

JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 47

SEPTEMBER 2007

NUMBER 3

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Editor	Steven Sippert 513 Ingram Dr Eau Claire, Wisconsin 54701-5913
Assistant Editor	Elton Hallauer
Circulation Manager	Benno Sydow bennosydow@yahoo.com 2750 Oxford Street North Roseville, Minnesota 55113
Staff Contributors	F. Gantt, N. Greve, T. Kesterson, D. Lau, D. Maas, P. Naumann, M. Roehl, D. Schaller, P. Tiefel

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SERMONS TO SEMINARIANS

David Lau

Homiletics Sermon #7 (Fall 2002): Psalm 73:21-28

Thus my heart was grieved, and I was vexed in my mind. I was so foolish and ignorant; I was like a beast before You. Nevertheless I am continually with You; You hold me by my right hand. You will guide me with Your counsel, and afterward receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but You? And there is none upon earth that I desire besides You. My flesh and my heart fail; but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. For indeed, those who are far from You shall perish; You have destroyed all those who desert You for harlotry. But it is good for me to draw near to God; I have put my trust in the Lord GOD, that I may declare all Your works.

Dear friends in Christ:

Think of the many athletes who train for the Olympic Games. In order to be the best at their sport in the whole world, they need to spend many hours in training every day. They must be thoroughly dedicated to giving their best effort. Then, of course, if they win, they are often asked whether all the training was worth it. Invariably, they answer that it was worth it. The losers may never be asked such a question, and perhaps their answers would be different.

As Christians, and especially as Christians striving to prepare yourselves for the public ministry in the twenty-first century, you may also be wondering at times whether **IT IS WORTH IT**. Is the goal for which we are striving worth the effort? Being genuine Christians at this time in our nation's history is getting to be dangerous. We don't fit in. We may be isolated from others. In our quest to hold on to God's Word in our teaching and practice, we too may find ourselves asking such a question.

This very question was asked by the psalmist Asaph many centuries ago. As a believer in God's promises to Israel and as a conscientious servant of the LORD God, he sometimes wondered whether it was worthwhile to do what he did as a servant of the Lord. We find him asking this question in the 73rd Psalm, from which our text is taken. Today we join Asaph in asking this question in relation to our own situation. **IS IT WORTH IT?** First of all, we see 1) **WHY THE QUESTION IS ASKED**; secondly, 2) **HOW THE QUESTION IS ANSWERED**; and finally, 3) **WHEN THE ANSWER WILL BECOME PERFECTLY CLEAR**. May the Holy Spirit guide our meditation on these words today, as He motivates us to be faithful Christians, who strive to do God's will out of love for what He has done for us, and as He reassures us in the truth that certainly **IT IS WORTH IT**.

1. Why did Asaph ask this question so many years ago? We read: **"Thus my heart was grieved, and I was vexed in my mind. I was so foolish and ignorant; I was like a beast before You."** Grieved, vexed, foolish, and ignorant? What does he mean? Earlier in this Psalm Asaph expressed what was bothering him. **"I was envious of the boastful,"** he said, **"when I saw the prosperity of the wicked"** (v. 3). Asaph looked around him and compared his own life with that of some people he knew who were much richer and happier, it seemed, than he was. And yet they were openly ungodly. They were not believers in the God of Israel, and thus they made no efforts to try to please God in their lives. On the contrary, they lived as they pleased; they did what they wanted; they satisfied their earthly lusts; and everything went very well for them. Or so it seemed.

Listen to Asaph's words written earlier in this Psalm. **"They are not in trouble as other men, nor are they plagued like other men.... Their eyes bulge with abundance; they have more than heart could wish.... Behold, these are the ungodly, who are always at ease; they increase in riches"** (Psa. 73:5,7,12). Asaph had become envious. He envied his ungodly neighbors because they had so much money and goods and all the pleasurable things money could buy. And they seemed to be happy. So the question came to Asaph's lips: **IS IT WORTH IT?** Is it worth it to be a believer in the Lord God and walk according to His ways? At one point

Asaph said, **“Surely I have cleansed my heart in vain.”** He was beginning to think there was no point in trying to serve God, for the ungodly seemed to be prospering much more than he was. There appeared to be no point in being a Christian. What was he getting out of it? Poverty, shame, disgrace, ridicule; why, there did not seem to be any benefits at all.

I have to admit that the same question sometimes goes through my mind. Perhaps it has gone through your minds as well. We begin to compare our lives with certain famous ungodly men, and it seems that they are prospering well beyond us. They seem to be succeeding in their lives, becoming rich and famous, able to enjoy all the pleasures this life has to offer. What do you think, for example, of the phenomenal earthly success of Hugh Hefner? Here is a man who has done perhaps more than any other to steer our country away from sexual morality into gross immorality. He is rich and successful, and in fact, he is now even looked up to as some kind of philosopher. The question therefore can be asked and is asked: why has God allowed this ungodly man and others like him to enjoy such prosperity, while there are poverty-stricken Christians, especially in other parts of the world, who are being starved and tortured for their confession of faith in Jesus Christ? It does not seem right or fair to us.

Well, this seems to be the way that Asaph felt as he expressed it in our text. We can hear his question, **“IS IT WORTH IT?”** There was a time when Asaph thought it was not worth it, and he was about to give it up. **“Thus my heart was grieved, and I was vexed in my mind. I was so foolish and ignorant; I was like a beast before You.”** When I had such thoughts, he said, I was almost like an animal, looking only at the externals.

2. How was Asaph’s question answered? Yes, **HOW IS THE QUESTION ANSWERED** for us and for all believers in Christ? The answer is one that is only accepted by faith. In other words, we cannot see the solution with our eyes. We only believe the solution on the basis of what God says in His Word. And so Asaph was led by the Holy Spirit to answer his own question with the unseen truth. **Is it worth it?** Yes, it is, and this is why, according to Asaph’s own experience and report: **“Nevertheless I am continually with You; You hold me by my right hand. You will guide me with Your counsel, and afterward receive me to glory.”**

As for the ungodly, Asaph says: **“For indeed, those who are far from You shall perish; You have destroyed all those who desert You for harlotry. But it is good for me to draw near to God; I have put my trust in the Lord GOD, that I may declare all Your works.”** The ungodly may seem to be prospering and getting rich and enjoying life more than all the others. But if they are far from God in their unbelief, they are headed for destruction. Especially those who have deserted the Lord for other gods are guilty of spiritual harlotry. Though the Lord God should be their husband, they have gone off after other lovers and made themselves ripe for destruction.

So, **IS IT WORTH IT** to serve the Lord, to trust in His works, to pray to Him, to listen to His counsel? Of course it is! He is our Savior God. As we talk about His works, we recall what He has done. He has created us; He has given us our bodies and souls; He has taken care of us all along. Yes, He holds us in His hands; He watches out for us, day in and day out, with no vacations or time away. He neither slumbers nor sleeps.

When we read His Word, we hear about His wonderful works to the children of men. We especially notice the promise that He made to sinners from the beginning, the promise that He would send a Savior from sin, a Substitute to carry our sins away, to be punished in our place for all of our guilt, and to win for us total and perfect forgiveness for all of our sins. God’s Word tells us all about such works of God: the coming of Jesus into the world, all of the Savior’s activities in our behalf, the sending of the Holy Spirit, the broadcasting of the good news of Jesus Christ throughout the entire world, and more recently, how God in His mercy has brought us also to faith in His Son. It’s all there in His Word, there for us to read about His works done in our behalf, to believe in them, and to trust in them for our salvation.

Asaph says: **“I have put my trust in the Lord GOD.”** That is the answer to this question: **IS IT WORTH IT?** Yes, it is, because in His Word we read of God’s love for us sinners,

what He promises to us, what He has done for us, and what our future is because of all that He has done and promised and declared. By faith we can hold on to God's Word, and in that faith we find the strength to carry on, to remain faithful to our Lord, to continue to walk in His ways, and to strive to do those things that please Him who has loved us so much. With Asaph we too can cry out: **"Whom have I in heaven but You? And there is none upon earth that I desire besides You. My flesh and my heart fail; but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever."**

Let the earth dwellers enjoy their earthly prosperity. We have something much more reliable and worthwhile. We have a God who loves us and will watch out for us. We can say with Job: **"Though He slay me, yet I will trust in Him"** (Job 13:15). That is, even though His actions at times seem to contradict His Word, I will trust what His Word says. God will not lie to me. I can depend on Him.

3. And finally, when all is said and done, the time will come **WHEN THE ANSWER WILL BECOME PERFECTLY CLEAR** not only to me, but to everyone in the whole world. **IS IT WORTH IT?** It is indeed, as we receive the final fulfillment of God's promises to us. **"You will guide me with Your counsel, and afterward receive me to glory."** Yes, all I have here on earth is words from You, God, words which are Your counsel to me. But the time will come when faith will become sight, when we shall see clearly how worth it the Christian life will have been. Asaph expresses it in one word **"glory."** He also says: **"God is my portion forever."** So here we are talking about eternity and considering what the inheritance of God's children is. Is it not being with God forever? Is it not beholding His glory with our eyes? Is it not seeing Jesus as He is, and even being like Him? Yes, our own sins and sinfulness will be with us no more on that day. No sin can remain in us who have trusted in Christ. The consequences of sin will be gone as well, things like pain, sorrow, ridicule, weakness, and death. All will be gone. As it is written: **"There shall be no more curse, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall serve Him. They shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads. There shall be no night there: They need no lamp nor light of the sun, for the Lord God gives them light. And they shall reign forever and ever"** (Rev. 22:3-5). This is the eternal glory that makes it all worth it.

So let us never give up the walk of faith. Let us not trouble ourselves by the prosperity of the wicked. Let us not think that we are getting a raw deal as Christians. No, by God's grace we have been brought into God's family of believers, and we can trust the Lord to take care of all our needs as He sees fit. For now we walk by faith, not by sight. For now we need to trust in God's Word, regardless of how things seem on the surface. In the midst of difficulties and troubles we need to keep on remembering that our God loves us, that Jesus is our Savior, that we have been promised a heavenly home with our Lord. It is certainly worth it, dear friends. May our God continue to guide us with His counsel here on earth and in His own time receive us to Himself in the glory of heaven. Amen!

Homiletics Sermon #8 (Fall 2003): 2 Chronicles 15:1-9

Now the Spirit of God came upon Azariah the son of Oded. And he went out to meet Asa, and said to him: "Hear me, Asa, and all Judah and Benjamin. The LORD is with you while you are with Him. If you seek Him, He will be found by you; but if you forsake Him, He will forsake you. For a long time Israel has been without the true God, without a teaching priest, and without law; but when in their trouble they turned to the LORD God of Israel, and sought Him, He was found by them. And in those times there was no peace to the one who went out, nor to the one who came in, but great turmoil was on all the inhabitants of the lands. So nation was destroyed by nation, and city by city, for God troubled them with every adversity. But you, be strong and do not let your hands be weak, for your work shall be rewarded!" And when Asa heard these words and the prophecy of Oded the

prophet, he took courage, and removed the abominable idols from all the land of Judah and Benjamin and from the cities which he had taken in the mountains of Ephraim; and he restored the altar of the LORD that was before the vestibule of the LORD. Then he gathered all Judah and Benjamin, and those who dwelt with them from Ephraim, Manasseh, and Simeon, for they came over to him in great numbers from Israel when they saw that the LORD his God was with him.

Dear friends in Christ, students of the Word:

As hymn 483 (TLH) reminds us, there were three distinct offices of men who represented God as His anointed leaders in Israel. There were priests anointed with the special anointing oil. There were prophets anointed with that oil. And there were kings anointed with that oil as well. Like the hymn our text for today makes mention of all three offices.

The anointed king of Judah at this time was Asa, a descendant from the royal line of David, an ancestor of the Messiah, and father of the good king Jehoshaphat, who was his successor in office. On the occasion of our text King Asa was greeted by a prophet of God named Azariah, the son of Oded. In the prophet's address to King Asa he made mention of the need for "teaching priests."

