the past is now more likely to rely on Karl Barth, who substituted the proclaimed “Word” for past historical events. A theology of the “Word” that presents itself as a Reformation theology can be a cover for historical agnosticism, or at least it relieves us of having to determine what happened to Jesus. Diverse as the piety characterized by Schleiermacher’s theology of religious consciousness and Barth’s “Word” theology are, both share in the heritage of Immanuel Kant, in that we can never get closer to past events than the impressions left on the minds of those who claimed to be observers. With Kant we only know the noumena but not the phenomena. So we are left in the dilemma of never knowing what really happened or even if anything happened at all—what the Germans call *wie es eigentlich geschehen ist*. So we no longer have to wrestle with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as historical events in our theology and preaching. For those following Barth, faith no longer finds certainty in a something or a someone, like the person of Jesus, but in proclamation of the “Word,” in which the hearer finds himself justified, a position that is purported to make generous use of Luther’s theology of the Word.<sup>5</sup>

Paul ranks second in importance in the triumvirate of Jesus-Paul-Luther, but no scholar, at least in my reading, has ever questioned his existence, though Ephesians, Colossians, and the Pastoral Epistles are removed from his curriculum vitae and assigned to an anonymous first century Christian who took advantage of the apostle’s prestige and who arguably rivaled him as a theologian. In Paul’s willingness to die for Jesus, there exists a pathetic irony in giving his life for a man whose claim to fame by being raised from the dead is now seen beyond the grasp of historical certainty. But for the sake of argument, suppose that Jesus really existed. This would mean Jesus and Paul were contemporaries, or may be

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<sup>4</sup> Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, “On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power,” in *Lessing: Philosophical and Theological Writings*, trans. by H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 87.

<sup>5</sup> See for example Timothy J. Wengert, *Reading the Bible with Martin Luther* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013). In a sub-chapter entitled, “The Self-Authenticating Scripture,” Wengert argues that the Scripture “is God’s Word because ‘it does God to me.’ . . . Or, to put it another way, God’s Word makes believers in Christ out of us. When a word does not do that, no matter who the author may be, it is not God’s Word and has no—or only limited authority” (10).

even the same age. To take the argument further, there would be good reason to hold that Paul would have been in Jerusalem during the last week of Jesus' life. There Gamaliel groomed his prize pupil to be a Pharisee (Acts 5:34; 27:3). So if Paul did not confront Jesus at his trial, which is a plausible view, he engaged in intense study of who he was when Christians became temple nuisances.

"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (Acts 9:4) is interpreted as Paul's persecution of the church as Christ's body, even though this doctrine is not found in Luke or Acts, but if the words are taken literally—or as some would say, "literalistically"—he may have been a backbencher at the trial of Jesus. Here we fall into the horrors of anachronism, that if anyone should have had a stake in quests for the historical Jesus yielding positive results, it had to be Paul. If he had indiscriminately accepted the oral tradition that was in its birth throes in the mid 30s, that Jesus had been raised from the dead, without examining the evidences of the Jerusalem tomb, he was not the scholar he or others thought he was. If questioning whether Paul ever lived has never been a serious option, determining what his theology really was has in recent years captured scholarly imagination. The New Perspective argues that Paul is best understood as a mediator in breaking through the exclusivity of Jewish Christians in getting them to accept Gentile newcomers as equal partners in the covenant.<sup>6</sup> This debate has consequences for Luther research. If the New Perspective proves to be right, then Luther's definition of justification as one's accountability for sin before God and declaration of acquittal by the same God—what some Lutherans call "law" and "gospel"—is a misinterpretation of Paul and so the entire Reformation enterprise is called into question.

