

A Response to David Jay Webber's
"Our Righteousness before God... Is Revealed in the Gospel.
On this Righteousness Faith Relies"
The Emmaus Conference, Tacoma, Washington
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+ Herbert Mueller

Why does objective justification matter?
It's the heart of the Gospel, that's why. The concern, in my mind, is first and foremost PASTORAL. The Gospel is meant to comfort penitent sinners. Lutheran Theology in general, and this teaching in particular, that our salvation, our righteousness, our forgiveness, are objective realities, that is, outside of us, already completed, brings the greatest comfort to hurting and broken people, penitent sinners. Personally, this is why I am a Lutheran. The introduction to Article IV of the Apology reads: *"In this controversy the main doctrine of Christianity is involved; when it is properly understood, it illumines and magnifies the honor of Christ and brings to **pious consciences the abundant consolation** that they need. ... [For since our opponents, Melancthon writes] understand neither the forgiveness of sins nor faith nor grace nor righteousness, our opponents confuse this doctrine miserably, they obscure the glory and blessings of Christ, and they rob **pious consciences of the consolation offered them in Christ.**"¹*

In the early 1980s, we in the Missouri Synod experienced our own controversy on justification. This was the context for Pastor Webber's references to Dr. Robert Preus's work on "Objective Justification," and for the carefully worded statement of Dr. Walter A. Maier II that got him out of some hot water at that time. Out of that controversy, our Commission on Theology and Church Relations produced an excellent series of Sixty (60) Theses on Justification, of which theses 5 & 6 read:

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).²

Objective justification proclaims a reality outside us, finished, complete, in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Individual justifying faith is the Spirit-given, means of grace-worked trust that this gift is also "for me," as St. Paul writes: "...the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).

All this is for the maximum comfort of the penitent sinner. It brings an objective reality from outside of me, but is also FOR me in Christ. The art of applying this pastorally is the art of properly distinguishing Law and Gospel.

A Personal Story

"We don't want Lutheran theology. We want Biblical theology!" one of the Bible class members insisted. New to that particularly parish, having just accepted the call a few months before, I had been aware that the congregation needed to

¹ *Apology IV, 2-3, Tappert, p. 107.*

² *Theses on Justification, A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod, May 1983, pp. 4f.*

be drawn toward a greater understanding of our confession and practice.

Now we were in the Book of Revelation because that's what the class had asked for. It was an enjoyable class with lots of give and take. I had thought this group of members was beginning to develop a level of personal trust, but there still seemed to be something of a "disconnect" at times. I had just explained how in Lutheran theology we understand the Book of Revelation to include the whole time between Pentecost and the Second Coming of Christ.

"Pastor, we don't want Lutheran theology. We want Biblical theology!" she said. I responded, "For me, Lutheran theology and Biblical theology are one and the same. In fact, my commitment to our Lutheran confessions means that everything I believe and teach must be drawn from the Bible. Our Lutheran theology helps me preach and teach the Bible faithfully."

I'm a passionate Lutheran because the purpose of our teaching is always to point to Jesus, crucified and risen for us. Every article of Lutheran doctrine drawn from the Bible is designed to give the maximum comfort to the penitent sinner, to the one hurting and broken.

Over the next two years we called our class "Distinctive Features of Lutheranism." Essentially, we worked through the articles of the Augsburg Confession, seeking to illustrate how each article of Lutheran doctrine brings the greatest possible comfort to penitent sinners.

The Trinity (Article I)

We confess one God in three persons, not only to be faithful to the Biblical revelation but also to comfort one another with the promise that this one God created us, redeemed us and now by His Word dwells within us so that we might believe. It's all His, the work of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit for us. In a world of uncertainty, nothing is more sure than the name of the Blessed Trinity, the

only name that saves. What is even more comforting, He puts this name on US in our Baptism!

