



# Theses on Justification

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A REPORT OF THE COMMISSION ON THEOLOGY AND CHURCH RELATIONS

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THE LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI SYNOD

# Theses on Justification

A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations

May 1983

Citations from the Lutheran Confessions are taken from The Book of Concord edited by T.G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), and, where noted, from Concordia Triglotta. The following abbreviations have been used:

AC –Augsburg Confession

Ap –Apology of the Augsburg Confession

Ep –Epitome of the Formula of Concord

FC –Formula of Concord

LC –Large Catechism

SA –Smalcald Articles

SC –Small Catechism

SD –Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord

Tr –Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope

*Trig.* –*Concordia Triglotta*

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## INTRODUCTION

The 1981 convention of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod adopted a resolution asking “the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, the joint faculties of the seminaries, and the Council of Presidents to make a study of the doctrine of justification within one year, which gives proper expression to all the aspects of what the Scriptures teach on this matter” (1981 Res. 3–12 “To Make a Study on the Doctrine of Justification”). In response to a request from the President of the Synod that the Commission on Theology and Church Relations coordinate the preparation of this study, a set of theses on justification was drafted by the CTCR and shared with the Council of Presidents and the seminary faculties for discussion and review as they carried out their own independent studies of this doctrine. On the basis of the written responses received, the CTCR revised the original draft of the theses and distributed them once again to the Council of Presidents and seminary faculties for final review. The commission now presents these theses for synod-wide study and discussion.

In keeping with the Synod’s recognition that “the need has been expressed to study anew what the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions teach on this doctrine,” these theses have been formulated for the purpose of presenting the Biblical doctrine of justification by grace through faith for Christ’s sake in as comprehensive a manner as is possible in a format of this kind. In order to elucidate certain key aspects of the doctrine of justification as precisely as possible,

the document presents a number of antitheses which point out and reject past and present errors which obscure and even vitiate this central doctrine.

The theses are here presented in accordance with the sequence followed in the articles of the Augsburg Confession. The article of justification is therefore presented in the context of its basis in the work of Christ, the means of grace through which the sinner is brought to faith and to possession of the benefits of Christ, and the renewal or Christian life of the sinner which results from his justification through faith in Christ. The theses are not intended to go beyond the pattern of thought and terminology of Scripture, the Lutheran Confessions, and the presentation of our respected Lutheran theologians of the past.

This study on justification is presented to the Synod in the year of the 500th anniversary of the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther. It can therefore serve as a timely reminder of the debt of gratitude we owe to God for this our father in the faith, who so faithfully labored to restore this doctrine to the center of the church’s life and proclamation. The Commission on Theology and Church Relations offers the theses which follow with the special prayer that they will assist pastors and congregations as they seek to bring comfort and peace to troubled consciences in their midst and to edify one another for the work of the Christian service.

## I. Centrality and Function

**1.** The doctrine of the sinner’s justification before God by grace for Christ’s sake through faith is the central and most important teaching of the Christian faith. (Is. 53; John 1:29; 3:16; Acts 4:12; Rom. 1:16–17; 3:23–28; 4:25; 1 Cor. 2:1–5; 3:11; Gal. 2:16; 5:4; 1 Tim. 1:15, 2:4–6; AC XX, 9–11; XXVI, 4; XXVII, 48; Ap IV, 2; SA II, i, 1–5; SA II, ii, 21, 24, 25; SA II, iii, 2; FC SD III, 6)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach: That justification or forgiveness for Christ’s sake by grace through faith is not central in Scripture or does not really take place, but is merely one of a number of modes or theological interpretations or metaphors or pictures or motifs – each of these really dispensable – of Christ’s saving work found in the Scriptures.

## II. Definition<sup>1</sup>

**2.** When used to refer to the sinner’s relationship to God, the term “justify” is used throughout the Scriptures to denote a verdict, i.e., a forensic act whereby a person is counted righteous, declared righteous, reckoned to be righteous, absolved, or forgiven. (Rom. 3:20–28; 4:1–13; 5–1; 8:33; Gal. 2:16, [cf. Deut. 25:1; Kings 8:32; Prov. 17:15; Is. 5:23]; Ap IV, 72, 158, 161, 252, 305; FC Ep III, 7; FC SD III, 17)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach: That God judges a person to be righteous because that person is inherently righteous on account of what he has done;

That Christ’s righteousness is reckoned to a person only in piece-meal fashion, as love is infused;

That justification is not a completely forensic act of God, but is realized at least in part in the “new creation” among Christians;

That God declares a person righteous because He has started to renew that person’s life and conduct.

**3.** The term “justify” in Scripture often overlaps in meaning the term “forgive,” which means to blot out [sins], to pardon. In Scripture the term “justify” is often used in the context of God’s grace, Christ’s work of obedience and redemption, reconciliation, propitiation, atonement, expiation, and faith in Christ. (Ps. 32:1; Rom. 3:24–26; 4:2–8; 5:1–11; 2 Cor. 5:18–21; Ap IV, 76, 103, 117, 132, 158, 163,

290; XII, 36; XX, 10; XXIV, 12; FC SD III, 30, 39, 54; FC SD V, 25; Trig. Ap III, 37, 61, 157, 261)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach: That forgiveness and justification before God do not involve each other, or that justification and reconciliation are entirely different from each other, as though a person can be reconciled without being justified or justified without being reconciled.

