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# Church Growth and Confessional Integrity

Carter Lindberg

Had I not been invited to participate in the 1988 Annual Symposium on the Lutheran Confessions at Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne, I should still be blissfully unaware of the church growth movement. But the symposium in Fort Wayne—which I then thought would be only a momentary distraction from my interest in Reformation social welfare—awakened me from my historical slumbers and made it clear that Melanchthon's dreaded *rabies theologorum* is still virulent. The symposium in Fort Wayne further complicated my hitherto peaceful life in a number of ways. Above all, the *Concordia Theological Quarterly* published my paper, "Pietism and the Church Growth Movement in a Confessional Lutheran Perspective."<sup>1</sup> This article has had the effect of somehow making me an instant expert on the subject. I shall begin by summarizing my previous critique of the church growth movement. After this summary I plan to look at the church growth movement from the perspective of the article on which the church stands or falls—justification by grace alone.

## *Summary of Previous Work*

In preparation for this study, I have been able to use some writings of which I was unaware when I made my first effort to evaluate the church growth movement. In particular, I want to mention some of the writings of the LCMS pastor, Kent R. Hunter, President of the International Lutheran Society for Church Growth and Director of the Church Growth Center in Corunna, Indiana; the report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the LCMS entitled "Evangelism and Church Growth with Special Reference to the Church Growth Movement"; the review of this report by LCMS pastor Steve Scheiderer as well as his master's thesis, "The Church Growth Movement: A Lutheran Analysis";<sup>2</sup> the excellent paper by Pastor Robert Schaibley entitled "Biblical Basis and Current Practices Regarding 'Spiritual Gifts'";<sup>3</sup> and the recent LWF statement, "Together in God's Mission: An LWF Contribution to the Understanding of Mission."<sup>4</sup> I mention these writings because I think they confirm my original criticisms of the church growth movement.

Thus I continue to perceive the church growth movement as sharing many of the theological deficits manifested by other post-Reformation renewal movements including the Radical Reformation, Pietism, and the charismatic movements. These deficits include the following: (1.) A triumphalism or theology of glory tends to equate numerical growth not only with faith but with the mind of God. Thus Kent Hunter states that "Jesus' ministry was church growth-oriented."<sup>5</sup>

(2.) A confusion of law and gospel (a) tends to baptize a self-consciously sociological and pragmatic approach to ecclesiology and theology and thus (b) tilts to a works-righteousness of behavioralism and achievement. Donald McGavran, the pioneer of the Church Growth Movement, protests this evaluation. But his very protest sharpens the issue of whether ecclesiology is simply correct sociology plus the doctrine of one's choice. In the revised edition of his influential book, *Understanding Church Growth*, he wrote: "As you set forth church growth theory and theology for your congregations and your denomination use your own creedal statements, your own system. . . Do not attack church growth as theologically inadequate. Make it adequate according to the doctrines emphasized by your Branch of the Church. The test as to whether you have done this or not is whether your congregations are stimulated to vibrant grateful growth such as the New Testament churches exemplified."<sup>6</sup> One problem with this perspective is that success becomes the criterion for the truth of doctrine. Conversely, lack of success means, again in Hunter's words, that "we are doing something to hinder God's desires."<sup>7</sup> Another problem is that the doctrine of justification by grace alone is demoted to one doctrine among many.

(3.) The Church Growth Movement calls into question the "satis set" of Augustana VII by suggesting that the gospel and the sacraments are not sufficient for the church. There is here the perennial pious desire of all renewal movements to add to the marks of the church. In this case discipleship and numerical growth are elevated to signs of the church's "real presence."

(4.) The ecclesiology that develops from this addition to Article VII displaces Luther's tension-filled dynamic of the theology of the cross and its social anthropology (of both the Christian and the Christian community being *simul iustus*

*et peccator*) with the church growth motifs of progress and perfection. "For McGavran the whole gospel for all mankind means little, unless it is *preceded*[my emphasis] by stupendous church-planting. There can be little hope of sustained signs of the Kingdom in the world without the influence of a sufficient number of sons and daughters of the Kingdom."<sup>8</sup> Need we be reminded that the initial conversation between Luther and Pope Leo X's theologian, Prierias, was about whether the gospel creates the church or whether the church creates the gospel? One commentator on the church growth movement goes so far as to say that, on the basis of a narrow evangelical hermeneutic and theology, the church growth movement "deduces that everywhere and in all circumstances the numerical increase of the church is the one goal for which everything else may be sacrificed."<sup>9</sup>

(5.) The church growth movement is a bedfellow if not an advocate of culture religion. It is ironic that McGavran and others in the movement have criticized the WCC for adopting the world's agenda, while the movement itself advocates sociological methods for church growth and posits that the church is a business like any other. The place where this orientation is most obvious and also most corrosive of theology and ethics is the well-known homogeneous unit principle: "Men [sic!] like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers."<sup>10</sup> The LWF statement mentioned above emphasizes that a missionary congregation "is an open and inclusive community which does not draw a distinction between people of 'our kind' and others, and which accepts 'outsiders' with love and draws them into its fellowship."<sup>11</sup>

#### *Justification by Faith Alone:*

##### *The Lutheran Critique of the Church Growth Movement*

Most Lutheran churches have, with more or less confessional integrity, striven to retain Luther's central proposal of continuing reform of the church on the basis of the article of justification.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, from the beginning of Luther's reform movement, this article of justification has been understood to be non-negotiable because it is the article on which the church stands or falls.<sup>13</sup> Everything else, including the papacy itself, is open for discussion.<sup>14</sup>

From the perspective of Luther and the Lutheran Confessions, the fundamental criticism of the church growth

movement is that it has displaced the article of justification by grace alone through faith alone with the mandate of the "Great Commission." Kent Hunter himself makes this clear when he writes: "While it is essential to solid growth for the church to articulate and demonstrate a theology that is true to the Scriptures and our Confessions, there is an added dimension that is gaining priority, especially among the churches of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. We are moving from the age of reaction (which could be called perhaps the era of the Reformation) to the age of action (which would be properly called the age of mission or the age of church growth)."<sup>15</sup> In other words, the church growth movement has displaced the gospel with the law. Thus, Kent Hunter defines church growth as "a theological conviction about what God wants his people to do in this world. It is not just an academic exercise or a confession of doctrine. It is a way of ministry, a way of life, and it all begins with a personal recommitment to the Lordship of Jesus Christ." Hunter goes on to say, "There is hard work ahead for a congregation that seriously attempts to carry out the New Testament commission to make disciples of the whole world. It costs money. It takes effort."<sup>16</sup> At best, the church growth movement reduces the article of justification to merely one doctrine among others.

