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## Sermons to Seminarians

David Lau

\* At the outset of the fall semester of Homiletics at Immanuel Lutheran Seminary, Prof. David Lau, now retired from teaching, customarily preached an opening address to the seminary students who took this course under his tutelage. He has passed on, in serial form, his "Sermons to Seminarians," dating from 1996 to 2004. It is our hope and his that seminary graduates in the ministry today will find these addresses useful, especially as personal devotions suited for those called to be public ministers of the Gospel.

### Homiletics Sermon #1 (Fall 1996): Matthew 5:1-12

**And seeing the multitudes, He went up on a mountain, and when He was seated His disciples came to Him. Then He opened His mouth and taught them, saying: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."**

Dear students preparing yourselves for service as ministers of the Word:

No doubt, by now you have heard that one of the most important qualifications for the public ministry is that the minister himself be a Christian. For it is written in the 50th Psalm: **"To the wicked God says: 'What right have you to declare My statutes, or take My covenant in your mouth, seeing you hate instruction and cast My words behind you?'"** (vv. 16-17). God wants His ministers to love Him and His Word. God wants His ministers themselves to trust in the same gospel that they are imparting to others. To the apostle Peter Jesus gave the command **"Feed My sheep,"** but only after Peter had declared his love for the Lord.

All of us certainly profess to be believers in Jesus Christ as our only Savior from sin. There is nothing which I know about any of you that makes me doubt the genuineness of your professed faith. Therefore I do not speak the Word to you today as though you were heathen or pagan in your beliefs, but I address you as Christians.

In our text from the Lord's Sermon on the Mount we have our Lord's description of those who believe in Him. As individuals who have been called to faith in Jesus Christ, these words will describe you, as they will describe me, too, for I also have been called to the same faith and thus profess to be a Christian, too. Let us then consider together **JESUS' DESCRIPTION OF US AS CHRISTIANS** and learn from this description how blessed we really are.

Our text begins with these words: **"And seeing the multitudes, He**

**went up on a mountain, and when He was seated His disciples came to Him."** Jesus' audience for this Sermon on the Mount was primarily His disciples. What Jesus has to say in this text applies only to them. They are the ones who are blessed, even as Jesus Himself said at another time: **"Blessed are those who hear the Word of God and keep it."** Unbelievers and hypocrites do not fit such a description. Only to Jesus' believing disciples do such words apply.

As the apostle Matthew has reported, Jesus opened His mouth and taught His disciples what has come to be known as the Beatitudes, a term based on the Latin word meaning "blessed." Each beatitude which Jesus spoke begins with the same wording [editor's note: each numbered beatitude corresponds with a numbered paragraph to follow below]:

- 1) **"Blessed are the poor in spirit . . ."**
- 2) **"Blessed are those who mourn . . ."**
- 3) **"Blessed are the meek . . ."**
- 4) **"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness . . ."**
- 5) **"Blessed are the merciful . . ."**
- 6) **"Blessed are the pure in heart . . ."**
- 7) **"Blessed are the peacemakers . . ."**
- 8) **"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake."**

With these words Jesus describes Christians. In Luke's account of this Sermon on the Mount, Jesus makes it very plain that He was describing His disciples who had gathered round to listen to His teaching. For in Luke's gospel Jesus said, **"Blessed are you poor! Blessed are you who hunger now!"** And so all the way down the line. That is likewise clear from our text in Matthew, for Jesus closes His beatitudes with this blessing: **"Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake."** So we can be sure that Jesus is talking to His disciples and describing who they are and what they are like. Since by faith in Christ we also qualify as disciples of Christ, these words are describing us as well.

1) How does Jesus describe us? Christians are, first of all, **"the poor in spirit."** In the humility God has given to us as believers, we recognize ourselves as having nothing we can offer to God to make Him love us. We recognize ourselves as being spiritual paupers, as being personally destitute of any moral qualities that enable us to claim any personal goodness in the sight of the holy God. The apostle Paul was poor in spirit when he said, **"I am chief of sinners."** King David was poor in spirit when he said to the prophet Nathan, **"I have sinned against the Lord."** The publican in the temple was poor in spirit when he said, **"God, be merciful to me a sinner."** The members of the lukewarm church in Laodicea, however, were not poor in spirit. They claimed to be rich and wealthy and in need of nothing. But God said: **"You are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked"** (Rev. 3:17). Their problem was that they did not realize their spiritual poverty and blindness, and so their claim to be rich was proud, puffed up and self-satisfied. Such persons do not fit the Lord's description of Christians and the blessed state which comes to them by faith.

2) The Lord's second description identifies believers as **"those who mourn."** Why do we mourn? It is because we are sinners and we know it. It

is because we have so often responded to God's love for us with ingratitude and indifference and perhaps even with rejection and rebellion. We face the realization that God's Law condemns us and that we don't measure up to His high standard of perfection. We therefore have reason to mourn, and we do mourn, saying with David: **"There is no soundness in my flesh because of Your anger, nor any health in my bones because of my sin. . . . I am troubled, I am bowed down greatly; I go mourning all the day long"** (Ps. 38:3, 6).

3) Thirdly, Christians are described as **"the meek,"** that is, they are willing to yield to others and willing to recognize that they deserve no special favors from God or from man. They are those who are constantly amazed that God and the people on earth are treating them so well. The meek are those who turn the other cheek when someone wants to pick a fight with them. The meek are those whom the apostle Paul describes as willing to **"accept wrong,"** willing even to **"let themselves be cheated"** (1 Cor. 6:7). However, this does not mean that they are willing to surrender any portion of God's Word or yield on any matter of doctrine. On matters of doctrine they are ready to say with Paul: **"We will not yield submission even for an hour"** (Gal. 2:5). Yet as far as their own person is concerned, they do esteem others as better than themselves.

4) In the fourth beatitude Christians are described as **"those who hunger and thirst for righteousness."** They long to have the kind of holiness which allows them to stand in the presence of the holy God and serve Him. They blush with shame because of their many sins. They feel wretched every day anew that their performance as Christians does not match their desires to follow the holy will of God. That is why they rejoice every day anew that God forgives their sins for Christ's sake, that God clothes them with Christ's perfection as their own robe of righteousness, that in Christ they can indeed stand before God and are seen by God as His holy and beloved children.

5) Christians are next described as being **"the merciful."** And indeed they are merciful, for they are the recipients of God's mercy in Christ Jesus. As God has been merciful to them and forgiven them their sins, they in turn are led to show mercy to others. They are not like the unforgiving servant who had his huge debt to the king forgiven and then was so hard-hearted that he refused to forgive another servant who owed him a very small sum. How can we Christians not be merciful to others when God has been so merciful to us?

6) In the next verse Christians are described as **"the pure in heart."** Now is this not going too far, to identify us and all other Christians as **"pure in heart,"** especially when Jesus says: **"Out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries"** and so forth? The only way we can be pure in heart is by having God purify our hearts. And so He does, as Peter has said concerning the household of Cornelius and other Gentile believers: **"God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us, and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith"** (Acts 15:8-9). After mourning his sin, David prayed: **"Create in me a clean heart, O God."** The apostle Paul declared: **"To the pure all things are pure"** (Tit. 1:15). The pure in heart are pure only by reason of the

forgiveness of their sins and the working of the Holy Spirit within them.

7) In the seventh beatitude Jesus describes believers as **"the peacemakers."** They happily transmit God's message of peace to the world through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Having experienced in their own hearts the peace that surpasses understanding, they become ambassadors of God's peace, ministers of reconciliation, and in their daily lives they live peaceably with all men to the extent which they are able.

8) Of course, God's message of peace always stirs up anger and resentment among people. Sinners want to retain their pride, their own sense of self-worth; they don't want to admit their utter and complete spiritual bankruptcy. So they turn on the Christians. They call them all kinds of bad names and make them as miserable as they can. But note how Christians are led to react to this name-calling and persecution. Jesus describes them as **"those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake."** Yes, Jesus says in His final beatitude: **"Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice, and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."**

Dear friends, let us realize that because we are Christians, all of these descriptions apply to us, including the last one. The apostle Paul laid it down as an absolute expectation: **"All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution."** Not that we have to go out of our way to make sure we are persecuted. Rather, it is true that when we are Christians living in this world and showing our loyalty to Christ, the persecution will come our way to the extent and degree that God wills.

