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Exegetical Notes and Comments on Psalm 69

Michael Thom

Introduction

The psalm that we have before us for study is one of the Messianic psalms. In it the Lord uses the words of the psalmist to point forward to Christ. This psalm pictures especially the sufferings that Jesus endured at the hands of His enemies. According to its title, it was written by David, who is so often set forth in Scripture as a type of Christ.

Aside from Psalm 22, this is the psalm quoted most often in the New Testament. New Testament quotations and references include the following:

1. John 15:25, where Jesus explains the animosity of the Jewish leaders toward Himself as a fulfillment of the words: "They hated me without a cause" (69:4).
2. John 2:17 – When Jesus drove the buyers and sellers out of the temple, the disciples remembered that it was written: "Zeal for Your house has eaten me up" (69:9).
3. Romans 15:3 quotes the second part of 69:9. There Paul holds Christ forth as our example of not pleasing ourselves but living for the good of our neighbor. Rather than pleasing Himself, Jesus bore the reproaches of those who reproached His Father, so that we might have forgiveness.
4. When Judas Iscariot committed suicide, the place where he fell was called the field of blood. It was a desolate place, with no one dwelling there. In Acts 1:16 Peter said: "Men and brethren, this Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke before by the mouth of David concerning Judas." Then in 1:20 he quotes 69:25.
5. In Romans 11:9f. the Apostle Paul interprets the Lord's judgment upon Israel according to the flesh as a fulfillment of 69:22-23.
6. Matthew 27:27-30 – the mockery of the soldiers in the Praetorium (69:13).
7. Matthew 27:34 – the offer of vinegar mixed with gall (69:21).

For our study we will divide the psalm into sections as follows:

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| verses 1-4 | – A description of the psalmist's miserable condition. |
| verses 5-12 | – He is hated unjustly, suffering for the Lord's sake. |
| verses 13-18 | – His plea for deliverance. |
| verses 19-21 | – He receives no pity in his suffering. |
| verses 22-28 | – His prayer that the Lord will put out His indignation upon his enemies. |

- verses 29-33 – He looks forward to offering a sacrifice of thanks for his deliverance.
 verses 34-36 – He looks toward the future in hope.

Verses 1-4 – A description of the psalmist’s miserable condition.

- 1 Save me, O God! For the waters have come up to my neck.
- 2 I sink in deep mire, where there is no standing;
I have come into deep waters, where floods overflow me.
3. I am weary with my crying; my throat is dry;
My eyes fail while I wait for my God.
- 4 Those who hate me without a cause are more than the hairs of my head;
They are mighty who would destroy me, being my enemies wrongfully;
Though I have stolen nothing, I still must restore it.

1. “Save me, O God! For the waters have come up to my neck.” The “waters” referred to here are calamities, which have come upon him like a flood and dragged him into their vortex. These calamities were ones that threatened his very life, for he says that the waters have come up “to my soul,” עַד־נַפְשׁ. Jonah used the same phrase to describe his situation after being thrown into the sea; he said the waters encompassed him עַד־נַפְשׁ. The NASB reflects the sense well by translating: “The waters have threatened my life.”

2. The mire (יֵין) is the deep mud or clay that is found at the bottom of the depths, at the bottom of a river, or at the bottom of a dungeon. One who is sinking into the mire is in a desperate situation. He is unable to gain sound footing and move to a place of safety. If left in this condition, he will die.

The second half of this verse speaks of the deep waters of the sea: “I have come into deep waters, where floods overflow me.” When the deep waters are flowing overhead, death is nigh at hand. The noun שַׁבְּלַת (flood) and the verb שָׁטַף (to overflow, gush out, inundate, overwhelm) suggest an **overpowering** stream. To be plunged beneath such a stream is a desperate, life-and-death situation. It is a situation from which man in his weakness cannot save himself.

The wrath of God was a mighty flood that rushed upon and enveloped our Savior. Jesus could have avoided the sufferings that that flood brought upon Him, but for our sakes He chose not to. It was because He endured the flood that we can be confident that the flood of God’s wrath will not overflow us.

3. “I am weary with my crying.” What kind of crying is David speaking of here? It is not weeping or shedding tears (that would be בִּכּוּה) but crying out, calling, קָרָא. In his desperate situation he has been calling out to the Lord for help and deliverance, so much so that he has become physically and emotionally weary. His throat (גְּרוֹן—according to Hebrew thought, the organ of speech) was dry, so that he could no longer call with full voice.

He also speaks of his eyes failing him (כָּלוּ עֵינָי). This expression occurs often in the Old Testament. Sometimes the failing is due to weeping, as in Lamentations 2:11. Once it is due to physical exhaustion (Jer. 14:6). In this case the psalmist has been looking steadfastly for God to come in answer to his prayers and deliver him. His eyes grow weary and are spent.

The opening words of this psalm give us a picture of a man surrounded by trouble. He is in danger of being overwhelmed. In his trouble he turns to the Lord for help and deliverance. He sets his hope on the Lord, whom he calls “my God,” for he believes that the Lord is his good and gracious God. He waits for the Lord to answer his prayers, but the answer seems long in coming. He becomes weary.

Many a child of God has experienced this same thing. The Lord allows His children at times to go through the deep waters, where life is difficult, where the burdens of life seem unbearable, where God Himself seems to have turned His back on them. But let them do as the psalmist did here. Let them cry out to the Lord and await His help. Then they will experience the marvelous deliverance the Lord promises through Isaiah: “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. . . . For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior” (43:2,3).

4. David uses two parallel verbs (עָצַם and רָבַח) to say that his enemies are many. עָצַם may mean “to be strong or powerful,” but here the context seems to point toward “be strong **in number**, be numerous.” This is how the NIV translates it: “Those who hate me without reason outnumber the hairs of

my head; **many** (עֲצָמִים) are my enemies without cause . . .” NKJV and NASB translate “strong.” Luther has *mächtig*. עֲצָמִים occurs in similar contexts in Psalm 38:19 and 40:5,12.

It was certainly true of David that there were many who hated him and that their hatred was without cause, undeserved. We think of King Saul, who sought David’s life, yet admitted: “You are more righteous than I; for you have rewarded me with good, whereas I have rewarded you with evil” (1 Sam. 24:20). Remember also the incident involving the men of Keilah, who would have handed David over to Saul, even though David had protected them from the Philistines (1 Sam. 23). David had foreign enemies. He had domestic enemies. Some of his close counselors became enemies. Even within his own family he had enemies. They were “more than the hairs of my head.”

If David had **many** enemies, Jesus had **multitudes** of enemies. Spurgeon: “From His cradle to His cross, beginning with Herod and not ending with Judas, He had foes without number” (*Treasury of David*, 2:177). Simeon had prophesied that Jesus would be “a sign which will be spoken against” (Luke 2:34). Jesus’ enemies include many who are very open and forceful in their opposition to Him and His Church. But all who are still standing outside Christ’s Kingdom are opposed to Him. “The carnal mind is **enmity** against God” (Rom. 8:7). Paul writes: “**Many** walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the **enemies** of the cross of Christ” (Phil. 3:18).

And it is totally without cause that they hate our Lord. Jesus asked the Jews: “Which of you convicts Me of sin?” (John 8:46). None of them could. He challenged the high priest’s officer: “If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil” (John 18:23). Again, no answer. Jesus committed no sin. Any and all hatred against Him is wholly unjustified.

“Though I have stolen nothing, I still must restore it.” The picture is that of a person who is forced to pay the penalty for a crime of which he is not guilty. Though Jesus committed no sin, still He was wounded and bruised, still He bore chastisement and stripes. Spurgeon: “In reference to our Lord, it may be truly said that he restores what he took not away; for he gives back to the injured honour of God a recompense, and to man his lost happiness, though the insult of the one and the fall of the other were neither of them, in any sense, his doings” (177).

Verses 5-12 – He is hated unjustly, suffering for the Lord’s sake.

- 5 O God, You know my foolishness; and my sins are not hidden from You.
- 6 Let not those who wait for You, O Lord God of hosts, be ashamed because of me;
Let not those who seek You be confounded because of me, O God of Israel.
- 7 Because for Your sake I have borne reproach; shame has covered my face.
- 8 I have become a stranger to my brothers, and an alien to my mother’s children;
- 9 Because zeal for Your house has eaten me up,
And the reproaches of those who reproach You have fallen on me.
- 10 When I wept and chastened my soul with fasting, that became my reproach.
- 11 I also made sackcloth my garment; I became a byword to them.
- 12 Those who sit in the gate speak against me, and I am the song of the drunkards.

5. David was hated without a cause. He was being forced to make payment for a crime he had not committed. But he was not without sin. He confesses himself to be a sinner. God knows his folly (אִוְלָתָא) and his sinful acts (אֲשָׁמָה). אִוְלָתָא does not refer to mental stupidity (our idea of foolishness), but to moral corruption and even insolence. It is the attitude of the one who feels he has all the answers, will not accept godly instruction, and therefore makes predicaments for himself, is overbearing in his attitude, is even licentious. David sees some of this in himself.

6. Nevertheless, he prays that his case will not bring shame to those who wait for the Lord: “Let not those who wait for You, O Lord God of hosts, be ashamed because of me.” David describes God’s people as “those who wait for You” and “those who seek You.” Waiting for the Lord (קָוָה) means enduring patiently in confident hope that God will decisively act for the salvation of His people. If God now failed to act to help David in his trouble, how would this affect these others who were placing their trust in Him? They would be discouraged and disappointed. The mockery of their enemies would ring in their ears. For their sake, and not because of any merit on David’s part, David implores the Lord’s help.

What wonderful concern David shows for the spiritual welfare of his brothers and sisters in the Lord. In this concern also he is a type of Christ. When Jesus was betrayed, tried, and crucified, all of His

disciples were offended. They were shaken in their faith in Him. But Jesus was full of concern that His being forsaken by God and reviled by men should not cause them to fall away from Him completely. To this end He tenderly instructed them at the Last Supper, saying: “These things I have spoken to you, that you should not be made to stumble” (John 16:1).

7. In this verse David describes another aspect of the suffering he was enduring: his enemies were casting blame, reproach, upon him. They were speaking of him as if he had done some great wrong. In so doing, they influenced others to think ill of him. Thus, “shame covered my face.” כְּלִמָּה is the shame that attends public humiliation. An example of such shame is found in 1 Samuel 20:34, where Saul is said to have done shame to David by maligning his character to Jonathan. To be charged with wrongdoing brought its own shame, whether the charge was correct or not.

Why was David being subjected to such humiliation? It was because he was “a man after the Lord’s own heart,” a man who was dedicated to serving the Lord, listening to His Word, and obeying. When the ungodly ran up against such a spirit, they reacted with hostility. They cast blame and scorn. Thus, David says it is “for Your sake” that he bore this reproach.

“For Your sake I have borne reproach.” These are words that could well be spoken by any of God’s children regarding themselves. For, as Paul wrote to Timothy, “All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution” (2 Tim. 3:12). As we strive to confess God’s Word in its purity and live our lives according to it, we are reproached by the ungodly, also by nominal Christians and those who have compromised God’s Word. This is the lot of God’s children in this world.

These words of David apply above all to our Lord Jesus Christ. How great a reproach He endured at the hands of those who arrested Him, tried Him, and put Him to death! Though He was innocent, they treated Him as though He were a criminal. They cast blame on Him as a blasphemer, as one who perverted the nation. They heaped their scorn upon Him. And He bore it “for Your sake,” i.e., because of His faithfulness to His Father, because of His desire to serve Him and do His will. At the beginning of His public ministry Satan offered Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory without the need to suffer the reproach, but Jesus rejected the offer. His heart was filled with love for His Father and zeal to worship and serve Him. He was glad and willing to suffer reproach for His Father’s sake.

8. It is difficult to point with certainty to a place in Scripture that shows David’s brothers, the sons of his mother, rejecting him. David’s brothers are spoken of in three places: first, at David’s first anointing by Samuel (1 Sam. 16); second, as part of Saul’s army fighting the Philistines (1 Sam. 17); and finally, when they came to David for protection at the cave of Adullam (1 Sam. 22). In none of these chapters do we find a strong rejection of David on their part. In general, the commentators make no attempt to link the words of this verse with an event in David’s life.

While we do not know for certain whether David’s brothers at any time regarded him as a stranger, the attitude of Jesus’ “brethren” toward Him is clearly spelled out in John’s gospel. Those whom John calls Jesus’ brothers were of a different spirit than our Lord. His brothers had their minds on earthly things. They were anxious for Jesus to carry on His ministry with a view toward making Himself well known and gaining a larger following. They themselves did not believe in Jesus, and therefore had no understanding of the nature and goals of Jesus’ kingdom. As long as Jesus was a rising public figure, they would acknowledge Him because of the earthly benefits they might gain through His success. But Jesus was not a politician. He was not out to win any popularity contests. Rather, He testified to the world that its works were evil. His brothers were brothers in the flesh but not in spirit. The farther Jesus went on the road leading to the cross, the more He came to be regarded as a stranger by His brothers.

The same attitude also infected the majority of Jesus’ brothers in the Jewish nation. “He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him” (John 1:11). And when He was betrayed, even His spiritual brothers, His disciples, forsook Him and fled.

The question has been asked, whether on the basis of this verse we might say for certain that Mary had other children. Since it is certain that this verse is prophetic, may we assume that all aspects of it are prophetic? We are certain that this verse prophesies that those who ought to have been closest to the Messiah would reject Him. May we also say that the Holy Spirit is here telling us that the Messiah would have brothers (not just cousins, but sons of His own mother)?

The hermeneutical principle that applies to this situation, as stated by Reformed scholar Louis Berkhof, is: “In the interpretation of the Messianic psalms, a careful distinction must be made between psalms or parts of psalms that are directly, and those that are indirectly Messianic” (*Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, 156). A verse is directly Messianic if it points only to Christ and does not have an earlier

fulfillment in David, e.g., Psalm 22:16-17; 16:10. A verse is indirectly Messianic if it applies first of all to the psalmist and only, through him, in the second place, to Christ.