Luther was quite self-conscious that the article of justification is what distinguished his reform movement from the renewal movements associated with Wyclif and Hus. Their concern was for moral renewal whereas his concern was for that article on which the church stands or falls: justification by faith alone. In other words, the issue is doctrine:

Doctrine and life are to be distinguished. Life is as bad among us as among the papists. Hence we do not fight and damn them because of their bad lives. Wyclif and Hus, who fought over the moral quality of life, failed to understand this. I do not consider myself to be pious. But when it comes to whether one teaches correctly about the Word of God, here I take my stand and fight. That is my calling. To contest doctrine has never happened until now. Others have fought over life; but to take on the doctrine—that is to grab the goose by the neck! . . . When the Word of God remains pure, even if the quality of life fails us, life is placed in a position to become what it ought

to be. That is why everything hinges on the purity of the Word. I have succeeded only if I have taught correctly.<sup>17</sup>

The perennial Lutheran obsession with doctrine, especially the article of justification, has its roots in Luther himself who never tired of emphasizing that doctrine stands above life. Doctrine "directs us and shows us the way to heaven. . . We can be saved without love. . . but not without pure doctrine and faith." To Luther doctrine and life are not at all on the same level. If doctrine gives way to love, then the gospel may be denied. That is why the devil "attacks us so cleverly with this specious argument about not offending against love and the harmony among the churches."<sup>18</sup>

Since Luther was so adamant regarding this distinction between doctrine and life, faith and love, we who are his heirs should also take it seriously. Critical Lutheran theological reflection upon the church growth movement is in order before we accept C. Peter Wagner's judgment that "Luther's sound theology was not sound missiology."<sup>19</sup>

Luther's emphasis may be misunderstood, especially in our culture which so prizes religious toleration on the one hand and moral activism on the other. So it must be mentioned that Luther's penetrating emphasis on distinguishing doctrine and life was made precisely for the sake of life. Without such a distinction the twin consequences of placing life over doctrine are cheap grace and works-righteousness.<sup>20</sup> The function of doctrine is the proclaiming of the forgiveness of sins as unconditional promise. That is why the church stands or falls on the basis of its relation to the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone.

This means that *the* mark of the church is the gospel. The church therefore is also an article of faith, not sight. The certain signs of the existence of the church in the world are not particular persons, not even large numbers of particular persons, but rather events such as the proclamation of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. In contrast, "The Church Growth Movement has always stressed pragmatism. . . If some sort of ministry in the church is not reaching intended goals, consecrated pragmatism says there is something wrong which needs to be corrected."<sup>21</sup>

The Lutheran Confessions reiterate justification as the chief article of Christian doctrine which may not be surrendered.<sup>22</sup>

Contemporary Lutheran theologians follow suit with the forceful clarification that the article of justification is "not just one doctrine among others, but. . . 'the article on which the church stands and falls' (*articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*)."<sup>21</sup> This is aptly expressed in the explication of Lutheranism by Eric Gritsch and Robert Jenson as an "ecumenical proposal of dogma":

The gospel tolerates no conditions. It is itself unconditional promise. And when it is rightly spoken, it takes the conditions we put on our life as the very occasions of this promise. This is the first and fundamental Lutheran proposal of dogma. When it is practiced consistently, the Lutheran Reformation has succeeded, whatever else may happen. When it is not practiced, other departures from medieval Christianity represent only sloth and lack of seriousness.<sup>21</sup>

Luther's own account of his struggle with medieval scholastic theology and piety that led to his exegetical insight that the righteousness of God is the gift of God rather than the demand of God is sufficiently well known that we need not review it here.<sup>25</sup> Luther's point is that justification by faith alone throws the burden of proof for human righteousness before God (*coram Deo*) back upon God. We shall look at this "Copernican revolution" in theology and piety in terms of the human quest for security and human efforts to control life. The oppositional headings "Security versus Certainty" and "Covenant versus Testament" will facilitate this discussion and also relate it to its historical-theological context.

#### *Insecurity versus Certainty*

In all respects Luther's historical context was characterized by great insecurity.<sup>26</sup> Medieval theology and piety in its various forms of scholasticism, mysticism, and pastoral care was a coherent effort to create security in an insecure, indeed crisis-laden, time. The pervasive ecclesial and pastoral exhortations to people to "try harder" to attain salvation have led scholars to characterize pre-Reformation piety as a "piety of achievement" that was preoccupied with the "mathematics of salvation."<sup>27</sup> The parallels between this medieval piety of achievement and the American values of success and numerical increase promoted by the church growth movement need not be belabored.