Having considered the Lord's detailed description of His disciples, we can recognize ourselves and all believers as the blessed people. How blessed we are to be counted among them, not by virtue of our works or worthiness, but by grace alone, grace that was showered on us already in eternity when God determined in love to call us to Himself and to make us His own.

Thus we do well to revisit Jesus' words, noticing with each beatitude the benefit attached and then understanding on that basis how great our blessedness truly is. Jesus said, **"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."** Heaven is ours, dear friends! Yes, as Christians we have the daily benefit of God ruling and guiding our hearts and lives and bringing us safely to Himself. So it is written that the Father **"has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins"** (Col. 1:12-14).

**"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."** We are indeed already comforted by the gospel of Christ. As the blessed result of our daily contrition and repentance, we are of good cheer, because we know that our sins are forgiven in the blood of Christ. Yes, we take heart in hearing the Lord's proclamation that **"our warfare is ended; our iniquity is pardoned"** (Isa. 40:2).

**"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."** The earth too is ours already, and everything in it. For our Lord has all things under His

feet and is “head over all things to the church,” that is, to us and all believers. Thus He works all things together for our good. Thus we experience the truth of what Paul said: **“All things are yours, whether ... the world or life or death, or things present or things to come—all are yours, and you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s”** (1 Cor. 3:21-23).

**“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.”** We are already filled to overflowing. Our cup runs over, for we sinners are declared righteous in God’s sight by virtue of Christ’s sacrifice. We walk by faith in this blessing now, and we do so with the confidence that we shall see what we now believe.

**“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.”** If God were to judge us according to His holy commandments, we could not stand before Him. No one can. But God deals with us according to His mercy. **“He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor punished us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His mercy toward those who fear Him. . . . The mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him”** (Ps. 103:10-11, 17a).

**“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”** Blessings upon blessings are bestowed to us! By bringing us to faith in Jesus Christ, God has adopted us as children of His holy family. Children of God, which also means that we are heirs of eternal life. **“What manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God. . . . Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is”** (1 John 3:1-2). We shall see God. And as those who belong to the “blessed of the Father,” we **“shall inherit the kingdom prepared for us from the foundation of the world”** (Matt. 25:34).

In this remarkable way our Savior speaks to us, His disciples. Can any road be too hard for us to travel with such blessings resting on our journeys? In joy let us take up our work of preparing for ministry in His Church, knowing full well the blessings God promises to us and to all those whom the Lord calls to Himself through our ministry. Praise the Lord for His grace and mercy. Amen!

#### Homiletics Sermon #2 (Fall 1997): Mark 9:38-41

**Now John answered Him, saying, “Teacher, we saw someone who does not follow us casting out demons in Your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow us.” But Jesus said, “Do not forbid him, for no one who works a miracle in My name can soon afterward speak evil of Me. For he who is not against us is on our side. For whoever gives you a cup of water to drink in My name, because you belong to Christ, assuredly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward.”**

Dear friends in Christ:

The customary three years of seminary training have sometimes been compared to the three years that the apostles spent with Jesus before His

suffering and death. During that three-year period the Lord's twelve apostles had the opportunity to hear His teaching from His own mouth. So also, during the three years of seminary our students get the opportunity to study Jesus' teachings with the help of their instructors. No doubt, during these three years the students get to know their teachers pretty well. It is possible that they may even be able to guess what their teacher is about to say, perhaps even before he says it. They probably do not expect their teachers to come up with something new or startling.

As we examine the record concerning Jesus, however, we find that His disciples were often startled and surprised by His teaching. A few examples come to mind. There was that time when Jesus was invited to the home of Mary and Martha in Bethany. Martha was busy serving, while Mary was just sitting there, listening to Jesus talk. Martha asked Jesus to have Mary come and help her. No doubt, Mary and Martha were amazed at the Lord's answer. **"One thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her."** There was also that time when Jesus told His disciples about His intent to go up to Jerusalem to suffer and die. Probably with his own good intentions, Peter tried to persuade Jesus not to take such a path. **"Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to you,"** he said. Peter must have received the shock of his life when Jesus turned to him and replied, **"Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me"** (Matt. 16:22-23). What made these words especially surprising was the fact that Jesus had just acknowledged how blessed Peter was in that wonderful confession he had made: **"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God"** (vv. 16-17).

Yes, Jesus certainly was **A TEACHER FULL OF SURPRISES**. Just when they thought they had Him figured out, He surprised them with His teaching. So also in this text from the Gospel of Mark we see **JESUS as OUR TEACHER FULL OF SURPRISES**. He surprises us, first of all, *by correcting our misguided zeal for His name*. Then also He surprises us *by accepting our least efforts in His name*.

Jesus' disciples had been arguing among themselves as to which of them was the greatest. How did Jesus respond to this argument? Perhaps we might expect a teacher to give his pupils a lesson in leadership. Maybe one might expect Him to have the disciples look for certain leadership qualities among them and then vote for the person who in their opinion best exhibited these qualities. Jesus, of course, did not do that. He surprised them by finding a little child and saying to them: **"If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all."** Then Jesus took the little child in His arms and said to His startled disciples: **"Whoever receives one of these little children in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me, receives not Me but Him who sent Me"** (Mark 9:35-37).

It was at this point that disciple John spoke up and asked Jesus to give His opinion on something he and the others had done. **"Teacher, we saw someone who does not follow us casting out demons in Your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow us."** Surely John and his fellow disciples thought they were doing the right thing. Certainly Jesus had taught them that He was the promised Messiah and there was no other like Him. Certainly Jesus had taught them the importance of listening to His words and

following them as the truth of God. Well, now they had met a man who did not travel in the company of the twelve. It seems that they did not know who he was or where he was from. They encountered him as one who was casting out demons in Jesus' name. Certainly this could not be right. Jesus had given the twelve the authority to cast out demons in His name. This man surely must be told to keep quiet and quit doing what he was doing. **"We forbade him,"** John said, and he was hoping for a word of validation from his Teacher.

Jesus, however, is the Teacher full of surprises, and He surprised John by saying: **"Do not forbid him, for no one who works a miracle in My name can soon afterward speak evil of Me. For he who is not against us is on our side."**

Notice that the man was not guilty of false teaching. He was not guilty, for example, of saying that John the Baptist was the Savior of the world, nor was he trying to lead anyone into idolatry. This man apparently had confidence in the power of Jesus' name to drive out demons, and that is what he was doing. John's whole argument was summarized in these words: **"He does not follow us."** Jesus' surprising answer was that they had no evidence that this man was doing anything wrong. He was giving glory to Christ. He was working a miracle, not in his own name or for his own glory, but in the name of Jesus. Why should John suspect the man of being an enemy? Since "he is not against us," says Jesus, he must be for us.

We need to hear this lesson from Jesus as much as the apostle John did. For we too are sometimes guilty of a misguided zeal for Jesus' name. At least, we think it is zeal for Jesus' name. More often it is zeal for our own name. That is, we tend to make a big thing out of what our group is doing, whether that group is our church body or our congregation or the small group of Christians with whom we have involvement. We identify our cause with Christ's cause, perhaps thinking that Christ is confined to doing all His work in the world through us who are orthodox teachers of His Word. We may then think that everybody else really ought to stop what they are doing, because it is all wrong anyway. After all, we're the only ones who have the true Word. Shouldn't the Lord forbid the other people from using His Word and trying to give glory to His name, since we are the only ones equipped to do it right? May such a misguided zeal be recognized for the sinful pride that it really is.

There have been other times when sincere Christians have been zealous for their cause which they also confused with the Lord's cause. We think back to the incident recorded in the book of Numbers. The Lord God had sent His Spirit on 70 of the elders of Israel, so that they could be helpers of Moses. All of the 70 had gathered together with Moses except two of them, Eldad and Medad. Now the report came that the Holy Spirit had come upon Eldad and Medad also, and they were prophesying in the camp, even though they were not together with the other elders and Moses at the tabernacle. This bothered Joshua, who said to Moses, **"Moses my lord, forbid them!"** Tell them to stop prophesying unless they are willing to join the group here with us. But Moses was more perceptive of God's will than Joshua was. Moses replied to Joshua: **"Are you zealous for my sake? Oh, that all the LORD's people were prophets and that the LORD would put His Spirit upon**



them" (Num. 11:29).

