

Where Were the Lutherans Before Luther?



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Concordia Theological Seminary exists to form servants in Jesus Christ who teach the faithful, reach the lost, and care for all.

Many times, Lutherans are challenged with: “Well, where was Lutheranism before Luther?” The implication is that Rome or the Eastern Orthodox have some sort of “corner” on the great church Fathers. But Lutherans have never believed this to be true. The Fathers repeatedly present the same or quite similar approaches to doctrine as the Lutheran Confessions do. Here are some citations from the Fathers that may be of help in dispelling the notion that “Lutheranism” is a johnny-come-lately to the Church scene:

SOLA SCRIPTURA

“Regarding the things I say, I should supply even the proofs, so I will not seem to rely on my own opinions, but rather, prove them with Scripture, so that the matter will remain certain and steadfast.” St. John Chrysostom (Homily 8 On Repentance and the Church, p. 118, vol. 96 TFOTC)

"Let the inspired Scriptures then be our umpire, and the vote of truth will be given to those whose dogmas are found to agree with the Divine words." St. Gregory of Nyssa (On the Holy Trinity, NPNF, p. 327).

"We are not entitled to such license, I mean that of affirming what we please; we make the Holy Scriptures the rule and the measure of every tenet; we necessarily fix our eyes upon that, and approve that alone which may be made to harmonize with the intention of those writings." St. Gregory of Nyssa (On the Soul and the Resurrection NPNF II, V:439)

“What is the mark of a faithful soul? To be in these dispositions of full acceptance on the authority of the words of Scripture, not venturing to reject anything nor making additions. For, if ‘all that is not of faith is sin’ as the Apostle says, and ‘faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the Word of God,’ everything outside Holy Scripture, not being of faith, is sin.” Basil the Great (The Morals, p. 204, vol 9 TFOTC).

“For concerning the divine and holy mysteries of the Faith, not even a casual statement must be delivered without the Holy Scriptures; nor must we be drawn aside by mere plausibility and artifices of speech. Even to me, who tell you these things, give not absolute credence, unless you receive the proof of the things which I announce from the Divine Scriptures. For this salvation which we believe depends not on ingenious reasoning, but on demonstration of the Holy Scriptures.” St. Cyril of Jerusalem (Catechetical Lectures, IV:17, in NPNF, Volume VII, p. 23.)

"It is impossible either to say or fully to understand anything about God beyond what has been divinely proclaimed to us, whether told or revealed, by the sacred declarations of the Old and New Testaments." St. John of Damascus, On the Orthodox Faith, Book I, Chapter 2

"Nevertheless, sacred doctrine makes use of these authorities as extrinsic and probable arguments; but properly uses the authority of the canonical Scriptures as an incontrovertible proof, and the authority of the doctors of the Church as one that may properly be used, yet merely as probable. For our faith rests upon the revelation made to the apostles and prophets who wrote the canonical books, and not on the revelations (if any such there are) made to other doctors. Hence Augustine says (Epis. ad Hieron. xix, 1): "Only those books of Scripture which are called canonical have I learned to hold in such honor as to believe their authors have not erred in any way in writing them. But other authors I so read as not to deem everything in their works to be true, merely on account of their having so thought and written, whatever may have been their holiness and learning."--St.

Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologia, Part 1, Question 1, Article 8

SOLA FIDE

"Similarly we also, who by His will have been called in Christ Jesus, are not justified by ourselves, or our own wisdom or understanding or godliness, nor by such deeds as we have done in holiness of heart, but by that faith through which Almighty God has justified all men since the beginning of time. Glory be to Him, forever and ever, Amen." - St. Clement of Rome (Letter to the Corinthians, par. 32)

"To this end has His Grace and Goodness been formed upon us in Christ Jesus, that being dead according to works, redeemed through faith and saved by grace, we might receive the gift of this great deliverance." (Ambrose, Letter 76 to Irenaeus, a layman)