The theological resource for the medieval behavior-oriented piety included both the Aristotelian teaching about self-improvement through practice (*habitus*) and the Augustinian theology of love which speaks of faith formed by love (*fides caritate formata*). Such a love-oriented ascent to God is not without grace, for God gratuitously infuses grace to initiate our pilgrimage toward the heavenly city. Nevertheless, on the basis of this imitating grace the burden of proof is upon us to actualize it, that is to do what is in us (*facere quod in se est*). In popular parlance, medieval theology exhorted people to do their very best. If one did his very best, then God would reward one with the grace to try even harder. The doctrine that God does not withhold grace from those who do their very best (*facientibus quod in se est Deus non denegat gratiam*) developed in a pastoral climate the intention of which was to provide assurance and security for the anxious sinner. It also developed in an Aristotelian philosophical climate of the continuity of being.

According to Aristotle reality precedes possibility. Thus possibilities are present only on the basis of existing realities. Here, of course, practice makes perfect and that goes for the practice of infused grace as well. As commonsensical as this Aristotelian perspective may be with regard to the development of various human attributes, it created difficulty when applied to the relationship with God. The difficulty was precisely in the assumption of continuity between the old and the new, between the sinner and the righteous person before God.<sup>28</sup> Such continuity which marks all theologies of progress and development throws the person back upon his or her own resources. In spite of the promise that God gives so much for so little, how do I know the little I do is enough? How do I know if I have done my very best? How do I know if my church is growing fast enough and large enough? The absolute demand of God is relativized to correlate with human ability, but in this process the sinner is thrown back upon him or herself. No matter how much you do and how well you do it, the tormenting question remains: Is this my very best? Thus Luther recalled that as a monk his conscience could never achieve certainty but was always in doubt. Luther's discovery that righteousness before God is totally discontinuous with the past is expressed in his conviction that God actually puts the old



Adam to death and creates the new justified person out of nothing.<sup>29</sup>

Medieval insecurity and uncertainty about salvation was the result of making salvation contingent upon an inner change in the person.<sup>30</sup> It seems to me that Kent Hunter approximates this medieval orientation when he speaks about "a New Testament mood of positivism" in his booklet, "Twenty Reasons Why the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod is the Church to Watch for Growth."<sup>31</sup> Hunter uses the example of runner Roger Bannister breaking the four-minute mile to illustrate how achievement depends upon one's attitude; once Bannister had achieved this record, many others followed suit. "The four-minute mile was broken because people knew it could be done. In many cases, the bold growth of God's kingdom is a matter of *our deciding* [my emphasis] that we can be used by God to do it. It is our understanding that God can do anything and that He wants His church to grow. *Our attitude is most important* [my emphasis]."

But justification contingent upon an inner change in the sinner, no matter how stimulated by the grace of God, is bad news because it throws the burden of proof for salvation back upon the person. The good news, Luther discovered, is that justification occurs outside us (*extra nos*). Justification by faith alone means that it is not the sinner who is changed but rather the sinner's situation before God.<sup>32</sup> "In short, the term 'to be justified' means that a man is considered righteous."<sup>33</sup>

In other words, only when the burden of proof for justification rests on God, is it possible to have any certainty of salvation. Our righteousness before God is not contingent upon our theological expertise, our ethical rigorism, our religious experience, our development of spiritual gifts, nor our church's numerical increase, but rather solely upon God's action in Jesus Christ. There are no human prerequisites to righteousness before God, except, of course, sin, and that is a condition we all fulfill.

When we examine our lives, we can only be plagued by insecurity and uncertainty; but if we look to God in Christ, we have certainty of salvation. This is what Luther meant when he emphasized doctrine, over life. What was at stake for Luther and is still at stake for his heirs is the certainty of salvation. When life (discipleship and fulfilling the Great Commission)

is placed over doctrine, the ultimate result is what Luther called the “monster of uncertainty”:

It is obvious that the enemies of Christ teach what is uncertain, because they command consciences to be in doubt. . . Let us thank God, therefore, that we have been delivered from this monster of uncertainty. . . The Gospel commands us to look, not at our own good deeds or perfection, but at God Himself as He promises, and at Christ Himself, the Mediator. . . And this is the reason why our theology is certain: it snatches us away from ourselves and places us outside ourselves, so that we do not depend on our own strength, conscience, experience, person, or works but depend on that which is outside ourselves, that is, on the promise and truth of God, which cannot deceive.<sup>34</sup>

#### *Covenant versus Testament*

Luther's emphasis on testament over covenant is closely linked to his emphasis on certainty over security. Here, too, his forensic understanding of justification is underlined. A recovery of Luther's testamentary theology would be a salutary contribution to the contemporary Protestant fascination with covenantal theology.

But if life and salvation are contingent—and Luther wholeheartedly agreed that they are—then to place the burden of proof for salvation on the person by the command to do his or her very best in covenant with God is unworkable. Introspection and activity as means to security lead only to the twin possibilities of pride and despair. What matters “is not whether the sinner has an impression of what is good and a longing for what is better, but whether he can realize in action the object of his longing. And for Luther the answer to this question is clearly no.”<sup>35</sup> Hope cannot come from within us but only from outside, *extra nos*, in the certainty that God does not lie. Paradoxically, as we have said above, the precondition for certainty of salvation is real sin. “God offers his grace to real sinners. He will not be turned aside by the unpromising character of the objects of his generosity.”<sup>36</sup> In the words of Gerhard Forde, “We can be candidates for such righteousness only if we are completely sinners.”<sup>37</sup> This means that all bilateral bets are off and our salvation is contingent on the unilateral action of God.

