



ALIEN HERMENEUTICS IN THE ELCA

Karl P. Donfried

Although persistently asserting the importance of Scripture, many in the ELCA have, for all intents and purposes, jettisoned Scripture as the anchor of faith by removing it from its creedal and confessional context. In lieu of a gospel of grace and redemption that calls sinful humanity to repentance and new life, the ELCA adamantly promulgates a message based on secular humanism that is fixated on issues of racism and sexism, more concerned with establishing new rostered racial justice monitors than with feeding and nurturing the ordained pastors and faithful of this church.

This alien and distorted gospel, no longer drawing on the deep wells of Scripture as classically interpreted, is now actualized through a political agenda of good works that is hell-bent on rectifying the injustices of a selfish and violent world with superficial language about “social justice” that seems to aspire to the highest levels of naiveté. At every corner exuberant banality appears to be the order of the day. When I read the all-too-frequent political manifestos emanating from Chicago, I realize that they have become the graveyard of serious theology and the birthplace of empty and misleading promises. A wall of words covers up a deep spiritual emptiness. When the clergy, and especially our bishops, “have neither a divine mandate nor authority nor special competence to articulate particular programs of politico-economic action, and when they pronounce their fallible ideas with presumptive piety, they encourage public doubt about the church’s possession of an authentic word of God in the theological and moral realm.”¹ This observation, I would urge, applies to all politicized preachers, whether on the left or the right!

*Alien Hermeneutics and the
Falsification of God’s Communication*

Many recognize that we live in a period of radically divergent and contradictory interpretations of the Bible—“alien

hermeneutics,” as I like to refer to them in *Who Owns the Bible? Toward the Recovery of a Biblical Hermeneutic*.² More difficult is to get at the root cause of the problem. The ethicist Philip Turner makes a helpful and useful contribution by contrasting two competing theologies at work in much of mainline Protestantism: a theology of acceptance and a theology of redemption.

A theology of redemption accentuates sin as key to understanding the human situation, and points to the death of Jesus on the cross as foundational for the liberation of humanity from the power of sin. A theology of acceptance, contrariwise, has reduced the mystery to a God who simply wants us to love one another. It leads to an excessive emphasis on the affirmation of the other, especially of those who have been marginalized by society. The practical consequence of this is to establish an equivalence between the gospel of the kingdom of God and a particular form of social justice.³ This, I would argue, is the theological paradigm operative in many of the official circles of the ELCA.

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The problem for Turner is that such a biblically ill-considered approach produces “a quasi-deist theology that posits a benevolent God

who favors love and justice as inclusion, but acts neither to save us from our sins nor to raise us to new life after the pattern of Christ... In a theology dominated by radical inclusion, terms such as ‘faith,’ ‘justification,’ ‘repentance,’ and ‘holiness of life’ seem to belong to an antique vocabulary that must be outgrown or reinterpreted.”⁴

By an alien hermeneutic, that is, an alien interpretation of Scripture, I mean a hermeneutic that rejects or distorts a trinitarian emphasis on sin and redemption by advocating instead an agenda that emphasizes (1) the *ambiguity* of Scripture, (2) the *dissonance* of Scripture, that is, its contradictory nature, the regular consequence of which is (3) *antinomianism*, namely, that one is not necessarily bound by the moral categories of Christian Scripture as interpreted by the church catholic throughout its history.⁵

For the advocates of alien hermeneutics, the frequent use

of vague terms like “mystery,” “love,” and “justice,” typified especially in the work of former Lutheran Marcus Borg, characterizes the ambiguity of their approach. Another feature is to draw attention to the dissonance of Scripture, namely, the “what it meant then is not necessarily what it means today” syndrome, so typical of the work of Craig Nesson, a professor at Wartburg Seminary.⁶ Here I am reminded of the important observation by the late Raymond Brown: “What the biblical text said to its first readers should be related to what the text says to me, because I am a Christian heir to the people of Israel and the people of the early church, and *not independent of them.*”⁷ And, thirdly, by antinomianism these advocates of an alien hermeneutic frequently censure those standing in the historic Christian tradition for the misuse of Scripture as a legalistic textbook, only, in turn, to severely limit its exhortative function to a mere “informing” or “guiding” function. All of these are characteristics of an agenda that allows for easy manipulation of the biblical texts.

