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## Lutheran Clichés as Theological Substitutes

David P. Scaer

For some time I wrestled over whether this paper should be called “Lutheran Clichés as Theological Substitutes” or “Lutheran Distinctives as Theological Substitutes. This topic came to mind from attending meetings and hearing phrases that often appeared to be little more than a rehearsing of clichés pretending to be theology. Clichés have value. Use the proper one and membership in the guild is assured. It starts at the seminary as students take over the language of their instructors without really knowing what it means.

Like Jesus, the church has both divine and human natures. We believe in the church, as the creed says. Its divine origin and essence are revealed, not seen. A church’s human side can be seen in its congregations, districts, and synods, which can be analyzed. One congregation or synod is not like another. Each has its own personality. A pastor leaving his first assignment for another soon learns that each congregation has its own DNA. A church’s boundaries are set by commonly held beliefs, but its external character is shaped by family ties, ethnicity, similar vocations, geography, and a shared history. Thus, a church can be defined by its culture, that is, sociologically. About this Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher had something to say.<sup>1</sup> His definition may skirt the biblical understanding, but it does comport with the reality in which pastor and people confront each other. A community church’s membership is determined more by place of residence than by faith, but even churches with confessions are in some sense community churches.

Any group can be recognized by the words and phrases frequently used by its members. A common discourse makes a group cohesive and intentionally or unintentionally serves as a barrier to nonmembers. So congregations and synods are bound together by a common language or discourse that serves as their set of distinctives. Entrance into the commu-

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H.R. Mackintosh and J.S. Stewart, 2 vols. (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1963), 676–687.

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nity requires knowledge of the discourse. These observations are hardly profound and are as true for informal gatherings of retirees gathering for morning coffee, for example, as they are for professional associations of architects, physicians, attorneys, or clergy. Each guild has its distinctive discourse that is often as instinctive as it is cognitive. Terms can be used without attention to precise meaning. Certain phrases sound good, simply because they have been heard so often.

A Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) pastor from northeastern Indiana claims that many LCMS congregations are not that distinct from congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA).<sup>2</sup> While this observation is general enough to avoid serious challenge, a congregation-by-congregation survey might show that just the opposite is true. Though congregations in each synod may use the terms “justification” and “the priesthood of all believers” in their discourses, substituting gender neutral language in speaking of God and human beings has substantially altered the discourse in the ELCA so that congregations of one synod can be recognized as increasingly different from the other. Pastors in their persons are as much a part of community discourse as are the words they speak, perhaps more so. Thus, women clergy presiding at the altar and standing in the pulpit make visible the different discourses separating ELCA and LCMS congregations. Discourses that take place at an ELCA convention call for social justice, while increasingly those at an LCMS convention call for doctrinal unity.

One purpose in establishing any group is assuring unity of discourse, so that its members say the same thing. This is also true of political action groups. Someone calling for gun control would probably no longer be welcome in the National Rifle Association. That said, within the larger communities of discourses there are interest groups, each with its distinctive discourse. They do not represent opposing theologies but show how a group works towards what each considers the perfection of the church. Discourses at gatherings of individuals associated with *Gottesdienst*, Lutheran Concerns Association, the Association of Confessing Evangelical Lutheran Congregations, and the Pastoral Leadership Institute are not interchangeable. Pastors and laity will gravitate to communities where the discourse is familiar. Dissatisfaction with discourse in the ELCA was a

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<sup>2</sup> “Matthew Becker Says That Many LCMS Congregations Look, Feel and Sound Like Many ELCA Congregations,” *Christian News* 51 (November 25, 2013): 15. This was taken from the ALPB Forum blog of November 13, 2013.

reason for the formation of the North American Lutheran Church (NALC), which is still forming its own distinct discourse.<sup>3</sup>