This is clear in Luther's use of the concepts of covenant and testament. In his extensive research on Luther's use of the terms "testament," "covenant," and cognates to 1525, Kenneth Hagen comes to this conclusion:

Luther's understanding and experience of covenants, historical and contemporary, seem to be consistently negative because they circumscribe freedom—theologically, the freedom of God. . . 'If-type soteriologies are the way of the law. The freedom of the Christian man depends on the sovereign freedom of God to give the promise of the New Testament.<sup>38</sup>

This conclusion is vividly expressed by Luther's discussion of inheritance rights and the certainty that a will provides the heir. Luther interpreted Hebrews 9:17 as the new testament—that is, the new will—in Christ already given us as "the forgiveness of sins and eternal life."<sup>39</sup> The following two quotations from Luther sum up, once again, his conviction that justification by faith alone is an event *extra nos* which changes our situation before God:

A testament, as everyone knows, is a promise made by one about to die, in which he designates his bequest and appoints his heirs. A testament, therefore, involves, first, the death of the testator and, second, the promise of an inheritance and the naming of the heir. Thus Paul discusses at length the nature of a testament in Romans 4, Galatians 3 and 4, and Hebrews 9. We see the same thing clearly also in these words of Christ. Christ testifies concerning his death when he says, "This is my body, which is given; this is my blood, which is poured out" (Luke 22:19-20). He names and designates the heirs when he says, "for you" (Luke 22:19-20; 1 Corinthians 11:24) and "for many" (Matthew 26:28, Mark 14:24), that is, for those who accept and believe the promise of the testator. For here is faith that makes men heirs, as we shall see.<sup>40</sup>

Everything depends, therefore, as I have said, upon the words of this sacrament. These are the words of Christ. . . Let someone else pray, fast, go to confession, prepare himself for mass and the sacrament as he chooses. You do the same, but remember that this is all foolishness and self-deception if you do not set before you the words of the testament and arouse yourself to believe

and desire them. You would have to spend a long time polishing your shoes, preening and primping to attain an inheritance, if you had no letter and seal with which you could prove your right to it. But if you have a letter and seal, and believe, desire, and seek it, it must be given to you, even though you were scaly, scabby, and most filthy.<sup>11</sup>

It is precisely this Lutheran awareness of the conditionality of all covenantal language and the unconditionality of testamentary language which is developed in *Lutheranism* by Gritsch and Jenson. The structure of covenants is always “if. . .then”; it is a language of conditions to be filled “in order to” receive whatever is promised on the basis of these conditions. In other words, covenantal language is always the language of law. Testamentary language is, however, always the language of gospel, of unconditional promise. Its structure is that of “because. . .therefore”:

The gospel, rightly spoken, involves no ifs, ands, buts, or maybes of any sort. It does not say, “If you do your best to live a good life, God will fulfill that life,” or, “If you fight on the right side of the great issues of your time. . .,” or, “If you repent. . .,” or, “If you believe. . .” It does not even say, “If you *want* to do good/repent/believe. . .,” or, “If you are sorry for not wanting to do good/repent/believe. . .” The gospel says, “Because the Crucified lives as Lord, your destiny is good.” The Reformation’s first and last assertion was that any talk of Jesus and God and human life that does not transcend all conditions is a perversion of the gospel and will be at best irrelevant in the lives of hearers and at worst destructive.<sup>12</sup>

Again, justification by faith alone is not one doctrine among others or a particular content of the church’s proclamation among other contents. Rather, justification by faith alone is “a metalinguistic stipulation of what *kind of talking*—about whatever contents—can properly be proclamation and word of the church.”<sup>13</sup>

#### *The Corollaries of Justification by Faith Alone*

The new wine of the gospel cannot be obtained in the old wineskins. So justification by faith alone radically altered every aspect of late medieval theology. If the gospel is

unconditional promise, it shatters all continuity and creates out of nothing. Once grasped by justification by faith alone Luther had to rewrite every aspect of theology. His theological anthropology radicalized the human predicament before God. The old Augustinian understanding of sin as a turning away from God toward lesser goods (*curvatus ad terra, curvatus ad inferior*) was displaced by knowing sin as that egocentricity which feeds upon itself (*incurvatus in se*). Consequently the old Augustinian theology of progress or growth in righteousness (*partim justus, partim peccator*) was displaced by an understanding of the pilgrim as wholly righteous and wholly sinner at the same time (*simul justus et peccator*). The medieval (and modern) notions of correlating human progress with the will of God were rejected as theologies of glory in opposition to the theology of the cross. And, perhaps most importantly, the theological method was developed for correctly making these and other distinctions as well as maintaining the unconditionality of justification by faith, namely, the dialectical distinction between law and gospel.

The corollaries of justification by faith alone are the fundamental motifs of Lutheran systematic theology. A brief presentation such as this does not allow elaboration of all these motifs.<sup>11</sup> But it may be helpful to say a few words about them in order once again to emphasize that the centrality of justification by faith alone is so critical to Lutheran theology that no particular theological motif or doctrine or church growth technique may be seen in isolation from it. The following comments will be organized with reference to justification and to the motif of law and gospel. The former is the Lutheran proposal of dogma and the latter is the Lutheran proposal of theological method to the church catholic.<sup>15</sup>

#### *Law and Gospel: The Methodological Proposal*

Luther never tired of asserting that the dialectical distinction between law and gospel is the essential nerve of theological thinking; it is that which makes a theologian a theologian: "Nearly the entire Scripture and the knowledge of all theology depends upon the correct understanding of law and gospel."<sup>16</sup> "The person who knows how to distinguish correctly the gospel from the law may thank God and know that he is a theologian."<sup>17</sup> In fact, justification by faith is itself only understood in its true significance in the light of this "decisive standard of theological judgment."<sup>18</sup>

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It is important to realize that the distinction of law and gospel is neither any kind of dualism nor an “either-or” relation. Neither can replace nor exclude the other. Nor are they complementary—the gospel needing the addition of the law for fulfillment or vice versa. The law is not the gospel and the gospel is not a new law.