"But when the Lord Jesus came, He forgave all men that sin which none could escape, and blotted out the handwriting against us by the shedding of His own Blood. This then is the Apostle's meaning; sin abounded by the Law, but grace abounded by Jesus; for after that the whole world became guilty, He took away the sin of the whole world, as John bore witness, saying: Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world. Wherefore let no man glory in works, for by his works no man shall be justified, for he that is just hath a free gift, for he is justified by the Bath. It is faith then which delivers by the blood of Christ, for Blessed is the man to whom sin is remitted, and, pardon granted." (Ambrose, Letter 73, to Irenaeus, a layman)

"Human beings can be saved from the ancient wound of the serpent in no other way than by believing in him who, when he was raised up from the earth on the tree of martyrdom in the likeness of sinful flesh, drew all things to himself and gave life to the dead." - St. Irenaeus (Against the Heresies, IV, 2, 7)

"Indeed, this is the perfect and complete glorification of God, when one does not exult in his own righteousness, but recognizing oneself as lacking true righteousness to be justified by faith alone in Christ." - St. Basil the Great (Homily on Humility, PG 31.532; TfoTC vol. 9, p. 479)

"But we all escape the condemnation for our sins referred to above, if we believe in the grace of God through His Only-begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who said: 'This is my blood of the new testament, which shall be shed for many unto the remission of sins.'" – St. Basil the Great (Concerning Baptism, TfoTC vol. 9, p. 344)

"They said that he who adhered to faith alone was cursed; but he, Paul, shows that he who adhered to faith alone is blessed." - St. John Chrysostom (Homily on Galatians 3)

"But he calls it their 'own righteousness,' either because the Law was no longer of force, or because it was one of trouble and toil. But this he calls God's righteousness, that from faith, because it comes entirely from the grace from above, and because men are justified in this case, not by labors, but by the gift of God." – St. John Chrysostom (Homily 17 on Romans 10:3)

"Here he shows God's power, in that He has not only saved, but has even justified, and led them to boasting, and this too without needing works, but looking for faith only." Homily 7 on Romans – St. John Chrysostom

"For you believe the faith; why then do you add other things, as if faith were not sufficient to justify? You make yourselves captive, and you subject yourself to the law." - St. John Chrysostom (Epistle to Titus, Homily 3, PG 62.651)

“To declare His righteousness.’ What is declaring of righteousness? Like the declaring of His riches, not only for Him to be rich Himself, but also to make others rich, or of life, not only that He is Himself living, but also that He makes the dead to live; and of His power, not only that He is Himself powerful, but also that He makes the feeble powerful. So also is the declaring of His righteousness not only that He is Himself righteous, but that He doth also make them that are filled with the putrefying sores (katasapentaj) of sin suddenly righteous. And it is to explain this, viz. what is "declaring," that he has added, "That He might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus." Doubt not then: for it is not of works, but of faith: and shun not the righteousness of God, for it is a blessing in two ways; because it is easy, and also open to all men. And be not abashed and shamefaced. For if He Himself openly declareth (endeiknutai) Himself to do so, and He, so to say, findeth a delight and a pride therein, how comest thou to be dejected and to hide thy face at what thy Master glorieth in?" - St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on Romans 3

“But what is the 'law of faith?' It is, being saved by grace. Here he shows God's power, in that He has not only saved, but has even justified, and led them to boasting, and this too without needing works, but looking for faith only. St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on Romans 3

“For the Law requires not only Faith but works also, but grace saves and justifies by Faith. (Eph. ii: 8)

You see how he proves that they are under the curse who cleave to the Law, because it is impossible to fulfill it; next, how comes Faith to have this justifying power? for to this doctrine he already stood pledged, and now maintains it with great force of argument. The Law being too weak to lead man to righteousness, an effectual remedy was provided in Faith, which is the means of rendering that possible which was "impossible by the Law." (Rom. viii: 3) Now as the Scripture says, "the just shall live by faith," thus repudiating salvation by the Law, and moreover as Abraham was justified by Faith, it is evident that its efficacy is very great. And it is also clear, that he who abides not by the Law is cursed, and that he who keeps to Faith is just. But, you may ask me, how I prove that this curse is not still of force? Abraham lived before the Law, but we, who once were subject to the yoke of bondage, have made ourselves liable to the curse; and who shall release us therefrom? Observe his ready answer to this; his former remark was sufficient; for, if a man be once justified, and has died to the Law and embraced a novel life, how can such a one be subject to the curse?" - St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on Galatians 3

“God does not wait for time to elapse after repentance. You state your sin, you are justified. You repented, you have been shown mercy.” – St. John Chrysostom, Homily 7 On Repentance and Compunction, p. 95 in FOTC, vol. 96.