We can also think of the apostle Paul's experience as a prisoner in Rome. Apparently there was a group of Christians in Rome who were not too fond of the apostle Paul. According to Paul's words, they preached Christ **"from envy and strife, . . . from selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my chains"** (Phil. 1:15-16). How did Paul react to this? He was not particularly concerned that their preaching was intended to hurt him. Rather, he rejoiced in the content of what they were proclaiming, for they were preaching Christ. They appeared to have wrong motives, but still they were preaching Christ, and so Paul wrote to the Philippian congregation: **"What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is preached; and in this I rejoice, yes, and will rejoice"** (v. 18).

We too can rejoice today whenever the true gospel of Jesus is being preached, no matter who it is who does the preaching. We don't want to forbid anyone from preaching the gospel, just because he is not associated with our group. We may even discover that he is orthodox as well, and perhaps twice as zealous in Christ's cause as we ourselves have proven to be. The Lord in His providence has led us to a number of other groups in the world who do things a lot differently from the way we do them, and yet they also by the same grace and blessing of God are preaching the gospel of Christ in its truth and purity. I'm thinking of our friends in Nigeria and India and other places too. It can also happen that the gospel of Christ is preached here and there in the world by other groups, both Lutheran and non-Lutheran, whose teachings, though found to be heterodox, may nevertheless contain the proclamation of Christ crucified which God uses as **"the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes."**

Therefore let us not be zealous for our church body and curse everyone else. Rather let us pray, **"Thy kingdom come,"** and in so doing ask God to send preachers of the gospel throughout the world with the true message of salvation. Of course, we do not pray for the success of false teachers insofar as they are false, but we do pray for the true preaching of the gospel, even when it is done by those who still may be heterodox in some of their teachings. We need to remember that the true Church of Jesus Christ, the sum total of all His faithful sheep, is not to be found only in our church body.

Let us now return to our text and listen to another surprising teaching taught by our Teacher who is full of surprises. Some tend to think that Jesus can do His work only through mass rallies, huge numbers of people brought in by powerful preachers and large organizations. We tend to ignore or downplay the efforts of ordinary believers as they live out their Christian lives in this world and affect individuals one person at a time. Well, listen to our Teacher Jesus. He said to His disciples: **"Whoever gives you a cup of water to drink in My name, because you belong to Christ, assuredly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward."** Jesus, our Teacher full of surprises, ***accepts our least efforts in His name.*** Even if it's nothing more than giving a Christian a cup of water, because he belongs to Christ.

That does not sound like much, not in comparison with the huge rallies, causes and crusades carried out in Jesus' name throughout the world.

We tend to be impressed by the bigness, the visible success, the large numbers of converts, the amount of money spent and the like. Jesus, on the other hand, has a way of letting us see things from a different point of view. For example, when the Lord was sitting near the treasury in the temple, He watched the wealthy contributing their big amounts and then noticed the widow giving her two mites. He told His disciples that she had given more than the rest. Truly as One who knows the heart, He accepts our least efforts done in His name.

Therefore in believing recognition of all that the Lord says to us and does for us, let us do the Christian things in our everyday lives. Let us not save our Christianity for the pulpit or the Bible class, but let us follow Christ in how we treat each other, particularly in the way we treat those persons so often despised or ignored by others. Jesus says: "Receive one of these little children in My name, and you receive Me." Jesus says: "Give a cup of water to one of your fellow Christians, and you are giving that cup of water to Me." Be kind to someone who is almost completely unlovable, and do it in Jesus' name, because that person also belongs to Christ. What does our surprising Teacher promise will happen? **"That person will by no means lose his reward."** Think of the picture Jesus foretold of Judgment Day. Jesus will be telling all His sheep on the right hand about all the good things they had done to Him. *To Him?* Yes, because whatever they did to one of the least of Jesus' brethren, they have done to Him. And their reward? Well, there they will be—at Jesus' right hand. Jesus loves to reward anything done in His name, even the least effort in His name. Of course, we know that the "reward" is not something earned by us, not even in the least. It remains a reward of grace that Christ is happy both to promise and to give as part of His gracious will that leads us to live as the Christians He is molding us to be.

What a Teacher we have! The Lord Jesus, so full of surprises! And I suppose His last surprise for the disciples was the greatest of all, although to them it should never have been a surprise. His followers went to His tomb on a Sunday morning to honor His dead body. What a surprise was in store for them! The tomb was empty. Jesus was alive. Their sins were forgiven. He had predicted it all, so they should not have been surprised at all. In fact, their Old Testament had predicted it too. They should not have been surprised, but surprised they were, and surprised are we when we think how truly wonderful our Savior is. He was willing to sacrifice Himself in love for us, who were dead in our sins. He was willing to expend His teaching energy on us, though we are so slow to learn. And He is still surprising us now by being so gracious as to let us study His Word and honor His name in preparing for the ministry. Glory be to Jesus! May Your name be glorified forever! Amen!

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**The Son of Man as Preacher  
Interacting with His Congregation**  
William Henkel

\* Norman Greve's translation of part III, "Der Menschensohn als Prediger im Umgang mit seiner Gemeinde—Fortsetzung" (*Theologische Quartalschrift*, 22:3, July 1925, pp. 182-201) will appear in the *Journal* in two separate installments. We continue with the previously used conventions that anything enclosed in brackets—but not parentheses—or provided as endnotes and all section headings have been included at the discretion of the translator or the editor.

Our second question is: How did the Son of Man preach?<sup>1</sup>

The question allows itself to be answered from various aspects. From one aspect the Scripture itself answers it with the words, "He preached powerfully."<sup>2</sup> We will be rewarded by lingering a while over this characteristic of Christ's preaching, to which Scripture itself draws our attention.

What does "Jesus preached powerfully" mean?

We must first turn our attention to the expression of this characteristic in the original. We find it in all three of the synoptic gospels. Matthew [7:29a] and Mark [1:22a] use identical wording: ἦν γὰρ διδάσκων αὐτοὺς ὡς ἐξουσίαν ἔχων, while Luke [4:32b] says: ἐν ἐξουσίᾳ ἦν ὁ λόγος αὐτοῦ.

What does ἐξουσία mean? It is derived from the verb ἔξειμι and has two basic meanings, just as ἔξεστι does (*it is permitted, it is possible*). It can mean 1. *authorization, plenary power, authority* or 2. *might, force, competence*. These two meanings often flow into one another, just as the German expression *Gewalt* also at times means "innate power" and at other times "conferred power" and sometimes a combination of the two. The first meaning of ἐξουσία seems to predominate in the New Testament, as also ἔξεστι rarely occurs here or indeed in the entire Koine with the second meaning "it is possible." But hardly anyone would want to deny that ἐξουσία can also bear the meaning of "might, power or force" in the New Testament. Everyone translates Revelation 9:19, ἡ ἐξουσία τῶν ἵππων ἐν τῷ στόματι αὐτῶν ἐστίν, as "the might" or strength—not the authority—"of the horses is in their mouths."

Which of its two meanings does ἐξουσία now have in our passage? According to Luther, it is apparently the second one, for he translates, "He preached powerfully," and remarks in this connection: "Everything lived, and sounded as though it had hands and feet." However, we can hardly agree with him. The English Bible [KJV] doubtless yields the sense of the Greek words more properly with the words "as one having authority." In favor of this rendering are two points: not only the fact that ἐξουσία denotes innate power and ability less than δύναμις does, but especially the adverb [conjunction] ὡς with the participle ἔχων. The phrase ὡς ἐξουσίαν ἔχων would be a stilted, antiquated paraphrase for ἐν δυνάμει or ἐν ἀποδείξει δυνάμεως (cf. 1 Cor. 2:4), if ἐξουσία is taken to mean "eloquence" or "ability to speak" and is translated "He taught as one who had eloquence." On the other hand, if one

takes ἐξουσία in the sense of “authority” or “plenary power,” the ὡς yields good sense. The Evangelists do not wish to state that Jesus had authority to speak, but to point out that His speech, His teaching gave the impression of a man who had authority, and the statement they made retains this subjective coloring through the ὡς. We then need to translate: *He spoke as one who has the authority*; i.e. His speech, His teaching gave the impression that it was authoritative.

### Jesus taught with authority

Now we ask: Why did His teaching make this impression? Why did His audience think: “This man has authority; He dares to speak the way He does, and no one dares to raise any objections to what He is teaching; what He says is at once decisive”?