The kings in David's line generally passed on their office to their sons or other close relatives. The priests likewise passed on their office to their sons and grandsons. But succession of the prophets was different. Whenever God so desired, He would send His Holy Spirit to someone selected by Him and would put **THE WORD OF GOD INTO THAT PERSON'S MOUTH**, so that what the prophet spoke would not be his own word, but indeed the very Word of God. And so our text says: "**Now the Spirit of God came upon Azariah the son of Oded.**" Thus Azariah was one of those prophets of whom it is written: "**Prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit**" (2 Pet. 1:21).

Our audience on this occasion of starting another year of homiletics is made up of persons in training to become proclaimers of the Word of God in Christ's Church. Of course, none of us are or ever will be prophets to whom the Spirit of God speaks directly. Nevertheless, because we have the Spirit's Word in the Scriptures and we intend to be proclaimers of that Word, we are also empowered to speak **THE WORD OF GOD IN OUR MOUTHS**, and thus we can learn something about that Word by a careful consideration of our text from Second Chronicles.

Notice, first of all, that **THE WORD OF GOD IN OUR MOUTHS** is 1) *a word of warning and of God's wrathful judgment*. The Spirit of God certainly put such a message into Azariah's mouth. Listen to the prophet's stern word of warning to the southern kingdom and its king: "**Hear me, Asa, and all Judah and Benjamin. . . . If you forsake the LORD, He will forsake you.**" Here we have an example in which God threatens dire judgment on an individual or group who dares to forsake the LORD. According to the strict laws of the religion of Islam, any defector or apostate from Islam will be put to death. Islamic leaders, however, have power only to end the physical life of any of Islam's former adherents. The one true God can do much more than kill the body. "**If you forsake the LORD, He will forsake you.**" What does this mean? What did it mean to Jesus on the cross when God forsook Him? In our place Jesus endured the curse of eternal hellfire. He was forsaken by God as the full punishment of our sins, which were all laid on Him. What Jesus endured has lifted the punishment from us and has brought us the gift of having God be for us, not against us, and with us, not away from us.

However, if we turn away from God and His anointed Son Jesus Christ and the salvation that He has won for us, God will forsake us. And finally, if there is no repentance on the part of the individual who has turned away, that forsaking will be forever. Jesus Himself said to His disciples: "**Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.**" Condemned! Or as the King James Version puts it, "damned!" Damned to hell, which amounts to what Jesus foretold in one of His last sermons: "**These will go away into everlasting punishment**" (Matt.

25:46). Again it is written: **“See that you do not refuse Him who speaks. For if they did not escape who refused Him who spoke on earth, much more shall we not escape if we turn away from Him who speaks from heaven”** (Heb. 12:25).

To help make this message sink in, the prophet Azariah gave his listeners a little history lesson. It seems that he was describing the way things were in the days of the judges, when the people turned away from the Lord not many years after Joshua died, and on account of their disobedience and unbelief the Lord permitted enemy nations to oppress them and to make their lives miserable, all in the attempt to bring them to repentance. This is the way the prophet Azariah said it, as the Holy Spirit moved him: **“For a long time Israel was without the true God, without a teaching priest, and without law; but when in their trouble they turned to the LORD God of Israel, and sought Him, He was found by them. And in those times there was no peace to the one who went out, nor to the one who came in, but great turmoil was on all the inhabitants of the lands. So nation was destroyed by nation, and city by city, for God troubled them with every adversity.”**

Do you see what God did to His people when they turned away from Him? He temporarily abandoned them. Their priests no longer carried out their work of teaching the people His Word. The law was not upheld, but rather everyone did what was right in his own eyes. Enemy nations swooped down on the Israelites and plundered them, taking the grain out of their fields and the fruit from their trees. Over and over again the book of Judges describes what happened in words like these: **“So the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD. They forgot the LORD their God, and served the Baals and Asherahs. Therefore the anger of the LORD was hot against Israel, and He sold them into the hand of Cushan-Rishathaim king of Mesopotamia”** (Judg. 3:7-8). This same thing happened over and over again. They forsook the Lord, and the Lord forsook them. But this forsaking was only temporary. When they then turned to the LORD in their distress, He helped them and sent deliverers to rescue them again from their enemies.

Now as we have said, a continued forsaking of the LORD will eventually result in a permanent forsaking by the LORD, after which there will be no more opportunities to repent and be restored. When you receive your calls into the public ministry, **THE WORD OF GOD IN YOUR MOUTHS** will at times have to be a word of warning, a word of rebuke, a word threatening the grave consequences of turning away from God and His teaching. This will not be enjoyable work, but necessary nonetheless. Unless there is a turnaround in the coming years, it seems as though our nation and even the Christendom within our nation have been turning away from the Lord more and more. When such is the case among those to whom we are to bring God’s Word, **THE WORD OF GOD IN OUR MOUTHS** will indeed have to be a word of warning, a word threatening God’s eternal wrath and judgment. Only if we speak this word as needed will we be faithful ministers of the Lord, who is sending us to warn and rebuke those who forsake Him.

2) Thankfully, in the course of our ministries there will be a different Word we can speak when God’s threats and foretaste of judgment move people to repentance. It happened already in the days of the judges, as Azariah recounted: **“When in their trouble they turned to the LORD God of Israel, and sought Him, He was found by them.”** Thus Azariah was moved by the Spirit of God to tell the people: **“The LORD is with you while you are with Him. If you seek Him, He will be found by you.”** Is this not *a word of gospel comfort and of strong encouragement*? God is gracious and merciful and slow to anger. He wants nothing more than to have the people who have forsaken Him realize their sins and turn to Him in repentance. The prophet Isaiah put it like this when he called out: **“Seek the LORD while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, and He will have mercy on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon”** (Isa. 55:6-7).

This is the gospel or good news that God’s prophets brought time and again to God’s sin-

ning and wayward people. The offer of total forgiveness of all sin was what gave the people hope that God had not yet permanently abandoned them. There was still hope for them. God wanted them to return, and His offer of total forgiveness brought them back into the fold where they belonged.

The prophet Azariah had such a word of comfort and encouragement for King Asa and the people of his kingdom. The prophet said: **“Be strong and do not let your hands be weak, for your work shall be rewarded.”** Of course, this reward was a reward of grace, not a reward of merit. God calls us back to Himself and offers us as a free gift not only the total forgiveness of all our sins, but the assurance of His presence with us all the days of our lives and the sure hope of eternal bliss.

Azariah was faithful in presenting this good news, just as he had been faithful in proclaiming God’s words of warning. And this is what our God wants of us as well. **THE WORD OF GOD IN OUR MOUTHS** is also to be *a word of gospel comfort and of strong encouragement*. We also will be sent to invite sinners to return to God, for God wants all to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. God wants every sinner to come to Him for forgiveness of sins and the sure hope of life forever. This is indeed the main message that we as God’s ministers are privileged to proclaim. We are to be gospel preachers first and foremost, bringing the word of reconciliation to lost sinners everywhere.

Our gospel proclamation is a certain and comforting Word of God, for it is based on the facts of what God has done for us in Christ. God made Him “who knew no sin to be sin for us.” This happened on the cross when Jesus, true God and true man, bore in our place the awful punishment for all human sin. We know and can proclaim that sin is forgiven because Jesus, that Holy One bearing the world’s sin, did not stay dead, but rose from the dead on the third day, as planned by God and foretold by Christ. His resurrection means forgiveness for all sin, and we who are ministers of His have the great privilege of bringing the good news of joy to troubled hearts. How blessed we are to have such a certain and comforting word of forgiveness in our mouths!

Our text ends on a very happy note. When Azariah opened his mouth and spoke the Word of God, Asa and his people listened. They believed the message of the prophet. They repented of their sins. They turned to the Lord in repentance, and as evidence of that repentance they took action and forcibly removed the idolatry that was present in the land. We read: **“When Asa heard these words and the prophecy of Oded the prophet, he took courage, and removed the abominable idols from all the land of Judah and Benjamin and from the cities which he had taken in the mountains of Ephraim; and he restored the altar of the LORD that was before the vestibule of the LORD. Then he gathered all Judah and Benjamin, and those who dwelt with them from Ephraim, Manasseh, and Simeon, for they came over to him in great numbers from Israel when they saw that the LORD his God was with him.”**

3) As it was for the prophet, **THE WORD OF GOD IN OUR MOUTHS** is an effective word. It is *a word that always works in the hearts of some*. God’s Word does not return to Him empty; it accomplishes what He pleases (Isa. 55:11). This is His promise to us, which we see fulfilled in the events of our text. Consider what happened to the Word given to the prophet Azariah by the Holy Spirit. King Asa listened and led the people in a godly crusade against the idolatry in the land, ripping out the idols which the people had made and restoring the right worship of Jehovah in accord with His Law. This godly crusade was truly blessed by God, for some of the other Jewish tribes that were not even part of the southern kingdom paid attention to what was going on, and many of them, yes, great numbers of them came over to King Asa when they saw that God was with him.

Since **THE WORD OF GOD** is **IN OUR MOUTHS**, we can be assured of some good results also. Maybe not great numbers, but there will always be some. We are guaranteed success in advance by the Lord who puts the Word into our mouths too. With God’s Word in our mouths, we cannot fail! Yes, there will be some who oppose our message, just as they opposed Jesus and

His prophets and apostles. Those who oppose our message will do so because it is not really our message that upsets them, but rather His message which they despise and reject. Yet just because it is His message and not our own, we can be sure that God will use the Word of God in our mouths to convert sinners where and when He pleases and also to strengthen and encourage those who are already His.

Jesus has died for our sins and risen again. The message made true by that victory on the cross, the message dispatched through us as He sends us forth is the life-saving, faith-sustaining declaration of sins forgiven in Jesus' name. In Jesus' name we can say: **“Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord”** (1 Cor. 15:57-58). Amen!

The Appropriation of Justification: Justifying Faith

Norbert H. Reim

- The following article, offered in memoriam to the above-named writer, first appeared as an essay presented to a Lutheran Free Conference which met to discuss the doctrine of justification in 1965. The essay was subsequently printed, along with others like it, in the soft-cover volume *His Pardoning Grace: Six Essays on the Doctrine of Justification* © 1966 Northwestern Publishing House, Wauwatosa, WI. It is here reprinted with permission. All rights reserved.
- Norbert Reim's essay is presented as it originally appeared in its first printing. Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptures are quoted from the King James Version, with words in italics usually reflecting the writer's desire for emphasis or contrast.

Man has been ceaseless in his determination to share in the credit for achieving his salvation. If he cannot take care of the entire task by himself, then he wants to do most of it. If not the most, at least a part. The beginning of the task, if possible. If not, then the last part. To something at least, he wants to be able to point and say: This is what *I* have done. But the Scriptures exclude *all* human merit from the doctrine of justification. “By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God; not of works, lest any man should boast” (Eph. 2:8). Each and every step in the plan of salvation is of life-or-death importance. God Himself has, therefore, personally executed each and every detail, so that no mistake will be made as a result of human insufficiency. This very Gospel truth, which brings such indescribable comfort to the heart of the believer in Christ who faces the moment of truth on his deathbed, remains a bitter pill indeed for the natural spirit of man.

Rome winced when Luther kept hammering at justification by faith. Rolling with the punch, however, she found it possible to retreat to the position that faith may indeed be called the *beginning* of justification, insofar as it prepares one to do works of love, which then really complete the process. But the real scream from the Romanists came when Luther closed even *that* door with the translation that underscored the true meaning of Romans 3:28: “Therefore we conclude that a man is justified without the deeds of the law, by faith *alone*.”

Yet, even when the formulation “justification by faith alone” is accepted, the idea of human merit is not thereby automatically excluded. Since believing is an act of man, there is still the danger of viewing faith as an important ingredient that man must yet contribute to make his justification complete. In that case the *sola gratia* again is lost. It is necessary for us then to retain a clear understanding of the exact role faith plays in our justification.