“Gain for yourself the pardon coming from faith, since he is his own worst enemy who does not believe that he is given what the very generous Bestower of mercy promises in all kindness.” St. Peter Chrysologus – Sermon 58 (On the Creed), par. 13 (TFOTC, Vol. 109, p. 224)

“Give yourself, O man, pardon by believing, since you fell into all the sins by despairing.” St. Peter Chrysologus – Sermon 62 (On the Creed), par. 16 (TFOTC, Vol. 109, p. 245)

“We need none of those legal observances, he says; faith suffices to obtain for us the Spirit, and by Him righteousness, and many and great benefits.” - Chrysostom, Homilies on Galatians 4

“And he well said, "a righteousness of mine own," not that which I gained by labor and toil, but that which I found from grace. If then he who was so excellent is saved by grace, much more are you. For since it was likely they would say that the righteousness which comes from toil is the greater, he shows that it is dung in comparison with the other. For otherwise I, who was so excellent in it, would not have cast it away, and run to the other. But what is that other? That which is from the faith of God, i.e. it too is given by God. This is the righteousness of God; this is altogether a gift. And the gifts of God far exceed those worthless good deeds, which are due to our own diligence.” Chrysostom, Homily on Philippians 3

Suppose someone should be caught in the act of adultery and the foulest crimes and then be thrown into prison. Suppose, next, that judgment was going to be passed against him and that he would be condemned.

Suppose that just at that moment a letter should come from the Emperor setting free from any accounting or examination all those detained in prison. If the prisoner should refuse to take advantage of the pardon, remain obstinate and choose to be brought to trial, to give an account, and to undergo punishment, he will not be able thereafter to avail himself of the Emperor's favor. For when he made himself accountable to the court, examination, and sentence, he chose of his own accord to deprive himself of the imperial gift.

This is what happened in the case of the Jews. Look how it is. All human nature was taken in the foulest evils. "All have sinned," says Paul. They were locked, as it were, in a prison by the curse of their transgression of the Law. The sentence of the judge was going to be passed against them. A letter from the King came down from heaven. Rather, the King himself came. Without examination, without exacting an account, he set all men free from the chains of their sins.

All, then, who run to Christ are saved by his grace and profit from his gift. But those who wish to find justification from the Law will also fall from grace. They will not be able to enjoy the King's loving-kindness because they are striving to gain salvation by their own efforts; they will draw down on themselves the curse of the Law because by the works of the Law no flesh will find justification.

What does this mean? That he has justified our race not by right actions, not by toils, not by barter and exchange, but by grace alone. Paul, too, made this clear when he said: “But now the justice of God has been made manifest apart from the Law.” But the justice of God comes through faith in Jesus Christ and not through any labor and suffering. Chrysostom on Justification, Discourses Against Judaizing Christians. Discourse I:6-II:1:

"Christ is Master by virtue of His own essence and Master by virtue of His incarnate life. For He creates man from nothing, and through His own blood redeems him when dead in sin; and to those who believe in Him He has given His grace. When Scripture says, 'He will reward every man according to his works' (Matt 16:27), do not imagine that works in themselves merit either hell or

the kingdom. On the contrary, Christ rewards each man according to whether his works are done with faith or without faith in Himself; and He is not a dealer bound by contract, but our Creator and Redeemer." St. Mark the Ascetic (ca. 425), On those who think that they are made righteous by works.

