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### **A Study of Psalms 120-134 And Their Correlation as "Songs of Ascents"\***

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“(Speak) to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your hearts to the Lord.” So did Paul exhort the readers of his epistle to the Ephesians (5:19). It is one of several New Testament passages which show (as we might have expected) that singing the praises of the Lord Jesus played a prominent role in the worship lives of early Christians. It is also an indication that the “hymnal” of the Old Testament (just like our hymnal) had more than one “section” in it, one of which was a “Psalms Section.” This, too, comes as no surprise. After all, the Book of Psalms—the best-loved book in the Old Testament, which is quoted in the New Testament more frequently than any other (116 times out of a total of 283 times, according to Halley<sup>1</sup>)—served for many years as the hymnbook for Old Testament believers. Most, if not all, of the psalms were written with the intention that they be sung.

How did this Old Testament gem of a hymnbook come to be arranged in its present form: 150 songs divided into five books?<sup>2</sup> And what of the headings or superscriptions which we find written over many of them?<sup>3</sup> How did they come to be included in the Hebrew text and what is their significance? It does not lie within the scope of this paper to delve into each of these questions. We do want to give attention, though, to that grouping of psalms which the Holy Spirit saw fit to be included in Book Five, over which is written the interesting and somewhat mysterious superscription *shir ha-ma-a-loth*. In this paper we will consider, in the first place, the question of “what does the Hebrew expression *shir ha-ma-a-loth* mean?” Secondly, observations will be made with respect to the entire collection of psalms in this group. And finally, some devotional thoughts will be shared on each of the psalms individually.

#### **1. Meaning of the Hebrew Superscription**

The Hebrew superscription translated literally means: “A song of goings up.”<sup>4</sup> Dictionary definitions for the two Hebrew words comprising this phrase are:

שִׁיר - masculine singular noun: a singing, song; a sacred song, hymn  
הַמַּעֲלוֹת - feminine plural noun of מַעֲלָה with prefixed ה־: ascent, going up, to a higher region; a step, by which anyone goes up; a lofty place, an upper room

It has been translated variously as:

- “A Song of Ascents” - NKJV, NIV, NASB
- “A Pilgrim Song” - Leupold
- “A Song of Degrees” - KJV, Keil-Delitzsch
- “A Song of Steps” - Gesenius
- “A Song from the Choir Loft” (*ein Lied im höhern Chor*) - Luther

Which of the above translations is the best choice? There is no clear-cut answer to this question. It depends on what the originally-intended meaning of this Hebrew superscription was (what thought the author intended to convey by it). Here are the four most common explanations as to why *shir ha-ma-a-loth* was written at the beginning of each of these psalms:

1. Because of the style in which they were written. According to this view the Songs of Ascents share the characteristic of an ascending, step-like thought pattern. In this style successive verses pick up and develop a word from the preceding verse. Gesenius is a strong proponent of this view. He says: “The sense, as it were, goes on progressively, thus the first or last words of a preceding sentence are often repeated at the beginning of those that follow, e.g., Psalm 121.”<sup>5</sup> This does seem to be true with some of the psalms in this group. On the other hand, it is not apparent in others. For this reason, I question whether this interpretation is the correct one.
2. Because these psalms were sung when the priests climbed the 15 steps leading up to the Court of the Men in the Temple. None of the commentators I read supported this view. In opposition to it Leupold writes: “A remark in the Talmud...to the effect that the fifteen ‘songs of ascents’ correspond in number to these fifteen Temple steps does not, however, assert that these songs were sung on these steps...”<sup>6</sup> Rev. G. Rawlinson, in the *Pulpit Commentary*, goes so far as to say that there is no sufficient evidence that these steps ever existed.<sup>7</sup>
3. Because they were composed for the Jews to sing as they went up from Babylon to the Holy Land at the return from the Captivity.
4. Because they were sung by bands of Jewish pilgrims traveling up to Jerusalem to celebrate the three great annual feasts (Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles). This fourth interpretation is the one supported by the majority of Bible commentators whom I consulted.

The Peoples’ Bible takes an eclectic approach to the question when it says: “These explanations need not be mutually exclusive, since there is often a difference between the original reason for the composition of a hymn and its ultimate use. Some of the hymns originated as personal meditations of David. Others very likely originated as festival hymns. The collection, as it now stands in the Book of Psalms, appears to be a group of hymns selected for use during the pilgrim festivals. Some of them were used in the temple worship; others were probably used outside the temple service. Such hymns concerning ascent to Jerusalem would, of course, be especially meaningful at the time of the return to Jerusalem after the captivity in Babylon.”<sup>8</sup>

## 2. “Songs of Ascents”–General Observations

Here are a couple of observations I made while studying this collection of psalms (which leads me to favor the idea that these psalms were a collection used by Jewish pilgrims traveling up to

Jerusalem):

- In many of them the thought and imagery of the author focuses on the holy city, Zion. Specific reference to “Zion” is made in seven of the Songs of Ascents (125,126,128,129,132,133,134). Specific reference to “Jerusalem” is made in three of them (122,125,128).
- Reference to the “house of God” as the place of worship is made in three places: 122:1,4; 132:7; and 134:1-2.
- A prominent theme in the “Songs of Ascents” is that Jehovah is the Helper/Defender/Protector of His people. Let us lift up our eyes to Him, our almighty Creator, the God of mercy and faithfulness, for blessing, for peace and prosperity, and for deliverance from our enemies: 120:1; 121:1; 123:1-2; 124:8; 130:1-2; 131:3; 135:3.

These observations do seem to support the idea that these psalms could have been a special collection of songs sung by returned exiles as they make their way to Jerusalem to celebrate the annual feasts. It would have been quite natural for their thoughts to be drawn to Mt. Zion, to the city of Jerusalem, and to the temple where they were preparing to worship Jehovah, the One upon whom their hopes were centered for forgiveness, spiritual life, and eternal salvation.

There are arguments against this view. One example I ran across: Gesenius states quite dogmatically that “those are (far away) from the truth who apply the title שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלֹת to the subject matter of those Psalms, and render it *songs of going up*...and suppose them to have been sung by the Israelites returning from their exile...or by those who went up to Jerusalem; for this subject is treated in only two of them (Psa.122, and 126), and other subjects in all the rest.”<sup>9</sup>

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An observation made by the author of the People’s Bible, John F. Brug, (which I found interesting) is that “there appear to be two groups of seven psalms arranged chiastically, that is, the first psalm matches up with the fourteenth, the second with the thirteenth, and so on. The fifteenth psalm then serves as a benediction to the whole group.”<sup>10</sup> He goes on to describe this chiastic arrangement as follows:

- In Psalm 120 the pilgrim begins his journey surrounded by enemies in a distant land; in Psalm 133 he completes the journey amidst the pleasant unity of brothers.
- Psalms 121 and 132 both speak of the help of the Lord, who establishes His people.
- Psalms 123 and 130 both speak of the lowliness of the pilgrim.
- Psalms 124 and 129 both speak of the Lord’s help against oppressors.
- Psalms 125 and 128 are both “Peace on Israel” psalms.
- Psalms 126 and 127 both point to the rebuilding of the nation after captivity. As very often in biblical literature, the key point of the literary work is placed in the middle.

Upon examination of this collection of psalms there is some evidence to support the idea that the original compiler (Ezra?) arranged the psalms in a chiastic manner. However, the thought content of some psalm pairs is not easily matched (Brug himself admits this). This—and the fact that no other commentator whom I consulted mentioned anything about a chiastic arrangement—leads me to wonder about the validity of this observation.

### 3. The “Songs of Ascents”—Devotional Thoughts

#### Psalm 120 “LORD, save me from the lying lips of my enemies.” A Prayer Psalm<sup>11</sup>

In my distress I cried to the Lord, And He heard me.  
Deliver my soul, O Lord, from lying lips And from a deceitful tongue.  
What shall be given to you, Or what shall be done to you, You false tongue?  
Sharp arrows of the warrior, With coals of the broom tree!  
Woe is me, that I sojourn in Meshech, That I dwell among the tents of Kedar!  
My soul has dwelt too long With one who hates peace.

I am for peace; But when I speak, they are for war.

The psalmist prays that the Lord would deliver him from his adversaries, especially from persecution in the form of slander. No doubt the Israelites were made to undergo this difficult trial on many an occasion while they languished as captives in Babylon. How often their enemies must have tried to “pick a fight” with them. How often the words must have pierced like an arrow into their soul: “Who is Jehovah? What a weak and helpless God that He would allow you to be deported as slaves from your homeland! Shame on you for believing in Him!” After the return from exile they were faced with bitter opposition from the side of the Samaritans. Recall the treachery of Sanballat, et al., spoken of in Nehemiah 6. How natural, then, for the Jewish pilgrims—as they made their way up to Jerusalem to worship Jehovah—to pray that He “deliver their soul from lying lips” and the “deceitful tongue” and to bless them with His peace.

This psalm is a fitting prayer for God’s people of all times. We, too, are confronted by enemies. Our most formidable foe, of course, is the devil (= slanderer), whom Jesus called the “father of lies” (John 8:44). He likes to whisper in our ear (especially in times of trouble): “Put your trust in Jehovah? What good will that do? He can’t help you!” Or: “You are a child of God? Why then is He permitting you to suffer? What kind of a God would allow this? Certainly not a loving God!” Then there is the ungodly world which, egged on by Satan, likes to poke fun at Christians and ridicule their beliefs (as Jesus predicted, Matt. 10:25). Truly, as we continue our journey to the New Jerusalem, we also need the Lord God to bless us with His peace—the peace which flows from the confidence that He is our Savior-God in whom our sins find perfect cleansing, and that He is controlling the events of our lives for our good (even when it doesn’t seem like it). Eventually, for His mercy’s sake, He will deliver us from every evil work and bless us with the perfect peace of heaven.

Related Scriptures: Matthew 5:11, Luke 6:22; Mark 14:55-59; Revelation 21:1-4.  
Hymns: 362:2; 364:4; 371:1; 381:2; 402:3.

### Psalm 121

**“LORD, You are my almighty Guardian. In You will I put my trust.”**

#### A Psalm of Comfort

I will lift up my eyes to the hills From whence comes my help?  
My help comes from the Lord, Who made heaven and earth.  
He will not allow your foot to be moved; He who keeps you will not slumber.  
Behold, He who keeps Israel Shall neither slumber nor sleep.  
The Lord is your keeper; The Lord is your shade at your right hand.  
The sun shall not strike you by day, Nor the moon by night.  
The Lord shall preserve you from all evil; He shall preserve your soul.  
The Lord shall preserve your going out and your coming in From this time forth, and even forevermore.

The key word in this psalm—it occurs six times—is שָׁמַר (= keep, watch, guard). The psalmist derives comfort from the Spirit-worked confidence that Jehovah is his Keeper. Jehovah isn’t like the idol god Baal. He is never slumbering, never sleeping, never “off duty.” He is aware of what is going on in the lives of His believers at all times. And since He is the almighty Maker of heaven and earth He is eminently qualified (powerful enough!) to defend them from danger and help them in times of trouble.

