This article will review some of the teachings of Lutheranism offering proof of the claim that the sixteenth century reformation failed to achieve a return to the teachings of Scripture within the framework of sola scriptura.

Since 1850 the Lutheran Church in the US has experienced an ongoing controversy over justification. Currently the two main rivals are the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS) and the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS). One central issue is the chronology of faith in relation to justification. The LCMS employs a German slogan to express its position; “Erst muss der Mensch glauben, dann wird er gerechtfertigt (first must the man believe, then he becomes justified.)” The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) has a preference for Latin. “Justificatio non post fidem, sed per fidem” (Justification not after faith, but through faith.)

For many years the primary spokesperson for WELS was Siegbert Becker and his version of “justificatio non post fidem” (through faith) sounds remarkably like “justificatio sine fide” (without faith.) Judge for yourself. Becker taught that “the term objective justification means that a sinner is justified by God whether he believes it or not.” (Sermon, Southeast Wisconsin District of the WELS, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, June 12, 1984)

The statement by Becker, “a sinner is justified by God whether he believes it or not” contradicts the teachings of Jesus that the unbeliever “stands condemned because they have not believed”¹ and “God’s wrath remains on them.”² If Scripture is taken seriously Protestantism is in serious need of reinventing itself. (¹John 3:18, ³3:36)

It turns out that the WELS position, “justificatio non post fidem,” for reasons never explained, somehow allows them to teach universal objective justification “sine fide” (without faith) which makes their claim to teach justification “per fidem” meaningless. Since in the Becker’s writings “justificatio non post fidem” translates to mean “justificatio sine fide” the WELS slogan of “righteousness through faith” turns out to be code for “righteousness by grace without faith.”

The problem with the debate between LCMS and WELS is that it is centered on wrong thinking. In biblical teaching the question of whether faith comes before or after justification in terms of chronology is sidestepped by the fact that the gift of faith to the unbeliever “stands condemned because they have not believed”¹ and “God’s wrath remains on them.”² If anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to Him.” (Romans 8:9)

Initial justification consists in turning an unbeliever into a believer and in this sense a justification of the “ungodly” takes place. In his early writings Luther wrote. “Therefore faith is an active difficult powerful thing. If we want to consider what it really is, it is something done to us rather than something we do.” (LW, 11, 266f.)

In the biblical paradigm justification begins when the sinner is in a state of unbelief and becomes a continuous process of rescuing sinners from their constitutional unbelief so that faith in Jesus becomes a perpetual habit. And everything that results from faith, forgiveness, victory over sin and final glorification comes under the heading of justification.

According to a recognized authoritative source “In English translation the words righteousness or justification are used to translate the Greek dikaiosyne.” (K. I. Onesti and M. T. Brauch; Righteousness, Righteousness of God, Dictionary of Paul and His Letters: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship (1993) p.828)

In Paul’s writings dikaiosyne (justification) covers forgiveness, deliverance from the power of sin, and the resurrection at the parousia. In Galatian 5:5 Paul identifies the resurrection as a future aspect of “justification.” “For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the justification (dikaiosynē) for which we hope.” In Roman 6:7 he speaks of justification as deliverance from sin. “For we know that our old self was crucified with Him so… that we should no longer be slaves to sin because anyone who has died has been justified (dikaioō) from sin.” (Romans 6:6-7)

According to Luther Jesus’ “resurrection from dead is our justification.”³ Also; “In His sufferings Christ made our sins known and was crucified for them. By His resurrection He makes us righteous and frees from all sin.”⁴ Our justification
is not yet complete … It is still under construction. *It shall, however, be completed in the resurrection of the dead.* "3

(WA 39:2; 237, 25, 2The Sermons of Martin Luther, Vol.2 p.185, 3 LW, 34, 152)

The great failure of reformation teaching was that in its final form it shifted the focus from Jesus to the plight of the sinner in such a way that Jesus’ role in salvation beyond the cross was severely abridged and a stand-alone forgiveness became the entire meaning of the atonement. Luther’s initial emphasis was on Christ’s presence within the believer as the internal source of a new identity. For both the older Luther and his followers the grounds for justification shifted from union with Jesus to the cross as an historic event which provided a universal and unconditional sacramental absolution.

In the new paradigm it was not union with Christ which accomplished justification but His “works” and “merits” functioning in separation from Jesus Himself by means of “forensic imputation.” In the reformation tradition Jesus’ contribution to salvation is limited to His meritorious life (active obedience) and death (passive obedience) so that Jesus’ crucifixion, His alleged “finished work of the cross” terminated His contribution to saving sinners.

“[Christ’s] obedience merits an eternal reward for us … *all we have to do is to accept and appropriate his finished substitutionary work* … as the legal and meritorious foundation on which our entire hope is built.” (Archibald Hodge, The Atonement pp. 230-231)

In Protestant thinking Jesus’ death on the cross becomes a replacement for a personal acceptance of Jesus Himself. Biblical forgiveness requires union with the resurrected Jesus as the “Spirit of Christ” who becomes our higher self and new identity. For that reason the cross alone was not a means of atonement. Paul says, “if Christ has not been raised, *our preaching is useless and so is your faith.*” (1Corinthians 15:14)

In its final form the reformation gospel requires neither faith in Jesus or union with Jesus but only a cognitive acceptance that universal forgiveness is an accomplished fact, disconnected from all moral conditions, and humanities birthright.