Going from one discourse group to another presents its own problems. Non-Lutherans joining our congregations will be at a loss for a time as to what is happening in our services, but this is also the case in joining any community. Catechesis is nothing else than familiarization with the community discourse. Leaving one church for another requires commitment to a different belief system, the creedal or confessional aspect, but it also requires adjustment to the discourse of the new community, its cultural side. Lutherans converting to Catholicism may still think in Lutheran terms. Those brought up as Baptists and Methodists often do not get the hang of what being Lutheran means. Non-Jews who convert to Judaism are never really full members of that community. One is born a Jew, and the same holds true for Roman Catholics. Membership in religious communities is based not only on beliefs but also on a cultural substructure acquired through upbringing in the community. Old habits die slowly, if they die at all. Conversions may never be total. Every group has its own linguistic shorthand. Newly enrolled seminary students are often at sea for the first two terms until they familiarize themselves with the community discourse. Single words and short phrases substitute for fully developed concepts. For example, the Latin *una sancta* grammatically might mean a holy woman, but in its everyday use in theology it is shorthand for the church. Two-source and two-document theories of the origins of the Gospels are familiar to New Testament scholars but perhaps not even to those specializing in other areas of theology. Without knowing a community's shorthand, one is hard-pressed to know fully what is going on.

Defined discourse is not unique to Christianity. Masons are held together as a community by a discourse of secretive codes designed to keep nonmembers at bay. This is their form of closed communion. Pastors leaving one church tradition for another because of doctrinal reasons soon realize that their new affiliation is held together not only by common beliefs but by a distinctive discourse that is at first strange to them. Clergy leaving the LCMS in the 1970s, especially the older ones, were never really at home in the ELCA. By including the words "in exile" in naming their theological institution, "Christ Seminary in Exile" (abbreviated Seminex), the St. Louis seminary faculty majority saw themselves in exile from the

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Ullring, "Who speaks for you?," *Lutheran Core Connection* (December 2013): 1-3.

mother church, hoping for a return to Zion. Those who switch their memberships between congregations of the LCMS and the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod may not have anticipated that the members of these two conservative Lutheran bodies think differently. Members of the newly formed NALC may have separated themselves from the ELCA, but similarities remain. First loves are not forgotten. Even when community bonds are irreparably dissolved, the exiles still hope to pray next year in Jerusalem. Knives detaching the cultural umbilical cords rarely cut cleanly.

Hasidic Jews and the Amish are monolithic in discourse and appearance. The LCMS with its commitment to the Book of Concord and a shared history rooted in the Wilhem Löhe colonies in Michigan and Martin Stephan's Perry County experiment in Missouri is, in comparison to most Protestant groups, monolithic. Outsiders have a general idea that we are conservative, and members of one congregation are easily assimilated into another. Half a century or so ago, the LCMS was even closer to monolithic perfection, but for the most part we still are of one mind. In contrast, the ELCA, with diverse origins in multiple synods, some going back to the colonial period, possesses a built-in tolerance for diversity in its discourse. This diversity allowed for a less acrimonious parting of the ways in the formation of the NALC than what the LCMS experienced in the 1970s. A reverse action took place when LCMS members helped form the ELCA. Dissidents detached themselves from the LCMS discourse, but they carried with them the style of that LCMS discourse in how they imposed their agenda on the new church. They remained Missourians not in what they believed but in the intensity of that belief.

In spite of differences from one group to another within the LCMS, the overarching discourse holding us together remains similar from congregation to congregation. In hearing certain doctrinal expressions in our theology and sermons, we assure ourselves we are in the right community; common discourse necessary for the unity of community, however, does not come without its drawbacks. Through repetition, the chief determinative distinctives within the common discourse morph into clichés whose meaning is assumed. Clichés, or what we call Lutheran distinctives, take on a sacred character with diplomatic immunity from analysis. An all-time favorite is the universal priesthood of believers that is substituted for the phrase "royal priesthood," which in 1 Peter 2:9 refers to the divine election of the church but is widely understood as a principle of congregational organization. Holding that some passages of the Bible are clearer than others, the *sedes doctrinae* is cliché and stands at odds with Luther who held that all Scriptures were clear. Arguably cliché is the

Reformation principle *sola scriptura*. Clichés come and go. Now in vogue is “first-article Christianity,” whose meaning is more often assumed than defined. Should it be defined, it would be hardly distinguishable from conservative eighteenth-century Unitarianism. Other clichés are “foretaste of the feast to come,” the “word of promise,” and “go in peace and serve the Lord.”