Original Sin (Article II)

If the problem we face with sin and death is something small and we only need a little help to overcome it ourselves, then our Savior is also quite small. But that's not how we experience life! None of us can stop sinning. None of us can decide not to die! That's because we are conceived and born in sin and cannot free ourselves. We need a Savior who has taken all our sins and conquered death for us! "*Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*" Paul writes (Romans 7:24-25).

The Person of Christ (Article III)

Jesus Christ unites in one person everything it takes to be God plus everything it takes to be human. This is the confession of the Church since the earliest days. At one and the same time fully God and fully human, in His death and resurrection Christ has done all for our salvation. It's all His work, not ours. If in our teaching we "fudge" on the personal union of the divine and human natures in Christ, we lose the comfort. A less than divine Jesus cannot save. A less than human Christ cannot take our place in death. In Jesus, God Himself takes on flesh (John 1:14) to die and rise so that we might be His forever.

Justification (Article IV)

What could be more comforting than the article of justification, that "... we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God through our merit, work or satisfactions, but that we

receive forgiveness of sin 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 in his sight..."³ We sinners are convicted by the Law and rely only on Christ and His finished work for us.

The Means of Grace and the Ministry *(Article V)*

The Holy Spirit does not jump on us in a dark alley somewhere, but comes through means. So that we might have this faith that justifies, God instituted the preaching office to bring the Word and Sacrament to people. We don't have to wonder where to find the grace of God. It's here in the Word and Sacrament. There is no wordless Spirit and no spiritless Word of God. Christ alone gives life by His means.

The New Obedience *(Article VI)*

We are not saved by our good works. We are saved by the good works of Christ for us, received through faith in Him. But living faith is always working, always doing things to serve God and the neighbor. Of course, God never needs our good works, but our neighbor always does. Though always tainted by sin here in this life, God sees our work through the cross of Jesus. God sees that we are justified in Christ.

The Church *(Article VII & VIII)*

The holy Christian Church is found wherever there are believers in Christ. What is necessary for the true unity of the

Church is not the right structure, but the Gospel purely taught and the Sacraments rightly done. This is a great comfort to the person distressed by all the mistakes and sins of churches and church leaders. It is the Word of Christ that saves, not the character of the preacher.

Baptism *(Article IX)*

God works in Baptism to bring the person (even an infant!) into His grace and unites the one baptized with the death and resurrection of Jesus (Romans 6:1ff). There is no clearer illustration of salvation by grace alone than infant Baptism. Were you baptized? Then you can always claim the promises of God and know they apply to you! This is not license to sin but freedom to live each day for Christ, daily repenting of sin and daily rising to new life in Christ.

Confession and Absolution (and Repentance) *(Article XI & XII)*

Our churches retain Confession and Absolution for the sake of the Absolution (both public and private), which is Christ Himself speaking through His called pastors to proclaim individually and personally the forgiveness of sins. This blessing also is received through faith. Every Christian is called to speak the same forgiveness within the vocations to which God has called him.

The Lord's Supper *(Article X)*

The Lord's Supper is the true Body and Blood of Christ given in, with and under the bread and wine, for us Christians to eat and to drink for the forgiveness of sins. The Body and Blood are given because Jesus promised to give them and are received by all who eat and drink. It is not our faith that makes Christ's Body and Blood present in the bread and wine, but the Word and promise of Christ. Those

³ Augsburg Confession IV, The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2000), p. 38ff.

who receive them in faith receive the blessings offered. Those who receive the Body and Blood apart from faith receive judgment, hence our careful practice of the Supper (see 1 Corinthians 11:17ff).

The Use of the Sacraments (*Article XIII*)

Some teach that the Sacraments bring benefit whether or not you believe the promise. Others teach that the Sacraments are simply ordinances we follow in order to do the will of God. However, we teach that the Sacraments are gifts of God's grace, that God is at work through them to bring the blessings of life and salvation and the forgiveness of sins. Therefore, the proper use of the Sacraments is to receive them in faith, trusting the promise of Christ to raise us to life and to feed us with His Body and Blood.