**4.** In normal Biblical and ecclesiastical usage the terms “justify” and “justification” refer to the (“subjective”) justification of the individual sinner through faith (Rom. 4–5, 5:1, etc.; AC IV, 3; FC SD III, 25). But because theologically justification is the same thing as the forgiveness of sins (Rom. 4:1–8; Ap IV, 76; FC Ep. III, 7), it is Biblically and confessionally correct to refer to the great sin-cancelling, atoning work of the Redeemer as the “objective” or “universal” justification of the whole sinful human race. (John 1:29; Rom. 5:6–18; 2 Cor. 5:19; Col. 2:14–15; 1 Tim. 3:16; Ap IV, 103–105; LC V, 31, 32, 36, 37; FC SD III, 57)

**5.** Thus *objective justification or reconciliation* is the forgiveness of sins both as it has been acquired for the entire human race by Christ’s work of obedience in its stead and declared by His resurrection, and as it is seriously and efficaciously offered to all in the means of grace.

**6.** Subjective justification or reconciliation is this same forgiveness as it is received, appropriated by, and applied to the individual sinner through God-given faith alone (*sola fide*).

## III. The Nature of Justification

### (What Happens When the Sinner is Justified)

**7.** When the sinner is justified, (a) God does not count his sin against him, but forgives him, and (b) God imputes to him the righteousness of Christ. (Is. 45:25; Rom. 5:18–19; Phil. 3:8–9; Ap IV, 177, 305; XXI, 19; FC Ep III, 4; FC SD III, 15, 30–31)

**8.** When the sinner is justified, he is forgiven all his sin; no sin remains unforgiven. (Matt. 9:2; Luke 7:47–48; Rom. 8:1; 1 John 1:7; Ap IV, 149, 222; SA III, xiii, 2; SC V, 16)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach: That, although Christ by His work has earned forgiveness for all, there are still certain conditions which God demands of people before He will pronounce them righteous.

<sup>1</sup> Definitions in part II. are preliminary to the material in the remainder of the document and should be cross-referenced with more detailed statements in the later theses. For example, theses 5 and 6 are elaborated in theses 19–22.

**9.** The one who justifies is always and only God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. (Is. 50:8; Rom. 5:19; 8:30, 33; 1 Cor.1:30; 6:11; Col. 3:13; AC IV, 3; Ap IV, 224, 389; XV, 7; SA II, i,1-4; III, xiii, 1; LC II, 63-65; FC Ep V, 5)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach: That a person is able to bring about his own justification or that of anyone else by his own faculties, abilities, or works.

#### IV. Man's Need for Justification

**10.** The one who is justified by God is sinful man, man ungodly (Rom. 3:23; 4:5; Eph. 4:20-24) and guilty (a) because the offense and guilt of Adam, the first man, have been imputed, or reckoned, to all mankind (Gen. 3; Rom. 5:12-19) and (b) because every human being is a sinner by the hereditary corruption of his nature (Rom. 7) and sins daily. (Ps. 51:5; Eccl. 7:20; John 3:6; Rom. 1:32; 3:12, 16-18, 23; 5:6, 8; 6:23; Gal. 5:19-21; 1 John 1:8; AC II; III, 3; XIX; Ap II, 5-13; IV, 34; XII, 142; SA III, i; SC III, 16; LC III, 86-87; FC SD I, 53)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach: That God judges all people to be guilty sinners only because of their hereditary corruption and resulting actual sinful thoughts, words, and actions, or only because He has reckoned Adam's offense and guilt to all human beings;

That Adam was not a historical person, the first man created by God;

That everyone is "his own Adam."

**11.** All people born according to the course of nature stand before God as sinful and guilty, owing an insurmountable debt, and condemned to eternal hell and punishment. (Lev. 19:2 Deut. 32:4; Is.6:3; Matt. 5:20; Luke 10:15; Rom. 1:18; 2:5, 8-9; 6:23; Gal. 3:10; Rev. 15:4; AC III, 3; LC I, 31-34, 234; FC SD I, 6)

**12.** Because of man's sin, God, who is absolutely holy and righteous, is angry against all sinners, and there could be no forgiveness or justification except for the fact that propitiation and satisfaction were made by Jesus Christ. (Deut. 27:26; Ps. 5:5; Gal. 3:10; 2 Tim. 2:13; Heb. 2:9, 9:22; AC II, 2; Ap II, 40; IV 40, 128; LC I, 122, 234; II, 68; FC SD I, 6)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach: That the loving God would not require propitiation and satisfaction before He forgives.

#### V. The Basis of Justification

**13.** The source of the sinner's justification before God is solely God's grace in Jesus Christ. (John 1:16-17; Eph. 1:7, 2:5b; Ap IV, 41, 53; LC II, 43; III, 96; IV, 37; FC SD XI, 43)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach: That there is grace outside of Jesus Christ.

**14.** God's grace whereby He justifies and saves the sinner in His undeserved mercy and loving kindness, His powerful and active love which sent Christ to be the Savior of the world. (John 3:16; Rom. 3:24, 5:15, 20; 2 Cor. 8:9; Eph. 1:19; Titus 2:11; AC III, 1-3, Ap II, 50; LC II, 65; III, 51)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach: That the grace by which God justifies the sinner is a supernatural divine power or quality which God gives or infuses into man in order to enable him to do good works and become righteous before God;

That there is conflict between the fact that Christ by His saving work made God gracious toward the world and the fact that God in His grace sent Christ to be the Savior, or vice versa.