Philip Turner is quite correct: the religious left has replaced a trinitarian “theology of redemption” with an alien and secularized “theology of inclusion.”⁸ The former is biblical, insists on “costly grace,”⁹ recognizes the power of sin, acknowledges that evil can be overcome only through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and accentuates the call to discipleship, i.e., the “exclusive inclusivity”¹⁰ of Jesus Christ, as a call to holiness. A “theology of inclusion,” characterized by “cheap grace,”¹¹ understands the incarnation as some vague expression of divine love that results in the inclusion of all, and it “produces an ethic of tolerant affirmation that carries with it no call to conversion and radical holiness.”¹² It is precisely this alien theology of acceptance that stands behind both the call to alter substantially the biblical understanding of sexuality as well as the increasingly voluble call to include all at the Lord’s Supper, whether baptized or not, Hindu,

atheist, Buddhist, or Jew.

The hijacking of Scripture by the liberal left is surely a major contributor to the current crisis of faith spreading like a cancer throughout the ELCA. Since biblical studies stand at the forefront of our current predicament, some are ready to blame the historical-critical method that came to the fore in the twentieth century as the root cause of this crisis. But here I would differ and be quite cautious: before a precious set of tools is jettisoned in the heat of the current controversy, one should remember the worthy adage *abusus non tollit usum* (wrong use does not preclude proper use).

Precisely because Lutherans recognize the guiding rule of the Holy Spirit in the formation and decision making of the early church, both with regard to creedal and doctrinal formulations as well as in shaping the canonical

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form and context of Scripture, we—in contrast to the fundamentalism of the right—are free to employ historical biblical criticism as an effective means, *when properly used*, to determine with greater insight the power of God’s presence in Jesus Christ. By using all the available critical tools, we are today in a far better position than previous interpreters to comprehend what the biblical authors wished to convey to the original audience for which they wrote. Since all Christians, including especially preachers and theologians, must be subject to the control of the written, canonical text, and not to spiritual or ideological speculations unrelated to the text, historical biblical criticism, properly used, becomes an indispensable tool. Therefore it is important to acknowledge with much gratitude the enormous advances and contributions that have been made by

biblical scholars throughout the world over the last two centuries toward a better understanding of what the biblical authors intended to communicate to their original audiences,¹³ despite the not infrequent misuse of historical biblical criticism by the revisionists and others.

Although Origen, Jerome, and Luther, to name only a few, employed the tools that the biblical criticism of their day made available to them, enormous additional advances in the field were made during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Germany, in a predominantly Christian context. Initially Lutheran in influence, with the announcement of the papal encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* in 1943, the Roman Catholic Church also approved the use of this heavily German Lutheran-dominated field of historical biblical study. In this way, Lutheranism helped shape important dimensions of the Second Vatican Council. When I did my doctoral work at the University of Heidelberg in the 1960s, each of the faculty regularly preached in the Peterskirche; a similar situation existed at Harvard Divinity School where I had studied earlier.

But this Christian framework for the critical study of the Bible changed dramatically in the late twentieth century. Contributing to this loss of a trinitarian, Christian hermeneutic as the contextual basis for the interpretation of the Bible was the dramatic increase of religion departments in secular colleges and universities in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Certainly by the 1970s, the trinitarian and christological basis of interpretation for the historical-critical method began to be abandoned in many academic contexts, eventually to be transformed and grossly distorted by the various ideologies of the left, whether claiming to be Christian or not. This is the sorry situation that we find ourselves in today.

*Scripture as the Communication of
God to Sinners*

Given the gross distortion of Scripture that surrounds us at so many points in today's churches, it is urgent for us to return to the principles of biblical interpretation that guided the Lutheran Reformation and, before that, the classic heritage of the church catholic. If Scripture is to be heard and experienced as the real presence of Christ, it must be encountered in the context of trinitarian faith.

Together with the early church and the reformers, Lutherans need to reassert that Scripture, that is, the Bible understood as a unified whole from Genesis through Revelation and finding its interpretative center in the Christ event, is the true presence of God in Jesus Christ. Every page refers to God's great plan of salvation. The reference to the cross allows all texts, "even those that at first glance have little to do with this message," to be related to this "unifying mystery."¹⁴ Jesus, his earliest followers, and the writers of the New Testament understood such an intimate relationship to the Old Testament story to be self-evident, whether the references were to Moses, Jonah, David, Isaiah, Melchizedek, or the psalms. In the New Testament, God's revelation to His people Israel remains foundational and is actualized anew through His self-giving in the incarnation of Jesus of Nazareth.