The Function of Faith in Reconciliation

Saint Paul demonstrates this very dramatically in the first 11 verses of Romans 5. There he describes the marvelous process by which God reconciled man to Himself. He opens the chap-

ter by pointing out that as a result of our being justified by faith, “we have *peace* with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” In showing how this reconciliation was accomplished, Paul stresses two things particularly: on the one hand, the bitter hostility of fallen man over against his Creator, and, on the other hand, the undeviating love of God for this rebellious creature of His, a love so pure that it was not deflected from its saving purpose even by man’s enmity.

In verse 5 the Apostle draws attention to this love of God, and then in the next verse proceeds to prove how wonderful that love is by showing what it did: “For when we were yet *without strength*,” while man was spiritually impotent and helpless, dead in trespasses and sin, while he was in that spiritually negative condition, Paul writes, “in due time Christ died for the *ungodly*.” Here he uses a stronger term. Not only were we in our natural state without the ability to love or serve God, but we were actively impious and wicked. Then in verse 7 Paul reminds us how reluctant any of us would be to die for someone else, even if it were a very good man. It would indeed have been love of the very highest order if Jesus had died to save men who were already faithful followers of His, consecrated to a lifetime of loyal service. But God’s love was not incited by anything noble in *us*. Rather, “God commendeth his love toward us, in that, *while we were yet sinners*, Christ died for us” (v. 8). Before we were ever converted, before there was anything lovable about us at all, while we were still engaged in the single-minded pursuit of doing what God forbids, and refusing to do those things that He commands of us, while we and the rest of the world were in *that* evil frame of mind over against Him, “God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son.” Is it possible that God’s love could carry on against such opposition and hatred? In verse 10 the Apostle reaches his climax. Yes, “when we were *enemies*, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son.” Even when we were God-hating, God-blaspheming rebels, God loved us. “Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound” (Rom. 5:20). When we were in such a state of open rebellion and warfare, God reconciled the world unto Himself.

J. P. Meyer eloquently describes this struggle between sin and grace: “In spite of the fact that we by our sins had aroused His righteous wrath, He had never wavered in His love toward us; and the more we burdened ourselves with sin and guilt, the more we displayed our aversion to His holy will, all the more His pitying love rose to ever greater heights in its efforts to save us, and finally brought the unbelievable sacrifice of His own Son.”¹

The word Saint Paul uses for “reconcile” is *katalassein*, from *kata* and *allos*, which literally means “to make thoroughly other,” to change. The question has arisen: With whom did the change take place? With God or man? Respected Lutheran exegetes differ. We notice, however, that Saint Paul does not let so important a question go unanswered. He says: “When we were enemies, *we* were ‘changed’ to God by the death of his Son” (v. 10). To the Corinthians he wrote, “God was in Christ reconciling (i.e., changing) the *world* unto himself” (II Cor. 5:19). In fact, whenever this reconciliation between man and God is spoken of in the New Testament, the object of the change is always man (or the world, or even “all things” in Col. 1:20). Scripture does not speak of God Himself as the One being reconciled. Rather, He is several times mentioned as the One who *does* the changing, e.g., “God was in Christ ‘changing’ the world unto himself.”

And what change did God bring about with the inhabitants of the world? The explanation follows immediately: “not imputing their trespasses unto them.” There was a change in their legal standing before God, the Judge. Those who, as enemies of God, had been guilty rebels before His bar of justice now suddenly found that the charges against them were dropped—not because they were innocent, but because the crimes had been charged instead against God’s Son. “He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world” (I John 2:2). And so the juridical status of the original defendants has been drastically changed. The Judge has acquitted them. They are free. Justice has no more demands to make of them. “Now,” the Apostle declares, we are “justified by his blood” (Rom. 5:9). The Substitute’s sacrifice has rendered full satisfaction to God’s punitive justice. The Father could now do what His Father’s heart had always wanted to do: He declared mankind righteous in Christ. The change has taken place. “It is finished.” And the blessed result is: We, Paul says, who “were enemies, were recon-

ciled to God by the death of his Son.” A new relationship has come into existence between God and man. Peace has been won.

Lenski, in his Commentary on this portion of Romans, describes the basic change that made man’s new relation to God possible: “Reconciliation . . . signifies that through Christ’s death God changed *our* status. By our enmity, our sin, our ungodliness (all synonymous) we had gotten ourselves into the desperate status that deserved nothing from God but wrath, penalty, damnation, and unless God did some thing to change this our status, it would compel him to treat us thus. By means of Christ’s death (*‘dia’*) God changed this into an utterly different status, one that despite our enmity, etc., enabled him to go on commending to us his love, this very love that changed our status, this love that impelled Christ to die for us hostile enemies of God. . . . ‘Being enemies, we were reconciled to God.’ This is the objective act. It wrought a change with or upon these enemies, not within them. It as yet did not turn their enmity into friendship, did not make the world the kingdom. It changed the unredeemed into the redeemed world. The instant Christ died the whole world of sinners was changed completely. It was now a world for whose sin atonement had been made, no longer a world with sins unatoned.”²

In all this we have heard nothing about faith. This is because faith has no part whatsoever to play in *establishing* our reconciliation. God was in Christ doing that. But finally in verse 11 Paul lets the function of faith in reconciliation come in so quietly we don’t even hear the word itself mentioned: “We also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have *now* (at the time of conversion) *received* the at-one-ment” (or, better as in the margin: reconciliation). There we have heard the part our faith plays. Nothing to boast about, is it? Faith simply *receives* the world-wide reconciliation which God wrought in the death of Christ. That at-one-ment stands as an objective reality, which is either accepted in faith or rejected in unbelief. Whenever the Spirit of the Lord brings a sinner to accept the general reconciliation, he then becomes a new creature in Christ who rejoices in the message that God for Christ’s sake no longer holds his sins against him. This new man does not hate God but loves Him. He is at peace with Him. This subjective reconciliation is being worked still today through the Word of Reconciliation, which pleads with the unconverted: “Be ye reconciled to God” (II Cor. 5:20).

In connection with the question as to where the reconciliation change took place, we ought to note a false position which has been championed by Albrecht Ritschl in the interest of giving man a more vital role in justification. When Saint Paul says, “Being enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son,” Ritschl and his followers understand this change to have taken place in the *nature* and *attitude* of man, rather than in his legal *status* before God, as though God’s actions of love demonstrated in the death of Christ produce this reaction in men that *they* now love God and thus *are* righteous of themselves. This view must be re-examined because it keeps turning up even in unexpected quarters. We fear that Robert Hoyer is headed in this dangerous direction when he writes in the *Cresset*: “God gave His Son into death to appease the wrath of an angry mankind. He sacrificed Himself in order to change *man from hate to love*. Such is the incredible concept of God’s infinite love: the Creator laying Himself as *sacrifice* at the feet of His creation!”³ (Emphases mine).

I do not believe that Hoyer can be faulted for saying earlier in the article that the Sacrifice “reconciled *man* to God,” for this is exactly what Paul says in Romans 5:10 and II Corinthians 5:18f. But he does err in describing this as a change *within* man from hate to love toward God, rather than a change in man’s legal standing in the sight of God. Though no Scripture references are given in this section of Hoyer’s article, the repeated references to Christ’s sacrifice imply that he is speaking of the reconciliation that took place on Calvary. But to say that this sacrifice appeased man’s wrath and changed it to love is to skate much too close to the old *justitia infusa* error, the belief that man is righteous before God because of a moral transformation that has taken place within him. The Calvary sacrifice did have an immediate effect on all men (cf. Rom. 5:18f.). But certainly it was not an inner, moral change that took place in the human race as a result of that sacrifice. Did not the world hate God just as much after Calvary as before? Man’s

immediate

reaction to the sacrifice of God's Son was: Seal the stone! Set a watch! Make sure that the grave does not open! "We remember that that deceiver said, . . . I will rise again" (Matt. 27:63). We find no instant saintliness here. If such a change within mankind itself had been accomplished by the death of Christ, then what need would there still be for the plea: "Be ye reconciled to God?" (II Cor. 5:20). Is the carnal mind no longer enmity against God? (Rom. 8:7). Man's hostility against God does not turn to love until he is made a new creature by the Holy Ghost in conversion.

The final result of this line of thought is seen in Ritschl's doctrine, described thus by Pieper: "He teaches there is no wrath of God on account of the sins of men and therefore no vicarious satisfaction on the part of Christ. The purpose of Christ's life and suffering was to reveal God's fatherly heart to men, to convince men that they do not need to fear God because of their sins. Once men are convinced of this, their reconciliation is accomplished." To this Pieper comments: "The objective reconciliation is here entirely replaced by a subjective one."⁴

Those who deny the wrath of God are denying what God expressly says in Romans 1:18: "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men." Those who deny the vicarious satisfaction and claim that Christ offered Himself as a sacrifice to *man* rather than to God are flatly contradicting such passages as Hebrews 9:14 and Ephesians 5:2: "Christ

. . . hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God."

Even though Scripture makes it abundantly clear that we "were by nature the children of wrath" (Eph. 2:3), having provoked God's wrath by our sin, and that Christ by His death had to make satisfaction to the demands of divine justice, yet the inspired Word still does not say that *God* was reconciled, or that *His* personal attitude toward us was changed from wrath to love by this sacrifice. God's love for sinners did not come as a *result* of the sacrifice for sin, but was rather the *cause* of that sacrifice (John 3:16; Rom. 5:8). It never was His will that any should perish (II Pet. 3:9).

Let us be eternally grateful that our case came under the jurisdiction of *this* particular Judge whose name is Love. He is indeed a holy Judge who could not tolerate sin. The Just One could not circumvent His own law which stipulates death as the wages of sin. But that same Judge at the same time also *loved* these guilty culprits. Were they not His own children? Could He forget that He Himself had formed man out of the dust of the ground, breathing His own life-giving breath into his nostrils, or that He had made this creature in His own image, after His own likeness? "Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? Yea, they may forget," this Father says, "yet will I not forget thee" (Isa. 49:15). This Judge was *steadfast* in His love for these His fallen creatures, and He was seeking a way of escape for them that would not violate His own holy righteousness. The awesome solution He found was to make Him to be sin for us who knew no sin, so that divine wrath could be expended on this Substitute. Then God's inherent and unchangeable hatred of sin no longer had to affect His relationship with man. Since Justice had now been fully satisfied, the Judge could declare the world of men righteous. Christ had become our peace.

Justifying Faith an Act, But Not Meritorious

In addition to the Romans 5 passage treated earlier, there are many other passages in Scripture in which the act of believing is described simply as a receiving. John uses the two as alternative expressions in his Gospel: "As many as *received* him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that *believe* on his name" (John 1:12). "As ye have therefore *received* Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him" (Col. 2:6). Conversely, unbelief is the act of not receiving Christ. "He came unto his own, and his own *received* him not" (John 1:11). For this reason our theologians rightly call justifying faith nothing more than the medium *leptikon*, the instrument of reception. As the lungs take oxygen from the air, as the hand of the beggar accepts

a gift, so faith appropriates the blessings offered in the Gospel.

Walther writes: “Nothing is demanded of the person; he is only told: ‘Stretch out your hand, and you have it.’ Just that is what faith is—reaching out the hand. Suppose a person had never heard a word concerning faith and, on being told the Gospel, would rejoice, accept it, put his confidence in it, and draw comfort from it; that person would have the true, genuine faith, although he may not have heard a word concerning faith.”⁵

Is the *sola gratia* possibly in danger when Walther here speaks of the command to “stretch out your hand,” and of “reaching out the hand”? By no means. Rather it points out the important truth that faith *is* an *act*, performed not only by the intellect, but even by the will of man. This must be retained over against the enthusiasts who view faith as a marvelously valuable treasure that lies encased in man, making him worthy in the eyes of God.

But even when it is granted that faith is an act of man, this concession certainly does not require the thought that there is anything whatsoever meritorious about that act. Such a notion is already excluded by the very *origin* of faith. Is it not a gift from God, wrought entirely by Him? If indeed, unconverted man had it within his power to make a “decision for Christ,” he might have whereof to boast. But dead men simply do not make decisions (Eph. 2:1). Only the mighty Spirit of God exerting divine power through the Gospel is able to convert the sinner. Jeremiah said: “Turn *thou* me, and I shall be turned, for thou art the Lord my God. Surely *after* that I was turned, I repented” (Jer. 31:18f.).

