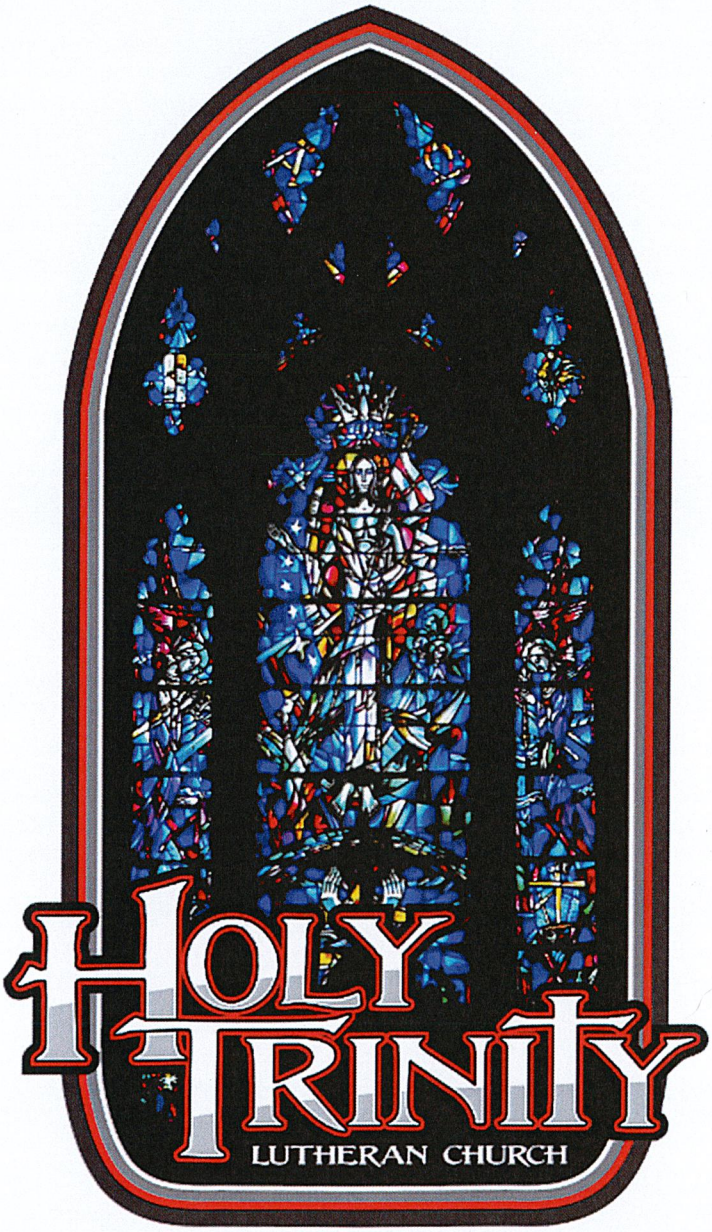
Teachings of the Church



Teachings of the Church

What do we mean when we say "God"?

What is "sin" and how is it overcome?

What does it mean to proclaim Jesus as the Christ?

How is God's Love manifest?

Why is the Resurrection of Christ indispensable?

What is the work of the Holy Spirit?

What is the purpose and place of the institutional Church?

Who will be saved?

INTRODUCTION

Lebanon's Holy Trinity Lutheran Church's adult Christian education class uses a discussion format in teaching what it means to be a Christian from the Lutheran perspective. Class discussions focus on insightful writings by Christians from a wide range of backgrounds who address questions of faith such as those on the front page of this free booklet.

The class's discussion materials are condensed and sometimes edited for continuity to facilitate their presentation and discussion within the limited time periods when it meets after the worship service each Sunday morning. The source of each writing is provided to encourage further reading and reflections on that source material.

What do we mean when we say "God"?

Nothing is so small, God is even smaller. Nothing is so large, God is even larger. God is an unspeakable being, above and outside everything we can name and think. Who knows what that is, which is called God? It is beyond body, beyond spirit, beyond everything we can say, hear, and think.

God has found the way his own divine essence can be completely in all creatures, and in everyone especially, deeper, more internally, more present, than the creature is to itself. And at the same time nowhere and cannot be comprehended by anyone, so that God embraces all things and is within them.

God is at the same time in every piece of sand totally, and nevertheless in all, above all and out of all creatures.

--Martin Luther quoted by Paul Tillich in *A History of Christian Thought*, Harper & Row, 1968 p. 248.

God in His Trinity of subsistent relations infinitely transcends every shadow of selfishness. For the One God does not subsist apart and alone in His Nature; He subsists as Father and as Son and as Holy Spirit. One Infinite Love in three subsistent relations.

The One God Who exists only in Three Persons is a circle of relations in which His infinite reality, Love, is ever identical and ever renewed, always perfect and always total, always beginning and never ending, absolute, everlasting and full.

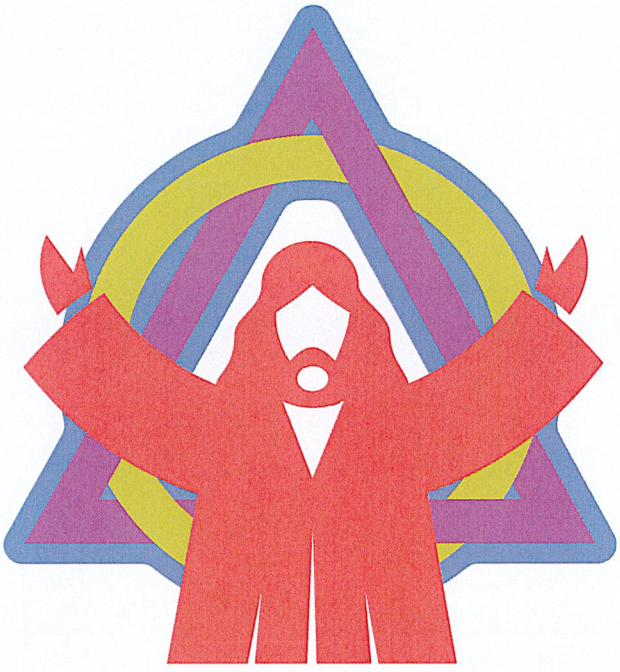
If you follow Love forward and backward from Person to Person, you can never track it to a stop, you can never corner it and hold it down and fix it to one of the Persons as if He could appropriate it to Himself the fruit of love of the others. For the One Love of the Three Persons is an infinitely rich giving of Itself which never ends and is never taken, but is always perfectly given, only received in order to be perfectly shared.