The creeds of the church and the Lutheran Confessions assert with clarity that an authentic interpretation of Scripture presupposes both the prior redeeming action of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—as well as their continuing presence within the interpreting community. In the first place, such a trinitarian interpretation recognizes, together with the church's earliest theologians, that Jesus is the definitive revelation of God. His life and ministry, his suffering, crucifixion, death, and resurrection is not only a word about God; he *is* the Word of God incarnate, the

Word made flesh, the *humanation* of God.¹⁵ The continued presence of the risen Jesus through the Spirit in the community that worships him leads to the affirmation of trinitarian theology as the most adequate manner in which to understand the revelation of God in creation, in the history of Israel, in Jesus, and in the church.

Because "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8), a trinitarian hermeneutic must of necessity be a hermeneutic of consistency and coherence. It cannot mean one thing to one generation of believers and something radically different to the next. Vincent of Lerins, a fifth-century theologian, put the matter well: "Now in the catholic church itself we take the greatest care to hold that which has

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been believed everywhere, always, and by all."¹⁶ These words cohere well with the earlier citation from Brown stating that it is illegitimate for some in the contemporary church to claim independence from the great tradition of the church catholic, which the Lutheran Confessions themselves so adamantly confirm. This assertion of independence from "anything *but* myself" is a troubling sign of a post-modern secular culture to which we as Lutherans must be alert, because the threat of this virus is very much present in our midst.

When Lutherans speak of the Bible, they do so in a very specific way, a way that is substantially different from the religious left, the religious right, and many other interpretations currently fashionable in the academy. Because of our baptism into the body of Jesus Christ we have, accord-

ing to the Lutheran Confessions, also pledged fidelity to the apostolic witness and teachings transmitted by the orthodox expressions of the church catholic. Thus it is not by chance that the Augsburg Confession opens with a recitation of the three great symbols of the universal church, the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed, all formulated by the early church gathering in councils through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is precisely to this catholicity of the church that the authors of the Augsburg Confession appeal at the end of Article 21 when they summarize their teaching in this way: "This is about the sum of our teaching. As can be seen, there is nothing here that departs from the Scriptures or the catholic church or the church of Rome, in so far as the ancient church is known to us from its writers."¹⁷ Can the ELCA today make the same affirmation?

When the Augsburg Confession speaks of the authority of Scripture, it is precisely that Scripture in which the triune God Who has spoken the true Word in Jesus Christ continues to encounter us with His present Word. That very Scripture was shaped and given final canonical form by the early church and councils through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Because of these conciliar decisions that Lutherans affirm and adhere to, we are trinitarian and not gnostic. We hold that the gospel of Matthew is authoritative but the gospel of Peter is not, and that the writings of Paul are normative but the Acts of Thecla are not. Since the Bible is the book of the church, it is the church universal empowered by the Holy Spirit, and not self-established ideological movements, that have the right and authority to interpret Scripture according to a trinitarian hermeneutic that recognizes both the priority and the finality of the crucified and risen Lord, and therefore the ultimate claim of Jesus Christ upon the interpreter.

*The Empowerment of Alien
Hermeneutics in the ELCA*

What drives the non-trinitarian, alien hermeneutic that empowers much of the ELCA's secularist tendencies? Here we need to have a brief but honest conversation about "feminism" and how this secular ideology has infiltrated churches and academic institutions as well as others in the cultural elite.

Precisely because the term "feminism" is so ambiguous and malleable, it is fraught with enormous danger since it may signify one thing to certain audiences (e.g., advocating the just cause of women), yet have a far more sweeping and intentional agenda to others (e.g., the transformation of traditional sexuality). Having devoted most of my teaching years to the education of women, and having had a hand in educating the first wave of women to go to seminary (one of whom is currently an ELCA bishop and another a seminary president), I stand firmly behind the substantial advances that allow women to contribute their God-given gifts for the benefit of both particular societies as well as to the larger world community. I have been deeply privileged to participate in these dramatic and positive steps forward for women that have resulted in enormous benefit for the entire human family.