The *Formula of Concord* explains how faith saves: “Faith justifies, not for this cause and reason that it is so good a work and so fair a virtue, but’ because it lays hold of and accepts the merit of Christ in the promise of the holy Gospel.”⁶

Regarding any kind of faith, the important thing is never the mere act of trusting, but always the *object* which faith grasps. Whereas faith in a good physician may bring prompt help, faith in a quack doctor is not only useless but expensive. The prophets of Baal may have had as sincere and as strong a faith as did Elijah. After all, how could 450 such bright fellows be found wrong and that single dissenter be right? Their faith, however, was futile because *Baal* was a fantasy. Elijah’s trust was victorious because the Lord, He is *God*.

Faith itself could not be more commonplace. Everyone believes in many things. In an essay on the danger of emphasizing faith at the expense of the object of faith, Christ, Robert Mackensen points out: “The miracle of Christian faith is not that Christians are given the ability to trust in some object but that they are given the ability to turn from trusting vain works and instead to trust *Christ* and His work alone for their salvation. The *act* of trusting in something is not miraculous, but the act of trusting in *Christ* as the Savior is miraculous, because no man can say that *Jesus* is the Lord but by the Holy Ghost.”⁷

When Acts 15:9 says that our hearts are purified by *faith*, it does not contradict I John 1:7, which says that we are cleansed by the *blood* of Jesus. The only reason faith purifies is that it trusts the cleansing blood of the Redeemer.

Warfield does not exaggerate when he writes: “The saving power resides exclusively, not in the act of faith or the attitude of faith or the nature of faith, but in the object of faith; and in this the whole Biblical representation centers, so that we could not more radically misconceive it than by transferring to faith even the smallest fraction of that saving energy which is attributed in the Scriptures solely to Christ Himself.”⁸

Faith justifies, then, simply because of the object it holds—the Lord Jesus Christ and His works on our behalf. “Follow *me*,” Jesus called to Matthew (Matt. 9:9). “He that believeth on *me* hath everlasting life” (John 6:47). At times the Scripture designates the Father as the object of our faith because He promised and then sent His Son (John 5:24), but this amounts to the same thing.

Frequently the Gospel is also mentioned as the object of our faith (e.g., Mark 1:15; I Cor. 15:1-4), because it is in the Word that the merits of Christ are offered to us. When we believe the Good News about Christ, we possess Christ Himself. It is worth noting, however, that it is *only* the Gospel and not the Law that is the object of justifying faith. The Romanists, never happy to

see anyone certain of his salvation, claim that all of God's Word (with heavy emphasis on the Law) must be considered the object of saving faith. But this would fill even the best of theologians with fear as to whether his understanding of all Scripture is indeed the right one. Saving faith is rather a trust in the simple Gospel message of forgiveness in Christ. Hollaz distinguishes here between special faith and general faith: "General faith is that by which man . . . believes all things to be true that are revealed in the Word of God. Of this species of faith we are not now speaking because we are treating of faith as the means of salvation. . . . Special faith is that faith by which the sinner applies to himself individually the universal promises in reference to Christ, the Mediator."⁹

To the child of God it is always a source of deepest comfort that his faith is anchored in the firm words and promises of God Himself. Nothing else in this life is really sure—no, not even death or taxes. "The grass withereth, the flower fadeth, but the word of our *God* shall stand forever" (Isa. 40:8). In this sure word of prophecy we have an unshakable rock for our faith to rely upon. Contrary to the opinion of skeptics, the Christian's faith is not a doubt-filled leap into the dark. It will never be that for us as long as we do not permit the Modernists to whittle away at our conviction on verbal inspiration. We do not, however, envy those who have assigned themselves the task of distinguishing between reality and myth, between truth and error in Holy Writ. Their type of "critical investigation" cannot but find ever more myth, and ever less reality. For all such, faith must of necessity find itself snatching at a rock that seems to them to be steadily disintegrating.

Let us be forever assured, faith saves not because of any good qualities it may have within itself, but only because it grasps this magnificent saving power which lies outside of man: the merits of Christ offered in the gracious Gospel promises. This then excludes all human merit from the act of faith. "Then what becomes of our boasting?" the Apostle asks. "It is excluded. On what principle? On the principle of works? No, but on the principle of faith. For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of law" (RSV: Rom. 3:27f).

Justifying Faith and Contrition

The best insurance for preserving the *sola gratia* in the doctrine of justification is a firm grip on the heart of the Gospel that forgiveness of all sin is an accomplished fact, a ready blessing; that God has in Christ once and for all forgiven all men all their sins. The job is done. It is finished. As soon as this is lost, the Gospel is made to say nothing more than: God is now *willing* to forgive you your sins, if you first do this and that. Immediately the gates are then opened to synergism, and men rush in with their own notions of what they must still contribute to bring about their justification. The worst synergists say: God is willing to forgive your sins if you as a believer produce works of love which will be worthy of salvation. Others say: God is willing to forgive you if you are *sorry* for your sins. Thus they make of the contrition that precedes faith a cause and a condition of forgiveness.

Here again it is Catholicism which goes farthest in work-righteousness. It even wants to probe the *quality* of your contrition before it is willing to concede that you are worthy of being forgiven. Are you terrified and trembling because the *Law* of God has struck you like a thunderbolt, showing you how horribly you have offended the holy God and deserved everlasting punishment in hell? The priest must tell you: This is not nearly a good enough contrition, my dear fellow. Come back and see me when you can assure me that your contrition flows from a love of God rather than merely from fear of punishment. Then the sinner is left to despair, for how can he possibly have a love for God before he has faith? If the unregenerate are honest about it, they must admit that they hate this God who drives them into the corner with the inexorable lash of His Law.

Some Pietists have another way of tormenting the contrite sinner and withholding the comfort of the Gospel from him. They say: Yes, surely God is willing to forgive your sins if you are sorry for them, but are you sure you have the right *degree* of contrition? Is yours as deep as

David's? Have you ever gone mourning for a whole day? (Ps. 38:6-8). Have you made your bed to swim all the night with your tears? (Ps. 6:6,7). Now, it is true that David's grief did manifest itself in this way. But where does Scripture specify that contrition must always take the same form or be experienced in the same degree by all people?

Not only must we object when the forgiveness of sins is viewed as contingent on some certain quality or degree of contrition, but also when *any* contrition whatsoever is thought of as a cause or condition of forgiveness. Sorrow over sin has no more part to play in our becoming just in the eyes of God than do good works. The *Formula of Concord* puts it this way: "When Paul says, Rom. 3:28: We are justified by faith without works, he indicates thereby that neither the contrition that precedes, nor the works that follow, belong in the article or transaction of justification by faith."¹⁰

Yet, is it not true that no one can be saved unless he has experienced contrition? Indeed, it is true. Our Savior exhorts: "Repent ye, and believe the gospel" (Mark 1:15). Repentance, when it is distinguished from believing, refers to the contrition that precedes faith. It is necessary. But for what? Theodore Dierks explains: "Repentance must ever be preached to man, not because contrition is a necessary condition of the forgiveness of sins, but because contrition is a necessary preparation for faith, which apprehends the forgiveness of sins."¹¹ Walther says, "When a person has been made to hunger and thirst for mercy, contrition has done its full work in him."¹²

So, then, contrition is necessary simply because no one can possibly be interested in the forgiveness of sins until he realizes that he is a lost and condemned sinner. The entire doctrine of justification has relevance only for the contrite heart. "They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick" (Luke 5:31). This truth was spelled out long ago by Solomon, "The full soul loatheth an honeycomb; but to the hungry soul every bitter thing is sweet" (Prov. 27:7). If even the bitter tastes good to the hungry, how much more shall not the sweet message of forgiveness satisfy the terrified conscience that hungers and thirsts after righteousness! But it can bring joy only to such a contrite spirit. The self-righteous Pharisee who has never experienced contrition will, as Walther points out, only yawn when hearing the Gospel and say, "That is an easy way to get to heaven!"¹³

Small wonder that so many today do not find the Gospel of the Cross "relevant" for their needs. Like the Pharisees, they do not realize how sick they are, and so feel no need for the Great Physician. Much of modern Lutheranism has joined in the Great Surrender of the absolutes in theology. Witness those who no longer proclaim the total corruption of natural man resulting from original sin. They fail to understand why the *Augsburg Confession* says that men by nature *cannot* have true faith in God. Today, in place of the firm code of moral conduct demanded by God's Law, increasing numbers are substituting, to a greater or lesser degree, the "permissiveness" of the new morality. When a real sense of sin is then lost and it is viewed as nothing more serious than a sickness, it becomes inevitable that an appreciation of the Biblical doctrine of justification is lost. Hence the drift to a social Gospel. The Gospel of a blood-bought peace with God cannot seem relevant to those that have known no warfare because their consciences have been sedated with the opiates of human self-justification.

Faith Neither a Condition nor a Cause of Forgiveness

At the hands of Lutherans who have been well trained in the doctrine of justification by faith alone, perhaps the greatest danger of taking something away from the *sola gratia* comes from looking upon faith itself as a condition of forgiveness, as that contribution which man must still make to render his justification complete. This again results from failure to remember that in Christ God already has forgiven all men their sins. Forgiveness is *not* something that awaits man's faith before becoming a reality. Rather, it is an accomplished fact. It provides the comforting assurance that *gives* faith.

How hard it is for us to avoid the impression of restricting the Gospel message with conditions! How many pastors are there that can look back over their old sermons without finding

instances where, even with the best of intentions, they may have left the idea with the hearer that his sins are not forgiven until he fulfills certain stipulations?

An example might best show how commonly this is done. In *Adventures in Evangelism*, Elmer Kettner recommends speaking to the unregenerate in this way about his sins:

“Black as they are, however, the Lord says: ‘They shall be as white as snow’—on one condition. Do you know what that condition is?”

“I suppose I have to join the church,” he replied.

“Not unless you want to. The condition is not anything outward at all. It is something which must take place in your heart. It is an acknowledging of your sinfulness in the sight of God and acceptance of Jesus, who paid the penalty of your sin.”¹⁴

An approach of this type then leads much too easily to an unhealthy prodding toward faith. Do you believe? Are you sure you believe? Why don’t you trust in Christ? This causes the terror-stricken sinner to subject his heart to an anxious, microscopic scrutiny for faith. What he sees, does not reassure him at all. He finds that his heart is a desperately wicked thing. What if he can find no faith there? Try as he will, he simply cannot believe! And is it not true that even saints, when in spiritual conflict, find that the hardest thing for them is to believe that they believe! Whoever begins to concentrate on something he is told *he* must do before forgiveness can be his, instead of dwelling on the mighty acts that *God* has performed to save him, is on extremely slippery ground.

Satan knows how to torment one with this line of thought. If he could tempt Jesus with the question: “Are you really the Son of God as your Father declared?” think how he can put a guilty sinner on the rack with such questions: Are you saved? Are you really a believer, and do you really have the true faith? Of what comfort is it then to such a troubled soul to hear an ambassador of Christ say to him: Son, be of good cheer, *the moment you believe* your sins will be forgiven? If the sinner is a thinking man, then he will find himself racing around the faulty circle that so vexed the Wuerttemberg superintendent Burk: “I am to believe and thereby become righteous. But what am I to believe? This that I am righteous. However, I cannot believe this before it is so. And yet it is not so, for I am first to become righteous.”¹⁵

Requiring faith as a condition which man must fulfill before being forgiven turns the blessed Gospel into Law. The Law indeed makes promises, as well as does the Gospel, but they are always conditional promises. See, for example, Leviticus 18:5: “Ye shall therefore keep my statutes and my judgments, which *if* a man do, he shall live in them.” The Gospel promises, however, to be in truth a heralding of *good news*, must always be unconditioned. This can only be an announcing of what God has done for us, never a demand of what we must do. As soon as one considers the call to believe an order of the Law, faith automatically becomes an act of obedience to that Law, and thus a work of the Law. How, then, could Saint Paul have concluded that “a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law”? (Rom. 3:28). That passage can mean only that we are saved, not on account of any acts that we do, but only by the achievements of our Savior Jesus Christ.