The people of Israel must have derived much comfort from this psalm while on their way to Jerusalem. It assured them that the Lord would keep them safe from harm both as they traveled to Jerusalem and as they returned home. But the psalmist—by the terms “coming in” and “going out”—was thinking about more than just a journey to and from an earthly city. He had in mind especially the pilgrimage of a believer from earth to the New Jerusalem. He expresses his confidence that Jehovah will keep close watch over His people throughout their sojourn in this world till the day they reach

their heavenly destination.

Christians of every period of church history have found comfort in the assurance that this psalm brings. How blessed also we are to know that Jehovah is our almighty Guardian. For we also “walk in danger all the way.” There are many pitfalls, snares, temptations along the way which would hinder us and keep us from reaching our destination. But our almighty Savior-God—who possesses all power in heaven and earth—promises to protect and defend us from these threatening perils. He will guide us through this world of sin “till we safely stand in our Fatherland.”

Related Scriptures: Psalm 18:36; 23:4; 91:1-2; Phil.4:7; 2 Thessalonians 3:3; 1 Peter 1:5; 5:7; Revelation 3:10.

Hymns: 45, 110, 410, 413, 538.

### **Psalm 122**

**“LORD, thank You for the privilege of worshiping You.”**

#### **A Psalm of Thanks**

I was glad when they said to me, “Let us go into the house of the Lord.”  
Our feet have been standing Within your gates, O Jerusalem!  
Jerusalem is built As a city that is compact together,  
Where the tribes go up, The tribes of the Lord, To the Testimony of Israel, To give thanks to the name of the Lord.  
For thrones are set there for judgment, The thrones of the house of David.  
Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: “May they prosper who love you.  
Peace be within your walls, Prosperity within your palaces.”  
For the sake of my brethren and companions, I will now say, “Peace be within you.”  
Because of the house of the Lord our God I will seek your good.

This psalm pictures the joy of the believing Israelite who has been invited by his friends to “go into the house of the LORD” to participate in the public worship service. He considers it a great blessing to be able to do this. He knows that it is in the house of the LORD that God “comes to be with His people.” The tabernacle was a symbol of His gracious dwelling in their midst. Here God’s people could join together in worshiping Him who promised—in the fullness of time—to send them a Savior from sin. A pleasant thought indeed for every true Israelite! Leupold comments: “The ideal Israelite of whom David here writes is stating what feelings always surged through his heart when his townspeople indicated that they were ready to make one of the usual pilgrimages to the capital city on the occasion of one of the great festivals. He was glad over those who informed him of their intention. He liked that kind of people who loved the house of the Lord sincerely enough to plan to go there three times year as a true Israelite was in conscience bound to do.”<sup>12</sup>

We who are members of the spiritual “Israel of God” (Gal.6:16) through faith in Christ share the sentiments of the psalmist. We consider it a privilege and blessing to gather as a congregation each week at church to worship Jehovah, the God of our salvation, and sing His praises with united voice. A blessing not to be taken for granted!

Related Scriptures: Exodus 20:24b; Luke 24:52-53; Acts 2:46-47, Hebrews 10:25; Psalm 22:22,25; 40:9-10; 107:31-32; 149:1.

Hymns: 2, 21, 462.

### **Psalm 123**

**“LORD, help me bear patiently the insults of the contemptuous world.”**

#### **A Prayer Psalm**

Unto You I lift up my eyes, O You who dwell in the heavens.  
Behold, as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their masters, As the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress, So our eyes look to the Lord our God, Until He has mercy on us.

Have mercy on us, O Lord, have mercy on us! For we are exceedingly filled with contempt.  
Our soul is exceedingly filled With the scorn of those who are at ease, With the contempt of the proud.

The thought content of this psalm is similar to Psalm 120. In it the psalmist prays that Jehovah would look down in mercy from His throne in heaven and bring relief to His people who were suffering severe hardship at the hands of their enemies. The specific hardship they were suffering was this, that their souls were being filled “with the scorn of those who are at ease” and “with contempt of the proud.” The ungodly children of the world were poking fun at God’s people, making life miserable for them, because they believed in Jehovah and were striving to walk in His ways, not the ways of the ungodly world.

The pilgrim bands would have ample reason to pray this prayer as they traveled to Zion. Their heathen neighbors must have thought of them as religious fanatics. “How foolish you Jewish people are to travel to far away Jerusalem three times each year to worship your God, the God who allowed your land to be conquered and overrun by the Babylonians!” Undoubtedly these enemies let their contempt for the Jews and for the God of Jews show. (The Samaritans come to mind again with their open opposition to the rebuilding of the temple.) This was a heavy cross for the believing remnant to bear. How natural, then, that they would turn to the Lord with the plea that He would help them and strengthen them to bear patiently, without complaint, the insults of their enemies as they journeyed to Jerusalem to worship the God whom they loved.

We modern day Christian “pilgrims” can expect to receive similar treatment from the world as we make our way to the New Jerusalem. The message of Christ Crucified is our dearest treasure. But it will remain a stumblingblock to the Jews and to the Greeks foolishness. This will be evident by the spiteful attitude that society takes toward the Word of God, toward the Lord Jesus, toward His Church, and those who seek to abide in His Word. “If you were of the world,” Jesus said, “the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A servant is not greater than his master’” (John 15:19-20). Yet we have reason to remain joyful and confident because we know that the Lord, to whom we lift up our eyes, has promised to strengthen us to “bear the world’s dread frown” as we continue our heavenward walk.

Related Scriptures: 2 Timothy 3:10-12; Matthew 5:10; 1 Peter 2:21-24.

Hymns: 347, 396, 518.

### **Psalm 124**

**“LORD, thank You for being my almighty Defender.”**

#### **A Psalm of Thanks**

“If it had not been the Lord who was on our side,” Let Israel now say—  
“If it had not been the Lord who was on our side, When men rose up against us,  
Then they would have swallowed us alive, When their wrath was kindled against us;  
Then the waters would have overwhelmed us, The stream would have gone over our soul;  
Then the swollen waters Would have gone over our soul.”  
Blessed be the Lord, Who has not given us as prey to their teeth.  
Our soul has escaped as a bird from the snare of the fowlers; The snare is broken, and we have escaped.  
Our help is in the name of the Lord, Who made heaven and earth.

This psalm is said to have been penned by David upon the occasion of some great deliverance which God wrought for him and his people (in a time of grave, threatening danger). It fits into the Songs of Ascents collection quite well. As the people journeyed to Jerusalem it would have been natural for them to recall the many instances during their history when Jehovah showed them His faithfulness and love by coming to their rescue “just in the nick of time” (e.g., their deliverance from Pharaoh’s armies at the Red Sea, their rescue from the Assyrian armies in the days of Hezekiah, their release from captivity in Babylon, to name a few). How often Jehovah enabled His people to come out

victorious in battle when they were greatly outnumbered, against all odds, when it seemed like there was no way they could win. It was out of gratitude to the Lord for His undeserved mercies in defending them from their enemies that the Jewish pilgrims joined their voices together in singing His praise: *“Blessed be the LORD, who has not given us us as prey to their teeth.”*

Like the Israelites of old we have wonderful reason to bless the Lord. Many and strong are the enemies which we, the members of the Holy Christian Church, face in this world of sin, as we go about our God-given task of heralding the gospel. Jesus’ promise, however, is that the gates of hell won’t prevail against it. “The Church shall never perish! Her dear Lord, to defend, to guide, sustain, and cherish, Is with her to the end.” There have been times in the history of the Church when it seemed like the Lord was no longer with His people and the gospel light would be completely extinguished (as in the days of Luther). But the almighty Lord kept this from happening. He used Luther as His instrument to uncover the gospel light so it could shine forth brilliantly again. This is but one example.

The same is true in the lives of individual Christians. Our faith is continuously under attack. It would seem that the unholy three of devil, world, and flesh—powerful enemies indeed!—would be too formidable for us to overcome. This would be true, of course, if we were to rely on our own strength... *“if it had not been the LORD who was on our side.”* The assurance of this psalm is that He in whom we trust will keep us safe by His power. He will come to our rescue “just in the nick of time” in every trial, in every trouble, so that though we be assailed by them, we will win in the end and keep the victory.

Related Scriptures: Matthew 14:30-31; Ephesians 6:10-17; Romans 8:35-39; 1 Corinthians 10:13.

Hymns: 262, 267, 372.

### **Psalm 125**

**“LORD, thank You for keeping my soul safe.”**

#### **A Psalm of Thanks**

Those who trust in the Lord Are like Mount Zion, Which cannot be moved, but abides forever.  
As the mountains surround Jerusalem, So the Lord surrounds His people From this time forth and forever.  
For the scepter of wickedness shall not rest On the land allotted to the righteous, Lest the righteous reach  
out their hands to iniquity.  
Do good, O Lord, to those who are good, And to those who are upright in their hearts.  
As for such as turn aside to their crooked ways, The Lord shall lead them away With the workers of  
iniquity. Peace be upon Israel!

In this psalm the poet pictures the superior strength and power of the Lord, and the stability, permanence, and safety of all who place their trust in Him. He does so by comparing the Lord to the mountain range which surrounds Jerusalem (v. 2) and God’s people to Mount Zion (v. 1). Says Leupold: “There can scarcely be a finer comparison to convey the thought of a completely unshakable solidity than that of a mountain rooted deep in the rock of the earth.”<sup>13</sup> The Jewish pilgrims may have sung this song as they drew near to Jerusalem and Mount Zion and saw the mountains rising up from the ground all around her. The thought must have come to their minds: “With Jehovah, our Savior-God, hedging us in on all sides (protecting and defending us from harm), we are safe and secure. No evil can befall us.”

A comforting thought for us too. The world we live in is in a constant state of flux. “Change and decay in all around I see.” Many are the quakes and tremors that threaten to shake our Christian confidence and crumble our faith to dust as we continue our journey to the Jerusalem above. Tremors in the form of trials, tribulations, stress, worry, attacks from the unholy three. This psalm teaches us where alone we can secure the strength and stability needed to withstand the powerful shock waves. It assures us that, as we place our trust in the Lord, nothing can move us, nothing can separate us from

His love. Our souls are safe.

Related Scriptures: Psalm 46; Matthew 7:24-27; Revelation 3:10-12.  
Hymns: 206:3; 385:1,10; 425:3-4; 427; 474.

### **Psalm 126**

**“LORD, thank You for liberating me.”**

#### **A Psalm of Thanks**

When the Lord brought back the captivity of Zion, We were like those who dream.  
Then our mouth was filled with laughter, And our tongue with singing. Then they said among the nations,  
“The Lord has done great things for them.”  
The Lord has done great things for us, Whereof we are glad.  
Bring back our captivity, O Lord, As the streams in the South.  
Those who sow in tears Shall reap in joy.  
He who continually goes forth weeping, Bearing seed for sowing, Shall doubtless come again with  
rejoicing, Bringing his sheaves with him.

This psalm is a psalm of thanksgiving for the return from captivity in Babylon. It pictures the joy that God’s people felt when this happened. The happiness they experienced was so exuberant that it almost seemed too good to be true. Later, when the Jewish pilgrims traveled up to Jerusalem for the annual feasts, they sang this song to express their thankfulness to the Lord for the mercy He showed in making their deliverance possible.