Objective realities received in faith. Maximum comfort in Christ, for hurting and broken people. That's what our confession is all about.⁴ This is why I appreciated that, after quoting the dogmatician Abraham Calov on the fact that Christ's resurrection is an actual absolution from sin, Pastor Webber writes:

Neither Gerhard nor Calov ever express themselves in this way – concerning Christ's absolution on our behalf, and our collective absolution in Christ – without also always recognizing the necessity of a personal absolution, and faith in the same, for the justification of the believing individual. And we should not be surprised in the least by this. The whole point of talking about *humanity's*

absolution in Christ's resurrection, is to lay the foundation for, and give substance to, the absolutions that are by necessity spoken to specific human beings here and now by their pastors. And faith is the only means by which these absolutions, and the justification in Christ that they convey, are received... [For] "the merits of Christ are *received* in no other way than through faith..."⁵

The doctrine of objective justification is the heart of our Lutheran practice of confession and absolution, whether public or private. For unless there is an objective reality, finished in Christ, the pastor really has nothing to give.

Personally, I could not have functioned as a pastor or Synod official without a Beichtvater, a "father-confessor." You want to see some real sinners – come to my office. See me. I need someone who can peel away the sinful pride to get at my central idolatry, and then speak the words Christ has given: "Your sin is forgiven you!" It's not, your sin will be forgiven when you receive this, and believe it. But, now, in Christ, your sin IS forgiven, here and now. It is finished! Christ has put away your sin. All is accomplished.

I also recommend to pastors that they seek out a father-confessor. How are you able to hear the confession of others if you yourself are not a penitent? How are you able to bear the burdens of the pastoral office, you, a poor miserable sinner, unless you regularly hear in the voice of another the voice of Christ Himself – "your sin is forgiven?" When I make this recommendation, the biggest question I get is – how can I find someone I can trust? You ask two questions: Do you have a confessor? Does never mean never? If he answers "yes" to both, trust him.

⁴ This is the heart and core of our confession as Lutherans! What we just did with the first 13 articles of the Augsburg Confession you can do with all the other parts of the Book of Concord. Read them with an eye toward answering this question: How will this help me bring the greatest possible Gospel comfort to the penitent sinners in my congregation?

⁵ David Jay Webber, "***Our Righteousness before God... Is Revealed in the Gospel. On this Righteousness Faith Relies,***" a paper presented to The Emmaus Conference, Tacoma, Washington, April 22-23, 2015, p. 36.

You see, when you enter that confessional compact, “Dear Pastor, will you hear my confession?” And he says, “yes, proceed,” and you spill it out, repentant, the confessor may help you see the full gravity of your sin, may apply the Scriptures, but when the sin is confessed, the pastor who hears the confession has no choice. He is commanded by Christ, under orders, so to speak, to announce forgiveness. He cannot do anything else. You hear his word in the certain promise of the risen Lord Jesus Christ: “If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven” (John 20:23).

How can He say that? Christ is the One “*who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification. Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ*” (Romans 4:25-5:1). That’s how!

Objective Realities

These are objective, finished realities. The pastor does not speak of potential forgiveness, but he applies forgiveness accomplished in the shed blood of Christ. From the cross, Christ cried out – “It is finished.” *Tetelesthai*. That’s perfect tense – action completed in the past with effects that continue into the future. Maximum comfort for penitent sinners.

So, our teaching on justification, with a careful distinction between its objective and subjective aspects, is above all PASTORAL, for the sake of hurting and broken people. Pastor Webber explains:

The objective forgiveness of humanity’s sins in Christ is not a remote or detached truth as far as the conscience of the individual Christian is concerned. Even though it involves all the people for whom Christ died – and that is everyone! – it is pondered by each believer in a very personal way. Luther gives evangelical direction to our meditation and reflection

in this respect, by telling us that Jesus made purification “not for the sins of others but for *our* sins.” Each of us, in our personal repentance and faith, is able to say with relief and joy that purification was made by *my* Savior for *my* sins. A conscience that is properly comforted by the gospel no longer fears, therefore, that this purification was probably made for the sins of others, who are more worthy, and not for my sins.⁶

July 1986 included what was for me just about the worst time of my pastoral life: four terrible funerals in the space of 10 days. Johnny was 55, Mark was 18, Bobby, 21, and the worst, Rick, 31 and father of two.