It is because the Love of God does not terminate in one self-sufficient *self* that is capable of halting and absorbing it, that the Life and Happiness of God are absolutely infinite and perfect and inexhaustible. Therefore in God there can be no selfishness,

because the Three Selves of God are Three subsistent relations of selflessness, overflowing and superabounding in joy in the Gift of their One Life.

The interior life of God is perfect contemplation. Our joy and our life are destined to be nothing but a participation in the Life that is theirs. In Them we will one day live entirely in God and in one another as the Persons of God live in One another.

--Thomas Merton, *New Sees of Contemplation*, New Directions, 1961, pp. 68-69.



The symbol of a triangle, representing the relationship of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, intertwined with the circle of eternal selfless Love flowing back and forth within the Holy Trinity, the One God in three Persons, is revealed in and through Jesus the Christ. A brief description of the charge of each "Person" of the Holy Trinity may be rendered as FATHER—the unfathomable CREATOR of the universe's diverse matter, energies, and finite beings; SON—the liberating WORD whose grace implants a deep trust in the God of Love, hope in God's coming kingdom, and a love that works for the well-being of all creatures; and HOLY SPIRIT—the elusive DIVINE PRESENCE nourishing our journeys of faith growing in free-obedience, abiding peace, and the everlasting community in union with God's Love.

What is "sin" and how is it overcome?

There are few words more strange to us than "sin" and "grace." They are strange, just because they are so well known.

Have the men of our time still a feeling of the meaning of sin? Do they, and do we, still realize that sin does not mean an immoral act, that "sin" should never be used in the plural, and that not our sins, but rather our *sin* is the all great, all-pervading problem of our life? Do we still know that it is arrogant and erroneous to divide men by calling some "sinners" and others "righteous?" For by way of such division, we can usually discover that we ourselves do not *quite* belong to the "sinners."

I should like to introduce another word as a clue in the interpretation of the word "sin:" "separation." To be in the state of sin is to be in the state of separation. And separation is threefold: there is separation among individual lives, separation of man to himself, and separation of all men from God, the ground of his being. This threefold separation constitutes the state of everything that exists; it is a universal fate; for *we* as men know that we are separated. We not only suffer with all other creatures because of the self-destructive consequences of our separation, but also know *why* we suffer. We know that we are estranged from something to which we really belong, and with which we *should* be united. It is an experience in which we actively participate, in which our whole personality is involved, and as fate, it is also *guilt*. Separation which is fate and guilt constitutes the meaning of "sin." It is *this* which is the state of entire existence.

We can say the same thing about grace. For sin and grace are bound to each other. We do not even have a knowledge of sin unless we have already experienced the unity of life, which is grace. And conversely, we could not grasp the meaning of grace without having experienced the separation of life, which is sin. In grace something is overcome; grace occurs "in spite of" separation and estrangement. Grace is the *re*union of life with life, the reconciliation of the self with the self. Grace is the acceptance of that which is rejected. Grace transforms fate into a meaningful destiny; it changes guilt into confidence and courage. There is something triumphant in the word "grace." In spite of the abounding of sin grace abounds much more.

Who has not, at some time, been lonely in the midst of a social event? The feeling of our separation from the rest of life is most acute when we are surrounded by it in noise and talk. We realize then much more than in moments of solitude how strange we are to each other; how estranged life is from life. There is something in the misfortune of our best friends which does not displease us. Are we not almost always ready to abuse everybody and everything, although in a very refined way, for the pleasure of self-elevation, for an occasion for boasting, for a moment of lust? To know that we are ready is to know the meaning of the separation of life from life, and of "abounding sin."

The most irrevocable expression of the separation of life from life today is the attitude of social groups within nations toward each other, and the attitude of nations themselves toward other nations. The walls of distance, in time and space, have been removed by technical progress; but the wall of estrangement between heart and heart have been incredibly strengthened. Man is split within himself. Life moves against itself through aggression, hate, and despair. We are wont to condemn self-love, but what we really mean to condemn is contrary to self-love. It is that mixture of selfishness and self -hate that permanently pursues us, that prevents us from loving others, and prohibits us from losing ourselves in the love with which we are loved eternally. They who are able to love themselves are able to love others also. On the contrary, in each of us is an instinct for self-destruction, which is as strong as our instinct for self-preservation.

Thus, the state of our whole life is estrangement from others and ourselves because we are estranged from the Ground of our being; because we are estranged from the origin and aim of our life. We are separated from the mystery, the depth, and the greatness of our existence. We hear the voice of that depth; but our ears are closed. We feel that something radical, total, and unconditional is demanded of us; but we rebel against it, trying to escape its urgency, and will not accept its promise.

"Where sin abounds, grace did much more abound." Paul does not say these words because sentimental interests demand a happy ending for everything tragic. Paul says them because they describe the most overwhelming and determining experience of his life. In the picture of Jesus as the Christ, which appeared to him at the moment of his greatest separation from other men, from himself and God, he found himself accepted in spite of his being rejected. And when he found that he was accepted he was able to accept himself and be reconciled to others. The moment in which grace struck him and

overwhelmed him, he was reunited with that to which he belonged, and from which he was estranged in utter strangeness.

Do we know what it means to be struck by grace? It does *not* mean that we suddenly believe that God exists, or that Jesus is the Savior, or that the Bible contains the truth. To believe that something *is*, is almost contrary to the meaning of grace. Furthermore, grace does not mean simply that we are making progress in our moral self-control, in our fight against special faults, and in our relationships to other men and to society. Moral progress may be a fruit of grace, but it is not grace itself, and it can even prevent us from receiving grace. For there is too often a graceless acceptance of Christian doctrines and battles against the structures of evil in our personalities. Such a graceless relation to God may lead us by necessity either to arrogance or despair.