**15.** The scope of God's grace in Christ is universal, including all people of all times and places. (John 3:16; Rom. 11:32; 1 Tim. 2:4; 4:10; FC SD XI, 28, 68)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach: That grace is extended to all simply by virtue of the fact that all are children of our Creator God, and not because of Christ's atonement;

That God's grace extends only to a segment of humanity, either those whom God has especially chosen to favor or those who have cooperated with God, sought after God, or believed in God.

**16.** The basis of the sinner's justification before God is the work of God's only begotten Son in the flesh, His work of obedience. This obedience is the perfect obedience of Christ according to both the divine and human natures. It is His vicarious living under God's law in the place of all sinners, as well as His substitutionary, sacrificial, and atoning death for all the sins of all sinners. (Rom. 5:18-19; Gal. 4:4-5; 1 Peter 2:21-24; 3:18; Ap IV, 214; FC Ep III, 3, 4, 6; FC SD III, 9, 11-12, 14-15, 22, 30, 54-58; V, 22; VIII, 46-47; XII, 10)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach:  
That the basis of the sinner's justification is Christ's inherent righteousness as God;

That Christ according to His human nature cannot render to God adequate obedience to substitute for all men;

That the obedience of Christ which is the basis of the sinner's justification is the obedience of the divine nature only or of the human nature only.

**17.** The obedient death of Christ was a penal death, the death of an innocent victim under the condemnation of God, a sacrificial and atoning death paid as a ransom to a just and wrathful God and vicariously given to satisfy the penal justice of God. (Is. 53:5–7; Mark 10:45; Rom. 8:32; 2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 3:13; Eph. 5:2; 1 Tim. 2:6; Titus 2:14; 1 Peter 1:18–19; 1 John 4:10; AC III, 3; IV, 2; XXIV, 25; Ap IV, 40, 53, 57, 98, 178–179, 204, 292; XII, 160; XIII, 7–8; 19; XXIV, 22–24, 55, 59; LC II, 31; FC Ep V, 5; FC SD V, 20)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach:  
That Christ's death was not a truly vicarious sacrifice because His condemnation under the wrath of God is a mere metaphor, or because it otherwise does not correspond to reality.

**18.** God imputed all the sins of all mankind to Christ, who by the perfect obedience of His life and death paid fully and made complete expiation for them and has thus propitiated the wrath of God. (John 1:29; Rom. 5:18–19; 2 Cor. 5:15, 21; Col. 2:14; 1 John 2:2; Ap IV, 40, 103; XX, 5; SA II, i, 1–3; III, iii, 38; FC SD V, 22)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach:  
That Christ has not propitiated the wrath of God by the perfect obedience of His life and death; That Christ paid the ransom to the devil.

## **VI. The Universal and Finished Results of Christ's Work of Obedience**

**19.** Christ is the Savior of all. This means that the whole world of sinners has been redeemed, forgiven, and reconciled to God in Him. (Rom. 3:24–25; 5:10; 2 Cor. 5:19; 1 Tim. 4:10; Heb. 9:28; Ap IV, 103; XXIV, 22–24; FC SD III, 57; XI, 15)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach:  
That it is improper to speak of God being reconciled to man;  
That we can only speak of man being reconciled to God by man's repentance or change of heart;

That God has redeemed but not reconciled the world.

**20.** God has accepted the vicarious offering and sacrifice of His Son, Jesus Christ, in whom therefore God is propitiated and reconciled with all sinners, so that for Christ's sake God's wrath against all sinners has been and remains stilled, and Satan, sin, death, and hell have been and are conquered. (Rom. 5:18; Col. 2:14–15; 1 Thess. 1:10; Heb. 7:27, 10:12; 1 John 2:2, AC III, 3; Ap XXIV, 22–24; FC SD XI, 28)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach:  
That God's acceptance of His Son's perfect sacrifice does not have as its necessary concomitant the propitiation of His wrath against all sinners.

**21.** Complete and perfect righteousness and forgiveness have been acquired for all sinners. (Ps. 130:4; Rom. 5:18; 1 Cor. 1:30; Heb. 10:12, 18; Ap IV, 103; LC II, 38; FC Ep III, 3; V, 5; FC SD III, 30, 57)

**22.** God, by raising His Son from the dead, has justified Him, declared Him to be the Righteous One, and in Him (i.e., for the sake of His finished work of obedience and satisfaction) has (Rom. 3:24; 4:25; 5:18–19; 2 Cor. 5:19–21; Ap IV, 40–41; SA II, i, 1–3)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach:  
That forgiveness of sins and justification for all have not been declared by God when He raised His Son from the dead, but have merely been acquired or made a possibility through Christ's atonement.