An equation mark cannot or should not be placed between how Paul and Luther each understood justification. Understanding Luther does not translate into understanding Paul. One cannot be superimposed upon the other. Paul, in his own words, was a Pharisee and a son of the Pharisees, and in his own mind he did religion better than others (Acts 26:5). In Reformation terms he performed works of supererogation. Had purgatory existed at his time, he would have been given a pass. His was a righteousness of the law. Now compare Paul's religious self-confidence with Luther's search for certainty, which was a factor in leading him to the

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<sup>6</sup> For a critique of recent reinterpretations of Paul's doctrine of justification, see Stephen Westerholm, *Justification Reconsidered: Rethinking a Paul Theme* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013). See also also Arland J. Hultgren, review of *Justification Reconsidered: Rethinking a Paul Theme*, by Stephen Westerholm, in *Lutheran Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (Autumn 2014): 358–359.

doctrine of justification by faith. Coming from opposite ends of the personality and theological spectrums—Paul’s overconfidence and Luther’s lack of it—each arrived at the same destination, that justification has to do with one’s standing before God, to be condemned by the law and acquitted by the gospel.

Justification is a matter of the first great commandment of fearing, loving, and trusting in God above all things, so Luther’s explanations of the First Commandment in the Large and Small Catechisms. Sanctification has to do with the second great commandment in how we deal with others, but its secondary position makes it no less necessary than the first (Matt 22:36–38). The New Perspective on Paul reverses the order and gives first place to the second great commandment requiring love for others, especially those who are racially, culturally, or ethnically different. Good relations between Jewish and Gentile Christians replaces the longstanding view that Paul’s concern was how individuals, by faith in Christ, are received by God. To be clear, the second great commandment, that of loving the neighbor, in what we call “sanctification,” derives its life from the first great commandment of faith in God, what we call “justification.” Sanctification is logically dependent on justification, but this does not mean that loving the neighbor is inferior to loving God—quite to the contrary! To express the matter in biblical terms, how can one love God whom one has not seen and hate one’s neighbor whom he has seen (1 John 4:20). Reformation beliefs have a stake in still-current scholarly studies. Should the historical quest for Jesus continue to give birth to uncertain and mixed results, Christianity would have to be reconstituted and of course this began in earnest with the Age of the Enlightenment. If the New Perspective on Paul trumps the traditional Reformation doctrine of justification by faith, the Reformation can be celebrated as a cultural or historical phenomenon in the West, but not as one that correctly understood Paul. It would also mean that even if Rome may not have entirely grasped Paul’s understanding of justification, its inclusion of an ethical component in justification places it closer to the heart of the apostle’s theology.

Here we rehearse our arguments. More fundamental to Christianity and so also for Lutheranism than anything else is securing a firm place in history for Jesus. Without this there is no incarnation, and without incarnation there is no resurrection, and without the resurrection justification by grace through faith is no more than a theological abstraction. Paul places makes our justification (Rom 4:25) and his apostleship as dependent on Jesus’ resurrection (1 Cor 15:8, 17–18). The one who is unfit to be called

an apostle witnessed the resurrection. In this trinity of resurrection, incarnation, and justification, to borrow a phrase from the Athanasian Creed, one is not before or after another, but as in the divine Trinity, in which one divine person depends on the others in a specific way, so justification depends on Jesus' resurrection, which in turn depends on the incarnation. Just as the place and function of each of the three divine persons cannot be shifted to another, so justification, resurrection, or incarnation each has its own order in the economy of salvation. Each is essential, but the function of one cannot be given to the other.

A shuffling or a reassignment of the functions of these core Christian teachings was at heart of the theology of the faculty majority at Concordia Seminary in their February 1974 walkout. Justification, the doctrine explicating one's standing before God, was assigned the role that in theology belongs to the resurrection as the historical foundation for Christianity. Resurrection, like other events, is one we can get our hands on, an event subject to historical critique in a way that justification is not. Incarnation is inaccessible to historical examination. However, the virgin birth of Jesus as the sign of the incarnation was to Mary a real event in her life, though only she knew that a male was not involved.<sup>7</sup> The presence of justification is verifiable not by historical critique as the resurrection is but by observation of the works that faith performs, an argument put forth by John the Baptist: faith produces visible works (Matt 3:8). This was essential to the preaching of Jesus as for example in the judgement of the sheep and the goats (Matt 25:31–46) and helps us to come to terms with James, who argues that faith is seen by its works (Jas 2:14–16).