Having taught almost four decades at Smith College, the largest women's college in the U.S., however, I have also become sensitized to the broader implications of the term "feminism" through our graduates, including Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem, through my colleagues—particularly in women's studies, queer studies, and philosophy—and through my students. As a result of this intense exposure to feminist thought and practice, I have come to realize that, at its core, feminism is an atheistic ideology. Many of its advocates argue that gender roles and identity as well as sexuality, especially heteronormativity, are social constructs that must be questioned

and critiqued. Given this perspective, feminism is often closely aligned with gay, lesbian, and transgender studies. Many feminists support the transgender movement since it defies the traditional distinction between "man" and "woman."

Further, many feminists argue that justice involves the elimination of diverse structures of authority and power that legitimate male prerogatives. Androcentric bias must be eradicated. This frequently results in the encouragement of "egalitarian

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lifestyles" such as cohabitation, open marriage, and other forms of what is referred to as "responsible non-monogamy." The goal for some is the replacement of the traditional family, since marriage is perceived as a form of slavery for women. Often it has been said to me that every woman must be willing to be identified as a lesbian in order to be completely feminist.

The practitioners of feminist ideology frequently use their newly found power within religious institutions to develop new and revised structures of belief that more appropriately cohere with their non-Christian philosophical orientation, including neopagan and goddess spirituality. When such feminist ideology attempts to merge with remnants of classical Christian

theology, heterodoxy—also known as a theology of inclusion or acceptance—emerges. This very theology of acceptance and inclusion, however, is neither inclusive nor tolerant of those with whom it disagrees. As a Lutheran Christian, I continue to support unequivocally the right of women to use their God-given talents to the fullest and to overcome all cultural barriers hindering such advancement, while simultaneously rejecting the non-Christian philosophical presuppositions that permeate much of the "feminist" movement.

Since most of our current seminary professors received their graduate training at secular institutions like Harvard or Union, dominated today by a variety of conflicting hermeneutics, alien and feminist ideologies quickly make their way into the life of the church via many of these seminary faculty. With incredible speed, trinitarian hermeneutics are being replaced by an alien hermeneutic that touts secular justice as the new canon within the canon—whatever that ambiguous and slippery term "justice" may mean—a canon that advocates above all the rightness of gay marriage as a key dimension of the theology of acceptance.

I would argue that whether it is part three of the current ELCA sexuality study, "Free in Christ to Serve the Neighbor: Lutherans Talk about Human Sexuality,"¹⁸ or Craig Nesan's 2006 lecture to the conference of bishops, "The Authority of Scripture," both represent an anti-trinitarian hermeneutic in which a theology of acceptance has been substituted for a theology of redemption. The starting point for both is a vague and secularized view of "justice" that assumes that sexual activity between gay partners is permissible and should be not only acceptable within the Christian church but also that such partnerships should be officially blessed by the community in Christ. Once these documents are read through the hermeneutical lens of a theology of acceptance and inclusion, driven heav-

ily by atheistic feminism, one begins to understand the unusual selection of Galatians as well as the rationale for what is emphasized, distorted, or omitted.

*Alien Hermeneutics at Work
within ELCA Documents*

By selecting Galatians as its foundational text, the 2006 ELCA study “Free in Christ to Serve the Neighbor” provides an excellent example of a hermeneutic of ambiguity. It appears that the Galatians study was supposed to provide congregations of the ELCA a way to understand classic Lutheran law-gospel theology as a theological basis for discerning and determining ethical decisions. Not only has

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this goal not been achieved but, given its explicit setting in this study document, the clear impression—whether intended or not—is that Galatians has something *specifically* to do with human sexuality. Given the fact that an explicit contextual linkage between Galatians and human sexuality has been forged, one must ask whether, within a trinitarian understanding of the canon, it is possible to discuss the theme of sexuality without also exploring (for example) the relevant parts of Matthew or 1 Corinthians, biblical books that actually present foundational material for discerning the purpose and holiness of human sexuality. How will the apparently exclusive association of Galatians with human sexuality be perceived and employed throughout the church? Are we not clearly in danger of giving further impetus to “playing first-century bible land”¹⁹—selecting or neglecting those texts that best fit predetermined agendas? The fundamentalisms of the left

and of the right are ready and willing to do exactly this. By linking Galatians alone so closely to the study of sexuality, and by omitting consideration of the broader biblical canon, the operational criteria for a secularized theology of acceptance are readily at hand for those who wish to move in such a direction.²⁰

To those for whom a theology of acceptance has become normative, one must, as a consequence, both limit justification to acceptance and eliminate all moral demands from it. In order to accomplish this goal, Galatians is removed from its historical and canonical context. Then, over and over again, the law is hammered as something detrimental to the Christian life without ever defining or discussing what exactly the law is. Assertions such as “these affirmations remind us that we live in the gospel, free in Christ from the condemnation of the law”²¹ demonstrate a fundamental misunderstanding of Pauline theology. Paul asserts that the “law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good” (Romans 7:12) precisely because it is *sin* and not the law that perverts God’s will. If Christian anthropology is to be properly understood, the Pauline as well as the broader biblical concept of sin needs far more comprehensive treatment than this ELCA document provides.