We first examine the context in which His teaching is characterized as authoritative. This occurs for the first time in Matthew 7:28-29. Immediately after the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount this observation follows: Καὶ ἐγένετο, ὅτε ἐτέλεσεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς τοὺς λόγους τούτους, ἐξεπλήρουντο οἱ ὄχλοι ἐπὶ τῇ διδαχῇ αὐτοῦ· ἦν γὰρ διδάσκων αὐτοὺς ὡς ἐξουσίαν ἔχων καὶ οὐχ ὡς οἱ γραμματεῖς. First, a few words about Luther’s translation. When Luther translates, “*Und es begab sich, da Jesus diese Reden vollendet hatte, entsetzte sich das Volk,*” [Eng. “And it happened, when Jesus had ended this speech, the people were shocked”], he does not do justice to the tense of ἐξεπλήρουντο. The people were not shocked only after Jesus had finished speaking. The shock had begun already earlier. The Imperfect tense<sup>3</sup> stresses the ongoing action, that is, the continuing condition, and it would permit rendering into English as “they were spellbound,” except that then the concept indicated by ἐκπλήσσεσθαι would receive a somewhat different coloration. The German expression *Sie waren in Staunen versunken* [They were swallowed up in astonishment] fits the sense to some degree. They were shocked at His teaching [*Über seine Lehren*], as Luther has translated.

The Greek διδαχή usually means “the thing taught” [*Lehre*], but not infrequently it has the more abstract meaning “the act of teaching” [*Lehren*], as is clearly brought out in Mark 4:2 and 12:38, Acts 2:42, 2 Timothy 4:2 and in other places. The word bears this meaning in our passage too. It was indeed the style and manner—how Jesus taught—that shocked His hearers into astonishment. The expression obviously does not exclude the content of His sermon. The people were “shocked” [Luther: *entsetzte*] at Jesus’ teaching with authority, if Luther has properly grasped the [lexical] meaning of ἐκπλήσσεσθαι. Does this perhaps give us a clue as to how we ought to think of Jesus’ teaching with authority?

Jesus had given the Sermon on the Mount and presented the Law with such sharpness that it cut His hearers to the very quick. Ought we then say that He preached the Law with such sharpness and turned it so mercilessly upon everyone without respect of person, as only One who has authority would dare do, and for that reason the people were horrified and shrank back in fear from the unprecedented demands which He set down as the Expounder of the Law—demands which could not be borne? By no means! It

happens that ἐκπλήσσεσθαι is also used by the Evangelists to describe the impression that Jesus' preaching made upon His hearers on other occasions, when there was no thought of shock or horror. Thus the words of Matthew 22:33 occur where we find a description of the impression made on the people by Jesus' dispute with the Sadducees [over the resurrection of the dead]. Why should the people have been horrified over that dispute? In Luke 4:22 [i.e. its noting of how the people marveled at what Jesus said] θαυμάζω stands as a synonym of ἐκπλήσσομαι.<sup>4</sup> There is therefore no question that the words ἐξεπλήσσοντο ἐπὶ τῇ διδαχῇ αὐτοῦ mean: "They were swallowed up in astonished wonder at His teaching." Accordingly [*daher*] they give us no information about why the people considered Jesus' teaching as authoritative.

#### **"Not as the scribes"**

Perhaps the additional words, "and not as the scribes," give us the needed information. If Christ's teaching as one with authority was the opposite of that of the scribes' teaching, then they obviously taught as people having no authority. So if we were to know how they taught, we could more readily clarify for ourselves the nature of what Jesus' teaching with authority consisted. From the New Testament as well as from the rabbinic literature, we know that the teaching style of the scribes was one of endless citation of authorities, the "earlier writings of the elders." Seldom does one of them say, "It is and it must be as I am teaching, for thus it stands written" or "because sound reason shows this." Rather the *ultima ratio* [ultimate reason] was always: "Rabbi So-and-so taught this way, and thus it has been handed down from the fathers." Tradition dominated all the teaching of the Jewish church at the time to such a degree that it is reported of the celebrated and rather liberally-inclined Hillel<sup>5</sup> that he could often argue and establish his view on a question of the Law for an entire day, without reaching agreement with his hearers. But then as soon as he added, "Thus it was handed down to me by Schemaiah and Abtalion," all opposition grew quiet. For this reason the scribes by their teaching had made the impression on their contemporaries that they themselves had no authority, but were only allowed to pass on what others before them had said. And as it goes with the very nature of traditionalism, after centuries of repeating the elders' explanation of the Law, almost nothing had remained of these explanations except words and empty forms. The spirit had flown away.

A theology which only mechanically repeats what others have said, which only assents intellectually to what others have worked out, which only speaks about truths which over and over have found approval in the heart, which truths have been handed down but never experienced afresh, such theology must in time harden and petrify and forfeit all vital strength. So when the scribes taught the people and in so doing made their entire theology casuistry, no one was engaged inwardly. Their words did not press into the conscience, and they warmed no one's heart. Their teachings were mere dead formal rubbish and left the inner life unmoved and its questions unanswered. Add to that one more thing. By their teachings the scribes imposed many demands which they themselves did not keep and indeed in

no way strove to keep. They laid burdens on the people and lifted not a finger, as Christ expressed it [Matt 23:4].<sup>6</sup> This too did not serve to establish their authority. Whoever does not himself do what he urges others to do will seldom win recognition for his teaching. For these reasons the scribes taught ὡς μὴ ἐξουσίαν ἔχοντες.

Jesus' teaching is the opposite of that of the scribes. Indeed, He brings no new teachings. He declares Himself for the Law, which the scribes allege to explain. He has not come to annul the Law or the Prophets. And whoever annuls even a tittle of the Law and releases the people from its smallest demand is called least in the kingdom of heaven. But His way of teaching is different from that of the scribes. He does not support His teachings with the sayings of the elders. To strengthen His preaching He does not say, "The people of old time have handed it down in this way. Thus says the wise Schemaiah or Rabbi Abtalion." No, He says, "You have heard that it was said thus and so to the people of old. But I tell you differently, and if you heed the fathers instead of Me, you will have to answer for it." He never sought to produce faith by appealing to authorities. He does cite Scripture often. But He does not do this for the purpose of obtaining authority as a teacher. No, what He says has authority in itself, exactly as authoritative even as Scripture.

He expects that His hearers will believe His words just as they believe the Scripture. But how can He expect that? His word carries its authority within itself. It gives testimony of itself to His hearers that it is the highest authority, that it is truth. Therefore He does not seek to make His teachings plausible to His hearers, but whenever someone doubts His teachings, He simply says, "If anyone wants to do His will, he will see whether My teaching is of God or whether I speak of Myself (ἄπ' ἐμαυτοῦ)" (John 7:17). He says bluntly and curtly to Pilate, "For this reason I was born and came into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Whoever is of the truth hears My voice" (John 18:37). And to the Jews who rejected His word and raised many objections to His teachings, He did not engage in apologetics, but rather attested to them, "Whoever is of God hears God's Word. Therefore you do not hear, because you are not of God" (John 8:47). But all who hear His word and permit it to influence them must acknowledge that "No man has ever spoken like this Man" (John 7:46).

Without doubt, the personality of the Preacher also contributed to the fact that Jesus' speech and teaching bore witness of itself, that it was with authority, to the hearts of those who heard it. Although teaching and life diverged widely among the scribes, with Him these were in perfect harmony. The truth which He preached and to which He exhorted and admonished His hearers to fully yield themselves was embodied in Him. Had the scribes preached the Law in its complete sharpness as He did, their hearers would have thought: "This is insincere speech, for if the scribes believed what they were teaching, they would no doubt earnestly try to act according to their words." Jesus' exposition of the Law made a different impression on His hearers. They note that with Him there is a holy earnestness in His demands; He Himself is as we should be according to His explanation of the Law; and no one has ever seen Him transgress a divine command. He Himself dares to

ask His enemies who scrutinize Him closely, "Who of you can accuse Me of a sin?" [John 8:46]. In this way His personality strengthened His gospel proclamation. His personality, His whole conduct in the flesh, was a visible preaching of the gospel. In Him the "kindness" and "love for mankind" (Titus 3:4) and the healing "grace of God" (Titus 2:11) had appeared. His relationship toward the poor and wretched, toward all sinners without exception, and His suffering and death were a vivid and impressive preaching of saving grace. When He preached the way to heaven, He could point to Himself and say, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life" (John 14:6). In this way His personality also contributed toward making His teaching ἐν ἐξουσίᾳ.