If there were *any* prerequisite demanded of man for pardon, then Paul would have been stretching things a bit to say that we are “justified *freely* by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 3:24). As soon as even one condition is attached to a gift, it is no longer being given “*freely*” (*‘dooreán’*—in the manner of a gift). The Gospel of salvation ceases then to be the offer of a free gift, and it becomes instead the proposal of a bargain. The true Gospel flavor which considers eternal life entirely a gracious favor of God is contaminated with a legalistic taint. But the Scriptures will have none of this. Paul says: “If by grace, then is it *no more* of works; otherwise grace is no more grace” (Rom. 11:6).

But when the jailer asked: “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” was he not told: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved”? (Acts 16:30f). True, but we must not understand such exhortations as orders of the Law, as if believing is something man should be able to bring about in himself. Rather, these are blessed *Gospel invitations*—creative invitations which

immediately not only give the hearer the right to accept the Christ, but also contain within them the power to bring him to do so. There is no problem when the emphasis is kept right: Not, “*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ,*” but rather, Forget about what *you* must do, and “*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.*”

There can be such a thing as talking too much about faith and thus giving the impression that here is the one big hurdle still standing between the sinner and heaven. “If I can just manage this yet . . .” is a poor thought to instill. The soul that trusts its faith rather than its Savior is in sad shape. Walther used to say that you should be able to preach an entire sermon on faith without ever using the term faith.¹⁶ What is needed, is simply to set before the famished spiritual beggars the bounteous feast of the Christ and His righteousness, with the pardon, peace, and eternal life He has earned for us. Point to the Bread of Life; don’t pester the sinners to eat. Wouldn’t it be rather silly to tell an emaciated beggar: This steak dinner will be yours on one condition. That condition is that you admit your need of it and take it. Now, obviously, if the foolish man *doesn’t* feel the need of it and doesn’t take it, he will have no benefit from it. But this does not mean that the offer of a free meal has a condition attached to it.

Does not Scripture itself, however, use such conditional terminology! Consider I John 1:9, for example: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” This is not to be understood in the sense that God is holding up forgiveness until He sees that the condition of confessing sin is met. John is here addressing believers, who could, however, fall into the error of perfectionism. So in the preceding verse he warns us that, if we deny that we have sin, we are deceiving only ourselves. In verse 9 he then rather encourages the new man to follow the opposite course and admit sinfulness, confident that there will be no problem about God’s side of the matter. He is faithful to His covenant and word about not imputing the trespasses of worldlings unto them, and He accordingly now “richly and daily forgives all sins to me and all believers.” As the sins are committed, they are forgiven, for the debt has been prepaid.

We see, then, that there is a difference between the word “if” when used in a promise of the Law, and “if” when used in a promise of the Gospel, as in this passage. Gerhard explains this difference: “The term ‘if’ is either etiological or syllogistic; that is, it signifies either a cause or a consequence. In the preaching of the Law the statement ‘If you do this, you shall live,’ the term is etiological; it signifies the cause, or reason; for obedience is the reason why eternal life is given to those who keep the Law. But in evangelical promises the term ‘if’ is syllogistic; it signifies a consequence; for it relates to the mode of application which God has appointed for these promises, and that is faith alone.”¹⁷

Just as the true comfort of the Gospel is lost when faith is regarded as a condition to be met before God forgives, so comfort fades and the *sola gratia* is blemished when it is said that God forgives us on account of our faith, or because of our faith, or in view of our faith. Whenever Scripture speaks of faith’s role in justification, it always portrays believing as a means of acceptance, never a cause of justification.

Many theologians rubbed their eyes when seeing the RSV perpetuate Goodspeed’s linguistic blunder by translating Romans 3:30, “God . . . will justify the circumcised on the ground of their faith and the uncircumcised *because of their faith.*” Although ‘*dia*’ with the accusative may mean ‘because of,’ that preposition with the genitive as we have it here never means ‘because of,’ but rather ‘through’ or ‘by.’ We are happy that this error has been rectified in later editions. Unfortunately, there has been no improvement of the phrase “on the ground of faith,” which is subject to the same false understanding.

How sad it would be, indeed, if our salvation were based on such shaky ground as our imperfect, often erring, always-too-weak faith! We should sing hallelujahs that the causes of our justification all lie outside us, in the safekeeping of the God who so loved us that He gave His only Son, that whosoever believeth on *Him* should not perish, but have everlasting life! Under these circumstances even that person who saw himself as the chief of sinners could be certain of

his salvation and gratefully write: “*Therefore* it is of faith, that it might be by *grace*; to the end the promise might be *sure* to all the seed” (Rom. 4:16).

What did St. Paul mean when he wrote that “Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness”? (Rom. 4:3). Could this mean that God regarded Abraham as righteous because of the excellent qualities of his faith, a faith which did not stagger even when reason made it difficult to believe? Paul himself excludes this interpretation in the following verses, where he specifically says: “To him that *worketh not*, but believeth on *him that justifieth* the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness.” The Apostle is therefore not talking about faith here in so far as it is a work of man. As such it would belong only to the righteousness of the Law. There is such a thing, for the First Commandment demands faith. Saint Paul was very conscious of the difference between the righteousness that results from his own doing and the imputed righteousness that results from Christ’s doing and dying. This was the same writer that impressed on the Philippians how deeply concerned he was to be found in Christ, “not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith” (Phil. 3:9). When this Apostle now says that Abraham’s faith was counted to him for righteousness, he could then not have been thinking of the activity of believing, but of the *object* which Abraham’s faith grasped: the promised Seed of the woman. As Preuss puts it: “The Scriptural term ‘faith’ contains both—kernel and shell. Christ’s merit is the kernel; our apprehension, the shell. The shell is indeed necessary to hold the fruit . . . , but the nourishing power of the fruit comes from the kernel.”¹⁸

Thus the *Formula* of Concord states: “We believe, teach and confess that faith alone is the means and instrument whereby we lay hold of Christ, and thus in Christ of that righteousness which avails before God, for whose sake this faith is imputed to us for righteousness, Rom. 4:5.”¹⁹

Conclusions

We conclude, then, that by the grace of God forgiveness for all men is an objective reality resulting from the atonement accomplished by the death and resurrection of Christ. Our faith, far from serving to complete our justification by fulfilling a stipulated condition of our forgiveness, is simply the receiving organ that joyfully accepts the peace and pardon offered in the Gospel. If this forgiveness is, however, rejected in unbelief, this does not change the fact that the sins were forgiven. Man’s unbelief cannot nullify that which God Himself has pronounced: “By the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life” (Rom. 5:18). Now that the world has been reconciled, the refusal to believe is really the only sin that damns. Therefore Christ does not say, “He that sinneth,” but, “He that believeth not shall be damned” (Mark 16:16). Thus Luther could rightly say: “What sin, then, remains on earth? Nothing but the failure to accept this Savior and the will not to have Him who puts away sin. . . . Therefore the world is no longer punished or damned because of other sins, since Christ has wiped out all of them. Only the resolve not to acknowledge or accept Him remains sin in the New Testament.”²⁰

Of the doctrine under discussion at this conference our Confessions say: “This article concerning justification by faith is the chief article in the entire Christian doctrine, without which no poor conscience can have any firm consolation, or can truly know the riches of the grace of Christ, as Dr. Luther also has written: If this only article remains pure on the battlefield, the Christian Church also remains pure and in goodly harmony and without any sects; but if it does not remain pure, it is not possible that any error or fanatical spirit can be resisted.”²¹

If Lutheranism in general is in a deplorable state both here in America and abroad, we need look no further for the cause than to the aberrations which have been allowed to creep into this central doctrine. When there is trouble in the heart, the entire body is affected. Nor dare we think that conservative Lutherans are automatically immune from infection in this vital area. They, too, may confuse Law and Gospel, restrict the Good News with conditions, be legalistic, or in one way or another permit human merit to creep into the article of justification by faith. This

can be done in spite of the best of intentions. Only the gracious Spirit of God can preserve among us not only the *sola Scriptura*, but with it also the *sola fide* and that all-important touchstone—the *sola gratia*. And it is only when the *sola gratia* is left perfectly intact and man claims no portion of the salvation process whatsoever as his own contribution, that we can in very truth say: *Soli Deo Gloria!*

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The Son of Man as Preacher Interacting with His Congregation

William Henkel

* As noted in the previous installment (*Journal*, 47:2, June 2007), the translation of Henkel's article "Der Menschensohn als Prediger im Umgang mit seiner Gemeinde (Forsetzung)" is being offered in two consecutive issues. The first portion of the article treated the homiletical method of Jesus according to its external form (*Theologische Quartalschrift*, 22:4, October 1925, pages 255-261). In the concluding portion of the same article (pp. 261-273) the author presented his applications and comments on the homiletical form and practice of effective preaching.¹

Even the outward form of the sermon offers material for contemplation.

As said earlier, this was not a form borrowed from someone else. Rather, the powerful thoughts of the great Preacher have created their own unique form. He has not adopted these from some school of rhetoric. Should He not be our model in this matter too? Would it not be proper to drop homiletics and perhaps also rhetoric from our curricula and convert the time gained to an

even more thorough study of the gospel in the certainty that our future theologians, filled and gripped by the powerful thoughts of God which the gospel reveals, will undoubtedly find for themselves a fitting form for the proclamation of salvation in Christ? And would not this form, produced to a certain degree by the gospel itself, be more fitting than the art form invented by the ancient pagans, which was designed more to bring honor to the orator than to the truth? Such thoughts are heard now and then in the church, sometimes taking a more radical, sometimes a less radical form. One cannot deny that they contain an element of truth. There is a danger bound up with the study of rhetoric. As soon as one studies it for its own sake, as soon as it stops being a means to an end, as soon as it is supposed to do something other than qualify us to express our thoughts adequately, as soon as it teaches me to paint up and polish an ugly or trifling thought so that it appears lovely and noteworthy, as soon as it diverts the attention of the hearer from the content of the address and directs that attention to its clothing, then it is an art unworthy of the gospel.

Undeniably, many a young preacher understands rhetoric and homiletics to be a sum of rules which he applies mechanically. The result is that his preaching not only becomes wooden and leathery, but even something valuable—his uniqueness—is suppressed, and one cannot feel his heartbeat through all the homiletical armor he has donned. Taken from another angle (this is said admittedly in a rather loose connection to the foregoing), the study of the gospel effects harm with many. It makes of them poor hearers of the gospel. One should never observe an artist in his workshop. If visitors to a studio see how the painter mixes and applies his colors, what means he uses to achieve the desired effect, then his painting no longer makes the impression on them which it would have made, had they viewed it simply as finished artwork and yielded to its charm without any reflection. When spouses begin to analyze their emotions and ask themselves, “Why exactly do we have this love?,” they already have their loveliest times behind them.

This applies in theology too. When the Scriptures tell me that the Son of the eternal Father in ardent love has come to me in this vale of tears and has become poor in the crib and on the cross, in order to make me rich through His poverty [2 Cor. 8:9], then He appears to me as the loveliest of all the children of men, and I cannot turn my gaze from Him. Then dogmatics comes to me and says: Now examine the Child in the manger again more closely. Study the individual lines of His face and just meditate on the means through which God has prepared for you this feast for your eyes. Analyze the complex Being lying before you in the manger. Study what I have to say to you about the two natures in Him. Above all, read those chapters entitled *genus majestaticum*, *apotelesmaticum*, *idiomaticum*. Now, instead of yielding fully to the impression of the overall picture and the impact of the naively [*kindlich*] great and pious mystery, I begin to study the mathematical, logical, rhetorical formulae under which dogmatics arranges it. I pursue each and every individual line on the countenance of the wonderful Child through the glasses of the Lutheran *communicatio idiomaticum*. Then my view is temporarily distracted from the loveliness of the Child, and it seems difficult for me to sing with a childlike joy of faith: “Beautiful Savior, King of creation” [TLH 657]. In a similar fashion homiletics has made poor sermon hearers out of many theologians. They know sermon technique and sermon construction; they know how the preacher brings his sermon into being; they have observed him in the workshop. It seems hard for them to let the content of the sermon work in them with all directness. They cannot forget the technique. If it is bad, it distracts them. If it is good, they marvel over it. It will always distract them, more or less, from the content of the sermon.