Is this verse directly Messianic or indirectly Messianic? The question is not easily answered. It is difficult to say whether David was applying these words to himself (and, through himself, to Christ), or was applying them only to the Savior. The safest interpretation is such a case is to say only what can positively be said on the basis of the New Testament Scriptures. As to Mary's having other children, the New Testament leaves room for either answer. The issue cannot be resolved by reference to this verse.

9. This verse is linked to verse eight by the conjunction **כִּי**. Here David explains the reason for the rejection—it was because of his great zeal for the house of the Lord. David's zeal for the house of the Lord can be seen in his desire to build a better place of worship than the tabernacle, and then in his gathering of building materials to be used later by Solomon. David was also filled with zeal for the ordinances of God's house and its honor. When David brought up the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem and danced before the Lord with all his might, he was not doing so to impress the people with his religiosity; his zeal was genuine.

That zeal was seen in perfect measure in Jesus. He demonstrated that zeal near the beginning of His public ministry, and again at the end, by driving the salesmen and the moneychangers out of the temple. This house was the dwelling-place of His Father. It was the visible symbol of His presence among His people. It was a sacred place, a place to be kept holy by God's people, a place to approach the God of their salvation with penitent and thankful hearts. All that would defile this place must be cast out.

But when we think of our Savior's zeal for the house of the Lord, we should not limit our thinking to that house of wood, stone, and gold. We should go beyond the visible temple to the spiritual temple of which it was a type and symbol. That spiritual temple is the Church, the believers. Jesus' zeal for that "house" was what moved Him to pray for Simon, that Simon's faith would not fail (Luke 21:31-32). It still moves Him to make intercession for us (Heb. 7:25). It impels Him to protect His Church from Satan and every foe, so that "the gates of Hades will not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18). His zeal is also a zeal to provide the spiritual temple of God with the gifts she needs for the equipping and edifying of the saints (Eph. 4). It is a zeal to bring vengeance and punishment upon those who do spiritual harm to her: "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depths of the sea" (Matt. 18:6). It is a zeal that expressed itself, above all, in His willingness to sacrifice Himself for the house of the Lord. "Zeal for Your house has eaten Me up."

The second phrase of verse nine is quoted by Paul in Romans 15:3. Here he holds up Jesus as our example in foregoing our rights out of love for our brother. Jesus placed the needs of others ahead of His own welfare. Though He would not have had to endure the taunts and jeers of His crucifiers, He subjected Himself to it. He did not live to please Himself, but to save us.

10. "When I wept and chastened my soul with fasting, that became my reproach." Notice that **וְאִבְכַּח** is translated temporally: "**When** I wept . . ." J. Wash Watts, in his *Survey of Syntax in the Hebrew Old Testament*, explains this usage as follows:

Oftentimes an independent clause introduced by **waw** consecutive can be turned quite fittingly into a time clause. An occasion of this kind arises whenever the first of two clauses, both introduced by **waw** consecutive, is used for the sole purpose of describing conditions pertaining to the time of the second. . . . This kind of construction occurs often in Hebrew. (132-133)

This same construction appears also in verse 11. There NIV and NASB translate temporally, but NKJV does not change from KJV.

The translators struggle with **נִפְשִׁי** in verse 10. It cannot be linked directly to **בְּצוּם**, because **בְּצוּם** is not in the construct case. NIV regards it as an alternating subject of **וְאִבְכַּח** and translates: "When **I** weep and fast . . ." NKJV, following the LXX, regards it as a pregnant construction, supplies a second verb (**וְאָנְדָה**, from **אָנַדָה**), and makes **נִפְשִׁי** its object: "When I wept **and chastened my soul** . . ." NASB translated **נִפְשִׁי** as an accusative of specification: "When I wept **in my soul** with fasting." According to Delitzsch, the NIV rendering is most likely, and is the one assumed by the accentuation.

10-12. A passage that sheds light on the meaning of these verses is Joel 2:12-17. There the Lord is urging His people to turn to Him "with fasting, weeping, and mourning," i.e., with these actions serving as expressions of genuine repentance. He urges the priests to "weep between the porch and the altar" as they pleaded with Him to spare His people. If the Lord did not answer their prayer, then they would become "a reproach, a byword among the nations." The nations would say, "Where is their God?"

David was doing what the Lord urged His people to do in that Joel passage. He was weeping and fasting. He put on sackcloth. And this was not just an outward show; it was genuine repentance. Yet, in spite of his humble turning to the Lord, his prayer for deliverance was not yet answered. For this reason, he continued to suffer the reproaches of his enemies. He became a byword among them. They spoke disparagingly about him in the gate, where they gathered to do business and exchange news. He became the subject of the drunkards' songs. And the reproaches, the byword, the talk at the gate, the song of the drunkards—all had one theme: "Where is his God?"

As David here pleaded for the Lord's help, so Jesus prayed in Gethsemane that, if possible, this cup might pass from Him. When the Lord did not answer David's prayer, his enemies spoke harshly of him. When the Father did not take the cup out of His Son's hands, His enemies taunted: "He trusted in God; let Him deliver Him now if He will have Him; for He said, 'I am the Son of God'" (Matt. 27:43). Even to our own day, the Jews say worse things about Jesus than any lyrics from a barroom drunkard's song (Cf. the Talmud). Spurgeon: "To this day the tavern makes rare fun of the tabernacle, and the ale-bench is the seat of the scorner" (179).

Verses 13-18 — His plea for deliverance.

- 13 But as for me, my prayer is to You, O Lord, in the acceptable time:
O God, in the multitude of Your mercy, hear me in the truth of Your salvation.
- 14 Deliver me out of the mire, and let me not sing;
Let me be delivered from those who hate me, and out of the deep waters.
- 15 Let not the floodwater overflow me, nor let the deep swallow me up;
And let not the pit shut its mouth on me.
- 16 Hear me, O Lord, for Your lovingkindness is good;
Turn to me according to the multitude of Your tender mercies.
- 17 And do not hide Your face from Your servant, for I am in trouble;
Hear me speedily.
- 18 Draw near to my soul, and redeem it; deliver me because of my enemies.

13. With **וְאֵנִי** ("But as for me . . .") David places his own actions in sharp contrast with those of his enemies. He was not going to return their insults. Instead, he turns to the Lord in prayer.

And he is confident that the Lord will indeed help and deliver him, for he says: "My prayer is to You, O Lord, **at an acceptable time.**" **עֵת רִצּוֹן**, time of favor or good pleasure, is a phrase taken from the ordinance of the Jubilee Year (Lev. 25:8ff.). It is the time the Lord has fixed for manifesting His grace and help. Paul translated it *καὶρὸς δέκτος*, which Luther rendered with *angenehme Zeit*, an acceptable time, and in Isaiah 49:8 with *zur gnädigen Zeit*, a time of grace. In spite of his many troubles, David was still confident that God's grace and favor rested upon him and that the Lord would hear his prayers. (See Pieper, *Isaiah II*, 365.)

Our Lord Jesus, in His distress, also commended Himself into the hands of the Father in heaven. The Father's answer to the suffering Servant was: "In an acceptable time (**עֵת רִצּוֹן**) I have heard You, and in the day of salvation I have helped You; I will preserve You and give You as a covenant to the people . . ." (Isa. 49:8).

14-17. Here David returns to the imagery of verses 1-2 and multiplies his pleas for deliverance. On what does he base his appeals? On the Lord's lovingkindness and the multitude of His tender mercies.

"Let not the pit shut its mouth on me." — The pit is a well-pit or a covered tank. Its mouth is its upper opening. Spurgeon: "When a great stone was rolled over the well, or pit, used as a dungeon, the prisoner was altogether enclosed and forgotten . . . this is an apt picture of the state of a man buried alive in grief and left without remedy; against this the great sufferer pleaded and was heard" (180).

18. "Draw near to my soul and redeem it." — There are two ideas interwoven in the verb **גָּאֵל** (redeem). The one is the idea of setting someone or something free from a type of bondage. The other is the paying of a price. Both ideas are clearly seen in the Levitical redemption laws. In other passages, however, the emphasis is on the deliverance, with the paying of the price receding into the background. Here there does not seem to be much difference between **גָּאֵל** and **פָּדָה** (to deliver).

"Deliver me because of my enemies." — The idea is that if he is not delivered, his enemies will heap scorn upon him and his God. He prays for deliverance so that their mouths will be stopped.

Verses 19-21– He receives no pity in his suffering.

- 19 You know my reproach, my shame, and my dishonor;
My adversaries are all before You.
20 Reproach has broken my heart, and I am full of heaviness;
I looked for someone to take pity, but there was none;
And for comforters, but I found none.
21 They also gave me gall for my food,
And for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.

19. Notice that here David uses not one but three nouns in speaking of his public humiliation. Each noun has a slightly different emphasis. The idea that comes through is that he was being made to suffer every possible form of malicious spite. These words give us a sense of how deeply hurt he was by this. But all their actions were known to the Lord. And when the Lord knows of His servant's suffering, He will not delay His help forever.

There is also comfort in this: "All my adversaries are before You." The Lord knows their names. The Lord has power over them. They cannot do anything but what He allows. So also Jesus said to Pilate: "You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above" (John 19:11).

20. One of the key words in this psalm is **רָפָה**, reproach. It refers to blame or scorn being cast upon someone. "Reproach has broken my heart"; it has filled him with sadness. This is said prophetically of our Lord Jesus. Jesus was not insensitive to and unaffected by the barrage of insults and mockery that were directed toward Him. It was as though their reproaches caused Him a terrible wound.

And as He suffered, there was no one to comfort Him. The word for comfort (**נִידָה**) originally signified nodding to anyone as a sign of pity and sympathy. No such sign was to be found in Jesus' case.

Grammatical note — In this verse there are two verbs preceded by waw consecutive (**וַאֲנִי שָׁחַ** and **וַאֲנִי יָדָה**) and one verb preceded by waw conjunctive (**וַאֲנִי קָרַח**). When waw consecutive precedes a verb, it makes the verb to which it is attached to be a temporal sequence, a logical result, a logical cause, or a logical contrast of the verb preceding (J. Wash Watts, 108). In the first part of this verse the connection between the first verb (**שָׁחַ**) and the verb with the waw consecutive (**וַאֲנִי שָׁחַ**) seems to be logical result: "Reproach has broken my heart **so that** I am very sick." In the second phrase the connection is one of logical contrast: "I waited for one to comfort, **but** there was not."

21. "They also gave me gall for my food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink." This expression appears also in Jeremiah's writings in slightly different form. It is always used in the sense of inflicting extreme pain and anguish on one. The emphasis here is on the cruelty of his enemies. To offer food and drink is normally an act of kindness, meant to bring refreshment and strength. But the food and drink given here is given only to increase his misery and suffering. The New Testament fulfillment is found in Matthew 27:27ff. and its parallels.

The word for gall is **שֶׂאֵל**. It signifies first of all a poisonous plant. Since bitter and poisonous are interchangeable notions in the Semitic languages, it signifies gall as the bitterest of the bitter (Delitzsch, 283).

Verses 22-28 – His prayer that the Lord will pour out His indignation upon his enemies.

- 22 Let their table become a snare before them, and their well-being a trap.
23 Let their eyes be darkened, so that they do not see;
And make their loins shake continually.
24 Pour out Your indignation upon them,
And let Your wrathful anger take hold of them.
25 Let their habitation be desolate; let no one dwell in their tents.
26 For they persecute him whom You have struck,
And talk of the grief of those You have wounded.
27 Add iniquity to their iniquity, and let them not come into Your righteousness.
28 Let them be blotted out of the book of the living,

And not be written with the righteous.

Upon first reading these verses we might wonder: are these words inspired by the Holy Spirit, or is David giving vent to a fleshly desire for vengeance? Are the imprecatory sections of the psalms the product of an earlier, less advanced stage of a progressive revelation on the part of God? The Lord Jesus Himself shows us they are not. In Matthew 23 we hear Him lamenting the fact that Jerusalem had rejected Him. Though He wanted to gather her children together, they would not. Therefore, in judgment, He applies to them the imprecation of Psalm 69:25, saying: “Your house is left to you desolate!” In the imprecations of these verses we have a prophecy of the Messiah’s judgment, which He will pronounce on those who refuse to repent and be gathered to Him in faith.

Also worthy of note are L. Berkhof’s comments on the imprecatory psalms. He points out that –

1. Orientals love the concrete, and therefore sometimes represent sin in the concrete form of the sinner.
2. These imprecations embody the desire of the Old Testament saints for the vindication of the righteousness and holiness of God.
3. They are not utterances of personal vindictiveness, but of the Church’s aversion to sin, embodied in the sinner.
4. They are, at the same time, a revelation of God’s attitude to those who are hostile to Him and His Kingdom. (157)

22. “Let their table become a snare before them.” — Leupold: “The table, which represents blessing and a source of strength and delight, is thought of as becoming the very opposite under the impact of God’s displeasure” (*Exposition of Psalms*, 507).

23. “Let their eyes be darkened . . . make their loins shake . . .” — Delitzsch: “With their eyes they have feasted themselves upon the sufferer, and in the strength of their loins they have ill-treated him. These eyes with their bloodthirsty malignant looks are to grow blind. These loins full of defiant self-confidence are to shake” (284).

25. “Let their habitation be desolate; let no one dwell in their tents.” טִירָה (from טוֹר, to encircle) is a designation of an encamping or dwelling-place taken from the circular encampments of the nomads. The laying waste and desolation of his house is the most fearful of all misfortunes to the Semite. Yet, this is exactly the fate that awaits all who reject and oppose Christ.

27. “Add iniquity to their iniquity.” Delitzsch: “Let God, by the complete withdrawal of His grace, suffer them to fall from one sin into another . . . in order that accumulated judgment may correspond to the accumulated guilt” (285). Let the entrance into God’s righteousness, i.e., His justifying and sanctifying grace, be denied to them forever.

28. “Let them be blotted out of the book of the living.” — Spurgeon: “Though in their conceit they wrote themselves among the people of God, and induced others to regard them under that character, they shall be unmasked and their names removed from the register” (184).