**23.** By "objective" or "universal" justification one means that God has declared the whole world to be righteous for Christ's sake and that righteousness has thus been procured for all people. It is objective because this was God's unilateral act prior to and in no way dependent upon man's response to it, and universal because all human beings are embraced by this verdict. God has acquired the forgiveness of sins for all people by declaring that the world for Christ's sake has been forgiven. The acquiring of forgiveness is the pronouncement of forgiveness. (Rom. 3:24; 4:25; 5:19; 2 Cor. 5:19–21; Ap IV, 40–41; SA II, i, 1–3; FC Ep V, 5; FC SD XI, 15)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach:  
That God's acquisition and establishment of forgiveness in objective justification is a conditional verdict, depending on faith or any other human response or activity;

That it is not Biblical to speak of "objective justification."

## VII. The Appropriation of Christ's Righteousness (Justification Through Faith)

**24.** “The only essential and necessary elements of justification are the grace of God, the merit of Christ, and faith which accepts these in the promise of the Gospel ...” (FC SD III, 25)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach: That it is possible to depart from this formulation of justification, particularly by the injection of human works as the cause which moves God to justify, or as the basis for justification, or as the means by which people receive justification.

**25.** Christ's righteousness and all the benefits of His perfect obedience of life and death are imputed and communicated to the sinner individually through faith (sometimes called “subjective justification”). (Gen. 15:6; Acts 10:43; 13:39; Rom. 3:25; 4:16; 5:1–2; Gal. 3:22–24; Ap IV, 80–86, 148–150, 227, 305, 307; SA II, ii, 24; LC IV, 37)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach: That God's justifying verdict is a mere fiction, divorced from reality;

That in justification men do not become righteous by imputation;

That justification is not a real forgiveness or imputation of righteousness but is merely a manner of speaking applicable to any conception of reality or specific doctrinal content.

**26.** Faith is the only vehicle, or means, through which a sinner can receive, appropriate, and have the righteousness and benefits of Christ, forgiveness of sins, and salvation. (Gen. 15:6; Hab.2:4; John 1:12; Rom. 3:25, 28; Gal.2:16; AC IV, 2; XXV, 4; Ap IV, 43, 45, 50–52, 80–86, 115, 158, 182, 272, 292, 305, 307; XII, 36; SA II, i, 4; III, xiii, 1; LC III, 54; V, 34–35; FC Ep III, 5)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach: That sinners can appropriate the benefits of Christ by their works.

**27.** The faith through which we are justified is trust in Christ and is knowing His benefits and appropriating them. (Phil. 3:8–10; AC XX, 23–26; XXIV, 31–32; Ap IV, 45, 48, 50, 80–81, 99, 101, 227, 304, 337, 351, 386; XIII, 21; FC Ep III, 6; FC SD IV, 12)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach: That justifying faith is mere knowledge of history;

That justifying faith is “commitment to Jesus” apart from His work;

That faith justifies because it is assent to the teachings of the church;

That faith justifies because it is a work of virtue formed or fashioned by love.

**28.** When used in connection with the article of justification, faith must always be regarded as receptivity, like an empty hand which does nothing, but solely receives a free gift. (John 1:12, 14; Rom. 4:16; Ap IV, 48, 50, 56–57, 80–81, 84, 86, 112–113, 159, 292; XII, 65; SA II, i, 4; ii, 24; LC IV, 37; FC Ep III, 5; FC SD III, 13, 31, 41)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach: That reconciliation only refers to a change in the heart and mind of man and to his transformation from a state of unbelief to a state of faith, rather than to the propitiation of God and reconciliation by the death of His Son;

That the atonement is complete only when a person comes to faith;

That faith is an activity of man that does something to effect or bring about man's justification.

**29.** The sinner is justified through faith alone, without and apart from any merit or works of the law that man does. (Rom. 3:24, 28; Eph.2:8–9, AC IV, 1; XX, 9–14; XXVI, 5; Ap IV, 57, 73–74, 80–81, 84, 159, 227, 231, 257; SA II, ii, 24)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach: That a sinner contributes to his justification by his own powers, merits, or works;

That love or good works precede or cause justification, rather than follow from it as its fruit;

That people may comfort themselves with forgiveness and the Gospel and imagine that they have justifying faith, when in fact they continue to live impenitently in mortal sin and have no intention to amend their lives.

**30.** That the sinner is personally justified through faith alone does not exclude good works as a part of the sanctified sinner's renewal or as the inevitable fruit of faith. (John 15:5; Rom. 6:1–14; Eph. 2:8–10; AC VI, 1; 6; XII, 29; Ap IV, 45, 250–251, 348–350; SA III, xiii, 1–2; LC II, 67–69; FC Ep IV, 8–11; FC SD II, 62–66, 89; III, 23, 32; IV, 7, 10–12, 20)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach: That faith is purely passive in the Christian life, just as it is in justification;

That Christians need not concern themselves with good works or the norm of good works, the law of God.

**31.** That the sinner is justified through faith alone does not exclude the work of the Holy Spirit and the means of grace in the sinner's justification before God. (John 17:20; Rom. 10:17, 15:13; 1 Cor. 6:11; 12:3; 2 Thess. 2:14; Titus 3:5; 1 Peter 1:23; AC V, 1:2; Ap IV, 64, 73; XII, 40–43; LC II, 38, 53–54; III, 37, 51; IV, 23–24, 29, 41; V, 31, 68; FC Ep II, 4, 13; XI, 10; FC SD II, 46, 50–52, 71–72; XI, 29, 37–38)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach:  
That men have the power to bring themselves to faith;

That the Holy Spirit will impart His blessings apart from the means of grace.