We cannot transform our lives, unless we allow them to be transformed by that stroke of grace. It happens or it does not happen. And certainly it does *not* happen if we try to force it upon ourselves, just as it shall not happen so long as we think, in our self-complacency, that we have no need of it. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel our separation is deeper than usual. Do not seek anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. *Simply accept the fact that you are accepted.* If that happens to us, we experience grace. After such an experience, we may not be better than before, we may not believe more than before. But everything is transformed. And nothing is demanded of this experience, no religious or moral or intellectual presuppositions, nothing but *acceptance*.

In the light of this grace, we perceive the power of grace in relation to others and ourselves. We experience the grace of being able to accept the life of another, even if it be hostile and harmful to us, for, through grace we know it belongs to the same Ground to which we have been accepted. We experience the grace which is able to overcome the tragic separation of the sexes, of the generations, of the nations, of the races, and even the utter strangeness between man and nature. Sometimes grace appears in all these separations to reunite us with whom we belong. For life belongs to life. We experience moments in which we accept ourselves, because we know that we have been accepted by that which is greater than we. If only more such moments were given to us!

--Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, Scribner,1948, pp. 153-163.

What does it mean to proclaim Jesus as the Christ?

When Christians speak of the "incarnation" of Christ there are two important implications. One is that "God" becomes much clearer through this self-revelation and self-limitation in human form. God in-essence becomes God in-relation, God-invisible becomes God-visible. The unspeakable and indescribable Reality becomes speakable and has a form. The mystery is made plain, at least for a moment, and we see God face to face. Those who knew Jesus of Nazareth, as attested in the synoptic Gospels, spoke of him as Immanuel, "God with us" (Matt. 1:23).

There is a second implication: In taking human form God sanctifies the human as well. Incarnation means that God finds us, and we find God. In the human faces of one another and in the human fabric of our lives; Christians cannot help but be inclusivists in Christology. As Christians see it, the "Christ event" of incarnation altered the meaning of the human condition not only for the tribe of Christians but for everyone. It disclosed a new image of the human as well as a new image of God.

Perhaps it is in the mystery of this double revelation of divinity and humanity that Christians can speak about the "uniqueness" of Jesus. I am sometimes uncertain about the language of uniqueness, for it often seems to be a declaration of exclusivity rather than an invitation to faith, discovery, and dialogue. When the "uniqueness" of Jesus Christ is used to exclude the stranger of another faith, it ceases to be Christian language. Or, in the language of Paul Tillich, who makes a similar point, "What is particular about him is that he crucified the particular in himself for the sake of the universal."

The Jesus of history and the Christ of faith are both central to the testimony of the early church as found in the New Testament. It is not one Jesus depicted in the Gospels, and it is a credit to the insight and honesty of the early church that several interpretations of Jesus were preserved in the New Testament. In the synoptic Gospels, for example, Jesus himself does not claim to be one with the Father as he does in the Gospel of John, but points continually to God his Father and challenges his followers to a God-centered life in which ethical action counts more than belief. Yet the Gospel of John opens by describing the Word, the Logos, who was present and with God even at the dawn of creation, and it is filled with theological discourses on

the meaning of Jesus as the Christ to the faith community. Saint Paul, in the context of the new and growing community of faith, does not focus on the teaching of the historical Jesus but on the meaning of the Christ event for the early church. All of this is the treasured heritage of the Christian community, but it does not point to a seamless single view of Jesus Christ.

Uniqueness, to me, does not mean that the "Jesus story" is the only story of God's dealing with humanity, nor the only and complete story. The language of *only* is the language of faith, not of statistics. Faith in Christ rest on two remarkable affirmations: Jesus Christ reveals to us the face of God, which is love. And Jesus Christ reveals to us the meaning of the human, which is love. This double revelation is enough. Indeed, the God whom Jesus Christ reveals is not a tribal god or a stingy one but has surely sought and loved the sheep of every fold. And the humanity which Jesus reveals is not narrow, arrogant and dogmatic, but boldly open to claiming the stranger as neighbor. Both sides of the double revelation—the Godward and the human—must push Christians beyond the narrow obsession of singularity.

As a human being, Jesus, the man of Nazareth, was unique as all human beings are—born of particular parents, at a particular time, in a particular place, and with a wholly distinctive physique and personality. There are many documents and one can cite them with footnotes. His life is, in that sense, part of public history. For those of us who are Christians, the revelation of the Christ event is far more radical than this, however. On the divine side of the double revelation, we say that this particular human being also reveals the fullness of God's love. How that can be so is a mystery. That is the radical faith of the church, and those of us who are Christians live our lives in terms of that faith.

We all live by powerful, resounding stories, stories so true that they reveal to us God's purpose for the whole creation and the whole human family. Not every story is a story up to that revelatory task. There are inadequate and even destructive stories that may be compelling for a generation but cannot sustain the ongoing life of a culture. Some stories have been up to the task of anchoring an entire life-world, of sustaining generations of faith and nourishing whole cultures and civilizations.

As a Christian, I confess that Jesus enables me to see something of God that I do not know in any other way: God truly grounded in the soil of human life and death. Jesus

did not point the way out of suffering, as did the Buddha. Jesus did not rescue humanity from suffering, as did the Hindu *avataras*. Jesus took on suffering himself, experiencing suffering and death as all of us do. Only by going through the valley of suffering and death did Jesus overcome the grip of suffering and death. Not only Hindus, but Muslims as well find this humbling humility of Jesus disturbing. As my friend, Is-Haq Oloyede, a law professor, put it in conversation, "God cannot be helpless! It is not fitting of God."

It is understandable that the early church struggled with the doctrine of incarnation, eliminating the extreme views in order to find a middle way between those who minimized Jesus' humanity and those who minimized his divinity. From the first century to the [twenty-first], Christians have continued to wrestle with the meaning of Jesus Christ, the double revelation of the divine and the human. Some interpretations, called "high Christologies", emphasize his divinity; it is through the disclosure of God's presence in Jesus Christ that Christians can "see" God. Other interpretations, sometimes called "low Christologies" or "Christologies from below," emphasize the humanity of Jesus who is above all, God-with-us.