Although the 1974 St. Louis seminary conflict might have appeared to some to be over biblical inerrancy, it was really over the negatives conclusions of the quests for the historical Jesus. Although most did not share these doubts and some seemed to be less than fully informed, they allowed those who did to continue as teachers of the church as long as they held to a doctrine of justification which claimed that by faith God justifies sinners. Luther's doctrine of justification by faith was the doctrine that unified both sides of the controversy and so in that moment, justification

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<sup>7</sup> For Wengert, "The fundamentals of the Christian faith, to use [the fundamentalists'] terms for it, are such things as the virgin birth, the bodily resurrection, the bodily resurrection, the substitutionary theory of the atonement, along with such doctrines as the Trinity and the two natures of Christ": *Reading the Bible with Martin Luther*, 9.



by faith was assigned the role that belongs to the resurrection of Jesus as the basis of Christianity.<sup>8</sup>

The position of the St. Louis seminary faculty majority in February 1974 was rooted in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment reinterpretation of miraculous events as ordinary ones or as never having happened at all. To save the day, Schleiermacher shifted the foundation of Christianity away from what was observable to the consciousness of the community of the followers of Jesus, a view that was given a Lutheran hue by the Erlangen theologians and strongly opposed by Francis Pieper, the Missouri Synod's premier theologian of the early twentieth century.<sup>9</sup> In the theology of the St. Louis faculty, justification by faith took the place of the Scriptures as the basis of the theological task. Pieper had provided a rarely recognized variant in that while insisting on belief in the entire Bible for salvation, justification by faith sufficed. Thus two principles stood side by side: the Bible determined what must be believed but only faith was required for justification. The inadequacy of this division was resolved in using the distinction of fundamental and non-fundamental doctrines. Fundamental doctrines were further subdivided into primary and secondary ones. In the last century, Rudolph Bultmann produced his own bifurcation. He affirmed an existential interpretation of justification by faith and at the same time he proposed a historically-agnostic method of demythologizing.<sup>10</sup> Both he and Paul Tillich defined justification as finding one's authentic existence.

An existential definition of faith hardly fit the classical Lutheran Reformation definition that saw a flesh-and-blood Jesus as the object of faith, but those who assented to the traditional view were in some cases not agreed on the role faith played in justification, a matter that came to the fore in American Lutheranism in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries' election controversy. On one side, the Missouri Synod held that election and justification were prior to faith. On the other side the Ohio Synod held that God elected to salvation those whom he knew would

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<sup>8</sup> Wengert holds to the same view. "To put it most radically, Luther and those who follow his approach prefer saying that the Hebrew Scriptures, like the New Testament, gain authority when they too support Christians in their faith—that is, in their trust of God in Christ. And do they ever do that!" *Reading the Bible with Martin Luther*, 12.

<sup>9</sup> Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 1 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 3–7.

<sup>10</sup> Bultmann's demythologizing was a variant of the eighteenth-century Rationalist view that Jesus and the apostles accommodated their teachings to common erroneous beliefs. For Bultmann this was done by anonymous early Christians.

come to faith, a position abbreviated by the Latin *intuitu fide*, that is, “in view of faith.” This view had similarities to ones held by Pietism, Fundamentalism, and now Evangelicalism, that faith is substance-like, almost a thing, which through spiritual exercise and prayer could be strengthened and increased.<sup>11</sup>

Neo-orthodoxy’s “Word” theology appears in those interpretations of Luther that locate the certainty of salvation not in the Scriptures but in the act of being justified by faith, an act which was understood as coming to terms with the preached or proclaimed word. With this, the history of Jesus is given a secondary role to the “Word” in action<sup>12</sup> and the Latin or Anselmic view of the atonement in which Christ stands in mankind’s place before God to be condemned fades. Both views, the one that holds to justification by faith apart from what can be known historically of Jesus and the other, that God justifies believers only after or because they come to faith, attribute to faith the defining role. As diverse as these views are, they locate the determinative theological moment in the believer’s faith, in which the entire theological reality is encapsulated and gives believers certainty.<sup>13</sup> Although in its original context of St. Louis in the year 1974, “gospel reductionism” referred to favoring proclamation over biblical history as the foundational theological principle, the phrase is applicable to any program that places justification within the moment that faith grasps the proclamation.