Code words in a discourse serve as passwords for entrance into the community, even when they are not understood. After the controversies of the 1970s, such words as inspiration and inerrancy moved to the top of the list marking one as a conservative. Use the words and one gained entry into the community ascendant at that time, or so, at least, one colloquy candidate thought. To pass, the applicant answered every question with the word inerrancy, even when the questions had nothing to do with the Bible. This is an extreme example of a community’s cliché detached not only from meaning but also the proper theological context. In most cases, code words or clichés surface in the appropriate environment but may still suffer from lack of meaning. Frequent repetition of key words and phrases in a community’s discourse erodes meaning, and a community’s distinctives devolve into clichés. Some distinctives can be negative, like expressing one’s opposition to the higher critical method, even though one such method does not exist. At best it is an umbrella term for acceptable and unacceptable methods of biblical interpretation, but it is good to be against it.

For some time, I have toyed with idea of gathering clichés frequently used at church gatherings and publishing them for the benefit of those desiring to be more deeply involved in the community we call the LCMS. Their use would also help for advancement in the ranks. This is hardly a new idea. About a half century ago, a Methodist clergyman with tongue in cheek wrote *How to Become a Bishop without Being Religious*.<sup>4</sup> It was once on the reading lists distributed by my colleague John T. Pless and recommended with good purpose. What passes as religious talk or theology is often little more than finding the right cliché. A reminder to pursue this compiling of LCMS clichés came with the publication of *The Tyranny of Clichés*, written by *New York Times* best-selling author Jonah Goldberg.<sup>5</sup> Politicians thrive on such clichés as social justice, environmental concerns, political correctness, and fairness. Their meanings are assumed but not

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<sup>4</sup> Charles Merrill Smith, *How to Become a Bishop without Being Religious* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965).

<sup>5</sup> Jonah Goldberg, “The Tyranny of Clichés: What Does ‘Social Justice’ Mean?” *National Review* 64 (May 14, 2012): 30–32.

defined and, when defined, spawn several definitions. Asking about the meaning of a cliché exposes one as a neophyte.

Clichés, nevertheless, are not without their benefit. They provide the raw data for the discourse on which communities are built and the fuel for programs, be they political, corporate, or churchly. In his lectures for his course on Lutheranism in America, Concordia Theological Seminary president Lawrence R. Rast Jr. rehearses some past LCMS programs that promised to set the world on fire. I wonder how many remember the synod evangelism program “Each One Reach One” and whether anyone knows what it meant or whether it worked. Meanings of clichés acquired through etymology are often not only wrong but annoying. You have heard that “synod” means walking together. No, it doesn’t. It means coming together, an assembly. Left unsaid is that the one telling us this contrived meaning wants us to march to his drumbeat. Through repetition, clichés take on a life of their own and, should they survive, become sacred. Like a geometric theorem, the truthfulness of a cliché rests in itself and is immune from analysis. In dogmatics this is called *autopistia*, a proposition or belief that needs no analysis because it is true in itself, at least until someone tells the emperor to look around for his clothes.

C. S. Mann, author of a previous edition of the Anchor Bible Commentary on Mark and a one-time speaker at the Concordia Theological Seminary symposium, once gave me a type-written paper entitled “A Theological Firestorm.” Lost for several years, it surfaced last spring in the storage boxes in the garage, and its discovery was welcomed with great joy. Described on the tattered paper—now photocopied for safe keeping—was the description of a fictitious meeting of representatives of various religions that was disrupted by a fire. The reaction by each group reflected its core self-understanding. For the Christian Scientists the fire was an illusion. Fundamentalists saw the fire as the wrath of God. Roman Catholics passed the collection basket for a rebuilding campaign. Congregationalists said, “Every man for himself.” Methodists pondered the fire for its implications for the blessed assurance. The association of women clergy asked if the fire was gender neutral. Baptists were heard asking where the water was, and “the Episcopalians formed a procession and walked out singing a suitably lugubrious hymn.” “The Lutherans decided that the fire was against either a) law, or b) the Gospel; and was in any event unlawful.”