Verses 29-33 – He looks forward to offering a sacrifice of
thanks for his deliverance.

- 29 But I am poor and sorrowful; let Your salvation, O God, set me up on high.
30 I will praise the name of God with a song,
And will magnify Him with thanksgiving.
31 This also shall please the Lord better than an ox or bull,
Which has horns and hooves.
32 The humble shall see this and be glad;
And you who seek God, your hearts shall live.
33 For the Lord hears the poor, and does not despise His prisoners.

29. As things stand now, his enemies are on high. But they will be brought low. He is low, but will be exalted. God’s salvation will remove him from his enemies to a height that is too steep for them.

31. Here פָּר (bull) is used in apposition to שׁוֹר (ox). An ox bullock is a young ox. The psalmist adds “which has horns and hooves” to show that it meets the Levitical requirements for being sacrificed. Even the most stately, full-grown, clean animal that may be offered as a sacrifice stands in the sight of the Lord very far below the sacrifice of grateful praise coming from the heart.

32. “The humble shall see this and be glad.” — David is talking about his fellow sufferers. When they see how he offers the sacrifice of thankful confession, they will rejoice.

Verses 34-36 – He looks toward the future in hope

- 34 Let heaven and earth praise Him, the seas and everything that moves in them.
35 For God will save Zion and build the cities of Judah,
That they may dwell there and possess it.
36 Also, the descendants of His servants shall inherit it,
And those who love His name shall dwell in it.

34. In verse 32 David writes that the humbled, oppressed believers would see how the Lord would deliver him from the hand of those who were afflicting him and would be glad. Now he urges the creation itself to join the believers in their praises.

It is interesting to note how often the Old Testament writers call upon creation to rejoice and praise the Lord. The heavens, the earth, the mountains, the seas, the creatures of the earth—all are viewed as having a vital stake in the drama that is being acted out. Creation was made to suffer as a result of man’s sin. All of creation longs to be delivered by the Lord from the bondage to which it was subjected. Therefore, all creation may rejoice whenever the Lord acts to deliver His people from their oppressors, whenever the Lord asserts His righteousness. For such deliverance and triumph of the Lord’s righteousness is a prefiguring and a guarantee of the final redemption of all creation. (Parallel passages include Isaiah 44:23 and 49:13. In both cases, as here, the reason for creation’s rejoicing is that the Lord has comforted His people and will have mercy on His afflicted.)

35-36. “For God will save Zion and build the cities of Judah.” The Lord had established David as king of Israel in Mount Zion. Zion was the Lord’s own kingdom. The true citizens of that kingdom were all who, like David, humbled themselves before the Lord in repentance and rejoiced in Him as their Savior. The Lord’s enemies are always attacking this Zion, as David shows in this psalm. But the Lord will save His Zion. The gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

He will also build the cities of Judah. The phrase extends the figure to include all the inheritance of God’s people. All the world may rage against Christ’s kingdom, but it will continue to be built; history will continue to be the story of the triumphant advance of Christ’s kingdom. God’s people and their believing children will continue to occupy and inhabit the inheritance that is theirs in Christ. All of this David expresses in the imagery most familiar to him.

In verse 35 the RSV and NIV have “rebuild” instead of simply “build” the cities of Judah. This is an interpretive translation. It suggests that this verse was written after Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Babylonians.

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An End Time Enchiridion

A Look at the Hymns of Martin H. Franzmann

John C. Reim

Brief does not mean an absence of breadth, nor does short imply a limited depth.

This can be seen in the works of those gifted communicators in the world who are able to express much with few words. Martin H. Franzmann (1907-1976) was such an individual. He is widely recognized as one who was blessed with a wide range of exceptional skills which he faithfully employed in the service of Christ's kingdom. He was a masterful theologian, exegete, speaker, scholar, author and poet. Perhaps the aspect of his legacy which is most influential at the present time is to be found in his poetry. More specifically, in his hymnody.

The influence of Dr. Franzmann's hymnody is increasing as the number of publications which include his texts rises. And that number *is* on the rise, although that was not the case in earlier decades. Toward the beginning of his career, for example, an appreciative colleague, Pastor Arthur Katt of Shaker Heights, Ohio, urged Franzmann to submit one of his texts to the committee which was compiling hymns for *The Lutheran Hymnal* of 1941. He did. But it was not accepted. Some years later a publication which *did* include one of his hymns was not preserved. The 1957 pamphlet in which "Thou Whose Glory None Can See" first appeared has proven to be untraceable, despite the extensive search efforts of the Concordia Historical Institute, St. Louis. In other instances, the initial presentation of one of his hymns may have taken place within the confines of a single congregation or event. "O Thou, Who On Th' Accursed Ground" was commissioned to be written to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the ministry of a pastor in Dallas, Texas. That isn't to say, of course, that texts designed for a specific occasion were not soon used beyond the initial event. Even though "Preach You The Word" was written specifically to celebrate the 125th anniversary of Concordia Theological Seminary in Springfield, Illinois, it was printed later that same year in *The Fort Wayne Lutheran*. And before his death in 1976 Dr. Franzmann saw the inclusion of some of his hymns in larger publications with wider circulations. *Worship Supplement* (1969), for example, made use of six of them. It was not until the years following 1976, however, that a significant expansion in the publishing of his hymns took place. The hymnal which features the greatest number of his works is the hymnal published by the synod in which he was reared and in which he taught during the earliest years of his ministry, the WELS. *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal* (1993) includes eight Martin Franzmann texts.

Also in 1993 the first of two books which focus exclusively on his hymnody was published, *Thy Strong Word* (subtitled *The Enduring Legacy of Martin Franzmann*) by Richard N. Brinkley. *Thy Strong Word* and *Come to the Feast* by Robin A. Leaver are compilations of the original hymns and hymn translations of Dr. Franzmann, along with historical information and commentary. *Thy Strong Word* pulls together 13 of the original hymn texts and *Come to the Feast* includes all 20 of his poems for singing. Needless to say, the pages in both books which contain the actual texts are not many in number. Were they to be printed some day without comment they would result merely in a booklet or a pamphlet. They would form an enchiridion.

An Enchiridion

The term has been around for a considerable length of time. "The word 'Enchiridion' is already found in the writings of Augustine, and later became common."¹ Constructed from Greek terms it simply means "in hand," and has come to be used as a synonym for a handbook. Those familiar with terms that were used in the years of the Reformation will likely have some recollection of the word as it was used then. It was familiar to Luther and has been used to refer to the preliminary section of modern day versions of the Small Catechism. And the text of that catechism illustrates how "enchiridion" has come to denote a short presentation of information which, despite its abbreviated nature, is rich in substance and profound in meaning. "It denotes a book of pithy brevity, an elementary book,"² writes Theodore Graebner. Certain as one may be of Graebner's admiration of Luther's Catechism, it is clear that his definition of an enchiridion as "an elementary book," does not mean "elementary" in the sense of "juvenile." An enchiridion such as Luther's catechism is elementary in the sense of being "basic." And in this regard, also, the collection of Franzmann's hymns fits that definition. They are elementary, solid. They are not content to present the religious fluff that overstuffs so many a modern day hymn. The Franzmann hymns sing forth the very foundations of the Christian faith, the heart and core of the Scriptures. And they don't hesitate to proclaim biblical principles which have become unpopular in some religious circles. Robin Leaver makes this point

by means of an omission he detected. “A number of more recent hymnals, such as *The Presbyterian Hymnal: Hymns, Psalms and Spiritual Songs* of 1990, include no Franzmann texts at all. This may well reflect the spirit of the age, which is often impatient with hymns of theological substance.”³ And they *are* packed with theological substance, in somewhat the same way in which Luther carefully crafted his questions and answers so that they would clearly convey the messages of Scripture.

It should be pointed out, in fact, that Franzmann used the space of the hymn stanza so economically, chose every syllable so carefully, and selected words so purposefully that even some relatively subtle changes by others have lessened their impact. Speaking of revisions which were made to Franzmann’s texts by hymnal editors, Leaver shows what happened in the case of “O God, O Lord of Heaven and Earth.”

The change of “Thy” to “Your” in lines 2 and 5 of the first stanza of this hymn is acceptable, since the change is minimal. I remember talking to Martin Franzmann, sometime around 1969 or 1970, about the issue of the substitution of a You-form for a Thy-form. His answer was unequivocal: if it is a matter of simple substitution then the prospect had little concern for him. But if it meant altering a rhyme, and that led to the alterations of a phrase or a whole line, then he expressed himself most forcibly: he would not agree to such changes. His argument was that the words he had chosen to use were not simply plucked out of the air, and therefore any other substitutes could replace them, but were the result of much heart and head searching to find exactly the right expression to convey what he, the poet/theologian, wanted to say—as opposed to what any hymn-editor might want the text to say. The way in which he agonized over the crafting of his texts in general, carefully considering each word, has been demonstrated in chapter 3, especially the process of writing the final stanza of this hymn.

In stanza 1, lines 5-6 were originally written as:

*Thy word meant life triumphant hurled
Through every cranny of thy world.*

The *LBW* revisers, literally, could not come to terms with “cranny” so re-wrote it thus:

*Your word meant life triumphant hurled
In splendor through your broken world.*

True, the word “splendor” is applied to God’s word, something Martin Franzmann could have endorsed. But this is done at the expense of the thought that the grace of God’s word touches even the smallest part of this world, which certainly is broken. Franzmann, however, was concerned to stress the particularity of God’s universal grace, an expression that has disappeared in the *LBW* version. The same can be said of the final couplet of the first stanza. Franzmann originally wrote:

*Since light awoke and life began,
Thou hast desired Thy life for man.*

The revisers made it into:

*Since light awoke and life began,
You made for us a holy plan.*

What was once a strong and specific statement has now become weak and vague. In the revision the “holy plan” is undefined. In Franzmann’s original it is clearly spelled out: God’s plan is nothing less than His own life for humanity—in general and in particular.⁴

With respect to the term “enchiridion,” history reveals that it has not been used only for publications such as the catechism. Early on in the Lutheran Church it was applied with greater frequency to hymnals. When Lutheranism was still in its infancy the number of hymn texts which reflected the proclamations from the pulpits was relatively small. And the short publications which housed the limited number of hymns were often called “enchiridia,” the most famous of which is the *Erfurt Enchiridion* of 1524. “In 1526 there appeared, as the first Wittenberg congregational songbook, the *Enchiridion* of Hans Lufft, in 1528 a (lost) second Wittenberg songbook published by Hans Weiss, and—probably dependent upon that—the *Leipzig Enchiridion*, published by Michael Blum (1528 or 1529), and the *Zwickau Enchiridion*.”⁵ Insofar, therefore, as Franzmann’s set of Christian poems forms a body of hymns, there is some historic legitimacy for referring to them as an “enchiridion,” in addition to the fact that they stand as a concise presentation of profound Biblical thought.

Endtime

The *Enchiridia* of the early Lutheran Church were typically distinguished one from another by means of a city name: Erfurt, Leipzig, and so on. In labeling Franzmann’s hymns, however, a place in time

seems more appropriate than a place in space. Franzmann was keenly aware of the era in which he was living. The New Testament teaches Christians of every age to recognize that the days of this present world are numbered and that Satan's time is short. Christ is standing at the door. And the fact that the Lord is at hand means that all the things which the Bible reveals about the last times are in place. It means that certain situations need to be addressed. Certain things need to be said. And sung. And Franzmann did. It is interesting to see what he, conscious of the era in which he was living and aware of the platform on which he stood, saw as the necessary proclamations for these end times. He wrote,

And as we survey all hymnody we must acknowledge that the Holy Spirit worked not only in the Reformation but in all times and in all places in the one Christian and apostolic church, that in the best of what the Christian poets and Christian music makers have produced the church possesses so vast a store of the absolutely excellent that it need never stoop to substitutes.

And yet there has always been a terrible fascination in *Ersatz*, especially for a sick church, a church grown so languid that it cannot bear to live in the last days. And so we have, instead of the full throated, joyful noise unto the Lord, the picture of the weary church sitting in a padded pew, weeping softly and elegantly into a lace handkerchief . . .⁶

Even though several of his texts were written for specific occasions, it is obvious that he never lost sight of the time frame into which his ministry had been set.

The following paragraphs will not focus on such aspects of his poetry as style of language, or suitability for singing, or mode of expression. Rather they will focus on the doctrinal themes which permeate these jewels. In doing so, only his original hymns will be considered, as distinct from the hymns of others which he translated. It is in his original hymn texts that we see what this servant of the Word felt so compelled to write in the short verses which others would feel compelled to sing.

“UP-WORDS”

One need not read all of Franzmann's hymns to discover the primary focus of his thoughts. It was on the God who reigns above. While writing them Franzmann was looking up. That is to say, his hymns are doxological. “The doxology has already been noted as one of Franzmann's favorite means of expression. Not only are doxologies found in abundance in his hymns, but his writings also abound with them.”⁷ He uses rather formal doxologies to conclude over half of his texts. Implied doxologies fill the rest. And the God whom these hymns extol is no generic supreme being. These hymns do not praise some blurry “Lord,” nor do they skip around a statement of clear identification, as do so many “songs of praise” today. These hymns boldly present the unique name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. With Nicene zeal, his poetic lines proclaim the doctrine of the Trinity, and show how the distinct persons of the Trinity are involved in whatever sphere of activity the rest of the text addresses. By way of example, the hymn “Though Wisdom All Her Skills Combine” speaks, chiefly, of the deity of Christ. But since the second person of the Godhead never acts independently, all three are brought into the final stanza.

Then praise to God the Father be,
His Saviour Son to us Who sent:
The Comforter be praised, Whom He,
The ascended God, to us has sent:
And praise to Thee, Who art the God,
Though in our ways Thy feet have trod.⁸

Perhaps the best known of Franzmann's hymns, “Thy Strong Word,” deals with the differing types and activities of God's light. And, again, since no person of the Trinity acts alone, they are all glorified in the final stanza.