We offered earlier the comment on Luther's translation, "He preached powerfully," that it did not fit the immediate sense of the Greek words. But actually, Luther has said nothing perverse in his translation. Because Jesus preached with authority, He also preached with power. He did not just parrot what others had taught Him. He did not feed His hearers on empty words. He did not offer up dry, moldy book learning. What He taught came from His warm and vibrant [*lebenswarm*] divine heart. It was a ceaseless stream from His inmost life and being, and He wished to introduce His hearers not to a stale casuistry but to life. He wished to help them to the life that alone satisfies the heart and serves His name, the life in fellowship with God. For these reasons His preaching was powerful. It moved feelings to their profoundest depths. It caused all aspects of the human soul to tingle [e.g., Luke 24:32]. And it effected the conviction that here the profoundest and most fundamental questions of human existence are treated, upon which depends the matter of whether the life of life [*das Leben des Lebens*] has value or not, and whether man is the least happy or the most blessed of all creatures.

Thus right after an address which seemed hard to His audience and became the occasion of many people leaving Him, when Jesus asked His disciples if they too wanted to leave, Simon Peter replied, "Lord, where should we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). [We can envision that he] wants to say: Lord, Your speech has also offended us and we would not be disinclined to turn our backs on You [and go] with the others. But where would we go? No one else can satisfy that hunger and thirst for righteousness and for the eternal and the imperishable which You have awakened in us through Your words of eternal life. No one else can give us to drink of the living water, with which You refresh our souls. Your teaching has authority. It has proven itself to us to be the truth which has eternal worth and which alone gives peace to the human heart. Your speech has become powerful to us; we could no longer leave You.

In such a way the Son of Man has preached ἐν ἐξουσίᾳ, ὡς ἐξουσίαν ἔχων.

#### **Following His example of preaching with authority**

Just as the Son of Man was constantly surrounded by hearers who hung on His words and often forgot even food and drink because of His preaching, because He taught ὡς ἐξουσίαν ἔχων, so only then will we also have attentive hearers and preach not only to their ears, but also to their hearts, if we preach ὡς ἐξουσίαν ἔχοντες. We do not have authority in the same sense as

He did. Truth is not in us in the same sense as it is in Him. By nature we stand under the domination of lies. As persons born again through the living seed of God's Word [1 Pet. 1:23], we do indeed have knowledge of the truth, but we also still have the old man in us always, who through our desires ruins us in error [Eph. 4:22]. Hence our word does not have authority of itself. It is authoritative only insofar as it is Christ's Word, the Word of the living God, set down in the writing of the Old and New Testaments. We speak with authority when we can call out to our hearers, "Thus says the Lord. . . . It stands written. . . ." Only when we, only to the measure that we comply with the apostolic admonition, "If anyone speaks, let him speak as God's word," [1 Pet. 4:11] will we gain entrance into the hearts of our hearers and accomplish what we were sent to do.

It is our duty to preach the Word of God to our hearers as a Word that carries its own authority within itself. It is not our duty to make it plausible to them and to justify it to their reason. That is neither possible, nor can it be attempted without weakening the authority of God's Word in the hearts of hearers. We are indeed permitted to point out in our preaching how the enemies of divine truth have been put to shame over and over, how Scripture has constantly been shown right in the end over against human wisdom, how unreasonable are many objections to Scripture or to the individual statements of Scripture. But to engage in actual apologetics—defending Scripture as the accused before reason as the complainant and judge and thus conceding to it the ultimate jurisdiction over Scripture—amounts in principle to undermining the authority of Scripture. Whoever does so is no longer able to preach *ὡς ἐξουσίαν ἔχων* in the unrestricted sense of that description. There is only one tribunal before which the preacher dares to bring his issues, and that is Scripture. If Scripture stands in his favor, then he must deliver his message untroubled by the objections of proudly rationalistic hearers and say, "Thus says the Lord, and whoever is of the truth hears His voice."

Such a sermon, the sermon *ἐν ἐξουσίᾳ*, still proves its power today, as it did at the time of Christ, including its power to attract. It fills the churches; the apologetic, indecisive, weak-kneed sermon, which begs the pardon of reason, does not. Experience confirms this. The Lutheran church of our land, which stands upon the firm ground of Scripture and therefore teaches with authority, has already preached to one generation after the other and has not had to complain of empty churches. But many sectarian preachers who have cast aside their authority and have made the authority of Scripture suspect to their hearers—indeed have totally undermined it—they preach to empty pews. They must continuously plan new means of enticing people if they want to have a full church, at least now and then.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore we dare never forget that preaching in the *ἐξουσία* which Scripture grants is the thing which produces acceptance. It has opened countless doors for us in this country; it has produced entrance to the hearts of our fellow men; it has filled our churches and built up a flourishing church life. Nothing worse could befall our church than that authoritative preaching be silenced in it, or that men should stand in her pulpits who teach there *ὡς μὴ ἐξουσίαν ἔχοντες*.



Perhaps many think that this is a danger with which we presently do not need to reckon. Our preachers are giving no thought to yielding their authority which is rooted in Scripture. They still stand just as our fathers have stood. They confess the pure doctrine of Scripture which the fathers have confessed. Their stance toward Scripture is the very same stance of the fathers. Just as those before them, they attest to the congregation of God: "The Bible is God's Word, given word for word by the Holy Spirit, and therefore divine truth in all its parts, the source of faith, the norm of doctrine and life." That is fine. But preaching ἐν ἑξουσίᾳ is not guaranteed to our church by our preachers speaking the language of the fathers. Subscribing to the fathers will not do it. The scribes at Christ's time were big on subscription to the fathers. For centuries the teachers in the Jewish church had done nothing but repeat what the fathers had said before them. They had watched over them with Argus eyes, so that the propositions of the fathers would remain untouched. But precisely this had to lead their losing Scripture and with it their teaching authority, and so they preached words completely set in stone, which were not powerful but empty.

That can also happen to us. The danger of turning away, satiated from the confessions of the fathers which have been held in esteem among us for so long, the danger of renouncing Scripture and embracing a coarse rationalism is not at present as great as the danger of continuing to speak the words of the fathers, while not understanding with the heart what the mouth is saying. Then we too would have Scripture, but would have lost its truth, despite the fact that we have remained "orthodox." Then we no longer would teach ἐν ἑξουσίᾳ and no longer preach with power, but would teach as the scribes had taught.

Perhaps some will object: No way! No, as long as we still have the pure doctrine, we are preaching ἐν ἑξουσίᾳ, even though we only parrot the fathers without inward participation. For it is not our stance toward the truth that gives it its authority and power, but the truth contains this within itself, as you have correctly stated.

This last assertion is true. But it is just as true that someone who mechanically repeats the pure teaching with inward detachment does not have the truth and therefore also does not preach the truth. His preaching might contain dogmatically correct propositions, but nevertheless he still does not yet preach the truth. Though the major statements of this preaching are correct, yet in his exposition he will again and again set them in false connections to each other and thus implant only mistaken thoughts in the souls of his hearers. He will use it in a confused way, constantly mixing law and gospel, and this mixture of truth and error cannot present itself to the audience as authoritative. And because a preacher preaches not only with the mouth, but also with his entire personality, a preacher who merely parrots and who treats the pure truth merely as an intellectual subject will all the more implant truth and error in the souls of his hearers in the most chaotic jumble and in the most inward amalgamation.<sup>8</sup> This confusion takes place when his personality, when his life and walk, contradict the Scripture truth in his preaching. This allows everything he says to be seen in a false light. It should not be denied that the bits of truth which preaching of this

kind contains will now and then prove their divine power and authority to the heart of a hearer and will bring it to the knowledge of the truth. This, however, is not the normal course of events, but rather a special dispensing of God's grace.

Much less will such a preacher preach in Luther's sense of ἐξουσία. No sermon can be powerful which is not a living witness. Hence no sermon is so deadly boring, none leaves the heart so cold, none is so insipid and powerless as that of a man who Sunday after Sunday recites "the pure truth" because that's the way he learned it and because he has been called by his congregation to do so. Already such a man will not preach powerfully on this account: for him there is only restricted material to preach on, and he is preached out in a short time. The individual teachings which form the church's confession are soon presented. These are not inexhaustible in themselves, that is, in their application to the constantly changing human life, the human life in its multifaceted diversity. For only in this manner, and not in their abstract form, do they prove themselves to be powerful and touch the human heart in its deepest recesses. But it is from just this angle that the merely parroting preacher does not understand them from his own experience.

Hence what the ancient pagans have already said remains true: *Pectus est, quod facit disertum* [It is the breast which produces eloquence]. It is not the understanding, but the heart which produces eloquence. What fills the heart spills over from the mouth, even as Scripture expresses this same truth [Matt. 12:34]. Only a preacher to whom the gospel is a matter of the heart, who has found in it the pearl of great price for which he is prepared to give up everything, will preach with all the strength of his inner man, and thus preach with power, in demonstration of the Spirit and power [1 Cor. 2:4], and not as the scribes.

