GOD'S GIFT OF SANCTIFICATION:

A CONFESSIONAL LUTHERAN PERSPECTIVE

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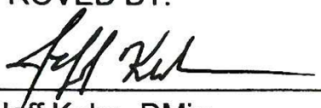

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ABSTRACT

GOD'S GIFT OF SANCTIFICATION:

A CONFESSIONAL LUTHERAN PERSPECTIVE

Name: Wiebe, Steven Charles

The research question for this project is, "How do Cornerstone Lutheran Church parishioners navigate sanctification?" This research explores how parishioners at Cornerstone Lutheran Church in Kelowna, British Columbia, navigate Christian life from a confessional Lutheran perspective, adhering to the bounds of biblical teachings as interpreted through the Lutheran Confessions and the historic creeds.

The methodology employed was Participatory Action Research. The participant co-researchers consisted of all eight adult founding members of the congregation, who engaged in three iterative interventions. Each intervention included a town hall meeting and individual sessions with each co-researcher. The interventions followed a cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting.

God's Word is a means of grace that gives believers faith to trust in Him. Demonstrating this, the second intervention resulted in a breakthrough, where the co-researchers recognized that 1 Corinthians 10:1-6 instructs believers to view the Book of Exodus as a model for their own Christian lives. This insight led to the development of the Seven Signposts of Christian Life in Exodus.

Justification:

1. The Ten Plagues / Exorcism
2. The Passover / Easter Celebration and the Lord's Supper
3. The Crossing of the Red Sea / Baptism

Sanctification:

4. Daily Bread / The Lord's Prayer
5. The Ten Commandments / Pentecost Celebration
6. The Tabernacle / Advent Celebration
7. Sabbath Rest / Weekly Worship / Eternal Life

The Apostles' Creed is a fundamental element in confessional Lutheranism. It offers a concise summary of biblical teachings and is recited during liturgical worship services. The co-researchers aimed to present the creed as a unifying framework for understanding the trinitarian nature of God's gift of sanctification.

Therefore, following the First Article, the Christian life involves growing in alignment with the eternal will of God the Father, as articulated in the Ten Commandments. According to the Second Article, the Christian life includes a deeper appreciation for the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ Jesus in the blessed exchange: believers' sins for Christ's righteousness. Regarding the Third Article, the Christian life embraces an increasing expression of the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

Ephesians 2:8-10

[Justification]

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

[Sanctification]

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you, Jennifer, my beloved wife, for your loving support, and Luke, Sophia, and Claire, our cherished children, for your constant encouragement. May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Dr. Martin Luther's posting of *The Ninety-Five Theses*[1] marks the beginning of the Reformation on October 31, 1517. Three years later, on June 15, 1520, Luther was officially notified by the Roman Catholic Church; Pope Leo X had promulgated a papal bull, Exsurge Domine (Latin for "Arise, O Lord"), which gave Luther sixty days to recant or face excommunication. In response, Luther wrote five treatises that year. The third, *The Freedom of a Christian*,[2] dated September 6, 1520, is addressed directly to Leo X, the Pope in Rome. In this treatise, Luther refers to Leo X as a Daniel in Babylon, encouraging him to worship the one true God, "the living God, enduring forever" (Dn 6:26 ESV).[3] Luther presents Leo X with an insightful discussion of Christian life by dividing the Gospel into two parts:

> A Christian is lord of all, completely free of everything.
>
> A Christian is a servant, completely attentive to the needs of all.[4]

The first part of the Gospel, "A Christian is lord of all," refers to the gift of justification through Christ Jesus. A person is made right with God through Christ. Jesus is the propitiation for the sins of the world (1 Jn 2:2) and covers those who are naked and ashamed (i.e., repentant sinners) with His perfect righteousness (Gn 3:21, Gal

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[1] Martin Luther, *Martin Luther's Ninety-Five Theses*, ed. Stephen J. Nichols (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2021).

[2] Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, trans. Mark D. Tranvik (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008).

[3] All Bible quotations are from the English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016).

[4] Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, 50.

3:27). God rescues sinners from the domain of darkness and transfers them to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom they receive redemption, the forgiveness of sins (Col 1:13-14). Justification is entirely the work and gift of Christ Jesus. This is certain; He has accomplished it; it is finished (Jn 19:30). This is the righteousness of God through faith in Christ Jesus for all who believe (Rom 3:22).

The second part of the Gospel, "A Christian is a servant," refers to the gift of sanctification in Christ Jesus. When one is set free from sin, they become a servant of God (Rom 6:22). Believers are being conformed to the image of Christ (Rom 8:29). By God's grace, Christians "put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh to gratify its desires" (Rom 13:14). Christ Jesus equips the assembly of believers (the saints) for:

> To equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ (Eph 4:12-15).

Christ Jesus empowers believers to engage in His ministry, speaking truth in love while discerning the deceitful schemes and trickery of false teachers. By rejecting the bondage of error, one embraces the freedom found in truth. Confessional Lutherans participate in discussions about what to believe, teach, and confess, as well as what to reject and condemn.[5] This research explores how Cornerstone Lutheran Church parishioners navigate the inherent tensions in their sanctification.

[5] Paul Timothy McCain, ed., *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions: A Reader's Edition of the Book of Concord*, 2nd ed (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), xiv.

Ministry Context

On April 21, 2024, I accepted a call to serve as pastor of Cornerstone Lutheran Church, an emerging independent, confessional Lutheran congregation in Kelowna, British Columbia. The congregation and I began exploring confessional Lutheran synods that might be suitable for us. Later that year, on October 8, 2024, I completed the colloquy process with the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod and was added to their roster. The congregation has become a preaching station affiliated with this church body and is considering formal membership in the synod. The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod is a confessional Lutheran synod distinct from progressive mainline Lutheran synods such as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada.

God's Word is the source and norm of confessional Lutheran doctrine. Confessional Lutherans believe that the Bible is the inspired Word of the living God and maintain that it is both incapable of and free from error. Confessional Lutherans agree with the *Statement of Faith* of Trinity Western University, Article 2, which states that God's Gospel is authoritatively revealed in the Bible:

> We believe that God has spoken in the Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments, through the words of human authors. As the verbally inspired Word of God, the Bible is without error in the original writings, the complete revelation of His will for salvation, and the ultimate authority by which every realm of human knowledge and endeavour should be judged. Therefore, it is to be believed in all that it teaches, obeyed in all that it requires, and trusted in all that it promises.[6]

[6] TWU Board of Governors, ed., "Statement of Faith," Trinity Western University, November 6, 2009, https://www.twu.ca/sites/default/files/2025-03/MCOM%20Statement%20of%20Faith_V1.3.pdf.

Confessional Lutherans believe that the confession of faith, as outlined in the *Book of Concord,*[7] provides a clear exposition and explanation of God's Word. This conviction leads confessional Lutheran congregations to subscribe quia (Latin for "because" it is faithful to the Bible) rather than quatenus (Latin for "insofar as" it agrees with the Bible) to the *Book of Concord*. Consequently, the primary role of a confessional Lutheran pastor is to teach and preach God's Word in accordance with confessional Lutheran theology. As Peter states in Acts 4:20, "For we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard."

The *Book of Concord*, Augsburg Confession, Article VII, the Church, states:

> Our churches teach that the one holy Church is to remain forever. The Church is the congregation of the saints [Ps 149:1] in which the Gospel is purely taught, and the Sacraments are correctly administered. For the true unity of the Church, it is enough to agree about the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. It is not necessary that human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies instituted by men, should be the same everywhere. As Paul says, "One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all (Eph 4:5-6).[8]

Confessional Lutheran parishioners attend worship services to receive God's gifts through His Word and Sacraments. They accept these gifts with gratitude and praise. In Christ Jesus, believers are granted the gifts of justification (i.e., forgiveness of sins and the righteousness of Christ) and sanctification (i.e., new life). Confessional Lutherans follow the traditional Divine Service liturgy as presented in the *Lutheran*

[7] McCain, *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*.

[8] McCain, *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, 34.

Service Book[9] or *Christian Worship*.[10] Confessional Lutheran congregations regard the preaching of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments (i.e., Baptism and the Lord's Supper) as the primary elements of worship and central to a pastor's ministry (Acts 6:4).

Problem and Purpose

Navigating the Christian life is a complex challenge for parishioners at Cornerstone Lutheran Church. These parishioners aim to deepen their understanding of what the Bible teaches about the Christian life. Their study is bound to the Bible, as interpreted in the Lutheran Confessions, and the historic creeds, such as the Apostles' Creed. They have chosen Luther's perspective on the two parts of the Gospel—justification and sanctification—as the starting point for their exploration.

Luther's understanding of these two parts of the Gospel is established from the Bible. Jesus instructs Paul to open the eyes of unbelievers so they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, i.e., justification, and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in Him (Acts 26:18). The Bible explains that believers are washed (i.e., baptized), sanctified, and justified in the name of the Lord Christ Jesus and by the Spirit of our God (1 Cor 6:11). The Bible promises that those whom God predestined, are also called, justified,

[9] Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, ed., *Lutheran Service Book*, Pew ed (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2006).

[10] Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, ed., *Christian Worship: Hymnal*, 1st ed. (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 2021).

and glorified, i.e., sanctified (Rom 8:30). The Bible explicitly teaches that although believers are justified in Christ, they also submit themselves in service to all, i.e., sanctification (1 Cor 9:19). Finally, the Bible explains that believers are called to freedom, i.e., justified. But should not use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh; instead, through love, serve one another, i.e., sanctification (Gal 5:13).

In addition, many Bible passages address the Gospel in these two parts.

Justification:

> For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another [because of bondage to sin and the devil]. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit [Baptism], whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life (Ti 3:3-7).

> For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith (Rom 3:23-25).

> Therefore, as [Adam's] one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so [Christ Jesus'] one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men (Rom 5:18).

Sanctification:

> I [Jesus] do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth (Jn 17:13-19).

> For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God (1 Thes 4:3-5).

> Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it (1 Thes 5:23-24).

This understanding is known as the two types of righteousness: justification, the passive, vertical righteousness of God, and sanctification, the active, horizontal righteousness of humanity.[11] Lutheran theologians have developed this biblical insight into the doctrine of Christian life. The most recent edition of this doctrine is found in *Confessing the Gospel*.[12] Published in 2017, this new two-volume systematic theology text is used in several confessional Lutheran seminaries, including those of the Lutheran Church Canada and the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod.

Primary Aspect

Cornerstone Lutheran Church parishioners want to navigate Christian life from the confessional Lutheran perspective. But where are they to start? Faith comes from hearing, and hearing comes through Christ's Word (Rom 10:17). Confessional Lutherans confess that one cannot contribute anything to God's gift of justification; one is saved by grace (Eph 2:8-9). However, one participates in God's gift of sanctification (Eph 2:10). Those who think they stand should take heed, lest they fall (1 Cor 10:12). In other words, sinners who are dead in their trespasses and sins (Eph 2:1) cannot turn toward Christ and His salvation on their own. Justification is a gift; however, once turned

[11] Edward W. A. Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine: A Popular Presentation of the Teachings of the Bible*, 3rd rev. ed (NKJV), ed. Brent W. Kuhlman (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 61.

[12] Samuel H. Nafzger et al., eds., *Confessing the Gospel: A Lutheran Approach to Systematic Theology* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 2:1021–108.

toward Christ and His salvation, one can turn away from Him and His sanctification, harden themselves, and fall from faith (1 Tim 1:19). Without repentance, apostasy ensues. Christ's disciples abide in His Word (Jn 8:31). Cornerstone Lutheran Church parishioners seek assurance that they are truly living life in Christ.

Wong et al. surveyed Canadian Christians to identify their top six areas of spiritual practice.[13] Overall, these top six areas are: 1. Preaching/teaching/homily, 2. Singing/music, 3. Volunteering in my congregation, 4. Prayer, 5. Small group, and 6. Eucharist/Holy Communion (see the table below). There is some variation among Canadian denominations in this study. However, it is noteworthy that Bible reading is absent from the top six spiritual practices of Canadian Christians, except within the Reformed denomination, where it ranks lowest among the six.

	Anglican	Baptist	Catholic	C&MA	Lutheran	Pentecostal	Reformed	United Church
Preaching/teaching/homily	62.3	69.4	65.3	72.3	65.5	81.9	78.2	69.4
Singing/music	46.7	45.6	38.1	44.4	56.8	50.0	67.5	59.8
Volunteering in my congregation	23.6	19.7	27.7	23.3	28.5	19.3	26.7	33.1
Prayer		21.2	15.7	19.9		21.4	15.3	12.8
Small group	26.6	36.0		37.7		21.8	29.9	16.0
Eucharist/Holy Communion	31.7		57.0		35.5			
Liturgy or structure of the service	21.1		19.2		19.9			
Sharing testimonies		18.9				10.9		
Social justice initiatives								22.1
Bible reading							8.6	
Personal devotional activities				20.9				
Faith					14.6			

Table 1: Top Six Spiritual Practices by Denominational Tradition (in %)

In contrast to mainline Lutherans, confessional Lutherans view Bible reading (i.e., Bible literacy) as a fundamental and essential spiritual practice. God Himself has

[13] Arch Chee Keen Wong et al., "Discipleship from Catholic, Mainline and Conservative Protestant Congregant Perspectives in Canada," *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 43, no. 4 (October 2022): 489.

determined what humanity should believe and how they ought to behave.[14] According to the *Book of Concord*, Formula, Epitome, Summary:

> We believe, teach, and confess that the only rule and norm according to which all teachings, together with all teachers, should be evaluated and judged [2 Tim 3:15-17] are the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and New Testament alone.[15]

To receive the benefits of God's gifts, believers must hear God's Word and develop adequate Bible literacy. This is accomplished through diligent reading and study of the Bible. Cornerstone Lutheran Church parishioners possess a strong biblical foundation rooted in the teachings of the Apostles and Prophets, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone (Eph 2:20). Consequently, these believers can boldly ask the question: "How do we navigate sanctification?"

Research Question

Research Question: How do Cornerstone Lutheran Church parishioners navigate sanctification?

Sub-Question #1: What challenges are parishioners experiencing?

Sub-Question #2: How are parishioners responding to these challenges?

Sub-Question #3: How is theology informing the sanctification of these parishioners?

Sub-Question #4: How does this relate to the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod?

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[14] Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, 21.

[15] McCain, *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, 473.

Assumptions

The Authority of the Bible

The Bible, the 66-book canon of the Old and New Testaments, is the source and norm for all things in life. Only God can say what He wants humanity to believe and do,[16] and no one can interpret God's Word outside of the Bible. "No one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God" (1 Cor 2:11). Therefore, the Bible interprets the Bible, where the clear passages interpret the less clear passages.[17]

The Distinction Between God's Law and Gospel

In both the Old and New Testaments, the Bible presents two fundamentally distinct doctrines: Law and Gospel.[18] Accurately distinguishing between Law and Gospel is essential for correctly interpreting God's Word.[19] Confessional Lutherans recognize three types of Law in the Bible: the ethical law, which outlines people's duties toward God and one another; the ceremonial law, which governs the religious practices of the Levite priests in ancient Israel; and the political law, which pertains to the civil statutes of

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[16] Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, 21.

[17] Michael Graves, *How Scripture Interprets Scripture: What Biblical Writers Can Teach Us About Reading The Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021).

[18] Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, 39.

[19] C. F. W. Walther et al., *Law & Gospel: How to Read and Apply the Bible* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2010).

ancient Israel.[20] The entirety of God's Law is fulfilled in Christ (Mt 5:17). However, God's eternal character remains unchanging (Heb 13:8; Mal 3:6; Is 40:8). God's ethic, i.e., His principles of proper conduct, is timeless and inscribed on the hearts of humanity, as He states, "I [God] will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts" (Jer 31:33). The death of Christ Jesus on the cross, the once-for-all sacrifice (Heb 10:10), fulfills the ceremonial law. Furthermore, Christ Jesus' resurrection and ascension fulfill the political law; sin, death, and the devil are defeated (1 Jn 3:5-8), and He reigns at the right hand of God the Father (Rom 8:34) as King forever and ever (Heb 1:8; Ps 45:6).

The Messianic Message of the Bible

The Old Testament Law and the Prophets foreshadow the coming of the Messiah, Christ Jesus.[21] His arrival was foretold, and his birth, life, death, and resurrection were revealed beforehand. After rebuking Cleopas and his companion on the road to Emmaus, Jesus opened the Bible to them. "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (Lk 24:27).

[20] Martin Luther, *Luther's Small Catechism, with Explanation* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 54.

[21] Andrew E. Steinmann and R. Reed Lessing, *The Messianic Message: Predictions, Patterns and the Presence of Jesus in the Old Testament* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2023).

Participant Co-Researchers

This study received approval from the Human Research Ethics Board at Trinity Western University before any interaction with participants. The Human Research Ethics Board Certificate of Approval is included (see Appendix 1). The research adhered to the guidelines and procedures established by the Human Research Ethics Board. The participant co-researchers of the study were all eight adult founding members of Cornerstone Lutheran Church. Their involvement did not include any financial compensation.

Definitions

Sanctification

Sanctification is God's gift of being set apart, made holy, and conformed to the image of Christ.[22] It refers to a new spiritual life characterized by attitudinal and behavioural changes. Sanctification begins with faith in the Gospel of Christ Jesus. This divine gift is granted by the Holy Spirit, who works in the hearts of sinners through His Word and Sacraments (i.e., Baptism). Faith trusts in God's promise of complete forgiveness of sins through Christ Jesus (justification) and acknowledges that He provides all the necessary resources for life (sanctification). Within a congregational context, God nurtures faith through the means of grace: His Word (i.e., preaching, teaching, and absolution) and Sacrament (i.e., the Lord's Supper). Justification is

[22] Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, 211–12.

complete in Christ; however, sanctification remains unfinished in this temporal life. On the last day, sanctification will reach its fulfillment when the temporal body is transformed into an eternal body in the new creation.[23]

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research employs a multi-method approach that integrates both interpretive and naturalistic perspectives on its subject matter.[24] Qualitative researchers examine natural settings to understand phenomena based on the meanings attributed to individuals' characteristics. This type of research involves collecting and utilizing various empirical materials—including case studies, personal experiences, introspection, life stories, interviews, artifacts, cultural texts, and productions, as well as observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts—which illuminate both routine and challenging moments, along with the meanings within people's lives. Researchers utilize a broad range of interconnected interpretive practices to deepen their understanding of a subject.

[23] Nafzger et al., *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1021.

[24] Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, eds., *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2011), 3–4.

Action Research

Action research, a form of qualitative research, is an iterative cycle that involves action, research, and reflection.[25] The lead researcher collaborates with participant researchers within their situational context to ensure alignment with the group's values. Its purpose is to promote positive change for individuals and communities while developing transferable theoretical knowledge. The primary dynamic involves cycles that progress through iterations, incorporating new insights and perspectives as they emerge. Key activities encompass action and research, as well as iterative processes such as discerning, planning, and reflecting. The main participants are the lead researcher and other engaged individuals. The overall objective is to foster positive change among participants and within the organization while generating valuable new knowledge.

Participatory Action Research

Participatory Action Research is a specific type of action research designed to minimize bias from the lead researcher that could influence research results.[26] Therefore, the lead researcher initiates and supervises research as a co-researcher, systematically eliminating factors that could hinder or distort the contributions of participant co-researchers. Project controls and ethical considerations are essential to

[25] Paul Bramer and Mark Chapman, "Action Research for Doctor of Ministry Project: A Practical Definition," *Journal of Christian Ministry* 6 (2017): 29.

[26] Bramer and Chapman, "Action Research for Doctor of Ministry Project: A Practical Definition," 34–35.

its objectives. This approach fosters positive change for both the co-researchers and the organization while generating valuable new knowledge applicable to others in the field of study.

Delimitation

This research is grounded in the confessional Lutheran perspective, which provides the co-researchers with a biblical foundation interpreted through the *Book of Concord*[27] and the historic creeds (e.g., the Apostles' Creed). Other resources, such as these systematic theology texts—*Confessing the Gospel*[28] and *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*[29]—are also foundational resources utilized in the research. These texts are recognized within the confessional Lutheran community for accurately conveying biblical teaching.

Limitation

The main limitation of this research is its small sample size. Data was gathered from the eight adult founding members of Cornerstone Lutheran Church. As a result, the recommendations and conclusions are restricted in scope.

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[27] McCain, *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*.

[28] Nafzger et al., *Confessing the Gospel*, vol. 2.

[29] Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Theological Foundation

The primary source for this research is the Bible, God's Word. The secondary sources include the *Book of Concord*[30] and the systematic theology texts *Confessing the Gospel*[31] and *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*,[32] published by Concordia Publishing House. The *Book of Concord* serves as the foundation for confessional Lutheranism, and the two systematic theology texts are widely recognized as presenting sound doctrine within the tradition.

The Old Testament

In Genesis, God illustrates how He grants grace to His chosen people by cultivating faith through His Word.[33] By trusting in God, they lead lives of obedience while He sustains their faith during challenging times, all to fulfill His eternal purpose. The first man and woman, Adam and Eve, received grace after their fall into original sin and were given God's promise of a Redeemer (Gn 3:15). Through faith in God's promises, Abel, Enoch, Noah, and Abraham were deemed righteous in His sight and found acceptable (Heb 11:1-12). Sanctification is God's work within His people, where

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[30] McCain, *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*.

[31] Nafzger et al., *Confessing the Gospel*, vol. 2.

[32] Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*.

[33] Edward A. Engelbrecht, ed., *The Lutheran Study Bible: English Standard Version* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), 8–9.

their actions are motivated by His grace rather than by self-driven moralism.[34] Following the fall into original sin, faith in the promised Redeemer (Christ Jesus) serves as the foundation of righteousness (justification). This righteousness, nurtured by God, encourages a life of obedience to His Word (sanctification).[35]

Exodus provides an example of life in Christ Jesus (1 Cor 10:6). This insight later serves as a key in this research. The Israelites were in bondage to Pharaoh, as well as to sin, death, and the devil.[36] The Passover sacrifice foreshadows the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ Jesus (Heb 10:10). The Israelites were baptized into Moses in the cloud and the sea (1 Cor 10:2). Their Baptism through the Red Sea was a saving act. The Israelites faced tests in the wilderness and were nourished with manna (bread) and drank water from the rock, which represented God's Word (Dt 8:3). These are God's means of grace: His Word and Sacraments (i.e., Baptism and the Lord's Supper).[37] However, life was challenging; they were a stubborn people who often grumbled.

Sin clings to their flesh. Some harden their hearts, turn away from God, and fall away (Ex 32: The Golden Calf; Nm 16: Korah's Rebellion). Others repent and cling to God's promise of forgiveness. God dwells among the Israelites, providing a foreshadowing of Christ's atonement for the forgiveness of sins[38] and sanctification, as outlined in His Word, the Ten Commandments (Ex 20:1-17). Only Joshua and Caleb

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[34] Nafzger et al., *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1022.

[35] Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, 40.

[36] Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, 115–16.

[37] McCain, *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, 281.

[38] Steinmann and Lessing, *The Messianic Message*, 85.

gave a favourable report of the Promised Land; the other ten spies did not. The Israelites, including Moses, perished in the wilderness, although Moses was allowed to see the Promised Land. They would receive the eternal Promised Land through faith; death is not the end but the path to eternal life (Mt 17:1-8 The Transfiguration). God is (not was) the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for all live to Him (Lk 20:37-38). In Exodus, God sanctifies, nurtures, and preserves His chosen people so that all the world's nations will be blessed through them.[39]

In the books of the Prophets, Israel and Judah repeatedly rebel against God's Word and are called to repentance. However, many harden their hearts and turn away. Nevertheless, God will not forsake them.

> "Yet even now," declares the Lord, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments." Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster (Jl 2:12-13).

However, Israel and Judah did not repent and return to the Lord. They faced punishment for their iniquities (Am 3:2). Nevertheless, after God's judgment was carried out by the Assyrians (who conquered Israel, the northern kingdom, in 723 BC[40]) and the Babylonians (who conquered Judah, the southern kingdom, in 587 BC[41]), the Lord preserved and comforted His remnant people.

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[39] Nafzger et al., *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1024.

[40] Andrew Steinmann, ed., *ESV Chronological Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023), 907.

[41] Steinmann, *ESV Chronological Bible, English Standard Version*, 1179.

> "You are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off"; fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand (Is 41:9-10).

According to God's eternal will, His Word is preserved to go forth and bless all nations (Is 2:3; 42:6-7; 54:2-3; 60:1-4). This hope centers on Christ Jesus, the promised One, God's servant, His chosen, in whom He delights (Is 42:1). In Him, there is salvation for all nations (Is 55:1-5; 56:1-8). However, this does not represent a theology of glory; God's Law and Gospel cannot mingle.[42] Salvation is the work of God, not something to be earned or merited. The remnant struggles with sin and lives a life of repentance and faith in God's promise of forgiveness. Indeed, God also judges and punishes the pagan nations. Nevertheless, God desires that all nations might come to faith in Him (Is 2:2-5; 11:10-16; 60:1-4; Mi 4:1-2).

> "Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more" (Jer 31:31-34).

God brings about an internal transformation that leads to voluntary external obedience through His Word and Sacraments.[43]

> I [God] will sprinkle clean water on you [Baptism], and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will

[42] Nafzger et al., *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1026.

[43] Nafzger et al., *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1028.

> remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules (Ez 36:25-27).

Baptism is an act of God. He cleanses, provides a new heart and spirit, places His Spirit within believers, and empowers them to obey as they walk according to His Word. While God's gift of Baptism can be rejected or denied, He desires all to be saved.[44] "Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other" (Is 45:22), and "I [God] have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord God; so turn, and live" (Ez 18:32).

The wisdom literature, including Job, Psalm, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon, provides profound insights into the concept of sanctification.[45] Both Satan and human sin are the root causes of suffering and the problem of evil in the world.[46] Job recognizes the complexity and insolubility of personal suffering. He laments, "God has loosed my cord and humbled me" (Jb 30:11). Eliphaz encourages Job by saying, "Blessed is the one whom God reproves; therefore, despise not the discipline of the Almighty. For he wounds, but he binds up; he shatters, but his hands heal" (Jb 5:17-18). Amid life's trials, Job steadfastly holds onto the gift of faith, proclaiming, "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he [Christ Jesus] will stand upon the earth" (Jb 19:25). The lesson from Job is clear: God is the Creator, and humans are His blessed creatures (Jb 40:1-5; 42:1-6); one must cling to God's Word.[47]

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[44] Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, 274–75.