Ironically, the doctrine of justification, the doctrine on which the church stands or falls, is without an agreed-upon definition among Lutherans, so its function as a standard for theology and an outline for preaching has been compromised, though in practice this discrepancy is not recognized. Thus a typical Lutheran sermon is recognized in making

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<sup>11</sup> Its popularity among Lutherans is found in preferring those hymns in which the believer with his faith is placed in the center of the theological program.

<sup>12</sup> Oswald Bayer understands absolution, baptism, and the Lord’s Supper as the same kind of speech acts as preaching. “Twenty Questions on the Relevance of Luther for Today,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (Winter 2015): 441. Karl Barth, following Calvin, held that the workings and the effects of the word and the sacraments were the same. See David P. Scaer, *Baptism*, Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics 11 (St. Louis: The Luther Academy, 1999), 175. In this essay as in some of his other writings, Bayer does not explicate how the proclaimed word is rooted in the history of Jesus.

<sup>13</sup> During the presidency of the late Robert D. Preus, this seminary had to address what was understood as a denial of objective justification, that is, that there was no justification prior to the moment of when faith is engendered. The Lutheran World Federation that was established with great promise could not come to agreement on justification at its July 1963 Helsinki Convention.

its hearers aware of their moral inadequacy before God and concludes with the assurance that the gospel rectifies their miserable condition. Such law-gospel sermons work into the homiletical twenty minutes all the years between Luther's vow to St. Ann in being struck with divine terror in a thunderstorm to his discovery of his doctrine of justification by faith. Each sermon becomes the Reformation in a nutshell and achieves its purpose in the hearer's self-awareness that he has been accepted by God for Christ's sake. Such a sermon has met the Lutheran law-gospel paradigm and it can be preached without coming to terms with the history of Jesus or the atonement or, for that matter, the text which it intends to expound. In such law-gospel sermons, faith created by the preached or proclaimed "Word" takes on a life of its own and can be preached by both those who take the biblical history seriously and those who do not. Neo-orthodoxy is administered in the form of a Lutheran homiletical pill. Belief in the message is all that matters. So it was with the St. Louis faculty in 1974, who located justification in the preached "Word" apart from any prior, necessarily-held historical reality.

Gospel reductionism, the Missouri Synod's provincial version of neo-orthodoxy, relegated the historical reliability of biblically reported events to "adiaphora," the dogmatical term for what is expendable.<sup>14</sup> Proclamation of the gospel accomplishes its purpose in creating faith as the encounter with God quite apart from whether what the Gospels report actually ever happened. Since preaching or proclamation possesses an importance in itself, gospel reductionism might also be called "justification reductionism." Justification, quite apart from how it is defined, provides foundation, content, and purpose for the entire theological enterprise. Calling this method "gospel reductionism" gave the impression that the Lutheran law-and-gospel paradigm of preaching in condemning and rescuing the sinner remained in place. However, justification was given an

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<sup>14</sup> David P. Scaer, "The Law Gospel Debate in the Missouri Synod," *Springfielder* 36 (December 1972), 156-171; "The Law Gospel Debate in the Missouri Synod Continued" *Springfielder* 40 (September 1976), 107-118; Scott R. Murray, *Law, Life and Living God: The Third Use of the Law in Modern American Lutheranism* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002), 103-107. Brought forth as an example of how the method worked was the Old Testament prophet Jonah's encounter with a large fish. Tossing that account to the winds as little more than a fish story eliminated only two sides of one page in the Hebrew Bible and with thirty-eight books in the old canon, its loss would be negligible. Problematic was that Matthew and Luke have Jesus using Jonah as the point of comparison for his own resurrection. The thing by which another thing is compared has the greater value. Jonah was the whipping boy for putting the resurrection of Jesus up for grabs. Gospel reductionist proponents were less interested in Jonah than they were in the virgin birth of Jesus, his miracles, and the resurrection.

existential twist in that it was no longer what God first accomplished in the man Jesus by his death as atonement, but what was accomplished in the hearer by preaching. Now justification was seen as the hearer's own consciousness or awareness of his condition in being accepted by God. Preaching allowed the hearer to come to terms with his own existence.<sup>15</sup>

