

Pondering the Central Thoughts of the Lutheran Faith
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From the Epistle: **But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother.**" Galatians 4.26.

"I know that in me, that is, in my flesh dwelleth no good thing." This confession is foundational if one is to understand the Christian life. We tend to believe that the issue of the Reformation is over the Christian faith, and indeed many believed that at the time of the Reformation.

However, it has become obvious even to the first generation of Lutheran Reformers that the issue of the faith impacts the issues of the Christian life. Errors in Christian doctrine become evident from errors in the teaching and practice of the Christian life.

Here is the key to the Lutheran faith, as it is originally expressed by St. Paul, and as it is proclaimed in the Augsburg Confession in Article II: "Our churches teach that since the fall of Adam, all who are naturally born are born with sin, that is, without the fear of God, without trust in God, and with the

inclination to sin, called concupiscence. The term concupiscence means an inner disease and original vice that, in itself, is truly sin. The presence of concupiscence in every person from the day of conception damns and brings eternal death on all those who are not born anew. Hence, Jesus declares, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."

Because of this pervasive sinfulness that we confess prior to every Service of God's House that we are poor, miserable sinners. Some come to visit us and find themselves revolting against this confession, and they never return.

The confession that I, as a Christian, am a poor, miserable sinner is not comfortable, but it's true! It confession speaks not just of

some events in my life. It speaks of who I am.

And when we speak about being poor, miserable sinners, we also are known to say: it is not that we are sinners because we happen to sin; rather, we happen to sin because we are sinners from conception -- born sinners, we are! Hence, as the apostle teaches: in me there dwells no good thing.

This is where and why Christ is sent to us. He is our atonement; He is our satisfaction before God the Father. As Article III of our chief Confession says, "There is one Christ, true God and true man, who was born of the Blessed Virgin Mary, who truly suffered, was crucified, died, and was buried. He did this to reconcile the Father to us and to be a sacrifice, not only for original guilt, but also for all actual sins of mankind." Christ reconciles us to the Father -- that is, He makes us acceptable to the Father. He makes the Father to be at peace with us. He does this on the cross. Here we face a mystery: From eternity God loves us, yet because of the Fall into sin,

God's holy and just wrath is against us. Be clear on this: Where God's wrath is against us; God Himself is against us, notwithstanding the fact that He still, yet, always loves us.

Out of this paradox comes the gift of the Savior. Because of the sacrifice of the holy cross, the Father sets His anger by. We call this the "Atonement," or, the "vicarious satisfaction." In Christ, the need of this atonement is because in me there dwells no good thing. In Christ, the benefit of the vicarious satisfaction is that God is reconciled to you. This saving work is the basis for the clear call from St. Paul, "Be reconciled to God." Be at peace with the One who is at peace with you! The manner in which this atonement and satisfaction is called "Justification." Justification is God's judicial act, His legal verdict.

Article IV of the Augsburg says, our basic declaration of what we believe the Holy Scriptures teach, "People are freely justified for Christ's

sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake. By His death, Christ made satisfaction for our sins. God counts this faith for righteousness, in His sight." So, to be a Christian -- to have faith in God the Son's sacrifice and the God the Father's verdict, on the basis of God the Holy Spirit's work through the Gospel, is to be a forgiven sinner, to be at peace with God, and to know His love.

Thus, our Apology – remember, not meaning an “I’m sorry,” but rather meaning our formal explanation of the Augsburg Confession – our Apology show that good works do not cause justification; rather, they are the result of justification: "These things cannot happen until we have been justified through faith and regenerated" Ap V (III) 5. So then what ought I think of myself? On the basis of what my mind, will, emotions, and

conscience say to me - it's an ugly picture, and I lie to myself when I think otherwise. But, on the basis of what God has done, what God has said to me –“The Jerusalem above is free – and she is our mother,” your visage is now your Savior's face. That smile is stronger and truer and more faithful than any other thing you can imagine or know or believe about yourself, in the sight of God the Father. That smile shines on you this day, especially for this Laetare, the day of refreshment in the midst of the season of Lent.

The smile of God the Father upon you is a certain and permanent blessing upon you, for Jesus' sake, through the Holy Spirit's effective work to keep you in the faith. This is your God, the Blessed Holy Trinity, so works to create and keep your faith, that you are able to enjoy the presence of your God today, and forever!