[45] Nafzger et al., *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1028–29.

[46] Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, 111–13.

[47] Nafzger et al., *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1028.

> Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night (Ps 1:1-2).

The New Testament

In the Gospels, God fulfills His plan of salvation through the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ Jesus.[48] "It is finished" (Jn 19:30). Jesus then sent His apostles to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe all that He commanded (Mt 28:19-20). Lutherans baptize infants and anyone who desires it after hearing God's Word (Rom 10:17).[49]

> The Word of God teaches that we are all conceived and born sinful and are under the power of the devil until Christ claims us as his own. We would be lost forever unless delivered from sin, death, and everlasting condemnation. But the Father of all mercy and grace has sent His Son Jesus Christ, who atoned for the sin of the whole world, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.[50]

When a strong man (the devil), fully armed, guards his palace (the world), his goods (sinners) remain in bondage to sin and death. But when one (Christ Jesus) stronger than he attacks and defeats him, He removes the armour he trusted and divides his spoils (Lk 11:21-22). Through His gifts, Jesus frees the captives (Eph 4:8). Baptism saves (1 Pt 3:21), grants the remission of sins (Acts 2:38), washes away sins (Acts 22:16), clothes one in Christ (Gal 3:27), sanctifies and cleanses (Eph 5:26),

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[48] Nafzger et al., *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1030–31.

[49] Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, 272–73.

[50] Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, *Lutheran Service Book*, 268.

bestows a new birth of water and Spirit (Jn 3:5), and grants conversion and salvation in Christ (Ti 3:5).

The New Testament describes sanctification in various ways: walking in newness of life (Rom 6:4), being transformed by the renewal of the mind (Rom 12:2), being renewed in knowledge in accordance with the image of its creator (Col 3:10), doing God's will (Mt 7:21), bearing fruit (Jn 15:5), living in a manner worthy of having received God's call (Phil 1:27) and Gospel (Eph 4:1; 1 Thes 2:12), and being led by the Spirit (Rom 8:14). This is God's gift to His people: empowering them to participate in His work.[51]

The New Testament Gospels proclaim the arrival of Christ Jesus and His message of salvation from sin, death, and the devil (1 Jn 3:5-8). "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mk 1:15). Jesus calls sinners to repentance. Everyone has sinned and falls short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23). The Ten Commandments reveal external sin; however, Jesus is equally concerned with the internal sin of the heart. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus defines sinful motives, desires, and attitudes as wicked as actual sinful deeds (Mt 5-7 The Sermon on the Mount). He calls sinners to believe in the Gospel, stating, "He [Jesus] is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 Jn 2:2). Jesus not only removes the sin of the world but also offers everyone His perfect righteousness before God as a gift without merit or work.[52] This is the

[51] Nafzger et al., *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1030–31.

[52] Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, 144–45.

Gospel, the blessed exchange: believers' sins for Christ's righteousness.[53] Jesus took sin upon Himself and died the death it deserved. In exchange, He provides His righteousness with God and eternal life to all who believe: "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 6:23). In granting this blessed freedom in Him, Jesus summarizes sanctification as loving God with all one's heart, soul, mind, and strength, and loving one's neighbour as oneself (Mk 12:30-31).

The Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-6) also discusses sanctification. Jesus introduces His sermon with nine beatitudes that detail the future blessedness of His disciples. He does not impose ethical demands on His followers but instead describes the blessings they will thoroughly enjoy in the new creation (Rv 21:1).[54] These promised blessings are God's gifts to those who, by His grace, repent of their sins and trust Christ for His righteousness.[55] Only after assuring His disciples of God's goodness does Jesus call upon them to be instruments of His goodness throughout the rest of His sermon. When God leads one to acknowledge their spiritual poverty, hunger and thirst for His righteousness, and makes one pure in heart to seek to worship the one true God, they are blessed, both now and forever.[56] Without God's blessing, spiritual poverty remains

[53] Daniel Preus, *Why I Am a Lutheran: Jesus at the Center* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2004), 46.

[54] Engelbrecht, *The Lutheran Study Bible*, 1585.

[55] Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, 129.

[56] Engelbrecht, *The Lutheran Study Bible*, 1586.

unrecognized, and sinfulness is not lamented.[57] God's blessings include meekness, a hunger and thirst for righteousness, mercifulness, a pure heart, peacefulness, and the grace to endure scorn, slander, and persecution. He offers comfort, hope, contentment, great rewards, and the kingdom of heaven (Mt 5:3-12). Through grace and faith in Christ, Christians are the "salt of the earth" and "light of the world" (Mt 5:13-16). Jesus fulfills the Law and the Prophets on behalf of all humanity (Mt 5:17). Knowing this, the Law contains no condemnation for those in Christ (Rom 8:1). Instead, there is delight in God's righteous ethical law (i.e., the Ten Commandments), which guides and protects sanctification.[58]

In the Acts of the Apostles, the Holy Spirit works as the Sanctifier through God's Word and Sacraments (i.e., Baptism and the Lord's Supper).[59] The Holy Spirit gives life and produces righteous motives, desires, and attitudes. By grace, believers commit themselves to the apostolic teaching of God's Word, fellowship among disciples, the breaking of bread (i.e., the Lord's Supper), and prayers (Acts 2:42). The needs of orphans, widows, and the poor are met. Through God's Word and Sacraments, the Holy Spirit guides believers in wisdom and knowledge, enabling them to recall all that Jesus taught (Jn 14:26) and to confess God's Word with boldness (Acts 4:31).

The apostolic letters describe sanctification as a gift from God.[60] The letter to the Ephesians summarizes the Christian life in a chiastic form: Ephesians 2:1-3 describes

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[57] Nafzger et al., *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1030–31.

[58] Nafzger et al., *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1031.

[59] Nafzger et al., *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1032.

[60] Nafzger et al., *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1032–37.

being dead in trespasses and sins; Ephesians 2:4-9 speaks of resurrection with Christ by the grace of God; and Ephesians 2:10 focuses on the new life of walking in the works prepared by God. Here, the chiastic structure illustrates God's movement in His gift of justification, culminating in His main point: by grace, you have been saved.

> And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked,
> following the course of this world,
> following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work
> in the sons of disobedience—
> among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying
> out the desires of the body and the mind,
> and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.
> But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with
> which he loved us,
> even when we were dead in our trespasses,
> made us alive together with Christ
> **—by grace you have been saved—**
> and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the
> heavenly places in Christ Jesus,
> so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable
> riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.
> For by grace you have been saved through faith.
> And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,
> not a result of works, so that no one may boast.
> For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works,
> which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.[61]

No one contributes anything to justification; one is saved by grace (Eph 2:5). Sinners who are dead in trespasses and sins (Eph 2:1) cannot turn themselves to Christ. However, once they are turned, they can negatively impact their sanctification and harden their hearts (1 Tm 1:19). "No one is good except God alone" (Mk 10:18). Therefore, anything positive is a gift from God. Once again, Christ's disciples abide in His Word (Jn 8:31). Sanctification is a gift from God to believers (Eph 2:10), enabling

[61] Thomas M. Winger, *Ephesians*, Concordia Commentary: A Theological Exposition of Sacred Scripture (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2015), 298.

them to grapple with the dichotomy of the old sinful self, which leads to death, and the new life in Christ, which leads to eternal life.[62]

> Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.
>
> For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus (Rom 6:3-11).

In Christ, God turns believers away from the works of the flesh: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and similar things (Gal 5:19-21). Instead, one participates in the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal 5:22-23). By God's grace, believers act wisely, avoiding anything that may harm, endanger, or destroy their own health and well-being or that of others (1 Cor 6:12), where all things are done to the glory of God (1 Cor 10:31).[63]

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[62] Daniel Christian Voth, *Clarifying The Great Commission: Jesus' Parting Gifts to His Church* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2025), 59.

[63] Nafzger et al., *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1035.

God works to sustain and nourish sanctification through the Sacrament of the Altar, the Lord's Supper.[64] Jesus Himself says, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst" (Jn 6:35), and "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh" (Jn 6:51). Some grumble and disdain this notion (Jn 6:52); however, Jesus confirms the teaching:

> So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him" (Jn 6:53-56).

Some reject this teaching and turn away (Jn 6:60). Jesus comments that this teaching is spiritually discerned: "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is of no help at all" (Jn 6:63). Nonetheless, some partake in the Lord's Supper to their detriment.[65]

> The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ (1 Cor 10:16)?
>
> Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself (1 Cor 11:27-29).

The Lord's Supper is a means of grace—Christ's body and blood are given to sustain and nourish faith, forgive sins, and bestow eternal life.[66] The Words of Institution

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[64] Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, 300–304.

[65] Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, 298.

[66] Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, 294.

appear in all three Gospels (Mt 26:26-28; Mk 14:22-24; Lk 22:19-20) and in 1 Corinthians (11:23-25).

> Our Lord Jesus Christ, on the night he was betrayed, took bread; and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."
>
> Then he took the cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; this is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins. Do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me."[67]

The Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper are essential to sanctification.[68] They are God's objective and tangible work in His people for the forgiveness of sins and life in Christ. "To him [Christ Jesus] who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy" (Jude 24).

Theoretical Foundation

In his book, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Dissertations*, Sensing advises researchers to avoid de-theologizing and to focus on doctrinal understanding rather than relying excessively on the social sciences for theoretical frameworks, practical applications, and success metrics.[69] This

[67] Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, *Christian Worship*, 202.

[68] Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, 266.

[69] Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Dissertations*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2022), 21.

research centers on theology and explores how it informs the sanctification of Cornerstone Lutheran Church parishioners.

Sanctification is the Gift of God

Christ Jesus has obtained forgiveness of sins, sanctification, and eternal salvation for all humanity.[70] However, this benefits no one without God's work in the lives of His people. For one to be saved, Christ's merits must be offered, imparted, and given. This is the work of God, the Holy Spirit, through the external means of grace: God's Word and Sacraments (i.e., Baptism and the Lord's Supper).[71] The believer's internal means of reception—the heart and mind—perceive and learn of God's gifts. The content of God's gifts imparts and impresses faith in believers. Salvation encompasses all the Holy Spirit's work in believers, leading them from a state of wrath to a state of grace, preservation, and, on the last day, into a state of glory in the new creation. One is washed, justified, and sanctified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ by the Spirit of God (1 Cor 6:11). God's Word (Rom 10:17; 1 Pt 1:23; Jas 1:18) and Baptism (Ti 3:5; Jn 3:5; Acts 2:38) create faith to trust Christ Jesus and His Gospel.

The Holy Spirit can work directly on a person's heart and mind without the means of grace (Lk 1:15-44). However, God does not promise this in the Bible; therefore, humanity is bound to His revealed means of grace. Jesus points to the Bible (Moses and the Prophets), saying, "Let them hear them" (Lk 16:29). Luther states in the *Book of*

[70] Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, 177.

[71] Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, 253.

Concord, Smalcald Articles, “God does not want to deal with us in any other way than through the spoken Word and the Sacraments.”[72] Thus, there is order in salvation, as the Holy Spirit works methodically according to His Word. Koehler organizes the work of the Holy Spirit into a normative six-step method.[73] His text, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*,[74] is widely accepted and highly regarded within the confessional Lutheran tradition. He connects all doctrines directly to the Bible as the primary source and further supports his claims from the *Book of Concord*[75] as his secondary source.

1. By the Law, God Gives Knowledge of Sin and Contrition

Those who are well do not need a physician, but those who are sick (Mt 9:12). The Holy Spirit works through God’s Law to convict, convince, and reveal sins.[76] No one is righteous, not even one; all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23). When the preaching of the Law is effective, the Holy Spirit brings forth sorrow, contrition, and despair. There is a sense of hopelessness: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” (Lk 18:13).

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[72] McCain, *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, 281.

[73] Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, 185–246.

[74] Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*.

[75] McCain, *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*.

[76] Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, 185–86.

2. By the Gospel, God Calls Penitent Sinners to Christ

When God's Law exposes sins and reveals the need for a Redeemer, the Gospel should be preached at that moment.[77] Jesus invites sinners, saying, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Mt 11:28). This gift is universal, sincere, and effective. God offers the Gospel to all sinners; however, some choose to reject it. Jesus Himself declares, "You were not willing!" (Mt 23:37). There are many reasons why God's Word does not take root; some reject the Gospel due to arrogance, self-righteousness, a love of sin, pride, or despair.

3. God Gives Faith in the Heart

One is called out of darkness and into His light (1 Pt 2:9). The effective call occurs when one receives God's Word and accepts it not as mere human words but as it truly is, God's Word, which works within them (1 Thes 2:13).[78] By the power of God, the Gospel saves and calls one to a holy calling, not due to works, but because of His purpose and grace (2 Tm 1:8-9). One contributes nothing to conversion; God creates faith just as He created light in the darkness (Gn 1:3)—from nothing, speaking it into existence. Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through Christ's Word (Rom 10:17).

[77] Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, 186–87.

[78] Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, 187–90.

4. God Justifies Through Faith

Faith is a verb, not a noun. Faith alone is not a virtue and has no value. What truly matters is the object of faith.[79] In justification, the object of faith is the Gospel of Christ Jesus, the blessed exchange: believers' sins for Christ's righteousness. Faith clings to Christ and His Word. Faith in Christ's objective and tangible gifts justifies sinners before God. One is justified by faith apart from the works of the Law (Rom 3:28).

5. God Sanctifies Through Faith

Natural humanity is carnally minded and an enemy of God (Rom 8:7). In Christ, one receives and appreciates God's grace and blessings. Consequently, God instills love and gratitude in the heart toward Him and His Word. One loves because He first loved them (1 Jn 4:19). In Christ, one does not conform to the world but is transformed by the renewal of the mind, so that by testing, one discerns the will of God, which is good, acceptable, and perfect (Rom 12:2). The sanctifying power of faith in Christ truly reforms sinners and renews them in the image of God (Eph 4:24).

Sanctification is a gift from the Holy Spirit that enables individuals to participate in God's will.[80] The appearance and experience of progress vary among believers. The fruit of the Spirit is not the believer's fruit but that of the Spirit. Consequently, believers may struggle, hindering themselves with their own plans and ideas regarding their fruit. However, believers are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for His good works,

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[79] Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, 201.

[80] Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, 211–16.

which He prepared beforehand, so they should walk in them (Eph 2:10). God has unique works prepared for each believer, meaning the appearance and experience of His works are different. At times, perceiving progress can be difficult and frustrating as believers wrestle with their old, sinful nature. This struggle and testing are part of sanctification. Therefore, one can rejoice in suffering, knowing that suffering produces endurance. Endurance, in turn, fosters character, and character produces hope. Hope does not disappoint because God's love has been poured into their hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to them (Rom 5:3-5).

6. God Preserves Faith to Salvation

God created heaven and earth and continuously sustains every aspect of them.[81] Despite the dichotomy between the old sinful self and the new life in Christ, He creates, maintains, and preserves the sanctification of believers. In His great mercy, God causes individuals to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Christ Jesus, granting them an imperishable, undefiled, and unfading inheritance, kept secure in heaven. Through His power, individuals are guarded by faith for salvation, ready to be revealed on the last day (1 Pt 1:3-5). One can be sure of this: He who began a good work in them will bring it to completion on the day of Christ Jesus (Phil 1:6). God not only enables individuals to participate and engage in sanctification, but He also strengthens and keeps them steadfast in His Word until they transition from this temporal life to eternal life with Him in the new creation.

[81] Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, 234–39.

Models of Progress

God delivers sinners from the domain of darkness and transfers them to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom they have redemption, the forgiveness of sins (Col 1:13-14). The three subsections below examine how believers navigate God's gift of salvation, specifically through justification and sanctification. I will explore these models in relation to individuals and discuss their relevance to congregations where applicable.

God desires all people to be saved and to know the truth (1 Tm 2:4). However, some are unwilling to accept God and His gifts (Mt 23:37). For various reasons, some deny and reject God's gifts of salvation, either never coming to faith or later falling away from it.[82] The Bible warns individuals (and communities) who believe they stand to take heed, lest they fall (1 Cor 10:12). Indeed, one must continue in faith, remaining stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the Gospel (Col 1:23). Believers are called to fight the good fight of faith (1 Tm 6:12), taking up the whole armour of God (Eph 6:13) and remaining sober-minded and watchful, for the adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour (1 Pt 5:8). The apostle Paul understands that he must discipline his body and keep it under control, lest, after preaching to others, he becomes disqualified (1 Cor 9:27). At the same time, believers hold fast to the promise that none of those given to Christ will be lost (Jn 6:37-39).

[82] Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, 198.

A. Progress by Works

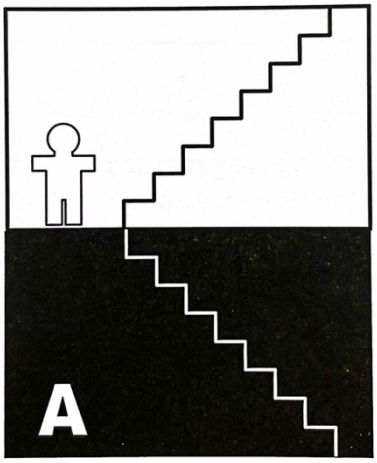

Figure 1: Progress by Works[83]

The first model depicts an individual or group starting their life journey, with progress shaped by both positive and negative actions.

Justification

This model presents a misleading view of justification through grace and works. Rather, justification is solely the gift of God by grace through faith in Christ Jesus.[84] "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Eph 2:8-9).

[83] Steven E. King, *Sola Confirmation Series: The Apostles' Creed*, Second (Maple Lake, MN: Sola Publishing, 2012), 34.

[84] Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, 201–6.

Sanctification

Although this model presents a misleading view of justification, it accurately depicts sanctification. Justification is secure in Christ and requires no contribution from individuals. However, one engages with God's gift of sanctification, which sets one apart and makes one holy.[85] God works in and through believers and congregations, acting as instruments for good works according to His will. Believers participate in this work not as its source or power, but as instruments. "We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph 2:10).

B. Progress by Choice

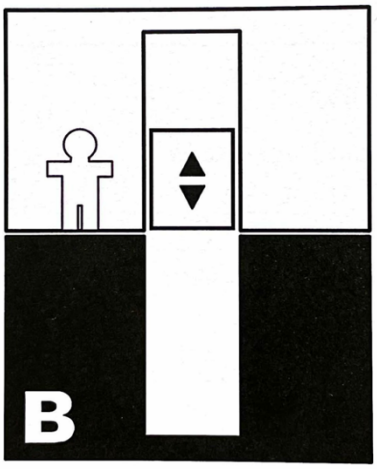

Figure 2: Progress by Choice[86]

[85] Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, 216.

[86] King, *Sola Confirmation Series: The Apostles' Creed*, 34.

The second model depicts an individual or group embarking on their life's journey. However, a decision must be made; therefore, progress hinges on that choice.

Justification

This is also a misleading representation of justification. Christ Jesus has secured victory for all humanity over sin, death, and the devil.[87] However, it benefits no one unless it is provided through God's means of grace (i.e., God's Word and Sacraments). Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through Christ's Word (Rom 10:17). Therefore, no one can declare that Jesus is Lord except in the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:3). Disciples do not choose Jesus; instead, Jesus chooses His disciples (Jn 15:16). "He chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless" (Eph 1:4).

Sanctification

While this model presents a misleading view of justification, it accurately depicts sanctification. In Christ, one continually and openly chooses to repent of sin, believe in the Gospel, and engage with God in sanctification—not as the source or power, but as an instrument of God.[88] "For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil 2:13).

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[87] Martin Luther, *Luther's Catechism—English Standard Version* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 2017), 5.

[88] McCain, *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, 548.

C. Progress by Intervention

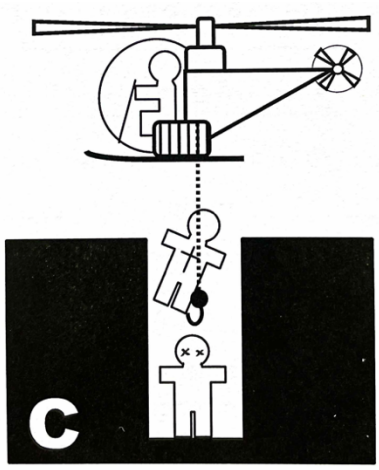

Figure 3: Progress by Intervention[89]

In the third and final model, one starts dead in a pit. This individual (or group) cannot achieve anything positive until an external intervention occurs.

Justification

This model accurately illustrates justification, where God the Father, through the Holy Spirit, intervenes externally on behalf of Christ Jesus.[90] The helicopter symbolizes God's means of grace (i.e., God's Word and Sacraments). The pilot represents God's servant—a preacher or teacher of God's Word—delivering the benefits of Jesus Himself. The Bible indicates that one begins spiritually dead in trespasses and sins (Eph 2:1) and must be born again of water and Spirit (Jn 3:3-5). The natural human heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick (Jer 17:9). Nothing good dwells in

[89] King, *Sola Confirmation Series: The Apostles' Creed*, 34.

[90] McCain, *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, 33.

humanity's flesh (Rom 7:18). The human mind is set on the flesh and is hostile to God; it does not submit to God because it is incapable (Rom 8:7). The intention of humanity's heart is evil from youth (Gn 8:21). Therefore, God must intervene externally.

Sanctification

The third model accurately represents justification; however, it inaccurately depicts sanctification. In Christ, believers have put on the new self, created in the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness (Eph 4:24), and they are made alive in Christ. Hence, faith alone, without good works, is dead (Jas 2:17). Therefore, believers strive to uphold God's statutes, because it is the Lord who sanctifies them (Lv 20:8). Nonetheless, a believer's sanctification remains incomplete in this temporal life.[91] Only at the resurrection on the last day will God's gift of sanctification be fulfilled in Christ.[92] Thus, with unveiled faces, believers behold the Lord's glory and are transformed into His image from one degree of glory to another. This gift comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit (2 Cor 3:18).

Theories of Sanctification

Sanctification is God's gift of being set apart, made holy, and conformed to the image of Christ.[93] It refers to a new spiritual life characterized by attitudinal and

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[91] Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, 214.

[92] Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, 422.

[93] Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, 211–12.

behavioural changes. Sanctification begins with faith in the Gospel of Christ Jesus. This divine gift is granted by the Holy Spirit, who works in the hearts of sinners through His Word and Sacraments (i.e., Baptism). Faith relies on God's promise of complete forgiveness of sins through Christ Jesus (justification) and acknowledges that He provides all the necessary resources for life (sanctification). Within a congregational context, God nurtures faith through the means of grace: His Word (preaching, teaching, and absolution) and Sacraments (i.e., the Lord's Supper). Justification is complete in Christ; however, sanctification remains incomplete in this temporal life. On the last day, sanctification will reach its fulfilment when the temporal body is transformed into an eternal body in the new creation.[94]

Nonetheless, what does sanctification look like in the lives and experiences of believers in practice? The following subsections describe three confessional Lutheran theories of sanctification that this research will explore. Each theory on its own seems lacking; a more unified approach is necessary. Perhaps unification can be found in the Apostles' Creed; more on this later. As an additional note, confessional Lutherans identify three uses or functions of God's Law: the first is to curb sin in the world, the second is to serve as a mirror to reveal sin, and the third is to guide Christian life.[95]

[94] Nafzger et al., *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1021.

[95] Luther, *Luther's Catechism—English Standard Version*, 34.

A. Growth of Participation in God's Will

The first theory of sanctification is the most widely accepted understanding among confessional Lutherans and other Christian denominations.[96] God's Law, the Ten Commandments, guides believers (third use) to align with God's will. Therefore, sanctification involves growth in performing good works in accordance with God's Law. The Holy Spirit serves as the source and strength behind these good works; however, believers must exercise commitment, effort, discipline, and self-control to act as instruments of God. With human grit, determination, and sincerity, believers can enhance their ability to do good works, improve ethical behaviour, overcome bad habits and sins, and experience growth in participating in God's will.[97] This external participation in good works, grounded in natural law and summarized by the Ten Commandments, characterizes the first theory of sanctification as the ultimate goal of the Christian life.

B. Growth of Dependency in Christ's Word

Some confessional Lutheran scholars advocate for the second theory of sanctification. Prenter is a prominent spokesperson for this theory.[98] Later, building on Prenter's foundation, a more progressive Lutheran scholar, Forde, advocates a similar

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[96] Joel Biermann, "Sanctification: Three Views," in *The Doctrine of Sanctification: Theological Essays from the Weidner Institute*, ed. Jordan B. Cooper and Matthew Fenn (Ithaca, NY: Just & Sinner, 2024), 75.

[97] Biermann, "Sanctification: Three Views," 75.

[98] Regin Prenter, *Spiritus Creator*, trans. John M. Jensen (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001).

approach.[99] Unlike the first theory, they advocate that sanctification does not refer to growth in virtuous living or progress in overcoming sinful desires or actions; rather, this is simply empirical piety.

> Progressive sanctification comes about when [the believer] again and again in faith yields to the alien righteousness of Christ and condemns all his own. In this way, he has placed his whole sanctification in the hand of Christ. His walk forward in the way of sanctification consists in this, that he again and again takes leave of himself and takes refuge in Christ.[100]

> Progress in sanctification is not imminent moral progress but the coming of the Kingdom of God among us through the power of unconditional justification.[101]

Believers empowered by the Holy Spirit may experience growth in good works (empirical piety). However, more importantly, they grow through a deeper faith and reliance on Christ, His Word, and His blessed exchange (i.e., their sins for Christ's righteousness). The confessional Lutheran scholar Scaer presents it this way:

> Paradoxically, the Christian has no internal evidence or feeling within himself that he is fulfilling the law. Rather than seeing himself making progress toward a greater holiness, which he may be, he becomes increasingly aware of his standing before God, coram deo, as a sinner. As faith increases, so does the awareness of sin, and he loses all sense of an internal, personal righteousness… Any definition of the third use of the law in terms of progress toward moral perfection must be dismissed, as it would hardly be different from how the Pharisees understood and used the law. Lutheran theology has a doctrine of Christian and spiritual perfection, but defines this as the increase of both faith and sorrow over sins. By faith, they hear from the gospel that they are being perfected in Christ and in Him are receiving, sharing, and doing His righteousness (third use), but within the reality of their own experience, they see themselves more and more as sinners condemned by the law's

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[99] Biermann, "Sanctification: Three Views," 80.