Nessan, in the lecture previously referred to, moves in a remarkably parallel and superficial manner, fully misconstruing the Pauline understanding of justification. Not only is he unable to relate the moral demands of the new life in Christ to justification, but he also drives a wedge between justification and justice—which, I would argue, is an integrated and cohesive concept in the Bible—and, as a result of these fundamental misunderstandings, calls for “justice” to replace “justification” as “a new canon within the canon.”²²

But let us return to the use of Galatians in the most recent sexuality study. Even if the purpose of choosing Galatians was to discuss law-

gospel theology rather than sexuality per se, can this epistle be properly interpreted on the subject of the law in complete isolation from Romans? If we recognize that Pauline theology is both contingent—that is, addressed to specific and unique situations—and also coherent, that is, having a logical unity, then at a minimum a Pauline letter must be read within the context of all of Paul’s letters. Recognizing the coherence of Pauline theology, and recalling Bornkamm’s helpful designation of Romans as “Paul’s last will and testament,”²³ ought we not factor in what Paul has to say about the law in his final letter?

Given all the negativity about the law in the sexuality study and in Nessan’s lecture, let us listen carefully to the following words from Romans.

Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law. (3:31)

For sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good. (7:11–12)

For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. (8:3–4)

One should also note the specific and reciprocal relationship between love and the commandments in Romans.

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet’; and any other commandment, are

summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. (13:8–10)

In light of these Pauline assertions, it should be evident how fundamentally flawed the perspective in the sexuality study really is. In describing an evangelical hermeneutic simplistically “as a gospel way of interpreting,” this study cleverly manipulates the theme of “law and gospel” in such a way as to strip the call to holiness from the gospel, as well as to convert the gospel’s call for the continuing transformation of the new life in Christ into some bland, vague, and incoherent love of the neighbor. The clear meaning of justification as both “gift” and

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“responsibility” is rejected because, for both the sexuality study and Nesson, that means “law” and not “gospel,” and anyone moving in that direction is simply a “literalist.” An antinomianism and gnosticism of the most insidious kind is at work here, completely misunderstanding the full and rich meaning of “justification” and failing to see the close interplay and unbreakable link between the indicative and the imperative inherent in the gospel of the New Testament.

According to the presuppositions at work in the current sexuality study, passages like 1 Thessalonians 4:1–8 and the role of exhortation for the new life in Christ evidently have no relevance.

Finally, brothers and sisters, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that, as you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God (as, in fact, you are doing), you should do so more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. For this

is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from fornication; that each one of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honor, not with lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one wrong or exploit a brother or sister in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, just as we have already told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. For God did not call us to impurity but in holiness. Therefore whoever rejects this rejects not human authority but God, who also gives His Holy Spirit to you.

Given this overall discussion, allow me to make a suggestion: namely, that we should consider a temporary moratorium on the use of the phrase “law and gospel,” given its radical misappropriation and misinterpretation in much contemporary theology. An alternative language needs to be found that explains what it is that we actually intend to say. Increasingly used by the revisionists or, as I prefer to call them, the sectarians, this terminology is being successfully employed to undermine both the biblical meaning of gospel as well as of justification.

Reaffirming the Gospel of Justification in its Fullness

Given the simplified and distorted views of justification prevalent today, not least Nesson’s separation of justice from justification, we need to take a brief look at Paul’s understanding of this theological concept. In fact, I would argue that the more Lutherans rigidify and narrow the dynamic concept “justification” from its far more expansive meaning in Paul and Luther, the more the door is opened to the revisionists and their ideological reframing of the moral life. This is, therefore, an urgent moment to go back to our biblical roots and ask once again just what is meant by the term “justification.” If we agree that it

refers to sinful human beings who have accepted God’s gracious and merciful gift of reconciliation, how does this new reality realize itself in terms of a renewed moral life? Further, it is necessary to ask in what ways this new life, resulting from God’s justifying action to the sinner through Christ, is able to discern and to do the will of God.