God the Father, Light Creator,
To Thee laud and honor be;
To Thee, Light of Light begotten,
Praise be sung eternally;
Holy Spirit, Light Revealer,
Glory, glory be to Thee;
Men and angels, now and ever,
Praise the Holy Trinity.⁹

Extolling this exultant stanza, Leaver quotes Bruce R. Backer of Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, MN: "Most liturgical expression is at the same time doxological, since it is the Christian's chief duty in addressing God to thank and praise him especially for the great gift of salvation through Jesus Christ. Martin Franzmann penned perhaps the greatest doxology in the entire corpus of western hymnody (see *Worship Supplement* 747, stanza 6)."¹⁰

Despite the fact that many centuries have now heard doxologies sung to the Triune God, Franzmann refused to see them as either outdated or overly used. He joined the psalmist in the confident desire: "I will make thy name to be remembered in all generations; therefore shall the people praise thee for ever and ever" (Ps. 45:17).

While looking up, Franzmann was also directed by the Scriptures to center the attention of his texts on the person and work of the Son. Even as St. Paul streamlined his thoughts to the Corinthians by declaring "I have determined to know nothing among you except Christ and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2), so also did Franzmann keep the doing and dying of Christ central. In the span of just a few of his hymns any reader will find clear testimony to all that Jesus Christ is and all He accomplished . . . although Franzmann was selective with respect to the terms he used.

Consider names. This reviewer of the hymns found it a curious thing that, in the course of composing 20 hymns Franzmann used the name "Jesus" only once, and that this single occurrence was part of the official title, "Lord Jesus Christ." It seems likely that the poet who is characterized by truly rugged and solid forms of expression was reacting to the overly sentimental use of Jesus' name in much of the hymnody of the romantic period in literature. No matter. The names which he did opt to use are as Biblical as they are reflective of the many things Jesus is: Lord of Glory, Crucified, Stranger, Word of God, Son, Love, Pascal Lamb. Such names assist the hymnist to the goal of conveying Christ's person and Christ's work.

By means of a few skillful verses Franzmann clearly presents **the doctrine of Christ's divine nature** and **the doctrine of Christ's human nature**, themes which recur from hymn to hymn and page to page.

Though wisdom all her skills combine
To prove Thee man and only man,
Still doth Thine ancient glory shine,
Begotten ere all worlds began:
Thou art the Christ, Thou art the God,
Though in our ways Thy feet have trod.
I joy to own the mystery
That veils Thy birth from human ken:
Thy godhead there I chiefly see,
Where love hath made Thee Man of men.
Thou art the Christ, Thou art the God,
Though in our ways Thy feet have trod.¹¹

Similarly Franzmann's words reveal a conscious (and successful) attempt to present *Christ's accomplishments* as clearly and concretely as possible. In reflection of the Savior's own explanation that He came "not to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28), Franzmann penned this poetic statement of the **doctrine of redemption**:

Lord, we will remember Thee,
How Thy soul for us hath striven
How in ransom ministry
Thou Thyself for us hast given.¹²

In this and other verses the singer is led to proclaim the triumph that belongs to every believer because of the Savior's atoning work. But since that work of atonement would remain a distant thing without the chosen means to bring it near, Franzmann makes much of the chosen means. He makes much of God's Word. Brinkley quotes from an article which Franzmann wrote for the *Concordia Theological Monthly* in 1951: "As God is, so is His Word to us: quick and powerful . . . the Gospel is a divine action and confronts and calls us into His grace. It is quick and powerful in virtue of the God who speaks it."¹³

The prominence of God's Word in the hymns of Franzmann becomes apparent at one's first introduction. A full fifth of his hymn titles (generally borrowed from the first lines) include the word "Word." "Preach You the Word." "Thy Strong Word did Cleave the Darkness." "Thy Word Has Been Our

Daily Bread.” “You Spoke Your Word of Truth.” This Lutheran poet shows his Lutheran roots, revealing his endorsement of the Reformation’s “Sola Scriptura” principle.

A great summation of the pivotal **doctrine of objective justification** is found in the cherished text of “Thy Strong Word,” which presents the key point that God’s justification of mankind is a matter of judiciously declaring people to be righteous.

Thy strong word bespeaks us righteous;
Bright with Thine own holiness.¹⁴

And since it is “sola fide,” by faith alone, that the benefits of the divine acquittal become one’s own, **the doctrine of conversion** is, of necessity, brought into the picture . . . for which God’s Word is once again brought into play. In a number of stanzas Franzmann sings of the powerful and purposeful way in which God’s Word alone can replace spiritual darkness with spiritual light, and eternal death with eternal life.

Lord, we will remember Thee,
How Thy love came down and sought us;
How thy truth hath made us free
And to God again hath brought us.¹⁵

Such a life—eternal life—could only be brought about by an eternal word. Consequently it was fitting for the poet to incorporate also the Biblical teaching regarding the eternal essence of God’s word. This theme, drawn from the inspired words of the apostle Peter, is reflected in this timely reminder of Franzmann.

Preach you the word, and plant it home,
To men who like or like it not,
The word that shall endure and stand
When flowers and men shall be forgot.¹⁶

The words of Franzmann’s hymns look up. They focus on the Triune God, His redemption, and His word, making these Biblical themes their own. And to these still more are added.

“BACK-WORDS”

A writer whose basis for writing is “Scripture alone” will be careful not to overlook that which Scripture makes a primary theme. The Bible looks back (hundreds of times) to its record of the creation in Genesis. Franzmann, therefore, uses the medium of his hymnody to highlight that **doctrine of creation**. The farther time takes us from the great event of God’s creation the more some promoters of religious thought distance themselves from it. Not Franzmann. Recognizing that any erosion of the Genesis account can have a debilitating effect on other teachings of Scripture, he held firmly to the inspired record and gave expression to his conviction. The doctrine of creation is dominant in his hymns—not in the sense of being present with frequency, but of being present with power. The phrase “it was done” serves as a hammer blow to encroachments of evolutionary theories and provides a unifying element to two separate hymns.

Thy Strong word did cleave the darkness;
At Thy speaking it was done.¹⁷
You spoke Your word of truth, and it was done –
Your sons reborn, Your brave new world begun --¹⁸

It doesn’t take long for the reader of Genesis to come upon the dark event which took place soon after the creation. Neither does it take long for the reader of Franzmann’s hymns to find references to the event. Boldly presented in his hymns is the **doctrine of the Fall**. And immediately upon the heels of his reference to Adam’s sin is his witness to **the doctrine of original sin and man’s natural depravity**.

In Adam we have all been one,
One huge rebellious man;
We all have fled that Evening Voice
That sought us as we ran.
We fled Thee, and in losing Thee
We lost our brother too;
Each singly sought and claimed his own;

Each man his brother slew.¹⁹

The deftness with which Franzmann stated the complete picture of man's rebellion is underscored by Robin Leaver in connection with his criticism of another unfortunate revision.

The second stanza of Franzmann's "O God, O Lord of heaven and earth" began:

*Our fatal will to equal Thee,
Our rebel will wrought death and night.*

The revisers—like John Wesley who could not accept the repetition of *our* at the beginning of Watts' "Our God, our help in ages past" and made it "O God, our help in ages past"—altered it to begin:

*In blind revolt we would not see
That rebel wills wrought death and night.*

Again, the revision is less specific and theologically more indistinct than the original. The Fall of Genesis 3 records not merely a human revolt or rebellion against God: it was the fatal act of will on the part of our first parents that they should become "like God." Franzmann's choice of the phrase "Our fatal will to equal Thee" not only expresses humanity's innate desire for deification, but also carries with it an unspoken Christological reference, that is, to Christ who "thought it not robbery to be equal with God" (Philippians 2:6) . . . Here is the irony of a fallen humanity that wants to steal from God that which God wills to give—His own life. All this is beautifully and powerfully expressed in Franzmann's carefully thought-out lines, but almost none of it remains intact in the LBW version.²⁰

It is appropriate, while on the subject of man's sin, to mention also the uncompromising mode of expression used by Franzmann when conveying God's reaction to human sin. In these end times, when considerable effort is made to soften the Biblical response to iniquity and to minimize God's judgment through a misrepresentation of His love, Franzmann's hymns keep God's love and judgment in their proper places and retains the full force of both. In "O Kingly Love, That Faithfully," he speaks of the "lavish" and "seeking" love of the Lord who calls out to the fallen world. But then, in a dramatic coupling of words ("ruthless Love"), he shows how one divine attribute does not obliterate another.

O holy Love, thou canst not brook
Man's cool and careless enmity;
O ruthless Love, thou wilt not look
On man robed in contempt of thee.²¹

"IN-WORDS"

The texts of Franzmann's hymns are predominantly objective. They look to God to praise Him, entreat Him, glorify Him.

The song of the church must be an unending song. The church must cherish its best, but its song should not be a mere repetition of the song in the past. Then shall we sing with grace, with all emphasis on God and a most unsentimental subordination of ourselves.²²

By the same token, however, Franzmann's hymns remain conscious of what the Lord has revealed about the human condition. Consequently, they look *in* from time to time and rehearse what all transpires there.

As noted above, Franzmann didn't hesitate to decry the fallen condition of the human spirit since the Fall. He saw the unconverted spirit dwelling in darkness and death. Brinkley also quotes from a paper Franzmann wrote on the topic of original sin.

Our Confessions speak of the doctrine of original sin as a "necessary article." It remains such, a necessary article, today and for today's preaching. . .the theology of the nineteenth century has left in its wake a blunted consciousness of sin that makes the preachment of sin in all its Biblical force necessary as never before. Moreover, grace and sin, faith and repentance, cannot be sundered.²³

In recognition of a need for the preaching of sin, then, his hymns maximize the human need for a Savior.

Lo, on men who dwelt in darkness,
Dark as night and deep as death,
Broke the light of Thy salvation,
Breathed Thine own lifebreathing breath.²⁴

At the same time, as he looked into himself through the window of Scripture, Franzmann also clearly saw all the wonders that could be accomplished by the power of the Spirit. His hymns also proclaim the **doctrine of sanctification**. Generally dressed in the garb of entreaty, asking the Spirit to be active in his life, he gives expression to the holy and pleasant fruits of faith which abound wherever that Spirit is working through the Word.

Someone filled with the Spirit sings and proclaims.

O Thou, whose fiery blessing can
Make pure the unclean lips of man;
That takest man and makest him
A singer with the seraphim;
O Thou that buildest mighty praise
From shouts that children's voices raise;
That canst, when human voices die,
Make silent stones to prophesy:
Oh, speak to us Thy potent Word,
That we may say, "Thus says the Lord,"
That in our frailty we may be
A wall of brass that echoes Thee.²⁵

Someone filled with the Spirit humbly serves.

O You who aproned in humility
Once willed to wash the feet that followed you,
Gird us with that same apron, set us free
To will Your willing and Your work to do.²⁶

Someone filled with the Spirit does glorifying deeds.

Let all our lives now celebrate
The feast; let malice die.
Let love grow strong anew, and great,
Let truth stamp out the lie . . .
Let all our deeds, unanimous
Confess him as our Lord
Who by the Spirit lives in us,
The Father's living Word . . .²⁷

As the Christian sings and serves and loves, of course, he or she does not do so independently. All believers are united with one another as members of the body of Christ and are made alive by the "one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all" (Eph. 4:6). In his hymns Franzmann deals with **the doctrine of the Church**, and makes the principle of unity one which occurs with some frequency. One of the examples comes from a hymn which was reportedly written at a time when Franzmann sensed the threat of divisiveness.

O Spirit, who didst once restore
Thy Church that it might be again
The bringer of good news to men,
Breathe on thy cloven Church once more,
That in these gray and latter days
There may be men whose life is praise,
Each life a high doxology
To Father, Son, and unto Thee.²⁸

A number of phrases in his hymns echo the apostle Paul's desire to see the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace maintained. But that ought not leave the impression that Franzmann was a proponent of some false ecumenical spirit which gladly tolerates error for the sake of external peace. Brinkley quotes from a sermon Franzmann wrote in celebration of the 450th anniversary of the Reformation:

We offer this salvation to all mankind, to everyone that believeth, to all the world; that is to say, to all the guilty, for God's grace extends as far as His judgment. That is what we have been doing these hundred years, that is what we are doing now, we "exclusive" Lutherans that will not dip our feet into the stream of a unionistic ecumenicity, we narrowhearted Lutherans, we dogmatical hairsplitters, we that have bound ourselves hand and foot—yea, brain, will, desire, heart, soul, and

all—to a Book that will not let us go. We offer salvation to all. We offer it more freely because we know it more truly.²⁹

The means by which the Holy Christian Church remains healthy and strong is the Gospel of Jesus Christ in Word and Sacrament. And in Franzmann's hymns, reference is made to Baptism and the Lord's Supper. The **doctrine of the Sacraments**, however, does not claim much space in his verses. And perhaps this illustrates the observation which has been made that, even though the Lutheran Church historically has emphasized the Gospel in Word and *Sacraments*, the Sacraments, in practice, don't receive as much emphasis as the spoken Word. The most direct reference to the visible means of grace is found in the hymn "O Fearful Place, Where He Who Knows Our Heart," in which Franzmann devotes one verse to holy communion and another to baptism.

O Son of God, who diedst our life to win,
Here in this house we died thy death to sin,
And from the dead with thee have rais-ed been.
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Thy body given and thy blood outpoured
In bread and wine here we have tasted, Lord;
For this thy gift forever be adored!
Alleluia! Alleluia!³⁰

"FORE-WORDS"

Speaking of wine . . .

Lord, we will remember Thee,
Till Thou com'st Thine own to gather,
Till we drink new wine with Thee
In the kingdom of Thy Father,
Lord of blessing, meek and lowly,
Lord of Glory, high and holy.³¹

While Franzmann's hymns are theological and doxological, they are also eschatological. This body of hymn texts is firmly focused on the parousia, **the doctrine of Christ's second coming**. The book of Revelation, on which Dr. Franzmann wrote a highly respected commentary, appears to have served as somewhat of a model for the structuring of his hymns. Even as the Apocalypse concludes with its eyes firmly fixed on the clouds of heaven in anticipation of the Lord's return, so do these texts cry out, "Come, Lord Jesus!"