The following Sunday the epistle in the lectionary was Romans 8:28-30 – Pentecost 10 in Series A – “*God works all things for good...*” Oh yeah? I started my sermon. Yes, if God brought good out of the death and burial of His Son, by raising Him from the dead, God is quite capable to bring good, even now.

In that circumstance, I learned experientially what I already knew theoretically. I have nothing in myself to give. When Vern and Wilma were picking out a casket for their 18 year old son, they didn’t care what I thought. They wanted to know what God thought. And all we had was the objective reality of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The basic outline of the proclamation of the Apostles in the Book of Acts also shows this:

- Prophecy is fulfilled in Jesus
- Jesus is attested to you by many signs and wonders
- He was delivered up according to God’s plan
- You crucified Him, but God raised Him up

⁶ Webber, p. 17.

- Just as David prophesied that death could not hold Him
- So God raised Him up from the dead
- Of that we are witnesses
- What you see here is the fulfillment of prophecy
- God has made Him both Lord and Christ
- What shall we do? Repent and be baptized every one of you, for the forgiveness of sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

This is the apostolic pattern. Everything hangs on the resurrection. St. Paul writes:

*If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But **in fact Christ has been raised from the dead**, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. (1 Corinthians 15:19-20).*

Christ and His resurrection are the guarantee of our resurrection, the guarantee we can trust the promises of God. At the core of these promises is the doctrine of justification. We are declared righteous in the death and resurrection of Jesus, and this great blessing is received through faith alone.

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

Romans 5: *"As one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men" (5:18).*

Romans 8: *"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (8:1).*

So the Gospel is not the possibility of forgiveness, but real forgiveness of real sins, accomplished on the cross, and delivered in the Word proclaimed, the water connected to the Word and the true body and blood of Jesus placed on my lips. An objective reality coming to me from outside myself and my thoughts.

Not – you might be justified if..., but you are justified, in Christ.

Not – you might have peace with God, but you have it, in Christ.

Not – you might be raised from the dead, but Jesus' promise, that He *"should lose nothing of all that [the Father] has given [Him] but raise it up at the last day"* (John 6:39).

That's why I appreciate Pastor Webber's reference to Dr. Robert Preus's piece on "Objective Justification."

According to all of Scripture Christ made a full atonement for the sins of all mankind. Atonement (at-one-ment) means reconciliation. If God was not reconciled by the saving work of Christ, if His wrath against sin was not appeased by Christ's sacrifice, if God did not respond to the perfect obedience and suffering and death of His Son for the sins of the world by forgiveness, by declaring the sinful world to be righteous in Christ – if all this were not so, if something remains to be done by us or through us or in us, then there is no finished atonement. But Christ said, "It is finished." And God raised Him from the dead and justified Him, pronounced Him, the sin bearer, righteous (1 Timothy 3:16), and thus in Him pronounced the entire world of sinners righteous (Romans 4:25).⁷

⁷ Webber, p. 18, quoting Robert Preus, "Objective Justification."

Outside Us, But For Me

These objective realities accomplished outside us are delivered to us in the means of grace. That means they do not depend on my feeling, my mental state, my capacity to comprehend. Let me briefly tell you about Beverly. When Beverly first came to see me, I realized I could not see her alone. Her husband needed to be there as well. So they would come together. She had huge self-esteem issues. She truly hated herself, for what she had done and what had happened to her. She just could not believe she was forgiven. Her sins were too many, too big, too bad.