Finding a suitable form for the preaching of the gospel

Would it not be better then to scrap homiletics? Definitely not! One should strike it from the curriculum just as little as dogmatics and other disciplines. Though many sorts of bad circumstances show up with its use, still we cannot do without it. We dare not depend only upon the knowledge of the gospel to make our young theologians into good preachers without further ado. The gospel would indeed create in them a form through which it would be transmitted to others,

but this form would be and would remain a very deficient one for many. But, many would say, that would cause no great harm, since nothing depends on the form. Thus they say and think no more about it. While it is true that nothing depends on the form, it is just as true that a great deal depends on it. If you look at form by itself, nothing depends on it. Yet because the form is very closely bound up with its content, very much depends on it. Without form there is no content. I can just as little communicate thoughts or truths to my fellow man without forms as give him a drink of water without a vessel. But surely nothing depends on whether the vessel is made of glass or gold, does it? Certainly not, but that comparison limps.

The content of the sermon is conditioned by its form. The words, sentences, and paragraphs of the sermon reflect the truth of the gospel. If the mirror is not properly polished, then there is a distorted image which does not correspond to the truth. If the expression by which I wish to present the truth is incorrect, then truth becomes error. Nor is it yet accomplished by my use of logical and dogmatically correct statements. These can be arranged in such a confused order that a fundamentally false impression is evoked in the soul of the hearer. Yes, the mere tone of the sermon can ruin everything and shut the door to the understanding and the heart.

What significance form has can often be seen with novices. Many a young student of theology has collected a small treasury of spiritual truths and has tested them by experience. As a possession acquired through his own effort, these are valuable to him, and when he produces his first sermon, he would gladly display his treasure to his hearers in all its glory. But now arises a desperate struggle with the form. He doesn't rightly know how to arrive at his theme and how he should formulate it to cover all that he would like to say. The treatment of the text gives him difficulties. Many of the turns of speech employed do not say what he wants to say. Often unsuitable conjunctions are chosen to tie together the individual sentences. The flow of thought is uneven or does not lead directly to the goal. The entire manner of presentation is of such a kind that a different image of the things of the kingdom of God arises in the mind of his hearers than that which the young preacher had intended to show. And how many more experienced preachers do not still struggle often enough with the form, particularly when they are not, Sunday after Sunday, treating a section of dogmatics—and thus are not making use of outworn dogmatic terminology—but rather are preaching from the Scripture and from life. Yes, has there ever been a preacher, however capable, who has been satisfied with how he has carried out his theme and has not had to tell himself after each sermon that he had not been successful in completely sharing with his hearers the thing that moved his heart?

Therefore we cannot dispense with rhetoric and other studies which qualify the future preacher to use language as a sheath of the Spirit. Nor can we dispense with homiletics, which makes the principles of a sound, sober rhetoric useful to the spiritual orator, teaching him the right manner of using Scripture and much else also. Only an unsound rhetoric, only a lifeless, mechanically applied homiletics is bad. We cannot practice the subjects mentioned too thoroughly as long as the gospel lives in us and we use the form only for the gospel's sake. Our goal must be to control the form in such a way that it is so completely the maidservant of the content and is so fitted to the content and so closely bound together with it that it no longer attracts attention or is noticed by anyone, but is nothing else than an instrument of the truth unto which we wish to give witness. Only when we so master the forms of language can the gospel create with each one of us a form for itself, which is suitable for itself and for our personality.

Adapting homiletical form to the hearers

However, the form of the sermon should not only be adapted to its contents and the personality of the preacher, but also to its hearers. As obvious as that is, it is so often not given attention. It seems exceedingly difficult to many preachers to remain constantly aware that a sermon can be correct dogmatically and conform to the style manual and even be profound and still be misguided. They remain unaware that a good sermon can be a bad one in some circumstances. Though a sermon might be ever so profound in its content and perfect in its form, if it goes by

over the hearer's head, if it stirs up strange lines of thought, if it does not touch him, but leaves his heart cold, then it is ill-conceived.

In this it should really be said that the preacher need not conform to the poor taste of his hearers. He does not need to wave his arms about constantly like the vanes of a wind mill, or shout himself hoarse, or frequently bang sharply on the pulpit because that is how many of his audience view a good preacher. Nor does he need to assume a weak, effeminate, sentimental tone just because a few of his female listeners think that they can only be edified by the sermon that brings them to tears [*auf der Tränensäcklein drückt*]. He does not need to speak the language of the street because his audience likes to hear it. But he must pursue a course which allows him access to the inner life of his fellow men. Without doubt, here such a preacher will best hit the mark who from experience knows his congregation, the times in which he lives, the human heart, and what that heart wishes and hopes for, strives for and desires, what depresses and torments it, what satisfies it and makes it happy.

In general one can well say that a preacher who wants to adapt his sermon to the listeners dare not today expect any strenuous mental effort from them. Many people cannot do that, and many do not wish to. Now obviously one cannot spare his hearers all effort of thought, if the sermon is to avoid becoming mere prattling. Yet one should not expect of them unnecessary mental effort which goes beyond their abilities. Let the sermon therefore be lucid. Let it contain no complicated lines of thought. Let it be clearly arranged, and let the development of the theme be done in such a way that the hearer grasps not only the individual statements, but also their connection to the theme, and he knows how far this is developed, that is, how far the assertions made in it are proven. If he cannot follow the line of thought, if he loses the thread, if the sermon is for him nothing more than a collection of disconnected truths, then he soon becomes tired and does not listen to the end. The question of what constitutes the highest form of address—whether or not it's a sermon that places so much weight on clarity and allows the line of thought to shine through like a scarlet thread—is of no concern here. For the sermon does not exist for its own sake, but for the sake of the hearers. It should not make us famous, but souls blessed.

Whoever knows this present generation and wants to serve it will not have long sermons. There have been times when long sermons were the rule. In the seventeenth century one to two hour sermons were not rare in the Lutheran Church. At the burial of pastors the funeral address often lasted three hours. In colonial times and even later the service as a rule lasted several hours among the sectarian churches of our land and, indeed, even in winter with the bitter cold and unheated churches. From the earliest days of our synod a story is told of a pastor who almost routinely preached an hour and a half, and then for fear that he had not exhausted his theme, he still had a sermon from Luther read on the appropriate pericope.² It is very questionable if the length of the sermons resulted in blessings to the earlier generations. There were indeed, as is reported, many eyes full of sleep, so that they had to be frequently roused, which did not exactly happen in an evangelical manner. But in our rushed, tense, and restless age long sermons are certainly not in order. Nowadays whoever preaches much over half an hour—a rule which obviously permits exceptions—will have the satisfaction of having his thoughts thoroughly explained, but he has explained them chiefly for himself, less so for his audience. It is better that his hearers listen willingly and attentively for half an hour than distractedly and unwillingly for forty-five minutes or an entire hour.

Part of accommodating the hearer is that we do not preach dogmatically or in abstract propositions, but rather according to life [*in der Form des Lebens*]. I fear we will suffer great harm if we do not learn this. The sermon whose method of teaching is dogmatic simply awakens only too easily a false conception of Christianity. It offers only an abstract description of it. Now one knows how absurdly descriptions are often understood. Many try to piece together or to use a complicated mechanism from the descriptions that come with it and, despite hour-long attempts, never get it done. But if the matter is demonstrated to him *ad oculos* [before his eyes], it becomes clear to him in a few minutes. It is this way too in spiritual matters. An abstract definition of justi-

fication often has a confusing effect on the hearer, especially when its assumptions and consequences for the inner life of the justified person are not considered along with it. Note how the statement, “Good works are not necessary for salvation,” has turned the heads of many of our church members! I have encountered Lutherans who understand “work righteousness” [*Werkerei*] to mean “good works” and see something unsound and un-Lutheran in having a zeal for good works and showing an earnest struggle against the sinful flesh. On the other hand, if instead of defining justification, one displays a justified person and shows how he has come to be justified and how he appears inwardly as a justified person and how he manifests himself as such, then the matter is clearer to the hearer than if he described justification in a dozen abstract sermons.

In addition, the dogmatic sermon addresses itself mainly to the understanding and moves one’s will and emotions only in lesser measure. Everyone knows from experience that emotional excitement and arousal of the will are called forth more quickly through observation and demonstration than through abstract thought. If a Christian virtue is described to us in our youth in religious instruction or in some other way and we are encouraged in it, that does not particularly stir us. But if a hero of faith is presented to us in whom this virtue is embodied, then we are all fired up, and we resolve that that is what we want to become too. It is this way especially among the young, but surely also with all people, more or less. Life catches fire from life, not from abstractions.

Here perhaps many shake their heads disapprovingly and say, “So then it does depend on the form in which the Word of God is proclaimed, whether life issues from it or not.” That’s not what we mean. The form in which the gospel is proclaimed neither gives it power nor takes it away. But the Word of God does not consist of letters and words, but of truths. These must be introduced into the soul and be received by it before they can prove their power. Therefore we are not dealing here with the question: How do I make the Word of God powerful? The question is rather: How do I communicate it unimpaired, or at least completely to the soul of the hearer, and indeed in such a way that I forcibly seize every door and every access to the soul and in such a way that the entire life of the soul is set in motion, so that the Word can deploy its power everywhere?³ Now, if human souls are not manufactured goods, and if not one is completely like any other and not all react in the same way to the same stimulus and if the human soul life in its profoundest depth is a dark mystery to us, then we are indeed dealing foolishly when we ignore the generally accepted facts of experience concerning our soul life.

Yet another large failing is inherent in the dogmatic sermon: over time it becomes unbearably boring. This is especially true when it is dogmatic in a double sense: drawn from dogmatics and wrapped up in the dogmatic manner of teaching. The technical expressions of dogmatics do not interest the average listener; after all, he has never studied dogmatics. But he does know life; he observes it all around him; he feels it pulsing within himself. So then, if the preacher proceeds from life and returns to life again and again, if he presents Christianity in living forms and not in lifeless abstractions, then the listener pricks up his ears and follows with eager expectation. Whoever preaches dogmatically soon exhausts not only his material, but also his vocabulary. Dogmatics is narrowly confined; life is limitless. It is a genuine test of patience to hear many pastors speak over and over again, with almost the exact same turns of speech, about the sinfulness of human nature, about God’s righteous judgment, about His grace, about justification and sanctification. And now when, as is usual among us, we preach rather often Sunday after Sunday once, twice, three times and not uncommonly during the week also,⁴ then the dogmatic preacher can certainly not avoid going again and again into the same old, worn-out ruts, and as a result the hearer yawns out of tedium and waits longingly for the “Amen.” But he shouldn’t do that! After all, one is preaching God’s Word to him. Well, he does it in any case, and we should not condemn him too severely for it. Why should I let it be said to me every Sunday: “All men are sinners; Christ has redeemed you; whoever believes will be saved; faith without works is dead.” If that is told me a hundred times in almost the same words, certainly that is fully sufficient. If it is said to me a thousand times, that does not deepen my understanding, but has the ef-

fect that I do not think much anymore about the words, and I am filled to surfeiting.