**32.** When we say that faith justifies, we say this not in the sense that a sinner's faith is a meritorious or efficient cause or condition of his justification, or in the sense that God justifies the sinner because of his faith, but (metonymically) in the sense that faith clings to Christ's benefits, in the sense that God justifies us freely for Christ's sake through faith. Faith justifies by virtue of its object. (John 3:16; Rom. 4:5; AC XXIV, 28; Ap IV, 44–45, 53–56, 67, 86, 88–99; FC SD III, 13, 24)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach:  
That faith appeases or propitiates God's wrath against sin;

That believing that God forgives because I believe is the same as true faith in Christ;

That faith is in any sense meritorious.

**33.** Faith does not justify for the reason that it produces good works or is in itself a good work or for the reason that it meets the "evangelical mandate" to believe, but solely because of its object. (1 Cor. 1:30; Phil. 3:9; Ap IV, 57–60, 74, 147–151, 180–182, 308–312, 338; XII 88, 94–97, 116; FC Ep III, 19, 21; FC SD III, 32–33, 35, 43)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach:  
That justification is to be understood as the work of the Spirit in giving a new direction to man's life;

That although the works of the law do not justify, nevertheless the good works of the believers, flowing from faith, in some way contribute to their justification before God, or that God declares the believer to be righteous not only and solely on the grounds of the holy obedience of Christ but also in part on the basis of his own "newness of life";

That God first justifies the sinner because of his faith, and then justifies the sinner because of the fruits of faith.

**34.** The sinner's personal justification, i.e., his having or appropriating Christ's benefits, forgiveness, and justification, does not take place because of his contrition or faith, or on the ground of his contrition or faith, or in view of his faith, or after he believes, but solely through faith. (Acts 13:38–39; Rom. 3:25, 28; Gal. 2:20; Eph. 2:8–9; AC IV, 2; XXVII. 37; Ap IV, 45, 81; XII, 77)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach:  
That God's verdict of justification or forgiveness is a conditional verdict which specifies that justification occurs only when a person believes;

That conversion or a change of heart is necessary before God speaks His divine sentence of forgiveness, or acquittal;

That our justification before God is a process that involves not merely the work of Christ but also our own willing acceptance of faith, and that only when the process has been completed is man truly declared forgiven by God;

That faith somehow creates forgiveness, rather than that it merely receives and embraces a forgiveness already obtained by Christ and offered and distributed in the Gospel;

That forgiveness or justification before God is the granting of some inherent righteousness which resides in man, whether it be the indwelling Christ or man's own change of mind and will;

That the contrition or faith of the believer is in some way a cause of forgiveness and justification before God;

That the redemptive work of Christ only makes it possible for God to pronounce His declaration of forgiveness;

That the pronouncement of that declaration is done only when a person has satisfied the condition of faith.

**35.** Anyone who does not believe, teach, and confess that a sinner is justified alone through faith in Christ does dishonor to Christ and obscures the Gospel. (Gal. 2:21; 5:4; AC XX, 9–10; XXVII, 37–38, 41–43; XXVIII, 35; Ap IV, 3, 12, 18, 120, 149–150, 157, 204, 213, 215–216, 223, 269, 317, 324, 332–333; XII, 16; XV, 9, 18; XXI, 14–15; XXIV, 96; XXVII, 11, 16, 40; Tr 45; FC SD V, 27)

**36.** Faith is a gift of God, that is, it is worked in a sinner by God alone through the means of grace, without and cooperation, effort, work, inclination, will, decision, movement, activity, or merit of man. (John 6:44, 65; 1 Cor. 12:3; Eph. 2:8–9; Phil. 1: 29; 2 Tim. 2:25; AC V, 2; FC SD II, 25–27, 40, 48, 54, 89; IV, 10)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach:  
That the will of man is free in such a manner that he can choose to accept the gift of faith;

That God works faith in man as in a robot;

That faith is coerced in man by God;

That an unbeliever can make a decision for Christ or commit himself to Christ;

That faith is not a gift from God;

That an unregenerated person can believe in Christ through powers given to him prior to his conversion by the Holy Spirit.

### VIII. Unbelief, the Rejection of Christ's Righteousness

**37.** Just as it is necessary and Scriptural, according to the Gospel, to speak of God as having declared the whole world to be justified for Christ's sake and by raising Him from the dead, it is also necessary and Scriptural, according to the terms of God's law, to speak of impenitent sinners as not justified and forgiven, but condemned. (Matt. 16:19; 18:18, 34; Luke 18:14; John 20:23; Rom. 9:33; Gal. 5:4; AC II, 2; XXVII, 41–43; Ap IV, 29–32, 222; LC II, 66)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach:  
That Christ's work of atonement is of such a nature that even those who do not believe receive justification to life and salvation;

That without faith one is not under the wrath of God and eternally lost;

That it is proper to speak of saints in hell or to use similar expressions in describing justification;

That there can be anonymous Christians, that is, those who have not had access to the means of grace but nevertheless believe without true repentance and faith in Christ, of whom they have never heard and about whom they know nothing.