As trivial as this story is, it pinpoints what each group holds as essential, and this determines the character of that group’s discourse. What Lutherans call the chief doctrine, i.e., justification, or as it is also called, the



law and the gospel, defines the community discourse in regard to biblical interpretation and preaching and provides the standard for evaluating other doctrines. Attempts to understand the words of Jesus as eucharistic, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you” (John 6:53), are refuted because only faith and not the Lord’s Supper is required for salvation. Thus, an entire chapter that speaks of eating and drinking flesh and blood must be about faith, so Luther argued.

Not only is law and gospel the standard for interpreting the Bible, but it is used as an outline for preaching. This was recently the case with four students in a preaching competition. Each was given a pericope from a different Gospel, but each sermon followed the outline of the law first, followed by the gospel. In hearing that the conclusion for the second sermon was identical to the first, the listener knew what to expect in the remaining two. In each case, the Lutheran distinctive of law and gospel took precedence over what each evangelist might have had in mind. It would be difficult to see how the law-gospel paradigm was a factor in how the evangelists composed their Gospels. Mark’s ending of the women running from the tomb afraid hardly looks like gospel, at least according to the dogmatic definition. If there is a unifying principle, that principle is Christ, but each Gospel is unique in format, content, theological perspective, and conclusion. Law and gospel is not meant to be considered as a doctrine among others; rather, it shows how God works in the individual.<sup>6</sup> It is neither a literary device nor a way of ranking the importance of doctrines.

Consider the case of the St. Louis faculty majority who in 1971 affirmed justification but were not able to commit to the historical character of the virgin birth and the resurrection.<sup>7</sup> With its affirmation of justification, the Fact Finding Committee wrote:

We praise and thank God that we can report that our church has been spared many of the theological aberrations that plague Christendom today. The Fact Finding Committee found no evidence that any professor at the seminary teaches false doctrine concerning such great

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<sup>6</sup> See Hans-Peter Grosshans, “Lutheran Hermeneutics: An Outline,” in *Transformative Reading of the Gospel of John*, ed. Kenneth Mtata (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2012), 23–46, esp. 36.

<sup>7</sup> Non-Lutherans are also aware of our dependency on law and gospel. In meetings with the late Carl F.H. Henry and Kenneth Kantzer, the great Evangelical theologians of the last century, I was struck by how much they knew about law and gospel as the heart of Lutheran theology.

doctrines as the Trinity, the deity of Christ, justification by faith, or the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, etc.<sup>8</sup>

In this sensitive situation, the committee had to be as generous as possible, but the report gives the impression, though it might not have been its intention, that the doctrines of the Trinity, the deity of Christ, and justification by faith can be held apart from affirming the historicity of Jesus, including the virgin birth, his miracles, and his resurrection. This raises the question whether the doctrine of justification should have precedence as the chief doctrine over the historical character of Jesus' incarnation, miracles, resurrection, or other events in his life. A church, even a Lutheran one, can survive as Christian with a false or inadequate definition of justification or no definition at all, but it cannot be the church if the historical character of Jesus and especially his resurrection are made optional. At least this is what Paul thought. Without the resurrection the Corinthians would still be in their sins (1 Cor 15:13-17). Resurrection was the doctrine on which justification depended. It was the prior doctrine and not the other way around. Justification is the goal and purpose of preaching and theology, not its beginning. If justification did not require belief in the resurrection of Jesus, then for some the gospel's freeing from the law became an argument for the ordination of women (Gal 3:23-29). In these two cases the chief doctrine became the only one.