“If forgiveness were dependent on faith in the sense that God does not forgive until we believe, we would always have to be sure that we are believers before we could be sure that we are forgiven. We may not see how dangerous that is … God has told me that in Christ He has forgiven the sins of the world. *My faith or my unbelief, will neither make God's Word true or untrue … Even if I am the most ungodly, the most wicked man on earth, I know that He has justified and forgiven me. To that promise I will cling, even if my heart tells me that I am without faith, without love, without hope. I know that God is greater than my heart and knows all things.*”(Becker, Universal Justification, pp. 7-8)

The Lutheran position (WELS) is that anyone who does not believe in unconditional universal justification is a heretic and a blasphemer. According to Melanchthon; “If anybody, therefore, is not sure that he is forgiven, he denies that God has sworn to the truth; a more horrible blasphemy than this cannot be imagined.” (Apology of the Augsburg Confession Art. XII, par. 94)

Both the Lutherans and Calvinists promote the thesis that “good works are not necessary” for justification.

“On this subject there has never been any real difference of opinion among Protestants. … *It was universally admitted that good works are not necessary to our justification.*”1 “When Lutherans teach that the sinner is justified by grace alone, they mean that good works have absolutely nothing to do with the sinner’s justification.”2 (Charles Hodge Systematic Theology Vol. 3. p.238, Rolf Preus, Do Lutherans and Roman Catholics Agree on Justification?)

Within Lutheranism this thesis became the primary article of faith and brought the reformation to a moral collapse.

“After we understood that good works were not necessary for justification, we became much more remiss and colder in the practice of good … And if we could return today to the prior state of things and if the doctrine that affirms the necessity of doing good works could be revived, our eagerness and promptness in doing good works would be quite different.” (WA. 27, 443)

Jesus taught; “he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.”1 “If you want to enter life, keep the commandments.”2 These sayings are difficult to find in reformation writings. They have no impact on reformation teachings and much is written that repudiates them. (1John 3:16 NASB, ESV, 2Matthew 19:17)
Sad to say, the one who lead the charge attacking the ethical demands of Jesus to keep the commandments was Luther.

“God only obliges you to believe and to confess. In everything else, He leaves you free to do whatever you want, without any danger to your conscience.”¹ “Do not ask anything of your conscience; and if it speaks, do not listen to it; if it insists, stifle it, amuse yourself; if necessary, commit some good big sin, in order to drive it away. Conscience is the voice of Satan, and it is necessary always to do just the contrary of what Satan wishes.”² (¹WA 12: 131ff, ²Cited, J. Dollinger, La Reforme et les résultats qu'elle a produits. (Trans. E. Perrot, Paris, Gaume, 1848-49), Vol. III, p. 248)

“From this you should learn to speak most contumaciously about the Law in the matter of justification. … [T]he Law is nothing but the dregs of all evils, heresies, and blasphemies; for all it does is to increase sin, accuse, frighten, threaten with death, and disclose God as a wrathful Judge who damn sinners. If you are wise, therefore, you will put Moses, that lisper and stammerer, far away with his Law; and you will not let his terrors and threats affect you in any way at all. Here he should be as suspect to you as an excommunicated and condemned heretic, worse than the pope and the devil, and therefore not to be listened to at all.” (LW 26:364-365)

In a sermon preached in 1532 Luther described the effect of his own teachings on his moral conduct. “As for me, I confess, and many others could undoubtedly make the same confession, that I am as neglectful in discipline as in zeal, much more negligent now than under the papacy. Today, no one has the zeal for the Gospel that they used to have in the past.” (Saemtliche Werke, ed. de Plochman-Irmischer, 28 (2), p. 353)

Luther wrote concerning his supporters; “they are seven times worse than they were before. After preaching our doctrine, men have given themselves over to stealing, lying, trickery, debauchery, drunkenness, and every kind of vice. We have expelled one devil (the papacy) and seven worse have entered.” (Martin Luther’s Sämtliche Werke, Polemische Deutsche Schriften, Johann Konrad Irmischer, Erlangen, 1833, Vol. 28, p.763)

The tension in the gospel is not between guilt and forgiveness as Protestant teaching tells it but between life and death. Scripture teaches we only survive death on account of Jesus’ resurrection and when He becomes our new life. “When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.”¹ “Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.”² “Christ Jesus has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.”³ (¹Colossians 3:4, ²John 5:12, ³Timothy 1:10)

In Ezekiel 18:9 God spelt out the precondition for being accounted righteous. “He who follows My decrees and faithfully keeps My laws that man is righteous.” “I will judge each of you according to your own ways, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit.” (Ezekiel 18:30-31)

Jesus taught; “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven.”¹ Paul taught likewise. “God will repay each person according to what they have done. To those who by persistence in doing good … He will give eternal life.”² Also, “It is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous.”³ (¹Matthew 7:21, ²Romans 2:6-8, ³Romans 2:13)

The biblical call to obedience is not a call to frenetic law-keeping. It is a call to loyalty to God conveyed by the Hebrew word 'emuwnah which expresses deep devotion. The best English translation of ‘emuwnah is loyalty but because Hebrew employs concrete forms of speech loyalty is defined as “faithfulness” albeit ‘emuwnah is actually an inner impulse which corresponds to what Paul describes as “the obedience that comes from faith.” (Romans 16:26)

‘Emuwnah is not a personal achievement; it is a gift from God. “I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. Then they will follow My decrees and be careful to keep My laws. (‘emuwnah) They will be My people, and I will be their God.” (Ezekiel 11:19-20)

The “faithfulness” God requires is a gift before it becomes an obligation. Whereas ‘emuwnah is manifested as obedience its primary dynamic is a reaching out for God in an act of abandonment to His mercy. This is because the instinct behind ‘emuwnah is “confidence” (mibtach) in God. In this sense ‘emuwnah is not merely an act of obedience, it is a sphere of existence lived out in total trust that God is “the compassionate and gracious God” He claims to be. (¹Exodus 34:6)