The centrality of this distinction for theology, the reason that it is constitutive for being a theologian, is because it is not a theoretical distinction but a practical one. The distinction between law and gospel is not a process of logic but rather involvement and commitment in proclaiming the Word of God. What is critical here is not so much content but use.<sup>49</sup> Correctly distinguishing law and gospel is proclamation. Preaching is not instruction concerning correct theological procedure but the proclamation, the enactment of salvation (*fides ex auditu*). Thus the distinction between law and gospel is not incidental but central to the event of preaching. “Their confusion is not a small misfortune, a regrettable failure but rather in the strict sense against salvation itself.”<sup>50</sup> Confusion of law and gospel is not merely preaching a partial gospel or preaching the gospel without sufficient clarity; it is rather the loss of the gospel itself and the preaching of law:

Therefore we always repeat, urge and inculcate this doctrine of faith or Christian righteousness, so that it may be observed by continuous use and may be precisely distinguished from the active righteousness of the law. (For *by this doctrine alone and through it alone is the church built, and in this it consists* [my emphasis]). Otherwise we shall not be able to observe true theology but shall immediately become lawyers, ceremonialists, legalists and papists. Christ will be so darkened that no one in the church will be correctly taught or comforted. Therefore if we want to be preachers and teachers of others, we must take great care in these issues and hold to this distinction between the righteousness of the law and that of Christ. This distinction is easy to speak of; but in experience and practice it is most difficult of all, even if you exercise and practice it diligently. For in the hour of death or in other conflicts or conscience these two kinds of righteousness come together more closely than you would wish or ask.<sup>51</sup>

This brings us back to our earlier comments on justification. The distinction between law and gospel is the distinction between two fundamental kinds of speech. The law is the communication of demands and conditions; it imposes an "if. . .then" structure on life. It is the language of covenants. It is the language of the Deuteronomic historian. In its inverted form it is the language which blames the victim. All law communication presents a future contingent upon the person's works. The gospel, however, is the language of promise; its structural pattern is "because. . .therefore."<sup>52</sup> It is the language of testament. It is a promise which is unconditional because it is made by Christ who has already satisfied all conditions including death. It is this understanding of the dialectic of law and gospel that is behind talk about justification as "a metalinguistic stipulation of what *kind* of talking — about whatever contents — can properly be proclamation and word of the church."<sup>53</sup>

Of course, there is content as well as use in the law and gospel. The gospel is univocal; its only use is the proclamation of unconditional promise. Its content is the cross of Jesus which communicates in the theology of the cross that God always confronts us under His opposite. In his famous "Heidelberg Disputation," Luther labeled all theologies which strive to ascend to God theologies of glory. Again, against Aristotelian theology, Luther asserted that like is not known by like but by unlike. Justification by faith alone is not our ascent to God but God's descent to us; it is a theology of the cross:

That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened (Romans 1:20).

He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross. . .

A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is. . . . .wisdom is not itself evil, nor is the law to be evaded; but without the theology of the cross man misuses the best in the worst manner.<sup>54</sup>

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The theology of the cross stands against the great vice of what is passed off as Christianity then and now—false security or otherworldliness or both. The theology of the cross opposes all efforts to ascend to God whether they be speculative, ethical, sociological, or experiential. God deals with sinners on the basis of their sin, not on the basis of their achievements. The theology of glory (cheap grace) fails to comprehend that God is hidden under the cross and that faith is not based on empirical verification or signs and wonders. “God’s gifts and benefits are so hidden under the cross that the godless can neither see nor recognize them but rather consider them to be only trouble and disaster. . . .”<sup>55</sup> The theology of the cross reveals God in His concealment in Jesus and the cross whereas the theology of glory conceals God in His revelation.

The realism of the theology of the cross is manifest in its rejection both of all flight from the world through speculation and religiosity and of triumphalist programs to establish the kingdom of God by works. The criticism of the theology of glory with its self-chosen crosses of religious works is that it makes human aspirations appear significant in direct proportion to their personal and social irrelevance. The theology of the cross, however, propels personal engagement where God wills to be found rather than where persons desire to find Him; this cruciform shape of life precludes all spectator stances in relation to the world.<sup>56</sup>

In the perspective of Luther and Lutheran theology, justification by faith alone does not make the Christian intrinsically righteous. The Christian “should not be so smug, as though he were pure of all sins. . . . He is righteous and holy by an alien or foreign holiness.” Sin is forgiven but it still remains.<sup>57</sup> The Christian, that is, the forgiven sinner, is therefore simultaneously righteous and sinner. Sin here is basically unbelief and being curved in upon the self; it is the desire to be God and the concomitant refusal to let God be God.<sup>58</sup> Sin, therefore, is so radical that only God’s gracious imputation of Christ’s righteousness can overcome it. The sinner’s acceptance of God’s judgment enables him or her to live as righteous in spite of sin.

By letting God be God the sinner is allowed to be what he or she was intended to be—human.<sup>59</sup> The sinner is not called



to deny his or her humanity and seek "likeness" (*similitudo*) with God. Rather, the forgiveness of sin occurs in the midst of human life. The Christian before God "is at the same time both a sinner and a righteous man; a sinner in fact, but a righteous man by the sure imputation and promise of God that he will continue to deliver him from sin until he has completely cured him. And thus he is entirely healthy in hope, but in fact he is still a sinner. . . ."60

In the light of this brief excursus into the *simul justus et peccator* motif we may return to an equally brief summary of the content of the law as understood by Luther and Lutheran theology. It is of interest that the traditional way of speaking of the law in Lutheran theology is in terms of its uses. The civil use of the law is to build up society through the encouragement of good and the discouragement of evil. The content of this use of the law is known through reason, which comes to the conclusion that life is better when we act toward others as we wish them to act toward us. In this sense Luther remarks that the Ten Commandments are the Jewish version of Saxon Common Law, in short, a kind of human survival kit.<sup>61</sup> However, this civil use of the law instituted by God for public peace and preservation does not make one righteous before God.<sup>62</sup>

In its theological use the law reveals and multiples sin. Thus the law poses the question for which the gospel of justification by faith alone is the only proper answer. Without the question the answer appears to be a trivial *non sequitur*. Without the answer the question creates presumption or despair. The dialectic of law and gospel runs through Lutheran theology because it is the form by which the gospel is proclaimed. The distinction of law and gospel is not a theoretical abstraction but the dynamic proclamation of the gospel by which the presumptuous are terrified and the terrified comforted.