[100] Prenter, *Spiritus Creator*, 77.

[101] Gerhard O. Forde, "Justification and Sanctification," in *Christian Dogmatics*, 1st ed, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Bloomfield, MN: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2011), 2:425.

> accusations (second use). They live and die as sinners (second use), pleading only for God's mercy in Christ (gospel).[102]

This growth may not be evident to believers or others, but it is hidden with Christ in God.[103] Since empirical piety is vague and often reflects a human effort devoid of faith, its measurement remains uncertain. Therefore, the sanctification of believers requires a heightened awareness of the seriousness, magnitude, and repulsiveness of sin, along with a recognition of their dependence on Christ's Word (Rom 10:17). Thus, believers do not depend on the growth of good works; rather, they cultivate a deeper understanding of their inability to contribute anything to their justification and their total reliance on Christ's life, death, resurrection, and ascension to overcome their fallen state (i.e., the blessed exchange: believers' sins for Christ's righteousness).

C. Growth of Expression in the Spirit's Fruit

The third theory of sanctification identifies the expression of the Spirit's fruit—namely, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control; against such things, there is no law (Gal 5:22-23)—as the unique feature that distinguishes Christian life from the unbelieving world. Therefore, sanctification is distinctly a Christian reality. The confessional Lutheran scholar Biermann says:

> The operative assumption [of this theory] is that the way Christian people are expected to live is higher, more refined, more authentic, and more

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[102] David P. Scaer, *Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics: Law and Gospel and the Means of Grace*, ed. Jennifer H. Maxfield, XIII (St. Louis, MO: The Luther Academy, 2008), Kindle 2154.

[103] Prenter, *Spiritus Creator*, 70.

> spiritual than the basic morality typical of those who are living in simple obedience to the standard of natural law or even the Decalogue.[104]

The newness of Christian life is evident in the expression of the Spirit's fruit, which transcends mere morality or simple adherence to ethical standards like the Ten Commandments. The hallmark of Christian living is the manifestation of the Spirit's fruit; against such things, there is no law. The Spirit's fruit naturally emerges in the lives of believers through God's grace. Therefore, Christian character derives from the Holy Spirit rather than being merely a human effort to follow moral law. Consequently, the Christian life is distinctly spiritual, embodying the expectation of genuine transformation in beliefs, attitudes, and desires.

Excesses

Excesses arise when God's gifts of justification and sanctification are not kept distinct from one another.[105] Believers are continually tempted to revert to unbelief or to distort the Gospel into a perspective that requires appeasing God to earn or merit salvation. They may look inward, attempting to self-justify and rely on their own works and merits instead of turning outward to Christ's work and merit. By grace, believers receive God's gifts with humility, gratitude, and praise. The subsections below explore some prevalent excesses from the early church to contemporary history. If left unaddressed, these excesses tend to resurface in various forms.

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[104] Biermann, "Sanctification: Three Views," 81.

[105] Nafzger et al., *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1091.

Asceticism

Asceticism[106] emerges as a response to the corrupt and fallen world.[107] When sin is prevalent, believers may seek to avoid worldly pleasures and disengage from the temptations of this fallen world, aiming to praise, worship, and glorify God. However, this often includes embracing a self-made religion of poverty, chastity, and a harsh life of obedience to one's own ideals. Asceticism is usually conspicuous, intended to be visible and acknowledged.[108] Ascetics desire recognition as super-Christians who willingly sacrifice worldly comfort and pleasure to earn God's grace. This can lead to a works-righteous hierarchy of Christian classes, including various forms of monasticism. Ascetics tend to seek greater heavenly rewards for their relative sacrifices. Nonetheless, there is only one, once-for-all sacrifice for the sins of the world (Heb 10:10). The only wage earned is death because all sin and fall short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23). "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 6:23). The one great reward is eternal life with God in the new creation.

Therefore, believers should remain in the world while avoiding evil (Jn 17:15). They should pray without drawing attention to themselves (Mt 6:5). When believers give materially, it should be done quietly and with humility (Mt 6:1-3). They should serve

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[106] "Asceticism," the doctrine that through renunciation of worldly pleasures it is possible to achieve a high spiritual or intellectual state. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, Fifth edition (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016).

[107] Nafzger et al., *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1091.

[108] Nafzger et al., *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1093.

others sincerely rather than merely offering kind words (Jas 2:14-17). Although human teachings may appear wise in promoting asceticism (i.e., self-made religion and harshness toward the body), they do not effectively restrain fleshly indulgence (Col 2:22-23). Thus, believers should steer clear of asceticism (Col 2:18) and rely entirely on God's gift of justification, recognizing that all fall short of the glory of God. Likewise, believers depend on God's gift of sanctification to will and work according to His good pleasure (Eph 2:10, Phil 2:13).

Human Will and Divine Grace

In the 13th century, Aquinas viewed justification and sanctification as interrelated aspects of God's grace without clearly distinguishing between them.[109] His expression of synergism[110]—an optimistic perspective on humanity's ability to seek, cooperate with, and love God—proved highly influential and continues to reflect the official doctrine of justification in the Roman Catholic Church, as affirmed by the Council of Trent[111]. Aquinas taught that justification arises from a gradual and progressive process of sanctification through individual works and divine grace. He asserted that before the fall into sin, Adam and Eve possessed the natural virtues of prudence, justice, courage, and self-control, alongside the supernatural virtues of faith, hope, and love. However, after the fall into sin, humanity lost these supernatural virtues while retaining the natural

[109] Nafzger et al., *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1096.

[110] "Synergism," the doctrine that individual salvation is achieved through a combination of human will and divine grace. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*.

[111] Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1978), 1:514–22.

ones. Consequently, the Christian life aims to merit God's grace through works that gradually restore these supernatural virtues. The hope is that, through sacrificial love, one's works of faith will gain merit before God, which, in turn, gradually secures grace that sanctifies and ultimately leads to justification. Thus, justification before God depends on sufficient progress in sanctification. Jesus' example of righteous and holy living is vital; nonetheless, God did not send His Son into the world to condemn it through His perfect example but to save it through His perfect sacrifice (Jn 3:17). Reformers, such as Luther, emphasized the importance of distinguishing between justification and sanctification to address the error of justification by grace and works.

Lutheran Pietism

The orthodox movement significantly influenced theology following the Lutheran Reformation in the late 16th and 17th centuries. A notable zeal and concern for doctrinal accuracy were evident; however, the importance of holy living was often overlooked.[112] In response to this neglect, Pietism[113] emerged, emphasizing growth in obedience to God's commandments (sanctification) that flows from justification. Nevertheless, Pietism

[112] Nafzger et al., *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1098.

[113] "Pietism," a movement in the Lutheran church in the 17th and 18th centuries, calling for a return to practical and devout Christianity. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*.

evolved excessively, promoting legalism,[114] moralism,[115] and even perfectionism[116] as interpretations of sanctification. In practice, individuals may begin to question their justification if they do not observe the "fruit" of sanctification. Consequently, this fruit came to be regarded as evidence of justification, leading to considerable distress. When there is relatively little fruit (i.e., a sense of insufficient sanctification), one may fall into despair, perceiving a lack of justification and fearing condemnation. Conversely, when one perceives an abundance of fruit (i.e., a sense of sufficient sanctification), one may become prideful, relying on personal merit rather than Christ's for justification. At the height of Pietism, a relative measure of sanctification was seen as proof of justification, which contributed to the development of a form of justification based on legalistic and moralistic works.[117] However, it is misguided to believe that sanctification contributes to or earns justification (Eph 2:8-9).

[114] Legalism neglects the blessed exchange (believers' sins for Christ's righteousness) by offering a path to self-justification before God by works following requirements and prohibitions that often extend beyond the Bible. "Legalism," an overly strict or rigid adherence to the law or to a religious or moral code. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*.

[115] Moralism neglects the blessed exchange (believers' sins for Christ's righteousness) by making the Christian message a guide for self-righteous living. "Moralism," the act or practice of moralizing, or an often undue concern for morality. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*.

[116] Perfectionism neglects the blessed exchange (believers' sins for Christ's righteousness) by offering a false hope that Christians can reach complete sanctification in this life and overcome temptation and sin. "Perfectionism," a belief in certain religions that moral or spiritual perfection can be achieved before the soul has passed into the afterlife. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*.

[117] Nafzger et al., *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1098.

The Social Gospel

Modernism[118] significantly influenced innovations in Christian theology during the late 19th and 20th centuries. Advances emerged in naturalism[119] (e.g., Darwin's theory of evolution[120]), rationalism[121] (e.g., Kant's morality and the categorical imperative[122]), and theological Romanticism[123] (e.g., Schleiermacher and modern theological liberalism[124]). Nafzger et al. contend that Schleiermacher aimed to address naturalism and religious skepticism[125] by grounding morality in a sense of dependence on the divine absolute. Believers are encouraged to reflect this divine absolute within their

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[118] "Modernism," the deliberate departure from tradition and the use of innovative forms of expression that distinguish many styles in the arts and literature of the 1900s. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*.

[119] "Naturalism," the system of thought holding that all phenomena can be explained in terms of natural causes and laws. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*.

[120] Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species: By Means of Natural Selection or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*, ed. William Bynum, Penguin Classics (London, UK: Penguin, 2009).

[121] "Rationalism," the theory that the exercise of reason, rather than experience, authority, or spiritual revelation, provides the primary basis for knowledge. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*.

[122] Immanuel Kant "defines the good as love expressed in the 'categorical imperative' the impulse to act only in such a way that one's maxim should become a universal law. Evil is essentially the impulse to selfishness, and human beings are free to choose between it and the good." Nafzger et al., *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1099.

[123] "Romanticism," an artistic and intellectual movement… characterized by a heightened interest in nature, emphasis on the individual's expression of emotion and imagination, departure from the attitudes and forms of classicism, and rebellion against established social rules and conventions. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*.

[124] "Liberalism," a 19th-century Protestant movement that favored free intellectual inquiry, stressed the ethical and humanitarian content of Christianity, and de-emphasized dogmatic theology. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*.

[125] "Skepticism," the doctrine that absolute knowledge is impossible, either in a particular domain or in general. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*.

communities.[126] Schleiermacher's views were rooted more in rationalism than in the Bible. He urged individuals to seek God internally, guided by feelings rather than through God's external revelation, the Bible. This perspective led to the belief that Christianity aims to expand God's Kingdom through a society organized around Christian love and freedom. However, this understanding neglects God's supernatural attributes and emphasizes an overly optimistic view of human potential. This belief resulted in a mandate to reconstruct society by aiding those affected by social injustice (i.e., the Social Gospel). A leading theological advocate of the Social Gospel was Rauschenbusch.[127] Nonetheless, this emphasis on humanity's temporal well-being often overlooks humanity's eternal well-being. The Social Gospel frequently defines salvation narrowly as freedom from worldly oppression, hunger, and inadequate living conditions rather than as deliverance from sin, death, and the devil. However, it profits no one to gain the whole world and forfeit one's soul (Mk 8:36). The movement tends to define the Christian life excessively in terms of progress toward the temporal well-being of others.

Neo-Orthodoxy

Naive optimism about humanity's inherent goodness and potential for moral improvement waned after World War I.[128] The Neo-Orthodoxy movement emerged, reinstating a more biblical perspective on humanity's fallen nature and the necessity of

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[126] Nafzger et al., *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1099.

[127] Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (London, UK: Forgotten Books, 2018).

[128] Nafzger et al., *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1101.

God's external, redemptive intervention. Barth, in Europe, and Niebuhr, in North America, were prominent proponents. Nafzger et al. contend, "While professing to repudiate the rationalistic views of the Enlightenment and abandoning many of the basic tenets of liberalism, both maintained its social concerns in modified forms."[129] These developments directed theology toward a more realistic and traditional view of original sin, for which God provides the solution through grace in justification and sanctification. However, Nafzger et al. conclude, "Unfortunately, Barth's theological reconstruction also contains elements that are seriously at odds with the Scriptural understanding of the Christian life as confessed in the Lutheran confessional writings. For example, he insisted that the law is a form of the gospel."[130] The preaching order of Law and Gospel (i.e., repent of sin and believe the Gospel, Mk 1:15) was reversed to Gospel and Law (i.e., believe the Gospel and obey the Law). Barth does not clearly distinguish between justification (God's completed work in Christ) and sanctification (God's ongoing work that involves believers' participation). Obedience to the Law becomes Good News for those receiving temporal services (i.e., charity, acts of mercy, social justice, etc.). However, this frames belief in the Gospel excessively as obedience to the Law within the context of social goals.

[129] Nafzger et al., *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1101.

[130] Nafzger et al., *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1101.

Rejection of the Third Use of the Law

In response to Barth's theology, some prominent progressive Lutheran theologians, including Forde, advocated for a significant separation between God's Law and the Gospel.[131] This perspective involved rejecting the third use, or function, of God's Law.[132] Forde asserted that God's Law, specifically the Ten Commandments, curbs sin in the world (the first use) and condemns sinners (the second use). The second use drives sinners to the Gospel with the plea: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner" (Lk 18:13). However, because believers are set free in Christ, the Law does not serve as a guide for the Christian life (the third use). To determine how to feel and act in the world, believers are called to embrace the freedom of the Gospel, allowing Spirit-led love and reason to guide their lives. Therefore, the Christian response to the Gospel is not obedience to God's Law, specifically the Ten Commandments, but rather Spirit-led, contextual, creative, and spontaneous action rooted in Christian love and freedom.[133] In practice, however, this innovative and spontaneous response often contradicts God's Word. Without an authoritative guide for sanctification—namely, God's Word—one's desires and contextual social preferences prevail. Consequently, the individual becomes the source and power of sanctification, rather than God. This excessively defines sanctification as a subjective, Spirit-led endeavour independent of God's Word. Yet,

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[131] Nafzger et al., *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1101.

[132] Confessional Lutherans identify three uses or functions of God's Law: the first is to curb sin in the world, the second is to serve as a mirror to reveal sin, and the third is to guide the Christian life. Luther, *Luther's Catechism—English Standard Version*, 34.

[133] Gerhard O. Forde, *The Law-Gospel Debate: An Interpretation of Its Development* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1969).

Christians are instructed not to believe every spirit but to test the spirits to see whether they are from God (1 Jn 4:1).

Conclusion

God's gifts of justification and sanctification are distinct aspects of the Gospel and should not be mixed or confused. Though they are interconnected—if a person is justified, they are also sanctified and vice versa—they should not be regarded or experienced as evidence for each other. God's Word addresses both justification and sanctification through the promises made for Christ's sake. These gifts are sure and certain, given through the means of grace: God's Word and Sacraments.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHOD

The purpose of this Doctor of Ministry project was fourfold:

1. Advance theological integration in my ministry by engaging the congregational context through theological understanding and critical thinking.
2. Gain a thorough understanding of the context to identify, frame, and respond to the key issues impacting my parishioners' sanctification.
3. Enhance my effectiveness as a minister and my leadership abilities.
4. Energize my spiritual growth and professional purpose.

This research aimed to support Cornerstone Lutheran Church parishioners through an intervention designed to promote positive change and enhance effective ministerial practice. It offers valuable insights for practitioners to apply in their fields. Bramer and Chapman advocate that Participatory Action Research is particularly well-suited to achieve these goals.[134]

Participant Co-Researchers

Cornerstone Lutheran Church was founded by three families in 2024. All eight of the adult founding members from these families participated as co-researchers in this study.

[134] Bramer and Chapman, "Action Research for Doctor of Ministry Project: A Practical Definition," 28.

Intervention 1: Initiation

The first intervention began with a town hall meeting for all participant co-researchers. This open-ended brainstorming initiative sought to identify themes and patterns in the issues that Cornerstone Lutheran Church parishioners experienced regarding sanctification. The discussion specifically addressed the following research question and sub-questions:

Research Question: How do we navigate sanctification?

Sub-Question #1: What challenges are we experiencing?

Sub-Question #2: How are we responding to these challenges?

Sub-Question #3: How is theology informing our sanctification?

Sub-Question #4: How does this relate to the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod?

The congregational secretary attended and documented the key points of each meeting, including the town hall and individual sessions. This method preserved the integrity of the discussions by keeping the recorded notes separate from me, the lead co-researcher. The notes from the town hall meetings were distributed to all co-researchers for their approval. In contrast, the notes from individual meetings were accessible only to the congregational secretary, each co-researcher, and me. Each co-researcher reviewed and approved the notes recorded during their sessions.

After the town hall meeting, the congregational secretary and I conducted individual sessions with each of the co-researchers. These sessions sparked an open-ended brainstorming discussion to identify themes and specific issues related to sanctification for each parishioner.

Once the individual meetings were completed, I evaluated the actions from the initial intervention. Theological themes and patterns were identified, along with potential answers and solutions. Each iteration of Participatory Action Research focuses on understanding the situation, addressing key issues, employing theological discernment, developing adequate responses, and assessing possible outcomes. Action research theorists Kemmis and McTaggart describe this iterative cycle as planning, acting, observing, and reflecting.[135]

Intervention 2: Formation

Participatory Action Research is an iterative process where each cycle builds on the reflection and evaluation of the previous one, either narrowing or broadening its scope while refining or redirecting the actions taken. Participatory Action Research serves as a method for gaining insights and fostering improvements, requiring active engagement from participant co-researchers who plan, act, observe, and reflect on each iteration of the process.[136] Consequently, the second intervention became more focused. I improved the discussion during the second town hall meeting by incorporating the key discussion points from the first intervention.

After the second town hall meeting, the next round of individual meetings began. Once all individual meetings were completed, I evaluated the outcomes of the second

[135] Stephen Kemmis, Robin McTaggart, and Rhonda Nixon, *The Action Research Planner: Doing Critical Participatory Action Research* (New York, NY: Springer, 2014), 5.

[136] Bramer and Chapman, "Action Research for Doctor of Ministry Project: A Practical Definition," 30.

intervention. Theological themes and patterns related to sanctification were further identified and clarified, along with potential insights and solutions. Schein observes:

> In practice, what most change agents have learned from their own experiences is that 'diagnostic' activities, such as observations, interviews, and questionnaires, are already powerful interventions; the processes of learning about a system and changing that system are, in fact, one and the same.[137]

Positive changes, such as increased engagement with God's Word, were already occurring among the co-researchers and within the congregation. This marked the conclusion of the second iteration.

Intervention 3: Completion

In her book, *Action Research Essentials*, Craig describes reflection as a mental process where events, experiences, problems, or situations are revisited and analyzed to enhance understanding, ultimately leading to solutions, ideas, improvements, and change.[138] I reflected on the first and second interventions, clarifying theological themes and patterns related to sanctification while providing specific insights and solutions. Demonstrating God's Word as a means of grace and instilling faith to trust in Him, a breakthrough occurred during the second intervention when 1 Corinthians 10:1-6 was identified as a key to unlocking a model for the Christian life through the lens of Exodus (see Chapter 4: Evaluation of Results). This was thoroughly discussed during the third

[137] Edgar H. Schein, "Kurt Lewin's Change Theory in the Field and in the Classroom: Notes toward a Model of Managed Learning.," *Systemic Practice and Action Research* 9, no. 1 (1996): 36.

[138] Dorothy Valcarcel Craig, *Action Research Essentials*, Research Methods for the Social Sciences (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 145.

and final town hall meeting. The feedback cycle continued into the last individual sessions, marking the conclusion of the third and final intervention.

Bramer and Chapman contend that involving individuals in similar situations as co-researchers is both fair and ethical. Encouraging parishioners to participate in this research process fostered positive changes in their lives. The co-researchers actively engaged with God's Word, their challenges, and their responses to these challenges, seeking sound theology for ultimate solutions. This engagement was crucial for their ownership, empowerment, and enlightenment throughout the research journey. Such inclusion was a vital element that made Participatory Action Research ethical for this study.[139]

[139] Bramer and Chapman, "Action Research for Doctor of Ministry Project: A Practical Definition," 34.

CHAPTER 4: EVALUATION OF RESULTS

Theological Rationale

This Participatory Action Research aimed to foster positive change by generating beneficial outcomes for the participant co-researchers and the congregation while contributing to new knowledge. This positive change encompasses knowledge and behaviour at both the individual and congregational levels. Evidence of this change follows below. The term “positive” reflects an interpretation of the Bible alongside a synthesis of the statement of faith of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, *This We Believe*[140] (see Appendix 6), contextualized within the congregation’s culture to achieve a correct understanding and good behaviour. Christ Jesus refers to the kingdom of God as the ideal culture, and the apostles describe Him as embodying the virtues of a perfect person.[141] Therefore, consistent with the approach taken so far, the confessional Lutheran perspective offered the theological rationale for evaluating the data.

[140] Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, ed., *This We Believe: A Statement of Belief of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1999).

[141] Bramer and Chapman, “Action Research for Doctor of Ministry Project: A Practical Definition,” 36.

Theoretical Rationale

The town hall and individual meeting notes from the three iterations of the intervention underwent analysis consistent with Sensing's approach.[142] This data has been unpacked and organized. Moschella suggests three methods for organizing the data: first, a literal reading that highlights specific words, phrases, language, interpretations, and gestures; second, an interpretive reading that selects and organizes the data according to implied or inferred meanings; and third, a reflexive reading that prioritizes personal feelings and understandings of the data.[143] Triangulation among the co-researchers and the note recorder (the congregational secretary) helped validate the organization of the data. Findings for various topics are presented in word clouds and phrases. My analysis considered convergence and divergence in the data, thematic overlaps, areas of disagreement as slippage, and unrepresented realities as silence.

Report of Findings

This Participatory Action Research illustrates how Cornerstone Lutheran Church parishioners navigate sanctification. The research produced definitive results, highlighting the theological challenges, responses, and influences that impact sanctification and its relation to the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. Following Patton's recommendations, I incorporated comments in the report to convey the

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[142] Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 304–18.

[143] Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2008), 172–73.

participants' experiences, thoughts, and perspectives.[144] The findings provide a comprehensive overview of the study's key outcomes, which were shared with co-researchers and the congregation.

Explanation

Introduction

Luther explains in the Large Catechism, Part II, the Apostles' Creed,[145] that believers cannot truly know anything about Christ, believe in Him, or accept Him as their Lord unless the truths of the Bible are presented to them and granted to their hearts by the Holy Spirit through the preaching of the Gospel (1 Cor 12:3; Gal 4:6). The work of redemption is fulfilled through Christ, who declares, "It is finished" (Jn 19:30). He has secured this treasure for believers through His life, death, resurrection, and ascension (Col 2:3). However, if this work goes unheard, no one will know about it, rendering it useless and forgotten. Therefore, this treasure should not be buried but instead received and enjoyed. God has caused His Word to be proclaimed. Through His Word, the Holy Spirit delivers this treasure and makes it the believer's own. Thus, through God's Word and Sacraments, the Holy Spirit leads the believer to Christ, allowing them to receive His goodness, which they could not attain on their own (1 Pt 3:18).

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[144] Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods: Integrating Theory and Practice*, Fourth (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2015), 605–6.

[145] McCain, *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, 403.

Sub-Question #1: What challenges are we experiencing?

The co-researchers faced seven key challenges (or opportunities). The following discussion does not provide a thorough analysis of these challenges; instead, it raises questions that have influenced the research on how Cornerstone Lutheran Church parishioners navigate sanctification. Sub-Questions #1 and #2 are answered by Sub-Questions #3 and #4 in the same sequence.

1. The Domain of Darkness (Exorcism)

Enthusiasm

Sadly, not many Christians read the Bible. In the 2022 study mentioned above, Wong et al. found that Bible reading is not among the top five spiritual practices of Canadian Christians.[146] Instead of encouraging individuals to read the Bible themselves, some churches urge parishioners to seek a new word or hear from the Holy Spirit (or Jesus) in a way that is unique and personal to them. This is enthusiasm.[147] It's an uplifting feeling that seems to originate from a divine or superhuman force, a state of ecstasy. Therefore, it involves a sense of divine possession, revelation, or being directly influenced by some divine urge. Luther spoke against this:

> Enthusiasm dwells in Adam and his children from the beginning to the end of the world. Its venom has been implanted and infused into them by the old serpent. It is the origin, power, and strength of all heresy… Therefore,

[146] Wong et al., "Discipleship from Catholic, Mainline and Conservative Protestant Congregant Perspectives in Canada," 489.

[147] "Enthusiasm," an ecstasy arising from supposed possession by a god. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*.

> we must constantly maintain this point: God does not want to deal with us in any other way than through the spoken Word and the Sacraments. Whatever is praised as from the Spirit—without the Word and the Sacraments—is the devil himself.[148]

Despite Luther's biblical teachings, some Christians adopt a mysticism that is less dependent on the Bible and its teachings. Root's triangulation model, which includes Beyonders (i.e., true believers), Exclusive Humanism, and Counter-Enlightenment, may help explain this phenomenon.[149] First, some individuals are drawn to Exclusive Humanism through a more personal form of spirituality. They seek truth within themselves rather than depending on the Bible, aiming to cultivate their inner genius—their true, authentic self. This genuine, authentic self holds relative authority and can be disconnected from both the Bible and reality, viewing lived experience as the ultimate authority. Second, some individuals are drawn to the Counter-Enlightenment. As the Bible cannot be implicitly trusted, it is heroic action that must define and shape reality. One must speak boldly, even in the name of God, as a courageous act to distinguish oneself and demonstrate one's closeness to God.

But is this true? Is this something to embrace? Is the aim or goal of the Christian life to receive personal revelation from God? Are we to dismiss the second commandment, "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain" (Ex 20:7)? Is this not a command and warning? Nonetheless, the Christian life is increasingly presented as one in which God (the Holy Spirit or Jesus Himself) speaks to the believer personally, leading and

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[148] McCain, *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, 281.