Placing faith in the moment of justification surfaced in the Missouri Synod less than two decades after the dust in St. Louis had settled. Justification followed faith and was dependent on it. Lutherans traditionally had spoken of universal or objective justification, in which God accepts all humanity in Christ, and of subjective justification as the individual appropriate of justification by faith. The new position held only to subjective justification. There was a prior redemption but no universal act of God by which he accepts all of humanity in Christ. This view resembled gospel reductionism and neo-orthodoxy in making faith in the proclamation primary. It differed from the Lutheran form of neo-orthodoxy in that it did not make the Bible as word of God dependent on the believing hearer. Since the hearer was not forgiven until he believed, justification was dependent on faith. This view is better understood as sanctification and resembles Roman Catholicism in that justification is understood as what God works in believers through baptism.<sup>16</sup>

Although the St. Louis faculty lobbied and received widespread support for its position from the guild of scholars, gospel reductionism was nevertheless a Lutheran idiosyncrasy developed by Rudolph Bultmann. On one hand it incorporated what purported to be Luther's doctrine of justification into the hermeneutical task, but on the other hand it allowed the demythologizing method of biblical interpretation. Little was left of the historical Jesus. Since then this particular method has fallen into disuse. Historical criticism, philosophy, and theology each has its own principles and so in an ideal world historical critical scholars should not be driven by ideology, but they are. By placing its understanding of justification at the center of the hermeneutical task, the St. Louis faculty was no different than others in introducing an external principle into the biblical task, but this is how the scholarly game is played. Consider the title of this recent publication: *An Introduction to Womanist Biblical Interpretation*. It purports to combine both African and feminine interpretations of the Bible.<sup>17</sup> In this

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<sup>15</sup> Pieper speaks of this as the *fides reflexa*, but holds that only *fides directa* is saving: *Christian Dogmatics* 3:444–445.

<sup>16</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1994), 481–483.

<sup>17</sup> Nyasha Junior, *Introduction to Womanist Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015).

approach the culture in which the Bible is read takes precedence over the culture in which it was written. In any event, according to this view, the culture of the author and his first readers may never be fully recovered and if it is, it is secondary in importance to how the reader now understands it. Therefore, whether it should be called historical criticism remains a question. Gospel reductionism's deceptively Lutheran appearance was the Trojan horse that opened the door for its reception into the Missouri Synod, where justification was hailed as the chief doctrine.<sup>18</sup> Justification was intended to serve Christology and not the other way around, but Luther's understanding of justification gave him reason to take exception to Hebrews, Revelation, and most famously to James.

Luther's writings are not "bible" for Lutherans, even in lower case, though in some cases it seems so. What he said about this or that book in his Prefaces to the New Testament<sup>19</sup> are at least the bluebook that is consulted for value, and his comments that "St. James' epistle is really an epistle of straw" have not escaped notice and have given reason for some to suggest that he was on cutting edge of historical criticism.<sup>20</sup> In deference to the Reformer, Lutheran commentators explain that since straw has a purpose, this is not as uncomplimentary as it looks; however with this sentence matters go from bad to worse. "Therefore St. James' epistle is really an epistle of straw, compared to these others, for it has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it."<sup>21</sup> By evaluating James with what he holds to be Paul's doctrine of justification, Luther makes Paul's epistles canonically determinative. Luther has replaced the authority of the apostles, in their being witnesses of the resurrection, with the doctrine of

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<sup>18</sup> See Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 2 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1951), 514: "Thus Christology serves merely as the substructure of the doctrine of justification." Lutheran theology was conceived in the caldron of the confrontation with Roman Catholics who allowed works into their understanding of justification, in how the believer stood before God; and so it became the pivotal organizing principle of the Augsburg Confession. Attributing justification to works diminished the work of Christ, so the confession argued.

<sup>19</sup> Martin Luther, "Prefaces to the New Testament" (1546 (1522)): vol. 35, pp. 395-397, in *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vols. 1-30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-76); vols. 31-55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957-86); vols. 56-82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009-), hereafter AE.