O King of kings, and of lords the Lord,
Come soon and speak Your last and royal word;
Shine forth, obeyed by all, by all adored.
Alleluia! Alleluia!³²

Writing on the the subject of the liturgy Franzmann shared this helpful perspective: Here the movement of the church year is a constant reminder of the eschatological character of our interpretation of Scripture, for here we are continually reminded that God is "on the way," in movement toward His last goal of judgment and consummation—and we are reminded, too, that we the church are the wandering people of God, on the way, looking toward the city that has foundations.³³

Ah, grant that they, and we, may stand
Before Thee when Thou com'st again
And by the glory of Thy grace
May share the glory of Thy reign.³⁴

And from "O Fearful Place, Where He Who Knows Our Heart,"
O God Almighty, gracious Three in One,
In this thy house let praise to thee be done
Until we join in heaven's high unison:
Alleluia! Alleluia!³⁵

Concluding Thoughts

The two recent publications, *Thy Strong Word* and *Come to the Feast*, have certainly done much to call additional attention to the wealth of biblical thought which can be found in the relatively small

treasure house of Franzmann's hymns. Perhaps additional publications will be forthcoming, as there is certainly more that can be said. This review, at least, does not pretend to have exhausted the topic of doctrinal themes in Franzmann's hymns. There are other themes which are not listed here. Those which *are* listed are the ones which struck this reviewer as those holding the places of greatest prominence. And how substantive those themes are! They are substantive because they are scriptural, edifying because they are biblical.

Since the hymn texts are brief, and number only 20 in all, one can read through them in a short amount of time. But why deprive oneself of the blessings which come through a pondering of the rich thoughts, assurances, and comforts which can be gained from these poetic gems? As fine dogmatic statements they are good to study. As full-throated doxologies they are good to learn. And as an end time enchiridion they are good to sing.

NOTES

- ¹ Theo. Graebner, *The Story of the Catechism* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1928) 51.
- ² Graebner 51.
- ³ Robin A. Leaver, *Come to the Feast* (St. Louis: MorningStar Music Publishing Co., 1994) 56.
- ⁴ Leaver 50-51.
- ⁵ Friedrich Blume, *Protestant Church Music – A History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1974) 47.
- ⁶ Richard N. Brinkley, *Thy Strong Word* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1993) 35.
- ⁷ Brinkley 109.
- ⁸ Leaver 77.
- ⁹ Leaver 79.
- ¹⁰ Brinkley 82.
- ¹¹ Leaver 77.
- ¹² Leaver 62.
- ¹³ Brinkley 83.
- ¹⁴ Leaver 78.
- ¹⁵ Leaver 62.
- ¹⁶ Leaver 74.
- ¹⁷ Leaver 78.
- ¹⁸ Leaver 82.
- ¹⁹ Leaver 61.
- ²⁰ Leaver 51.
- ²¹ Leaver 68.
- ²² Brinkley 34.
- ²³ Brinkley 17.
- ²⁴ Leaver 78.
- ²⁵ Leaver 71.
- ²⁶ Leaver 65.
- ²⁷ Leaver 66.
- ²⁸ Leaver 66.
- ²⁹ Brinkley 15.
- ³⁰ Leaver 64.
- ³¹ Leaver 62.
- ³² Leaver 82.
- ³³ Brinkley 27.
- ³⁴ Leaver 70.
- ³⁵ Leaver 64.

ERRATA

All but four of the following errors in Volume 35, Number 4, were due to software conversions. Please accept our apologies. – EAH. & JL.

Contents – 2nd item, “Internation” should be “International”

- p. 13 – 3rd line of 1st full paragraph, “Brickamer” should be “Drickamer”
- p. 29 – 16 lines from bottom: “aÛtù” should be αὐτῶ
- p. 31 – last line: “TMperèthma” should be ἐπερώτημα
- p. 33 – line 13: “and” should be “an”
- p. 33 – 10 lines from bottom: “paralambēnw” should be παραλαμβάνω
- p. 34 – line 4: “lambēnw” should be λαμβάνω
- p. 36 – 17 lines from bottom: “TMriqume” should be ἐπιθυμεῖ
- p. 41 – omit the first line
- p. 41 – 10 lines from bottom, should begin: (2) BY ITS
- p. 43 – after the last line, add: ought to translate: “They stumble—being disobedient to the word—to
- p. 45 – omit the first line
- p. 47 – after the last line, add: of the Church Growth Movement.
- p. 49 – omit the first line
- p. 50 – 1st line of 2nd paragraph, “intellectual” should be “intellectual”

EXEGETICAL OPINIONS VS. DOCTRINAL DIFFERENCES*

Clifford M. Kuehne

* This paper was delivered at the Fall 1993 Great Lakes Pastoral Conference of the Church of the Lutheran Confession. A few nonsubstantive changes were made following the reading of the paper. – Editor.

Introduction

The goal of all legitimate Biblical interpretation is to ascertain the one Spirit-intended meaning of the passage which is being studied. This goal, and only this goal, deserves the name “exegesis”—a word whose etymology suggests a leading forth of the meaning that lies within the passage. We repudiate the commonly held notion that a passage of the Bible can properly have a variety of meanings to different people, depending on the particular viewpoints of the individual interpreters. This notion is implied in the often-heard retort: “Well, that’s *your* interpretation of the verse; I have *my own* interpretation of it”—as if room may rightly be given to both interpretations, no matter how diverse they may be.

And yet, even though we affirm that a given passage has one, and only one, literal sense, that meaning may at times elude even the best of exegetes. A study of commentaries on a particular verse may reveal two or more quite different opinions as to the meaning intended by the divine Author of Scripture, the Holy Spirit. This may happen even when the scholars are fully competent in the Biblical languages and orthodox in their theology. The question being addressed in this paper, now, is the following: When do such exegetical differences involve differences in doctrine, divisive of church fellowship; and, when do they constitute no more than differing exegetical opinions, which may legitimately exist side by side within a Christian fellowship?

At first this question may seem to be far too complex to discuss within the scope of a brief paper. I believe, however, that the answer involves principles which are both obvious and simple. Unfortunately, the application of these principles to a particular problem situation within a church body may prove to be quite difficult.

In the remainder of this introduction, I would like to offer a series of summary statements. These statements will then receive elaboration in the discussion portion of the paper. Finally, a brief conclusion will be offered.

1. We confess the clarity of Holy Scripture and affirm that all of the divine truths which a person needs to know for his Christian faith and life are presented in passages which are simple, clear, and direct.

2. Such simple, clear, direct passages constitute the sedes doctrinae, or “seats of doctrine,” upon which Biblical doctrines are based. A questioning of such passages by an exegete is a serious matter.

3. Scripture contains also many passages in which the Spirit-intended meaning is not immediately evident, which passages may present exegetical problems for the interpreter. The cause of such

difficulty is in no way to be ascribed to the Holy Spirit or to His inspired Word, but rather to a lack of necessary knowledge and understanding on the part of the exegete.

4. In his study of a difficult passage, the exegete may have to content himself with a probable or merely possible interpretation—an interpretation which may be called an “exegetical opinion.” The exegete should exercise care that such exegetical opinions of his are consistent with the analogy of Scripture, and he should be suspicious of any exegetical result that has nowhere and at no time been expressed by the church in its study of Scripture.

5. A doctrine of Scripture based on the sedes doctrinae is not to be regarded as a mere exegetical opinion. An exegetical opinion may be set aside without harm, but the rejection of doctrine involves defiance of the authority of God and an endangering of precious blood-bought souls.

6. To require the acceptance of a mere exegetical opinion by other Christians is a violation of Christian love, and it may constitute an addition of human chaff to the pure wheat of God’s Word.

7. Students of the Bible may at times disagree, if not on the meaning of a passage, then perhaps on whether or not the passage is so simple, clear, and direct that it belongs among the sedes doctrinae. The resolution of such questions may require an intensive study of text and context, coupled with fervent prayer for the guidance and illumination of the Holy Spirit.

Discussion

1. We confess the clarity of Holy Scripture and affirm that all of the divine truths which a person needs to know for his Christian faith and life are presented in passages which are simple, clear, and direct.

During the centuries prior to the Lutheran Reformation, the Bible was regarded as a dark and difficult book. It was believed that only the hierarchy and official teachers of the Roman church possessed the ability to comprehend the meaning of Scripture and rightly apply it to Christian faith and life. Over against this, Martin Luther and his followers affirmed the *clarity* of Scripture. They insisted that all of the truths which a person needs to know for his salvation and for his daily walk as a Christian are expressed in passages which are so simple and direct that anyone—even a child, for that matter—can readily understand their Spirit-intended sense. Luther, for example, stated:

No clearer book has been written on earth than the Holy Scripture. It compares with other books as the sun with other lights. . . . It is a horrible shame and crime against Holy Scripture and all Christendom to say that Holy Scripture is dark and not so clear that everybody may understand it in order to teach and prove his faith. . . . If faith only hears Scripture, it is clear and plain enough to enable it [faith] to say without the comments of all fathers and teachers: That is right. I, too, believe it. (Ewald M. Plass, *What Luther Says* [St. Louis: Concordia, ©1959] 1:73)

When Luther thus spoke of the Bible being a clear book, he was referring both to the words of Scripture and to the divine truths which are expressed by these words.

A perusal of the Book of Concord will show how seriously also the Lutheran confessors took this matter. Over against the Reformed denial of the literal sense of Christ’s words of institution in the Lord’s Supper, the Formula of Concord insisted:

There is, of course, no more faithful or trustworthy interpreter of the words of Jesus Christ than the Lord Christ himself, who best understands his words and heart and intention and is best qualified from the standpoint of wisdom and intelligence to explain them. In the institution of his last will and testament and of his abiding covenant and union, he uses no flowery language but the most *appropriate* [eigentlich, proprius], *simple, indubitable, and clear words*, just as he does in *all the articles of faith* . . . (Theodore G. Tappert, *The Book of Concord* [Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, ©1959] FC SD 7:50, p. 578; emphasis added. Tappert’s translation “appropriate” must be understood in the sense of “literal” or “non-figurative,” which is the meaning of the German and Latin original.)

In their discussions of Scriptural doctrines, the confessors again and again pointed to the simplicity and clarity with which the Holy Spirit expressed these truths.

In this affirmation of the clarity of the Bible, the Reformation teachers stood on the solid ground of Scripture itself. The Psalmist, for example, testifies: “The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; the statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes” (19:7-8; Biblical

quotations are from the NKJV, ©1982). In Psalm 119 he confesses: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (119:105). The Apostle Peter states: “We also have the prophetic word made more sure, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place” (2 Pet. 1:19). And what more powerful testimony to both the clarity and the sufficiency of Holy Scripture can we find than these words of the Apostle Paul to Timothy:

But as for you, continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Tim. 3:14-17)

Even as we by faith confess that Scripture in itself is clear, we do recognize that there are passages in the Bible which to our intellect are not immediately clear, and that in some cases it may not be possible to determine the Spirit-intended meaning with full certainty. Yet, the student of Scripture can have the confidence that all those truths of God which he truly needs for his daily walk through the world and for his eternal salvation are expressed in passages which are clear, simple, and direct. Luther gave this encouraging advice: “If you encounter an obscure passage in Scripture, do not doubt that it certainly contains the same truth which is elsewhere stated in clear language. If you cannot understand the obscure, then stay with the clear” (cited in Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* [St. Louis: Concordia, 1950] 1:324).

2. *Such simple, clear, direct passages constitute the sedes doctrinae, or “seats of doctrine,” upon which Biblical doctrines are based. A questioning of such passages by an exegete is a serious matter.*

In his treatise “On the Papacy in Rome,” Martin Luther recognizes the mischief that can result if one does not base his doctrines on the simple and direct passages of Holy Scripture. He alludes to the Romanists who take a passage containing a figure and then read into it whatever they please. Luther affirms that their interpretation of such figurative passages would not hold up unless they had a clear passage of Scripture confirming that interpretation. He offers this general principle of Biblical interpretation:

Furthermore, if one fights for the sake of faith, one should not fight with uncertain texts but with those referring to the point in question, in a sure, simple, and clear way. Otherwise, the evil spirit tosses us to and fro so that in the end we do not know where we are—as happened to many people regarding the little words “Peter” and *petra*, Matthew 16[18]. (American Edition, 39:82)

Those clear passages of the Bible on which our doctrines are based are commonly referred to as *sedes doctrinae*, or “seats of doctrine.” They are passages which are not rendered doubtful by significant variant readings. They are passages which are simple and direct in their manner of expression, which are readily understandable when read in their contexts, which are free of any ambiguity, and which therefore require no interpretation. They are passages which do not rely on other verses of Scripture for clarification, but which in and by themselves “say what they mean and mean what they say.” For example, the Scriptural doctrine of God’s universal grace is founded upon such supremely lucid verses as the following: “‘As I live,’ says the Lord GOD, ‘I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live’” (Ezek. 33:11); “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16); and “God our Savior . . . desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:3-4).

Walter A. Maier, Jr., states the following: “Every doctrine of Holy Scripture is set forth at some place very clearly, in non-figurative terms, as the main theme of a discourse. Such a passage may be referred to as a *sedes doctrinae*, as the seat or source of a doctrine. All passages dealing with a certain doctrine are to be understood and expounded according to the *sedes doctrinae*” (Cited in Raymond F. Surburg, *The Principles of Biblical Interpretation* [Fort Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, n.d.] p. 578. An apparent typographical error in this citation has been corrected above.).

In his volume on Biblical hermeneutics, Raymond Surburg includes a helpful section dealing with how a person can determine which passages of Scripture constitute the *sedes doctrinae*. He states:

A *sedis* [sic] *doctrinae* is a passage or passages which specifically, clearly and unequivocally proclaim a Bible teaching or doctrine. This, therefore, means that a Biblical doctrine is not to be based upon a verse or verses that somehow allude to or suggest a teaching, but must be founded on passages where specifically (ex professo) a teaching is clearly set forth. Such clear passages are like the sun in comparison with other passages. Each and every doctrine must have a *sedis* (a seat), a verse or number of verses in which the doctrine is clearly enunciated.