[149] Andrew Root, *The Church in an Age of Secular Mysticisms: Why Spiritualities Without God Fail to Transform Us*, Ministry in a Secular Age 6 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2023).

guiding them through life's ups and downs, much like a life coach or personal trainer, independent of the Bible. However, a "spirit" separate from the Bible is not of God, but of the devil.

Yoga

One of the co-researchers is a former yoga instructor, and all the other seven co-researchers have participated in yoga at some point in their lives. The sentiment in Kelowna mirrors that of Vancouver: "Meditation, yoga, and finding oneself in the mountains is everywhere."[150] In Lockhart's book, *West Coast Mission*, Rev. Joy James, the pastor of Oak Ridge United Church and a yoga instructor, describes the desire to engage neighbours by offering "Holy Yoga."[151] But can yoga be made holy? Or is this an oxymoron? Is there anything holy about yoga? And why does yoga need to be made holy? No other fitness activity or sport demands this kind of cleansing; there is no sacred weightlifting, holy baseball, or holy golf.

There is no doubt that yoga has an allure. Many people adopt yoga primarily for exercise, along with various other reasons, such as stress relief, increased flexibility, weight loss, and alleviating depression and anxiety. However, 62 percent of students and 85 percent of instructors report that their primary reason for practising yoga has

[150] Ross A. Lockhart, *West Coast Mission: The Changing Nature of Christianity in Vancouver* (Montreal, QB: McGill-Queens University Press, 2024), 83.

[151] Lockhart, *West Coast Mission*, 50.

shifted from fitness to spirituality.[152] It appears there is a religious component to yoga. If so, is yoga compatible with Christianity? If not, what can be done to address this issue? Many Christians are committed yoga practitioners. There would probably be an uproar in many congregations if the pastor suggested otherwise. So, what is yoga?

Patanjali was a Hindu author, mystic, and philosopher who lived in the 3rd or 4th century AD. He wrote the Yoga Sutras, which form the foundation of the yoga tradition. Yoga is very popular. Who hasn't been to a yoga class? Yoga is widely accepted throughout North America as a beneficial physical and spiritual practice, and it is offered in many public-school physical education programs. Yoga studios and classes are common in Kelowna.

Patanjali synthesized and organized the knowledge and wisdom of yoga from older traditions into a coherent yoga philosophy. The Yoga Sutras are renowned for teaching ashtanga (or the eight limbs), a practice that involves emptying the mind and manifesting supernatural gifts, culminating in samadhi—the absorption into the spirit. But what spirit, exactly?

Icons of Patanjali depict the Kundalini serpent, wrapped three and a half times around the practitioner's midsection and joining at the spine. Patanjali's yoga poses retell ancient stories and honour various deities (perhaps demons?). The aim is to awaken the Kundalini serpent life force by clearing the mind through the worship pose, allowing for absorption into the Kundalini serpent spirit. Creating space between the mind and thoughts, surrendering the ego, and merging with the spirit all lead to

[152] Crystal L. Park et al., "Why Practice Yoga? Practitioners' Motivations for Adopting and Maintaining Yoga Practice," *Journal of Health Psychology* 21, no. 6 (June 2016): 887, https://doi.org/10.1177/1359105314541314.

discovering your own nature, your "true self." For Walker and Wiebe, authors of *Yoga—Timeless Wisdom*, "The purpose of this system of eight limbs is for one to awaken to [the divine] True Self and be absorbed in [divine] Spirit."[153] This aligns with Root's model, which involves finding and expressing one's inner genius (Exclusive-Humanism) by wholeheartedly embracing the divine within and engaging in heroic action (Counter-Enlightenment) through dedicated practice.

Yoga is more than just stretching and exercising; it is a comprehensive approach to overall spiritual "well-being." For example, the Yoga Sutras have four Padas or chapters. Pada three is on supernatural abilities and gifts. Walker and Wiebe claim:

> Supernatural abilities and gifts can appear as the practice of Yoga become well developed. The evidence that paranormal abilities are attainable is exemplified in all human cultures. This potential for psychic or supernatural capacities must be taken seriously and critically examined to be discerned from true spiritual potential: "These gifts are implements to being absorbed in spirit" (Yoga Sutras, III.38).[154]

Although yoga is gaining popularity within the church, it appears entirely incompatible with Christianity. The challenge for parishioners at Cornerstone Lutheran Church is to help their families, friends, and communities avoid falling into the trap of yoga. By God's grace, dedicated yoga practitioners need a strong intervention—perhaps even an exorcism—to help them realize that yoga conflicts with Christianity.

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[153] Foster Walker and Barbara Wiebe, *Yoga—Timeless Wisdom: The Path of Awakening to Your True Self* (Bloomington, IN: LifeRich Publishing, 2022), 80.

[154] Walker and Wiebe, *Yoga—Timeless Wisdom*, 75.

Gender Ideology

The rainbow flag is visible throughout Kelowna—in public schools, retail stores, real estate offices, and even churches. The flag symbolizes acceptance, inclusion, and affirmation, signalling that without it visibly posted, some individuals may be excluded from these spaces. But is this true? Are some people being excluded from public schools and stores? Where is the evidence for this? It exists in microaggressions and lived experiences. Therefore, the problem is real and systemic. But again, is this true? Many churches, including several that Lockhart interviewed in his study, embrace gender ideology.[155]

Despite this, the Bible teaches that "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Gn 1:27). It seems there are only two sexes, and gender is a human construct. But who should Christians believe, God or humanity? When Peter and the apostles faced this predicament, they advised, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). However, this was two thousand years ago; how can this principle apply today? Many church bodies, pastors, and congregants believe in prioritizing humanity's word over God's Word. However, the Bible warns:

> For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths (2 Tm 4:3-4).

In Kelowna's secular culture, the biblical argument has had little impact on hindering the gender ideology movement, even within various congregations and

[155] Lockhart, *West Coast Mission*.

religious bodies (as Lockhart demonstrates in Vancouver). But what about the children to whom this ideology is imposed? Does this ideology pose any risk of harm? Is it ethical to impose confusion on children regarding sex, gender, attraction, and lifestyle? What about hormone therapy and transition surgery? Could this be a form of child abuse? There seems to be a dark and demonic element to gender ideology.

2. Some Saved and Not Others (Passover)

Universalism

Two of the co-researchers are former Roman Catholics. Pope Francis passed away on April 21, 2025. Should one revere Pope Francis? Was he a holy man? Was he a blessed servant of Christ? Should one give thanks for Pope Francis? Some Protestant denominations believe, teach, and confess that the office of the papacy is of the devil and specifically the antichrist warned about in the Bible. Luther held this position;[156] however, what are Lutherans to think today? Did Luther believe that only Lutherans are saved? Confessional Lutherans believe the following:

> We believe that there is one holy Christian church, which is the temple of God (1 Corinthians 3:16) and the body of Christ (Ephesians 1:23; 4:12). The members of this one church are all those who are the "sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:26). The church, then, consists only of believers, or saints, whom God accepts as holy for the sake of Jesus' righteousness, which has been credited to them (2 Corinthians 5:21). These saints are scattered throughout the world. All people who believe that Jesus is their Savior from sin are members of the holy

[156] McCain, *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, 270.

> Christian church, regardless of the nation, race, or church body to which they belong (VII Church and Ministry, #1).[157]

In contrast, what did Pope Francis teach? On September 13, 2024, Pope Francis stated in Singapore at the Interreligious Meeting with Young People, as cited in *The Holy See* transcript for the event:

> All religions are paths to God. I will use an analogy, they are like different languages that express the divine. But God is for everyone, and therefore, we are all God's children. "But my God is more important than yours!" Is this true? There is only one God, and religions are like languages, paths to reach God. Some Sikh, some Muslim, some Hindu, some Christian. Understood?[158]

This statement conveys Universalism, a doctrine accepted by some religious groups, which teaches that all people will be saved or ultimately saved through purgatory or some other means.[159] Along with Pope Francis, Kelowna Unitarians advocate this view. Their slogan is, "Sharing diverse explorations of faith."[160] Some promote this perspective as the "ecumenical worldview," which involves understanding others' backgrounds, cultures, rituals, and religions by believing there is good in all people.[161]

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[157] Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, *This We Believe*, 18.

[158] Pope Francis, "Address of His Holiness: Interreligious Meeting With Young People," Libreria Editrice Vaticana, September 13, 2024, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2024/september/documents/20240913-singapore-giovani.html.

[159] "Universalism," the theological doctrine that all people will eventually be saved. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*.

[160] Kelowna Unitarians, ed., "Sharing Diverse Explorations of Faith," 2023, https://www.kelownaunitarians.ca/.

[161] Jason Bertrand, "Cultivating the Spirit: How College Can Enhance Student's Inner Lives," *Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development* 12, nos. 12, article 7 (2013), https://pillars.taylor.edu/acsd_growth/vol12/iss12/7.

But is Universalism true? Jesus says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (Jn 14:6). The Bible advises avoiding other religions: “The sorrows of those who run after another god shall multiply; their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out or take their names on my lips” (Ps 16.4). Nonetheless, do Sikhs, Muslims, Hindus, and Christians pray to the same God, as Pope Francis implies? Does praying to any god imply praying to the one true God? How does the Jewish community fit in? Do they pray to the one true God? One is to test all spirits:

> Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already (1 Jn 4:1-3).

In contrast, Pope Francis teaches that since all religions lead to God and all prayer is directed to the one true God, salvation is available to everyone who has faith. But is faith a noun or a verb? Is having faith in one’s possession (noun) what the Bible teaches? Or is faith a verb? Faith is believing (verb) in a person, place, or thing. However, is faith of any value if the person, place or thing is not real?

Should the growing universalistic worldview be a concern? Christians and non-Christians in the Kelowna area appear to be increasingly open to Universalism. Doctrines are criticized as divisive and unnecessary, despite Universalism itself being a doctrine. Many seem to agree with the Roman Catholic doctrine that all can be saved if they are good people. Good people can participate in salvation as “anonymous Christians,” a theological idea developed by Karl Rahner and taught in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph 847:

> Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and,

> moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience—these too may achieve eternal salvation.[162]

How does Universalism triangulate within Root's model?[163] Universalism represents a shift from the Beyonders to Exclusive Humanism and Counter-Enlightenment. First, Universalism expresses inner genius (Exclusive Humanism), asserting that humanity is fundamentally good. Therefore, if a loving God exists, God would love humankind because of their inherent goodness and save everyone (Universalism). If God does not save everyone, then God must be evil for creating humanity below His standard or must be evil for saving some but not all. In either scenario, this presents a cruel God unworthy of worship. Second, Universalism signifies an expression of heroic action characteristic of the Counter-Enlightenment. People naturally do their best with what God has given them, often through heroic actions. If someone is a good person and has done good things, there is no reason a good God would not save them. Only an evil God would reject the apparent and abundant good demonstrated by humanity through their heroic actions. Nevertheless, it appears that the Bible teaches that God will pass over some people and not others.

The Goodness of Humanity

Many people, both inside and outside the church, believe that humanity is essentially good. Roman Catholics generally think that the late Pope Francis was a

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[162] Catholic Church, ed., *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2003).

[163] Root, *The Church in an Age of Secular Mysticisms*.

good, even holy person. His white garments symbolized his goodness, holiness, and closeness to God. Many other spiritual leaders are also regarded as good individuals. Secular humanists argue that all humanity is good and has significant potential for goodness. Many, to some extent, assume the inherent goodness of people. But is this true? Are people born into the world with a certain amount of goodness and the ability to tell right from wrong and choose what is right? This is a fundamental question and requires an accurate understanding when navigating sanctification. However, the Bible explains that since the fall, everyone is born in sin and by nature children of wrath (Eph 2:3). It is not until God's intervention that believers become adopted children of God.

3. The Means of Grace (Word and Sacrament)

God works exclusively through His chosen means of grace: Word (i.e., the Bible) and Sacrament (i.e., Baptism and the Lord's Supper). The life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ Jesus benefit no one except through these chosen means of grace. However, many faith traditions deny and reject these means in favour of alternatives. Howard's book, *A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation*,[164] promotes a host of things outside God's Word and Sacrament as means of grace. In this context, any person, thing, or experience can become a means of grace. But is this true? "In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:19). God's Word is the message of reconciliation. His Word has power and achieves what God intends (Is 55:11). Prayer,

[164] Evan B. Howard, *A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation: How Scripture, Spirit, Community, and Mission Shape Our Souls* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018).

self-imposed works, and pious exercises are not means of grace. The means of grace assume that God is gracious to everyone because of Christ. If Christ Jesus had not atoned for the sins of the world, forgiveness would not be possible or available. In that case, the means of grace would become ways for people to earn grace, instead of remaining methods through which God gives grace.

4. Trust in God's Word and His Provision (Daily Bread)

Language as God's Gift

A harmful misconception has taken root within Christianity. Some see God's Word, the Bible, only as signs pointing to the living God. A high regard for the Bible is often misunderstood as worship of a book, merely words on a page. Instead, it's taught that the Bible's purpose is to help individuals develop a personal relationship with the living God. Therefore, the Bible is fundamentally a sign that directs people to God. This may sound familiar, and there is some truth to it; however, this view shows less respect for God's Word. It weakens God's Word, denying its power to fulfill its purpose. "In the beginning was the Word (or Language), and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (Jn 1:1 ESV). God's Word is powerful; it is how God acts in the world.

The Bible warns of human wisdom that seeks to distort God's Word:

> See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ (Col 2:8).
>
> So that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes (Eph 4:14).

According to Cary, in his book, *Outward Signs*, there are two competing views regarding God's Word: External Efficacious Means of Grace and Expressionist Semiotics.[165] Confessional Lutheran scholar, Schulz, defines External Efficacious Means of Grace as:

> The recognition that the biblical text is itself meaningful and effective. We could say of the text what we say of the sacrament of Holy Communion: There is a real presence here. God is present, speaking in, with, and under the texts of the Holy Scriptures. The infallible and efficacious words of the biblical text are the means by which God Himself does His work among us.

And Expressionist Semiotics as:

> The view that the biblical text is nothing but signs to be decoded, and that what really counts is what is going on in each individual's soul or mind. So, the semeia or signs are incidental and serve only as opportunities for us to express our individual inner convictions.[166]

Schulz argues that the philosophy of External Efficacious Means of Grace reflects the biblical and confessional Lutheran understanding of language. It encompasses the philosophy of language found in the Lutheran Confessions, particularly in the *Formula of Concord*.[167] Every prominent confessional thinker has supported this interpretation of the Bible's language since Luther, including Johann Gerhard. In contrast, Expressionist Semiotics rejects the idea that language is a gift from God. Instead, it views language as a human creation and claims that God's Word lacks objective eternal meaning. This view contradicts Christ Jesus' own words:

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[165] Phillip Cary, *Outward Signs: The Powerlessness of External Things in Augustine's Thought* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[166] Gregory Schulz, *Seminex 2.0 The Foundational Heresy That Has Propelled the LCMS from Explosion to Implosion*, March 13, 2025, https://lutheranphilosopher.com/seminex-2-0-the-foundational-heresy-that-has-propelled-the-lcms-from-explosion-to-implosion/.

[167] McCain, *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, 503.

"Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away" (Mt 24:35). Because language is ultimately meaningless, Expressionist Semiotics promotes individual and personal interpretation, allowing the interpreter to assign meaning to the sign. Therefore, one should consider the personal significance of these signs rather than what God intended when He spoke. Schulz encapsulates the issue by quoting philosopher Jacques Derrida:

> This is the foundational heresy: "I [Derrida] want to keep the right to read these texts [the Bible] in a way that has to be constantly reinvented." It is something which can be totally new at every moment. The enthymeme, or unspoken proposition that follows, is, "Therefore, no one gets to tell me that I'm wrong!"[168]

Positivism

Positivism[169] is a doctrine that claims sense perceptions are the only valid foundation for human knowledge and accurate thinking. Consequently, all genuine knowledge is either true by definition or obtained through reasoned sensory experience. Other methods of knowing, such as intuition, introspection, or religious faith, are regarded as meaningless. This philosophy was developed to replace theology and metaphysics, based on a hierarchy of sciences, beginning with mathematics and ending with sociology.

Christianity is increasingly seen as just one among many primitive, superstitious religions available to followers. In Kelowna, some ask, "Is Christianity relevant? Is it

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[168] Schulz, *Seminex 2.0 The Foundational Heresy That Has Propelled the LCMS from Explosion to Implosion*.

[169] "Positivism," a doctrine that states that the only authentic knowledge is scientific knowledge, and that such knowledge can only come from positive affirmation of theories through strict scientific method, refusing every form of metaphysics. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*.

beneficial? Is there an afterlife? Isn't death natural?" Some conclude that Christianity has no real meaning or relevance, accepting death as part of the natural life cycle. Schmemann, in his book *For the Life of the World*, highlights this growing acceptance of death.[170] By dismissing God's Law, the Gospel loses its significance. Typically, people rely on reason, science, and "expert" authorities, while ignoring God's Word, the Bible. Phrases like "trust the science" and "the greater good" are common, often disconnected from any higher standard. These slogans usually serve as taglines to promote specific agendas.

In contrast, the biblical worldview appears dismissive and hostile towards reason and science. However, all genuine science aligns with the Bible. There is a distinction between scientific inquiry (testable and repeatable) and historical theory (not testable or repeatable). For example, the Big Bang and the theory of evolution are not scientific theories; they are historical theories based on assumptions such as uniformitarianism[171] and unguided progress over a vast period in the distant past. These theories are neither testable nor repeatable. No one witnessed or observed the Big Bang, and no one has evolved a new species. While some can modify a trait within a species, it remains the same species, as the DNA information for that trait was already present, and no new DNA data was created. Nonetheless, both theories are presented as undeniable

[170] Alexander Schmemann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004), 97.

[171] "Uniformitarianism," the theory that all geologic phenomena may be explained as the result of existing forces having operated uniformly from the origin of the earth to the present time. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*.

scientific facts. This turns science into the domain of a religious movement (i.e., scientism[172]) that implicitly believes in Positivism.

5. God has Spoken (Pentecost)

Gospel Reductionism

What is the essence of the Gospel? Can it be reduced to a simple message? In Kelowna, a movement seeks to distill the Gospel into its main themes of faith, hope, and love. However, these are expressed as nouns (things) rather than verbs (actions).

For these moderate individuals, this involves returning to the simple teachings of the Bible. This is nothing new; Locke, in his book, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, set aside the body of theological commentary in favour of an "unprejudiced examination" of God's Word alone. He defined the essence of Christianity as a belief in Christ the Redeemer and advised against engaging in more detailed debates.[173] Phrases such as "deeds not creeds" and "that's not a salvation issue" define this impulse. Christianity becomes a contextual moral imperative: possess kindness and love according to the present cultural mandate, and you will have God's affirmation. Any discussion regarding the details of the Bible is often perceived as unkind and unloving,

[172] "Scientism," the often dogmatic belief that science is the only source of knowledge. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*.

[173] John Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity: With A Discourse of Miracles and Part of A Third Letter Concerning Toleration*, ed. Ian T. Ramsey, A Library of Modern Religious Thought (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1989).

particularly in relation to the ethics of God's Law as articulated in the Ten Commandments.

The Freedom to Interpret the Bible

Two of the co-researchers have a close friend who attends Missions Springs Church of God in Kelowna. It appeared that this friend and her family might be interested in joining Cornerstone Lutheran Church. This prompted the co-researchers to look into the background of the Church of God.

The Church of God was founded on August 19, 1886, in Monroe County, Tennessee. Former Baptist Richard Green Spurling preached in a millhouse along Barney Creek. Eight people formed a Christian union to follow the New Testament as their guide for faith and practice, granting each other equal rights and privileges to interpret the Bible. Ten years after the initial meeting, a revival at the Shearer Schoolhouse in nearby Camp Creek, North Carolina, introduced a new doctrine of sanctification to the community. Opposition to this progressive doctrine persisted from the local community. Nevertheless, the Church of God claimed to possess a spirit of revival—an outpouring of the Holy Spirit that included speaking in tongues and divine healing. These experiences contributed to the growth of the Pentecostal movement in the early twentieth century. Today, the Church of God has several million members worldwide.

However, this foundation is unbiblical. The church makes two mistakes: first, it prioritizes the New Testament over the Old Testament, and second, it encourages each member to interpret the Bible independently. Yet aren't Christians supposed to uphold

the whole counsel of God? Has God not spoken to humanity through both the Old and New Testaments? Did God not have specific intentions and meanings for His Word? Are Christians not supposed to seek and understand what God truly intended when He spoke? Or are they free to pursue their own interpretation that fits their personal desires and circumstances?

These issues are common in Kelowna. Many residents question the interpretations provided by church groups, communities, or leaders, such as statements of faith. This discernment can be a positive development, as false teachers distort biblical teachings. However, faithful church communities also seek to understand what God truly intended by carefully asking, “What does this mean?” Luther firmly demonstrates this approach in his Small and Large Catechisms by allowing the Bible to interpret itself through its own perspective, aiming to understand God’s intended meaning.[174]

6. The Purpose of Worship (God’s Advent)

There are many different perspectives on the purpose of worship in Kelowna. The key question is why people attend church: do parishioners come to give something to God, or do they come to receive something from Him? Roman Catholics go to Mass to re-sacrifice Christ Jesus on their behalf or to help a deceased loved one. Charismatics gather to demonstrate their gifts, such as prophesying, speaking in tongues, and healing. Evangelicals seek an emotional encounter with God to

[174] Martin Luther, *Martin Luther’s Small and Large Catechisms* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2019).

experience His presence. Some view worship as an opportunity to present their good works and generous donations to God. Confessional Lutherans attend church to receive God's gifts of forgiveness for sins, Christ's righteousness, new life, and eternal life with Him in the new creation. When the means of grace—God's Word and Sacraments—are seen as inefficacious, the worship service turns inward to express one's inner genius or outward to showcase heroic actions.

7. The Purpose of Sanctification (Eternal Life)

In this final section, I explore two exegetical perspectives experienced by a co-researcher in Vancouver. The first is from A Rocha, and the second from the Bethesda Circle of Friends at New Life Church. A Rocha is a Christian ministry dedicated to environmental stewardship, while the Bethesda Circle of Friends supports individuals with diverse abilities, including mental disabilities. Both A Rocha and the Bethesda Circle of Friends overly esteem human potential. However, by not recognizing the fallenness of the world, this misdiagnosis has led to a problematic prognosis.

A Rocha does not interpret Genesis 3 as the fall into original sin. A Rocha explains that while Adam and Eve rebelled against God, this event had minimal consequences for humanity and God's natural created order for the earth. Therefore, thorns, thistles, sin, and death were part of God's original creation. For instance, bald eagles devour salmon as part of the beautiful natural order that God defines as very good (Gn 1:31). This misinterpretation has led to a misunderstanding of Christian life and a diminished view of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. A Rocha asserts that salmon passively give their lives for the benefit of bald eagles, just as Christ gave His life for

others. This is A Rocha's interpretation of the Gospel as seen in "wild nature." This misunderstanding has also skewed the perception of the purpose and goals (soteriology) of Christianity. The aim is to fulfill what Adam did not: obey God and steward His creation. Humanity will bring about the end times (eschatology) when believers restore the environment to its original glory.

However, this is not the case. Death is not natural but is a result of Adam's rebellion:

> Thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return (Gn 3:18-19);
>
> Just as sin came into the world through one man [Adam], and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned (Rom 5:12);
>
> Because of one man's [Adam's] trespass, death reigned through that one man (Rom 5:17);
>
> The wages of sin is death (Rom 6:23); and
>
> For as in Adam all die (1 Cor 15:22).

However, Christ Jesus has overcome sin and death once and for all (Heb 10:1-18):

> The last enemy to be destroyed is death (1 Cor 15:26); and
>
> Death is swallowed up in victory (1 Cor 15:54).

Death is not part of God's natural created order; it is a dreadful thing. God did not create bald eagles to tear salmon apart for sustenance. Violence, murder, and death stem from Adam's sin. Thorns and thistles are not natural but are a direct consequence of Adam's sin. The natural order of animals is not violent; instead, it is characterized by peace.

> The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea (Is 11:6-9).

Additionally, from an optimistic perspective on humanity, the Bethesda Circle of Friends at New Life Church has misunderstood the concept of the fall of humanity. Bethesda explains that diverse abilities are part of God's natural created order and are considered very good (Gn 1:31). All people, including those with diverse abilities, are wonderfully made; however, everyone is fallen and imperfect. Bethesda suggests that people with diverse abilities will likely be the same in heaven because they are not flawed. The only flawed part is how some perceive them, as if something is wrong. But is this view biblical? Jesus healed many people with diverse abilities: a man with a withered hand (Mk 3:1-6), a man with dropsy (Lk 14:1-4), a boy with epilepsy (Mt 17:14-18), a paralyzed man (Lk 5:17-26), a man born blind (Jn 9:1-7); the list goes on. Jesus, as God Himself, identifies these conditions as contrary to His created order and immediately heals all these individuals. It is wrong and insensitive to believe that the Bible teaches that those with diverse abilities will stay in this condition forever (Phil 3:20-21). This illustrates how a mistaken diagnosis can lead to an incorrect prognosis.

Conclusion

These seven challenges (or opportunities) all relate to belief and trust in God's Word. Some faith groups avoid a straightforward reading and interpretation of the Bible. But does this put those who deny or reject parts of God's Word in a risky position? Is

Jesus not the authority on all matters of faith and life? Are believers not called to accept the whole counsel of God, or does God allow them to impose their own views? All will be revealed at the final judgment on the last day. However, that may be too late for some. Perhaps when someone finds themselves at odds with God's Word, they should remember that God says:

> For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts (Is 55:8-9).

Sub-Question #2: How are we responding to these challenges?