**38.** Although faith itself does not cause justification, the lack of faith does cause damnation; i.e., without faith the redeemed sinner to whom God is reconciled does not have the righteousness of Christ or any of the benefits of His work of obedience, but is condemned by God and lost eternally. (Mark 16:16; John 3:36; 8:24; 1 Thess. 5:1–10; 1 John 5:12; Ap II, 40; IV, 69, 80–81; SC IV, 5–8; LC I, 16; II, 66; III, 90–91; FC SD III, 20; VII, 89; XI, 60–61, 78)

### IX. The Gospel and Absolution

**39.** The justification of the world is Christ's work accomplished once and for all through His obedience of living and suffering. Justification by faith is the work of the Holy Spirit as He works faith in the hearts of individuals. (1 Cor. 2:12; 12:3; Gal. 5:5; Heb. 2:9, 14–18; 9:26; 10:12; 1 Peter 3:18; 1 John 2:2; SA II, i, 1–4; LC II, 31, 38, 61–65; III, 88; V, 31; FC Ep III, 3–6; FC SD XI, 15)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach:  
That either of these aspects of justification militates against the other.

**40.** Not only has God loved all mankind and sent Christ to be the Savior of all, not only is He graciously disposed toward each and every sinner and earnestly desirous that they lay hold on His grace and on Christ's benefits through faith, but God has instituted definite means and instruments of His grace and salvation, namely, His Gospel and sacraments (Baptism and the Lord's Supper), through which alone He both offers and distributes to sinners all the treasures of forgiveness and salvation which Christ has merited, and creates in sinners the faith through which these treasures are received and appropriated. (Gen. 12:3; Ps. 19:7–8; Matt. 26:26–28; 28:18–20; John 17:20; Acts 2:38; 11:20–21; Rom. 1:16; 10:6–8, 17; 1 Cor. 3:5; 4:15; 15:1–2; 2 Cor. 3:5; Col. 1:5–6; 1 Thess. 2:13; James 1:18–21; 1 Peter 1:23; 3:21; 1 John 2:2; AC V, 1–2; XXVIII, 8–9; Ap IV, 73; XII, 40–43; XIII, 1,5; XVIII, 8; SA III, viii, 3, 10; LC I, 101; II, 42, 53–54, 56; V, 31)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach:  
That God does not convert people and maintain them in faith through these means;

That God has promised to convert and save people apart from these means;

That these means inform people about Christ and His work but do not offer and confer the very blessings which result from Christ's atonement.

**41.** The Gospel is the specific good news of everything that God in Christ has done and is doing for our salvation. Its content is that the Son of God has come into the world to be our Brother and Substitute, to endure the curse of the law and bear our sins and thus to save us. Christ and all His benefits are freely offered and given us in His Word and sacraments. (Luke 24:46–47; John 20:21–23; Acts 2:22–24, 32–33; 5:30–32; 8:35; 10:38–43; 13:32–33 Rom. 1:16–17; 16:25; 1 Cor. 1:30; 2:2; 15:1–5; 2 Cor. 5:18–21; Gal 1:11;

2:21; 3:1; Eph. 1:3–10; 2:13–16; Col. 1:21–23; 2:14; 2 Tim. 1:8–11; Heb. 2:14–17; Ap IV, 5, 43, 67, 103, 159–165; VII, 9; XIII, 21; XXIV, 36, 69–70; LC II, 58, 62, 68–69; IV, 80–83; V, 31–32; V Confession, 32–33; FC Ep V, 5; FC SD III, 33; FC SD XI, 16)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach:  
That the content of the Gospel, strictly speaking, includes laws or demands of God;

That the Gospel includes an individual's confidence that he really believes the Gospel;

That Word and sacraments only inform people of blessings that God won for them long ago, at the time of Christ's work.

**42.** Thus, the Gospel is the message that God has saved the world through the work of Christ, that He is reconciled and at peace with the sinful world because of the atonement of His Son and has by raising His Son from the dead declared the world to be righteous (objective justification). This Gospel Word is a mighty means of grace and salvation which, with the sacraments, the visible Word, the Holy Spirit employs to create and sustain faith (subjective justification), and to build, nourish, strengthen, and sanctify His church on earth. (Is. 55:10–11; Luke 8:11–15; Rom. 10:5–17; 16:25–27; 1 Cor. 2:2; 15:4; Gal. 1:7; 3:1; Col. 1:5–6; 2 Tim. 1:10; 2:8; James 1:18, 21; 1 Peter 1:23–25; AC V, 1–3; XII, 5; XIII, 1; Ap IV, 73, 103; XVIII, 8; LC I, 91–92, 101; II, 38, 43–45, 53–54; FC Ep V, 5; FC SD II, 50; III, 57; XI, 28–32)

**43.** When Christ died for sinners, He died for each and every sinner individually; when God accepted the redemption of Christ, He did so for each and every sinner. When we proclaim the Gospel of justification, we do so in order that every sinner may know that God loved him and had him individually and personally in mind when He delivered up His Son. And we announce to every sinner personally and individually forgiveness and justification in Christ. (Job 19:25; Ps. 32:5; Is. 53:5; Gal. 2:20; 1 Tim. 1:15; Ap IV, 45, 262–264; XII, 59–65, 72–74; XIII, 21; FC SD XI, 28–29)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach:  
That the Gospel is adequately proclaimed if Christ is shown to have died for the world only in a general or vague way, and not necessarily for the individual hearer;

That Christ did not carry out the atonement for the benefit of and in the place of all;

That the contrite unbeliever's lack of faith makes it impossible for him to be told he is forgiven and justified.