As the Jewish exiles were released from captivity in Babylon, we have been released from a captivity that was far worse: captivity to sin and Satan. Jesus secured our freedom through His holy life and sinless death. It seems almost too good to be true, but it is true. The Christian gospel teaches (and we believe!) that the Son of God paid for our sins, conquered Satan, defeated death, and “led captivity captive.” Even when we were still His enemies. Cause for great joy indeed! Now we are free to serve the Lord in love. Then we shall serve Him perfectly in the New Jerusalem above.

Related Scriptures: Luke 4:18-19; John 8:31-32.  
Hymns: 90:4-6; 141; 387.

### **Psalm 127**

**“LORD, bless my undertakings with success.”**

#### **A Psalm of Instruction**

Unless the Lord builds the house, They labor in vain who build it; Unless the Lord guards the city, The  
watchman stays awake in vain.  
It is vain for you to rise up early, To sit up late, To eat the bread of sorrows; For so He gives His beloved  
sleep.  
Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord, The fruit of the womb is His reward.  
Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, So are the children of one’s youth.  
Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them; They shall not be ashamed, But shall speak with their  
enemies in the gate.

This psalm is one of two said to have been written by King Solomon (the other being 72). In it he stresses that when man undertakes to do something, success depends on more than hard work and sweat. The unseen all-important factor is that God must bless what he does. This is true with respect to both house-building (vv. 1-2) and family-building (vv. 3-5).

The instruction this psalm gives would have been very appropriate—and necessary—for the Jewish pilgrims traveling to Jerusalem in the days following the exile. The temple was being rebuilt at that time. The nation of Judah was also just getting back on its feet. A two-fold temptation confronted them: (1) To rely too much on their own strength and ability for success in these ventures, and (2) To

become discouraged or depressed, thinking the assignment that lay ahead of them was too difficult to tackle. As they chanted this song along the road to Jerusalem they would have been reminded and encouraged by Jehovah's promise that the success of their undertakings didn't depend on their might and skill, but on Him, their almighty and all-merciful Lord.

The psalm has great application for our lives today. It applies to all endeavors—whether small or great—which we Christian heaven-bound pilgrims undertake throughout the duration of our trek. Whether it be the planting of a tree in the ground or the planting of our children in the garden of the Lord. Whether it be the construction of a house made of wood and stone or the building of God's heavenly kingdom through the preaching of the gospel. Whether it be a secular business enterprise or the spiritual enterprise of building a Christian home or family or marriage. "All depends on our possessing God's abundant grace and blessing." Labors carried on in His name are never in vain! Knowing this, we may lay our worries aside.

Related Scriptures: Isaiah 55:10-11; Matthew 6:25-34; 1 Corinthians 15:58; Romans 8:31; James 1:17.

Hymns: 425:1; 621; 640.

### **Psalm 128**

**"LORD, grant me the blessing of family happiness."**

#### **A Psalm of Comfort**

Blessed is every one who fears the Lord, Who walks in His ways.  
When you eat the labor of your hands, You shall be happy, and it shall be well with you.  
Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine In the very heart of your house, Your children like olive plants All  
around your table.  
Behold, thus shall the man be blessed Who fears the Lord.  
The Lord bless you out of Zion, And may you see the good of Jerusalem All the days of your life.  
Yes, may you see your children's children. Peace be upon Israel!

In this "song of ascent" the psalmist teaches that a happy home doesn't happen by accident. It's a blessing God graciously bestows on those who are faithful to Him and who, in love for their Lord, strive to "walk in His ways."

Why was this psalm included in the Songs of Ascents collection? Perhaps it was recognized that the Jewish pilgrims (who were just getting established in the land) needed the comfort and admonition which this psalm offers. Did they wish to enjoy the blessing of a happy home in the land of Canaan? Did husbands and wives desire the blessing of marital happiness? Let them not follow the example of their stubborn, unbelieving forefathers who forsook the Lord. Let them remember their God, serve Him faithfully in love, and follow in the way of His commandments. If they did this they would experience the blessing of family joy and happiness.

The Lord continues to bestow this precious blessing on Christian families today. Where godliness is "the crown of the home," where the place of honor is set apart in the heart for Jesus, where He is invited in each day to be the honored Guest, He gladly consents to tarry with His blessing. And there is happiness.

Related Scriptures: Ephesians 5:22-33.

Hymns: 624, 625, 626.

### **Psalm 129**

**"LORD, thank You for saving me from my enemies."**

#### **A Psalm of Thanks**

"Many a time they have afflicted me from my youth," Let Israel now say—  
"Many a time they have afflicted me from my youth; Yet they have not prevailed against me.  
The plowers plowed on my back; They made their furrows long."

The Lord is righteous; He has cut in pieces the cords of the wicked.  
Let all those who hate Zion Be put to shame and turned back.  
Let them be as the grass on the housetops, Which withers before it grows up,  
With which the reaper does not fill his hand, Nor he who binds sheaves, his arms.  
Neither let those who pass by them say, "The blessing of the Lord be upon you; We bless you in the name  
of the Lord!"

This psalm has the same general theme as Psalm 124. In it the author, speaking for the nation of Israel, recalls the many times that he has been afflicted by his enemies from the time of his youth (that is, from the time that the Israelites left the land of Egypt; cf. Hos. 2:15). Examples of such enemies: The Moabites, Ammonites, Philistines, Midianites, and Assyrians. The psalmist also recalls with thankful heart how in each instance the Lord God worked for His people a mighty deliverance.

As the pilgrim bands wended their way to the city of Jerusalem to worship Jehovah they would have had good reason to reflect on these events of the past and to sing this song of thanks. Had the Lord not recently demonstrated His love and faithfulness towards them again by throwing off from them the yoke of Babylon and bringing them back to their homeland? How fitting that they should praise Him for this!

We join the psalmist in praising the Lord. The enemies that oppress God's people today may not be identical to those whom the people of God faced centuries ago. But they still do exist and they are formidable and dangerous. Yet it remains true: Whoever the oppressors of God's people may be, in whatever period of history they rise up, they will be overthrown by the Lord. They can harm us none. We need not fear them.

Related Scriptures: Luke 1:68-79; Luke 12:32; Ephesians 6:10-17; Romans 8:35-39; 1 John 5:4-5.

Hymn: 262:3; 263.

**Psalm 130**  
**"LORD, lift me up from the depths."**  
**A Prayer Psalm**

Out of the depths I have cried to You, O Lord;  
Lord, hear my voice! Let Your ears be attentive To the voice of my supplications.  
If You, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?  
But there is forgiveness with You, That You may be feared.  
I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, And in His word I do hope.  
My soul waits for the Lord More than those who watch for the morning—I say, more than those who watch  
for the morning.  
O Israel, hope in the Lord; For with the Lord there is mercy, And with Him is abundant redemption.  
And He shall redeem Israel From all his iniquities.

This is one of the seven so-called "penitential psalms." (The others are: 6, 32, 38, 51, 106, and 143.) The psalmist bares his soul before the Lord, imploring Him to hear his prayer for forgiveness. He knows that if Jehovah kept a record of his iniquities his situation would be quite hopeless. He would remain in "the woeful deep of sin," separated from his God forever. At the same time he knows that Jehovah—though He is a holy and just God who hates sin and must punish it with death—is also a merciful and gracious God who forgives sin and pardons it for Christ's sake.

Concerning this psalm Leupold says: "The unique feature of (it) over against the others that are in a special way designated as penitential ... is, perhaps, the fact that it centers attention on sin itself, not so much on its results and consequences. No other psalm expresses quite so well what an evil sin itself is. At the same time ... the psalm has a distinct gospel emphasis."<sup>14</sup>

Why was it included in the Songs of Ascents collection? What more appropriate way could the Jewish pilgrims have chosen to prepare themselves for the worship of Jehovah during those three

festivals than by confessing their sins and seeking God's forgiveness? Today we prepare our hearts for the worship of the Lord the same way. At the beginning of the service we join together in making confession of our sins, acknowledging our transgressions in thought, word, and deed, and hearing the good news of our Lord's forgiveness. We know it is through the Lord's mercy alone that we can be lifted up from the depths of our sin and draw near to worship Him, our holy God. Washing our robes and making them white in the blood of the Lamb is important each and every day because we daily sin much. And this is our daily comfort: "*With the LORD there is mercy, and with Him is abundant redemption, and He shall redeem Israel from all his iniquities.*" When the days of our pilgrimage come to an end we shall find the gates of the New Jerusalem flung wide open for us. Praise the Lord!

Related Scriptures: Luke 18:9-14; 1 Timothy 1:15; Hebrews 4:14-16.  
Hymns: 279, 327, 329, 371.

### **Psalm 131**

**"LORD, teach me to be content."**

#### **A Psalm of Instruction**

Lord, my heart is not haughty, Nor my eyes lofty. Neither do I concern myself with great matters, Nor with things too profound for me.

Surely I have calmed and quieted my soul, Like a weaned child with his mother; Like a weaned child is my soul within me.

O Israel, hope in the Lord From this time forth and forever.

In this three-verse psalm, penned by King David, the virtue of Christian contentment is extolled. The illustration of a weaned child (lying quietly on its mother's lap, no longer clamoring for the breast, content with the fact that it has its mother) is used to portray the child of God satisfied in the Lord. The child of God has every reason to be content because he knows that God promises to give him everything he needs. Everything he needs for his earthly life. Everything he needs for spiritual life. Everything he needs for eternal life in the hereafter (cf. Rom. 8:32; 1 Cor. 3:21-22; 2 Cor. 6:10b).

Why did the pilgrims traveling up to Jerusalem need this reminder? The prophets of the Lord had promised great things upon their return to Canaan from Babylon (the restoration of their land and nation and temple). When these promises did not come to fruition immediately they were tempted to become discontented and discouraged. As the returned exiles sang this song on the way to Zion they would have been reminded and encouraged (through the pious example of their forefather David who wrote this psalm) to wait patiently for the fulfillment of God's promises.

Sometimes we, too, are tempted to become discontented and dissatisfied with the Lord's timetable in His dealings with us. When He delays to answer our prayer and we can't understand why...when we're called upon to endure a difficult trial and we can't see the good in it...when things aren't going in our life the way we would like them to...then let us listen to the advice which this psalm offers: "Commend the matter into the hands of the Lord who knows what is best for His people ... and be content." "*O Israel, hope in the Lord, from this time forth and forever.*"

Related Scriptures: Philippians 4:11-13; 1 Timothy 6:6.  
Hymns: 196; 366:7; 518:3; 521.

### **Psalm 132**

**"LORD, establish Your gracious rule in my heart."**

#### **A Prayer Psalm**

Lord, remember David And all his afflictions;

How he swore to the Lord, And vowed to the Mighty God of Jacob:

"Surely I will not go into the chamber of my house, Or go up to the comfort of my bed;

I will not give sleep to my eyes Or slumber to my eyelids,

Until I find a place for the Lord, A dwelling place for the Mighty God of Jacob."