A key insight from the co-researchers during the initial intervention was their awareness of the wide range of general perspectives on human potential across different faith groups. They identified a spectrum from a high view (10) of human potential to a low view (0). I have arranged them as follows:

(10) Muslim:

In 95:4 of the Quran, it states that "Indeed, We created man in the best mould."[175] Therefore, a person is born in a state of purity and innocence. A Muslim's faith journey aims to return to or preserve this state of purity and innocence through the five pillars: Shahadah (the declaration of faith), Salah (prayer), Zakat (almsgiving), Sawm (fasting

[175] Abu-Isa Webb, Aaron Wannamaker, and Hisham Sharif, eds., *The Clear Quran: A Thematic English Translation*, 2nd edition, 16th printing, trans. Mustafa Khattab (Lombard, IL: Book of Signs Foundation, 2016), 342.

during Ramadan), and Hajj (the pilgrimage to Mecca). These pillars shape a Muslim's faith and guide their actions in everyday life.

(7) Jewish Mysticism:

One is born with a divine spark. God remains unseen, encouraging one to seek Him. However, some lose interest and give up, contributing little to this spark. Still, those who nurture their divine spark into a flame and seek God will uncover heavenly treasures. Yet, this view does not align with the Bible. The Old Testament states that no one seeks God or does good, not even one; all humanity has fallen away (Ps 14:1-3; Ps 53:1-3). The New Testament confirms this in the letter to the Romans.

> As it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one." "Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive." "The venom of asps is under their lips." "Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness." "Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known." "There is no fear of God before their eyes" (Rom 3:10-18).

(6) Anabaptist:

One is born into the world with a somewhat optimistic view of one's inherent potential and free will. A relationship with God depends on individual choices and decisions. An Anabaptist's life is guided by their decision for Christ and their ongoing devotion and obedience to Him. For example, at Willingdon Church in Vancouver, individuals who choose Baptism wear t-shirts with a large, bold font stating, "I have decided." Christian life begins when one surrenders to Christ in service to Him and one's neighbour.

(5) Roman Catholic:

Individuals are born spiritually neutral. God offers universal grace to all people in units or packets. For instance, Baptism provides a unit of grace, as do Confirmation and First Communion. The Christian life is characterized by one's response to these units of grace. Free will determines whether an individual moves toward holiness or falls from grace. Original sin is not defined as a detrimental or disabling condition. Interestingly, some Roman Catholics refer to the Garden of Eden as "symbolic." Thus, Adam and Eve are symbolic representatives of humanity rather than historic figures. For example, *Break Through! The Bible for Young Catholics* explains the symbolic nature of Adam and Eve.[176] This indicates the exchange of foundational Christian doctrines for naturalism. Some perceive this as inconsequential. However, does this flawed foundation not lead to incorrect conclusions?

(5) Orthodox:

Like the Roman Catholic tradition, individuals are considered spiritually neutral at birth and receive grace through rites and sacraments. However, Orthodoxy places a greater emphasis on the teachings of the Church Fathers than does Roman Catholicism. One is encouraged to seek prayer and intercession from saints on their behalf to God.

[176] *Break Through! The Bible for Young Catholics* (Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 2005), c1.

(0) Reformed and Lutheran:

Individuals are born spiritually dead and incapable of anything spiritually positive (Ps 51:5; Ps 58:3; Rom 3:10-18). The letter to the Ephesians explains spiritual fallenness, brokenness, or deadness.

> You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air [the devil], the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind (Eph 2:1-3).

The letter to the Colossians explains that humanity remains in darkness until God's inbreaking intervention.

> He [God] has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins (Col 1:13-14).

This presents a significantly different view of humanity compared to more optimistic perspectives. These outlooks greatly influence Christian life and the journey toward salvation. The question then arises: Who bears responsibility for salvation? Is it God, humans, or some form of synergism? This clearly underscores key differences among various faith traditions. If one misinterprets the problem, how can one suggest an appropriate solution? An accurate diagnosis is essential. Therefore, the agents of healing and reconciliation vary among faith groups. Some believe all individuals can serve as agents of healing and reconciliation, while others maintain that only God is the true agent of these processes.

Our Response:

In the above section, I discussed the spectrum of human optimism, or the doctrine of humanity, as presented by various faith groups analyzed by the co-researchers. In this section, I examine how the co-researchers investigated the interaction between this foundation and other doctrines taught in the Bible, specifically focusing on the crux theologorum: why some are saved, and others are not. Confessional Lutheran scholar Wolfmueller provides valuable insights into this discussion on his YouTube video.[177] The focus is on three doctrines and their connections to different faith traditions. First, the doctrine of universal grace asserts that Christ Jesus has died for the sins of the whole world and desires all to be saved (Jn 3:16; 2 Pt 3:9; 1 Jn 2:1-2). Second, the doctrine of grace alone states that salvation is God's gift, with humanity contributing nothing to justification before God (Eph 2:8-9). Lastly, the doctrine of hell maintains that some will remain apart from God for all eternity (Mt 8:12, Mt 25:41). This challenges the understanding of what the Bible teaches, as logic may not provide satisfactory answers regarding how these doctrines fit together. Nevertheless, all three doctrines are true because the Bible teaches them; however, various faith groups disregard one in favour of the other two to make sense of them.

For instance, if one logically concludes that the doctrines of universal grace and grace alone prevail, then no one can be in hell. If Christ Jesus died for the sins of the world and God freely grants justification before Himself through Christ as a gift, then all must be saved, leaving hell empty and non-existent. Those who accept this view are

[177] Bryan Wolfmueller, "Why Are Some Saved, and Not Others?," YouTube, May 3, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pMiNjSsjM_w.

Universalists. Next, suppose one logically concludes that the doctrines of grace alone and hell prevail. In that case, there can be no universal grace, meaning God must choose some for salvation and others for damnation (double predestination). Those who accept this are Calvinists. The third option is to logically conclude that the doctrines of universal grace and hell prevail; therefore, justification cannot be by grace alone. If Jesus died for the sins of the world and yet some go to hell, God must require something from humanity; one cannot be saved by grace alone. These individuals are Synergists. The faith groups that maintain an optimistic view of human potential often assume some human responsibility for one's own justification before God. Since humanity can choose to do good and possesses great potential for good, it is up to each person to merit or achieve salvation in some manner.

This aligns well with Root's triangle.[178] The Beyonders are those who believe in all three doctrines, despite their lack of logical satisfaction. God mystically intervenes externally in one's life to save them; however, some do not desire this and, consequently, condemn themselves by resisting and rejecting their helper (Hos 13:9). The Calvinists embrace Exclusive Humanism, encouraging individuals to look inward to discover their inner genius or, more specifically, to solve the mysteries of God through rationality. The Synergists are more optimistic about their capabilities, focusing on heroic actions (Counter-Enlightenment). God offers a path to salvation, leaving it up to everyone to act, decide for Christ, and continue their courageous journey toward spiritual maturity. Finally, the Universalists accept all approaches; after all, hell does not exist, and even if it does, it is only for Satan, demons, or perhaps the evilest of

[178] Root, *The Church in an Age of Secular Mysticisms*.

individuals. The Beyonders remain faithful to God's Word. By God's grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone do they receive the entire counsel of God. By grace, the Beyonders humbly acknowledge:

> God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all. Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" "Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?" For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. (Rom 11:32-36).

Pursuing inner genius or heroic action represents the ultimate vanity, akin to a striving after the wind described in Ecclesiastes: "Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?" (Eccl 1:2-3). Inner genius and heroic action do not justify oneself before God. They do not enhance one's standing with God or bring anyone closer to Him. Some believe that the Christian life begins somewhat distanced from God and that by developing inner genius or heroic action, they can attain a better standing or even holiness before Him. However, this contradicts biblical teaching, as everyone starts at zero and remains at zero throughout their life. The Bible plainly states, "No one does good, not even one" (Rom 3:12). The Bible rebukes those who think a certain goodness is attainable, "For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it" (Jas 2:10). Believers confess no sufficiency within themselves. "Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God (2 Cor 3:5). Only through God's external inbreaking intervention is one clothed in the righteousness of Christ (10). Thus, the life of a Christian involves a lifelong struggle, being simultaneously both a sinner (0) and a saint (10). Ambrose of Milan says, regarding the forgiveness of sins received through the Lord's Supper,

"Because I always sin [0], I always need to take the medicine [10]."[179] This understanding is truly transformational (Rom 12:2).

For example, a co-researcher shared a story about their child's experience at Kelowna Christian School, a non-denominational school. In a high school Bible class, the teacher asked students to rate themselves on a scale from zero to ten across different areas of their Christian spiritual development. The categories included prayer, worship, devotional activities, outreach, and other related activities. The co-researcher's son rated himself between four and six in these areas. The teacher then asked the students to come to the front of the classroom and record their scores on a large, visible grid. After everyone had finished, the teacher noted that this student's scores seemed lower than those of the other students. This caused some embarrassment for the co-researcher's son, who then discussed the matter with the co-researchers.

From a confessional Lutheran perspective, a co-researcher suggested that this teenager consider assigning himself a score of zero in all categories. While this might seem even more embarrassing, it acknowledges that he has no worth or merit and claims no righteousness within himself. After explaining this to the class, the co-researcher encouraged him to go back to the board and add a one in front of all the zeros, turning each rating into a ten. He could then tell the class that, in Christ, he has been made perfectly righteous in God's eyes, which he received in Baptism: his sin was exchanged for Christ's righteousness. Although believers are considered tens in Christ during this life, they remain zeros within themselves. Sanctification involves recognizing that, in this life, one is and remains a zero (0) within oneself while being clothed in the

[179] McCain, *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, 49.

righteousness of Christ (10). However, sanctification will be completed when Christ Jesus returns on the last day, and believers are raised and glorified. Then, and only then, will a believer be a ten throughout their entire being for all eternity.

Conclusion

There is significant diversity in beliefs about human goodness among various faith groups. Accurate diagnosis is essential for prescribing the proper remedy; a mistaken diagnosis leads to an incorrect prognosis. This is vital for navigating sanctification. Theologically speaking, correctly understanding the fall of humanity is crucial for grasping Christ's call to repentance and belief in the Gospel (Mk 1:15). Without this understanding, confusion and misbelief can easily arise. The entire counsel of God applies to the Church, and believers are called to study, meditate on, and correctly apply God's Word.

> All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work (2 Tm 3:16-17).

Sub-Question #3 and #4: How is theology informing our sanctification, and how does this relate to the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod?

Only God can tell humanity what to believe and how to act, because "No one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God" (1 Cor 2:11). The co-researchers agree that our understanding of God and His will for us can only come from God's Word: the Bible. Therefore, the process of navigating sanctification must originate from the Bible.

The Seven Signposts of Christian Life in Exodus

Preaching is the proclamation of God's Word where faith comes from hearing, and hearing through Christ's Word (Rom 10:17). This is God's chosen means of grace to deliver His good gifts: justification and sanctification. The Law and the Prophets point to Jesus and the work He was to accomplish (Lk 24:27). The Gospels and the Epistles declare that Jesus' work is complete and accessible to all through the gift of faith.

This Participatory Action Research intervened in the lives of Cornerstone Lutheran parishioners by posing the question, "How do we navigate sanctification?" This inquiry began to resonate in the hearts and minds of the co-researchers. Furthermore, this research profoundly influenced my preaching and teaching. I incorporated various aspects of our discussions into my sermons, further impacting the Cornerstone Lutheran Church parishioners. This research was consistently on our minds, even outside of the town hall meetings and individual interviews. We often found ourselves discussing our research and grappling with our research questions before and after church on Sundays, as well as throughout the week. The findings from this research highlight this significant influence. God's Word is a means of grace that gives believers faith to trust in Him. Demonstrating this, the breakthrough and outcome of the study emerged from the second reading, 1 Corinthians 9:24-10:5, of the one-year lectionary for the week of Septuagesima.[180] I included 1 Corinthians 10:6 in the reading, "Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did." One co-researcher heard the passage and, after the service, responded, "Exodus does

[180] Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, *Christian Worship*, xxiv.

provide an example for us!" This illuminated a path for navigating sanctification through God's Word. For the co-researchers, this is the only way to navigate sanctification, not through inner genius or heroic action. Cornerstone Lutheran Church parishioners have embraced this message and come to appreciate the gifts of justification and sanctification through God's intervention and example, as seen in the lives of believers in Exodus.

> For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness.
>
> Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did (1 Cor 10:1-6).

Consequently, the co-researcher's examination of Exodus established a framework for how Cornerstone Lutheran Church parishioners navigate sanctification, directly addressing their challenges (Sub-Question #1). Jesus Himself said, "If you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me" (Jn 5:46). The co-researchers identified the following signposts for receiving God's gifts of justification and sanctification, as illustrated in Exodus.

Justification:

1. The Ten Plagues / Exorcism
2. The Passover / Easter Celebration and the Lord's Supper
3. The Crossing of the Red Sea / Baptism

Sanctification:

4. Daily Bread / The Lord's Prayer
5. The Ten Commandments / Pentecost Celebration
6. The Tabernacle / Advent Celebration
7. Sabbath Rest / Weekly Worship / Eternal Life

The forward slash distinguishes the Old Testament interpretation before Jesus' incarnation from the New Testament perspective that acknowledges Jesus' coming. Only in the seventh signpost is there a future New Testament understanding of eternal life, following Jesus' second coming on the last day, in the new creation.

Justification:

> For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast (Eph 2:8-9).

1. The Ten Plagues / Exorcism

The Israelites have been held captive by a cruel oppressor, the king of Egypt, Pharaoh, for 430 years (Ex 12:40-41). Born into this dire situation, they are powerless to change it. Few, if any, recognize the gravity of their plight; it merely defines who they are and shapes their identity. The Israelites are possessions of Pharaoh; he owns them and refuses to release them. However, God saw their suffering and heard their cries (Ex 3:7). God tells Moses that the king of Egypt, Pharaoh, will not let the Israelites go free unless compelled by a mighty hand (Ex 3:19).

Throughout the New Testament, God uses physical conditions such as blindness, deafness, lameness, paralysis, leprosy, disease, and demonic oppression to illustrate humanity's spiritual bondage, sickness, and deadness. Humanity is born into original sin, which encompasses far more than merely thinking, speaking, or acting wrongly; it represents bondage, terminal illness, and death. Everyone is conceived and born in sin, inheriting it from their first father, Adam. The disease of sin can be overcome only by one remedy: the cleansing, healing, and forgiving blood of God's own Son, Christ Jesus. By misdiagnosing this fatal condition, some mislead others into believing they can cooperate with God and justify themselves. However, spiritually dead individuals cannot do anything spiritual. God must intervene, and He does so through His Word (Rom 10:17) and Sacraments (Baptism: Ti 3:5, the Lord's Supper: Jn 6:53). The Letter to the Ephesians addresses this spiritual deadness and bondage of all humanity:

> And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air [the devil], the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind (Eph 2:1-3).

Everyone, because of original sin, is born a child of wrath. Humanity is born in bondage to the devil, the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that rules the sons and daughters of disobedience—the children of Adam. Therefore, God must intervene and take the first and necessary step towards justification, an exorcism:

> But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. When a strong man [the devil], fully armed, guards his own palace [the world], his goods [sinners] are safe; but when one [Christ Jesus] stronger than he attacks him and overcomes him, he takes away his armor in which he trusted and divides his spoil. Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters (Lk 11:20-23).

In Exodus, the Egyptians worshiped demonic spirits they believed were animal-like deities.[181] Acting as an exorcism, God cleanses Egypt and the Israelites of these false gods, the sinister minions of the devil, defeating them one by one and preparing the Israelites to know the one true God: the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, the I AM WHO I AM (Ex 3:14).

In the preface to *The Screwtape Letters*, Lewis addresses the mistake of misinterpreting the demonic forces at play in the world: one group entirely dismisses the idea of their existence, while the other naively collaborates with them.

> There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race [humanity] can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves [the devils] are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight.[182]

In the service of Baptism, the *Christian Worship* hymnal features a component of exorcism in the following question and answer before the candidate is baptized:

> Do you reject the devil along with his lies and empty promises?
>
> Yes, I do.[183] (When a young child is baptized, a parent or sponsor answers on the child's behalf. Like in Exodus, Moses acts on behalf of the Israelites' exorcism.)

The co-researchers portray humanity's condition before God's exorcism, as shown in the following word cloud:

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[181] Engelbrecht, *The Lutheran Study Bible*, 107.

[182] C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1942), ix.

[183] Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, *Christian Worship*, 263.

Figure 4: The Ten Plagues / Exorcism

The co-researchers found the concept of needing an exorcism both unsettling and terrifying. This is a disconcerting reality: humanity is born into a state of bondage to sin, death, and the devil, necessitating God's intervention—an exorcism. The following phrases from the co-researchers capture this sentiment:

"The devil's venom is powerful; it has deadened the senses of humanity."

"Our fallen condition is alarming; it's almost unimaginable."

"Everyone, all of us—you and me—born spiritually blind, lost, and dead!"

"It's truly frightening; no one is even conscious of it."

"Living for the moment, but eternally dead."

This signpost marks the beginning of Christian spiritual formation: God's intervention through an exorcism. It also embodies the heart of God's mission: to liberate those enslaved by sin, death, and the devil.

Connections

The devil continues to influence the world through enthusiasm and manifests in false beliefs, such as yoga and other new age and new thought movements (e.g.,

gender ideology). The co-researchers connect this signpost to the following statements of faith from *This We Believe* of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. This statement of faith is highly esteemed within the confessional Lutheran community as accurately explaining the teachings of the Bible.

> We believe and accept the Bible on its own terms, accepting as factual history what it presents as history and recognizing as figurative speech what is evident as such (I. God and His Revelation, #10).
>
> We believe that Adam and Eve lost their divine image when they yielded to the temptation of Satan and disobeyed God's command. This brought upon them the judgment of God: "You will surely die" (Genesis 2:17). Since that time all people are conceived and born in a sinful condition (Psalm 51:5) and are inclined only to evil (Genesis 8:21). "Flesh gives birth to flesh" (John 3:6). Since all people are by nature dead in sin and separated from God (Ephesians 2:1), they are unable to reconcile themselves to God by their own efforts and deeds (II. Creation, Man, and Sin, #5)

2. The Passover / Easter Celebration and the Lord's Supper

The final exorcism is the tenth plague: the death of the firstborn. God, through Moses, instructed the Israelites regarding the Passover meal (Ex 12: The Passover). Each family or household selected a male lamb without blemish and sacrificed it at twilight. They then took some of the blood and smeared it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses where they ate. This blood served as a sign for the Lord to pass over the household. Anyone without this sign faced judgment, resulting in the death of their firstborn. At midnight, the Lord struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from Pharaoh's firstborn, who sat on his throne, to the firstborn of the captive in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of the livestock (Ex 12:29).

The Passover event anticipates Jesus. John the Baptist declares, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn 1:29). The death of Christ on the

cross fulfills the Passover. He is the propitiation for our sins, as well as for the sins of the whole world (1 Jn 2:2). This is justification before God—the blessed exchange: believers' sins for Christ's righteousness. Before Christ's arrival, believers celebrated the Passover (Feast of Unleavened Bread), and now that Jesus has come, they celebrate Easter. Christ's life, death, resurrection, and ascension benefit no one if they are neither given nor received. God has chosen to deliver the gift of justification through the means of grace, as seen in the Passover meal, anticipating Christ, and now in the Lord's Supper, where Jesus offers His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins and new life. Jesus Himself states, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you" (Jn 6:53).

The co-researchers share their insights on the Passover and Easter celebrations, as well as the Lord's Supper, depicted in the following word cloud:

Figure 5: The Passover / Easter Celebration (The Lord's Supper)

The morning after Passover, the Israelites emerged from their homes, feeling safe, secure, and grateful. Many years later, on the first Easter morning, the tomb was

found to be empty; Jesus was alive, and death had been definitively defeated. The co-researchers convey this sentiment in the following phrases:

"He is risen; He is risen indeed! Alleluia!"

"Empty tomb; abundant life."

"Where is your sting, oh death!"

"Because He lives, we too shall live."

"Through His death, we are given new life."

Connections

This signpost addresses the question, "Why are some saved and not others?" Universalism is false because humanity is not good and requires God to pass over their sin and cover them in Christ's righteousness. The co-researchers connect this signpost to the following statements of faith from *This We Believe* of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod.

> We believe that Jesus Christ, the God-man, was sent by the Father to redeem all people, that is, to buy them back from the guilt and punishment of sin. Jesus came to fulfill the law (Matthew 5:17) so that on the basis of his perfect obedience all people would be declared holy (Romans 5:18,19). He came to bear "the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6), ransoming all people by his sacrifice for sin on the altar of the cross (Matthew 20:28). We believe that he is the God-appointed substitute for all people. His righteousness, or perfect obedience, is accepted by the Father as our righteousness, his death for sin as our death for sin (2 Corinthians 5:21). We believe that his resurrection gives full assurance that God has accepted the payment he made for all (Romans 4:25) (III. Christ and Redemption, #3).
>
> We believe that God reconciled "the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them" (2 Corinthians 5:19). We believe that Jesus is "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). The mercy and grace of God are all-embracing; the reconciliation through Christ is universal; the forgiveness of sins has been gained as an

> accomplished fact for all people. Because of the substitutionary work of Christ, God has justified all people, that is, God has declared them to be not guilty. This forms the firm, objective basis for the sinner's assurance of salvation (III. Christ and Redemption, #4).
>
> We reject any teaching that in any way limits Christ's work of atonement. We reject any teaching that says Christ paid the penalty only for the sins of some people. We reject any teaching that says Christ made only a partial payment for sins (III. Christ and Redemption, #5).
>
> We believe that all who join in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper receive the true body and blood of Christ in, with, and under the bread and wine (1 Corinthians 10:16). This is true because, when the Lord instituted this sacrament, he said, "This is my body. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:26,28). We believe that Christ's words of institution cause the real presence—not any human action. As believers receive his body and blood, they also receive the forgiveness of sins (Matthew 26:28) and the comfort and assurance that they are truly his own. Unbelievers also receive Christ's body and blood, but to their judgment (1 Corinthians 11:29) (VI. The Means of Grace, #4).

3. The Crossing of the Red Sea / Baptism

After the tenth and final plague, the Egyptians urged the Israelites to leave their land quickly (Ex 12:33). Throughout the plagues, some Egyptians embraced God's Word and found faith, joining a mixed multitude that departed Egypt with the Israelites (Ex 12:38). However, Pharaoh and his officials changed their minds and sought to bring the Israelites back to serve them (Ex 14:5). Consequently, Pharaoh pursued them with his army. God instructed the Israelites to camp at Pi-hahiroth, situated between Migdol and the sea (Ex 14:2). It was here that Pharaoh and his army confronted Moses and the Israelites. Witnessing this, the Israelites indignantly said to Moses, "Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us in bringing us out of Egypt? Is this not what we told you in Egypt: 'Leave us alone so that we may serve the Egyptians?'" (Ex 14:11-12).

At the first sign of stress, even after witnessing God's power and glory through the Ten Plagues, some individuals begin to doubt Him and long to return to their previous lives in Egypt. Like a dog returning to its vomit, a fool repeats his folly (Prv 26:11). God's gifts can be denied and even rejected. Nevertheless, God does not abandon His people. Moses tells the Israelites that the Lord will fight for them; they need only to be still (Ex 14:14). God separates them from the enemy, saving them by parting the Red Sea and drowning their pursuers in the waters.

Christ Jesus died for the sins of the whole world. However, this benefits no one unless it is delivered and received through His chosen means of grace. To give His gift of justification, Jesus institutes the Sacrament of Baptism (Mt 28:19). This is God's means of grace. In Baptism, believers are saved (1 Pt 3:21), cleansed of their sins (Acts 22:16), forgiven of their sins (Acts 2:38), made children of God (Gal 3:26), given the Holy Spirit (Jn 3:5), and justified (Ti 3:5). The enemy, the old self, is drowned in the waters of Baptism and the new self is raised in Christ (Rom 6:3-4).

The co-researchers convey their association of crossing the Red Sea and Baptism, as depicted in the following word cloud:

Figure 6: The Crossing of the Red Sea / Baptism

The crossing of the Red Sea saved the Israelites, while the returning waters destroyed their enemy, Pharaoh. This is how God chose to deliver His people. Likewise, Jesus instructs His disciples to administer His gift of justification by going and baptizing all nations in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit (Mt 28:19). Just as the Israelites were baptized into Moses (1 Cor 10:2), believers are now baptized into Christ (Gal 3:27). This is God's means of grace.

The co-researchers convey this sentiment through the following phrases:

"How can I be sure that I'm saved? I am a baptized child of God."

"It looks only like water, but joined with God's Word, it's salvation."

"What an incredible gift it is to be Baptized, regardless of age."

"Baptism is the way God saves His people."

"My faith rests in God's gift of Baptism."

Connections

The co-researchers align this signpost with God's chosen means of grace and connect it to the following statements of faith from *This We Believe* of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod.

> We believe that God bestows all spiritual blessings upon sinners by special means established by him. These are the means of grace, the gospel in Word and sacraments. We define a sacrament as a sacred act established by Christ in which the Word connected with an earthly element gives the forgiveness of sins (VI. The Means of Grace, #1).
>
> We believe that also through the Sacrament of Baptism the Holy Spirit applies the gospel to sinners, giving them new life (Titus 3:5) and cleansing them from all sin (Acts 2:38). The Lord points to the blessing of Baptism when he promises, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved" (Mark 16:16). We believe that the blessing of Baptism is meant for all people (Matthew 28:19), including infants. Infants are born sinful (John

> 3:6) and therefore need to be born again, that is, to be brought to faith, through Baptism (John 3:5) (VI. The Means of Grace, #3).

Sanctification:

> For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (Eph 2:10).

4. Daily Bread / The Lord's Prayer

Now that the Israelites have been freed, saved, and given new life, they embark on a journey of spiritual formation, which is God's gift of sanctification. The Lord leads them into the wilderness for instruction, discipline, and testing (Ex 15:25). However, the Israelites' grumbling makes them their own worst enemies in this process. At the first sign of trouble, some wish to turn away from God, even accusing Him of being their enemy (Ex 16:3). Nevertheless, God is patient, kind, and slow to anger, dealing generously with them. When they complain about the lack of water, He provides it (Ex 15:25). When they grumble about the absence of bread, He supplies it. When they express discontent over the lack of meat, God again provides (Ex 16:12).