If therefore we would have preaching ἐν ἐξουσίᾳ in our church as before, then there dare not arise among us any generation of preachers who have set for themselves the goal of repeating what the fathers have taught. To be sure, the danger does not threaten us from what the fathers taught nor from its study. It is self-evident that everyone who wishes to teach among us will make himself familiar with the teachings of the fathers, the confessional writings and the dogmatics of our church. Discontinuing this would mean despising and showing ourselves ungrateful for the magnificent gifts which God has bestowed on our church. But in mechanical repetition lies the danger. Mechanically repeating what the fathers have taught means receiving it uncritically, just because they have taught it. This leads unfailingly to falling away from Scripture. And there—not in the teachings of the fathers as such—is where the authority dwells, which alone commands respect in the heart and conscience and before which all opposition is silenced. Therefore only to the degree that we live in Scripture, absorb its world of thought, take our preaching material from it and found ourselves upon it—and only to the degree that our preaching is a witness of the truth of Scripture which has become living and powerful in us<sup>9</sup>—will we preach ὡς ἐξουσίαν ἔχοντες.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> We encountered Henkel's first question "What did the Son of Man preach?" in Greve's translation of part II (cf. *Journal*, 46:2, p. 29).

<sup>2</sup> This reflects Luther's translation of Matthew 7:29a: *Er predigte gewaltig*.

<sup>3</sup> ἐξεπλήσσοντο is the Imperfect Passive Indicative 3<sup>rd</sup> plural form of ἐκπλήσσω, which occurs in the active voice outside the Greek New Testament. For ἐκπλήσσω the BDAG 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. lexicon gives the following definition and glosses: "to cause to be filled with amazement to the point of being overwhelmed; *amaze, astound, overwhelm*."

<sup>4</sup> Consider the pertinent words in Luke 4:22 (NKJ): So all bore witness to Him, and marveled at the gracious words which proceeded out of His mouth. And they said, "Is this not Joseph's son?" The Greek text rendered by the underlined words is ἐθαύμαζον ἐπὶ τοῖς λόγοις τῆς χάριτος; lit. "they were marveling upon the words of the grace." While the verb here is θαυμάζω rather than ἐκπλήσσω, Henkel's point is underscored nonetheless in that here too the marveling of the people at what Jesus said was not in shock over indicting words of the Law.

<sup>5</sup> Hillel (ca 70 BC - ca AD 10), also known as Hillel the Elder and Hillel the Babylonian, was a prominent rabbi during the time of Jesus' birth and early childhood. He presided over the Sanhedrin and opposed Shammai by taking a generally more lenient view of the Law.

<sup>6</sup> Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples, saying: "The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do. For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers" (Matt. 23:1-4).

<sup>7</sup> At this point Prof. Henkel goes on to describe what he had observed taking place in some American churches at that time. Due to the dated nature of this material it has been omitted.

<sup>8</sup> While we agree with Henkel's warnings that the preacher should not put up any barriers to the gospel by his actions or his attitudes, we want to avoid giving the impression that the power to convict, convert, enlighten or renew the heart of anyone is to be found within the preacher at all. That power remains solely with the Holy Spirit, who uses His Word to change human hearts. It is the "message preached," not the preacher, that is "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:18-25).

<sup>9</sup> In our sermon preparations, for example, we do well to apply the text first of all to ourselves and have its specific message of sin and grace speak with God's power and authority to our own hearts and lives.

## What We Can Learn from the *Gospel of Judas*

Paul Tiefel, Jr. and Steven Sippert

Within the past year a religious writing from antiquity, whose renown as an extant manuscript took over 1,700 years to emerge from obscurity, has now caught the attention of both scholars and reporters. The *Gospel of Judas* has gained some interest in the news reporting of 2006, being featured in a number of news magazines and given television coverage on The National Geographic Channel and MSNBC. The claims have emerged about the “real story” behind Jesus and Judas Iscariot, with shocking “new revelations” coming to light from the “Gospel” that bears Judas’ name. Much can be read on the Internet, including the text of the English translation.<sup>1</sup>

The *Gospel of Judas* is not long; it can be read in about 15 minutes, although to the writers of this article it was not an easy read to follow or comprehend. The extent of the English translation appears to be about one-third the length of the Gospel of Mark, the shortest of the four Gospels in the New Testament.<sup>2</sup> Though the *Gospel of Judas* has been around for centuries, its existence was only vaguely known until 1978, when a Coptic<sup>3</sup> manuscript, part of a four-text codex, was first discovered in El Minya, Egypt. Based on the findings of paleographers and other experts consulted in recent years, the only extant manuscript of the *Gospel of Judas* has been identified as a third or fourth century<sup>4</sup> Coptic translation of what is believed to be a Greek text of this “Gospel.” The writing of the autograph (which, of course, is not extant) has been dated to a time prior to AD 180 AD or so.<sup>5</sup>

What can we actually learn from the *Gospel of Judas*? About Jesus, that is? Absolutely nothing! But there are lessons to be gleaned from an examination of this writing and the effect it has had on various people.

### 1. Satan’s lie in disguise as “Gospel”

There is nothing new under the sun. While the promises of a new discovery may appeal to the itching ears of another generation, the truth remains that this “Gospel,” though centuries old, simply serves up another heaping helping of Satan’s lies. It is the devil who wants people to doubt and wonder: “Has God really said that Jesus is true God? No, Jesus can’t be true God.” In apparent imitation of the Bible’s form Satan seeks to undermine the Bible’s message and continue his faith-destroying propaganda against Jesus Christ, despite the steadfast testimony to the contrary by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, as well as that of Acts, Romans, the rest of the New Testament and various parts of the Old Testament. “Jesus is not really true God who became man to redeem all people from sin, death and hell”—that is the implied claim made by the *Gospel of Judas*, a conclusion we draw in comparing the Bible’s assertions about Jesus with pertinent material obtained from the National Geographic Society (NGS) translation of the Coptic text.

## The Bible

**In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God (John 1:1).**

**In Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily (Col. 2:9).**

**Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross (Phil. 2:5-8).**

## In the "Gospel of Judas"<sup>6</sup>

In a scene that describes the disciples gathered together to eat bread, probably during the festival week leading up to Passover, Jesus encounters them as they pray and laughs. The disciples regard this reaction as a laughing about their prayer. When they ask him about this, he appears to question the adequacy of their motives and says that they are not praying voluntarily. When they call him the son of their god, he does not accept their confession, but questions how it is that they know him. He even claims that the people living at that time will not know him. Cf. page 1, scene 1 of the NGS translation available online.

## 2. Lacuna, lacuna, lacuna

The *Gospel of Judas* is full of holes, literally. By going to [www.nationalgeographic.com](http://www.nationalgeographic.com) and perusing the online photographs of pages 33, 35, 44, 46, 56, 57 and 58 of the codex, one can see for himself the rather fragmentary condition of the text. This should be kept in mind if the reader chooses to access and read the English translation, also provided online at the same link. The holes in the pages of the papyrus have obliterated numerous portions of the Coptic text, an inescapable and undesirable reality which poses a significant problem for the translator. Depending on the size of the "hole" (what textual critics and others call *lacuna*), the translator is either compelled to supply words that will make for a complete sentence (or at least a complete thought) in translation. Or he must indicate through notation of his own making that a portion of the text is missing. The online version provided by the National Geographic Society acknowledges such addition of English words and omission of Coptic text mainly by what is expressed in brackets. Throughout the NGS translation many such brackets occur as the chosen means of supplying one or two words to fill in the "hole," with the English wording itself being chosen from a consideration of the context in which the hole appears.<sup>7</sup>

But what is the translator to do when the amount of obliterated text is more than a word or two? Larger lacunae require an honest acknowledgment. Thus in many places the translators of the "Gospel of Judas" have inserted a bracketed set of ellipsis dots—[ . . . ]—to indicate the

type of lacuna in which the number of missing words is unknown and the missing text cannot be supplied from the context.<sup>8</sup> And in some places the inserted brackets are used to acknowledge some 13 different instances where *one or more lines* (up to 17) of text are missing. How problematic are the smaller and larger “holes?” By going to the website listed above and accessing the online translation there, the reader can gauge for himself the nature and difficulty of these lacunae. Two of the larger ones, amounting to 15 and 17 lines each, can be found on page 3 of the NGS translation.