The importance of law and gospel for the NALC was seen in its August 2012 convention, at which non-Lutheran and Lutheran theologians lectured on the topic.<sup>9</sup> Since non-Lutherans do not operate with this distinctive, reports that this multi-denominational approach was less than fully successful were not surprising. Leave Lutherans to themselves and the discussion fares no better. Sarah Hinlicky Wilson begins her essay "Law and Gospel (With a Little Help from St. John)" with what she calls "five typical misreadings of law and gospel across Lutheran history."<sup>10</sup> Add to this several competing definitions of justification in the LCMS and the every-five-year international Luther conference debates on how the reformer understood justification. Here is the irony: the distinctive

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<sup>8</sup> Paul A. Zimmerman, *A Seminary in Crisis: The Inside Story of the Preus Fact Finding Committee* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007), 225.

<sup>9</sup> These essays were published in *Preaching and Teaching the Law and the Gospel of God*, ed. Carl Braaten (Dehli, NY: American Lutheran Publicity Books, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> Sarah Hinlicky Wilson, "Law and Gospel (With a Little Help from St. John)," in *You Have the Words of Eternal Life: Transformative Readings of the Gospel of John from a Lutheran Perspective*, ed. Kenneth Mtata (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2012), 84-92, esp. 85.

determining the character of Lutheran discourse has no one meaning among those who insist on it, but it remains the one distinctive that holds Lutherans together. Cliché triumphs over substance, culture over doctrine.<sup>11</sup>

Justification was for Luther the standard not only in dispensing a eucharistic understanding of John but also in determining the worth of the biblical books. Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, 1 Peter, and the Gospel and first epistle of John formed his inner canon. Nevertheless, this did not deter him from preaching on Sundays from the appointed Gospels, of which Matthew and Luke had the lion's share. For his sermons he did not resort to the epistles that articulated for him and for Lutherans after him justification as the chief doctrine. Here is a conundrum. If we hold to the now widely-held scholarly view that the Gospels were written after the epistles, this raises the question of why Paul's doctrine of justification is not spelled out in the Gospels, or at least had little or no influence on them. If the reverse is true, that one or more of the Gospels were written first before the epistles, then the doctrine of justification was Paul's reflection on the narrative of the life and death of Jesus.<sup>12</sup> Paul came to his doctrine of justification in his conflict with the Judaizers in Galatia, and then towards the end of his life he wrote his magnum opus on justification in his letter to the Romans.

Paul and Luther were alike in that their doctrines of justification came from their personal experiences (though they were different). What Paul said about justification came from his reflection on how he had persecuted the church (Gal 1:23). Luther's articulation sprang from an intense guilt of not fulfilling the law. For each, justification was a solution to a dilemma, but Paul's authority to formulate this doctrine came from his being made

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<sup>11</sup> Justification was defined as the chief doctrine by Lutherans in the Reformation in their conflict with the papacy and, after the first article, was the subject of the remaining twenty-seven of the Augsburg Confession. This doctrine is what Lutherans are all about, but ironically it has become a doctrine over which Lutherans cannot agree among themselves. Disagreements surfaced even during Luther's lifetime and were resolved by the Formula of Concord, but that was not the end of it. At its 1963 Helsinki convention, the Lutheran World Federation could not come to an agreement on justification. Lutherans and Roman Catholics have disagreed more over justification than any other doctrine, so working to overcome age old differences was welcomed. However, the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (1999) became a cause of further dissension among Lutherans and dissatisfaction among Catholics.

<sup>12</sup> This was Luther's view. See Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Muehlenberg and Fortress, and St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-1986), 35:118 (hereafter AE).