The Lutheran-Roman Catholic *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, agreed to and signed by the Lutheran World Federation and the Vatican in Augsburg, Germany, on October 31, 1999, stands among the clearest articulations of the meaning and consequences of “justification.”

In faith we together hold the conviction that justification is the work of the triune God. The Father sent His Son into the world to save sinners. The foundation and presupposition of justification is the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ. Justification thus means that Christ himself is our righteousness, in which we share through the Holy Spirit in accord with the will of the Father. Together we confess: *By grace alone, in faith in Christ’s saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, Who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works.*²⁴

As a working definition, one might say that justification brings to health the diseased, broken relationship between God and humanity, between the creator and His creation. This healing, this bringing to wholeness, is a

What is the intention of the healing power of justification?

completely unmerited gift on the part of God through the blood of Jesus Christ (cf. Romans 5:9). But what is the *intention* of this healing power that takes place in the act of justification

and reconciliation? What is the relationship of God's gift to His "equipping and calling us to good works"?

*Luther had it right:
"Good works do not
make a good person,
but a good person
does good works."*

And, finally, one must ask: if there is a gift, an indicative, is there not also a responsibility, an imperative?

The conclusion of the paragraph cited from the JDDJ speaks about an irrevocable interrelationship between grace and good works, specifically, that the reception of God's reconciling grace leads to a renewal of the heart and calls us to good works. Particularly in light of polemics at the time of the Reformation, many in the Protestant tradition have become allergic to the term "good works," as if it were some Roman Catholic invention. In fact, the term goes back to Jesus and the New Testament. "You are the light of the world," says Jesus. "A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your *good works* and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:14–16).²⁵ Paul rephrases this thought as "faith working through love" (Galatians 5:6). To further help his congregations understand more fully their new life in Christ, the apostle uses three terms in overlapping yet distinct ways: justification, sanctification, and salvation.²⁶

Although analogies are always imperfect, they may provide, at least to some extent, helpful clarifications. The relationship of "grace" and "good works," so encumbered by Protestant–Roman Catholic hostilities since the sixteenth-century Reformation and the subsequent Council of Trent,

might be viewed in terms of medical terminology. Following a medical checkup one may be told that a serious disease has set in, perhaps breast or prostate cancer, and that only some form of radical intervention, such as chemotherapy or surgery, will resolve the problem. One can receive this gift or one can deny the need for such radical intervention and opt instead for a self-improvement program that might perhaps include vigorous exercise, a significantly altered diet as well as megadoses of vitamins and herbal formulas. As important as these good efforts, these "good works," may be, they will not resolve the fundamental health issue. Only a radical medical intervention from outside oneself contains the potential for healing. This radical entry into the human condition from beyond ourselves can, by analogy, be referred to as "grace," as "free gift."

However, such a radical intervention of grace does not instantaneously complete the process of healing–reconciliation–salvation. When a surgeon, for example, shares the good news following surgery that she was able to remove all the cancerous cells, the patient is certainly not at that moment fully healed. Similarly, one might say that disease and illness have been overcome, but only with the further aid of medication, rest, prayer, and exercise is one able to be what one was meant to be, namely, a healthy human being. Two important points need to be emphasized: (1) that surgery as radical intervention does not lead *immediately* to a state of full recovery, although it does allow for that possibility, and (2) recovering from illness results not only in being freed from disease and pain, i.e., from self-absorption, but also in being free to serve others.

Justification by faith is akin to such a process. The presupposition is that human beings, in terms of their relationship with God, are in a state of ill health, sin. This is a theme that is emphasized throughout the Pauline letters (e.g., Romans 3:9–20). As

a result of God's radical entry into human history through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the diseased state between the human and God can be healed, reconciled, and justified.