<sup>20</sup> Wengert uses Luther's comments on James to foster his own program of biblical interpretation and places it in his first chapter, "Authority," with the subtitle "Putting James in Its Place": *Reading the Bible with Martin Luther*, 1-21.

<sup>21</sup> Luther, "Prefaces to the New Testament," AE 35:362.

justification. Paul's epistles, 1 Peter, and 1 John met Luther's standards. Then he winnowed the true books down to Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians as "the true kernel and marrow of all the books."<sup>22</sup> Luther's preferences do not prevent him from adding this caveat that "in them you do not find many works and miracles of Christ described, but you do find depicted in masterly fashion how faith in Christ overcomes sin, death, and hell, and gives life, righteousness, and this salvation. This is the real nature of the gospel, as you have heard." Luther says he would rather do without the works of Christ than his words. Perhaps Luther is at his hyperbolic best, but should it not be the other way around, that the deeds of Christ through which God accomplished salvation take precedence in providing the substance to what is preached?

What Luther said could be put to good use and perhaps was by the proponents of gospel reductionism, who elevated preaching the gospel above the deeds of Christ, and who placed the latter on the back shelves of inconsequential *adiaphora*. This is what neo-orthodoxy was all about and still is when it appears in scholarly Luther research.

Luther's preference for John over the other three Gospels cannot escape notice. "So too, the epistles of St. Paul and St. John far surpass the other three gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke." These books "show you Christ and teach all that is necessary and salvatory for you to know, even if you were never to see or hear other books or doctrine."<sup>23</sup> Some scholars cite Luther's favoring one book over another in support of their own critical views, but rarely note that Luther's conclusions came from his own personal dilemma of being confronted with an avenging God, for which he found relief in a doctrine of justification articulated by Paul. Historical criticism, as it was conceived in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, reinterpreted miraculously reported events as natural ones or denied them altogether. These methods use different and opposing programs and so the expression "the historical critical method" would best be dropped, but it won't be. One method accepts only those things in the Bible that have correlations to other events and another approach holds only what is unique in the life of Jesus is authentic. In the past three centuries the criteria have shifted, as have the results, which have contradicted one

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<sup>22</sup> Luther, "Prefaces to the New Testament," AE 35:361–362.

<sup>23</sup> Luther, "Prefaces to the New Testament," AE 35:362. Luther's immodest preference for John is counterbalanced by his sermons on Matthew. Favoring one book over another is not unusual. Scholars can give good reason for their favored gospel, but unmatched is Matthew's preservation of the trinitarian formula or Luke's look into inner trinitarian function: "And behold, I send the promise of my Father" (Luke 24:49).

another, making claims to objectivity suspect. Speaking of Luther as a historical critic is inappropriate, but this does mean that his making justification the one determinative principle for interpretation is above critique?

Luther making Paul and John canonically normative stands at odds with the early church's near total dependence on Matthew with little use of Paul until the end of the second century.<sup>24</sup> Romans, Ephesians, Galatians—books Luther says holds “the true kernel and marrow of all the books”—have no reference to the Lord's Supper. John, the favored gospel, also has no reference to the Lord's Supper unless one concedes that John 6 offers a discourse on this sacrament, which Luther's gnesio-followers are unlikely to do. None of his favored books provides the Lord's Prayer or the baptismal formula. Cause for the alleged biblical lack of clarity in any book resides not in the Spirit-inspired writer but in the hearers who at the first hearing often seemed not to have gotten things straight. Misunderstandings are not without a purpose. Without them 2 Corinthians, 2 Thessalonians, and 2 Peter may have never seen the light of day. Nor would our sermons.

The inadequacies that Luther finds in James should not go unanswered. Here they are: 1. James disagrees with Paul and the rest of the Scripture on justification. 2. James speaks of a general faith in God, not faith in Christ specifically. 3. James does not teach or mention the suffering and resurrection of Christ, nor does he mention the Holy Spirit. 4. James knows only the law, which, Luther concedes, he preaches vigorously. 5. James throws things together chaotically. 6. James calls the law “the law of liberty.”<sup>25</sup> Basic to Luther's critique of James is making Paul canonically determinative,<sup>26</sup> but had he applied the same measuring rod to the teaching of Jesus, he may have had to exclude most of it, as he did James. Take, for example, the last judgment scene where eternal bliss is awarded to those who tended to the hungry, thirsty, homeless, poorly clothed, sick, and imprisoned brothers of Jesus (Matt 25:36–37). This parallels James' concerns about Christians who favored the rich in the congregation and ignored the poor. By this they dishonored Jesus, who is the poorest of men (Jas 2:3–6). James, like Jesus, was speaking not in Pauline terms of how

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<sup>24</sup> See Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I–XII*, The Anchor Bible 29 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1985), LXXX–LXXXVI.