Let’s contrast the glaring textual problems in the “Gospel of Judas,” a relatively shorter document, to the 28 chapters of Matthew, the 16 chapters of Mark, the 24 chapters of Luke and the 21 chapters of John, all of which have NO missing lines and NO missing words due to any obliteration of the Greek text.<sup>9</sup> The complete text of each canonical Gospel has been transmitted intact down through the centuries, with NO lacunae of any kind.

It has also been observed that the *Gospel of Judas* was written as dialogue,<sup>10</sup> not as history or biography. As a dialogue between Jesus and the disciples and especially between Jesus and Judas, this Gospel lacks meaningful references to historical events and geographic locations. There are no markings of historicity. For example, no attempt is made to chronicle the events of Jesus’ ministry among the people or to show the impact and aftermath of His death. The four canonical Gospels, on the other hand, contain many references to villages and cities Jesus visited and to other locations in and around Galilee, Samaria and Judea, as well as the mention of historic persons—all provided in a given order of recorded events which are presented as facts. In short, the four canonical Gospels read like history;<sup>11</sup> the *Gospel of Judas* does not. The only way to account for such a difference is to realize that, unlike the apocryphal “Gospel of Judas,” the four Gospels are the true product of God’s own speaking and God’s own doing:

- God promising and predicting Jesus in the Old Testament,
- God sending His Son in the “fullness of time,”
- Jesus living, speaking and acting as the God-man Savior of the world in the presence of eyewitnesses,
- Those eyewitness apostles then reporting and recording what Jesus did through the promised guidance and miraculous inspiration of God’s Spirit.

It is the Holy Spirit who inspired the very words which the Gospel writers wrote. Since then God has preserved the text of these words from any harm or loss and has used them for nearly 2000 years.

### 3. It doesn’t sound like Holy Scripture

The obscurity of the *Gospel of Judas* is not only due to what it is missing in the text. The style and content of what is written are reminiscent of the Gnostic tradition of the second century; we can see traces of that ancient heretical belief system which contended that the truth was couched in phrases only “those in the know” could unravel. Like other apocryphal writings of the second century, this “Gospel” does not harmonize well with the rest of the Bible. For example, while familiar Biblical names are scattered

throughout (Adam, Eve, Michael, Gabriel), these appear to be outnumbered by strange and extra-biblical names: Barbelo, Nebro, Yaldabaoth, Saklas, Galila, Yobel and Adonaias. On the very first page Jesus is generally described as one who did not encounter His disciples as looking like Himself. Instead He would often be in their presence as a child. As for the disciples, each one is said to have a star assigned or belonging to him. The strange sound and feel of this "Gospel" only increase when the reader encounters a number of strange visions needing interpretation and the introduction of luminaries, virgin spirits, something called "the Self-Generated" and seventy-two aeons, all mixed in with a sort of angelology. In the National Geographic Society translation one can find a section on page 5, with the heading "Adamas and the Luminaries," which depicts such a vision and its unusual elements.

In this Gnostic rewrite of Bible history, in which the devil's lies have replaced God's truth, Judas is portrayed as the misunderstood hero and the lone disciple who had the enlightened star and secret knowledge. In taking him aside from the others, Jesus reveals things to Judas privately and even predicts that Judas will be persecuted by the other disciples. And in stark contradiction to what is reported in the New Testament Gospels, we hear Jesus wanting and telling Judas to betray Him as the way to surpass the other disciples and release Jesus from His body.

#### **4. The light of God's grace vs. the darkness of man's works**

As the product of God's Spirit the true Gospel of Christ reveals the way of salvation by grace through faith in the crucified and risen Savior. As the product of Satan the false "gospel" casts the sinner back on human works and personal merit. Thus, while we find the *Gospel of Judas* stating that Jesus did miracles and other great things to save mankind, we do not find the substitutionary life and death of Jesus set forth as the one and only way to effect the sinner's reconciliation with God. Surely the strong and condemning words of Paul in Galatians 1 will fit what we find (and what is lacking) in the *Gospel of Judas*: "I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed" (Gal. 1:6-9).

In the apostolic Gospel of the New Testament the message of Christ crucified to cleanse guilty sinners shines forth as the clear light of salvation. Such a portrayal of Jesus in the *Gospel of Judas* is sorely missing! Although many references are made to "light" and those who bear light, only the darkness of a human-works religion remains. We thank our gracious God for the light of the New Testament, which points to the true Light Himself in these and many other passages.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it (John 1:1-5).

“Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life” (John 5:24).

“I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life” (John 8:12).

Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ’s behalf, be reconciled to God. For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him (2 Cor. 5:18-21).

Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power (Col. 2:8-10).

Without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up in glory (1 Tim. 3:16).

## 5. A chance to talk about the real Jesus

The *Gospel of Judas* may afford us an opportunity to witness to others. As the topic of the “new” discovery about Jesus is brought up and discussed, we can testify to the real Jesus. It can be as simple as a challenge: “I’ll read the *Gospel of Judas*, if you will read the Gospel of \_\_\_\_\_.” We can fill in the blank by choosing a specific Gospel of the New Testament according to the situation at hand, the needs of the person involved and the distinct purpose of each canonical Gospel. On that basis we can suggest:

- The Gospel of Matthew to show how the promised Savior of the Old Testament is Jesus, who truly fulfilled the Messianic prophecies.
- The Gospel of Mark to offer a quicker read on Jesus’ mission and ministry and to focus especially on what He did.
- The Gospel of Luke to present more details and a longer overview and to emphasize that Jesus is the Savior of all people—Jews and Gentiles, men and women, adults and children.
- The Gospel of John to focus on Jesus as true God, the great “I am,” and to present His other detailed sermons not recorded in the synoptic Gospels.



In this endeavor we are encouraged by the LORD God Himself to go forth with all our confidence in the power of His Word:

“The prophet who has a dream, let him tell a dream; and he who has My word, let him speak My word faithfully. What is the chaff to the wheat?” says the LORD. “Is not My word like a fire?” says the LORD, “and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces? (Jer. 23:28-29).

It is part of human nature to take for granted the real deal, until something else takes its place. Reading the *Gospel of Judas* can by contrast make the brilliance of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John shine all the brighter.

God’s Spirit will see to it that the world will end before any portion of His truth is ever lost. And so, in spite of all the static we hear regarding “lost gospels,” canonicity debates in the early church and the like, the promise of the Lord Jesus has been and will be fulfilled: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away” (Matt. 24:35, Mark 13:31, Luke 21:33). May He graciously preserve it for our justification and sanctification and expose once again the lies and blasphemies of all fake “gospels.”

The study of the *Gospel of Judas* brings to mind the poem “The Anvil of God’s Word” and its fitting portrayal of the Bible’s impregnable, enduring nature.

Last eve I paused beside the blacksmith’s door  
And heard the anvil ring the vesper chime’  
Then looking in, I saw upon the floor  
Old hammers worn with beating years of time.

“How many anvils have you had,” said I,  
“To wear and batter all these hammers so?”  
“Just one,” said he, and then with twinkling eye,  
“The anvil wears the hammers out, you know.”

“And so,” I thought, “the Anvil of God’s Word  
For ages skeptic blows have beat upon,  
Yet, though the noise of falling blows was heard,  
The Anvil is unharmed, the hammers gone.”

The *Gospel of Judas* is just another broken hammer. God’s Word remains, and it alone reveals the true Jesus!

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The only English translation currently available is the 2006 product of Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer and Gregor Wurst, done in collaboration with Francois Guadard and copyrighted by The National Geographic Society. When this issue of the *Journal* went to print, our request for permission to quote from this translation had not been granted.

<sup>2</sup> We are treating the apocryphal *Gospel of Judas* as a man-made document of Gnostic origin; hence nearly every mention of its title in this article is expressed in italics or quotation marks. In contrast, we are treating the Gospel of Mark and the other three Gospels of the New Testament as the verbally inspired Word of God and as books which rightly belong in the New Testament

canon.

<sup>3</sup> According to the online source Wikipedia, Coptic is an extinct Egyptian language used by Christians and others living in Egypt from AD 200 to 1100. Its written form employs a combination of Greek and Egyptian (demotic) letters.

<sup>4</sup> The estimated date range of the manuscript (AD 220-340) is based somewhat on the analysis of the ink and papyrus used, a detailed study of the Coptic script (the handwriting style and lettering used by the scribe) and especially on the carbon dating tests performed in Tucson in 2005, using five different pieces of the codex which were submitted to the radio carbon dating lab at the University of Arizona.

