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Chapter 7

“Learning from Patristic Christology”

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[A]Christ, the Article on Which the Church Stands or Falls

According to Lutheran teaching the church stands or falls on the article of justification.¹ As much as I love the Pauline teaching of justification, that we are clothed with and stand in the imputed righteousness of Christ, I think a case can be made from Jesus’ own lips that Christology, not justification, is the article upon which the church stands or falls. The Lord asked Peter, “But who do you say that I am?” In response to the confession of Peter, that he was “the Christ, the Son of the living God,” Jesus said, “Upon this rock I will build My church” (Matt 16:15-18, NASB). The beloved disciple John also recognized that Christology was of the utmost importance, saying, “Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father; the one who confesses the Son has the Father also.” And later, “He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life” (1 John 2:23; 5:12, NASB). What is the place of orthodox Christology in evangelicalism today? How can patristic Christology inform our faith?

In the late twentieth century, as liberals were debating over whether the Jesus of the gospels was the Jesus of history, evangelicalism was experiencing its own

¹ Martin Luther, *Exposition on Psalm 130:4*: “. . . quia isto articulo stante stat Ecclesia, ruente ruit Ecclesia” (cited in Anderson et al., *Justification by Faith*, 320 n. 51). See also the Lutheran *Smalcald Articles* 2.1 and *Book of Concord* 292, in which justification is called the “first and chief article” (as cited in *Joint Declaration*, 9).