Christians should not be fearful or suspicious, therefore, of discovering the presence of God, which we now know in Christ, in the religious lives of people of other faiths. If we follow the Indian theologian Stanley Samartha toward what is called "Christology from below," one that begins with the man Jesus of Nazareth, we follow a route to the discovery of the incarnation that leads us to the poor, the ordinary, the unremarkable yet remarkable humanity that Jesus loved and shared. The route to affirming Jesus' divinity passes through his humanity. As Samartha puts it, "At a time when there is so much degrading dehumanization in the world and such great need to bring out what it is to be human in such a world, to minimize the humanity of Jesus is to diminish seriously the resources for supporting the struggles for human freedom, dignity, and self-respect."

In so far as India has been drawn to Jesus, it is not so much because of the miraculous divinity of Jesus as the Christ, for divinity abounds in the life-worlds of Hindus, but because of his compelling humanity. It was this that found resonance in Gandhi when he said, "Christ died on the cross with a crown of thorns on his head defying the might of a whole empire. And if I raise resistance of a non-violent character, I simply and humbly follow in the footsteps of the great teacher."

--Diana L. Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras*, Beacon, 2003, pp. 86-93.

How is God's Love manifest?

The Bible is hot. And the heat of current arguments stokes debate and controversy as many on both the left and right seem terribly sure they alone possess the truth: Who is correct? What is biblical truth? Why even study the Scriptures at all when it leads to so much conflict?

The intensity of questions like these deserves a response that can take the heat. That is why the Augsburg Confession is so important to the church today. This document forged in the heat of battle, has stood the test of time.

In 1530, our forebearers in the faith confessed their faith before the gathered estates of Christendom at Augsburg, Germany. The Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, had ordered them to give an account of their teaching. Therefore, these first "Lutherans" drew upon previous documents and discussions to pen the Augsburg Confession that spring.

With Martin Luther banned from attendance, and the document's editor, Phillip Melanchthon, revising up to the last minute, the confessors read the German version to the Diet of Augsburg on June 25 that year.

The fate of the Reformation and the course of human history hung in the balance when Luther, Melanchthon, and their cohorts fashioned this confession of faith. What they developed contains no secret code, no mere esoteric academic abstractions. Nor does it melt into rampant relativity or stultifying subjectivity.

The confession at Augsburg claimed there was a key to understanding the Bible, and in this document, they offered that key to all who would gain access to the center of the Scriptures. These reformers were convinced the Bible contained a basic overall message, which connects Genesis 1:1 to Revelation 22:21. In addition, they believed the church should read the Scriptures from the perspective of that story.

At its core, the Bible is about God's great, eternal love for the world and the creatures who inhabit it. Therefore, the Augsburg Confession begins with Article I, "Concerning God" that maintains that the one God revealed in Scriptures as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is the "creator and preserver of all visible and invisible things."

Unfortunately, as Article II, "Concerning Original Sin," points out, this good creation has run amok. With human beings clearly in the crosshairs, the Augsburg Confession focuses on the root sin: unbelief. As this article put it, we "cannot by nature possess... true faith in God." This sin, this lack of faith, "condemns [us] to eternal wrath."

The problem is that the world doesn't work the way God intended. Sin separates people from God and from one another. Twentieth-century theologian Paul Tillich described the alienation of sin by pointing to three profoundly negative aspects of life: death, despair, and guilt. These realities confront all people and threaten our very existence. They are expressions of the sin that alienates humankind from God. No amount of human striving or effort (in Luther's day, this was called "merit") can overcome this alienation.

Thankfully, this isn't the end of the story. The Bible, the confessors say, is ultimately a story of divine love: God's never-ending commitment to save. Therefore Article III, "Concerning the Son of God," tells of Jesus' life, death and resurrection so that, through the Spirit, Christ might "make holy, purify, strengthen, and comfort all who believe in him..." In this way, God in Jesus Christ bestows "life and various gifts and benefits...."

This leads to Article IV, "Concerning Justification,"—the pinnacle of our confession and the distinctively Lutheran key to Scriptures. The confessors here place justification in its biblical context, where it is related to the Greek and Hebrew words we translate "to make righteous," "to justify," and "righteousness."

The biblical link between these words is that to justify is to make righteous, and justification is the act of actually making a person righteous. With respect to God's relationship to humankind, the question is: How are unrighteous and sinful human beings made righteous or justified before God?

The Augsburg Confession answers: "Furthermore, it is taught that we cannot obtain

forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merit, works, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sins and become righteous before God out of grace, for Christ's sake through faith when we believe that Christ has suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness, as Paul says in Romans 3:21-26 and 4:5."

Here we see the close connection between grace, faith, and Christ in official Lutheran understanding of justification. Motivated solely by God's grace, Christ does what people can't do—liberates those who are in bondage to sin and cannot free themselves. This divine action in Christ becomes a living reality in the life of believers by faith alone. When this happens, sinners receive forgiveness; the unrighteous are made righteous before God.

Out of divine mercy and goodness, not because of any human striving, God acts in order to save. This gracious action is God's free choice on behalf of the world. Humankind does not deserve God's action in Christ. *Sinners* are justified in Jesus Christ. In the Bible (especially in Romans and Galatians), justification ranks as a central concept, describing God's interaction with the world.

"Salvation," "redemption," and "reconciliation" are other biblical words that point to this same reality. All of them underscore God's necessary role in re-establishing and maintaining a saving relationship with the world in Christ.

Not only do Lutherans contend that Christians are justified before God by grace, they assert that God's grace even works to create faith in the believer. By grace alone, God acts through Christ alone to justify humankind. And this gracious act is appropriated by faith alone. Human beings receive justification as a gift from God.

The reality of this gift defines the church's proclamation. Therefore, Article V, "Concerning the Office of Preaching," says the gospel and the sacraments are means by which God gives this grace. God's Word is threefold:

> Jesus Christ is the Word of God—the Word made flesh, John 1:14.
> The Bible is the word of God—the written record of God's saving action,
> pre-eminently expressed in Christ's life, death and resurrection.

Biblical preaching is God's word—when someone proclaims the gospel, whether formally or informally.

God's Word, understood in this multiple way, is ultimately the proclamation of God's grace.

In addition, the grace revealed in Christ comes through the sacraments of baptism and communion. These two sacraments, instituted by Jesus, connect the gospel of forgiveness to physical elements. They are concrete and physical expressions of grace that create faith.

For Lutherans, then, justification isn't simply one idea about God among others. Justification is, as Luther says in The Smalcald Articles of 1538, "the first and chief" doctrine by which other teachings receive their proper place in the church's preaching and teaching.