Over the course of time, several passages of Scripture began to help:

Isaiah 61: *“He has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness... as a bride adorns herself with her jewels” (61:10).*

Ephesians 5: Jesus presents *“the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle, or any such thing...” (5:27).*

Revelation 21: *“prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” (21:2).*

She came to know that she was part of Christ’s bride, daily washed clean in His blood. That her self-loathing was actually idolatry turned inside out. That she could begin to see ALL her sin nailed to the cross with Jesus, that God forgave them all (past tense) *“by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.” (Colossians 2:14).* That her state before God depended, not on her feeling, but on the fact, the objective reality, that Christ covered her with the seamless robe of His righteousness. That her forgiveness was objective, finished, outside of us, given to us. There’s nothing we need to add, but it’s delivered to us in the means of grace.

To believe in Jesus is to say with St. Paul, that Christ *“gave Himself for me” (Galatians 2:20).*

In his “Great Galatians” commentary, Luther makes it very personal:

Therefore read these words “*me*” and “*for me*” with great emphasis, and accustom yourself to accepting this “*me*” with a sure faith and applying it to yourself. Do not doubt that you belong to the number of those who speak this “*me.*” Christ did not love only Peter and Paul and give Himself for them, but the same grace belongs and comes to us as to them; therefore we are included in this “*me.*”⁸

Pastor Webber points us to Luther’s simple yet profound distinction between forgiveness won, and forgiveness distributed:

[Luther:] We treat of the forgiveness of sins in two ways. First, how it is achieved and won. Second, how it is distributed and given to us. Christ has achieved it on the cross, it is true. But he has not distributed or given it on the cross. He has not won it in the supper or sacrament. There he has distributed and given it through the Word, as also in the gospel, where it is preached. He has won it once for all on the cross. But the distribution takes place continuously, before and after, from the beginning to the end of the world.⁹

Luther further explains:

But faith must be taught correctly, namely, that by it you are so cemented to Christ that He and you are as one person, which cannot be separated but remains attached to Him forever and declares: “I am as Christ.” And Christ, in turn, says: “I am as that sinner who is attached to Me, and I to him. For by faith we are joined together into one flesh and one bone.” Thus Eph.

⁸ Luther, Martin; Pelikan, Jaroslav Jan (Hrsg.) ; Oswald, Hilton C. (Hrsg.) ; Lehmann, Helmut T. (Hrsg.): *Luther's Works, Vol. 26 : Lectures on Galatians, 1535, Chapters 1-4.* Saint Louis : Concordia Publishing House, 1999, c1963 (Luther's Works 26), S. 26:179 (American Edition).

⁹ Webber, p. 33.

5:30 says: "We are members of the body of Christ, of His flesh and of His bones," in such a way that this faith couples Christ and me more intimately than a husband is coupled to his wife.¹⁰

Law and Gospel

Lutheran Biblical Theology is not logical. If anyone is saved, God receives 100% of the credit, because Christ did it all for you. If you are damned, 100% of the blame belongs to you, because you rejected the gift. Our purpose is not to accord with human logic, but to comfort penitent sinners. Apart from the proper distinction of Law and Gospel, Pastor Webber tells us, none of this makes sense.

Remember that the man crying in the wilderness, who said that the wrath of God remains on the one who does not obey the Son, is the same man crying in the wilderness who said this, in regard to that Son: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29, ESV). Is John contradicting himself? Or does John understand the distinction between law and gospel – that is, the distinction between how God looks at and addresses the *fallen* world in and unto itself, *apart from* Christ; and how God looks at and addresses the *redeemed* world, *in and through* Christ?¹¹

God has one way of operating. He kills with the law, so that He can make us alive in Christ. He condemns so that He can raise us up. Knowing which to apply in every situation is part of the art of being a pastor. When forgiveness is proclaimed to the penitent, what is loosed here, forgiven here, is also forgiven, loosed in heaven (Matthew 16:18-20). But when you tell the impenitent sinner his sin is bound to him, that is also an objective fact, the same in heaven as also

here. For the sin we hold onto and refuse to let go of sticks with us. We are not to judge the person – only God can do that – but we are to warn the sinner that anything you refuse to acknowledge as sin will stick to you forever until you give it up to Jesus in confession.