There can be no article of faith advanced by an exegete or systematician for which there is no clear *sedis*, a verse or verses specifically setting forth the doctrine as claimed. A *sedis* proof passage must explicitly state the doctrine and not merely hint or accidentally allude to it.

But how can the Biblical interpreter know when a verse or group of verses constitute the seat for a doctrine? God has not given the Biblical readers a list of the *sedes* passages in His Word. Who then is to decide where and when the Bible reader has before him the passage or passages which constitute the basis for a Christian doctrine? Man's reason? The pious self-consciousness? A church council? The conclusions of philosophers? The answer must be: the Bible itself. Genesis 1:1-2:3 obviously is intended to be the *sedis* for the doctrine of creation. Genesis 2:4-25; Job 38-39; Proverbs 8:22-31; Psalm 104 all take their source from Genesis 1:1-2:3.

The *sedis* of a doctrine must always be clear and unambiguous. Unclear or dark passages should never be used for the establishment of Scriptural doctrines or tenets. Furthermore, in the *sedes* passages the words in them must always be understood in their originally intended sense. It is thus only permissible and proper to look for doctrinal *sedes* in those Bible verses or passages which specifically were intended by God to teach a particular doctrinal truth and therefore it is improper and wrong to employ Scriptural references as the basis for doctrines which they were not intended to explicate or teach. Only those passages which directly set forth a teaching are to be employed for the promulgation of doctrinal teaching, a method which was employed by Christ and the apostles. Readers of the Lutheran confessions will find that this was the manner by which Luther, Melancthon and the authors of the Formula of Concord proceeded when they set forth Biblical doctrines. (Surburg, p. 499- 501. Both the singular and plural forms of the Latin word for "seat" end with *-es: sedes.*)

False-teaching sects, on the other hand, commonly base their doctrinal errors upon passages of the Bible that are not immediately clear in themselves. First they read their errors into such darker passages, sometimes with apparent plausibility; and then they use these darker passages to deny the evident meaning of passages which express truth in a simple and direct way. With Luther we can rightly affirm that all of our doctrines are based on Scriptures which express the truth with a brightness and clarity which is like the noonday sun. The sum total of all such *sedes doctrinae* constitutes the so-called "analogy of Scripture," by which all difficult passages of the Bible must be understood and by which all teachings in the church must be judged.

For anyone to question the simple, direct, clear meaning of these *sedes doctrinae* is indeed a serious matter, for he thereby undermines the very foundation of Scriptural truth itself!

3. *Scripture contains also many passages in which the Spirit-intended meaning is not immediately evident, which passages may present exegetical problems for the interpreter. The cause of such difficulty is in no way to be ascribed to the Holy Spirit or to His inspired Word, but rather to a lack of necessary knowledge and understanding on the part of the exegete.*

Biblical scholars through all the ages have recognized that there are passages in the Bible, indeed many passages, which are not immediately clear to the intellect of the reader—some passages, in fact, whose meaning may elude even the most prayerful and diligent efforts of the exegete. Compare these words which Martin Luther quoted with approval from the writings of Gregory of Nazianzus: "The Word of God is a water so shallow that a lamb may wade safely through, but with such depths that an elephant may drown" (documentation not available). Even the learned Lutheran dogmaticians of the 17th century recognized that "there will be many times when an interpreter must content himself with a *possible* exegesis of a Biblical text" (Robert D. Preus, *The Theology of Post- Reformation Lutheranism* [St. Louis: Concordia, c1970] 1:326).

At no time, however, will a humble Christian charge the Holy Spirit with responsibility for the difficulties which he finds in the Bible. He will recognize that these problems have their true source in his own lack of knowledge and understanding. For example, the exegete may lack certain background information, known to the original readers of the passage, which is vital for discerning the meaning. In 1 Corinthians 15:29 Paul alludes to those "who are baptized for the dead." The Christians in Corinth were well aware of the particular practice to which the apostle had reference, so there was no need for him to elaborate. Unfortunately we no longer have that information, and we can therefore only guess what that practice may have been.

Again, the exegete may lack certain knowledge regarding word meanings or grammatical structure, or he may not be sensitive to some of the subtle nuances of the original languages of Scripture.

Moreover, he may have failed to trace the flow of thought accurately through a section of Scripture, thereby missing the help that could come from the context of a difficult passage. Then there are those verses of the Bible which contain idiomatic expressions, figures of speech, symbolical language, prophetic utterances yet unfulfilled, and such like. All of these things can present difficulties in arriving at that single literal sense intended by the Holy Spirit. Finally, the problem may arise from the exegete's own laziness and a lack of that kind of disciplined study that can, with the blessing of the Holy Spirit, lead to the desired result.

4. In his study of a difficult passage, the exegete may have to content himself with a probable or merely possible interpretation—an interpretation which may be called an “exegetical opinion.” The exegete should exercise care that such exegetical opinions of his are consistent with the analogy of Scripture, and he should be suspicious of any exegetical result that has nowhere and at no time been expressed by the church in its study of Scripture.

Some years ago, an essayist at a general pastoral conference of the Church of the Lutheran Confession presented a paper which surveyed a number of Bible passages on a matter of Christian practice which was then being debated within the church body. During his presentation, he would at times qualify his remarks with words like these: “It would *seem* that the meaning of this passage is . . .” Several speakers during the discussion period faulted this essayist for not uniformly presenting his exegetical results with an unqualified “Thus saith the Lord!”

I would not agree entirely with such criticism; for in the case of a difficult passage, the student of Scripture may have to content himself with a probable or merely possible interpretation. It is simply a matter of honesty for him to admit that he is not dogmatically certain about the meaning of the passage, but is presenting nothing more than an exegetical opinion.

It is essential, of course, that the interpreter compare his exegetical results with the analogy of Scripture: namely, with those clear *sedes doctrinae* on which Christian doctrine is based. His interpretation must be consistent with that analogy; and he will, hopefully, summarily reject any interpretation which violates that analogy. It has been rightly said that in the case of a problem passage it is generally easier to say what the passage does *not* mean than to say what it *does* mean. For example, we can be certain that the Mormons have misunderstood the meaning of the above-cited passage on “baptism for the dead” when they base their system of proxy baptism for the deceased upon this passage, for Scripture testifies clearly elsewhere that “it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment” (Heb. 9:27)—no second chance to be saved following death!

A reminder should perhaps be given here, also, that the mere fact that one's interpretation of a difficult passage agrees with the analogy of Scripture does not mean that he has found the Spirit-intended meaning of the passage. If his interpretation *disagrees* with the analogy, he knows definitely that it is wrong; if it *agrees* with the analogy, he knows only that it *may* be the correct understanding of that passage.

When the Bible student has carried out in a well-disciplined fashion the various endeavors that are part of proper exegetical procedure, he does well to compare his interpretation with those which have been reached by other Christian scholars in the past. He should be suspicious of any interpretation which has nowhere and at no time been expressed by former students of the Word. Novelty in exegesis is generally not a virtue, and striking out in some new direction may be dangerous. It must, of course, be recognized that the Holy Spirit could impart to an exegete insights on a passage which have eluded all earlier interpreters, but this probably happens quite rarely. Humility, coupled with a proper godly confidence, is appropriate for the student of the Bible. After all, even Luther himself confessed near the end of his life that he remained but a child in his knowledge of the Scriptures!

Lest any of us disparage consulting our Christian fathers on a passage, we should be reminded of the practice of the Lutheran confessors during the 16th century. Ralph Bohlmann points out:

But the *sola scriptura* principle in the Lutheran Confessions does not mean a disregard for the testimony of the fathers or the tradition of the church. In fact the confessions manifest the opposite: a grateful, yet careful and critical appreciation of the doctrinal continuity of the church. . . . Moreover, the doctrinal continuity with the ancient church is evident in the frequent citation of the early fathers of the church. The list of patristic citations in the confessions fills eleven pages!

. . . The confessions certainly do not suggest that the testimony of the fathers is a source or norm of doctrine, let alone a hermeneutical principle for Biblical interpretation. But they do suggest that the Biblical testimony of the fathers, extending from the age of Adam to the present age, can serve Biblical interpretation as a hermeneutical guide by summoning the interpreter to the task of appreciative, yet critical listening to the saints of yesterday. (Ralph A. Bohlmann,

Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Lutheran Confessions [St. Louis: Concordia, ©1968] pp. 127f., 133f.)

The question will no doubt arise here: What if a pastor or Christian teacher, in spite of diligent study and fervent prayer, arrives at only a tentative conclusion as to the single literal sense of the passage which he is preparing for his flock? Surely he may and should present to his people the fruits of his exegesis, with confidence in the Lord's blessing on his work—provided, of course, that his interpretation is consistent with the analogy of Scripture and does not present some new teaching that is not part of this analogy. While he may have missed a portion of the text's divine message, he will nonetheless be bringing God's Word to his flock.

5. *A doctrine of Scripture based on the sedes doctrinae is not to be regarded as a mere exegetical opinion. An exegetical opinion may be set aside without harm, but the rejection of doctrine involves a defiance of the authority of God and an endangering of precious blood-bought souls.*

The *sedes doctrinae* constitute an especially great light and priceless treasure for Christ's Church on earth. Here we have those statements of Law which convict us of our sin and show us our need for a Savior. Here we have those gems of Gospel by which God creates and preserves faith in our hearts through His Holy Spirit, thereby bestowing upon us the inestimable gifts of forgiveness and righteousness in Christ Jesus. Here we have those words from our heavenly Father which are able to lead us safely and surely through this ungodly world to our everlasting inheritance. Here we have those comforting passages which give us strength and hope in the midst of trials and suffering. And here we have those uplifting promises which can carry us safely across that boundary that separates time from eternity. Here, in these *sedes doctrinae*, we have those precious passages that have entered deeply into our minds and hearts, and which we have come to cherish above all the glory and good things of this world!

Surely we would have to dissent if anyone would treat one of these clear words of our God as a mere exegetical opinion; surely we would have to dissociate ourselves from anyone who would deny the divine truth that lies within such a passage. A human opinion about the meaning of a difficult verse in the Bible may be set aside without harm to Christian faith and life, but the rejection of one of the "seats of doctrine" involves defiance of the authority of the Triune God and endangers the salvation of precious, blood-bought souls.

May we ever be willing to give up our goods, our reputation, and even our lives in the exercise of Christian love. But may we never be willing to surrender even one word of Holy Scripture for the sake of outward tranquility or personal advantage!

6. *To require the acceptance of a mere exegetical opinion by other Christians is a violation of Christian love, and it may constitute an addition of human chaff to the pure wheat of God's Word.*

In his first letter, the Apostle Peter admonishes Christian ministers: "Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by constraint but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock" (5:2-3). There are many ways in which an under-shepherd of Christ could lord it over those in his spiritual care. One such way, surely, would be to require the members of his flock to submit to some exegetical novelty that he has "found" in a passage of Holy Scripture. In general, it would be a violation of Christian love for anyone to require another to accept a merely human opinion as divine truth.

Moreover, to promote one's own religious notions, even though these ideas may not specifically violate a clear passage of the Bible, runs the risk of adding human chaff to the pure wheat of God's Word (cf. Jer. 23:28) and "teaching as doctrines the commandments of men" (Matt. 15:9). As someone once said, it is not necessarily a virtue to be able to write the longest dogmatics book. (Compare the 30 heavy volumes of the Soncino edition of the Babylonian Talmud!) Indeed, the exegete should continually take heed lest the "spirit" which he hears may be, not the Holy Spirit, but his own inventive ego. He should read and read again the warning expressed by the Apostle John in the closing verses of the Bible:

For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book. (Rev. 22:18-19)

7. *Students of the Bible may at times disagree, if not on the meaning of a passage, then perhaps on whether or not the passage is so simple, clear, and direct that it belongs among the sedes doctrinae. The resolution of such questions may require an intensive study of text and context, coupled with fervent prayer for the guidance and illumination of the Holy Spirit.*

We need to remember that unity of faith and confession is not the product of human effort and ingenuity, but rather of the working of the Holy Spirit on the minds and hearts of people through the Gospel and Word of Christ. When, therefore, disagreement arises within a fellowship as to the meaning or clarity of one or more passages of Scripture, the solution can lie only in the Word and Spirit of God. This is a time for utter distrust of one's own exegetical sagacity, a time for fervent prayer to God for the help of His Spirit, a time for thorough and meditative study of Holy Scripture.

And such endeavor should be carried on with confidence. For we know that each verse of the Bible has a single Spirit-intended meaning, and that it is the will of our heavenly Father that we "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 3:18). Robert Preus affirms that the principle of the *unus sensus* should be "a source of constant encouragement to the interpreter. If careful investigation is made, the meaning of even difficult texts often becomes clear. Watching the context, the scope, and the intention of the text, as well as the analogy of faith [Scripture], often aids the theologian in arriving at the true sense of passages that at first seem dark and obscure" (Preus, p. 326).

Speaking of the *sedes doctrinae*, Surburg adds: "Since a Scriptural passage has only one-intended meaning, all Biblical interpreters of the Bible ought to agree on its meaning, providing the text is clear and no textual problems characterize it. This is, of course, holding forth the ideal. History and experience reveal that there is often a gulf between the ideal and the real" (Surburg, p. 504f.). Indeed, how hard it can be for the exegete to cast down his own reasonings and every lofty speculation that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, and to bring his every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ (Cf. 2 Cor. 10:5)!

Conclusion

At the beginning of this paper, we asked: When do exegetical differences involve a difference in doctrine, divisive of church fellowship; and, when do they constitute no more than differing exegetical opinions, which may legitimately exist side by side within a Christian fellowship? Permit the following summary response: Any exegetical result which violates the simple, clear, direct meaning of the *sedes doctrinae*, the passages on which Christian doctrine is based, is a serious matter; for it would constitute an undermining of the very doctrines presented in those passages and would draw into question the exegete's orthodoxy. When exegetical differences, however, have to do with passages that present difficulties in interpretation, such differences may be tolerated within the church so long as they are not contrary to the analogy of Scripture and are not laid upon the consciences of others as binding doctrine.