This means that all authentic preaching and teaching underscores or points to God's forgiving grace, revealed in Scripture—most especially in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Theologian Joseph Sittler, in *Running with the Hounds*, captured well the Lutheran understanding of justification when he wrote about the time he had his car repaired in Israel. The mechanic cleaned the distributor and, when the car was running properly, he stood back and pronounced the car *Zedek* (Hebrew for "righteousness").

Sittler summed it up this way: "It is righteous when it does what it is made to do, what it was intended to do. Righteousness means to get rid of the gunk which is standing in the way of what God intended...."

Lutherans believe people were created to have faith in Christ and this faith makes us righteous, justifies us. Put simply, with words penned by Paul, confessed by the Augsburg Confession in 1530, and affirmed by Lutherans worldwide, we deem this to be the key to Scripture: "We hold that we are justified by faith, apart from works of the law."

--William R. Russell, "Key to the Scriptures." *The Lutheran,* January 2008, pp. 20-22.

Why is the Resurrection of Christ indispensable?

What is meant by a theology *of* the cross, not merely *about* the cross? It says that Christ was born "under the law, to redeem them that are under the law." Christ came into this closed circle of law and death. He does not come to bring some more law. A theology of the cross affirms in the first instance that he was not doing anything else in his death but dying. For the frightening thing about death is that ultimately it has no meaning. Jesus "was crucified, dead and buried."

In the view *of* a theology *of* the cross only the resurrection gives his death significance. He rose from the dead, he conquered the grave, the meaningless, and became the first fruits of the *new*. He broke through the closed circle and brought new life to light in his resurrection. Without the resurrection, the cross has no importance for us.

In a theology of the cross, the cross and resurrection *is* the way. The law is not the way, the *cross* is. As Jesus put it himself: "*I am* the way, the truth and the life." The point is that one must himself go *through* the cross, for the cross and resurrection *is* the way. The cross and resurrection must be so understood and so preached that they bring about in us as well a death and a new life. The preaching of the cross puts the old Adam to death. It puts to death in us the pious fraud, the man who thought there was some other way out. For if there is no way out for Jesus, how could there be a way out for us? That is the ultimate crescendo of the law. The cross makes us face the truth. It destroys the old Adam.

Such is the theology of the cross. If you wish to be raised with him you must die with him. This is to say that there is no way to appropriate the cross other than to go through it. There is nothing to do about death involved but to die it. Then something absolutely new begins: the life of *faith*, the life of trusting God. Through the cross and resurrection God reveals and works God's will in us. God invades our lives, puts an end to the old, raises up the new. In this event, the voice of the law ends.

Of course, all this is possible in this life only by faith and hope. We are not yet one with Christ completely. In this life the Old Adam is still with us and is all too much alive. That is why the faith Luther spoke of had to be renewed every day. Once one sees things in terms of a theology of the cross one realizes immediately that they cannot live today

on yesterday's faith. The only way to deal with such problems is, as Luther said, to go every day to the cross and begin again. In his *Small Catechism*, Luther says that baptism cannot be just a once-and-for-all thing, but rather that the Old Adam must be daily drowned in repentance and the new man arise to live before God. Faith in the gospel has to be renewed each day. Yesterday's faith tends to slip into mere theory. The voice of the law sounds again. Each day we must hear anew that Christ is the end of the law and the gift of new life.

Luther rejected the doctrine of atonement as it came from the medieval theologian St. Anselm. God, Anslem said, had two choices to repair the damage done to God's honor by sin; God could either punish man or God could demand satisfaction. St. Anselm reasoned that if God took the first course and punish man, that would mean the destruction of man and consequently the end of God's plans for his creation. Therefore, God, according to Anselm, took the second course, that of satisfaction. From this kind of thinking arose the idea of vicarious satisfaction. Jesus is a "substitute" payment for man to go on living.

Luther, however rejected this idea and chose the first course, that of punishment. Jesus was destroyed in our place. He entered that darkness of that punishment and forsakenness to do battle and—wonders of wonders—emerged victorious. It was not a transaction but a battle between life and death that is joined. Nor is he strictly speaking, a "substitute" for us. Rather he dies in our place, i.e. he *identifies* himself with us by entering absolutely into that place where we must die. He does not die "instead" of us, rather "ahead" of us, bringing it forward to us. His absolute identification with us puts to death the Old Adam in us so that his death is our death. He dies ahead of us to bring us life here and now. This identification with him in death leads to identification with him in the new resurrection life. The death and resurrection of Christ leads not merely to a doctrine *about* atonement, but to an actual *accomplishment* of atonement.

For only the God who comes down to earth can really help us. Only the one who dies the death we must die and yet is not conquered by it can *save* us. Anything else—however pious or orthodox it sounds—is useless and vain.

--Gerhard O. Forde, *Where God Meets Man*, Augsburg, 1972, pp. 36-44.

What is the work of the Holy Spirit?

There are at least three strong and resonant images associated with the Spirit: breath, fire, and the dove. They are all vibrant images, life images, visible and invisible icons. Breath evokes the sense of the intimacy and presence of the Spirit, with us always, even when we are unaware of it. Much of the spirit language in the Bible is breath language. In Hebrew the word for spirit is *ruach*, literally "breath" or "wind." It is a female noun, and it is employed in the very first verses of Genesis to speak of the mothering, life-giving Spirit of God that hovered, brooded, over the deep at the dawn of creation. Fire evokes the sense of power and empowerment that was the experience of Pentecost and that energized the mission of the early church. Fifty days after the resurrection of Christ, the disciples experienced the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, with the rushing sound of a mighty wind and the descent of what seemed to be the flames of fire setting upon their tongues and giving them the ability to speak of the mighty works of God in the languages of earth.

Breath and fire may be distinct images, but they belong together as intertwined images of the Spirit. The Spirit both nurtures contemplation and empowers action; the Spirit guides us into a life in which these moments of stillness and action; silence and energy are balanced. Finally, there is the bird, the dove, which has become the preeminent icon of the Spirit in the church. The dove's flight is the image of the Spirit's freedom; she is not tethered to the church. As Metropolitan George Khodr of the Orthodox church in Lebanon put it, "other religions too come under the wings of the Spirit."