"Confess Jesus Christ, and believe that He is risen from the dead, and you will be saved. For indeed righteousness is only to be believed; but a complete salvation must also be confessed and knowledge must be added to confidence." - St. Gregory Nazianzus (On Moderation, PG 36.204)

"While I was sick in the flesh, the Savior was sent to me in the likeness of sinful flesh, fulfilling such a dispensation, to redeem me from slavery, from corruption, and from death. And He became to me righteousness, and sanctification, and salvation. Righteousness, by setting me free from sin through faith in Him. Sanctification, in having set me free through water and the Spirit and His word. And salvation, His blood being the ransom of the true Lamb, having given Himself on my behalf." - St. Epiphanius (Against Heresies 3.1,2 PG 42.477)

Where Christ enters, there necessarily is also salvation. May he therefore also be in us: and He is in us when we believe; for he dwells in our hearts by faith, and we are His abode. It would have been better then for the Jews to have rejoiced because Zaccheus was wonderfully saved, for he too was counted among the sons of Abraham, to whom God promised salvation in Christ by the holy prophets, saying, There shall come a Savior from Zion, and he shall take away iniquities from Jacob, and this is my covenant with them, when I will bear their sins. Christ, therefore, arose to deliver the inhabitants of the earth from their sins, and to seek them that were lost, and to save them that had perished. For this is His office, and, so to say, the fruit of His godlike gentleness. Of this will he also count all those worthy who have believed in him. -- St. Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on Luke, Homily 127

What is meant by mercy? and what by sacrifice? By mercy then is signified, Justification and grace in Christ, even that which is by faith. For we have been justified, not by the works of the law that we have done, but by His great mercy. And sacrifice means the law of Moses. - St. Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on Luke, Homily 23

Be not troubled when thou meditatest upon the greatness of thy former sins; but rather know, that still greater is the grace that justifieth the sinner and absolveth the wicked. Faith then in Christ is found to be the pledge to us of these great blessings; for it is the way that leadeth unto life, that bids us go to the mansions that are above, that raises us to the inheritance of the saints, that makes us members of the kingdom of Christ. -- St. Cyril of Alexandria, Homily 40 on St. Luke.

SOLA GRATIA

"Why then are you afraid of drawing nigh, since you have no works demanded of you? Why are you bickering and quarrelsome, when grace is before you, and why keep putting me the Law forward to no purpose whatsoever? For you will not be saved by that, and will mar this gift also; since if you pertinaciously insist on being saved by it, you do away with this grace of God." – St. John Chrysostom, Homily 18 on Romans 10,11

"After speaking of the wages of sin, in the case of blessings, he has not kept to the same order: for he does not say, the wages of your good deeds, but the gift of God: to show, that it was not of

themselves that they were freed, nor was it a due they received, neither yet a return, nor a recompense of labors, but by grace all these things came about. And so there was superiority for this cause also, in that He did not free them only, or change their condition for the better, but that He did it without any labor or trouble upon their part: and that He not only freed them, but also gave them more than before, and that through His Son.” - St. John Chrysostom (Epistle to the Romans, Homily 12, Rom 6:23)

“And if any were to cast in prison a person who owed ten mites, and not the man himself only, but wife and children and servants for his sake; and another were to come and not to pay down the ten mites only, but to give also ten thousand talents of gold, and to lead the prisoner into the king’s courts, and to the throne of the highest power, and were to make him partaker of the highest honour and every kind of magnificence, the creditor would not be able to remember the ten mites; so hath our case been. For Christ hath paid down far more than we owe, yea as much more as the illimitable ocean is than a little drop.” - St. John Chrysostom, Epistle to the Romans, Homily X, Rom 5:17

“Is it possible, Scripture says, for one to repent and be saved? It is absolutely and most certainly the case. What, though, if I have wasted my life in sins and then repent: will I be saved? Yes, indeed! What source indicates this? The philanthropy of your Master. Can I take courage from your repentance? Could it be that your repentance has the power to wipe clean so many evils? If it were only up to repentance, then assuredly be afraid. However, since repentance is mixed together with the philanthropy of God, take courage. For God’s philanthropy is immeasurable, nor can any word provide the measure of his goodness. Your wickedness is measurable, but the medicine is immeasurable. Your wickedness, whatever it may be, is human wickedness; but God’s philanthropy is ineffable. Have courage because it surpasses your wickedness. Just think of one spark that fell into the sea; could it stand or be seen? What one spark is in comparison to the sea, so wickedness is before the philanthropy of God; not even this much, but much more so. For the sea, even though it is vast, has limits; but God’s philanthropy is unlimited.” – St. John Chrysostom, Homily 8 On Repentance and the Church FOTC: vol 96, p. 112,113