<sup>25</sup> See Luther, “Preface to the Epistles of St. James and St. Jude” (1546 (1522)), AE 35:395–397.

<sup>26</sup> Wengert, *Reading the Bible with Martin Luther*, 1–21.

believers find the certainty of their own salvation in Jesus, but eschatologically in terms of how God and others determine that faith is present.<sup>27</sup> Forensic justification describes the Pauline perspective that on account of Christ believers in him are declared righteous, but forensic justification can also describe the last step in the legal process of being sentenced to either eternal bliss or damnation on the last day. James provides two examples of forensic justification in this sense: Abraham sacrificing his son and Rahab providing refuge for the spies. They are recognized as being justified primarily by what they did and not only by what they confessed. At issue here is not how these two Old Testament figures knew they were justified, but how others know that they were justified. This we know by what they did. By putting his son's life at risk, Abraham was risking the promise God gave him that his descendants would be as plentiful as the stars of the heavens. Rahab risked her own life. Their faith reached completion not in the garden variety of good works that belong to Christian vocation or the silly good works of the pope, like walking through the front doors of cathedrals to merit a half-century of indulgences. Their works risked life and limb and were like the works of Christ who sacrificed his life for others. In these self-sacrificial works Christ was working and they were recognized as justified. Had Luther read James in the light of how justification was presented in the synoptic gospels, he may have seen things differently. Should it be any consolation, while Luther subjects Jesus to Pauline standards and fails, Roman Catholics in allowing works a place of the justification of the believer before God reverse the order, subordinating Paul's doctrine of justification to their misunderstanding of James.

Now to the specifics of Luther's concerns, of which the first is that James "only speaks of general faith in God."<sup>28</sup> This flies right in the face of James 2:1: "My brethren, show no partiality as you hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory" and by extension James 1:1, where Jesus is called "Lord" and "God," in terms matching the confession of Thomas. Next, Luther says James does not contain a narrative of Christ's suffering. For that matter neither does Paul, as Luther concedes, who does not go much more beyond the bare-bones creedal outline that Christ died and rose. James resembles the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7) in presenting Christ's suffering and that of the church as one thing. For example, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake" (Matt 5:10) bears a resemblance to "Blessed is the man who endures trial,

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. the explanation of Jas 2:24 in Ap IV 244-253 (III 123-132).

<sup>28</sup> Luther, "Preface to James and Jude," AE 35:396.



for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life which God has promised to those who love him" (Jas 1:12). The accusation that James preaches only the law suggests that perhaps Luther did not recognize that such statements as the promise of a crown of life (Jas 1:12) are as much gospel as Revelation 2:10. God's promise to hear prayer offered in faith (Jas 5:15) is a passage that has an uncanny resemblance to Matthew 21:22: "whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith." Since James speaks of dead faith, the word "faith" by itself is living. Demons have a lively faith fully aware of what is in store for them. For Luther to speak of the disorderly style of another writer is ironic. For the record, James takes up one topic at a time and spares us the agony of transitional sentences. Finally, in Luther's taking exception to James speaking of the law as giving liberty (Jas 1:25), he might have censured Paul for speaking of "law of the Spirit of life" (Rom 8:2). In both cases Paul and James are using the word as reference to the gospel. For Paul the law that gives life is the gospel, as it is for James, for whom the law that gives liberty is the gospel. In James' phrase, "perfect law of liberty" (Jas 2:12), he is speaking primarily not of law without moral imperfection, but of the law reaching its goal in what Christ did. This law, namely the gospel, frees the Christian to do good works. Luther in his *Freedom of the Christian Man* could have taken his cue from James, but of course he did not. Exaggeration serves to make the point and so this may explain Luther saying, "Again, whatever preaches Christ would be apostolic, even if Judas, Annas, Pilate, and Herod were doing it." This might apply to Caiaphas saying it is expedient for one man to die for the people (John 11:50), but he did not know what he was saying. James did. Luther had played the Pauline justification card against James.