an apostle by God and Jesus whom God raised from the dead (Gal 1:1). Narrative about the historical event precedes justification and not the other way around, and so justification follows resurrection. This is spelled out in 1 Corinthians 15:14, "If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain." Paul's hearers were justified not when they learned of the doctrine of justification but when they heard and believed about Christ's death for sins and resurrection.<sup>13</sup> From my experience, Lutheran pastors find it hard to resist the temptation to superimpose Paul's doctrine of justification on the content and outline of the sermons based on the gospels. Attempts to find Paul's doctrine of justification in the gospels are unconvincing. Offered as one example is the account of the tax collector who returns to his home justified (Luke 18:10-14).<sup>14</sup> Rather than Jesus explaining how God justifies through faith, he directs the hearers to the self-degrading posture of the tax collector who, in asking God for mercy, shows he is justified.<sup>15</sup> While the conclusion of the account, "for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted," shows how the law destroyed the tax collector's self-esteem and how he was accepted or justified by God, at a deeper level the words describe Christ's humiliation in being accused by the law and his being rescued by God through his resurrection from the dead. Law and gospel in the life of the Christian correspond to Christ's humiliation and exaltation. Christology is the prior reality and justification is the subsequent one. Christology is the foundation and content of preaching and justification the result. Letting justification be detached from the historical component in Christology allowed the Fact Finding Committee to commend the St. Louis faculty majority for holding to justification in spite of their allowing doubts about the virgin birth and resurrection. Rather than seeing the Antichrist as the denier of justification, the term is better applied

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<sup>13</sup> Had Paul's opponents in Galatia not attributed salvation to works of the law, he may not have articulated justification then, but it would have happened sooner or later. By nature man takes credit for who he is and what he does. Works righteousness adheres to our existence, so this doctrine would have to be spelled out. But for both Paul and Luther, circumstances in their lives were the cause for their articulation.

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of the different perspectives on justification, see David Morlan, "Luke and Paul on Repentance," in *Paul and the Gospels: Christologies, Conflicts and Convergences*, ed. Michael F. Bird and Joel Willitts (New York: T & T Clark, 2011), 114-145.

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of how this parable can be considered forensically, see Arthur A. Just Jr., *Luke: 9:51-24:53*, Concordia Commentary (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1997), 684-685. Just correctly understands the passive form *δεδικαιωμένος* as God who justifies, but whether this can be extended to incorporate the Pauline sense of "hav[ing] been declared righteous" is another matter.

to those theologians who since the Enlightenment “do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh” (2 John 7).

Unquestionably, Lutheran distinctives are rooted in the books Luther favored. He writes,

Therefore John’s Gospel is the one, fine, true, and chief gospel, and is far, far to be preferred over the other three and placed high above them. So too, the epistles of St. Paul and St. Peter far surpass the other three gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In a word St. John’s Gospel and his first epistle, St. Paul’s epistles, especially Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians, and St. Peter’s first epistle are the books that show you Christ and teach you all that is necessary and salvatory for you to know, even if you were never to see or hear any other book or doctrine.<sup>16</sup>

Part of the equation is his view of the Gospels:

Thus the gospel is and should be nothing less than a chronicle, a story, a narrative about Christ, telling us who he is, what he did, said, and suffered—a subject which one describes briefly, another more fully, one this way, another that way.<sup>17</sup>

Luther set the terms for hermeneutics with the principle that Scripture is its own interpreter, *scriptura sui ipsius interpres*, but with James the interpreting Scripture was Paul, and so Luther concluded that “nothing of the nature of the gospel is in [James].”<sup>18</sup> Had Luther measured James not by Paul but the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, he might have come to a different conclusion. Maybe not. In judging James, Luther used Reformation principles, which are themselves clichés, and *sola fide* took precedence over *sola scriptura*. Justification had become not only a homiletical principle but a hermeneutical one in interpreting the Bible.

It was not that Jesus had nothing to say about forensic justification. His perspective, however, was eschatological, with believers appearing before him as the judge, who in hearing an account of their works would pronounce the verdict. Jesus entered his ministry as this judge. At least this is how John the Baptist described him, holding a winnowing fork in his hand to sift chaff from the grain (Matt 3:12). After Peter’s confession, Jesus makes this explicit, “For the Son of man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will judge all people according to their

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<sup>16</sup> AE 35:362.

<sup>17</sup> AE 35:117–118.

<sup>18</sup> AE 35:117–118.

deeds" (Matt 16:27).<sup>19</sup> Judgment as justification finds its longest discourse in the account of the sheep and the goats (Matt 25:31–46) and is at the heart of the Lord's Prayer, "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matt 6:12), the only petition to be immediately reinforced by Jesus' commentary, "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (6:14–15). Just as Jesus saw justification in terms of the reward distributed at the judgment, so he saw justification as sacramental. The request in the Fourth Petition for supernatural bread is inseparably linked by an "and" (*καί*) to the Fifth Petition's request for forgiveness.<sup>20</sup> In receiving the bread, sins are forgiven.