God's radically gracious act of healing and reconciliation cannot be brought into being as a result of human capacity and can be received only as an entirely free gift. It has not been achieved through individual efforts, human actions, or through the accumulation of "good works." Now, however, that reconciliation, justification, has become a reality, the disciple who has received this healing power for new life in Christ must continue to mature in Christ and receive the medicine of immortality—the eucharist, prayer, and meditation. This is what Paul has in mind when he speaks of "progress" (Philippians 1:25), "sanctification" (1 Thessalonians 4:3),

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and "transformation" (II Corinthians 3:18). Paul stresses that the new life moves toward completeness in Jesus Christ and that this persistent process of transformation is a gift that comes from "the Lord, the Spirit." But this growth in new life is a not a private set of activities that takes place only between the believer and Jesus. Quite the contrary, this becoming more like Christ allows the disciple to actualize faith as an activity of love (Galatians 5:6) toward the other, toward the neighbor. Supported and nurtured by the body of Christ that is the church, all activities, all such "good works," all such acts of love are intended to upbuild and encourage and console

the entire community of faith (1 Corinthians 14:3).

Luther had it quite right: “Good works do not make a good person, but a good person does good works.”²⁷ Good works do not bring about healing, but once healing takes place one begins to be free to love the other with the same sacrificial love that characterized God’s self-donation through the suffering and death of Jesus. As God was wounded for us, so must we in turn become wounded healers²⁸ to those who need to be embraced by the intimacy of Christ’s love.

It is evident that one’s understanding of justification will influence both one’s biblical hermeneutic as well as one’s understanding of the relationship of faith to the moral life. Thus we need to be alert to some of the ways in which the meaning of justification can be distorted.

In the first place, we must recognize that the gift given in justification does not have *automatic* consequences, i.e., some kind of lifetime immunization or guarantee. Rather, it remains a gift only as long as the gift is received with daily fidelity and obedience to Christ. Never to be overlooked is the fact that the believer *participates in* but does not thereby possess the righteousness of God.²⁹ Justification is both “*Gabe und Aufgabe*” (gift *and* responsibility) and because it contains not only a present but also a future dimension, it is “a matter of promise *and* expectation.”³⁰

Secondly, the gift given in justification calls all recipients to a life of holiness. By failure to recognize this essential component of justification, many in the ELCA have pursued alien and false ideological agendas, especially a political agenda that has more in common with a theology of secular good works than a theology of redemption. What, we must inquire, is the crucial connection between the already realized dimension of salvation experienced in justification and that future, consummated dimension of salvation, if not “obedience”? For Paul, faith always means obedience to the will of God above all else, as

revealed in a trinitarian understanding of Scripture. Therefore faith contains an active element as both believers and the communities in Christ respond to the gift as well as the claim of God.

For Paul, justification both initiates and enables the life in Christ from beginning to end. As human beings participate in the revelation of the sovereign creator in Jesus Christ by faith, or as the apostle alternatively describes such participation as “standing in the gospel” (1 Corinthians 15:1, rsv), their broken relationship with God becomes whole and is restored. God now offers the believer in Christ, through the gift of His Spirit, the possibility of leading a new life that is both obedient to Him and responsive to the needs of the neighbor. The Spirit permits such a person to live “in holiness,” frequently translated from the Greek as “sanctification.” The life of sanctification and transformation (II Corinthians 3:18), a gift granted by God, will lead to the final fulfillment of that which God began in justification, namely, the consummated gift of salvation on the last day.³¹

To bring our discussion of justification to a close, I would suggest that we in the ELCA must guard against the various distortions of this biblical teaching that include, on the one hand, the trivialization of justification in such radically individualistic and simplistic terms that it is stripped of its power, and, on the other, largely in response to the emptiness of the first, the creation of a new works-righteousness that seems to suggest that if we write enough political memos and do enough works on behalf of social justice we will save ourselves and the world in the eyes of God.

Let me conclude with the reminder that alien hermeneutics, the captivity of Scripture to a theology of acceptance and inclusion, is not new to our time. Luther had to fight remarkably similar battles and it might be useful for us to hear what Luther has to say about the distortion of Scripture in his day:

Wiles and evasions for the distorting of the Scriptures St. Paul, in Ephesians iv, calls in Greek *κυβεία* and *πανουργία*, that is, “sleight of hand,” “jugglers’ tricks,” “gamesters’ tricks,” because they toss the words of God to and fro, as the gamesters throw their dice; and because, like the jugglers who give things new noses and change the whole appearance of them, they take from the Scriptures their single, simple, constant sense, and blind our eyes, so that we waver to and fro, hold fast to no sure interpretation, and are like men whom they have bewitched or tricked, while they play with us as gamblers with their dice.³²

With Luther we must fervently pray that all who bear the name of Christ may return to the life-giving power of the Scriptures so that we can discern their “single, simple, and constant sense,” the presence of God in Jesus Christ who has redeemed us and called us to obedience through his death and resurrection. LF

KARL P. DONFRIED is an ELCA pastor and has served as the Elizabeth A. Woodson Professor Emeritus of Religion and Biblical Literature at Smith College and the 2006 Joseph Gregory McCarthy Professor of New Testament at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome.