There are moments in all human lives of what Martin Buber called the "I-Thou experience"—where eyes meet, where truth meets truth, where one being meets another. Love and suffering, beauty and horror provide us with the experience of such moments. The I-Thou experience of full presence is what Krishnamurti calls "choiceless awareness"—awareness without the grasping, naming, categorizing, and polarizing that distances us from experience. Full presence living. Ordinary human experience can name such moments. They are times of insight, recognition, and awareness. Christians give a name to this powerful sense of presence: The Holy Spirit. It is what Bishop John V. Taylor has called the "Go-Between God," the invisible "current of communication" that streams between us when we truly recognize the presence of the other. Breath, fire and dove all, in different ways, are annunciations of the presence of the "Go-Between God."

The most pervasive and intimate presence of the Divine has often been expressed with "breath language." The Jesuit theologian Donald Gelpi says, "breathing" is perhaps even better than "breath" because it conveys the energy and activity of movement. It inspires, it fills, it "clothes" the prophets with power, it enters into their hearts. The Bible is filled with the descent and the infusion of this divine breath. It was the Spirit that came upon David when he was anointed by Samuel (I Samuel 16:13). It was the Spirit that inspired Bezalel, the chief architect of the tabernacle, with his creativity and artistry: "And I have filled Bezalel with the Spirit of God, with the ability and intelligence, with knowledge and craftmanship, to devise artistic designs" (Exod. 35:30ff.). And it is the same Spirit that came upon Mary, descended upon Jesus, and poured out upon the church at Pentecost.

In the Gospel of John, the risen Christ is said to breathe upon his disciples and thus transmit to them the Holy Spirit as they were gathered together (John 20:22). The Divine within us is not exactly our own breath, our own process of respiration as such, but breath is surely the closest possible analogue to what we mean when we speak of the human "soul" or "spirit." Breath is enlivening, it sustains us even when we forget it, even when we are asleep. Breath is vital to our individual existence, and yet it is not "ours," for we share the fact of that vital presence with all that lives.

Breath is the invisible icon of the Divine. In breath-centered meditation, one rests the mind in the breath, returning again and again to the breath as the mind wanders. It is the breath that draws one back to awareness, to presence. In Christian meditation, it is the breath that draws one again and again to the awareness of God. To speak of our human breath as an icon means that it is both a reminder of God's presence and a window through which we may be drawn toward God's presence at any time and any place, for the breath is the most portable of icons. It is indeed the go-between, rising and falling, tracing an invisible thread of connection between the respiration of the body and the Spirit of God.

Those of us who look to Genesis say that God "breathed the breath of life" into Adam and that first human being became "a living soul" (Gen. 2:7). The *ruach* of a person is the God-given breath of life. The Quakers call it "that of God in us." As Job put it, "The spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life.... If he should take back his spirit to himself, and gather to himself his breath, all flesh would perish together, and all mortals return to dust." (Job 33: 4, 34:14). In many religious traditions, breath is a primary image for the divine presence within.

In the Christian tradition, the language of the Holy Spirit is not only one of breath, attention, and presence, but also a language of energy and fire. The experience of the Spirit is not only the experience of calm insight, but also the experience of power and empowerment. The decent of the Spirit at the time of the baptism of Jesus, an event recorded in all four Gospels, was clearly an empowerment for his testing in the wilderness and then his public ministry. And the decent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is the story of the outpouring of heavenly power as fire, and it is also the story of the birth of the church.

As the Acts of the Apostles, recorded by Luke, begins, Christ speaks to the disciples at the time of his ascension into heaven, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). What would this receiving of power look like? The disciples returned to Jerusalem to wait, and they devoted themselves to prayer. They were surely uncertain about the future and uncertain about how to understand the past. Then, in Acts, Luke tells the mighty story of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the day of Pentecost. It was the culmination of the Feast of Weeks, fifty days after Passover, and Jews came from many countries on pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Luke tells us that there were devout Jews from every nation on earth living in Jerusalem, for in the Jewish liturgical calendar, the Feast of Weeks celebrated another outpouring of the divine, the giving of the Torah on Sinai. It is not surprising that the Christian story of Divine empowerment is layered upon the story of the decent of divine power on Sinai.

"And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind,' Luke writes. "Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit, they said, gave them the ability" (Acts 2:3-4). The people who had gathered in Jerusalem also heard this sound, this "windrush." They listened and were amazed. Hearing about God's deeds of power, each in language they could understand, they said to one another, "What does this mean?" From that decisive event, a dozen discouraged, frightened men and women found the courage to launch a movement that would spread throughout the Roman world. This flaming shower of the Spirit did not lead simply to individual transformation, it gave birth to a community.

The term *Pentecost* today calls up the image of Pentecostal churches, with their emphasis on Spirit-filled prayer, including speaking in tongues, which certainly repeats in a way that first Pentecost. I want to reclaim another aspect of Pentecost, which is the experience of the worldwide Christian community of many languages, faces, and cultures. At Pentecost, it is to the *community* that the Spirit is given, breathed, showered down like flames on high. As Paul puts it, "For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body...and we were all made to drink of one Spirit (I Cor.12:13). The living power of the Spirit, then, drives Christians today to discover the unity of the Holy Spirit and what it means to belong together as the church, not just within one small isolated community, but throughout the world.

After all, it was not unintelligible speech that those speakers-in-tongues spoke at the great Pentecost event. They spoke languages, all the languages of the earth. "We hear them speaking in our own tongues the wonderful works of God," said the foreigners. The message of Pentecost is not of ecstatic utterance, but of the importance of hearing the Good News in every land, in every tongue. The love of God is not a family affair, nor is it in any way exclusive, it is translatable, it is news for everyone. In symbolic terms, Pentecost reverses the linguistic confusion of Babel. Those of various tongues can suddenly understand one another. And the gift of that understanding, whether among Christians who speak many languages and come from many cultures, or between Christians, Muslims, and Hindus, is the kind of miracle Christians can only refer to as a gift of the Spirit.

Christians do not have a single, fixed story in telling about the Holy Spirit in the same way they have the story of the stable and the angels, Nazareth and the Sea of Galilee. The stories of the touch of the Spirit are as many as there are individuals and communities. The Holy Spirit perpetually reminds us of God's mystery and complexity. It is also a radical reminder of God's ineluctable freedom. Though we may glimpse God in the Face of Jesus, we do not truly understand or comprehend God. Pentecost sets it all on fire.