Hardly anything else could so stand in the way of an effective knowledge of sin for many sermon hearers and make it seem so shallow than the endlessly repeated, stereotypical way of saying that all men are sinners. But if the preacher on one Sunday takes me through one area of life and then the next Sunday through another, and if he shows me how sin has destroyed and poisoned everything and how the gospel comforts sinners of every sort, making them certain of their forgiveness and sanctifying all relationships in life, then I grow in knowledge and therefore listen gladly. Indeed, that is why the sermon exists, not to bore me. But can't God also rouse a sinner from his security through the most tedious, the most continuously repetitious sermons and lead him to Christ? Of course. But we are not dealing with the question of what God can do, but the question of what we should do. The Son of Man did not proclaim the gospel of the kingdom in hackneyed expressions. He was tireless in discovering new vantage points from which He could present it to His hearers. He gave it new dress over and over again, to which end He gathered materials from all areas of life. Whoever does not permit Him to be his model in this regard will not always have a full church and attentive hearers.

Vivid preaching with a suitable tone

Generally speaking, we should preach vividly, as Jesus preached vividly. One could object that He was an oriental,⁵ after all, and spoke to orientals, whereas we are westerners and are different. There is this much truth to that objection: speaking graphically or using language rich in imagery comes to us with more difficulty. We Germans, above all others, are thinkers and meditators; our imaginations are not vivid or fiery enough to supply us fitting images when we speak. But nevertheless our people, our hearers know enough to treasure a graphic presentation. The Anglo-American speaker speaks more graphically than we do. About three decades ago, De Witt Talmadge was the most popular preacher of our country.⁶ Hundreds of newspapers regularly carried his Sunday sermon. His sermons were by no means profound. But he understood how to speak so graphically, how to present the stage of the activity told about in the text, how to present its background so realistically and the people acting so true to life, that everything lived and breathed, touched the reader, and left behind a deep impression. We could wish that we also understood that better. These are, to be sure, all matters of form, but whoever considers them of little importance and thinks that it really only matters that one's preaching is dogmatically correct is ensnared in no little error.

Finally, the tone of the sermon is not insignificant either. It should be a serious tone, as that of Jesus' sermons. There are preachers, especially in our country, who use wit of almost every sort in their sermons and not uncommonly entice their hearers to laughter. There may be preachers who can do this now and then without obscuring the seriousness of the matter they are advocating or appearing to their audience as a jokester. But it is indeed a risky business. It easily distracts the mind from the seriousness of the gospel and easily degenerates into buffoonery. Sin has certainly also its comical side, but that should not be treated from the pulpit. The gospel of the eternal mercy which surpasses all thought is not a suitable occasion for wit, much less humorous banter.

Furthermore, let the tone of the sermon be a manly tone, as it was with Jesus. There is nothing effeminate about the gospel. In it is revealed, not the love of a sentimental, frail Father, but the love of a strong, zealous God, before whose wrath no one can stand and whose love has torn open heaven in order to rescue the lost world. Let one therefore beware of contracting the habit of an effeminate, unmanly tone from the sermon literature of past emotional times.

Above all, let the sermon tone not be pessimistic, not one from which unceasingly sounds the misery of sin or despair for the church in this evil age. Certainly we must again and again hear, note, and feel that we are sinners and that sin still clings to us always. But it is just as important, yea, much more important that from each sermon sounds forth these truths: that we are no longer sinners, but only [*lauter*] saints and righteous ones, dear children and heirs of God, priests

and kings, in whose dealings and conduct [*Tun und Lassen*] God is well pleased; that our faith is the victory which has overcome the world, sin, death, and the devil. Least of all should a preacher allow his personal irritation or his testiness over not receiving appreciation, or over an underestimation of his gifts and achievements, or his annoyance over injustices he has encountered sound through in his sermons. He improves nothing with that, but harms himself and the gospel. He must say, "What's the harm if I get no recognition, but am trodden underfoot? If only the gospel which I proclaim finds willing acceptance and Christ is glorified." Admittedly, this is easier said than done. There are hours in the life of a preacher when he would like to despair of everything, and it becomes unspeakably difficult for him to strike a tone of joyful faith. It must be given to him by the One who works the willing and the doing according to His good pleasure [Phil. 2:13].

We have tried to show how the Son of Man preached and how we should preach in conformity to His model. The demands placed by this on a good sermon are not to be taken as the law of the Medes and Persians. Someone can do it differently in one or another area than what was presented above and still deliver a good sermon. Dr. Walther's preaching was not really textual exposition. He delivered some sermons whose chief parts simply did not have a textual base. He wanted, more than anything else, to explain his theme, which very often was a proposition from dogmatics. His method throughout was the dogmatic method. And yet he was a great preacher. Why? For this reason above all else: his preaching was a living witness of the truth of the gospel, which had been powerful in him as in few others. He was a great preacher also for this second reason: the things lacking in his teaching method were evened out by significant virtues. To be sure, he almost always had an abstractly rational theme, but he explained it so much, renouncing the wealth of his own ideas [*Gedankenreichtum*] and supplying so much detail that the guiding dogmatic statement lost its abstractness, its pallor; it ceased to be a dry skeleton and took on flesh and blood. In addition, there was that rare unity of construction, the unusually clear and lucid train of thought which makes it possible for the hearer to follow the speaker step by step without great effort. There was the noble language which addresses the heart and emotion and a warm, sincere tone which allows the hearer to notice preaching that is dealing not with a portion of dogmatics, but with the health of his soul.

Luther lacks the uniformity of presentation which we find in Walther. A thought is not always clung to and carried through. The train of thought is more psychological than logical, resulting more from the nature of our soul life than from the subject matter. But his certainty of faith and joy of faith, his life in the Scripture's world of thought, the circumstance that he has experienced everything which he preached a hundred times in his heart and proved it valid in life, his knowledge of the human heart and of all human relationships have made him into a preacher who swept everything before him, who still today edifies countless numbers and makes their faith certain and joyful.

The old time-tested axiom holds true for the form of the sermon: one thing is not suitable for everyone. Here the personality of the preacher must be given much leeway. The sermon should by all means be a witness and therefore be true above all else. Hence its form dare not stand in contradiction to the preacher's personality. Many significant defects, both according to content and to form, are inherent in many sermons, when one judges them according to their draft, and still they produce much fruit. Why? Because the conduct of the preacher among his hearers, his whole personality, is preaching as well. It is not the individual words and sentences of the sermon which make an impression on the hearer, but rather the truth to which they give expression, the spirit from which they are spoken, and the life that clings to them. Thus many printed sermons are far from making the same impression [on readers] which they had made from the pulpit [on hearers]. A strong, powerful personality makes a sermon concrete that is, in itself, abstract; it illustrates the abstractly presented truths. Life is wonderful, beyond comprehending, and does not let itself be reduced to rules.

If in the presentation just offered there are many demands made on the preacher, de-

mands which we have not done justice to in full measure, that does not yet need to dishearten us. The model of the Teacher sent from God shows us the goal for which we should strive. Although we do not achieve it in many areas despite honest efforts, yet our preaching is not in vain on that account. The divine power of the gospel also overcomes those hindrances which our ineptness places in its path. The Son of Man, whom we serve in His brethren and who seeks nothing more from us than that we are found faithful, is with us and produces fruit from our lips, so that His word does not return to Him empty, but does what is pleasing to Him and succeeds in that for which He sends it.

End Notes

¹ Endnotes, headings, other conventions of formatting and anything contained in brackets have been inserted by the translator or editor.

² At that time the synod to which Henkel refers, the predecessor church body of the WELS, was known as the General Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin and Other States.

³ The reader may understandably have reservations about the premises and assertions in this sentence and the next, as well as other remarks made in this article. Rather than delete the material, however, the statements have been retained with the recognition that for the most part these are the author's opinion, nothing more.

⁴ Prof. Henkel's observation here, we believe, is in reference to the situation at the time of pastors serving two or three parishes, and thus preaching that often on Sundays, as well having a number of mid-week sermons to preach throughout the church year.

⁵ The German word here is *Morgenländer*. Unfortunately, a modern English term with a broad enough connotation to cover the intended meaning may not be possible. Alternatives like *easterner*, *Asian*, *Near Eastern*, or *Middle Eastern* suggest connotations that seem insufficient.

⁶ Thomas DeWitt Talmadge was a well-known Presbyterian minister and journal editor who served a number of eastern U.S. churches from 1856 to 1899. According to *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, Vol. XI (Funk & Wagnalls, New York, 1911, p. 254), "his sermons were widely published in America and Europe, weekly, for thirty years."

ELIJAH'S MANTLE

Paul Tiefel, Jr.

The writer has chosen the title of this series with the same hope and prayer as that of the hymn-writer in the first verse of hymn 483 (TLH): "*God of the prophets, bless the prophets' sons; Elijah's mantle o'er Elisha cast. Each age its solemn task may claim but once; make each one nobler, stronger, than the last. Amen.*" In the course of presenting the articles of this series, we are relying on the Lord to impart His wisdom to us through the experience gained and shared by pastors who have gone before us and spent more time than we in doing a variety of tasks that carry out the ministry of the gospel.¹

It has been the experience of the writer and many others that *prayer* is such an invaluable tool in the work of the public ministry and thus a fitting topic for the next installment in this series.

The Pastor's Use of Prayer

In considering the use of prayer in the work of the public ministry, it seems wise to review the basics of prayer as God has revealed them to us in the Bible. The devil has sown many lies about prayer and its power. On the one hand, his lies have elevated prayer, in the minds of some, to the level of the means of grace, and thereby he has thrown individuals back on their own works and off the solid base of Christ's work alone. On the other hand, the father of lies has managed to devalue the great privilege and power of prayer, so that many a child of God goes wanting, simply because no request has been made.

The paradoxical truth of the matter is that prayer has its limits, but these limits are limitless. A true prayer must be addressed in faith to the true God, and though it is spoken by the sinner, it must come to the holy God only through God's appointed mediator, Jesus Christ. But such a prayer may be expressed any time, any place, for anyone, about anything.² It may cover concerns for body and soul, include items of seeming insignificance, and even focus on great issues of life and death. A Christian's prayer may be formal or informal, spoken or sighed, written by someone else or made up on one's own. Understood in simple terms, it is a ceaseless pouring of the child's heart to the Father's heart, with the Father's promise of an answer that will bless us.

Yet our concern here is not for the topic of prayer as such or the use of prayer in general; our concern is for the more specific area of prayer in the work of the public ministry.

Prayers in the public worship service

Unless there are certain restraints or unusual factors to consider, it seems wisest and best to use modern English in the public prayers of the congregation. This practice encourages all members similarly to "talk" to God in their own language. It is also easier for children, visitors, and others who might be unfamiliar with the language of the King James Version to follow along.

There is value in using the same prayers frequently, such as the "Opening Prayer" from the *Lutheran Hymnary* or "The General Prayer" from *The Lutheran Hymnal*. Such prayers can then become part of our members' memories, similar to their recognition of the liturgy and the Lord's Prayer, and thus be more easily incorporated into their personal prayer life. That advantage, though, has the accompanying disadvantage of these very same prayers becoming mere rote, something tuned out by disengaged minds. For that reason well-written prayer books have served a worthy purpose in the worship service. One such book, a collection of general prayers with a gospel-centered approach for the various topics of the church year, is Arthur J. Clement's *Prayers for The Worship Service*.

How shall we view the use of *ex corde* prayers in the public service (*ex corde* meaning "from the heart")? If by such a phrase it is understood that the pastor or someone else writes a prayer for the service, then that would be a worthy effort, which enables the prayer to be tailor-made to the situation and encourages members to go and pray likewise. If by the phrase, however, it is meant that the pastor leads the prayer on the spot with words and phrases that he chooses spontaneously, then we need to consider the pros and cons. In favor of the idea we note the fact that we all can talk to God without using someone else's words. But against the idea comes the observation that the inevitable halting and uneven style will be distracting and unsettling to those who are listening. Using such prayers in the less formal setting of a Bible Class or a congregational meeting might give all the advantages, while avoiding the disadvantages. Prayers used in the public worship service should always serve to glorify God, aid the worship of Him, and edify the worshiper, not distract him.

It has been helpful and interesting to assign a member or group of members, such as a Catechism class, the privilege of writing a prayer for an upcoming service. Such a prayer may need some editing before its use in the service, but it is nevertheless an effective way to encourage prayer, and it incorporates a wider spectrum of thoughts and concerns beyond what the pastor may consider.