Behold, we heard of it in Ephrathah; We found it in the fields of the woods.  
 Let us go into His tabernacle; Let us worship at His footstool.  
 Arise, O Lord, to Your resting place, You and the ark of Your strength. Let Your priests be clothed with righteousness, And let Your saints shout for joy.  
 For Your servant David's sake, Do not turn away the face of Your Anointed.  
 The Lord has sworn in truth to David; He will not turn from it: "I will set upon your throne the fruit of your body.  
 If your sons will keep My covenant And My testimony which I shall teach them, Their sons also shall sit upon your throne forevermore."  
 For the Lord has chosen Zion; He has desired it for His habitation:  
 "This is My resting place forever; Here I will dwell, for I have desired it.  
 I will abundantly bless her provision; I will satisfy her poor with bread.  
 I will also clothe her priests with salvation, And her saints shall shout aloud for joy.  
 There I will make the horn of David grow; I will prepare a lamp for My Anointed.  
 His enemies I will clothe with shame, But upon Himself His crown shall flourish."

This is the longest of the Songs of Ascents. It is thought to have been composed by Solomon at the time of the temple dedication. (Some believe it was written by David at the time when the ark of the covenant was removed from the house of Abinadab and brought to Jerusalem.) As to subject matter: "It is concerned almost entirely with the temple, which it sets before the faithful from the first conception of it in the mind of David to its final glory when visited by the Redeemer. Verses 1-5 are concerned with the birth of the idea in David's mind; verses 6-10, with its realization under Solomon; while verses 11-18 point to the time when David's true Son would be set upon David's throne, and the Lord himself would suddenly come to his temple, and make the glory of the second house greater than that of the first had ever been."<sup>15</sup>

This psalm is well suited to be a song of ascents. As the pilgrims sang it on their way up to the earthly city of Zion (from which David had ruled over an earthly kingdom and where a temple made with human hands was situated), they would have been reminded of Jehovah's promise to raise up from David's family line a King who would establish a spiritual kingdom...a King who would defeat their enemies and make it possible for them to dwell in a house "not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (2 Cor. 5:1).

As they looked forward in joy-filled faith to the fulfillment of the promise so we may look back and rejoice. The promised ancestor, great David's greater Son, came in the fullness of time. He conquered our spiritual foes through His redemptive work so that we may be His own for time and eternity. Truly, a King most wonderful! Let us serve and worship Him!

Related Scriptures: Psalm 2; Jeremiah 23:5-6, Colossians 1:13-14.

Hymns: 59, 361.

### **Psalm 133**

**"LORD, thank You for the blessing of Christian fellowship."**

#### **A Psalm of Instruction**

Behold, how good and how pleasant it is For brethren to dwell together in unity!  
 It is like the precious oil upon the head, Running down on the beard, The beard of Aaron, Running down on the edge of his garments.  
 It is like the dew of Hermon, Descending upon the mountains of Zion; For there the Lord commanded the blessing—Life forevermore.

In this Song of Ascent the psalmist David extols the blessing of Christian unity and fellowship. He does this through the use of two illustrations: (1) The anointing oil which ran down from Aaron's head onto his beard and the collar of his robe, and (2) the dew which ran down from Mount Hermon onto Mount Zion.

These pictures would have been very meaningful and beautiful for the people of Israel. Anointing with oil, for the Jew, was a symbol of joyful celebration and rich blessing from God. Just as the anointing oil dripped down the high priest Aaron's head onto his beard and robe, so fellowship with God "drips down" and spreads out to His believing people. Dew likewise is a symbol of the blessings God bestows on His people.

"Just as heavy dews refresh and invigorate plant life, so the blessing of unity descends alike on all those that are within the church, and all godly virtues thrive and flourish. Discord disrupts, destroys, and kills all the finer things that could grow under the blessing of true unity."<sup>16</sup>

How appropriate it was for the bands of Jewish pilgrims to sing this song on the way to their religious festivals at Jerusalem. They hailed from many different cities of Palestine. They came from many different walks of life. But the Lord had made them all one in heart and soul. He had joined them to Himself and each other by the bond of a common faith in Him and love for Him, their Savior-God.

Our Lord has bestowed on us the same precious blessing. When He brought us to faith by the power of the Holy Spirit through the gospel, He brought us into fellowship with Himself and united us with all believers—past, present, and future—in a tight-knit spiritual family: The Holy Christian Church. In this Church we are privileged to enjoy all the blessings of His love. He has also blessed us, the members of the Church of the Lutheran Confession, with the blessing of doctrinal unity, so that we may glorify Him with one heart and one mouth, and strive together with one mind for the faith of the gospel. A precious blessing indeed! May the Lord graciously preserve it in our midst!

Related Scriptures: Psalm 23:5; Ephesians 4:1-6; Romans 15:5-6; 1 Corinthians 1:10; Philippians 2:1-2.

Hymns: 231:3; 251; 464; 477:2; 478.

### **Psalm 134**

**"LORD, bless Your pastors and bless Your people."**

#### **A Psalm of Instruction**

Behold, bless the Lord, All you servants of the Lord, Who by night stand in the house of the Lord!  
Lift up your hands in the sanctuary, And bless the Lord.  
The Lord who made heaven and earth Bless you from Zion!

This psalm brings the Songs of Ascents collection to its conclusion. It may be thought of as a closing doxology. The psalm consists of two parts: (1) A call from those outside the temple (the people) to those inside (the priests) to praise and thank the Lord in their name for mercies bestowed on them (vv. 1-2), and (2) a response from those inside the temple who ask God to pour out His blessings on those who have addressed them (v. 3).

This psalm was very suitable for use by the pilgrim-bands. Oftentimes they would arrive at the city of Jerusalem late in the day. After proceeding to the temple gate they would announce their arrival to the priests who were on night-duty and who would be expecting them. They would call on the priests to "bless the Lord" for His grace in conducting them safely to Jerusalem. The priests, in turn, would call on the Lord to bless the Jewish pilgrims through their worship of Him during the upcoming festival.

"Now, this psalm, being placed here at the end of the series, bids us look back and trace, in the psalms that have gone before, the manifold reasons wherefore we should bless the Lord. The first of these psalms, Ps. 120, tells of deliverance from cruel enemies; Ps. 121, of God's continual preservation of his people; Ps. 122, of joy and delight realized in the worship of the Lord; Ps. 123, of waiting continually upon God in times of trouble; Ps. 124, of deliverance from fierce forces; Ps. 125, of experience of God's guardian care; Ps. 126, of the joy of God's salvation; Ps. 127, of the Lord alone being our sure Keeper; Ps. 128, of God's grace and goodness sweetening the home; Ps. 129, of

afflictions many, but of preservation in them all; Ps. 130, of God's blessed uplifting; Ps. 131, of the soul kept in the peace of God; Ps. 132, of the prosperity of the Church; and Ps. 133, of her unity; and now in Ps. 134 there is, as there well may be, the command to bless the Lord. What a long list it is of mercies, and help, and deliverance, and blessings unspeakable! If men will look back along their lives, they too will bless the Lord."<sup>17</sup>

To this we would add, before closing, that we also have wonderful reason to bless the Lord as we look ahead to the *future*. Though our journey as pilgrims in this world of sin has not yet reached its end (there are miles remaining to travel, hills to climb, valleys to pass through, uncharted territory to traverse before we reach our destination), our eventual entrance into the New Jerusalem is assured because of Jesus and His saving work in our behalf. With our faith anchored solidly in Him we may confidently affirm with Paul: "*I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day.*" What a Day it will be! Then we'll experience fullness of joy and pleasures at God's right hand forevermore! Until then may our prayer be:

Jerusalem, thou city fair and high, Would God I were in thee!  
My longing heart fain, fain, to thee would fly, It will not stay with me.  
Far over vale and mountain, Far over field and plain,  
It hastes to seek its Fountain And leave this world of pain.  
O happy day and yet far happier hour, When wilt thou come at last,  
When fearless to my Father's love and pow'r Whose promise standeth fast,  
My soul I gladly render? For surely will His hand  
Lead her with guidance tender To heav'n, her fatherland.  
And when within that lovely Paradise At last I safely dwell,  
What songs of bliss shall from my lips arise, What joy my tongue shall tell,  
While all the saints are singing Hosannas o'er and o'er,  
Pure hallelujahs ringing Around me evermore!<sup>18</sup> Amen.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Halley's Pocket Bible Handbook, 226.

<sup>2</sup> The five-fold division is: Book I (1-41); Book II (42-72); Book III (73-89); Book IV (90-106); Book V (107-150).

<sup>3</sup> Of the 150 psalms, 116 have headings. Among the types of information provided by these headings are: The name of the author of the psalm (or the person for whom it was written), the historical circumstance that led to its writing, the intended liturgical use of the psalm, and musical directions for its use.

<sup>4</sup> The heading written over one of the psalms in this group (Ps. 121) differs slightly from the form which it has in all the others in that it reads *שיר למעלות* ("a song for goings up"), instead of *המעלות שיר* ("a song of goings up"). The difference in meaning of the two phrases does not appear to be significant.

<sup>5</sup> See his lexicon, 495.

<sup>6</sup> Leupold, Exposition of Psalms, 862.

<sup>7</sup> Pulpit Commentary, Psalms, Vol. III, 178.

<sup>8</sup> People's Bible, Psalms, Vol. 2, 211f.

<sup>9</sup> See his lexicon, 495.

<sup>10</sup> People's Bible, Psalms, Vol. 2, 213.

<sup>11</sup> The "psalm types" listed in this paper are based on Martin Luther's five-fold classification of the psalms: prophecy, instruction, comfort, prayer, and thanks.

<sup>12</sup> Leupold, 873.

- <sup>13</sup> Leupold, 885.  
<sup>14</sup> Leupold, 902.  
<sup>15</sup> Pulpit Commentary, 258.  
<sup>16</sup> Leupold, 920.  
<sup>17</sup> Pulpit Commentary, 276.  
<sup>18</sup> Hymn 619, stanzas 1,2,7.

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#### From Halley's Pocket Bible Handbook, 240.

**Psalms 120-134.** These are called songs of "Degrees," or "Ascents," or "Pilgrim Songs." They were designed for vocal music, and are commonly thought to have been sung by pilgrims on the road to the Feasts at Jerusalem; or, as they went up the 15 steps to the Men's Court. Or, "Ascents" may mean the "elevated voice in which they were sung"; or, "the climacteric style of thought."

**Psalm 120.** A Prayer for Protection by one who lived among Deceitful and Treacherous people far away from Zion.

**Psalm 121.** This may have been the hymn the pilgrims sang as they first caught sight of the mountains surrounding Jerusalem.

**Psalm 122.** This may have been the hymn the pilgrims sang as they neared the Temple gate within the city walls.

**Psalm 123.** And this, within the Temple, as the pilgrims lifted their eyes to God in prayer for His mercy.

**Psalm 124.** One of the Temple hymns of thanksgiving and praise for repeated national deliverances in times of fearful danger.

**Psalm 125.** A Hymn of Trust. As the mountains are round about Jerusalem, so God is round about His people forevermore.

**Psalm 126.** A Song of Thanksgiving for Return from Captivity. Too good to be true, it seems as if they were dreaming.

**Psalm 127.** Seems like a combination of two poems: Temple-building and Family-building. One of Solomon's Psalms, the other being 72.