The title for this essay is taken from Mark 13:14. "But when you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains," a passage for which there is no agreed interpretation. Whatever the desolating sacrilege was, it was so horrid that one should get out of town right away. Putting aside at least five other interpretations,<sup>29</sup> I favor the view

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<sup>29</sup> The options are: 1. Paul's man of lawlessness, i.e., the end-time antichrist. 2. The erection of a statue of Jupiter after the destruction of Jerusalem, where once the temple stood. 3. The aborted attempt of the Emperor Caligula to set up his own statue in the temple precincts around 40 AD. 4. The destruction of Jerusalem. 5. Bringing the Roman military standards into the temple before Jerusalem's destruction. Three things are clear: First, those who see it are to head for the hills. Second, whatever and wherever it is, it does not belong there. Third, the one reading the sacred text in the church service should take into account that he is reading something of extraordinary importance.

that in the abominable ugliness of Golgotha God is manifesting himself as the God of love. Here is the last place anyone would expect to find a merciful God. By inserting the rubric, "let the reader understand," Matthew and Mark alert the lector that he is about to speak about the most incomprehensible mystery of all time.

In this essay the phrase "where it does not belong" does not refer to a historical event, but to the introduction of the doctrine of justification as a theological principle where it does not belong, as Luther did in James. We do not have the wherewithal to tackle Hebrews 6:5–6, where Luther could not come to terms with the statement that those who have fallen from the faith have no chance of returning. Jesus seems to have spoken similarly of Judas (Matt 26:24). In facing alleged problems, it might be the wiser course of action to take the writer on his own terms rather than applying the Pauline measuring stick. Then there is the matter of whether justification by faith—what Lutherans also call the law and gospel principle—is the only homiletical principle, in such a way that each sermon begins with condemning the hearer of real or fictive transgressions and concludes with a divine pardon. Coming to mind is a sermon on the servant who acquired such an enormous debt that he could have never repaid it in real time. To fit the law-gospel paradigm the sermon concluded that God forgives our inability or refusal to forgive others, a conclusion that flies diametrically contrary to intentions of the parable and Jesus' own interpretation of it (Matt 18:23–35), as well as to the Lord's Prayer (Matt 6:12, 14–15). For Lutherans, forensic justification means God's declaring the sinner free from sin; however, the word "forensic" applies to any step in the judicial process including imposition of the sentence and being taken to prison. This process Jesus outlines in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:25). One biblical writer should not be made to march to the tune of another, and Jesus (like James) should not be made to sway to the Pauline rhythm. Forty-three years have passed since the Concordia Seminary faculty majority elevated the doctrine of justification to the determinative role of what the church confesses. To reference Mark 13:14, justification was "set up where it ought not to be." In more recent disguise this has found support in the allegation that for Luther all that mattered was the faith that the "Word" created, a position hard to distinguish from gospel reduc-

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None of these proposals for identifying the abomination of desolation fit, since with the resurrection of Jesus, Jerusalem and its temple lost their importance for Christians. Years before Jerusalem was destroyed by the Roman armies, its temple had long faded from their sight. They had heard and believed in the one who said that if "this temple" were destroyed, in three days he would raise it up (Mark 14:58; 15:29).

tionism. The word or the gospel matters not because of itself, but because its origin is in an historical *something* that God accomplished in the incarnation and made accessible to us in the virgin birth, crucifixion, burial, and resurrection of the man Jesus Christ. In that word the past history of Jesus Christ is brought into the present, but that history remains intact and becomes the standard for world judgment. That is a wider understanding of what forensic justification should be and is. The honor of the standard of faith, the *norma normans*, will forever belong to the apostles as witnesses of the resurrection, who saw and touched the word of life (1 John 1:10) and had dinner with him.