Article VII of the Augsburg Confession is elegant in its simple definition of the church as "the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel." Thus Luther can liken the church to a "mouth house" because faith comes by hearing the gospel. The marks of the church are not the like-mindedness, the homogeneity, the giftedness, or the size of the community, but rather the proclamation of the

gospel of the unconditional promise of God embodied in word and sacraments. "The human structures of the church, of course, exhibit the same life as the church's members—a life under the cross which is simultaneously sin and righteousness. Thus the church, like its members, also lives by the continuous encounter with the Word of God which is why it needs constant reform. This is another way of saying that the church is not specified by the character of its members but rather by the character of the assembly—the preaching of the gospel. This is the basis upon which the church stands or falls."<sup>63</sup> The church is not recognized by its growth but by the "possession of the holy word of God." In Luther's words, "Now, wherever you hear or see this word preached, believed, professed, and lived, do not doubt that the true *ecclesia sancta catholica*, 'a Christian holy people,' must be there, even though their number is small. . . . And even if there were no other sign than this alone, it would still suffice to prove that a Christian holy people must exist there, for God's word cannot be without God's people and, conversely, God's people cannot be without God's word."<sup>64</sup>

#### ENDNOTES

1. *CTQ*, 52:2-3, pp. 129-147. Versions of the present article were presented to the "Free Lutheran Theological Conference of the Peninsula," San Mateo, California, 2-3 February, 1989, and the Northeast LCMS Pastors Conference, Cape Cod, Massachusetts, 31 October, 1989. I am grateful for these invitations that provided the opportunities to pursue reflections upon the church growth movement and Lutheran theology.
2. This thesis of 1985 is available in typescript from the bookstore of Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne.
3. This paper is to appear in the *Lutheran Quarterly*.
4. *LWF Documentation*, No. 26 (November 1988).
5. Kent R. Hunter, *Your Church Has Personality* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), p. 64.
6. Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, Revised Edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 8.

7. *Your Church Has Personality*, op. cit., p. 81: "God expects growth. It is normal for God's church to grow. If it is not growing, it is because we are doing something to hinder God's desires."
8. Eddie Gibbs, *I Believe in Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), p. 19.
9. Charles Tabor, "Contextualization," in Wilbert Schenck, ed., *Exploring Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 119.
10. McGavran, op. cit., p. 223.
11. LWF, op. cit., p. 21.
12. "No, the point is not whether we are Lutherans, but whether we are Christians—whether we confess the Lord. What counts is the content of our inheritance, something which imposes on us an obligation." Klaus Schwarzwäller, "The Lutheran Tradition and Its Obligation," *Lutheran Quarterly*, N.S. 1:2 (1987), pp. 172-173. "If the *raison d'être* of Lutheranism is not oriented to the ongoing reform of the *una sancta catholica et apostolica ecclesia* in terms of the article of justification by faith alone apart from the law, then Lutheranism has defaulted on the promise of its reforming mission. Then in establishing itself as an independent church alongside other churches, each left to its self-indulging ways, Lutheranism has indeed exchanged the true marks of the church for those of a sect." Carl E. Braaten, *Principles of Lutheran Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), p. 35. *Mutatis mutandis* the same can be argued for the Reformed churches; cf. James Andrews and Joseph Burgess, eds., *An Invitation to Action: The Lutheran-Reformed Dialogue. Series III. 1981-1983* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), pp. 9-13: "Joint Statement on Justification."
13. See, for example, Scott H. Hendrix, *Luther and the Papacy: Stages in a Reformation Conflict* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), p. 149.
14. "I am willing to kiss your feet, pope, and to acknowledge you as the supreme pontiff, if you adore my Christ and grant that we have the forgiveness of sins and eternal life through His death and resurrection and not through the observance of your traditions." "Lectures on Galatians," 1525. WA, 40, p. 356; LW, 26, p. 224.
15. Kent Hunter, *Twenty Reasons Why the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod Is the Church to Watch for Growth* (Corunna, Indiana: Church Growth Center, 1986), p. 44.

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16. Kent R. Hunter, *Your Church Has Personality*, op. cit., p. 109.
  17. WA, TR 1, p. 295; cited by Steven Ozment, "Humanism, Scholasticism, and the Intellectual Origins of the Reformation," in F. Forrester Church and Timothy George, eds., *Continuity and Discontinuity in Church History* (Leiden: Brill, 1979), p. 148; and by Eberhard Jüngel, "Gottes Umstrittene Gerechtigkeit: Eine reformatorische Besinnung zum Paulinischen Begriff 'dikaosune theou,'" in his *Unterwegs zur Sache* (Munich: Kaiser, 1972), p. 62.
  18. "Lectures on Galatians," 1535. WA, 40 II, pp. 51-52; LW, 27, pp. 41-42. It is of interest that in this passage Luther is responding to the Enthusiasts and Sacramentarians with the same argument that he made against the papists. Luther regarded the Enthusiasts and the papists as two sides of the same coin of works-righteousness. See, for example, "Lectures on Galatians" (1535), WA, 40, p. 603; LW, 26, p. 396; and the Smalcald Articles (1537) in Theodore Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 312.
  19. C. Peter Wagner, *Leading Your Church to Growth* (Ventura, California: Regal Books, 1984), p. 154.
  20. See Gerhard Ebeling's excellent chapter, "Faith and Love," in his *Luther: An Introduction to His Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), especially pp. 172-173; and Jüngel, op. cit., pp. 62-66. For a recent Lutheran discussion of this distinction in relation to liberation theology, cf. *Word and World*, 7:1 (1987), which includes some of the papers of the "Justice and Justification" Consultation held in Mexico City in 1985 under the auspices of the ALC.
  21. Wagner, *Leading Your Church to Growth*, op. cit., p. 201. For an analysis of this orientation to "the end justifies the means" and to pragmatism, cf. Steve Scheiderer, "The Church Growth Movement: A Lutheran Analysis," op. cit., p. 40ff., 192ff.
  22. See the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article 4 ("Justification"), and the Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article 3 ("Righteousness"), in Tappert, pp. 107, 540; Robert Jenson, "On Recognizing the Augsburg Confession," in Joseph A. Burgess, ed., *The Role of the Augsburg Confession: Catholic and Lutheran Views* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), pp. 151-166; John F. Johnson, "Justification According to the Apology of the Augsburg Confession and the Formula of Concord," in H. George Anderson, T. Austin Murphy, Joseph A. Burgess, eds., *Justification by Faith: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VII* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), pp. 185-199.