“Well done, O Christ, O Wisdom and Power and Word of God, and God almighty! What should we resourceless people give Thee in return for all things? For all things are Thine and Thou askest nothing of us but that we be saved. Even this Thou hast given us, and by Thy ineffable goodness Thou art grateful to those who accept it. Thanks be to Thee who hast given being and grace of well-being and who by Thy ineffable condescension hast brought back to this state those who fell from it!” - St. John of Damascus, On the Orthodox Faith, Book 4, Chapter 4

“And so the power is conquered in the name of him who assumed human nature and whose life was without sin, so that in him, who was both priest and sacrifice, remission of sins might be effected, that is, through the ‘mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus’, through whom we are purified from our sins and reconciled to God. For it is only sins that separate men from God; and in this life purification from sins is not effected by our merit, but by the compassion of God, through his indulgence, not through our power; for even that poor little virtue which we call ours has itself been granted to us by his bounty.”– St. Augustine, City of God, X, Chapter 22

JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH IN CHRIST THE KEY TO UNLOCK THE SCRIPTURES

Of faults thus grievous, Christ proved them guilty who professed to be skilled in the law; the scribes, I mean, and lawyers; and for this reason he said unto them, Also to you lawyers, woe! who

have taken away the key of knowledge. By the key of knowledge we consider that the law itself is meant, and justification in Christ, by faith I mean in Him. For though the law was in shadow and type, yet those types shape out to us the truth and those shadows depict to us in manifold ways the mystery of Christ. -- St. Cyril of Alexandria, Homily 86 on St. Luke

ORIGINAL SIN

And so the human race was lying under a just condemnation, and all men were the children of wrath. Of which wrath it is written: "All our days are passed away in Your wrath; we spend our years as a tale that is told." Of which wrath also Job says: "Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble." Of which wrath also the Lord Jesus says: "He that believes in the Son has everlasting life: and he that believes not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abides on him." He does not say it will come, but it "abides on him." For every man is born with it; wherefore the apostle says: "We were by nature the children of wrath, even as others." Now, as men were lying under this wrath by reason of their original sin, and as this original sin was the more heavy and deadly in proportion to the number and magnitude of the actual sins which were added to it, there was need for a Mediator, that is, for a reconciler, who, by the offering of one sacrifice, of which all the sacrifices of the law and the prophets were types, should take away this wrath. Wherefore the apostle says: "For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by His life." Now when God is said to be angry, we do not attribute to Him such a disturbed feeling as exists in the mind of an angry man; but we call His just displeasure against sin by the name "anger," a word transferred by analogy from human emotions. But our being reconciled to God through a Mediator, and receiving the Holy Spirit, so that we who were enemies are made sons ("For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God"): this is the grace of God through Jesus Christ our Lord. – St. Augustine, Enchiridion 33

“The psalmist does not suppose that he is living this life, for he had said, See, I was conceived in iniquities and my mother bore me in sins. He know that he was born from a sinful origin and under the law of sin.” - St. Hilary (Commentary on Psalm 118, 22)

“The words ‘the Jordan turned backward’ (Ps 114:3), signified the future mysteries of the bath of salvation through which the little ones who have been baptized are changed from wickedness back to their original state.” - St. Ambrose (Commentary on Luke 1, 37)

"We then say, that in many things we all of us offend, and that no man is pure from uncleanness, even though his life upon earth be but one day. Let us ask then of God mercy; which if we do, Christ will justify us; by Whom and with Whom, to God the Father, be praise and dominion, with the Holy Spirit, unto ages of ages. Amen." - Homily 120 on Luke 18 - St. Cyril of Alexandria

And if you like to hear what other saints also have felt in regard to physical birth, listen to David when he says, I was conceived, so it runs, in iniquity and in sin my mother hath borne me, proving that every soul which is born in the flesh is tainted with the stain of iniquity and sin. This is the reason for that saying which we have already quoted above, No man is clean from sin, not even if his life be one day long. To these, as a further point, may be added an enquiry into the reason for which, while the church's baptism is given for the remission of sin, it is the custom of the church that baptism be administered even to infants. Certainly, if there were nothing in infants that required remission and called for lenient treatment, the grace of baptism would seem unnecessary. (R.B.