**Psalm 128.** A Marriage-Song. A continuation of the last half of Psalm 127. Godly families are the basis of the nation's welfare.

**Psalm 129.** Israel's Prayer for the Overthrow of her Enemies, who, from her youth up, generation after generation, had afflicted her.

**Psalm 130.** The Cry of a Soul Overwhelmed with his consciousness of sin. One of the Penitential Psalms, see on Psalm 32.

**Psalm 131.** A Psalm of Humble Childlike Trust in God, I have stilled and quited my soul in God,

as a child with his mother.

**Psalm 132.** A Poetic Reiteration of God's Unbreakable Promise to David of an Eternal Inheritor of his Throne. See on Psalm 2.

**Psalms 133, 134.** A Psalm of Brotherly Love, and Life Forevermore. And a Psalm of the Temple-Night-Watchers, and their Greetings.

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From Smith's Bible Dictionary, 458.

Psalms	After what Scripture	Probable occasion when each was composed.	B.C.	
120-122	1 Chr. 28:21	Inserted towards the end of David's life	1015	
123	Dan. 7:28	During the Babylonish captivity		539
124	1 Chr. 28:21	Inserted towards the end of David's life	1015	
125	Ezr. 3:7	On the return from the captivity		536
126	Ezr. 1:4	On the decree of Cyrus		536
127, 128	Ezr. 3:7	On the return from the captivity		536
129	Ezr. 4:24	On the opposition of the Samaritans	535	
130	Dan. 7:28	During the Babylonish captivity		539
131	1 Chr. 28:21	Inserted towards the end of David's life	1015	
132	1 Chr. 15:14	On the second removal of the ark		1051
133	1 Chr. 28:21	Inserted towards the end of David's life	1015	
134	Ezr. 3:7	On the return from the captivity		536

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### **When is a Catechumen Ready for Confirmation?\***

Arthur E. Schulz

\* Presented to the Great Lakes Pastoral Conference of the CLC, September 30-October 1, 1998.

Promises! Promises! The world is full of promises! Whenever we have an election year in the USA, we grow accustomed to hearing many promises. At the same time, we seem to develop the attitude that "promises are made to be broken." We don't take election-year promises too seriously, because they are likely to be forgotten or compromised once the individual has been elected to office.

Many promises are made before the marriage altar. Not least are the words: "I ... in the presence of God and these witnesses, take you ... to be my wife/husband. I **promise** to be faithful to you as long as we both shall live." These words are spoken in all sincerity and love. And yet which pastor and congregation has not had to deal with heart-rending situations where this promise was broken through the influence of the devil, the unbelieving world, and our own sinful flesh.

On confirmation day, the catechumens make some sacred promises. According to the *Lutheran Agenda*, the catechumen says that he/she renounces the devil and all his works and all his ways (as was originally promised through their parents or sponsors at the time of baptism). They also confess their faith in the words of the Apostolic Creed, and agree that the teachings of the Lutheran church are based on the inspired Word of God. They then are asked: "Do you also, as a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, intend to continue steadfast in the confession of this Church, and suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it?" To which comes the answer: "I do so intend, with the help of God." Then comes the last question: "Finally, do you intend faithfully to conform all your life to the rule of the divine Word, to be diligent in the use of the Means of Grace, to walk as it becometh the gospel of Christ, and in faith, word, and deed to remain true to the Triune God, even unto death?" The **promise** is given: "I do so intend, by the grace of God." Thereupon the pastor says: "Upon this your voluntary profession and **promise**, I invite and welcome you, as a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and of this congregation, to partake of the Lord's Supper and to participate with us

in all the rights and privileges of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.”

As pastors, I’m sure that with each and every catechumen, it is our hope and prayer that these promises are made with the full intention of keeping them. But in these days when promises of all kinds are easily made, and just as easily broken, we owe it to our young people, to their parents, and to our congregations, to try to do more both in the years before and after confirmation day. After all, we aren’t interested merely in trying to prepare people to be hypocrites, but are trying to help them be and remain genuine children of God through the working of the Holy Spirit. So, when are young people ready to make their confirmation promises?

**Instruction for Confirmation.** The promises made on confirmation day are preceded by a period of instruction. Here customs may vary, depending on whether there is a Christian Day School or not, as well as other considerations. It has never been my privilege to serve a congregation with a Christian Day School, so I can only share my experience working with students who attend public schools.

Confirmation instruction should include both a study of Luther’s *Small Catechism*, and a review of Bible history. The ideal would be to meet at some mutually agreeable time when sufficient time can be spent in both areas. The purpose of study in the *Small Catechism* is to learn the basic teachings of the Bible, to become familiar with many Bible passages, and thereby enable the Holy Spirit to convince the students of the wonderful truths of the Christian faith. Bible history is studied in order to acquaint students with the rich history of God’s people in both Old and New Testament times, and to see how the teachings of the Bible have been put into practice in the **lives** of God’s people down through the centuries. And this, after all, is our goal as pastors. We don’t want the children to have merely a “head knowledge” of the teachings of God’s Word, but under the blessing of the Holy Spirit that they may be convinced in their **hearts** that these are eternal truths given to us from heaven, upon which we can base our faith and our hope for a blessed hereafter in heaven.

Permit me to review briefly what our emphasis is as we go through the instruction with our children. In his *Explanation of Luther’s Small Catechism*, Prof. Michael Sydow begins his first section on “The Bible” with the question: “What is the most important things we can learn?” Citing John 17:3, he answers: “The most important thing we can learn is that God has sent His Son Jesus to be our Savior.” Having introduced the catechumens to the Bible, he directs them to the two main doctrines of the Bible: law and gospel. From the very beginning we want catechumens to know the differences between law and gospel, and to know why this is so important.

Then follows a detailed study of the **law**. The **first table** of the law outlines how God wants us to show our love for Him in our thoughts (First Commandment), in our words (Second commandment), and in our deeds (Third Commandment). God doesn’t want us to vaguely acknowledge Him merely as a “Supreme Being” or “the Man upstairs,” or as “the Grand Architect of the Universe.” Our love for Him is to be expressed, not in ways **we** choose to invent, but according to **His** will. — The **second table** of the law outlines how God wants us to show love to our neighbor. The Fourth Commandment shows what our attitude is to be toward those who **represent** God in our lives on earth. God has His representatives in the home (parents), in the church (pastors, teachers, elders, etc.), in government (president, governor, police, etc.), and at the place where we work. Just as children are to honor those who represent God, so also parents, pastors, etc., should remember that they **are** God’s representatives. As such, they will want to work together so as to give the **same** message to children. Great spiritual harm will result when pastors teach one message to children, but parents teach a different message by their word and example. Those who represent God should proclaim one and the same message. That is why God has given us His Word in writing, so that we may know what that message is to be.

God's representatives should teach a united message in connection with the Fifth Commandment, where we learn that it is wrong to hurt or harm, or to end another person's life. This includes such things as abortion and mercy death – transgressions which are constantly before us in the news, and which in today's society are commonly presented as lawful and acceptable activities.

How very important it is that children have a clear understanding of God's will in the Sixth Commandment. The devil has succeeded in convincing many people that this commandment is unnecessary and an infringement on their rights. Children should learn that God wants to protect marriage and that He wants His children, married or unmarried, to live according to His will. When people choose to go their own way rather than God's way, the inevitable result is what we see around us: the AIDS epidemic, the plague of teenage pregnancies, the high divorce rate, the abundance of single parents, and the burden on taxpayers to provide care for everyone involved and to find a cure for resultant diseases. God's blessing rests on those who live according to His will.

In the Seventh Commandment God protects our and our neighbor's property. The Eighth Commandment protects our and our neighbor's good name and reputation. The Ninth and Tenth Commandments remind us that we can sin against God's will, not only by our words and deeds, but also in our thoughts. Children should realize that God can see even what we are thinking, and therefore we want to think according to His will. Paul wrote to the Christians at Philippi: "Let this **mind** be in you which was also in Christ Jesus" (2:5). The NET translates: "Have the same **attitude** that Christ Jesus had." Beck's American Translation phrases it: "Think just as Christ Jesus thought."

Our study of the *Small Catechism* then takes us to the **Apostolic Creed**, which summarizes what we as Christians believe. The creed is gospel, since it doesn't tell us anything **we** are to do, but what **God** has done for us. The words "I believe" enable us to speak about **faith**, and why this is so important. Faith leads us to believe what Scripture says about God the **Father**, that He is the Creator and Preserver of all things. The differences between the Biblical account of creation and the theories of evolution are emphasized. Man isn't just another animal, but has an immortal soul. The Second Article leads us to a detailed study of the Person and work of our only **Savior** Jesus Christ. As the God-man, He alone was able to rescue us from the curse and punishment of sin, and He did so.

The Third Article shows who the **Holy Spirit** is, and the importance of His work in bringing us to saving faith through the Means of Grace, and keeping us in the true faith through those same means. With all the mistaken notions floating around as to how people can supposedly earn a place in heaven for themselves, it is vitally important that our children not only know the facts revealed in Scripture about the three Persons of the Triune God, but that they can say from their hearts that this is what they really believe. All true believers in Jesus, and only such believers, constitute the holy Christian church. We are not to imagine that a mere outward connection with some visible church is sufficient for salvation. God can see when saving faith is in the heart. Christians want their spiritual life to be properly nourished with the food God provides. This also affects our relationship to false-teaching visible organizations.

Next comes a study of the **Sacraments**. Children should have a right understanding of the blessings, power, and meaning of **Baptism**. They should understand that in baptism God actually **gives** something to us, and that it isn't merely a symbolic ritual. Christians want to treasure their baptism all their lives.

The **Office of the Keys** helps us to understand that **forgiveness** is the key which opens the kingdom of heaven to people. How very important it is to know that unbelief, impenitence, locks the door of heaven to people. Christians don't want pride, self-esteem, love of pet sins, or anything else to hinder us from having repentant hearts in the sight of God and man. Children also learn the importance and necessity for having church discipline and what excommunication is all about and what its purpose is. Our children learn the importance of confessing our sins and receiving absolution,

and thereby better understand what our liturgical service is all about in Sunday services.

The **Sacrament of the Altar** is studied in detail. Children learn that by faith we receive not only bread and wine in the sacrament, but also what Jesus placed into it, namely, His body and blood. We are reminded that we sin continually, and therefore are in continual need of the personal assurance of forgiveness that is offered in the sacrament. Since Jesus invites us to partake of the sacrament “often,” a Christian responds by **wanting** to receive it often. We remind the children of Luther’s words in his preface to the *Small Catechism*, that “if a person does not seek nor desire the Lord’s Supper at least some four times a year, it is to be feared that he despises the Sacrament and is not a Christian, just as he is not a Christian who refuses to believe or to hear the gospel.” We surely don’t want to make a **law** about communion attendance, as the Pope does, but we heartily desire that people will treasure their attendance at the Lord’s Table as a vitally important **fruit** of saving faith.