Conclusion

The doctrine of justification, especially the distinction between objective and subjective justification, is forever PASTORAL. It is the hub and axle of our teaching, the thing that holds it together, and the point around which everything turns. The Apology of the Augsburg Confession reinforces this:

Therefore, whenever we speak about justifying faith, we must understand that these three elements belong together: the promise itself; the fact that the promise is free; and the merits of Christ as the payment and atoning sacrifice [propitiation]. The promise is received by faith; the word "free" excludes our merits and means that the blessing is offered only through mercy; the merits of Christ are the payment because there must be some definite atoning sacrifice for our sins. ... Therefore, every time mercy is mentioned, we must bear in mind that faith is also required, for it receives the promised mercy. Conversely, every time we speak about faith, we want the object [of faith] to be understood as well, namely, the promised mercy. For faith does not justify or save because it is a worthy work in and of itself, but only because it receives the promised mercy.¹²

In his conclusion, Pastor Webber explains:

This gospel does not demand faith in order to be fully true, but it creates the faith that it requires, as it bestows Christ –

¹⁰ Luther, AE 26:168.

¹¹ Webber, p. 7.

¹² Apology IV.53ff, Book of Concord, Kolb/Wengert, p. 128f.

the Justified and the Justifier – upon those who hear it. The justification that is offered in the gospel – to all who hear the gospel – is not a pregnant potentiality to be *actualized in* faith. It is a finished reality – in Christ – to be *received by* faith.

If I do not have *Christ*, then I do not have my *justification*. If I remain in this Christless state until I die, then I die a lost man, dead in trespasses and sins, under the wrath and condemnation of God, and without hope. But if I *have* Christ, then I *have* my justification – because if I have *Christ*, I have the *world's* justification. And I am a part of the world for which Christ died and rose again.¹³

This message begs to be proclaimed for all. It is the heart of what it means to be Lutheran. Justification is not a museum piece from the past, but a vibrant, living message to be preached, proclaimed, taught, told, spoken, spread, communicated, demonstrated... all in ways that 21st Century sinners might hear and know that it is for them.

The Large Catechism says:

*Neither you nor I could ever know anything of Christ, or believe in him and take him as our Lord, unless these were first offered to us and bestowed on our hearts through the preaching of the Gospel by the Holy Spirit. The work is finished and completed, Christ has acquired and won the treasure for us by his sufferings, death, and resurrection, etc. But if the work remained hidden and no one knew of it, it would have been all in vain, all lost. **In order that this treasure might not be buried but put to use and enjoyed, God has caused the Word to be published and proclaimed, in which he has given the Holy Spirit to offer and apply to us this treasure of salvation.***¹⁴

That's why, if anyone sets doctrine and mission, confession or outreach against each other, they are misunderstanding both at a fundamental level. So to those who are interested in outreach, we say, that's good! It is our Lord's command to take the Gospel to all creation. Now please **be sure** of what you are proclaiming by living faithfully in our confession.

And to those who claim to be "confessional," we say, that's good! "You shall know the truth," Jesus said, "and the truth shall set you free." (John 8:32). Now don't keep that to yourself, but **get out there** in the world and **confess this truth** for as many as will hear you! Scatter the Lord's good seed (His Word) wherever and whenever you can! The world is full of people who need to hear the Law of God which convicts of sin and then to hear over and over again the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins and our justification in Christ.

Thank you, Pastor Webber for helping us do exactly that.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

+ Herbert Mueller
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The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod
Friday after Easter, 2015

¹³ Webber, pp. 49f.

¹⁴Tappert, p. 415.