The image of the bird, the dove, is the most substantial icon of the Spirit. That which we Christians call the Spirit is as intimate and abiding as our breath, as elusive as the wind, as powerful and consuming as fire, and as surprising and mysterious as a sudden sense of presence.

Although the Spiritdove may seem tame enough caught in midair in the icon or in the stained glass of a church, the Holy Spirit is not tame. She can hover protectively, and she also can soar. As one Spirit song puts it, "She comes sailing on the wind, her wings flashing in the sun, on a journey just begun, she flies on." The flight of a bird is the image of freedom, and the Spirit of God sails free. The bird is also an image of gentile comfort. The Psalmist who prays for shelter under the feathers of God's wings evokes protection of mother bird gathering he downy young under her wings. In William Blake's line drawing of the Holy Spirit, an immense bird stretches her wingspan over two figures, the Father doubled over and gathering up the crucified Christ. The hovering, encompassing presence has a wingspan that reaches out over and beyond suffering and death.

It is clear in the New Testament that the Spirit is a gift, not a reward. The decent of the Spirit upon Jesus during his baptism in the Jordan, often depicted as a dove, wings outspread, sailing downward toward him, comes before his initiatory period of testing in the wilderness, not after. In most initiation sequences, one would expect the order to be reversed; after testing and trial, one is confirmed with a cloak of blessing. But the empowerment of the Spirit is not earned, it is freely given.
The freedom made so clear in the winged flight of the Holy Spirit forces Christians to think about the mystery and spiritual life among people of every faith—Buddhist and Muslim, Hindu and Jewish. When we use the term Holy Spirit, we mean the active, creative, energetic, mysterious presence of the one we call God. The Spirit does not read the fine print of the prayer book or the creed. The Spirit, though she gave birth to the church, is not the possession of the church, let alone of its early church fathers or its modern theologians. The Pentecost experience reminds us that the Holy Spirit is, above all, a gift, a fullness, an outpouring. We cannot grasp it, we can only be attentive to it, awaken to it and attest to its presence.

Emphasizing the freedom of the Spirit, however, does not mean that one part

of God is cut loose from the Trinity to roam about the world while the other two are left at home in heaven or in the church. On the contrary, on emphasizing the freedom and mystery of the dove and breath, Christians point to the freedom and mystery of the whole of what we mean by God. The Canberra assembly of the World Council of Churches wrote, "The Holy Spirit is at work in ways that pass human understanding: the freedom of the Spirit may challenge and surprise us as we enter into dialogue with people of other faiths. The Gospel of Jesus Christ has taught us the signs and fruit of the Holy Spirit—joy, peace, patience, and faithfulness (Gal. 5). Dialogue challenges us to discern the fruits of the Spirit in the way God deals with all humanity."

--Diana L. Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras*, Beacon, 2003, pp. 120-135.

What is the purpose and place of the institutional Church?

The purpose of doctrine of the church cannot be to tyrannize man's spirit, to prescribe what he must do or think to be saved. Rather, the only purpose the doctrine can have is to preserve and protect the message of spiritual freedom, to help keep the possibility of faith and hope alive. For that message to be heard in our world, it must take the form of our language. It must be passed on as doctrine, as a teaching. The trouble is, however, that we tend to treat it as any other doctrine or teaching—as something we must do or think. We confuse gospel with law, our own legislative ways of acting and thinking. Even though the message of freedom must be cast in the form of doctrine, and to be kept by the church in that form, that is not its ultimate purpose. Its purpose is to point beyond itself to the freedom that comes from God.

The church in this world is the custodian of the message of faith, hope and love. The empirical institution as such cannot be identified with the kingdom which is to come, but it is a witness to that kingdom, and as a place in which those who believe and hope in that kingdom gather and draw sustenance. Since it is in this world, it must have an institutional life just like other institutions. It has constitutions, laws, regulations, officers, buildings, and property as needed, and it calls and appoints pastors to public preaching and administer the sacraments, but all these things are not absolute or eternal. They are necessary only for this world—necessary to care for the hope of the

coming world. Thus Luther did not absolutize any form of church institutional life. The decisions about how the institution was to be set up could be made to fit the practical demands of concrete situations. Institutional forms in this world cannot be made absolute, they cannot be made instruments of tyranny. The church, above all, must bear witness to this fact. There must be freedom to try new things when the old breaks down. Hope in the kingdom of grace gives us precisely that liberty—even in the church.

The institutional church is for the *public* proclamation of the message. It is *for* the world. God ordains that there be an institution for getting at the world. To be a Christian means inevitably, therefore, to become involved in the institutional life of the church as a means for getting at the world. The church is public, not private. It is directed outward to the world, not inward upon itself.

The place of the church in the modern world should, according to Luther and the Reformation, not be over the state, nor is it to trade on the power of the state in any kind of unholy alliance. At the same time, it is not merely a private club for cultivating individual religious emotions. It is a public institution ordained by God, placed alongside the state, business, and family, given the task of publicly proclaiming and bearing witness in its deeds to the true end of human life in God's kingdom to come. Its message is not merely private, not merely to individuals. Wherever the state, or business, or any human institution makes itself the absolute end, wherever there is tyranny or injustice, the church must bear its public witness, both in word and if need be, in action and suffering. The church as institution is entrusted with the task of seeing to it that public life too is truly down to earth. To be a Christian is to live under the sign of Christ's cross and resurrection, to wait hopefully, patiently, on this earth by making it a better place and challenging the world, through one's vocation *and* the church to do the same.

--Gerhard O. Forde, *Where God Meets Man*, Augsburg, 1972, pp. 120-128.

Who will be saved?

In Revelation 21, John talks about a *new heaven* and a *new earth*. Yet it is significant that he speaks of a *new heaven and earth* rather than a completely different "something else" totally divorced from that which has gone before. In short, although John wants to speak to newness, he also wants to affirm a continuity with what had been previously. John knows that, in spite of what happened to it consequently, God's original creation was "very good"—and God is not about to act in a way that would deny that fact.