23. Eric W. Gritsch, "The Origins of the Lutheran Teaching on Justification," in Anderson, Murphy, and Burgess, op. cit., p. 163 and note 3 on p. 351; cf. also Gerhard Müller and Vinzenz Pfnür, "Justification—Faith—Works," in George W. Forell and James F. McCue, eds., *Confessing One Faith: A Joint Commentary on the Augsburg Confession by Lutheran and Catholic Theologians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1982), p. 188. This position is so widely held that it is not necessary to provide extensive references at this point. It is the leitmotif of the Lutheran contributions in the volume mentioned above as well as in the recent major analysis of ecumenical dialogues by André Birmelé, *Le Salut en Jésus Christ dans les Dialogues Oecuméniques* (Paris: Cerf, 1986). On the famous phrase itself, cf. Alister McGrath, *Iustitia Dei. A History of the Doctrine of Justification*, II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 193, note 3. McGrath mentions not only its rootage in Luther (e.g., WA, 40 III, p. 352,3) but also its seventeenth-century Reformed use.
24. Eric W. Gritsch and Robert W. Jenson, *Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and Its Confessional Writings* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), p. 44; cf. also Gerhard Forde, "Radical Lutheranism," *Lutheran Quarterly*, NS, 1:1 (1987), pp. 5-18.
25. Luther recounts his struggle over the righteousness of God in his 1545 preface to the edition of his Latin writings: *LW*, 34, pp. 325-338, esp. 336-337. For clear discussions of Luther's medieval religious context see Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform: 1250-1550* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980), pp. 233-244, and David Steinmetz, *Luther in Context* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 1-11. A recent study on Luther's conversion experience is by Marilyn J. Harran, *Luther on Conversion: The Early Years* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1983).
26. For an overview of this assessment and references to relevant literature see my "Luther and the Crises of the Late Medieval Era, An Historical Interpretation," *Africa Theological Journal* 13:2 (1984), pp. 92-104.
27. Jacques Chiffolleau, *La Comptabilité de l'au-delà. Les Hommes, la Mort et la Religion dans la Région d'Avignon à la Fin du Moyen Age (vers 1320-vers 1480)* (Rome: École Française de Rome, 1980).
28. "The doctrine of justification by faith alone implies that human reality is not a substance given prior to all community. Rather, humanity happens in the event of communication, in the

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speaking and hearing of the word. . . What I am is not defined in advance by some set of timelessly possessed attributes; it is being defined in the history of address and response in and by which you and I live together." Gritsch and Jenson, *op. cit.*, p. 68. This incompatibility of justification by faith alone and any process of becoming righteous is discussed by Gerhard Forde in this essay, "Forensic Justification and Law in Lutheran Theology," in Anderson, Murphy, and Burgess, *op. cit.*, pp. 278-303.

29. "Second Disputation against the Antinomians," 1538. WA, 39 I, p. 470, 7-8.
30. There is widespread scholarly agreement on this prevalent lack of certainty about salvation in the Middle Ages. The focal point of this uncertainty was in the sacrament of penance. Thomas Tentler, *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), pp. 347, 362, points out the self-conscious promotion of insecurity by the medieval penitential system; and Ozment, *op. cit.*, p. 216, makes a similar observation. Dietrich Kolde, author of the most widely used catechism of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, confesses his own uncertainty at the end of his catechism when he says: "There are three things I know to be true that frequently make my heart heavy. The first troubles my spirit, because I will have to die. The second troubles my heart more, because I do not know when. The third troubles me above all. I do not know where I will go." Denis Janz, ed., *Three Reformation Catechisms: Catholic, Anabaptist, Lutheran* (New York and Toronto: Mellon Press, 1982), p. 127.
31. Corunna, Indiana: Church Growth Center, 1986, pp. 44-45.
32. For a concise discussion of this point cf. Gerhard Ebeling, *op. cit.*, pp. 154-158.
33. "Disputation Concerning Justification," 1536. LW, 34, p. 167; WA, 39 I, p. 98, 13-14.
34. *Ibid.*, LW, 26, pp. 386-387; WA, 40 I, p. 589. In the essay "Justification—Faith—Works" by Müller and Pfnür cited earlier, it is argued that this question of certainty of salvation was one of the major issues in the late Middle Ages but that it is "a presupposition which no longer exists today"; *op. cit.*, p. 119. I strongly disagree with this latter judgment. It is precisely the question of certainty of salvation that is behind so much of contemporary media evangelism and the charismatic movements. I have discussed this at length in my *The Third Reformation? Charismatic Movements and the Lutheran*

*Tradition* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1983); *Charismatic Renewal and the Lutheran Tradition* (Geneva: LWF, 1985); and "Justice and Injustice in Luther's Judgment of 'Holiness Movements,'" in Peter Manns and Harding Meyer with C. Lindberg and Harry McSorley, eds., *Luther's Ecumenical Significance* (New York and Philadelphia: Paulist Press and Fortress Press, 1984), pp. 161-181. The Roman Catholic scholar, Carl Maxcy, makes a similar judgment when he writes: "In my opinion, the twisted spirituality which has plagued Roman Catholics in the twentieth century is also partially the result of the post-Freudian obsession with self-analysis. The tendency is quite 'ecumenical,' because it afflicts Christians of every denomination. Our culture has told us that introspection is the proper *modus operandi* in life. As a result contemporary spirituality has turned increasingly to navel-gazing and has made us unable to get outside ourselves. . . A healthy person is one who looks outside for truth and meaning. . ." "Catholic Spirituality, Catholic Ethics and Martin Luther," *Ecumenical Trends*, 10:4 (1981), p. 57.