Tollinton, Selections From The Commentaries And Homilies of Origen, 1929, p. 211)

Brethren, the selection (rom 5:12-14) from the Apostle for today tells us that through one man the whole world received its sentence... The downfall of one man has flowed out to become a punishment of all, and the vice of the parent has brought a sad catastrophe upon the whole race. (Chrysologus, Sermon 111, Original Sin, p. 175 vol. 17 FOTC)

Through a man sin came and clearly through this sin we are seen to have come under the control of death. O sin, you cruel beast – and a beast not content to vent your fury against the human race from merely one head. We have seen this beast, brethren, devouring with a triple head all the highly precious sprouts of the human family. Yes, brethren, with a mouth that is triple: as sin this beast captures, as death it devours, as hell it swallows down. (ibid, p. 176, 177)

For the whole nature of man became guilty in the person of him who was first formed; but now it is wholly justified again in Christ. -- St. Cyril of Alexandria, Homily 42 on St. Luke

ON DIVINE JUSTICE

If Phinees, when he waxed zealous and slew the evil-doer, staved the wrath of God, shall not Jesus, who slew not another, but gave up Himself for a ransom, put away the wrath which is against mankind?...Further; if the lamb under Moses drove the destroyer far away, did not much rather the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world, deliver us from our sins? The blood of a silly sheep gave salvation; and shall not the Blood of the Only-begotten much rather save?...Jesus then really suffered for all men; for the Cross was no illusion, otherwise our redemption is an illusion also...These things the Saviour endured, and made peace through the Blood of His Cross, for things in heaven, and things in earth. For we were enemies of God through sin, and God had appointed the sinner to die. There must needs therefore have happened one of two things; either that God, in His truth, should destroy all men, or that in His loving-kindness He should cancel the sentence. But behold the wisdom of God; He preserved both the truth of His sentence, and the exercise of His loving-kindness. Christ took our sins in His body on the tree, that we by His death might die to sin, and live unto righteousness.--St. Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechetical Lectures, XIII

“And the Lamb of God not only did this, but was chastised on our behalf, and suffered a penalty He did not owe, but which we owed because of the multitude of our sins; and so He became the cause of the forgiveness of our sins, because He received death for us, and transferred to Himself the scourging, the insults, and the dishonour, which were due to us, and drew down on Himself the apportioned curse, being made a curse for us. And what is that but the price of our souls? And so the oracle says in our person: “By his stripes we were healed,” and “The Lord delivered him for our sins,” with the result that uniting Himself to us and us to Himself, and appropriating our sufferings, He can say, “I said, Lord, have mercy on me, heal my soul, for I have sinned against thee.” - Eusebius of Caesarea, Demonstratio Evangelica, X.1

“A sacrifice was needed to reconcile the Father on high with us and to sanctify us, since we had been soiled by fellowship with the evil one. There had to be a sacrifice which both cleansed and was clean, and a purified, sinless priest.... God overturned the devil through suffering and His Flesh which He offered as a sacrifice to God the Father, as a pure and altogether holy victim – how great is His gift! – and reconciled God to the human race...Since He gave His Blood, which was sinless and therefore guiltless, as a ransom for us who were liable to punishment because of our sins, He

redeemed us from our guilt. He forgave us our sins, tore up the record of them on the Cross and delivered us from the devil's tyranny." --St. Gregory Palamas, Homily 16, 21, 24, 31

For the wrath of man reaches at most the body, and the death of the flesh is the utmost that they can contrive against us, but when God punishes, the loss reaches not to the flesh alone – how could it – but the wretched soul also is cast along with it into torments. -- St. Cyril of Alexandria, Homily 87 on Luke

For it was by reason of Adam's transgression of the commandment that we, having our faces turned away from God, returned to our dust; for the sentence of God upon human nature was, Dust thou art and unto dust thou shalt return; but at the time of the consummation of this world, the face of the earth shall be renewed; for God the Father by the Son in the Spirit will give life to all those who are laid within it.--St. Cyril of Alexandria, Homily 36 on St. Luke.