Clichés have a way of dominating the conversation, with the result that one is seen as more important than another. For Lutherans, these clichés have to do with justification. Assign a seminarian a sermon from one of Paul's epistles, and he envisions a marvelous doctrinal discourse. Give him a pericope from a Gospel, especially the Sermon on the Mount, and he runs to Paul for relief. In facing James, Luther looked to Paul for help and then cut his losses by dismissing the epistle. James did preach Christ, but Luther did not see it. Or at least James did not measure up to Paul, and we are forever condemned to hearing the cliché that the treatise written by Jesus' brother is an epistle of straw. Luther did not see that James's self-identification as "the servant of Jesus Christ as Lord and God" (James 1:1)<sup>21</sup> easily matched Thomas's confession "my Lord and my God." James had a marvelously all-embracing understanding of faith: "My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory" (James 2:1).

Rather than coming to terms with a writer's intention, one chooses the cliché that best preserves one's self-interests, and so Luther was no different than the rest of us. But the whole procedure is hardly allowed since Jesus leaves no hint that we are to value any one word of his over another. In fact, he said the exact opposite (Matt 7:24–26; 28:20). Luther said that our failure to understand the Scripture "is not due to the obscurity of Scripture, but to the blindness or indolence of those who will not take the

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<sup>19</sup> τότε ἀποδώσει ἑκάστῳ κατὰ τὴν πρᾶξιν αὐτοῦ.

<sup>20</sup> AE 8:258. "For the sacraments have their efficacy from the wounds and blood of Christ."

<sup>21</sup> Author's own translation.

trouble to look at the very clearest truth.”<sup>22</sup> Luther deviated from his own principle, and in some cases the Pauline distinctive or cliché won out. Clichés, however, are what theological life is all about. Clichés are persistent and resist extinction. One group values one set of clichés over others, and diametrically opposing theologies can find shelter under the same cliché. Such was the situation in the LCMS as early as the 1950s and still is today among Lutherans. Justification must be preserved at all costs, even if we disagree or ignore the fact that we may disagree on the deity of Christ, his resurrection, and the miracles. If Lutheran distinctives morph into clichés, so can any other term, including the name of Christ. Frequent mention of the word of Christ in a sermon does not make it Christological, and its absence does not make it non-christological. James used the word “Christ” of Jesus twice. Jesus never used it of himself.

For good or for bad, cliché is part of life in the church, and the task of theology is to sift through the clichés to separate the wheat from the chaff. Eighteenth-century theologians kept the Lutheran distinctives, but in dissembling their meaning, what was Lutheran was lost. Honor for being the master of clichés belongs to Schleiermacher, who reassembled discarded Lutheran, Reformed, and Anglican distinctives into one unified theological program. Christian distinctives made his program look Christian, but it was not truly Christian. Such is the character of the cliché that it allows the hearer to supply his own meaning or no meaning at all.

Though we might be cliché preachers and theologians holding on to our distinctives for dear life, Luther was not—at least most of the time. One distinctive for him was that John 6 was not eucharistic, a position around which his faithful followers have clinched such tight fists that it has been canonized as Lutheran cliché. However, Luther did locate the Lord’s Supper in John. He writes, “Among the papists this word has remained: ‘The sacraments flowed out of the side of Christ.’ For the sacraments have their efficacy from the wounds and blood of Christ. Therefore this is a good and godly saying.”<sup>23</sup>

Closing an essay with a biblical reference is cliché in itself, but try one of these two. Of the making of clichés there is no end (Eccl 12:12) or chase out the old cliché and it returns with seven other clichés more meaningless than itself (Matt 12:45; Luke 11:26).

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<sup>22</sup> AE 33:27.

<sup>23</sup> AE 8:258.