35. David Steinmetz, *Luther and Staupitz: An Essay in the Intellectual Origins of the Protestant Reformation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1980), p. 114.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
37. "Forensic Justification," *op. cit.*, p. 281.
38. Kenneth Hagen, "The Testament of a Worm: Luther on Testament to 1525," *Consensus* 8:1 (1982), pp. 16-17.
39. See Kenneth Hagen, *A Theology of Testament in the Young Luther: The Lectures on Hebrews* (Leiden: Brill, 1974), p. 82.
40. "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," 1520. *LW*, 36, p. 38; *WA*, 6, pp. 513, 22-514, 10.
41. "A Treatise on the New Testament," 1520; *LW*, 35, p. 88; *WA*, 6, p. 361, 3-7; cf. also "Lectures on Galatians," 1519; *LW*, 27, p. 268.
42. Gritsch and Jenson, *op. cit.*, p. 42.
43. *Ibid.*, pp. 42-43. This may, so to speak, provide a "theological umbrella" for the various biblical themes expressing the gospel and thereby speak to the tensions between biblical and systematic theologians with regard to the uniqueness of justification as an expression of the gospel; cf., for example, Birmelé, *op. cit.*, pp. 30, 106-111, and John Reumann, "*Righteousness*" in the New Testament (Philadelphia: Fortress Press,

- 1982). I agree with William Rusch's comment that the "meta-linguistic" stipulation does not require the specific language of justification; cf. Rusch, "How the Eastern Fathers Understood What the Western Church Meant by Justification," in Anderson, Murphy, Burgess, op. cit., p. 133.
44. For Luther's own overview of his theological motifs see his "Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans," 1546 (1522). *LW*, 35, pp. 365-380.
  45. "If justification by faith is the proposal of dogma which the Lutheran Reformation made to the church catholic, then the proper distinction between law and gospel is its major methodological proposal. It is a distinction that is to be applied to all doctrines and their use in the church." Forde, "Forensic Justification," op. cit., p. 293.
  46. *WA*, 7, p. 502, 34-35.
  47. "Lectures on Galatians," 1535. *WA*, 40 I, p. 207, 17-18.
  48. Ebeling, op. cit., p. 113.
  49. See Forde, "Forensic Justification," op. cit., pp. 293ff. For an illuminating discussion of the difference between Luther's law-gospel dialectic and all letter-spirit typologies cf. 296ff. and also Forde's "When the Old Gods Fail: Martin Luther's Critique of Mysticism," in C. Lindberg, ed., *Piety, Politics, and Ethics: Reformation Studies in Honor of George Wolfgang Forell* (Kirksville, Missouri: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1984), pp. 15-26.
  50. Ebeling, op. cit., p. 117 (my translation from the German, *Luther*, Tübingen: Mohr, 1965, p. 129).
  51. "Lectures on Galatians," 1535. *LW*, 26, p. 10; *WA*, 40 I, p. 49. This entire introductory section to the lectures treats the distinction of law and gospel.
  52. For Luther's discussion of these language patterns see, for example, his "The Bondage of the Will," 1525. *LW*, 33, pp. 132ff., 158.
  53. Gritsch and Jenson, op. cit., pp. 42-43. Ebeling begins his Luther study with what he calls "Luther's Linguistic Innovation" (or "Language-Event" [*Sprachereignis*]). A recent effort to apply this insight to doctrine is George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine, Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984).
  54. Theses 19-21, 24. *LW*, 31, p. 53; *WA*, 1, p. 362, 28-29.



55. "Psalm 118," 1529-1530. *WA*, 31 I, p. 51, 21-24.
56. Walther von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976), pp. 112-113. Jerome King del Pino, *Luther's Theology of the Cross as Reflected in Selected Historical Contexts of Social Change from 1512-1525* (Ph.D. dissertation, Boston University, 1980), pp. 130-131.
57. "Commentary of Psalm 51," 1538. *LW*, 12, p. 328; *WA*, 40 II, p. 352, 33-34.
58. "Lectures on Romans," 1516. *LW*, 25, p. 291; *WA*, 56, p. 304, 25ff. The human inability to let God be God is from thesis 17 of the "Disputation against Scholastic Theology" of 1517: "Man is by nature unable to want God to be God. Indeed, he himself wants to be God, and does not want God to be God." *LW*, 31, p. 10; *WA*, 1, p. 225.
59. "Commentary of Psalm 51," *LW*, 12, pp. 342-343; *WA*, 40 II, p. 373, 25-35.
60. "Lectures on Romans," *LW*, 25, p. 260; *WA*, 56, p. 272, 16-20; cf. also *WA*, 57, p. 165, 12-13; 2, p. 497, 13.
61. "Lectures on Galatians," 1535. *LW*, 26, pp. 274-275; *WA*, 40 I, pp. 429-430.
62. *Ibid.*, *LW*, 26, p. 309; *WA*, 40 I, pp. 479-481.
63. Lindberg, *The Third Reformation?* op. cit., p. 51.
64. "On the Councils and the Church," 1539. *LW*, 41, p. 150.