Prof. Sydow closes his explanation of the *Small Catechism* with a study of the **Lord’s Prayer**. The prevailing spirit in the world is that prayer is a waste of time and a useless endeavor. Christians, too, can easily be infected by that spirit. So we need to remind ourselves constantly of the importance of prayer. The seven petitions help us to understand what we should pray for. It is much more important to pray for spiritual blessings than for physical, earthly blessings. We seek to instill a prayerful spirit in our children. Knowing that their future lives will surely bring times of affliction and trials and sickness and sorrow, how very important it is that they know how to communicate with Almighty God, Who alone is able to hear and answer their prayers.

#### **What About Confirmation?**

We do well to remember that while the **teaching** of God’s Word to our children is commanded by God, the rite of confirmation is not commanded, or even spoken of, in the Bible. Jesus tells us to “search the Scriptures” (John 5:39). God inspired Moses to tell the people of Israel: “These words which I command you today shall be in your heart; you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up” (Deut. 6:6-7). The Apostle Paul wrote: “You, fathers, do not make your children angry, but bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4 [NET]). The teaching of God’s Word is not something which God leaves optional for Christian parents. But confirmation itself is a custom of the church. At confirmation a person “confirms” his/her baptismal vow (usually spoken by parents or sponsors), by making his/her own personal confession of faith. The Bible has many examples of people who made such personal confessions of faith: the centurion (Luke 7:1-10); the woman of Canaan (Matt. 15:21-28); and Peter (John 6:68-69 and 21:5-17). Paul wrote: “If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus, and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom. 10:9).

Here, then is the goal which Christian parents, teachers, and pastors have in common. We want our children to **believe** in the Lord Jesus in their hearts and to **confess** that faith with their mouths. It is that simple faith in the hearts of children of which Jesus spoke to His grown disciples: “If you do not change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:3). We who are God’s representatives in home, school, and church can never have a higher personal goal that to preserve a childlike faith which simply clings to God and His Word.

Living as we do in a world which wants to do as it pleases, regardless of what God may say about it in His Word, we also remember what the psalmist Asaph wrote in Psalm 78:1-7: “My people, listen to my instruction, pay attention to what I say. I will open my mouth with a parable, and speak of the ancient mysteries that we have heard and known, and our fathers told us; which were not hidden from their children, but told to the next generation: about the Lord’s wonderful deeds, His power, and the marvelous things He did ... How He ordered our fathers to teach their children, so a coming generation would know it; and children yet to be born might grow up and tell their children to put their trust in God, and not forget the things God did. That they might do what He ordered, and not be

stubborn and rebellious like their fathers, whose hearts didn't stand firm, whose spirits were unfaithful to God."

How achieve this goal? The more I think about it, I believe that it is essential for God's representatives in the home, school, and church to make sure they are working in close harmony with each other. They do well to sit down together and agree on how they can better work together for the spiritual well-being and salvation of their children. Quality time needs to be given to instruction in preparation for confirmation. Everyone involved needs to agree that we are not merely trying to cram some facts into the heads of our children. Confirmation instruction should not be looked on as a necessary burden that must be endured in order finally to receive a confirmation certificate. Rather, it should be looked on as instruction in a **way of life** which is entirely different from what they see in the world about them. There is nothing in the catechism that is not of great practical value in our faith-life as children of God.

This working together among God's representatives should be an on-going thing. Parents do well to ask the pastor/teacher how their child is doing, and if there is some way in which they can be of more help at home. It goes without saying that all who represent God in the lives of the children will wish to work together in setting a God-pleasing example. Christian parents want their children to see from their own example how they can show love to God (first table of the law), and how to show love to their neighbor (second table of the law). By working together and by setting a good example before the eyes and ears of our children, God's representatives fulfill the duties given us by our heavenly Father.

A pastor also does well to work closely with each individual in his class. Perhaps he can offer suggestions on how to improve study habits, or how to concentrate better in memory work. Individuals sometimes need encouragement on how to listen with more benefit during worship services. Children in worship services should learn to listen to the sermon, follow along with the liturgy, and join in singing the hymns, and not merely occupy their time with coloring pictures or playing games. Perhaps having catechumens take notes of each sermon to bring to the next class would be beneficial in helping them to concentrate on what is being said.

When the course of instruction is nearing its end, the pastor might do well to get together again with the parents of each child, and review the questions which will be asked at the time of confirmation. The pastor will especially want to work through those questions with each catechumen, to make sure he/she understands them. It is much to be desired that catechumens think these things through well ahead of time. We don't want them to repeat the answers merely because this is what they are supposed to say. Rather, they should make these promises because they are convinced that this is what is right and pleasing to God. On confirmation day we want them to promise, from their hearts, that they will be faithful to their Savior-God even unto death. When all of God's representatives have worked together by word and example, this, by the grace of God, is the way it will turn out (Prov. 22:6).

But what about situations where God's representatives do not faithfully represent God in harmony with each other? Suppose that parents do not set a good example by their church attendance and other areas of a Christian life. Suppose the children are left on their own to decide if they wish to continue in the church or not. Here the pastor recognizes that there are already two strikes against the child remaining faithful to the Savior. If it becomes a choice between following the instruction received from the pastor and the example set by the parents, the chances are good that the child will take the easy way out and follow the example of the parents.

Here the pastor will want to discuss this with the parents and with the individual child. If the child wishes to continue as a faithful member of the church, then that child can answer the confirmation questions honestly and sincerely in the affirmative. If, however, the child gives every

indication of having reached his/her goal by receiving a confirmation certificate, but doesn't intend to continue active participation in worship services or church-related activities, I would be very reluctant to consider that child ready for confirmation. As stated earlier, we are not in the business of encouraging people to make hypocritical promises in answer to the questions, for hypocrites will have no place in the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 23:13).

May God grant all of us who are God's representatives here on earth the will to work together for our own sakes and for the spiritual well-being of our children. May He help us to look, not at the unbelieving world about us for our example, but to the Word of God, which will never pass away. May we ever plead with our people to take their Christianity seriously and not play games with God and His Word. After all, the salvation of blood-bought souls is at stake. The time of our earthly pilgrimage is so very short when compared with the vast eternity which lies ahead. Let us not waste the little time our Lord gives us now and have regrets for all eternity. May God bless our children in their study of God's Word and grant them (and us) the faith which proves itself by a life dedicated to the glory of God.

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### **A Review of Carl Manthey-Zorn's Hermeneutical Principles\***

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Perhaps some of our readers have the devotional book written by Carl Manthey-Zorn entitled *Manna*. It was written originally in German in 1898 and a second edition appeared in 1906. In 1988 John F. Sullivan translated it into English and in 1994 a 681-page devotional book was published.

Who was Carl Manthey-Zorn? He was born on March 18, 1846, in Sterup, Schleswig, a duchy belonging to Denmark at the time. He graduated from a school of the Leipzig Mission Society and was sent to India where he served as a missionary from 1871-1876. In 1876 he disassociated himself from the missionary society for doctrinal reasons and accepted a call into the Missouri Synod. He served as pastor in Sheboygan, WI, 1876-1881 and in Cleveland, OH, 1881-1911, when he retired. He received a D.D. degree from Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. He wrote many books, some, popular commentaries on books of the Bible; others, on doctrine and church practice. He died on July 12, 1928.

Hermeneutics is the study of those principles which guide a Bible reader or interpreter in determining what the intended meaning of a word or passage is. According to Louis Berkhof, author of *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, Plato was the first to employ the word hermeneutics as a technical term. Berkhof defines hermeneutics as "the science that teaches us the principles, laws, and methods of interpretation."

The Holy Spirit creates the presuppositions that determine our hermeneutical principles. Some of these presuppositions and the Bible passages to support them are:

- 1) ALL of the Bible is the verbally inspired Word of God.
- 2) The Scriptures were written by men as the Holy Spirit moved them.
- 3) All Scripture centers in Christ.

#### **Proof Passages:**

2 Timothy 3:16 –All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.

2 Peter 1:21 –For prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.

Hebrews 1:1 –God, who at various times and in different ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets.

Matthew 1:22 –Now all of this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet,...

1 Corinthians 2:13 –These things we also speak, not in words which man's wisdom teaches but which

the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual.

1 Thessalonians 2:13 –For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe.

John 5:39 –You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me.

Luke 24:27 –And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.

Acts 3:18, 24 –But those things which God foretold by the mouth of all His prophets, that the Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled...Yes, and all the prophets, from Samuel and those who follow, as many as have spoken, have also foretold these days.

Acts 10:42-43 –And He commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that it is He who was ordained by God to be Judge of the living and the dead. To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins.

1 Peter 1:10-12 –Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace that would come to you, searching what, or what manner of time, the Spirit of Christ who was in them was indicating when He testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. To them it was revealed that, not to themselves, but to us they were ministering the things which now have been revealed to you through those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven--things which angels desire to look into.

1 Corinthians 2:2 –For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

Ephesians 2:20 –Having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone.

Some of the general rules of Hermeneutics that have been handed down to us from the Reformation are:

- 1) We derive God's intended meaning from the words of the text.
- 2) There is only one simple intended sense.
- 3) Scripture interprets Scripture

David Kuske in his book, *Biblical Interpretation: The Only Right Way*, lists six principles of Biblical Interpretation

- 1) The only books that are God's Word are the Canonical books of the Bible.
- 2) The only world view of Scripture is the supernatural.
- 3) The only text that is determinative is the original.
- 4) The only literary criticism to be done is the external kind--the Historical Setting.
- 5) The only meaning of the words is the simple, plain meaning--the Grammatical Setting.
- 6) The only safe and true interpreter of Scripture is Scripture itself--the Scriptural Setting.

What hermeneutical principles did Carl Manthey-Zorn hold to? A sheet of paper listing the 22 basic hermeneutical principles that controlled Zorn's exegesis was found as an insert in his devotional book *Manna*. I assume it was written by John F. Sullivan, who translated his book. Let us look at these 22 principles.

1. *The Bible must be interpreted according to its own claims that it is the inspired Word of God in all its parts.*

Scripture teaches that God gave us His Word by the miracle of inspiration. Though written by men, Scripture has no human failings such as unclarity or error because God the Holy Spirit guided the men in their writing. He not only directed the general content of what they were to write, but He also guided them in the very words they used to write. This supernatural act of God is clearly taught in many passages throughout Scripture. Many of them are quoted in this paper. There are also numerous passages that simply say that God was speaking when the Old Testament prophet or the New Testament apostle said or wrote something: Matthew 2:14-15--"When he arose, he took the young Child and His mother by night and departed for Egypt, and was there until the death of Herod, that it

might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, 'Out of Egypt I called My Son.'" "

Luke records how Peter took it for granted that it was really God who spoke through all of the Old Testament prophets: Acts 3:20-21—"And that He may send Jesus Christ, who was preached to you before, whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began."

Sullivan adds this note under point 1: "In his writings Zorn makes every effort to impress the reader with the fact that only the Word of God established doctrine."

2. *Only the Bible is the true source for instruction for faith and life.*

This principle is found in our congregation's and synod's constitutions. "We accept without reservation the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the verbally inspired Word of God and therefore as the sole and only infallible rule of doctrine and life."

3. *The Bible canon is a unit as a whole and in all of its parts and therefore does not contradict itself.*

Jesus states, "The Scripture cannot be broken" and "Your word is truth." We read in Martin Luther's *Small Catechism*, Sydow edition, Question 10: "What does the Bible say about itself? Answer: a. The Bible is true and tells the truth. It does not contain any errors on any subject of which it speaks—even when it mentions matters of geography, science and history."