The newness of God is properly a *consummation* of history—not a junking of history. Yes, Evil was junked; but history was more than that. God is Redeemer as well as Creator; and his newness is as much or more that of redemption as of creation. Whatever is redeemable, God will redeem.

When the new Jerusalem comes *down* from *heaven*, the distinction between the two is lost—and thus another element of radical newness is introduced. From here on, the picture will include elements of heavenliness and elements of earthliness—with absolutely no way of extracting the two. The new Jerusalem comes down "like a bride adorned for her husband." Just as "Jerusalem" was the city of the old church, "the new Jerusalem" is the city of the resurrected church; so, the scene here does portray the church coming into a new relationship of special intimacy with God and the Lamb.

Now John repeats the scene in more detail. John seems to have two main purposes behind this scene. One is to highlight the *beauty* of the redeemed church.

John's second purpose in the measuring of the new Jerusalem is to show us that this entire city is built on *twelves*. (the same "12" as that of the twenty-four elders; the 144,000; the stars in the crown of the woman clothed in the sun). Here is *continuity*. Granted, this new Jerusalem doesn't look much like any church we have known; but all of those twelves are meant to ring a bell. If you belong to the church of Jesus Christ, then this is *your* church; this is what God will make of the church as God gets all the twelves to come right! Every measurement in this passage is related to twelve.

Two of the twelve call for particular attention. The gates, the instrument of "entering," bear the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. The foundation stones, the instruments

of "upholding," bear those of the twelve disciples of the Lamb. These details confirm that Israel is to become an integral part of the bride of the Lamb. The city "foursquare" is an *inclusive* city.

Out of the biblical tradition of eschatological vison which had come to John, two themes always had been strong: light and life. Light? Don't talk about suns and moon and stars and nova; we have God and the Lamb—and with them is the light of truth, clarity, and illumination with nothing of darkness about it.

"By its light shall the nations walk, and the kings of the earth shall bring into it all their splendor." ".... The wealth and splendor of the nations shall be brought in." Now, honestly, aren't those the very last people you ever expected to see here—and the wealth and splendor of the nations the last merchandise you would have thought could be allowed in? After all, the last we saw in John's vision of those kings, they were a feast for the buzzards. When John deliberately puts "the kings of the earth" and "the wealth and splendor of the nations" right in the streets of the new Jerusalem, there would seem to be no alternative but that he also is talking of a continued possibility of repentance and redemption, of a *second* resurrection. And as that is a possibility for the kings of the earth—whom John, clearly, considered as the worst of all people—then it is a possibility for anyone.

There is another detail that reinforces this interpretation. In verse 21:25, John makes it emphatic that the new Jerusalem is an *open-gated* city; its gates are never closed. Because there is no night in the new Jerusalem (it isn't like the old earth where the "light" sinks below the horizon just when it is getting dark and the gates of the walled city are closed), the gates are always and forever open. Open gates have no meaning at all unless there is traffic to use them. Rather certainly, there is no out traffic: Why would anyone want to leave?—and where is there to go, except to the lake of fire? The gates must be "open" for the sake of *incoming* traffic. John says as much in verses 24-27: "shall bring it into it," "shall be brought into it," "shall enter."

The theme in chapter 22 is "life." Anyone who has lived in arid country that requires irrigation will feel the force of the symbol of "the river of life." John envisions the river's source flowing from beneath "The thrown of God." The river then flows down "the middle of the city's street." There can't be a sphere of blessing and redemption outside the city, because redemption is in Jesus Christ—and that redemption is what

the city stands for. The world is the city, and the city is the world. God redeems and blesses everything in sight, everything redeemable.

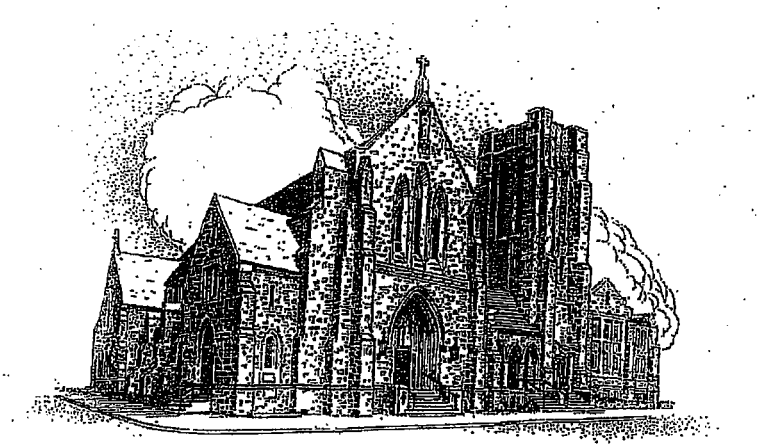
The *river* irrigates the *tree* of life; the tree man lost when he was driven out of Eden is his once more. Life, now, is nourishment as well as irrigation. The leaves of the trees of life that stood on either side of the river, we are told, make poultices effective for "the *healing* of the nations." Further, "every accursed thing shall disappear." John's language has again pointed us to something like "continued redemption" and a traffic into the city from out of the lake of fire.

But it would be wrong to assert that he teaches that *all people will be saved*, just as wrong to teach that *some people can never be saved*; he doesn't say that, either! We dare not be dogmatic as to what God *will* do, but even more, we dare not suggest that God is limited in what God *can* do. By failing to give unanimous support to any other alternative, the rest of the New Testament has the net effect of doing this, too.

Scripture may be wanting to tell us that this question regarding the ultimate destiny of individuals is not one we need to have answered, not one that affects our present opportunities and obligations, not one that needs to cause divisions between Christians and Christians. The rest safely can be left to God, because our "doctrine" won't change a thing in any case.

Now, when the last word of Revelation is found to be "Come!"—what does that tell us about the book itself? It tells us that Revelation is first and foremost an *evangelical appeal* and never ever a convoluted cryptogram with which to crystal-ball hidden events out of a secret future. John's interest is a revelation of Jesus Christ, the *gospel.* So, "Come to us, Lord Jesus!" the bride prays through the Spirit. The perpetually expectant community cries "Amen, Lord Jesus."

--Vernard Eller, *The Most Revealing Book of the Bible: Making sense out of Revelation*, Eerdmans, 1974, pp. 195-212.



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