Every student of the Bible needs to recognize the darkness of his own understanding and his utter dependence upon the guidance and illumination of the Holy Spirit in the study of God's Word. The words of the hymn writer surely apply:

All our knowledge, sense, and sight
Lie in deepest darkness shrouded
Till Thy Spirit breaks our night
With the beams of truth unclouded.
Thou alone to God canst win us;
Thou must work all good within us. (TLH 16:2)

The exegete can, therefore, do no better than to heed with diligence this exhortation of our Lutheran fathers:

And after God, through the Holy Spirit in Baptism, has kindled and wrought a beginning of true knowledge of God and faith, we ought to petition him incessantly that by the same Spirit and grace, through daily exercise in reading his Word and putting it into practice, he would preserve faith and his heavenly gifts in us and strengthen us daily until our end. Unless God himself is our teacher, we cannot study and learn anything pleasing to him and beneficial to us and others. (Tappert, FC SD 2:16, p. 523)

To What Extent Must There be Agreement in Practice Before Fellowship Can be Established*

David Schierenbeck

Introduction

In the 1975 General Pastoral Conference, Pastor Gilbert Sydow delivered a paper entitled, "The Concept of Complete Agreement in Doctrine and Live and Its Application." This paper helped all better understand the basis for the 1974 Convention action establishing fellowship with the NCLC (Nigerian Church of the Lutheran Confession). Amidst concerns that the limited contact and lack of a complete assurance of doctrinal unity from the NCLC made fellowship with the NCLC premature, we were reminded of the unique aspect of an overseas mission situation. Despite extensive doctrinal correspondence with Mr. Erpenstein and the Board of Missions, the visitation discussion, their acceptance of the Word brought them, and their plea, "Come and teach us!" – cultural, logistical, governmental and financial obstacles made fellowship evaluations difficult. Second-guessing both the Board of Missions and Convention's handling of this special opportunity seemed inappropriate, according to Pastor Sydow. Somewhat the same situation has arisen in the origin and development of our fellowship relations in India. In both cases, a commitment to and agreement on the truths of Scripture as a basis for fellowship has, with the Spirit's blessing, grown and matured. One might draw a parallel to a child or adult confirmand whose fellowship is recognized and rejoiced in on Confirmation Day—but whose faith, knowledge and understanding have much room for spiritual growth and maturing. As Pastor Sydow observed: "We can start with baptismal fellowship and move up the ladder, as it were, to fuller, shall we say more complete confessions calling for more knowledge and intellectual comprehension—the preschoolers reciting at our Christmas Eve services, our catechumens at their confirmation, the candidates of theology at their ordination, to a possible discussed agreement between church bodies based on a long and thorough study of the multi-volume dogmatical works of Franz Pieper. These are all possibilities for the practice of fellowship in our church life. And we make use of them. Are any of them in violation of Scripture?"

The origin of this paper is somewhat different. Its emphasis is more on the agreement in "doctrine and practice" stated as a prerequisite for fellowship in both CLC and WELS doctrinal statements. What is meant by "practice"? Is it necessary or even possible to agree in "practice"?

* Delivered to the CLC General Pastoral Conference held at Immanuel Lutheran College, Eau Claire, WI, June 18-20, 1991; presented here as somewhat edited. – Editor.

I. The Historical Background and Usage of "Doctrine and Practice"

A number of contacts and resources were pursued to determine the historical origin and usage of the expression "doctrine and practice." The following are gleanings from a variety of sources tracing the development of this expression.

THE LUTHERAN CONFESSIONS

"The entire congregation of God, yea, every Christian, but especially the ministers of God are bound by God's Word to confess godly doctrine and what belongs to the whole of pure religion, not only in words, but also in works and with deeds" (FC, Thorough Declaration, *Triglot*, p. 1055, ¶ 5). While our confessions do not explicitly use the expression, they do use the concept of "practice" (*üben, treiben, leben, tun*) as an expression and outgrowth of doctrine in Christian life. Invariably, it is linked to doctrine, to the teachings of Scripture, particularly those involving activities such as penance, baptism, and the Lord's Supper. Likewise, the antitheses of our confessions reject both false doctrine and practice (indulgences, pilgrimages, and other abuses), thus showing the inseparable connection between the two. "It is clear that in the Lutheran Confessions, doctrine and practice according to our modern distinction are so intertwined and intermingled in their discussions as to be virtually indistinguishable" (*Concordia Theological Quarterly*, April-July, 1990, p. 100-102).

EARLY WISCONSIN AND MISSOURI DAYS

A recent article (*Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Spring 1991, p. 124-125) on the influence of Dr. Adolph Hoenecke during the early days of the Wisconsin Synod and its struggle for orthodoxy well documented his (and by God's grace also the synod's) concerns over both the doctrine and practice of his own beloved synod and others. His prayer was that they "be held together not merely by the bond of human constitutions, but by a full unification for our dear church by virtue of a spiritual oneness in doctrine and in a practice that is required by the same" (p. 139). At the 1868 convention, President Bading urged all to "put

away unionism and become faultlessly resolute in confessing Lutheranism in all its glory in doctrine and practice” (p. 140). In response to some who were sympathetic to the “mild and moderate Lutheranism of the General Synod,” the convention rejected “all and every altar and pulpit fellowship with false believers of the heterodox as something that contradicts the teaching and practice of the Lutheran Church” (p. 140-141).

As the Synodical Conference, organized in 1872, became the magnet for confessional Lutheran groups, one of its primary purposes in promoting the pure gospel was “the cultivation of unity in doctrine and practice,” something sorely lacking in the General Synod. A series of 18 theses by Missouri Synod Pastor Wilhelm Sihler were presented at early Synodical Conference conventions. Most demonstrated the confession-contradicting practice of the General Synod, including chiliasm, unionism, church fellowship, lodge membership and others. One thesis stated, “Therefore, a church body whose practice is in accord with its confessions may not unite with one whose practice contradicts that confession” (*Which Way to Lutheran Unity*, ch. 4, p. 68-72).

Dr. Franz Pieper used the expression “doctrine and practice” often in his 1896 CPH publication, *Unsere Stellung in Lehre und Praxis*, referring to such things as church discipline, church fellowship, stewardship, lodges, and the actual public preaching of the gospel. In his foreword explaining his reason for writing his *Christian Dogmatics*, Pieper mentions among other things “difficulties in establishing and maintaining correct practice in some congregations” (Vol. I, Preface, XI). Later on he speaks of congregational members “continuing in doctrine and applying the doctrine to one another” (Vol. I, p. 71).

Although the expression “doctrine and practice” is not used in the *Brief Statement* of 1932 (to which our churches subscribe in their constitutions), it well defines what is meant:

The orthodox character of a church is established not by its mere name nor by its outward acceptance of and subscription to, an orthodox creed, but by the doctrine which is actually taught in its pulpits, in its theological seminaries and in its publications. (“Of the Church,” ¶ 29A)

CLC CONFESSIONS

Our own *Concerning Church Fellowship* clearly states:

We believe and teach that Christian fellowship is based only on profession of faith, by word and deed. (¶ 27)

We must, therefore, maintain steadfastly that the only basis for fellowship is complete unity in the doctrine of Christ and that when this unity is broken, there is no basis for fellowship. Toleration of error, partaking of another’s evil deeds, worshipping with someone who profanes the name of God by his false doctrine—all of these things are no less wicked because of some previous relationship. (¶ 47)

In our 1969 *Statement of Faith and Purpose* we state:

Instead by the mercy and grace of our God, we are permitted to fellowship with those, but only those, who in their confession and life bow to the rule of the divine Word. (10, ¶ 2)

We limit . . . fellowship . . . to those professing Christians who meet the Scriptural requirement of complete agreement in doctrine and life and do not by word or act reject any part of the pure doctrine of God’s Word. (1, ¶ 2)

From these quotations, it is clear that agreement in doctrine and practice has always been a hallmark of the confessional Lutheran Church and its only basis for unity.

II. How Much Agreement Does Scripture Require?

Church fellowship is first and foremost a positive concept. It is a sharing in all the blessings of our faith-relationship with our God and with those of His children with whom God has united us around His Word. It is as the Apostle John describes it, “a working together for the truth” (3 John 8). Although primarily a positive aspect of our gospel witness (something both we and our people must be reminded of often), working together for the truth must of necessity also involve separation from falsehood and those who espouse it.

With good reason both we and those faithful before us have spoken of agreement in doctrine and practice as the basis for fellowship. Our God nowhere asks us to judge hearts to determine the presence or absence of faith, to identify those who belong to Christ as members of the *Una Sancta*. Yet, He clearly enjoins us to “test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets are gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1).

MORE THAN WORDS

This “testing” (δοκιμάζω—examine, scrutinize) process involves not simply evaluating a person’s words or a church’s written confessions or constitutions. Certainly they are an integral part of their public witness and confession, but by no means the only gauge for determining their orthodoxy or heterodoxy. Also considered must be what is preached in their pulpits, taught in their schools, written in their publications, and practiced in their church life.

Our Savior warned against deriving false security from orthodox words and creeds alone: “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 7:21). Doing the Father’s will involves much more than speaking the right words—it describes faith in action, believing on the Son and seeking to live according to His will.

PASSAGES

Many are the words of our Lord and His inspired apostles imploring complete faithfulness to all His words, to all the teachings of Scripture as a basis for fellowship and unity. A careful look at those Scripture passages which speak of our following of and fellowship around the Word also suggest a Spirit-wrought consistency and continuity between faith and its fruits, between creeds and deeds, between doctrine and practice.

John 8:31 – “If you continue (μένω – remain, abide) in My Word, you are My disciples indeed.” Surely continuing in the Word involves more than simply a correct oral or church confession. Discipleship is most reflected in our attitude toward and relationship with our Savior and His Word in our daily lives.

Matthew 28:20 – “Go . . . teaching them to observe (τηρέω – watch carefully, hold firmly, keep) all things that I commanded you.” Again, the idea of carefully noting and keeping is descriptive of both confession and life.

Romans 10:10 – “For with the heart one believes to righteousness and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.” Having beautifully shown us the righteousness of faith which comes through the Word, the apostle now reminds us that faith will be confessed and lived unto the day of our salvation.

1 Corinthians 1:10 – “Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.” No σχίσματα (divisions, splitting apart) implies anything that would threaten or disrupt the bond of oneness which united them. In the case of the Corinthians, their “practice” reflected some doctrinal weaknesses which needed to be brought in line with their confession.

Romans 16:17 – “. . . mark those who cause divisions (διχοστασία – dissension, cutting apart) and offenses (σκάνδαλον – death-trap, stumbling block) contrary to the doctrine you have learned, and avoid them.” Again, these divisions and offenses may involve false teaching, unscriptural practice, or both. “By their fruits you will know them” (Matt. 7:20).

Some of the Apostle Paul’s inspired usage of διδασκαλία (teaching, doctrine) involve both doctrine and practice. Cf. 2 Timothy 2:1, 7b, 10; 1 Timothy 1:10; 6:1.

WHAT PRACTICE?

We assume there is agreement with Pastor Maynard Witt’s one-line response to his pastoral conference assignment, “What Is a Doctrine?” — “A doctrine is anything and everything written in the Bible.” However, the question inevitably arises, “What, then, is practice?”

The term practice seems to be differently understood. Some understand it to refer exclusively to the application of the doctrines and principles of Scripture to life; others regard it as adiaphora, outward forms—such as preference for a particular Bible translation, liturgical form, or hymnal, even including what we in the pastoral ministry label “cases of casuistry.” Neither the Scriptures nor our confessions require uniformity in these areas, but only exercise of a Spirit-given measure of Christian love and liberty.

Even in the area of pastoral practice, differing situations and individual spiritual needs may require different approaches, different manners of applying principles. For example, as we sought to inform, instruct, guide and lead our flocks out of the sometimes difficult, hazy, unionistic maze of the fraternal life insurance issue, different approaches and timetables were inevitable. The pastor dealing with a large traditional Lutheran congregation, long steeped in the virtues of this insurance as both good personal stewardship and a mission venture, faced a situation far different from that in a small mission congregation whose membership had few ties to these organizations. Each situation would call for patient instruction, while one might proceed more swiftly than the other. In either case, a pastor would faithfully bring the Father’s Word and the gospel to bear on the hearts of precious souls in his charge.

However, when used as part of the phrase “doctrine and practice,” we do well to follow our historical usage. For our purposes, practice then may be defined as doctrine in action, as the natural outgrowth and application of the beliefs and convictions of the individual or church.

This touches on another matter of long-standing concern to the essayist—the matter of religious terminology understood several different ways. While it is difficult and perhaps even unwise to dictate uniform definition and usage of terminology not expressed in Scripture, there would seem to be merit in seeking as much uniformity in expression as possible. One wonders how many misunderstandings and problems might have been and still may be prevented when efforts are made to communicate clearly one’s own thoughts as well as patiently striving to understand those of others.

LIFE IS EARTH

At the same time we recognize, as Luther said, that “doctrine is heaven, life is earth.” While our confession must be perfectly in harmony with Scripture, both our understanding and application of God’s Word to our lives will at times be imperfect. Because of our sinful nature, our “practice” individually, congregationally and synodically will sometimes fall short of our confession. We are all “weak brothers” of varying kinds and degrees. Both in our own spiritual lives and our pastoral practice, who among us has measured up to the Lord’s standards? Which of us has perfectly loved his wife as Christ loved the church or perfectly embodies the ideal pastoral qualities of 1 Timothy 3? Is there any among us who has flawlessly divided the word of truth, perfectly applied the Word to every spiritual need of our people? Will the shepherd whose love for his sheep always exemplifies that of the Good Shepherd come forward? Is there among us the ideal Christian pastor? Need we go further? Yet none of these failings disqualifies us from the ministry, provided we humbly, prayerfully and faithfully carry out our calling. Rather, they only reinforce and enhance our understanding and appreciation of Paul’s words, “Our sufficiency is of God” (2 Cor. 3:5).