Sullivan adds, "Like Luther, Zorn believed that God does not lie or deceive."

4. *Since the Bible is God's Word in human language, it must be interpreted according to its human side. This does not mean that the historical method may be employed to question truths normally contrary to human experience, as miracles or prophecies.*

For many Christians, this principle is an obvious one. Before the 1800s almost every Christian would subscribe to this. Unfortunately, today many interpret the Bible according to its human side and question or outright deny the supernatural in the Bible. The historical-critical method is the most commonly accepted form of Biblical interpretation among liberal theologians today, maybe in all of Christianity today. Miracles are denied by some, explained away by others, and called unimportant by still others. The historical accounts of God's direction of events in history to carry out His saving plan are either openly denied or questioned.

5. *The interpretation is never an end in itself, but the purpose is the glorification of God.*

John writes, "But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name." Paul writes, "And that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus."

The interpretation of Scripture leads one to know his sins and also see and believe in Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. This glorifies the God of our salvation who has revealed to us our lost condition and also what He has done to save us from our deserved eternal death.

6. *The true interpreter of the Bible is a Christian who possesses the gifts of the Holy Spirit.*

"Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. These things we also speak, not in words which man's wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2:12-14).

Those applying the principles of Hermeneutics themselves are led by the Holy Spirit. If not, then the Scripture's soteriological meaning cannot be understood and believed.

7. *Biblical hermeneutics presupposes that God's Word is found in the original Biblical languages; in the Hebrew and Aramaic for the Old Testament, and Greek for the New Testament.*

The Old Testament Hebrew text was preserved through the Babylonian captivity and came down

to us through the Masoretes. The New Testament Greek text we have today is a result of many years of textual critical work with the thousands of manuscripts extant. Sullivan notes, “Zorn believed that Luther’s translation in the German Bible of 1534 and later revised, contained in general the reliable original text.

8. *In determining the words of Holy Writ, the author used the word in its common meaning (usus loquendi), until it is obvious that the Biblical writer is employing it in a different manner.*

Berkhof writes, “In the study of the words in their connection, the interpreter should proceed on the following principles: 1. THE LANGUAGE OF SCRIPTURE SHOULD BE INTERPRETED ACCORDING TO ITS GRAMMATICAL IMPORT; AND THE SENSE OF ANY EXPRESSION, PROPOSITION, OR DECLARATION, IS TO BE DETERMINED BY THE WORDS EMPLOYED (Muenscher, *Manual of Biblical Interpretation*, 107). In the last analysis, our theology finds its solid foundation only in the grammatical sense of Scripture. Theological knowledge will be faulty in proportion to its deviation from the plain meaning of the Bible. Though this canon is perfectly obvious, it is repeatedly violated by those who bring their preconceived ideas to bear upon the interpretation of the Bible. By means of forced exegesis, they attempt to make the sense of Scripture square with their pet theories or opinions. Rationalists act in defiance of it, when they resolve the story of the fall into a myth; and Millenarians, when they find in I Thess. 4:16 proof for a two-fold resurrection. The interpreter should carefully guard against this mistake, and conscientiously abide by the plain meaning of the words.”

The inspired words of Scripture must be understood only according to the one obvious sense that they convey in common usage. Otherwise what God wants to communicate to us through these words is not what He wants to say, but what we decide we want to hear Him say to us.

9. *No interpretation is correct, that is not according to grammar and syntax of the language in which it was written.*

Syntax is the study of the connection and relation of words as they are arranged grammatically. This is just as important as the study of individual word meanings. How words are arranged in groupings also contributes to what God wants to communicate to us through His inspired Word. Kuske writes, “...in speaking of syntax... we are looking at a given grouping of words according to considerations such as these:

1. The *kind of words* they are: nouns, verbs, participles, prepositions, adverbs, adjectives, pronouns, particles, conjunctions, interjections
2. The *forms* they take: verbs have tense, voice, mood, person and number; nouns and adjectives (in Greek) have case, number and gender
3. The *order in which they occur*: genitives are usually right after the noun they modify; the position at the beginning or end of the sentence can be used for emphasis; unusual word order can express emphasis
4. The *way groupings of words are coordinated or subordinated* within a sentence, from sentence to sentence, from paragraph to paragraph, and even from one larger section to another.”

10. *The interpretation of every word and passage of Scriptures must be in agreement with the context.*

The context, both immediate and remote, affects how a writer intended a word or phrase to be understood. No passage of Scripture can be plucked out of its immediate context and be made to mean something other than what it means in that setting. The wider context of a passage might be the chapter or several chapters, the book or letter, the Old or New Testament, or the whole Bible. God cannot contradict Himself and thus become a liar. We must remember that the chapter and verse designations are not inspired and sometimes we must read large sections well before and well into the next chapter for the context. Chapter divisions were made by Stephen Langton in AD 1228. Robert Stephanus did verse divisions in the New Testament in AD 1551.

11. *Every interpretation of Scripture must be historically correct, that is, the Bible must be understood as a historical book, and be interpreted according to its historical circumstances both of the Bible*

*itself and the world in which it is written.*

We use the term historical-grammatical to describe our approach to the study of Scripture. On this matter Kuske writes, “As His plan of salvation unfolded through the Old Testament into the New, God chose human writers to write the Bible. He inspired them to record what He had done. He also guided them to explain the significance of these events for fallen mankind. Although the importance of this verbally inspired and inerrant record is timeless, God chose to have the writers express themselves in ways that make it necessary for us to take into account the historical setting of the Bible. Three aspects that require special attention on the interpreter’s part are:

1. The writers spoke the language of the particular time and place in which they lived.
2. They wrote about concrete life situations that were, for the most part, either their own experiences or the experiences of those to whom or about whom they wrote.
3. What they wrote reflects the particular stage that God’s plan of salvation had reached at the time they were writing.”

Berkhof lists 4 basic assumptions for historical interpretation:

- a. The Word of God originated in a historical way, and therefore, can be understood only in light of history.
- b. A word is never fully understood until it is apprehended as a living word, i.e., as it originated in the soul of the author.
- c. It is impossible to understand an author and to interpret his words correctly unless he is seen against the proper historical background.
- d. The place, the time, the circumstances and the prevailing view of the world and of life in general, will naturally color the writings that are produced under those conditions of time, place and circumstances.

The study of the external, historical setting and circumstances, called Isagogics, is very important because this is information that God Himself supplies about His Word as part of the inspired record. We need to consider who the author is, when he wrote, to whom he wrote, why he wrote, etc.

12. *The Bible must be interpreted with the assumption that the author had only one intended sense in mind when he wrote the given word or passage. (Sensus literalis unus est.)*

This refutes the allegorical: there are at least two and perhaps three or four intended meanings for each scriptural assertion.

13. *The New Testament interpretation of an Old Testament passage quoted in the New Testament is definitive for the original intended sense of the Old Testament word or passage.*

Luther states, “The Old is in the New revealed; the New is in the Old concealed.” The New Testament writers quote the Old Testament for several reasons. Some cite the Old Testament to show how an Old Testament prophecy was fulfilled. Matthew does this very often in his gospel written to the Jewish people. He introduces these sections with the words, “that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet.”

Sometimes the New Testament writers used Old Testament quotes as proof passages. In Romans 3:10-19, Paul quotes several passages from the Psalms to prove the point he has made in chapters 1 and 2 that “both Jews and Greeks...they are all under sin.”

Quite a few Old Testament quotations are illustrative. In Romans 4:6 Paul quotes David’s words from Psalm 32 as an example of the fact that God credits righteousness apart from works. In 1 Corinthians 10:7 Paul cites Exodus 32:6 as an illustration of the kind of evil he was warning them about. The Bronze Serpent on the pole is an illustrative type of Jesus raised up on the cross (John 3:14-15).

14. *Scripture interprets Scripture. Scripture radiates its own light.*

John 10:35 “... the Scripture cannot be broken.” No meaning may be derived from any passage of Scripture which denies another passage of Scripture. Our God is not a God of confusion; He is not contradictory. The apparent contradictions that appear in Scripture are because of our inability to understand the full counsel of God. Kuske writes, “What set Luther apart from other interpreters was

his insistence that the only way an interpreter can be sure his interpretation is the correct one is if he lets Scripture itself determine for him what any given passage means. This does not happen by some kind of immediate illumination from God, but from the careful study of Scripture in which reason plays its proper role as servant, not master. In Luther's approach, besides considering the historical and grammatical settings, a third setting was all-important, namely, the scriptural setting.

"Scripture must interpret Scripture, Luther insisted. The meaning of a given passage is determined only 1) by comparing what it says with all the other passages of Scripture which address the same subject in the same or similar words; and then 2) by letting what God said in all those other passages explain what God means by the words in the passage under study. This is the only proper way to interpret a passage of Scripture because it is only in this way that God Himself becomes the arbiter of what He means by those words."

15. *All formulations of Christian doctrine must agree with the analogy of faith and must never contradict the analogy of faith.*

We are to use clear passages to explain unclear passages that speak of the same subject. Franz Pieper writes in his *Christian Dogmatics*, "Scripture must certainly be interpreted 'according to the analogy of faith.' But this term is used in a twofold, contradictory sense, with totally different results. Rightly used, it serves the proper interpretation of Scripture. Wrongly used, it serves utterly to pervert Scripture. Luther and the old theologians, who with him took the right course, understand by analogy of faith the clear Scripture passages that require no interpretation, but are lucid in themselves...And Luther reminds us, 'Therefore you are to know that Scripture without any gloss is the sun and the whole light, from which all teachers receive their light; they do not shed light on the Scriptures.' He teaches that both the instructing and the refuting of error must be done 'with clear passages, as with bared and drawn sword, without any glosses or commentaries.' 'The holy fathers,' Luther says, 'explained Scripture by taking the clear, lucid passages and with them shed light on obscure and doubtful passages.' These 'clear, lucid' passages are, of course, to be found in those places in Scripture which deal with a doctrine *ex professo*, in the so-called *sedes doctrinae*... Diametrically opposed to this view is the false conception of 'faith' or the 'analogy of faith,' held by all those who do not permit the 'clear, lucid passages of Scripture,' to constitute the rule, or analogy, of faith, but substitute for it a 'faith' which, with complete disregard of the clear and lucid passages, they have constructed out of their own notions. This 'faith' is to be the light with which to elucidate the clear passages of Scripture, which need no elucidation whatever!"

16. *All Biblical interpretation must have Christ as its center, teach Christ, and glorify Him as Lord and Savior.*

The Scriptures constitute a unit. Salvation is the same in all its parts. The Old and New Testament point to the same Savior, Jesus Christ. All who believe in Him alone, shall be saved, whether living in Old Testament time or New Testament.

17. *Any interpretation which violates the doctrine of justification by faith is erroneous and must be rejected.*

This is the fundamental teaching of Christianity. "Man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law" (Rom. 3:28).