Every morning, God provides the Israelites with their daily bread: manna. They receive just enough for one day, except on the day before the Sabbath, when they are given provisions for two days. God teaches His people to cultivate humility and trust in His daily provision. This concept continues into the Gospels, where Jesus instructs believers to pray:

> Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil (Mt 6:9-13).

Jesus encourages believers to call God their Father. They must trust that God hears and understands their needs. Therefore, they should release their worries and concerns about tomorrow, placing their faith in God's goodness to provide for them. A believer's life is a journey of cultivating trust and confidence in God's promises. This trust and confidence lead to new obedience to God's commandments, where believers resist temptation, avoid evil, and actively engage in good works. However, believers should never place their trust in their own good works for justification; that is entirely a gift from Christ. Prayer and good works are the results of God's gift of sanctification.

The co-researchers share their sentiments regarding their daily bread and the Lord's Prayer, as demonstrated in the following word cloud:

Figure 7: Daily Bread / The Lord's Prayer

God continues to nourish His people through His Word and Sacrament. God's Word is not merely a sign for human interpretation; it carries an objective, eternal meaning because language is a gift from God to humanity, not a human invention. God's Word is powerful, fulfilling what God intends (Is 55:11). God is present in, with, and through His Word. The co-researchers express this belief in the following phrases:

"God provides for His people."

“This is how Jesus wants us to pray.”

“God knows what we need; His will be done.”

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not rely on yourself.”

“Trust in God; walk by faith, not by sight.”

Connections

Believers trust in God’s Word through His gift of language rather than relying on worldly wisdom (i.e., Expressionist Semiotics, Positivism, and scientism), as warned about in Colossians.

> See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ (Col 2:8).

The co-researchers connect this signpost to the following statements of faith from *This We Believe* of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod.

> We believe that faith in Jesus Christ always leads a believer to produce works that are pleasing to God. “Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead” (James 2:17). As a branch in Christ the vine, a Christian produces good fruit (John 15:5) (V. Good Works and Prayer, #1).
>
> We believe that good works, which are fruits of faith, must be distinguished from works of civic righteousness performed by unbelievers. Although unbelievers may do much that appears to be good and upright, these works are not good in God’s sight, for “without faith it is impossible to please God” (Hebrews 11:6). While we recognize the value of such works for human society, we know that unbelievers cannot do their duty to God through works of civic righteousness (V. Good Works and Prayer, #6).
>
> We believe that the Holy Spirit enables every believer to produce good works as fruits of faith (Galatians 5:22-25). The Holy Spirit gives every believer a new nature, or “new man,” that cooperates with the Holy Spirit in doing good works. The Holy Spirit uses the gospel to motivate believers to do good works (V. Good Works and Prayer, #8).

> We believe that a life of prayer is a fruit of faith. Confidently, through faith in their Savior, Christians address their heavenly Father with petitions and praise. They present their needs and the needs of others, and they give thanks (1 Timothy 2:1). Such prayers are a delight to God, and he grants their requests according to his wisdom (Matthew 7:7,8; 1 John 5:14) (V. Good Works and Prayer, #10).

5. The Ten Commandments / Pentecost Celebration

The Israelites journeyed to the base of Mount Sinai, where God spoke these words: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Ex 20:1-2). From the fiery summit of Mount Sinai, God delivered the Ten Commandments to the Israelites Himself. This scene was terrifying! God sought to instill a profound reverence for Himself and His commandments to prevent them from sinning. However, they said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen, but do not let God speak to us, lest we die” (Ex 20:19). The Israelites preferred to hear God’s voice through Moses rather than directly from Him. God obliged by speaking through Moses, giving the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament (Ex 24:4). Ultimately, God would have the final say by speaking again, directly, through His Son, Christ Jesus.

The Ten Commandments were given forty-nine days after Passover. Each year thereafter, the Israelites were instructed to remember and celebrate this event during the Feast of Weeks, also known as Pentecost. This period consists of seven weeks, each containing seven days, totalling forty-nine. In Greek, “Pentecost” means “fifty,” which accounts for the day of Passover plus the forty-nine days of the Feast of Weeks. This remembrance of God proclaiming the Ten Commandments from the fiery mountain adds significance to the day of Pentecost in Acts 2. God spoke again to His people through His Son, Christ Jesus. In this event, much like with Moses, God inspired these

fiery men through the Holy Spirit to remember all that Jesus had said and to write the New Testament (Jn 14:26). The same fire that rested on the summit of Mount Sinai on the day God spoke the Ten Commandments to the Israelites rested on the disciples on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2, marking the giving of the New Testament.

The co-researchers convey their regard for the Ten Commandments and the Pentecost celebration, as represented in the following word cloud:

Figure 8: The Ten Commandments / Pentecost Celebration

The co-researchers express this belief in the following phrases:

“God’s eternal will for our well-being.”

“Our relationship with God, and our relationship with others.”

“Justice, truth, and righteousness.”

“Shows our sins and need for a Redeemer.”

“God’s Law: the curb, mirror, and guide to life.”

Connections

God has spoken to humanity through His Word. Gospel reductionism diminishes the fullness of God's counsel, placing its advocates in a precarious position. Believers are called to seek God's intended meaning of His Word, rather than their own interpretation that fits their personal desires and circumstances. The co-researchers connect this signpost to the following statements of faith from *This We Believe* of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod.

> We believe that works pleasing to God are works of love, for "love is the fulfillment of the law" (Romans 13:10). Faith, however, does not set up its own standards to determine what is loving (Matthew 15:9). True faith delights to do only what agrees with God's holy will. That will of God is revealed in the Bible, particularly in the Ten Commandments as their content is repeated in the New Testament. In wrestling with current moral problems, the Christian will therefore seek answers from God's law (V. Good Works and Prayer, #2).
>
> We believe, for example, that the Fifth Commandment teaches that all human life is a gift from God. This commandment speaks against abortion, suicide, and euthanasia ("mercy killing") (V. Good Works and Prayer, #3).
>
> We believe that the Sixth Commandment regulates marriage and the family. God instituted marriage as a lifelong union of one man and one woman (Matthew 19:4-6). It is the only proper context for sexual intimacy and the procreation of children. A marriage can be ended without sin only when God ends the marriage through the death of one of the spouses. Nevertheless, a Christian may obtain a divorce if his or her spouse has broken the marriage through adultery (Matthew 19:9) or malicious desertion (1 Corinthians 7:15). The Sixth Commandment forbids all sexual intimacy apart from marriage, including homosexuality (1 Corinthians 6:9,10) (V. Good Works and Prayer, #4).
>
> We reject every thought that the good works of Christians in any way earn or contribute toward establishing a right relationship with God and gaining salvation in heaven (V. Good Works and Prayer, #11).
>
> We reject every attempt to abolish the unchanging moral law of God as revealed in the Bible as the absolute standard of what is right and wrong (V. Good Works and Prayer, #12).

6. The Tabernacle / Advent Celebration

The Feast of Tabernacles is the third and final festival of the year. “Three times a year, you shall keep a feast to me” (Ex 23:14-17): the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Passover, now Easter), the Feast of Harvest (Weeks, now Pentecost), and the Feast of Ingathering (Tabernacles or Booths, now Advent).

The Feast of Tabernacles commemorates God’s presence among His people. In the final chapter of Exodus, God appears to the Israelites, hidden in the glory cloud that fills the Tabernacle with His presence.

> Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. Throughout all their journeys, whenever the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle, the people of Israel would set out. But if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set out till the day that it was taken up. For the cloud of the Lord was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel throughout all their journeys (Ex 40:34-38).

God assures the Israelites that He is their God, and they are His people. He promises to be with them. God continually gives this assurance to His people throughout the Old Testament.

> Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go (Jo 1:9).
>
> Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand (Is 41:10).
>
> The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing (Zep 3:17).

This foreshadows the incarnation of Christ Jesus, who will come to humanity and dwell among them as both fully God and fully man. It also alludes to the second coming of Christ Jesus on the last day, when the final harvest and gathering of His people will take place. Jesus' last statement in the Gospel of Matthew is a promise: "Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Mt 28:20).

The Tabernacle also holds significance as the site of sacrifice for the Israelites. Since the fall into original sin, sacrifice has been integral to their history. God clothed Adam and Eve in garments of skins, marking the first sacrifice (Gn 3:21). He uses the covering of animal skins to direct them toward their Redeemer, the seed of the woman, Christ Jesus, whose sacrifice will atone for their sins. Cain and Abel also offered sacrifices to God. He regarded Abel and his offering but had no regard for Cain and his offering (Gn 4:4-5). The difference was that Cain believed the offering itself made him right with God, while Abel had faith (Heb 11:4) in the Redeemer to whom the sacrifice pointed. Jesus Himself tells the Pharisees, "Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mt 9:13). The sacrificial offering was a confession of guilt, a recognition of sin, and a plea for God's mercy, which Abel understood. However, Cain thought that what he presented to God would render him righteous. This is why the sacrifices are burned on the altar in Exodus. God clarifies that personal sacrifices, offerings, works, or merits do not make one right with Him. Believers only offer contrition, sorrow, repentance, and a plea for God's mercy: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner" (Lk 18:13). This is why the sacrifices are burned; the sacrifice itself does nothing to appease God because no goodness originates within human flesh (Rom 7:18). All goodness originates from God Himself

and proceeds from Him to believers (Jas 1:17). The entire sacrificial system of the Israelites points solely to the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ Jesus (Heb 10:1-18).

> For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings (Hos 6:6).
>
> For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise (Ps 51:16-17).

The co-researchers express the relationship between the Tabernacle and Advent celebration, as shown in the following word cloud:

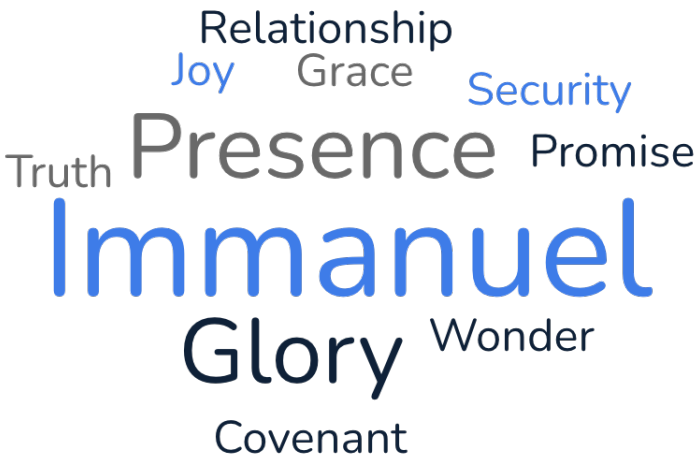

Figure 9: The Tabernacle / Advent Celebration

The co-researchers convey this sentiment in the following phrases:

“I will fear no evil, for you are with me.”

“He will not leave us or forsake us.”

“God has made His home with us.”

“Immanuel, God with us!”

“Come, Lord Jesus!”

Connections

The purpose of worship is to receive God's gifts through His coming via the means of grace. The co-researchers connect this signpost to the following statements of faith from *This We Believe* of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod.

> We believe that there is one holy Christian church, which is the temple of God (1 Corinthians 3:16) and the body of Christ (Ephesians 1:23; 4:12). The members of this one church are all those who are the "sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:26). The church, then, consists only of believers, or saints, whom God accepts as holy for the sake of Jesus' righteousness, which has been credited to them (2 Corinthians 5:21). These saints are scattered throughout the world. All people who believe that Jesus is their Savior from sin are members of the holy Christian church, regardless of the nation, race, or church body to which they belong (VII. Church and Ministry, #1).
>
> We believe that Jesus, true God and true man, who rose from death and ascended to the right hand of the Father, will come again. He will return visibly, in the same way as his disciples saw him go into heaven (Acts 1:11) (IX. Jesus' Return and the Judgement, #1).
>
> We believe that at Jesus' return this present world will come to an end. "In keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness" (2 Peter 3:13) (IX. Jesus' Return and the Judgement, #3).

7. Sabbath Rest / Weekly Worship / Eternal Life

The Sabbath day of rest is established in the creation of heaven and earth (Gn 2:3). In Exodus, the Sabbath day is reiterated and further confirmed:

> And the Lord said to Moses, "You are to speak to the people of Israel and say, 'Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you. You shall keep the Sabbath, because it is holy for you. Everyone who profanes it shall be put to death. Whoever does any work on it, that soul shall be cut off from among his people. Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the Lord. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day shall be put to death. Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the

> Sabbath throughout their generations, as a covenant forever. It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed'" (Ex 31:12-17).

God confirms that sanctification is His gift and that heaven and earth were created in six literal days, with God designating the seventh day as a sacred day of rest. From the very beginning of creation, God initiates His plan to save His people and bring them home to enjoy eternal rest with Him. For those who deny and reject this, only death awaits. Through the gifts of justification and sanctification, Christ Jesus leads believers into eternal rest with Him. Moses was faithful in all of God's house as a servant, testifying to the things that would be spoken later; however, Christ is faithful over God's house as a Son. Believers are His house if they hold fast to their confidence and boast in their hope (Heb 3:5-6).

The Sabbath is a day for weekly worship, when families, parents, and grandparents make a special effort to instill the Christian faith in their children (Ex 13:8; Dt 11:19). Like the Tabernacle, believers are to designate a space for this weekly worship. It begins with the gathering of resources. Moses instructs the Israelites:

> Moses said to all the congregation of the people of Israel, "This is the thing that the Lord has commanded. Take from among you a contribution to the Lord. Whoever is of a generous heart, let him bring the Lord's contribution: gold, silver, and bronze" (Ex 35:4-5).

These funds should be used to create a beautiful and respectful space for believers to gather regularly, receive God's gifts, and express their gratitude and praise.

This indicates God's eschatological consummation: bringing believers home to enjoy eternal rest with Him in the new creation. Believers receive a taste of this as God sanctifies them in this life; however, it remains merely a taste while they are here. Nonetheless, it provides the comfort and peace that believers need to endure the trials

and tests of temporal life, all while lovingly serving God and one another for His glory.

Jesus Himself says:

> Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light (Mt 11:28-30).

The final book of the New Testament, Revelation, offers believers a glimpse of what is to come:

> Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away” (Rv 21:1-4).

The co-researchers express their appreciation for the Tabernacle and Advent celebration, as shown in the following word cloud:

Figure 10: Sabbath Rest / Weekly Worship / Eternal Life

The co-researchers express this belief in the following phrases:

> “In the hope of eternal life, which God, who cannot lie, promises.”

“Let us firmly hold the confession of our hope.”

“Rejoice in hope, be patient during hardships, always in prayer.”

“All the glory and praise belong to God.”

“Oh, to see God face to face; words cannot describe it!”

Connections

God’s purpose of sanctification is to grant eternal life to all believers and usher them into the new creation. While the original creation was very good, the new creation is perfect and everlasting. The co-researchers connect this signpost to the following statements of faith from *This We Believe* of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod.

> We believe that the universe, the world, and the human race came into existence in the beginning when God created heaven and earth and all creatures (Genesis 1,2). Further testimony to this event is found in other passages of the Old and New Testaments (for example, Exodus 20:11; Hebrews 11:3). The creation happened in the course of six consecutive days of normal length by the power of God’s almighty word (II. Creation, Man, and Sin #1).
>
> We believe that the Bible presents a true, factual, and historical account of creation (II. Creation, Man, and Sin #2).
>
> We reject all theories of evolution as an explanation of the origin of the universe and the human race and all attempts to harmonize the scriptural account of creation with such theories (II. Creation, Man, and Sin #7).
>
> We believe that it is the Lord’s will that Christians meet regularly to build one another up by using the means of grace together (Hebrews 10:24,25) and to work for the spread of the gospel into all the world (Mark 16:15). Since these visible gatherings (for example, congregations and synods) use the means of grace, they are called churches. They bear this name, however, only because of the true believers present in them (1 Corinthians 1:2) (VII. Church and Ministry, #4).

These are the seven signposts of Exodus that guide Cornerstone Lutheran Church parishioners in their sanctification.

CHAPTER 5: RECOMMENDATION AND CONCLUSION

Implication

Contribution to Practice

Cornerstone Lutheran Church parishioners have come to recognize their agreement with the teachings and doctrines of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, as outlined in their statement of faith, *This We Believe* (see Appendix 6). They acknowledge that God delivers His good gifts of justification and sanctification through His chosen means of grace. The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod defines the means of grace in its statement of faith.

> We believe that God bestows all spiritual blessings upon sinners by special means established by him. These are the means of grace, the gospel in Word and sacraments [i.e., Baptism and the Lord's Supper]. We define a sacrament as a sacred act established by Christ in which the Word connected with an earthly element gives the forgiveness of sins (VI. The Means of Grace, #1).
>
> We reject any views that look for the revelation of the grace of God and salvation apart from the gospel as found in the Scriptures. We reject any views that look for the Holy Spirit to work faith apart from the means of grace. We likewise reject the view that the law is a means of grace (VI. The Means of Grace, #6).

Cornerstone Lutheran Church parishioners have adopted the statement of faith of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod as their own and are pursuing membership in this church body. If approved, the congregation will be officially welcomed into the synod at the next general convention of the Pacific Northwest District of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. The congregation has created a mission

and vision statement that closely aligns with the insights gained from this research project.

> ***Our mission*** is to deliver God's gifts of faith, new birth, the forgiveness of sins, and eternal life in Christ Jesus, our Redeemer.
>
> ***Our vision*** is to persevere until the end, celebrating the wedding feast of the Lamb, Christ Jesus our Lord, with His Church—the assembly of believers—on the last day.

To support this mission and vision, Cornerstone Lutheran Church will ensure that each head of household (or elder) receives, understands, and takes responsibility for educating their families with these four books.

The Lutheran Study Bible[184]

Luther's Catechism—English Standard Version[185]

A Summary of Christian Doctrine[186]

Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions (Book of Concord)[187]

The congregation's weekly worship embodies a lifelong quest to live, learn, and love in Christ. It encompasses elements of the past, present, and future. We have been saved by Christ Jesus through the cross; we are saved in our Baptism, and we continue to be saved by receiving God's Word along with the body and blood of Christ in the Lord's Supper. All of this culminates on the last day at the wedding feast of the Bridegroom and His Church.

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[184] Engelbrecht, *The Lutheran Study Bible*.

[185] Luther, *Luther's Catechism—English Standard Version*.

[186] Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*.

[187] McCain, *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*.

By God's grace, Cornerstone Lutheran Church parishioners immerse themselves in His gifts of faith, new birth, forgiveness of sins, and eternal life with Him in the new creation. They faithfully sow the seed of God's Word in one another and in the community, trusting in Him alone (Prv 3:5-6). Through His strength and power, they desire for this trust to manifest in themselves and their community. They pray for God, through the Holy Spirit, to continue His work in and through them, clothing them in the righteousness of His Son, Christ Jesus, the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation (Col 1:15). Therefore, they do not conform to the pattern of this world but are transformed by the renewing of their minds in understanding the blessed exchange, believers' sins (0) for Christ's righteousness (10), as they discern what is good, acceptable, and perfect (Rom 12:2).

In his book, *Transforming Church*, Ford suggests that the church's mission and vision should prioritize the external community.[188] However, Cornerstone Lutheran Church is a new church plant and does not yet have the resources to fully engage with the external community. Nonetheless, "Let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith" (Gal 6:10). Therefore, the purpose of Cornerstone Lutheran Church is to serve its members and equip them to love and support their families, congregation, synod, and communities. Their mission and vision emerge from within the congregation, extending to their communities through each member's unique vocations. The future health of the congregation will closely relate to how well it embodies this virtue within its character.

[188] Kevin G. Ford, *Transforming Church: Bringing Out the Good to Get to Great* (Carol Stream, Il: Tyndale House Publishers, 2007), 124.

Contribution to Knowledge

Cornerstone Lutheran Church's approach to this research focused on studying, reflecting on, and engaging with God's gift of sanctification through His Word. Jesus teaches, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (Jn 8:31-32). The co-researchers aimed to develop a deep understanding of sanctification that fully embraces God's gifts and models the Christian life for their children and community. The Apostles' Creed is a fundamental element in confessional Lutheranism. It offers a concise summary of biblical teachings and is recited during liturgical worship services. The congregation aims to present the creed as a unifying framework for understanding the trinitarian nature of God's gift of sanctification.

The First Article: Growth in Conformance to the Father's Will

> I believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth.
>
> What does this mean?
>
> I believe that God created me and all that exists, and that he gave me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my mind and all my abilities.
>
> And I believe that God still preserves me by richly and daily providing clothing and shoes, food and drink, property and home, spouse and children, land, cattle, and all I own, and all I need to keep my body and life. God also preserves me by defending me against all danger, guarding and protecting me from all evil. All this God does only because He is my good and merciful Father in heaven, and not because I have earned or deserved it. For all this I ought to thank and praise, to serve and obey Him.

This is most certainly true.[189]

The First Strategy: God is orderly, as evidenced by all His creation. Therefore, God aligns believers with His created order according to His eternal will, which is revealed in the Ten Commandments. The Christian life progresses toward the growth and fulfillment of His eternal will. Believers are to fear God and keep His commandments, for this is their whole duty (Eccl 12:13). God completes this work in believers only on the last day. In this life, sanctification remains unfinished and manifests differently in each believer (Eph 2:10). However, sanctification is always consistent with His eternal will. The Ten Commandments serve as the guide for all Christian good works. In accordance with the *Book of Concord*, Large Catechism:

> The Ten Commandments [are] a summary of divine teaching about what we are to do in order that our whole life may be pleasing to God. Everything that is to be a good work must arise and flow from and in this true fountain and channel. So, apart from the Ten Commandments, no work or thing can be good or pleasing to God, no matter how great or precious it is in the world's eyes.[190]

Key Takeaway:

The Christian life involves growing in alignment with the eternal will of God the Father, as articulated in the Ten Commandments.

The Second Article: Growth in Appreciation for the Son's Sacrifice

> I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell. The third day he

[189] Luther, *Luther's Catechism—English Standard Version*, 4.

[190] McCain, *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, 395.

> rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty. From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.
>
> What does this mean?
>
> I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord.
>
> He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death.
>
> All this he did that I should be his own, and live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he has risen from death and lives and rules eternally.
>
> This is most certainly true.[191]

The Second Strategy: Believers are justified by promise. God has given them His eternal Word, and by His grace, He saves them through faith in Christ. Believers contribute nothing to their justification; therefore, the Christian life involves growing in their understanding and appreciation of what Christ accomplished on the cross for them. By grace, they have been saved through faith. This is not their own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. Believers are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand for them to walk in (Eph 2:8-10). These good works encompass daily growth in contrition, repentance, thanksgiving, and praise while reflecting on God's promised salvation through Christ.

[191] Luther, *Luther's Catechism—English Standard Version*, 4–5.

Key Takeaway:

The Christian life includes a deeper appreciation for the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ Jesus in the blessed exchange: believers' sins for Christ's righteousness.

The Third Article: Growth in Expression of the Spirit's Fruit

> I believe in the Holy Spirit; the holy Christian church, the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; The resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen.
>
> What does this mean?
>
> I believe that I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him.
>
> But the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.
>
> In this Christian church he daily and fully forgives all sins to me and all believers.
>
> On the last day he will raise me and all the dead and give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ.
>
> This is most certainly true.[192]

The Third Strategy: God, the Holy Spirit, manifests the fruit of the Spirit in the lives of believers. The fruit of the Spirit includes love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control; against such things, there is no law

[192] Luther, *Luther's Catechism—English Standard Version*, 5.

(Gal 5:22-23). This distinction characterizes the Christian life and sets believers apart from the unbelieving world.

Key Takeaway:

The Christian life embraces an increasing expression of the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

These three strategies converge in the Holy Trinity, which consists of three persons in one Godhead. God's will is to sanctify believers according to His Word through the power of His Spirit.

Application

Laity

Through this research, Cornerstone Lutheran Church parishioners have recognized that their most effective discipline, aside from attending weekly worship services, is engaging in sanctification through daily Christian devotional study. Jesus teaches, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples" (Jn 8:31). Avoiding self-made religion, severity to the body, and pious exercises is essential.

> Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.
>
> If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations—"Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch" (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? These have indeed

> an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh (Col 2:18-23).

Jesus Himself says:

> Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light (Mt 11:28-30).

The congregation has examined several resources and concluded that the most comprehensive daily devotional practice is the *Treasury of Daily Prayer*.[193] This devotional book provides daily elements for prayer and reflection on God's Word and the Lutheran Confessions. It is structured according to the Christian church calendar and includes the following components for each day.

1. Psalm Reading: The Psalms act as the hymnbook of the Bible. Each day highlights a specific Psalm. Selected verses from a Psalm create the Psalmody, setting the tone and introducing the subsequent readings. Additionally, suggested related Psalms are included.
2. Old Testament and New Testament Readings: The devotional core focus is the daily reading of God's Word. The texts for the two readings, one from the Old Testament and the other from the New Testament, are taken from the English Standard Version, which aligns with the congregation's practice. The schedule for the Bible readings follows a daily lectionary, ensuring that it does not repeat the Sunday lessons or Gospels and that the readings do not occur again throughout the year.

[193] Scot A. Kinnaman, ed., *Treasury of Daily Prayer* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2008).

3. Writings of the Church Fathers: Each day features an excerpt from the writings of a Church Father. These writings serve as additional reading or as part of daily devotion. Typically, the selected passages reflect or correspond with the daily Bible readings, the festival or commemoration observed on that day, or the liturgical season of the church year.
4. Hymnody: Each day presents the text of one or more stanzas from a hymn. These stanzas can be prayed, recited, or sung as intended.
5. The Prayer of the Day: This prayer unites the thoughts and themes from the selected texts for each day, particularly those related to the New Testament reading.
6. Biography of a Saint, Festival, or Season: A brief biographical description of the saint or event being honoured is provided on designated commemoration or feast days. This devotional includes approximately 120 commemorations.
7. The Book of Concord: This devotional features a reading from the Lutheran Confessions that enriches the Bible readings and deepens the theological understanding of the texts.
8. Lenten Catechism: Throughout the six weeks of Lent, this devotional emphasizes the key sections of Luther's Catechism and additional teachings from the confessions for study and meditation.