**44.** It is essential to the proclamation of the Gospel to declare the work of Christ, His atonement as well as its result. (Luke 24:46–47; 1 Cor. 2:2, 9:16; 2 Cor. 5:16–21; 11:4; Gal. 1:8; Ap IV, 53; SA II, i, 5; FC Ep V, 5; FC SD III, 25)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach:  
That the Gospel is preached without explicit mention of Christ's work of redemption and His benefits;

That mere reference to faith in Christ or to justification through faith is to preach the Gospel, even when no mention is made of Christ's saving work and His benefits;

That the Gospel promises and grants not only forgiveness and salvation but also physical healing, material prosperity, political liberation, or other temporal benefits.

**45.** The work of the Holy Spirit is to convert, regenerate, and sanctify the sinner by means of the Gospel of reconciliation, not to reconcile God to the sinner. The Holy Spirit reconciles the sinner to God by means of the message of God's work in Christ. (2 Cor. 4:6; 5:19–20; Eph. 2:5–8; Col. 2:12; AC V, 2; Ap IV, 64–68; LC II, 38–39, 61–65; III, 51; FC SD I, 14)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach:  
That the Holy Spirit reconciles God to the sinner by His work in the sinner.

**46.** When one proclaims Christ's finished work and world justification this must always be done with the purpose that it be received through faith (Mark 16:16; Rom. 1:16–17). When one speaks of faith or justification through faith, this must be done in such a way that it is clear that faith is logically subsequent, not prior, to the Gospel of objective justification. (Rom. 3:21–28; 5:1–11; 2 Cor. 5:19–20; Gal. 4:4–7; Col. 1:20–23; Ap IV, 43–45, 80–81, 84, 87, 97; SA II, i, 1–4; FC Ep III, 3–6)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach:  
That there is any more basic goal in Gospel proclamation than the Holy Spirit's creation of faith in the hearers;

That the psychological dimension of justifying faith is more basic and important than justifying faith as receptivity.

**47.** It must be proclaimed in the churches and in the world that man is a sinner (law), just as it must be proclaimed that man is forgiven and righteous for Christ's sake, that God forgives sins because of Christ's fulfillment of the just demands of the law (Gospel). (Matt. 19:16–22; Rom. 3:9–19, 25–26; 10:4; Gal. 3:10–14, 21–26, Ap II, 13; IV, 166–168; XII, 53; FC Ep I, 9; FC SD I, 8; V, 10–13, 17–18)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach: That people at any time in history do not need the law to expose their sin.

**48.** It must be proclaimed in the church and to the world that God is reconciled and at peace with all (Gospel), just as that God is angry and punishes sinners (law) must be proclaimed in the church and to the world. (Ps. 5:5; 90:7–8; 103:10–12; Is. 52:3–7; Luke 24:47; Rom. 1:18; 2:5; 4:13–15; 2 Cor. 3:9; 5:19–20; Eph. 2:3; 5:6; Col. 3:6; 1 John 2:1–2; AC II, 1–2; Ap IV, 128; FC SD V, 10–13, 17–18)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach: That people can have saving faith in God even though they have not heard the definite Word which tells them that God for Christ's sake is no longer angry with them.

**49.** When the command to preach the Gospel to every creature. Christ has commanded that the forgiveness of sins which He has acquired for all, that is, complete absolution, be preached to all. But the distinction between law and Gospel must always be observed, lest the penitent be further afflicted with the law, or the impenitent be falsely comforted with the Gospel. (Mark 16:15; Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8; Ap IV, 43, 62; LC II, 38)

**50.** This absolution, or forgiveness of sins, based upon Christ's perfect and vicarious obedience of life, death, and resurrection, is the Gospel, whether proclaimed to many or few. (Matt. 9:1–8; Luke 24:47; AC XII, 5; XXV, 1–6; Ap IV, 271; XII, 39; SA III, iv; FC Ep V, 5)

**51.** Private absolution is nothing else than the proclamation of the Gospel to the individual sinner. (John 20:23; Ap XII, 39, 99, 105; SA III, iv; LC V Confession, 29, 32)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach: That private absolution has, is based on, or confers some power outside the Gospel, e.g., a power inherent in the person or office of the person pronouncing the absolution.

**52.** The proclamation of forgiveness, or absolution (God's justification, or acquittal), does not consist in the fact that the confessor, or pastor, sits as judge over the confessant and renders a verdict over his worthiness or faith, nor is it an empty announcement, or mere wish, that the confessant be forgiven, but it powerfully imparts forgiveness and salvation. (Matt. 7:1–5; 9:1–5; John 5:39; Acts 11:14; Rom. 1:16–17; 10:17; 1 Cor. 1:21; 4:3–5; James 4:11; Peter 1:23; Ap XII, 40, 104–105; SA III, vii, 1–3; LCV, 31; Confession, 14)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach: That the word of absolution may be pronounced conditionally, e.g., "I forgive you your sins, on the condition that you believe and change your life";

That absolution is not a true forgiveness, a divine verdict by which God exonerates and forgives sins, but merely an offer of forgiveness to those who believe;

That since we cannot be certain of the true contrition and faith of anyone, we cannot pronounce an unconditional absolution.