Notes

1. “Rev. Dr. Carl F. H. Henry, 90, Brain of the Evangelical Movement,” *The New York Times* (December 13, 2003). See also the penetrating article by Mark Lilla, “The Politics of God,” *The New York Times Magazine* (August 19, 2007): 28ff. Lilla comments that we “have chosen to keep our politics unilluminated by divine revelation” (55).

2. Karl P. Donfried, *Who Owns the Bible? Toward the Recovery of a Biblical Hermeneutic* (New York: Crossroads, 2006), 1–19.

3. See, for example, the article by Marcus Borg, “Jesus and the Kingdom of God,” *The Lutheran* (June 2007).

4. Philip Turner, “An Unworkable Theology,” *First Things* 154 (2005): 12.

5. Donfried, *Who Owns the Bible?*, 154–65.
6. *Ibid.*, 84–85, 150–53.
7. Raymond E. Brown, “The Contribution of Historical Biblical Criticism to Ecumenical Church Discussion,” in *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: The Ratzinger Conference on Bible and Church*, ed. Richard John Neuhaus (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989): 46. My italics.
8. Turner, 10–12.
9. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R. H. Fuller, with Irmgard Booth (New York: Collier, 1963), 45–47.
10. Joseph Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1987), 281.
11. Bonhoeffer, 45–47.
12. Turner, 11.
13. Exemplary among such contributions is Raymond E. Brown’s *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997).
14. Carlo Maria Martini, “The School of the Word,” *Worship* 61 (1987): 196.
15. See Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 15.
16. Vincent of Lerins, *Commonitorium*, in *Documents of the Christian Church*, ed. Henry Bettenson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 83.
17. *The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1959), 47 (Latin).
18. *Free in Christ to Serve the Neighbor: Lutherans Talk about Human Sexuality*. ELCA Studies on Sexuality: Journey Together Faithfully, Part Three (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006).
19. A phrase frequently used by Krister Stendahl in the classroom and beyond.
20. For example, “Dwelling in the Word,” the bible study on Galatians 5 led by Timothy J. Wengert on August 10, 2007 at the ELCA churchwide assembly.
21. *Free in Christ to Serve the Neighbor*, 68.
22. Craig Nesson, “The Authority of Scripture,” 2006 lecture to the conference of bishops, 18.
23. Günther Bornkamm, “The Letter to the Romans as Paul’s Last Will and Testament,” in *The Romans Debate*, ed. Karl P. Donfried (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2001), 16–28.
24. *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), paragraph 15.
25. My italics.
26. Karl P. Donfried, *Paul, Thessalonica, and Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 253–92.
27. Martin Luther, “A Treatise on Christian Liberty,” in *Three Treatises*, trans. C. M. Jacobs, A. T. W. Steinhaeuser, and W. A. Lambert (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1943), 271.
28. Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (Garden City: Image, 1979).
29. J. A. Ziesler, *The Meaning of Righteousness in Paul: A Linguistic and Theological Inquiry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 160. What is disappointing here is that Ziesler’s rich insights are not carried through more consistently, especially with regard to the relationship between justification and last judgment.
30. Ernst Käsemann, “Righteousness of God,” in *New Testament Questions of Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), 170. My italics.
31. See further the discussion in George T. Montague, *Growth in Christ* (Fribourg: Regina Mundi, 1961).
32. “An Argument in Defence of All the Articles of Dr. Martin Luther Wrongly Condemned in the Roman Bull,” *Works of Martin Luther* III (Philadelphia: United Lutheran, 1915–32): 32ff.

A READING FROM LEVITICUS 16:8–10, 21–22

THE GOAT AZAZEL

Aaron shall cast lots over the two goats, one lot for the LORD and the other lot for Azazel. And Aaron shall present the goat on which the lot fell for the LORD and use it as a sin offering, but the goat on which the lot fell for Azazel shall be presented alive before the LORD to make atonement over it, that it may be sent away into the wilderness to Azazel.

And Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins. And he shall put them on the head of the goat and send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who is in readiness.

The goat shall bear all their iniquities on itself to a remote area, and he shall let the goat go free in the wilderness.