And what is true of us as Christian pastors is also true of our Christian people, our congregations, and our synods. Without questioning the orthodox character of our church body and while thankfully acknowledging the Lord’s many mercies and blessings upon us, we fully confess our failings as a synod. With spiritual hindsight also being 20/20, we confess to succumbing at times to a measure of pride, to vacillation, to slowness in understanding and responding to doctrinal concerns which arose in our midst, to sluggishness in carrying out our commission, and to a host of other failings.

Yet the mark of a faithful Christian congregation or synod is a willingness to recognize and confess these failings, seek forgiveness for them, and pray for strength to address and remedy them. Where such is the spirit and attitude and where there is a willingness and desire to bow to the authority of the Word, much patience and love is called for. Such a spirit fosters an atmosphere most conducive to growth in the gospel and in the Word so vital to our ministries and to precious souls.

When, however, practice is willfully and consistently at variance with a scriptural confession, it represents more than a “weak brother” situation or even a casual intrusion of error. Unscriptural practice suggests doctrine gone astray and must be dealt with according to the clear teachings of Scripture on church fellowship. A church or synod which promotes, defends, condones, or tolerates error in its midst, no matter how pure its confession, forfeits its claim to orthodoxy.

Fellowshipping with a “practicing” errorist (no matter what his formal confession) involves one in his evil deeds. Such fellowship is a sin against our Savior and His Word, rejecting His and its authority. It is a sin against one’s church, giving offense to fellow members by leading them to believe one doctrine or church is as good as another. It is a sin against the errorist by strengthening him in his error rather than in love testifying against it. And it is a sin against his own soul by exposing it to the corruptive influence of error, which like leaven is never dormant.

III. A Wise Expression for Today’s Religious Climate

The ALC Declaration of 1938 espoused a fellowship basis that has since pervaded much of Lutheranism. Stating that “it is neither necessary nor possible to agree in all areas of doctrine,” the seeds were planted for the growth and nurturing of one of Satan’s most subtle and destructive teachings—unionism. “Believing it reflects the loving spirit of Christ, presents a united witness before the unbelieving world, and pools our joint efforts in a mega-witness campaign against the forces of darkness,” many “Christian” churches have bought into this treacherous deception. One St. Olaf College chapel speaker said that “the greatest tragedy on the American religious scene is not so much the multiplicity of the 250 or so denominations in the U.S., but rather the fact that some among them have the audacity to claim a corner on divine Truth.”

In 1961, Dr. Samuel Cavert echoed the thought of many in his book, *On the Road to Christian Unity*, proclaiming subjective faith to be his basis for the acknowledgment and exercise of church fellowship. “Unity,” he claimed, “lies in the experience of finding that God meets us in Christ and in our response to Him in faith. Agreement in doctrine is a function of the united church rather than a precondition of it. The community of faith and love comes first, and agreement in doctrinal statements grow out of this—not vice versa.” Both Scripture and history tell a far different story. Error, rather than dissipating in a sea of brotherly love or being overwhelmed by truth, tends to leaven, dilute and ultimately erode the very foundation of the church. The ecumenical spirit and movement has not produced a return to biblically-oriented churches. In fact, quite the opposite is true.

A CONFSSIONAL SHELL

As a result, while theological views and practices in many churches have distanced themselves further from Scripture, there yet remains in many cases a token, nominal subscription to its historical confessions. A shell of confessionalism remains; the kernel is gone. This has made “testing the spirits,” evaluating a church’s confessional position, sometimes confusing and difficult. In the introduction to the reference chart, *Test the Spirits*, readers are reminded:

We recognize that not all pastors and teachers in a specific church body may teach or hold the errors here exposed. At the same time, many church bodies do not hold their clergy to any particular standard of doctrine. Others, while not official promoting or defending an error, tolerate in their midst such as do.

It has been a long-held and time-tested principle within the orthodox Lutheran church that the official doctrinal position of a church is determined by what is preached from its pulpits, taught in its schools, and written in its official publications. We subscribe to this principle. Indeed, looking at both doctrine and practice may be more important than ever today. Emerson’s words have spiritual application here, “What you are speaks so loudly I cannot hear what you are saying.”

RELIGIOUS DOUBLESPEAK

A related concern is the growing use of correct religious terminology to mask confession differences. A 1990 report by the Barna Research Group in Glendale, CA, pointed out a significant difference between what Americans say about religion and how they practice it. While almost 75% believe the Bible is the Word of God, there is a wide latitude of interpretation over what that belief means. So also, with belief in Jesus as the Son of God. One’s joy over two-thirds of Americans believing in the resurrection of Jesus is tempered by the not-uncommon explanation given that all people have some post-death experience.

Small wonder then that religious doublespeak has infiltrated church confessions. From Arius’ ὁμοιούσιος at Nicea to Melancthon’s *leisetreten* tendencies, from the Common Confession of 1950 to the wording of the new ELCA Constitution and Confession, history clearly shows this to be nothing new. Satan loves confessional ambiguity, masking growing error under the pious cover of fine-sounding confessional phraseology. Looking only at this form of godliness, the hearts of many simple are deceived. With the lessening significance of confessions, examining a church’s practice becomes ever more vital.

EXAMPLE

No more sad example may exist within “confessional” Lutheranism than that of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod. Once a bulwark of orthodoxy and a valued fellow-confessor in the Synodical Conference, the germs of error have gradually weakened her from within until she now stands confessionally as a shadow of her former self. To be sure, there are many causes—not the least of which has been her advances to other Lutherans in the name of a strong, worldwide Lutheran witness. Yet those close to the scene also point to Missouri’s reluctance and inability to enforce doctrinal discipline in her own midst. While maintaining a public subscription to Scripture and to the historic Lutheran confessions, even her own *Brief Statement* of 1932, Missouri has at the same time tolerated false teachers and false doctrine in her midst. In a presentation at St. Cloud, MN, several years ago, retired Missouri President Dr. Jacob Preus lamented the constitutional and bureaucratic barriers which hamstrung his efforts as president to restore doctrinal discipline. As an interest observer, one had the distinct feeling their problems went much deeper than constitutional and bureaucratic inadequacies.

In the *CTQ* article referred to earlier, Dr. Robert Preus lamented the growing tendency to isolate practice from doctrine, indeed elevating practice above doctrine. Within his own fellowship, this “conservative” voice in the wilderness saw some key areas of concern: church fellowship, open

communion, the office of the ministry, and women pastors. Unless his beloved church reexamines and returns to the scriptural principles governing its practices, its confessional future will remain bleak.

CLC-WELS MEETINGS

In the previous meetings involving our CLC Board of Doctrine and the WELS Doctrinal Commission, it was recognized by both groups that agreement in doctrine and practice would be a necessary prerequisite for fellowship. This joint phraseology was wisely chosen. It ruled out any possible misunderstanding that agreement in the principles of church fellowship alone would lead to resumption of fellowship without any consideration as to how either church body has “practiced” that doctrine, past and present. Especially when there is a history of differences in doctrine and practice, special consideration must be given to practice. So past and present synodical actions support or undermine what is professed in a joint confessional statement? If practice has not matched or does not match “doctrine,” does that not indicate a doctrinal difference which must be recognized and resolved?

OUR PRACTICE

Our God in His mercy has created and preserved among us a unity in Christ, both in doctrine and practice, that is as rare as it is precious. In this we rejoice and for this we give Him glory. In the face of relentless Satanic wiles, a pressure-filled religious environment, our own proud and fiercely independent spirits, and a number of struggles over issues which could easily have severed that fragile Spirit-created bond, our CLC today stands as a monument of God’s grace. Surely there is nothing in us worthy of such blessing nor deserving of its continued presence in the future. Yet, humbly we again come before the throne of grace, imploring our Father in heaven for His promised forgiveness as well as His presence and strength for ourselves, our flocks, and our extended synodical family. May our hearts believe, our tongues confess, and our lives ever practice the precious and saving truths of His eternal Word.

A Brief History of the CLC’s Work for Him in India

(God’s Work with Gideon’s Band)

David Koenig

Initial Contact — The CLC Board of Missions (BoM) received a letter from John Rohrbach, a member of Zion, Ipswich, SD, dated Dec. 10, 1981. In it he wrote, “This past summer I went to Sri Lanka and India. I was doing social work and missionary work in India. . . . While there I became sick and was hospitalized for ten days. During my stay at the hospital a schoolmaster and his wife came to me with three pastors. They were looking for a Lutheran body to belong to.” When John communicated this to his brethren in the CLC, there was joy aplenty which then led to action.

July 1982 — The BoM in a supplementary report to the CLC convention made mention of a meeting with John, correspondence with both John and the contact in India, Mr. Benjamin, a West Central Conference Memorial on the issue, and a projected budget for the effort. The report stated, “Recognizing the apparent mission opportunity the Lord may be laying before us, we recommend disseminating this information about India to our people as well as pursuing various ways and means of answering this request.”

January 1983 — A visitation team representing the CLC embarked for India to investigate the field of labor around Nidubrolu, Guntur District, Andhra Pradesh State, India. The team consisted of John Rohrbach and Pastors David Schierenbeck and David Koenig. They held doctrinal discussions with V. S. Benjamin in which it was observed that we were in doctrinal agreement and he was willing to continue to learn with us. David Schierenbeck as chairman of the BoM submitted the report to the president of the synod.

April 1983 — Based upon doctrinal agreement with V. S. Benjamin’s Church of the Lutheran Confession of India (CLCI) and with a prayer for a missionary to be sent, the BoM authorized the purchase of a Mission House in Nidubrolu at a cost of \$9,500. The building was then used as a residence for Pastor Benjamin and as a headquarters and meeting place of the CLCI.

Again January 1983 — While the visitation team was in the Guntur area of India, a letter from the far southern tip of India was winging its way to the CLC/USA. Pastor Mohan Bas with his Bharath Evangelical Lutheran Church was looking for a missionary and support for their work. Like the CLCI, they were separate and had left other Lutheran churches. Pastor Bas had found our name in an international directory of Lutheran churches. He did not know of our visitation. Correspondence began with him on the teachings of the Word.

Again April 1983 — The first meeting was held by the committee which would, under BoM supervision, oversee orphan work under Project Kinship. There was enthusiastic support to assist the orphans under Pastor Benjamin's care. In June it received its official designation of Project Kinship (Kids in Need—Source of Help for India's Poor).

January 1984 — A visitation team was sent to India, consisting of Pastors Norbert Reim and David Koenig. They were to hold doctrinal discussions with Pastor Bas at Trivandrum and visit Pastor Benjamin and his people. Discussion disclosed an agreement on the teachings discussed and a willingness of Pastor Bas to continue in the Word.

July 1984 — The CLC Convention formally recognized that “the Holy Spirit has established fellowship between the CLC and the CLCI. With grateful hearts we praise His holy name. . . . The convention authorized the construction of an orphanage building to house 25-30 orphans. Though the cost eventually ran somewhat higher, the first estimate for land and building was \$11,327. John Rohrbach went over to assist in the construction.

January 1985 — Calling of a missionary to India began. As developments proceeded that year, David Koenig accepted the call.

November 1985 — Visas were applied for to enter India. Different avenues to gain entrance were investigated but proved unworkable. The BoM decided to send the missionary to Nigeria.

Late 1984 — A Bible correspondence course, developed by Pastor Bertram J. Naumann, was advertised in several newspapers in India, with CLC laypeople then correcting the mailed worksheets. A Mr. V. S. Willard led many young people through the course in Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh.

July 1986 — The CLC in convention formally recognized that confessional fellowship existed between us and Pastor Bas and the Bharath Ev. Lutheran Church (BELC). As of this date the CLCI consisted of 22 pastors and 35 congregations representing about 2,800 souls. the BELC consisted of two pastors serving six congregations with approximately 300 souls.

February 1989 — A visitation team of Pastor Norbert Reim and Mr. Lee Krueger (member of the BoM) visited our sister churches in India. Besides reporting that they thoroughly enjoyed every day they were over there, they came back with recommendations which were carried out. They recommended that three more acres be purchased, to add to the two already purchased, upon which rice is grown for the orphans. They recommended that Pastor Benjamin's Son, Jyothi, be brought to the USA for training at ILC to return then to India to assist his father in serving the Lord.

September 1989 — Jyothi Benjamin began his courses at ILC and, upon finishing the two-year program, returned to India in July 1991.

Spring 1990 — A cyclone ravaged the area where our sister church, the CLCI, is located. There was extensive damage to property. The Kinship Committee, upon learning of this, immediately sent over \$3,000, sure that our people would respond to this need. Pastor David Koenig was sent to the ravaged area to consult with Pastor Benjamin on how best to use the CLC Disaster Relief monies. By December \$34,101 had been given to help our brothers and sisters in Christ with their losses.

June 1992 — It was reported to us that the CLCI had 30 congregations of approximately 8,000 souls. We were assisting in the care of 25 orphans at Nidubrolu. The BELC consisted of approximately 2,000 souls. Pastor Bas was still working outside of Madras at Uthukottai in his Martin Luther Bible School, having relocated his center of activity from Trivandrum for a while.

January 1994 — A visitation team of Pastors Daniel Fleischer and Mark Bohde was sent by the BoM “to give encouragement to our brethren . . . and provide us with a better understanding of the Lord's work that we are sharing in . . .” They returned reporting, “. . . most distressing beyond the physical poverty we saw was the spiritual poverty that holds the masses in its grasp. Hindu temples and shrines appear on public grounds and on private land . . .”

August 1995 — The Kinship Committee approved sponsorship of 15 orphans taken care of by Pastor Bas outside of Madras. The number of orphans at Nidubrolu under Pastor Benjamin was 35 at this time. Project Kinship continues to operate under the Scripture direction of James 1:27 to visit orphans in their affliction. One of the men of the Kinship Committee wrote what certainly applies to the India field, “The fields are white unto harvest and the hour is late. Doors are opening to the gospel all over the world, and we are the workers. Any question or difficulty concerning the work is first of all a call to come to our knees before our heavenly Father in prayer . . . Please pray with us . . . that we all would clearly know His will . . . and then in faith to step ahead and do.”