**53.** The efficacy of the proclamation of forgiveness, or absolution, does not depend upon man's worthiness, confession, or faith; rather absolution solicits faith and, like Baptism, creates and sustains the very faith that it solicits. (John 17:20; Acts 11:20–21; Rom. 1:16, 10:17; 1 Cor. 1:21–24; AC V, 1–2; XII, 5; XXV, 4; Ap IV, 5556, 267, 272, 324, 397; Ap XII, 42, 56; XIII, 19–20; LC II, 62; IV, 35; V, 34; LC V Confession, 15)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach: That anyone receives for himself the forgiveness granted in absolution without faith;

That the proper object of faith, that to which it clings, is the "inner assurance," the "indwelling Christ," or some other inner experience or feeling of forgiveness, instead of the external means of grace;

That the hearing of the Gospel and the use of the sacraments is merely the evidence that true faith exists in the heart, rather than that the hearing of the Gospel and the use of the sacraments are the means by which God awakens and confirms faith in those who use them.

## X. Justification and Renewal

**54.** Although the term justification may be used interchangeably with regeneration (the bestowal of faith), since faith given in regeneration is the faith through which the sinner is justified (Gal. 3:26–27; Titus 3:3–7; Ap IV, 72, 78, 117; FC SD III, 18–19), the term must never be confused or use interchangeably with renewal (sanctification, love, the keeping of the law), which always follows faith. (Acts 13:38–39; Rom. 3:28; 11:6; Ga. 2:16; Eph. 2:8–10; FC Ep III, 7–8; FC SD III, 30)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach: That we are justified, or forgiven, by virtue of our "mystical

union” with Christ, rather than by God’s verdict or pronouncement of forgiveness in the means of grace;

That since faith involves our union with Christ, this union with Christ becomes the basis for our justification before God.

**55.** Faith, which is worked by the Holy Spirit in the sinner solely through the Gospel, must not be confused with contrition, that is, terror of conscience and fear of God’s wrath, which is worked by the Holy Spirit in the sinner solely through the law. (Ps. 32:3–5; 130:1–8; Rom. 3:19–28; Gal. 3:12; Ap XII, 53–54; SA III, iii, 2; FC SD III, 22)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach:  
That true faith can exist in the heart without contrition.

**56.** Good works and renewal are the result of faith, or the fruit of faith, in the sense that the Holy Spirit, who has quickened us and made us new creatures in Christ, works the fruits of faith in and through us. (Ps. 110:3; Jer. 31:31–34; John 15:1–11; Rom. 12:1; 2 Cor. 5:17; 8:3–4; Gal. 5:22–24; AC VI, 1; XII, 6; XX, 29; Ap II, 35; IV 45, 125, 250, 275; SA III, xiii, 2; LC II, 2, 69)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach:  
That good works in the Christian life are to be motivated by the law;

That good works are not a necessary result of an individual’s justification.

**57.** Faith, which alone receives and obtains grace and forgiveness, must not be confused with good works, which are pleasing to God only because of faith in Christ. (John 15:1–11; Acts 13:38–39; Rom. 3:28; 11:6; 14:23; Gal. 2:16; Eph. 2:8–10; AC VI, 1–3; Ap XII, 67; FC SD III, 27–28)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach:  
That man is saved by faith and works;

That good works are pleasing to God for their own sake or because they justify;

That is possible for a person to desire to grow spiritually without having already been justified through faith;

That challenging Christians to do good works can cause faith to grow.

## **XI. Certainty of Salvation**

**58.** Every justified and regenerated sinner can and should be certain of his salvation. (John 10:28; Rom. 8:37–39; Phil.

1:6; 2 Tim. 1:12; 1 Peter 1:3–5; 5:10; 1 John 3:2; 5:10–13; AC XII, 5; XX, 15; Ap IV, 85, 314–315, 382, XI, 2; XX, 8; LC III, 92, 96–97; FC SD XI, 90)

**59.** The justified sinner’s certainty of salvation should not be sought in his experience, good works, feelings, or faith, but rest only in the once and for all obedience of Christ’s life and death and resurrection. (1 John 5:9–10; Rom. 8:32–34; 10:6–8; 1 Cor. 1:29–30; 4:1–5; Gal. 6:14–15; AC XX, 15; Ap IV, 58, 285, 313–315; XX, 8; LC III, 96; FC SD II, 56)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach:  
That no one can be certain of forgiveness or justification before God unless he also perceives in his life the “spiritual gifts” imparted by the Holy Spirit;

That Christians can only be assured of their justification before God when they are able to identify the evidence of, and the presence of, good works in their own life.

**60.** The justified sinner’s certainty of salvation is mediated only by the Gospel, to which alone he clings for certainty. (2 Cor. 1:19–20; 1 John 5:9–10; AC XX, 15; XXV, 4; Ap IV, 2, 58–60, 85, 285, 313–315, 382; XI, 2; XX, 8; LC III, 92; FC SD XI, 25–31, 65–70)

It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach:  
That we are not to rely solely upon Christ and the Gospel promise in the means of grace for the certainty of our salvation, but that we must also be able to “see” in our own life the evidence of “spiritual gifts” in order to be certain that we have been justified before God.