What shall we say about the matter of prayer requests? It is good for members to develop the habit of asking the larger fellowship to join in prayers for specific events: an upcoming or successful surgery; an engagement, marriage, or wedding anniversary; a soldier going off to service or a member going on a special trip; an outreach effort; and the like. Often members will need encouragement to request such corporate prayers on their own behalf and that of others. Of course, a pastor will need to know when a member really needs or wants privacy in a given matter and when modesty will yield to allowing the brethren to share in a certain burden.

Perhaps a word on prayers in regard for the dead is in order. God reveals that the soul of the dead person is judged immediately upon separation of the soul from the body and is sent to

heaven or hell, depending upon the soul's relationship to Jesus the Savior. Therefore prayers for the dead (as if they could be helped) and prayers to the dead (as if they could help us) are unscriptural. Nevertheless, it is appropriate upon the death of a Christian to offer a prayer of thanksgiving to God for the many blessings of body and soul which God in His grace and mercy gave during the earthly pilgrimage. Especially appropriate would be praise to God for the gift of Christian faith and the victory over the final enemy of death, which the departed Christian now enjoys.

Prayers used in other aspects of the ministry

The pastor has the great privilege of setting the example of a beneficial and appropriate prayer life. The hospital call or shut-in visit are but two of many opportunities for an *ex corde* prayer. In using these opportunities for extemporaneous prayer, the pastor has a chance to tie in Bible passages with personal needs, to prioritize the spiritual over the physical, and to emphasize the great and certain hope that we have in Jesus. He also gives the members a pattern to follow in their own personal prayer lives.

Permit a couple of observations in this regard. An active prayer life by the pastor will make *ex corde* prayers for members easier to implement. While it may seem awkward the first few times it is attempted, try pausing before the close of the prayer to see if the member has anything to add. On occasion members have asked for the prayer to include more requests. On one occasion with this writer a member took an active role in continuing the prayer before turning it back over to the pastor for the closing.

The pastor can also take advantage of public prayers which happen in settings other than the worship service. When asked to lead the table prayer at the congregational potluck or at the meal of a wedding reception, the pastor may incorporate specific Bible passages that relate to the occasion and thus turn the members' thoughts to appropriate Bible truths which apply to this or that aspect of their lives.

The prayer at the sickbed or deathbed of a member affords the opportunity for a personal touch, something done quite literally. When the member is too weak or is restricted by IV's, taking his hand helps to relay the pastor's sincere concern and compassion and can be an aid in alerting him to the time when prayer is about to be said on his behalf. On other occasions with certain groups it might be beneficial to join hands in forming a prayer circle.

Prayer in the pastor's personal life

While our focus so far has been the use of prayer in the pastor's ministry, both within the worship service and beyond, we should briefly consider the personal side of prayer for the pastor. It is the will of God that every child of God, including the pastor, should pray without ceasing. Part of the ordination or installation vows usually has a reference to remembering the members in prayer. Surely the God of grace and mercy is waiting to hear the pastor's requests for wisdom, strength, love, and all the other gifts necessary for the high calling of serving God's precious, ransomed souls with what they need most. And the more prayer is used, the more it becomes second nature. There is no end of pastoral concerns which would benefit from a fervent petitioning to the heavenly Father. Marriage problems among the members, faithfulness by the recently confirmed, strength for the sick and dying, faithfulness to the Word by our churches and synod, outreach with the Gospel to the unbeliever, harmony among called servants and lay leaders, guidance in approaching the delinquent members, wisdom in prioritizing this very list—all these come to mind, and so much more.

Truly the pastor needs to be fervent in his prayers and to pray without ceasing. One place to buy a few extra moments for prayer is the car, where so much time can be taken up in travel for the ministry. Instead of having the CD player or radio left on from the last time, try turning it off at the end of the trip. And then use the quiet time at the beginning of the next trip for a prayer. Use the walk to the day school or the opening up of the church or the stuffing of the mailboxes or the assembly of the bulletin (and other such tasks) as moments for prayer. Make shaving or

brushing the teeth a time for a specific kind of prayer. Health experts advise washing the hands for as long as it takes to sing “Happy Birthday” twice. Why not replace it with a prayer or a hymn of similar length?

As a final encouragement to the importance and value of prayer in the life and ministry of the pastor, we consider the words of James 5:13-18:

anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit.

O Thou by whom we come to God,
The Life, the Truth, the Way,
The path of prayer Thyself hast trod,—
Lord, teach us how to pray (TLH 454:8).

End Notes

¹ The first installment, “Selection of Hymns for the Worship Service,” appeared in the last issue (47:2 June 2007).

² In accord with the axiom that every rule has an exception, the reader will be aware of 1 John 5:16: “If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin which does not lead to death, he will ask, and He will give him life for those who commit sin not leading to death. There is sin leading to death. I do not say that he should pray about that.”

BOOK REVIEWS

Elisabeth Elliot: *Quest for Love—True Stories of Passion and Purity*, Fleming H. Revell, 1996, 2001, paperback, 271 pages.

There is hardly anything in our world today more different from the thirties and forties than the public reaction to sexual immorality. What was once considered shocking and perverse is now commonplace and even promoted by leaders in government, education, and, of course, the entertainment industry. Virginity among young men and women seems to be rarer and rarer, and one wonders whether any of our young people will be able to maintain a Christian view of what is right and wrong in sexual matters, bombarded as they are by advertising, movies, television, the Internet, magazines, and books that portray human beings as sexual animals without any sense of control or restraint.

Elisabeth Elliot has written on sexual purity before. One may read or peruse *Passion and Purity*, which was reviewed in the June 2003 issue of the *Journal*. This volume, *Quest for Love—True Stories of Passion and Purity*, as the subtitle indicates, presents the responses of listeners and readers to the author’s previous attempts at promoting sexual abstinence before marriage and sexual faithfulness within marriage.

In her introduction Elisabeth Elliot recounts the experience she had when, as an “old woman,” she addressed a student convention in Kansas City on the subject of sexual restraint. As

she spoke about “the priceless and irreplaceable gift of virginity,” there was total silence with all eyes glued to the speaker. When she finished, “there was not only applause. They leaped to their feet. They stamped. They whooped, whistled, and cheered for what seemed a long time” (p. 14). And on that same day they bought six thousand copies of *Passion and Purity*.

So, it would seem, there is still a desire among many young people to throw all the sexual garbage of our day into the trash and return to the simplicity of Bible teaching. *Quest for Love* tells the stories of persons responding to *Passion and Purity*. Each chapter is introduced by a Bible verse. Each chapter concludes with reflections for thought. In between are the stories of individuals and couples who sometimes followed right paths and sometimes followed wrong paths, but eventually realized that God's morality is the best morality.

Headed by 1 Thessalonians 4:1-5, chapter 23 has the title “Is Chastity Possible?” Elisabeth Elliot's answer (pp. 174-180) is “Yes Chastity is rare, but it is always possible. . . . It is deeply disturbing to find that abstinence, chastity, virginity, sexual purity are seldom if ever the subjects of sermons in most churches today. It is often taken for granted that as free moral agents we may choose whatever feels good or seems ‘right for us.’ . . . Here is the battleground, and none more crucial, in the lives of young people who determine to be holy. . . . Until Jesus Christ is Lord of the sex life He is not Lord of one's *life*.”

Since chastity is so rare, many are those who are troubled by the sexual sins they have committed. Chapter 27 (pp. 206-214) is entitled “Grace Greater than All Our Sin,” with 1 John 1:8-10 as the introductory Scripture. Elisabeth Elliot concludes this chapter with these words: “Nothing seems more miraculous, more difficult for us who insist on figuring things out, than this matter of grace. Logic has nothing to do with it. It is the incomprehensible and inscrutable High and Mighty One pouring Himself out in love for His helpless, sinning creatures. Through the sacrifice of Himself He offers us, when we ask for it, absolute forgiveness. Nor does He merely forgive. He sanctifies us, definitively establishing a new quality of life in the cleansed soul, communicating to us *His* life and love, quite apart from any merit whatsoever on our side.”

Tremper Longman III: *Proverbs*, Baker Academic, 2006, hard cover, 608 pages.

One of the commentaries reviewed by Longman (see the pertinent book review in issue 47:1 of the *Journal*) is his own commentary on the Old Testament book of Proverbs. This commentary is one in a series of commentaries entitled *Baker Commentary on the Old Testament*. Longman does not give stars to his own commentaries, but he does have this to say about *Proverbs*: “I wouldn't have published it if I didn't like it!”

After reading his discussion of a few sections and key passages, I think I like it too. In his preface Longman states his agreement with the traditional view “that the proverbs are relatively randomly organized” (p. 16). Therefore he has included a helpful appendix of topical studies that list and discuss key passages in Proverbs on such subjects as anger, laziness, gossip, poverty, women, etc.

A lengthy introduction discusses such matters as authorship, genre, parallelism, structure, comparisons with non-canonical collections of wisdom, and the use of Proverbs in the New Testament.

The body of the commentary comprises translation, interpretation, and (for the first nine chapters) theological implications. One of the benefits of a good commentary on Proverbs is that examples are given from the Scriptures to illustrate the point of the proverb. Longman does a good job of providing such examples.

Chapter 8, of course, deserves our special attention. Longman's conclusion on pages 212-213 is this: “Woman Wisdom is a personification of Yahweh's wisdom. . . . Later Jewish interpretation of the chapter tends to identify wisdom with Torah, while Christian interpretation connects Wisdom with Jesus. It is possible to overread these connections by not taking account of the genre of Prov. 8. One clear example of misapplying the passage comes from an early theologian named Arius (AD 260-336), commonly recognized as heretical by the orthodox church. Arius and

his followers note the connection between Jesus and Wisdom and then apply all the characteristics of Wisdom to Jesus. They press literally the language that Wisdom (Jesus) was created or brought forth as the first of creation. Then they reason that since God is ‘unbegotten,’ and Wisdom, who stands for Jesus, is ‘begotten,’ Jesus cannot be God. In response, we simply point out that Prov. 8 is not a prophecy of Jesus or any kind of literal description of him. . . . Woman Wisdom is not a preincarnate form of the second person of the Trinity. Jesus is not to be identified with Wisdom. The language about Jesus being the ‘firstborn of creation’ is not to be pressed literally, as if Jesus were a created being. But—and this is crucial—the association between Jesus and Woman Wisdom in the NT is a powerful way of saying that Jesus is the embodiment of God’s Wisdom.”

I was also interested in Longman’s understanding of Proverbs 22:6, which reads in the New King James Version: “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.” The Hebrew text does not include the words “the way he should go,” but only “his way.” Therefore, as a general rule it is true that whatever way a child is trained, that is the way he will follow when he is old. Nevertheless, Longman believes that translators are right when they add a qualifying adjective to “way,” such as the “right way.” He understands “his” way as being God’s way.

At the same time, since this admonition is a proverb, we must be careful not to read it as an absolute promise. Longman says (p. 405): “It sounds like a promise, but a proverb does not give a promise. The book of Proverbs advises its hearers in ways that are most likely to lead them to desired consequences if all things are equal. It is much more likely that a child will be a responsible adult if trained in the right path. However, there is also the possibility that the child might come under the negative influence of peers or be led astray in some other way. The point is that this proverb encourages parents to train their children, but does not guarantee that if they do so their children will never stray. This insight into the form of the proverb is particularly important for parents to grasp when their adult children have not turned out well; otherwise, the verse becomes a sledgehammer of guilt—a purpose that it was not intended to carry. On the other side, the proverb should not become a reason for pride if one’s children turn out well either. The proverb is simply an encouragement to do the right thing when it comes to raising one’s children.”

Perhaps this is enough to give the flavor of the book. In his preface Longman says about the intent of his book: “It is my hope that this commentary can help them [pastors and future ministers] as they prepare sermons and Bible studies on the book of Proverbs” (p. 16). During my earlier pastoral ministry I wish I had had this book available to me when I worked on a series of sermons on Proverbs, and also when I prepared a series of Bible studies on Proverbs for the young people in my congregation.

David Lau

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