18. *In the interpretation of figurative language the interpreter seeks the point of comparison and does not go beyond it.*

The wrong interpretation of figurative language is one area that has brought about many false teachings over the years. Millennialists, for example, in their literal interpretation of various figurative Bible portions of Old Testament prophecies and of Revelation have come up with false teachings concerning a literal 1,000 year rule of Christ on earth, a literal marking of 666 on the foreheads of unbelievers, a literal bloody battle between believers and unbelievers, etc.

How does the interpreter decide whether a passage is literal or figurative? (1) Either the writer must indicate in direct words that he is using a figure of speech; or (2) the context must make it clear

that the words have to be taken figuratively.

Figurative language uses something known to explain something unknown. Therefore in interpreting a figure of speech, the interpretation must be limited to the one point of comparison. Kuske lists 5 points as the only proper way for interpreting figurative language:

1. Identify the known in the figure of speech.
2. Identify the unknown.
3. Identify the one point of comparison.
4. The interpretation of the figure of speech must be limited to the one point of comparison.
5. The interpretation of details in the figure of speech must be limited to those details which develop the one point of comparison. Any interpretation of details which leads to a second point of comparison is illegitimate interpretation.

19. *In the interpretation of prophecy, the interpreter seeks its fulfillment in the New Testament and shows how the prophecy was fulfilled.*

Sometimes there are direct New Testament passages that show how the prophecy was fulfilled. Examples: Hosea 11:1/Matthew 2:15; Isaiah 7:14/Matthew 1:22-23.

Sometimes similarities of events, descriptions or words may indicate how the prophecy was fulfilled. Examples: Psalm 22:1/ Matthew 27:46; Daniel 7/Revelation 13.

20. *In the interpretation of types, the interpreter designates those portions of Scripture typological which Holy Writ itself indicates as typical.*

A “type” is a picture or pattern of something that lies in the future. Types in the Old Testament pictured something about Christ for the people who lived before Christ came. Types took the form of

- 1) a person/Moses (Deut. 18:15).
- 2) a place/the Holy of Holies (Heb. 9:3,8,12,25).
- 3) an office/the High Priest (Ps. 110:4; Heb. 9:6-7,11-12).
- 4) a festival/Sabbath (Col. 2:16)/Day of Atonement (Heb. 9:25-26).
- 5) an animal/the Passover Lamb (John 1:21).
- 6) a thing/Bronze Serpent (John 3:14-15).

21. *To the doctrines of Scriptures belong also the valid and the necessary deductions from Scripture; not all doctrines of the Bible are taught in expressed words.*

Kuske states “Using Scripture to interpret Scripture does not preclude making judgments and deductions that are clearly based on Scripture. In fact, such judgments and deductions are necessary for two basic reasons:

- 1) The Bible is not a book that supplies the church with formal doctrinal statements covering every truth that is taught in Scripture.
- 2) Scripture does not give us a code of rules that one can apply to every situation he may meet in life.”

Examples: Triune God, fellowship, infant baptism, antichrist.

22. *The interpreter must distinguish between explanation, exegesis and application.*

Scriptural principles and the applications that Scripture makes are two different things. Kuske writes, “In distinguishing between scriptural principles and their applications, we must distinguish first between what a universal principle is (i.e., a command of God that applies to all people for all time) and what an application of a principle is (i.e., a command of God given to a particular group of people at a particular time for a particular reason).”

Examples: Paul writes to Timothy about elders in 1 Timothy 5:17.

This is addressed to elders in general, so these words do not apply only to the elders in Ephesus working with Timothy, but for all elders. But Paul’s words to Timothy in 1 Timothy 1:3 concerning staying in Ephesus is addressed only to Timothy, so it applies only to him.

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 9:14 that those who hear the gospel should provide for those who preach the gospel to them. His four examples from everyday life, three examples from the law of Moses, makes it clear that this is a responsibility of all Christians, not just the Corinthians. But Paul’s

words in 1 Corinthians 16:2 that they are to set aside a sum of money each Sunday is so he does not have to make a collection when he comes to Corinth. Therefore the command that offerings MUST be given once a week on Sunday does not apply to all Christians.

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## BOOK REVIEW

*Preaching is Dialogue, A Concise Introduction to Homiletics*, by Henry Eggold. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986. Paperback, 124 pages.

### Overview

If you're looking for a refresher course in homiletics, then the book at hand will serve you well. Unlike most other books (recent vintage) on preaching, Eggold's approach is refreshingly Lutheran. Eggold served as Professor of Ministry and Homiletics at Concordia Seminary, Fort Wayne, IN.

Eggold's premise is that preaching is dialogue and not monologue. In other words, instead of simply mounting the pulpit on Sunday morning and expounding the text in a general way, preaching should be targeted toward one's specific audience. Eggold suggests that an effective preacher must be in dialogue with his members through regular pastoral visits, thereby gaining insight into their fears, frustrations, their hopes and dreams. This enables him to preach dialogically, tailoring the application of God's Word to them as best as he is able.

The Word of God is dialogue, as well. Through the Word proclaimed, God accomplishes His work. Eggold notes that while some preachers expect too much from their preaching (expecting immediate visible results), others expect too little, failing to remember that "*preaching is not simply words; it is God the Holy Spirit at work seeking to achieve His saving purpose in the lives of men, confronting men both with the revelation of His holiness by which He must punish sin and with His grace by which He forgives sin.*" "In a very real sense," he adds, "*we preachers 'are laborers together with God' (1 Cor. 3:9) when we stand up to preach. We plant and water but God gives the increase. This is a staggering thought, enough to urge every preacher to give his best to the preaching task. Of every sermon we preach we ought to be able to say with Paul, 'For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake.'*" (2 Cor. 4:5)."

### Goals

Eggold spends a chapter discussing the general goals of preaching. He reminds us that our audience is typically the same Sunday after Sunday, and for the majority present, the goal will be to edify and preserve them in their Christian faith. Because each Christian still retains his sinful flesh,

diligent warnings are required (though one should not treat members as heathen) and the law must be proclaimed in all its severity, while the gospel must be preached in all its sweetness.

### Law and Gospel

Eggold has a nice section on the purposes of and the place of law and gospel in the sermon. He states, *“The sermon must mirror the sins which the congregation members are committing. The listing of the number of murders, rapes, and divorces in our country or the indignities to man practiced in totalitarian states has doubtful value for convicting hearers of sin.”*

Eggold makes some fine comments, reminding us that we need to be clear and direct when proclaiming the unconditional message of God’s grace in Christ. This should not be wedged into the sermon at the end; rather, the sermon should be built around the gospel so that penitent sinners are brought the comfort of God’s pure and wondrous grace. The more the gospel is presented in the language of the text and the more it is proclaimed in direct opposition to the law, the greater its clarity and freshness will be (e.g.: if the text deals with man’s unfaithfulness, the gospel could be presented in terms of God’s faithfulness to sinful mankind, etc.).

### Structure

Perhaps the most worthwhile section of the book carries pointers for developing a theme, parts, and subparts. *“Having mastered the text, the preacher has the task of structuring the sermon dialogically. That means paying attention to principles of sermon construction. Ministers at times say, ‘I have long forgotten the rules for sermon construction which I learned at the seminary.’ Granted that every man must develop his own style, there are certain principles which a preacher can neglect only to the detriment of his sermon....”*

*“H. Grady Davis suggests that as the hearer listens to a sermon, he is asking five questions: ‘What is the man talking about? What is he saying about it? What does he mean? Is it true? So what?’ A wise preacher will memorize these questions and try to shape his sermon to answer them.”*

### What is the man talking about?

*“This question is answered in the theme of the sermon. The theme should be the specific thought of the text, containing in a single sentence the thrust of the whole text. The theme is to the sermon what the lid is to the kettle. The theme is too broad if it promises more than the text can deliver; too narrow if it treats only one aspect of the text, neglecting others. The minimal requirement of a good theme is that it contain a subject and a limiting idea....If possible, the theme should also signal the goal of the sermon.”*

*“It is in the introduction to the sermon that the theme is established. The introduction not only tells what the preacher is going to talk about but also shows why the theme is worth listening to....Before writing an introduction the minister ought to consider, ‘Why should this theme be worth anyone’s attention?’“*

Once the preacher has a tentative idea on how the theme will be developed in supporting parts, Eggold suggests the following: *“A simple test of the symmetry of theme and parts is the use of one of the category questions: who, what, where, when, why, and how. In every theme one of these questions lurks. For example, in the theme based on 1 Cor. 13, ‘Try Love,’ the parts ought to follow either the question how? or why? The drift of the text suggests why...Use of only one category question in a sermon will make the sermon more incisive.”*

In writing explanatory paragraphs, Eggold suggests: *“It is therefore, a good rule to introduce a paragraph with a generalization, illustrate it with particulars - definition, illustration, statistics, examples - and conclude it with some reference to the generalized thought.”*

Eggold stresses the need for the preacher to use plenty of doctrine in his sermons. He encourages this, not because the use of doctrine is an end in itself, (a sermon is not a Bible Class) but because doctrine establishes and supports the goal of the sermon.

On the use of illustrations, he writes, *“Good illustrations make thought vivid and carry persuasive power. Moreover, people tend to remember truth in terms of illustrations. Franklin D. Roosevelt once said that late in his political career he used fifty illustrations for every one he used at the beginning. But there is an art to using them. They ought to be clear as light; a foggy illustration is worse than useless. And they ought to be sharp as lightning so that they hit the point.”*

### “So What?”

*“That’s the question the preacher has to come to grips with at the end of each major part of the sermon. Here he tries to answer the Pentecost question, ‘Men and brethren, what shall we do?’ His task is to persuade people to move in the direction of the goal which the text calls for...The application should suggest ways of carrying out the demands of the text. The hearer resists change if the program seems impossible to execute. There is a difference, for example, in telling a person to win the world for Christ, and suggesting that he share Christ with an unchurched friend. To win the world seems impossible; to win one person looks like an inviting possibility.”*

Eggold concludes the section on application, *“But, as indicated earlier, the strongest appeal is the love of Christ - not my love for Christ, remember, but Christ’s love for me. Hence, the gospel must be brought in as the motivating force to produce in the hearer the change which the text calls for.”*

The remainder of the book deals with style, variety, the use of good order, etc. In addition to stating why a sermon must progress *“like a train from destination to destination,”* Eggold has some tips on the use of English. *“Avoid excessive verbiage...as an experiment, go through one of your sermons, crossing out one-fourth of the words. Then read the sermon aloud. If the experts are correct, you should be amazed at the added force of your sermon.”*

*“Strengthen nouns and verbs” - avoid excessive use of adjectives and adverbs. “Use shorter sentences...short sentences give power.” “Develop emotive language. Another way to build energy into the sermon is to use emotive language, appealing to the physical senses of sight, taste, touch, smell, and hearing, and to emotional feelings. An abstract style appeals to only one gate to a person’s understanding, the ear.”*

### Bottom Line:

I have been pleased with the general contents of this book and appreciate having it on the shelf. At times, a refresher in the basics of homiletics gives one a new outlook and stimulates ideas which are helpful in writing sermons. As Eggold reminds us, we are to give our best to this work, but then are to be confident that it is the Lord, and not us, Who brings true effectiveness to the proclaimed Word.

– James Albrecht