This devotional marks the beginning of the church year in the Easter season, starting with Ash Wednesday. For example, the first day of this devotion is presented in Appendix 7.

Pastoral

Cornerstone Lutheran Church has authorized me to develop this research project into a Bible study presentation. The presentation will consist of three main parts: first, the background, introduction, and literature review; second, the challenges and responses; and third, the Seven Signposts of Christian Life in Exodus, along with the three strategies for Christian life modelled in the Apostles' Creed, and their application through daily devotion using the *Treasury of Daily Prayer*.[194] Additionally, I will incorporate the findings related to the seven signposts into my sermons to align with the lectionary readings of God's Word during worship services.

Future Research

Building on this research project's success, Cornerstone Lutheran Church has outlined a plan for further study. Like the signposts in the book of Exodus, the congregation is eager to begin a study that will guide their church's growth through the Acts of the Apostles. Participatory Action Research is well-suited for this, as it promotes community involvement and development within the congregation. The innovative ideas emerging from this approach could inspire other pastors or congregations seeking positive change in their shared Christian journey.

[194] Kinnaman, *Treasury of Daily Prayer*.

Conclusion

This research project has successfully achieved its goals. It has advanced the theological integration of my ministry through effective engagement with our congregational context, supported by theological understanding and critical thinking. Together, we have developed a profound knowledge of this context, enabling us to identify, frame, and address the key issues affecting our sanctification. This research has enhanced my effectiveness as a minister, increased my leadership capacity, and invigorated my spiritual development and professional calling. The primary outcomes of this research project include discovering how Cornerstone Lutheran Church parishioners navigate sanctification through the establishment of the Seven Signposts of Christian Life in Exodus, the trinitarian nature of sanctification modelled in the Apostles' Creed, and their application through daily devotion using the *Treasury of Daily Prayer*.[195] The signposts and the trinitarian nature of sanctification are:

The Seven Signposts of Christian Life in Exodus

Justification:

1. The Ten Plagues / Exorcism
2. The Passover / Easter Celebration and the Lord's Supper
3. The Crossing of the Red Sea / Baptism

[195] Kinnaman, *Treasury of Daily Prayer*.

Sanctification:

4. Daily Bread / The Lord's Prayer
5. The Ten Commandments / Pentecost Celebration
6. The Tabernacle / Advent Celebration
7. Sabbath Rest / Weekly Worship / Eternal Life

The Trinitarian Nature of Sanctification Modelled in the Apostles' Creed

The First Article:

The Christian life involves growing in alignment with the eternal will of God the Father, as articulated in the Ten Commandments.

The Second Article:

The Christian life includes a deeper appreciation for the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ Jesus in the blessed exchange: believers' sins for Christ's righteousness.

The Third Article:

The Christian life embraces an increasing expression of the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Human Research Ethics Board Certificate of Approval

TRINITY WESTERN UNIVERSITY

Human Research Ethics Board
22500 University Drive
Langley, BC | V2Y 1Y1
HREB@twu.ca | 604-513-2167

HREB Certificate of Approval

To: Steven Wiebe

From: Bill Badke, HREB Co-Chair

Re: How Cornerstone Lutheran Church Parishioners Navigate Sanctification

HREB File No.: 24G14

Effective: 2024 DEC 12 Expiry: 2025 DEC 12

Approval Period: ☑ One year ☐ Three years

Approval Type: ☑ New ☐ Continuation ☐ Amendment

Certification: 22fb1ddd-6513-4d87-b25e-0da3bc923ecf Digitally signed by 22fb1ddd-6513-4d87-b25e-0da3bc923ecf Date: 2024.12.12 09:41:18 -08'00'

The Trinity Western University Human Research Ethics Board (TWU HREB) has reviewed and approved the research proposal and concludes that the proposed research meets appropriate standards of ethics as outlined by the current *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans*.

This approval is subject to the following conditions:

1. Approval is granted for the research and purposes described in the application only.
2. Any modification to the research or research materials must be submitted to the HREB for approval before implementation.
3. Any deviations to the research or adverse events must be submitted to the HREB as soon as possible.
4. This approval is valid for the indicated approval period and a Request for Continuing Approval must be submitted and approved by the above expiry date.
5. A Final Project Report form must be submitted to the HREB when the research is complete or terminated.
6. Trinity Western University may request to review research documentation from this project to demonstrate compliance with this approved protocol and with the TWU Policy concerning Research Ethics with Human Participants.

Funded Research

If your research is funded by any of the Tri-Agency or any other research funding organizations, send a copy of this Certificate, with the HREB File Number in the subject line, to the Research Grants Officer at Sue.Funk@twu.ca.

Appendix 2: Agency Permission Letter

Cornerstone Lutheran Church
1131 Wintergreen Crescent
Kelowna, BC V1W 3V8
(250) 300-6410

Date: November 20, 2025
Regarding: Agency Permission
Project Title: How Cornerstone Lutheran Church Parishioners Navigate Sanctification

Dear Trinity Western University's Human Research Ethics Board (HREB),

Steven Wiebe, a graduate student in the Doctor of Ministry program at ACTS Seminary and principal investigator of the above project, plans to conduct research with participants from Cornerstone Lutheran Church's membership.

As president of Cornerstone Lutheran Church, I grant Steven Wiebe permission to recruit participants from the congregation and conduct this research project at our church, subject to HREB approval.

Regards,

Cavan Loughran

President
Cornerstone Lutheran Church

Appendix 3: Explanation Letter

Rev. Steven Wiebe, PEng, MBA, MDiv
Principal Investigator
Doctor of Ministry Graduate Student
ACTS Seminary—Trinity Western University
Email: steven.wiebe2@mytwu.ca
Call/Text: (250) 300-6410

Dear Cornerstone Lutheran Church parishioners,

I must conduct research as part of my major project in the ACTS Seminary, Trinity Western University's Doctor of Ministry program. Dr. Jeffrey Kuhn is my supervisor. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact him at (604) 869-6492 or jeffrey.kuhn@twu.ca. My final report will be available to you and be part of the public domain.

Research Project Title:
How Cornerstone Lutheran Church Parishioners Navigate Sanctification

Purpose:
The purpose of this Doctor of Ministry project dissertation is four-fold:

1. Advance theological integration within my ministry, effectively engaging the congregational context with theological understanding and critical thinking.
2. Develop in-depth contextual competency to identify, frame, and respond to the vital issues affecting my parishioners.
3. Enhance my ministerial effectiveness and leadership capacity.
4. Invigorate my spiritual growth and vocational call.

Research Type: Participatory Action Research
Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a subcategory of Qualitative Research that specifically aims to address and mitigate any bias from the principal investigator that may influence the research. Therefore, the principal investigator initiates and guides PAR as a co-researcher and intentionally removes any aspect that may patronize the other participant researchers or manipulate the process. Project controls and ethical considerations attend to PAR's specific aim. This contributes to establishing positive change in the participants and organization and generating robust new knowledge.

This initiative aims to serve Cornerstone Lutheran Church parishioners through an intervention that establishes positive change and develops sound ministerial practice. It

contributes robust new knowledge that applies to similar practitioners in the field. Participatory Action Research (PAR) best suits and satisfies this aim.

Research Format:

A. Three town hall focus group meetings
B. Three individual interview sessions

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is iterative and cyclical. Therefore, the format is Intervention 1: A1, B1, Intervention 2: A2, B2, and Intervention 3: A3, B3. Expanding on the previous cycle's insights and actions, the answers to the questions become more developed and focused.

Question: How do we (you) navigate sanctification?
Sub-Question 1: What challenges are we (you) experiencing?
Sub-Question 2: How are we (you) responding to these challenges?
Sub-Question 3: How is theology informing our (your) sanctification?
Sub-Question 4: How is the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) guiding us (you)?

Intervention 1: Initiation

The first intervention begins with a town hall focus group meeting of all participant researchers. This open-ended brainstorming initiative will seek to identify themes and patterns of issues and problems that Cornerstone Lutheran Church parishioners currently navigate in their lives. The discussion will specifically address the following research question and sub-questions:

Research Question: How do we navigate sanctification?
Sub-Question 1: What challenges are we experiencing?
Sub-Question 2: How are we responding to these challenges?
Sub-Question 3: How is theology informing our sanctification?
Sub-Question 4: How is the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) guiding us?

The congregation's secretary will attend and record the minutes (the data) of all meetings, including the town hall focus group meetings and individual interview sessions. This safeguards the integrity of the discussion by keeping the recorded minutes (the data) at arm's length from the principal investigator. Upon completion of each session, the meeting minutes (the data) will be given to the principal investigator, who will store the data password-protected.

After the town hall meeting, the principal investigator and congregational secretary will conduct individual meetings with each participant researcher. A similar, open-ended brainstorming initiative will seek to identify themes and patterns of issues and problems specific to each parishioner.

Once the individual meetings are complete, the principal investigator will evaluate the first intervention's actions. Themes and patterns related to the Ten Commandments will be identified, along with potential theological answers and solutions. Each iteration of Participatory Action Research (PAR) aims to comprehend the situation, focus on vital issues, employ theological discernment, develop robust responses, and assess potential outcomes. Action Research theorists describe this iterative cycle as planning, acting, observing, and reflecting.

Intervention 2: Formation

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is an iterative process. Each iteration arises from reflecting on and assessing the previous one, narrowing or extending the scope, and refining or redirecting the action. PAR is an approach to comprehension and improvement that requires active engagement with participant researchers who plan, act, observe, and reflect on each iteration of the process. Therefore, the second intervention is more focused. The principal investigator will narrow the second town hall meeting discussion by utilizing the "fruit" from the first intervention.

After the second town hall meeting, the second round of individual meetings begins. Once all the individual meetings are complete, the principal investigator will evaluate the action of the second intervention. Themes and patterns relating to the Ten Commandments will be further identified and clarified with potential theological answers and solutions. One researcher notes, "In actual practice, what most change agents have learned from their own experience is that 'diagnostic' activities such as observations, interviews, and questionnaires are already powerful interventions and that the processes of learning about a system and changing that system are, in fact, one and the same." Perhaps positive changes in the participants and congregation will be already occurring. This concludes the second iteration of PAR.

Intervention 3: Completion

Reflection is "a mental process during which events, experiences, problems, or situations are revisited and examined in order to promote further understanding that leads to solutions, ideas, improvement and change." The principal investigator will reflect on the first and second interventions and further clarify the themes and patterns relating to the Ten Commandments with specific theological answers and solutions. The "fruit" will be presented for discussion at the third and final town hall meeting. The

feedback cycle will continue into the third and final individual meetings. This concludes the third and final intervention.

Researchers have found that participating with people in their situations as participants is fair and moral. Inviting parishioners to participate in the research as part of the process leads to positive change in their lives. This is intrinsic to their ownership, empowerment, and enlightenment within the research process. Such inclusion is a critical factor in what makes Participatory Action Research (PAR) ethical.

Contact Information:
If you have any questions or want more information about this study, please contact me at (250) 300-6410 or steven.wiebe2@mytwu.ca.

Sincerely,
Steven Wiebe

Appendix 4: Participant Consent Form

Rev. Steven Wiebe, PEng, MBA, MDiv
Principal Investigator
Doctor of Ministry Graduate Student
ACTS Seminary—Trinity Western University
Email: steven.wiebe2@mytwu.ca
Call/Text: (250) 300-6410

I must conduct research as part of my major project in the ACTS Seminary, Trinity Western University's Doctor of Ministry program. Dr. Jeffrey Kuhn is my supervisor. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact him at (604) 869-6492 or jeffrey.kuhn@twu.ca. My final report will be available to you and be part of the public domain.

Research Project Title:
How Cornerstone Lutheran Church Parishioners Navigate Sanctification

Research Duration:
Initiation on February 1, 2025, completion on July 31, 2025 (Six months)

Funding:
Participation is free, and I will cover all costs for this research. There are no additional sources of funding.

Problem and Purpose:
Theologians have developed a scriptural teaching of the doctrine of sanctification. However, how does this theology translate into believers' lives and experiences? How do Cornerstone Lutheran Church parishioners navigate sanctification?

Research Question: How do Cornerstone Lutheran Church parishioners navigate sanctification?
Sub-Question 1: What challenges are parishioners experiencing?
Sub-Question 2: How are parishioners responding to these challenges?
Sub-Question 3: How is theology informing the sanctification of these parishioners?
Sub-Question 4: How does this relate to the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS)?

This initiative aims to serve Cornerstone Lutheran Church parishioners through an intervention that establishes positive change and develops sound ministerial practice. It contributes new knowledge that applies to similar practitioners in the field.

Request for Participation:
I have received permission from the congregation's president to request your participation in this research. Your valuable insight and experiences will contribute to its success.

If you consent to participate, expect to contribute three hours monthly for six months (18 hours total). There will be three intervention cycles; in each cycle, you will be asked to discuss these questions in a group and individual setting.

Question: How do we (you) navigate sanctification?
Sub-Question 1: What challenges are we (you) experiencing?
Sub-Question 2: How are we (you) responding to these challenges?
Sub-Question 3: How is theology informing our (your) sanctification?
Sub-Question 4: How is the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) guiding us (you)?

On completion, participants will have access to my final report.

Potential Risks and Discomforts:
This research involves participants discussing their faith and religion, which may be emotional (e.g., feeling uncomfortable, anxious, embarrassed, or upset). Therefore, I will guide the sessions carefully and gently (without coercion or manipulation). Participants will not be asked or expected to discuss intensely personal matters. The risk of involvement is similar to participating in a church Bible study and interacting with the pastor and fellow congregation members about faith and religion.

Potential Benefits to Participants, Congregation, and Society:
This research encourages positive change and action in the participants, including a greater theological understanding and application of sanctification.

This research aims to establish positive change and action in Cornerstone Lutheran Church. The goal is to produce a guide to sanctification for the congregation.

This research aims to generate new knowledge in practical theology. Although outside the scope of this project, I may strive to publish a book on sanctification for the greater Christian community.

There is no monetary benefit to participating in this research.

Confidentiality and Anonymity:
Your name will not be recorded in the dataset or the final report. Any information obtained in connection with this study that can be identified with you will remain confidential and disclosed only with your permission or as required by law.

Data Maintenance:
The congregation's secretary will record each session's meeting minutes (the data) and immediately provide it to me. Your name will not be recorded or stored within the dataset. Only I will have access to the data, which I will store password-protected indefinitely.

Contact Information:
If you have any questions or want more information about this study, please contact me at (250) 300-6410 or steven.wiebe2@mytwu.ca.

If you have any concerns about your treatment or rights as a research participant, you may contact the Ethics Compliance Officer in the Office of Research at Trinity Western University at (604) 513-2167 or HREB@twu.ca.

Consent:
Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and you may refuse to participate or withdraw from it at any time without any impact on your status in the congregation. You may withdraw from further participation in the research at any time before the study's completion date (July 31, 2025). However, removing your previous contribution from the dataset is impossible because participants' names are not associated with the meeting minutes (the data). If you want to withdraw from further participation in the study, please contact me in writing before this date.

I will store the data password-protected indefinitely. The data from this study may be used in future research. If you do not wish it to be used in future research, you may indicate so below. It will then only be used within this study.

Signature:

Your signature below indicates that your questions about the study were answered to your satisfaction, and you have received a copy of this consent form for your records.

Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study.

_____ _____

Research Participant Signature Date

_____

Printed Name of the Research Participant

Do you consent to allow your data from this study (in anonymous form) to be used in future research?

□ Yes □ No

Appendix 5: Debriefing Letter

Rev. Steven Wiebe, PEng, MBA, MDiv
Principal Investigator
Doctor of Ministry Graduate Student
ACTS Seminary—Trinity Western University
Email: steven.wiebe2@mytwu.ca
Call/Text: (250) 300-6410

Dear participant,

Thank you for participating in this research on how Cornerstone Lutheran Church parishioners navigate sanctification. This research encourages positive change and action in the participants, including a greater theological understanding and application of sanctification. This research aims to establish positive change and action in Cornerstone Lutheran Church. The goal is to produce a guide to sanctification for the congregation. This research aims to generate new knowledge in practical theology. Although outside the scope of this project, I may strive to publish a book on sanctification for the greater Christian community.

You may withdraw from further participation in the research at any time before the study's completion date (July 31, 2025). However, removing your previous contribution from the dataset is impossible because participants' names are not associated with the meeting minutes (the data). If you want to withdraw from further participation in the study, please contact me in writing before this date.

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Sincerely,
Steven Wiebe

This We Believe

A Statement of Belief of the
Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

Prepared for the Conference of Presidents by the

Commission on Inter-Church Relations for the Wisconsin Evangelical Synod, 1999

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INTRODUCTION

"Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven" (Matthew 10:32). With these words Jesus indicates that he wants Christians to confess publicly what they believe in their hearts.

This We Believe is one way the members of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod have chosen to confess their faith in Christ. This document publicly summarizes the main teachings of our church body.

This We Believe was first published in 1967. A minor revision was undertaken in 1980. In consultation with the Conference of Presidents, the Commission on Inter-Church Relations completed the present revision in 1999. This second revision seeks to simplify the language and to add some important points of doctrine not addressed in the first two editions. The current revision was not undertaken because of doctrinal disagreement with the previous editions.

The current document does not claim to be a full treatment of all the Bible's teachings. For a fuller exposition of the doctrines of Scripture, the reader is referred to other sources, including the pamphlet Doctrinal Statements of the WELS (Northwestern Publishing House, 1997).

It should also be noted that This We Believe was not specifically designed to serve as an outreach tool for unchurched people, but as a basis for doctrinal discussions with other church bodies and informed individuals.

It is our conviction that over the years This We Believe has been a great blessing to the church. This revised edition is presented with the fervent prayer that it may continue to serve Christ's church, to the glory of his name and for the extension of his kingdom.

I. GOD AND HIS REVELATION

1. We believe that there is only one true God (Isaiah 44:6). He has made himself known as the triune God, one God in three persons. This is evident from Jesus' command to his disciples to baptize "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). Whoever does not worship this God worships a false god, a god who does not exist. Jesus said, "He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him" (John 5:23).

2. We believe that God has revealed himself in nature. "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands" (Psalm 19:1). "Since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities--his eternal power and divine nature--have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse" (Romans 1:20). So there is no excuse for atheists. Since the requirements of the law are written on people's hearts, the consciences of people also bear witness that there is a God to whom they are accountable (Romans 2:15). However, nature and conscience present only a partial revelation of God and one that is not able to show the way to heaven.

3. We believe that God has given the full revelation of himself in his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. "No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known" (John 1:18). In Jesus, God has revealed himself as the Savior-God, who "so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

4. We believe that God has also given a written revelation for all people in the Holy Scriptures. His revelation in the Bible has two main messages, the law and the gospel. The law declares what is right and wrong, and it threatens God's punishment for sin. The gospel presents the love of God, which he has shown especially by providing salvation from sin through Jesus Christ.

5. We believe that the entire Bible is Christ-centered. In the Old Testament God repeatedly promised a divine deliverer from sin, death, and hell. The New Testament proclaims that this promised deliverer has come in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus himself says of the Old Testament, "These are the Scriptures that testify about me" (John 5:39).

6. We believe that God gave the Scriptures through men whom he chose, using the language they knew and the style of writing they had. He used Moses and the prophets

to write the Old Testament in Hebrew (some portions in Aramaic) and the evangelists and apostles to write the New Testament in Greek.

7. We believe that in a miraculous way that goes beyond all human investigation, God the Holy Spirit moved these men to write his Word. These men “spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:21). What they said was spoken “not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit” (1 Corinthians 2:13). Every thought they expressed and every word they used were given them by the Holy Spirit. Saint Paul wrote to Timothy, “All Scripture is God-breathed” (2 Timothy 3:16). The church has called this miraculous process inspiration, which means “breathing into.” Since every word of Scripture was inspired, we also call this process verbal inspiration, or word-forword inspiration. This is not to be equated with mechanical dictation, since the Holy Spirit guided the writers as they used their individual vocabularies and writing styles.

8. We believe that Scripture is a unified whole, true and without error in everything it says, for the Savior said, “The Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35). Therefore it is the infallible authority and guide for everything we believe and do.

9. We believe that the Bible is fully sufficient, clearly teaching people all they need to know to get to heaven. It makes them “wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 3:15), and it equips them for “every good work” (2 Timothy 3:17). Since God’s plan of salvation has been fully revealed in the canonical books of the Bible, we need and expect no other revelations (Hebrews 1:1,2). The church is built on the teachings of the apostles and prophets (Ephesians 2:20).

10. We believe and accept the Bible on its own terms, accepting as factual history what it presents as history and recognizing as figurative speech what is evident as such. We believe that Scripture must interpret Scripture, clear passages throwing light on those less easily understood. We believe that no authority-whether it is human reason, science, or scholarship--may stand in judgment over Scripture. Sound scholarship will faithfully search out the true meaning of Scripture without presuming to pass judgment on it.

11. We believe that the original Hebrew text of the Old Testament and the Greek text of the New Testament are the inspired Word of God. Translations of the Hebrew and Greek that accurately reflect the meaning of the original text convey God’s truth to people and can properly be called the Word of God.

12. Although the original documents themselves have been lost, we believe that the Lord in his providential care has accurately preserved the Hebrew and Greek texts through the many hand-copied manuscripts that exist. Although there are minor differences or “variants” between the various hand-copied manuscripts, these variants do not cause any changes in doctrine.

13. We believe that the three ecumenical creeds (the Apostles’, the Nicene, and the Athanasian) as well as the Lutheran Confessions as contained in the Book of Concord of 1580 express the true doctrine of Scripture. Since the doctrines they confess are drawn from Scripture alone, we are bound to them in our faith and life. Therefore all preaching and teaching in our churches and schools must be in harmony with these confessions, and we reject all the errors that they reject.

14. We reject any worship that is not directed to the triune God as revealed in the Bible. We reject the use of feminine names and pronouns for God because in Scripture God reveals himself as Father and Son. We reject the opinion that all religions lead to the same God.

15. We reject any thought that makes only part of Scripture God’s Word or that allows for the possibility of factual error in Scripture, even in so-called nonreligious matters such as historical or geographical details. We likewise reject all views that say Scripture is merely a human record of God’s revelation as he encounters mankind in history, and so is a record subject to human imperfections.

16. We reject any emphasis upon Jesus as the personal Word of God (John 1:1) that minimizes the role of the Scriptures as the written Word of God (Romans 3:2).

17. We reject every effort to reduce the confessions contained in the Book of Concord to historical documents that do not have binding confessional significance for the church today. We likewise reject any claim that the church is bound only to those doctrines of Scripture that are specifically addressed in these confessions.

This is what Scripture teaches about God and his revelation. This we believe, teach, and confess.

II. CREATION, MAN, AND SIN

1. We believe that the universe, the world, and the human race came into existence in the beginning when God created heaven and earth and all creatures (Genesis 1,2). Further testimony to this event is found in other passages of the Old and New Testaments (for example, Exodus 20:11; Hebrews 11:3). The creation happened in the course of six consecutive days of normal length by the power of God's almighty word.

2. We believe that the Bible presents a true, factual, and historical account of creation.

3. We believe that God created Adam and Eve in his own image (Genesis 1:26,27), that is, holy and righteous. Their thoughts, desires, and will were in full harmony with God (Colossians 3:10; Ephesians 4:24). They were furthermore given the capacity to "subdue" God's creation (Genesis 1:28) and the responsibility to care for it (Genesis 2:15).

4. We believe that God created a multitude of good angels. Sometime after creation, a number of these angels rebelled against God under the leadership of one of their own who is called Satan or the devil (2 Peter 2:4). Ever since, these evil angels have opposed God and God's people (1 Peter 5:8).

5. We believe that Adam and Eve lost their divine image when they yielded to the temptation of Satan and disobeyed God's command. This brought upon them the judgment of God: "You will surely die" (Genesis 2:17). Since that time all people are conceived and born in a sinful condition (Psalm 51:5) and are inclined only to evil (Genesis 8:21). "Flesh gives birth to flesh" (John 3:6). Since all people are by nature dead in sin and separated from God (Ephesians 2:1), they are unable to reconcile themselves to God by their own efforts and deeds.

6. We believe that God in his gracious providence richly and daily provides for the bodily needs of all people (Psalm 145:15,16). He furthermore protects believers against all danger by keeping evil away from them (Psalm 121:7) or by making it serve their good (Romans 8:28).

7. We reject all theories of evolution as an explanation of the origin of the universe and the human race and all attempts to harmonize the scriptural account of creation with such theories.

8. We reject interpretations that reduce the first chapters of Genesis to a narration of myths or parables or poetic accounts that are not factual history.

9. We reject all theories that blur the distinction between human beings and animals, since only human beings have immortal souls and are accountable to God.

10. We reject all theories that blur the distinction between God and his creation (pantheism).

11. We reject all views that look upon people as basically good by nature; that consider their natural tendencies to be mere weaknesses, which are not sinful; or that fail to recognize their total spiritual depravity and their inability to please God (Romans 3:9-18). This is what Scripture teaches about creation, mankind, and sin. This we believe, teach, and confess.

This is what Scripture teaches about creation, mankind, and sin. This we believe, teach, and confess.

III. CHRIST AND REDEMPTION

1. We believe that Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God, one with the Father from all eternity (John 1:1,2). In the course of time, he took a true and complete, yet sinless, human nature to himself (Galatians 4:4) when he was conceived as a holy child in the virgin Mary through a miracle of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35). God's angel testified, "What is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 1:20). Jesus Christ is unique, for in him the true God and a true human nature are inseparably united in one person, the holy God-man. He is called Immanuel, which means "God with us" (Matthew 1:23).

2. We believe that Jesus at all times possessed the fullness of the Deity with all divine power, wisdom, and glory (Colossians 2:9). His divinity was evident when he performed miracles (John 2:11). But while he lived on earth, he took on the form of a servant, humbling himself by laying aside the continuous and full display and use of his divine characteristics. During this time he lived as a man among mankind, endured suffering, and humbled himself to the shameful death on the cross (Philippians 2:7,8). We believe that Christ descended into hell to proclaim his victory over Satan (1 Peter 3:18,19). We believe that he rose again from the grave with a glorified body, ascended, and is exalted on high to rule with power over the world, with grace in his church, and with glory in eternity (Philippians 2:9-11).

3. We believe that Jesus Christ, the God-man, was sent by the Father to redeem all people, that is, to buy them back from the guilt and punishment of sin. Jesus came to fulfill the law (Matthew 5:17) so that on the basis of his perfect obedience all people would be declared holy (Romans 5:18,19). He came to bear "the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6), ransoming all people by his sacrifice for sin on the altar of the cross (Matthew 20:28). We believe that he is the God-appointed substitute for all people. His righteousness, or perfect obedience, is accepted by the Father as our righteousness, his death for sin as our death for sin (2 Corinthians 5:21). We believe that his resurrection gives full assurance that God has accepted the payment he made for all (Romans 4:25).

4. We believe that God reconciled "the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them" (2 Corinthians 5:19). We believe that Jesus is "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). The mercy and grace of God are all-embracing; the reconciliation through Christ is universal; the forgiveness of sins has been gained as an accomplished fact for all people. Because of the substitutionary work of Christ, God has justified all people, that is, God has declared them to be not guilty. This forms the firm, objective basis for the sinner's assurance of salvation.

5. We reject any teaching that in any way limits Christ's work of atonement. We reject any teaching that says Christ paid the penalty only for the sins of some people. We reject any teaching that says Christ made only a partial payment for sins.

6. We reject the views that consider the Gospel accounts to be pious fiction developed by early Christians to express their ideas about Jesus Christ rather than a true account of what actually happened in history. We reject all attempts to make the historical accuracy of events in Christ's life--such as his virgin birth, his miracles, or his bodily resurrection--appear unimportant or even doubtful. We reject the attempts to stress a "present encounter with the living Christ" in such a way that Jesus' redemptive work recorded in Scripture loses its importance.

This is what Scripture teaches about Christ and redemption. This we believe, teach and confess.

IV. JUSTIFICATION BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH

1. We believe that God has justified all sinners, that is, he has declared them righteous for the sake of Christ. This is the central message of Scripture upon which the very existence of the church depends. It is a message relevant to people of all times and places, of all races and social levels, for "the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men" (Romans 5:18). All need forgiveness of sins before God, and Scripture proclaims that all have been justified, for "the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men" (Romans 5:18).

2. We believe that individuals receive this free gift of forgiveness not on the basis of their own works, but only through faith (Ephesians 2:8,9). Justifying faith is trust in Christ and his redemptive work. This faith justifies not because of any power it has in itself, but only because of the salvation prepared by God in Christ, which it embraces (Romans 3:28; 4:5). On the other hand, although Jesus died for all, Scripture says that "whoever does not believe will be condemned" (Mark 16:16). Unbelievers forfeit the forgiveness won for them by Christ (John 8:24).

3. We believe that people cannot produce this justifying faith, or trust, in their own hearts, because "the man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him" (1 Corinthians 2:14). In fact, "the sinful mind is hostile to God" (Romans 8:7). It is the Holy Spirit who gives people faith to recognize that "Jesus is Lord" (1 Corinthians 12:3). The Holy Spirit works this faith by means of the gospel (Romans 10:17). We believe, therefore, that a person's conversion is entirely the work of God's grace. Rejection of the gospel is, however, entirely the unbeliever's own fault (Matthew 23:37).

4. We believe that sinners are saved by grace alone. Grace is the undeserved love of God for sinners. This love led God to give sinners everything they need for their salvation. It is all a gift of God. People do nothing to earn any of it (Ephesians 2:8,9).

5. We believe that already before the world was created, God chose those individuals whom he would in time convert through the gospel of Christ and preserve in faith to eternal life (Ephesians 1:4-6; Romans 8:29,30). This election to faith and salvation in no way was caused by anything in people but shows how completely salvation is by grace alone (Romans 11:5,6).

6. We believe that at the moment of death, the souls of those who believe in Christ go immediately to be with the Lord in the joy of heaven because of the atoning work of

Christ (Luke 23:43). The souls of those who do not believe in Christ go to an eternity of misery in hell (Luke 16:22-24).

7. We reject every teaching that people in any way contribute to their salvation. We reject the belief that people with their own power can cooperate in their conversion or make a decision for Christ (John 15:16). We reject the belief that those who are converted were less resistant to God's grace than those who remain unconverted. We reject all efforts to present faith as a condition people must fulfill to complete their justification. We reject all attempts of sinners to justify themselves before God.

8. We reject any suggestion that the doctrine of justification by faith is no longer meaningful today.

9. We reject the teaching that believers can never fall from faith ("once saved, always saved"), because the Bible says it is possible for believers to fall from faith (1 Corinthians 10:12).

10. We reject the false and blasphemous conclusion that those who are lost were predestined, or elected, by God to damnation, for God wants all people to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9).

11. We reject universalism, the belief that all people are saved, even those without faith in Christ (John 3:36). We reject pluralism, the belief that there are other ways to salvation besides faith in Christ (John 14:6; Acts 4:12). We reject any teaching that says it does not matter what one believes so long as one has faith in God.

This is what Scripture teaches about justification by grace through faith. This we believe, teach and confess.

V. GOOD WORKS AND PRAYER

1. We believe that faith in Jesus Christ always leads a believer to produce works that are pleasing to God. “Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead” (James 2:17). As a branch in Christ the vine, a Christian produces good fruit (John 15:5).

2. We believe that works pleasing to God are works of love, for “love is the fulfillment of the law” (Romans 13:10). Faith, however, does not set up its own standards to determine what is loving (Matthew 15:9). True faith delights to do only what agrees with God’s holy will. That will of God is revealed in the Bible, particularly in the Ten Commandments as their content is repeated in the New Testament. In wrestling with current moral problems, the Christian will therefore seek answers from God’s law.

3. We believe, for example, that the Fifth Commandment teaches that all human life is a gift from God. This commandment speaks against abortion, suicide, and euthanasia (“mercy killing”).

4. We believe that the Sixth Commandment regulates marriage and the family. God instituted marriage as a lifelong union of one man and one woman (Matthew 19:4-6). It is the only proper context for sexual intimacy and the procreation of children. A marriage can be ended without sin only when God ends the marriage through the death of one of the spouses. Nevertheless, a Christian may obtain a divorce if his or her spouse has broken the marriage through adultery (Matthew 19:9) or malicious desertion (1 Corinthians 7:15). The Sixth Commandment forbids all sexual intimacy apart from marriage, including homosexuality (1 Corinthians 6:9,10).

5. We believe that individuals are free to make their own decisions concerning matters that are neither forbidden nor commanded by God’s Word (adiaphora). People must be careful, however, that their use of this freedom does not cause others to sin.

6. We believe that good works, which are fruits of faith, must be distinguished from works of civic righteousness performed by unbelievers. Although unbelievers may do much that appears to be good and upright, these works are not good in God’s sight, for “without faith it is impossible to please God” (Hebrews 11:6). While we recognize the value of such works for human society, we know that unbelievers cannot do their duty to God through works of civic righteousness.

7. We believe that in this world even the best works of Christians are tainted with sin. A sinful nature still afflicts every Christian. Therefore Christians often fail to do the good they want to do but keep on doing the evil they do not want to do (Romans 7:18-21). They must confess that all their righteous acts are like filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6). Because of Christ's redemption, however, these imperfect efforts of Christians are considered holy and acceptable by their heavenly Father.

8. We believe that the Holy Spirit enables every believer to produce good works as fruits of faith (Galatians 5:22-25). The Holy Spirit gives every believer a new nature, or "new man," that cooperates with the Holy Spirit in doing good works. The Holy Spirit uses the gospel to motivate believers to do good works.

9. The Holy Spirit also equips the church with all the spiritual gifts it needs for its well-being (1 Corinthians 12:4-11). During the beginning of the New Testament era, special charismatic gifts were given to the church, such as signs, miracles, and speaking in tongues. These gifts were connected with the ministry of the apostles (2 Corinthians 12:12). There is no evidence in Scripture that we today should expect the continuation of such charismatic gifts.

10. We believe that a life of prayer is a fruit of faith. Confidently, through faith in their Savior, Christians address their heavenly Father with petitions and praise. They present their needs and the needs of others, and they give thanks (1 Timothy 2:1). Such prayers are a delight to God, and he grants their requests according to his wisdom (Matthew 7:7,8; 1 John 5:14).

11. We reject every thought that the good works of Christians in any way earn or contribute toward establishing a right relationship with God and gaining salvation in heaven.

12. We reject every attempt to abolish the unchanging moral law of God as revealed in the Bible as the absolute standard of what is right and wrong.

13. We reject the view that people may decide for themselves what is right and wrong apart from God's Word. We reject any misuse of the term love to condone behavior contrary to God's Word. We recognize these arguments as schemes of Satan to obscure the knowledge of God's holy will and to undermine the consciousness of sin.

14. We reject any view that considers the act of praying a means of grace. Although God certainly gives good gifts to believers in answer to their prayers, he conveys his forgiving grace and strengthens faith only through the Word and sacraments.

Furthermore, we reject any view that looks upon prayer as beneficial only because it helps the one who prays feel better.

15. We reject the view that all prayers are acceptable to God, and we hold that the prayers of all who do not have faith in Christ are vain babbling addressed to false gods (Matthew 6:7).

This is what Scripture teaches about good works and prayer. This we believe, teach, and confess.

VI. THE MEANS OF GRACE

1. We believe that God bestows all spiritual blessings upon sinners by special means established by him. These are the means of grace, the gospel in Word and sacraments. We define a sacrament as a sacred act established by Christ in which the Word connected with an earthly element gives the forgiveness of sins.

2. We believe that through the gospel, the good news of Christ's atoning sacrifice for sinners, the Holy Spirit works faith in people, whose hearts are by nature hostile to God (1 Peter 1:23). Scripture teaches that "faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). This Spirit-worked faith brings about a renewal in sinners and makes them heirs of eternal life in heaven.

3. We believe that also through the Sacrament of Baptism the Holy Spirit applies the gospel to sinners, giving them new life (Titus 3:5) and cleansing them from all sin (Acts 2:38). The Lord points to the blessing of Baptism when he promises, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved" (Mark 16:16). We believe that the blessing of Baptism is meant for all people (Matthew 28:19), including infants. Infants are born sinful (John 3:6) and therefore need to be born again, that is, to be brought to faith, through Baptism (John 3:5).

4. We believe that all who join in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper receive the true body and blood of Christ in, with, and under the bread and wine (1 Corinthians 10:16). This is true because, when the Lord instituted this sacrament, he said, "This is my body. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:26,28). We believe that Christ's words of institution cause the real presence--not any human action. As believers receive his body and blood, they also receive the forgiveness of sins (Matthew 26:28) and the comfort and assurance that they are truly his own. Unbelievers also receive Christ's body and blood, but to their judgment (1 Corinthians 11:29).

5. We believe that the Lord gave his Word and the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper for a purpose. He commanded his followers, "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19,20). Through God's Word and sacraments he preserves and extends the holy Christian church throughout the world. Believers should therefore be diligent and faithful in the use of these divinely established means of grace for themselves and in their

mission outreach to others. These are the only means through which immortal souls are brought to faith and to life in heaven.

6. We reject any views that look for the revelation of the grace of God and salvation apart from the gospel as found in the Scriptures. We reject any views that look for the Holy Spirit to work faith apart from the means of grace. We likewise reject the view that the law is a means of grace.

7. We reject the view that babies should not be baptized and that they cannot believe in Christ (Luke 18:15-17). We reject the view that baptism must be by immersion.

8. We reject all teachings that the Sacrament of the Altar offers nothing more than signs and symbols of Jesus' sacrifice, thereby denying that Christ's true body and blood are received in the Lord's Supper. We reject the view that those who eat the body of Christ in the sacrament merely receive Christ spiritually by faith. We reject the claim that unbelievers and hypocrites do not receive the true body and blood of Jesus in the Sacrament.

9. We reject the doctrine of transubstantiation, which teaches that the substance of the bread and wine are changed entirely into the body and blood of Christ. Scripture teaches that all communicants receive both the bread and wine and the body and blood of Christ (1 Corinthians 10:16).

10. We reject any attempt to set the precise moment within the celebration of the Lord's Supper when the body and blood of Christ become present. We therefore reject the view that one must believe that Christ's body and blood are present as soon as the words of consecration have been spoken and the view that one must believe that Christ's body and blood become present only at the moment of eating and drinking.

This is what Scripture teaches about the means of grace. This we believe, teach and confess.

VII. CHURCH AND MINISTRY

1. We believe that there is one holy Christian church, which is the temple of God (1 Corinthians 3:16) and the body of Christ (Ephesians 1:23; 4:12). The members of this one church are all those who are the "sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:26). The church, then, consists only of believers, or saints, whom God accepts as holy for the sake of Jesus' righteousness, which has been credited to them (2 Corinthians 5:21). These saints are scattered throughout the world. All people who believe that Jesus is their Savior from sin are members of the holy Christian church, regardless of the nation, race, or church body to which they belong.

2. We believe that this holy Christian church is a reality, although it is not an external, visible organization. Because "man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7), only the Lord knows "those who are his" (2 Timothy 2:19). The members of the holy Christian church are known only to God; we cannot distinguish between true believers and hypocrites. The holy Christian church is therefore invisible and cannot be identified with any one church body or with the total membership of all church bodies.

3. We believe that the presence of the holy Christian church nevertheless can be recognized. Wherever the gospel is preached and the sacraments are administered, the holy Christian church is present, for through the means of grace true faith is produced and preserved (Isaiah 55:10,11). The means of grace, therefore, are called the marks of the church.

4. We believe that it is the Lord's will that Christians meet regularly to build one another up by using the means of grace together (Hebrews 10:24,25) and to work for the spread of the gospel into all the world (Mark 16:15). Since these visible gatherings (for example, congregations and synods) use the means of grace, they are called churches. They bear this name, however, only because of the true believers present in them (1 Corinthians 1:2).

5. We believe that God directs believers to acknowledge oneness in faith with Christians whose confession of faith submits to all the teachings of Scripture (John 8:31; 1 Thessalonians 5:21,22). We believe, furthermore, that individuals through their membership in a church body commit themselves to the doctrine and practice of that church. To assert that unity exists where there is no agreement in confession is to presume to look into people's hearts. Only God can look into people's hearts. It is not

necessary that all Christians agree on matters of church ritual or organization. About these the New Testament gives no commands (Romans 14:17).

6. We believe that those whose confession of faith reveals that they are united in the doctrines of Scripture will express their fellowship in Christ as occasion permits (Ephesians 4:3). They may express their fellowship by joint worship, by joint proclamation of the gospel, by joining in Holy Communion, by joint prayer, and by joint church work. God directs believers not to practice religious fellowship with those whose confession and actions reveal that they teach, tolerate, support, or defend error (2 John 10,11). When error appears in the church, Christians will try to preserve their fellowship by patiently admonishing the offenders, in the hope that they will turn from their error (2 Timothy 2:25,26; Titus 3:10). But the Lord commands believers not to practice church fellowship with people who persist in teaching or adhering to beliefs that are false (Romans 16:17,18).

7. We believe that every Christian is a priest before God (1 Peter 2:9). All believers have direct and equal access to the throne of grace through Christ, the mediator (Ephesians 2:17,18). God has given the means of grace to all believers. All Christians are to declare the praises of him who called them out of darkness into his wonderful light (1 Peter 2:9). In this sense all Christians are ministers, or servants, of the gospel. God wants all Christians to share the message of salvation with other people (Matthew 28:19,20; 10:32).

8. We believe that God has also established the public ministry of the Word (Ephesians 4:11), and it is the will of God that the church, in accordance with good order (1 Corinthians 14:40), call qualified individuals into this public ministry (1 Timothy 3:1-10; 1 Corinthians 9:14). Such individuals minister publicly, that is, not because as individuals they possess the universal priesthood but because they are asked to do this in the name of fellow Christians (Romans 10:15). These individuals are the called servants of Christ and ministers of the gospel. They are not to be lords over God's church (1 Peter 5:3). We believe that when the church calls individuals into this public ministry, the Lord himself is acting through the church (Acts 20:28). We believe that the church has the freedom to establish various forms within the one ministry of the Word, such as pastors, Christian teachers, and staff ministers. Through its call, the church in Christian liberty designates the place and scope of service.

9. We believe that the church's mission is to serve people with the Word and sacraments. This service is usually done in local congregations. We look upon the pastoral office as the most comprehensive form of the public ministry of the Word.

Pastors are trained and called to provide such comprehensive spiritual oversight for the gathering and nurturing of souls in congregations (1 Peter 5:2).

10. We believe that women may participate in offices and activities of the public ministry except where that work involves authority over men (1 Timothy 2:11,12). This means that women may not serve as pastors nor participate in assemblies of the church in ways that exercise authority over men (1 Corinthians 11:3; 14:33-35).

11. We reject any attempt to identify the holy Christian church with an outward organization. We reject any claim that the church must function in the world through specific organizational forms.

12. We reject as false ecumenicity any views that look for the true unity of the church in some form of external or organizational union, and we oppose all movements toward such union made at the expense of a clear confession of all the teachings of Scripture. We reject the contention that religious fellowship may be practiced without agreement in doctrine and practice. There must be agreement in the confession of scriptural doctrines, and also one's actions or practice must show that error is not tolerated.

13. We reject participation or membership in organizations that have religious features in conflict with the Christian faith, such as most lodges.

This is what Scripture teaches about church and ministry. This we believe, teach, and confess.

VIII. CHURCH AND STATE

1. We believe that not only the church but also the state, that is, all governmental authority, has been instituted by God. “The authorities that exist have been established by God” (Romans 13:1). Christians will, therefore, for conscience’ sake obey the government that rules over them (Romans 13:5) unless that government commands them to disobey God (Acts 5:29).

2. We believe that God has given the church and the state their own distinct responsibilities. To the church the Lord has assigned the responsibility of calling sinners to repentance, of proclaiming forgiveness through the cross of Christ, and of encouraging believers in their Christian living. The purpose is to lead the elect of God to eternal salvation through faith in Christ. To the state the Lord has assigned the duty of keeping good order and peace, of punishing the wrongdoer, and of arranging all civil matters in society (Romans 13:3,4). The purpose is “that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness” (1 Timothy 2:2).

3. We believe that the only means God has given to the church to carry out its assigned purpose are the Word and sacraments (Matthew 28:19,20). People are converted by the Holy Spirit only through the message of law and gospel, sin and grace, the wrath of God against sin and the mercy of God in Christ. We believe that the means given to the state to fulfill its assignment is civil law with its punishments and rewards, set up and used according to the light of reason (Romans 13:4). The light of reason includes the natural knowledge of God, the natural knowledge of the law, and conscience.

4. We believe the proper relation is preserved between the church and the state only when each remains within its divinely assigned sphere and uses its divinely entrusted means. The church should not exercise civil authority nor interfere with the state as the state carries out its responsibilities. The state should not become a messenger of the gospel nor interfere with the church in its preaching mission. The church should not attempt to use the civil law and force to lead people to Christ. The state should not seek to govern by means of the gospel. On the other hand, the church and the state may cooperate in an endeavor as long as each remains within its assigned place and uses its entrusted means.

5. We believe that Christians are citizens of both realms and serve God by faithfully fulfilling their duties in both (Romans 13:6,7).

6. We reject any attempt by the state to restrict the free exercise of religion.

7. We reject any views that look to the church to guide and influence the state directly in the conduct of its affairs.

8. We reject any attempt on the part of the church to seek the financial assistance of the state in carrying out its saving purpose.

9. We reject any views that hold that citizens are free to disobey such laws of the state with which they disagree on the basis of personal judgment.

This is what Scripture teaches about church and state. This we believe, teach, and confess.

IX. JESUS' RETURN AND THE JUDGMENT

1. We believe that Jesus, true God and true man, who rose from death and ascended to the right hand of the Father, will come again. He will return visibly, in the same way as his disciples saw him go into heaven (Acts 1:11).

2. We believe that no one can know the exact time of Jesus' return. This knowledge is hidden even from the angels in heaven (Matthew 24:36). Nevertheless, our Lord has given signs to his believers to keep them in constant expectation of his return (Matthew 24:4-14). He has told them to be alert and to watch so that day will not come upon them unexpectedly (Luke 21:34).

3. We believe that at Jesus' return this present world will come to an end. "In keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness" (2 Peter 3:13).

4. We believe that when Jesus returns and his voice is heard throughout the earth, all the dead will rise, that is, their souls will be reunited with their bodies (John 5:28,29). Together with those still living, the resurrected will appear before his throne of judgment. The unbelievers will be condemned to an eternity in hell. Those who by faith have been cleansed in the blood of Christ will be glorified and will live with Jesus forever in the blessed presence of God in heaven (Philippians 3:21).

5. We reject the teaching that Christ will reign on earth for a thousand years in a physical, earthly kingdom. This teaching (millennialism) has no valid scriptural basis and falsely leads Christians to set their hopes upon an earthly kingdom of Christ (John 18:36). We reject as unscriptural any claim that Christians will be physically removed, or "raptured," from the earth prior to judgment day. We likewise reject as unscriptural any claim that all the Jews will be converted in the final days.

6. We reject the teaching that Christians should look for one individual to arise in the end times as the great Antichrist. The characteristics of the Antichrist as presented in Scripture have been and are being fulfilled in the institution of the papacy (2 Thessalonians 2:4-10). We reject the opinion that the identification of the papacy with the Antichrist was merely a historical judgment valid only at the time of the Reformation.

7. We reject any denial of a bodily resurrection and of the reality and eternity of hell. We reject the teaching that the souls of people who have died return to earth in other bodies (reincarnation) (Hebrews 9:27).

8. We reject all attempts to interpret the New Testament descriptions of Jesus' second coming, of the end of the world, and of the judgment as mere figures of speech for events that take place not at the end of time but within the ongoing history of the world.

This is what Scripture teaches about Jesus' return and the judgment. This we believe, teach and confess.

Appendix 7: Treasury of Daily Prayer (Day 1)

Psalmody: Psalm 136:1-9

His Steadfast Love Endures Forever

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,

for his steadfast love endures forever.

2 Give thanks to the God of gods,

for his steadfast love endures forever.

3 Give thanks to the Lord of lords,

for his steadfast love endures forever;

4 to him who alone does great wonders,

for his steadfast love endures forever;

5 to him who by understanding made the heavens,

for his steadfast love endures forever;

6 to him who spread out the earth above the waters,

for his steadfast love endures forever;

7 to him who made the great lights,

for his steadfast love endures forever;

8 the sun to rule over the day,

for his steadfast love endures forever;

9 the moon and stars to rule over the night,

for his steadfast love endures forever;

- Additional Psalms: Psalm 90, Psalm 6

Old Testament Reading: Genesis 1:1-19

The Creation of the World

1 In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. 2 The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.

3 And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. 4 And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. 5 God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

6 And God said, “Let there be an expanse[a] in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.” 7 And God made[b] the expanse and separated the waters that were under the expanse from the waters that were above the expanse. And it was so. 8 And God called the expanse Heaven.[c] And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

9 And God said, “Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.” And it was so. 10 God called the dry land Earth,[d] and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good.

11 And God said, “Let the earth sprout vegetation, plants[e] yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind, on the earth.” And it was so. 12 The earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed according to their own kinds, and trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. 13 And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

14 And God said, “Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night. And let them be for signs and for seasons,[f] and for days and years, 15 and let them be lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light upon the earth.” And it was so. 16 And God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. 17 And God set them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth, 18 to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. 19 And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

New Testament Reading: Mark 1:1-13

John the Baptist Prepares the Way

1 The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

2 As it is written in Isaiah the prophet,

“Behold, I send my messenger before your face,

who will prepare your way,

3 the voice of one crying in the wilderness:

‘Prepare[c] the way of the Lord,

make his paths straight,’”

4 John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. 7 And he preached, saying, “After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. 8 I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

The Baptism of Jesus

9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. 11 And a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son;[d] with you I am well pleased.”

The Temptation of Jesus

12 The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. 13 And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him.

Writing: Book of Concord, Smalcald Articles, Part III, Article III, 3-6.

This is what true repentance means. Here a person needs to hear something like this, ‘You are all of no account, whether you are obvious sinners or saints <in your own opinions>. You have to become different from what you are now. You have to act differently than you are now acting, whether you are as great, wise, powerful, and holy as you can be. Here no one is godly.’

But to this office of the Law, the New Testament immediately adds the consoling promise of grace through the Gospel. This must be believed. As Christ declares, ‘Repent and believe in the gospel’ (Mark 1:15).

That is, become different, act differently, and believe My promise. John the Baptist (preceding Christ) is called a preacher of repentance, but this is for the forgiveness of sins. That is, John was to accuse all and convict them of being sinners. This is so they can know what they are before God and acknowledge that they are lost. So they can be prepared for the Lord [Mark 1:3] to receive grace and to expect and accept from Him the forgiveness of sins. This is what Christ Himself says, ‘Repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in [My] name to all nations (Luke 24:47).

Hymnody: Lutheran Service Book, LSB 346:1

When All the World Was Cursed

When all the world was cursed

By Moses’ condemnation,

Saint John the Baptist came

With words of consolation.

With true forerunner’s zeal

The greater One he named,

And Him, as yet unknown,

As Savior he proclaimed.

Prayer of the Day: L22

Almighty and everlasting God, You despise nothing You have made and forgive the sins of all who are repentant. Create in us new and contrite hearts that lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness we may receive from You full pardon and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Lent and Ash Wednesday

During the 40 days of lent, gods baptize people cleanse their hearts through the discipline of lent: repentance, prayer, fasting, in almsgiving. Lent is a time in which God's people prepare with joy for the Pascal feast (Easter). It is a time in which God renews his people's zeal in faith and life. It is a time in which we pray that we may be given the fullness of grace that belongs to the children of God.

Suggested reading from the Book of Concord:

Solid Declaration and the Formula of Concord, Introduction

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