<sup>5</sup> The findings of paleographers, linguists and Coptic scholars have led to the conclusion that the text of the *Gospel of Judas*, which is part of the Codex Tchacos, is not a forgery, nor a writing originally done in Coptic, but the translation into Coptic (or perhaps a copy of this translation) from a Greek text. What this Greek text looked like is unknown. Its existence and probable date of origin prior to AD 180 are based largely on the remarks of the church father Irenaeus, who wrote the following about certain Gnostic heretics at the time: there are some who “declare that Judas the traitor was thoroughly acquainted with these things, and that he alone, knowing the truth as no others did, accomplished the mystery of the betrayal; by him all things, both earthly and heavenly, were thus thrown into confusion. They produce a fictional history of this kind, which they style the Gospel of Judas” (from *Against Heresies*, which Irenaeus wrote around 180). As for the title of the manuscript itself, the Coptic words which translate as “the Gospel of Judas” are plainly discernible at the very end of the text.

<sup>6</sup> What follows below is a summary, not a direct quotation.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Tiefel counted 89 occurrences of this kind of lacuna, using the English translation he downloaded from the National Geographic weblink. It should also be noted that at regular intervals throughout the English document, numbers occur in brackets, ranging in consecutive order from 34 to 58. These seem to indicate the beginning of a new page in the Coptic manuscript.

<sup>8</sup> Pastor Tiefel counted 73 of these.

<sup>9</sup> Lacunae are a common problem in evaluating, transmitting and translating the text of ancient writings. This is largely due to the scant number of extant manuscripts available for study and comparison. However, in the prolific copying and translating of New Testament books done by the early Christian church, the Lord has preserved numerous manuscripts of each book He caused to be written as His verbally inspired Word. In so doing the Lord has faithfully preserved His text, expressed in the four Gospels and the rest of the New Testament, from being lost or even slightly obscured by the destructive forces of Satan, the ravages of time or the carelessness of man.

<sup>10</sup> The National Geographic Society translation has numerous headings. Three of these are scene titles, which identify specific conversations and appearances that Jesus made with the disciples and with Judas.

<sup>11</sup> With two of these Gospels we recognize the direct eyewitness testimony of the apostles Matthew and John. In most of what they recorded they have borne witness to what they saw and heard with their own eyes and ears. Cf. the eyewitness perspective indicated by the apostle John in John 19:35 and 21:24. Cf. also 1 John 1:1-4 and 2 Peter 1:16-21.

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## Books of Interest to Confessional Lutherans

David Lau

In this issue we hope to call attention to three ongoing series of books that may be of interest to our readers, simply because they are written, for the most part, by persons who profess to be confessional Lutherans. With each of the three series the reviewer will also attempt to examine in greater detail a selected volume within that series.

As a side benefit our readers will also gain in this type of review an update on current trends in confessional Lutheranism and the reviewer's comments on what is taking place doctrinally in several Lutheran church bodies in the USA.

### *The Pieper Lectures*

The foreword to the first volume of *The Pieper Lectures* says of them: "These lectures, first held in 1996, were established in honor of Dr. Francis Pieper, professor and president at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, president of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, and teacher of the Church." Ten volumes of these lectures are now in print, published jointly by the Concordia Historical Institute and The Luther Academy, which was founded in 1991 by Robert Preus. The authors of these lectures have been Lutheran theologians, chiefly from the LCMS, but also from other Lutheran bodies, including the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS). The books, all paperbacks, vary in length from 96 pages to 184 pages. They are available at \$11.95 each from The Luther Academy (15825 373<sup>rd</sup> Avenue, Northville, SD 57465). The eleventh lecture, whose topic is Vocation, was scheduled for September 11-12, 2006. The titles are as follows:

- Volume I, 1996: *The Office of the Ministry*
- Volume II, 1997: *Church Fellowship*
- Volume III, 1998: *Pietism and Lutheranism*
- Volume IV, 1999: *What Does It Mean to Be Lutheran?*
- Volume V, 2000: *Lutheran Catholicity*
- Volume VI, 2001: *The American Book of Concord*
- Volume VII, 2002: *Sanctification: New Life in Christianity*
- Volume VIII, 2003: *Preaching through the Ages*
- Volume IX, 2004: *The Bible in the History of the Lutheran Church*
- Volume X, 2005: *Call and Ordination in the Lutheran Church*

From the titles alone we can deduce that an attempt is being made to discuss issues that are currently in debate among confessional Lutherans. Since there are many different authors from various backgrounds, there is no doctrinal unity or specific position promoted in these volumes. In fact, each book clearly states: "The views represented by the individual writers are not necessarily those of Concordia Historical Institute or The Luther Academy."

We doubt that Francis Pieper would appreciate the disunity exhibited in these volumes. It is certain that he would have disagreed with much of the

theology presented, but even more so he would have disagreed with the policy and practice of the various lecturers to remain members of church bodies that have shown themselves to be heterodox by their official pronouncements and actions. We recall what Dr. Pieper once wrote in a *Lehre und Weh-re* article in 1890: "We Missourians consider a church body to be an orthodox fellowship only when the true doctrine sounds forth from all its pulpits, professors' chairs, and in all writings which publicly appear within the fellowship. . . . If any one shows us that even only one pastor preached false doctrine or that even only one periodical is in the service of false doctrine, and we did not remove this false doctrine, we thereby would have ceased to be an orthodox synod, and we would have become a unionistic fellowship. . . . The characteristic mark of an orthodox fellowship is that everywhere in it the pure doctrine alone not only has official standing but also actually is in effect and prevails."

Volume X in the series, entitled *Call and Ordination in the Lutheran Church*, presents six lectures: three by LCMS theologians, one by an ELS pastor at the time of presentation (Rolf Preus), one by an ELCA professor and one by a retired pastor from the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church in Germany (SELK).

The first lecture, by Jobst Schöne of Germany, is a historical study of how Luther and the early Lutherans considered the call and ordination into the public ministry.

This is followed by a lecture of Cameron MacKenzie, dealing with the views on call and ordination held by C. F. W. Walther and the founders of the LCMS. Of special interest here is the controversy between Walther and Grabau of the Buffalo Synod. The LCMS founders had learned through their bitter experience with their first leader, Martin Stephan, that "they did not need a state church, a bishop, or any other clergy to confer upon them what God had first of all given to every congregation and then through their congregations to them" (p. 24). This "transference theory," as MacKenzie calls it, is part of our heritage in the CLC, and it is important for us to restudy this "theory" and assure ourselves that it is grounded in Scripture, since there are many would-be confessional Lutheran leaders who now seem to be favoring Grabau over Walther.

The banquet speech included a translation of an address given by the highly respected Swedish bishop, Bo Giertz (1905-1998). Back in 1957 Bo Giertz said: "Success in my work . . . depends on if I am faithful to that Word which alone can do the work" (p. 41). Sadly, the Church of Sweden has not followed its bishop's lead.

The next lecture, delivered by Rolf Preus (formerly of the LCMS, then of the ELS, but suspended from the ELS ministry at the time this was written), delves into the church and ministry debate between theologians of the Synodical Conference that continued throughout the years of the twentieth century. But this debate, it should be noted, is not just ancient history. For the last few years the ELS has been striving to present a statement on church and ministry that will be acceptable to its members. In 2001 and 2002 the Doctrine Committee of the ELS offered theses that were in basic agreement with the official Wisconsin Synod position on church and

ministry, which is also the position of the CLC on this matter. Briefly stated, the Wisconsin Synod position is that the pastoral ministry is a part of a broader public ministry, which includes teaching in Lutheran schools, synodical administration, theological professors, etc. Likewise, the church is not to be restricted to local congregations, but includes synods and other groupings of Christians for Christian fellowship and various phases of church work. Rolf Preus and other ELS members have opposed this position. He reports: "The ELS was not prepared to embrace as her own confession the official position of the Wisconsin Synod, but she was not prepared to express official disagreement with the Wisconsin Synod position either" (p. 43).

Subsequently, a committee (the Presidium's Committee on Ministry or PCM) appointed by ELS President John Moldstad, Jr. submitted a document on church and ministry that was adopted by the ELS at its 2005 convention. Rolf Preus reports: "After vigorous debate, the document was adopted by a 62% majority, with fourteen pastors and nine laymen recording their negative votes" (p. 43). One of the negative votes was cast by Rolf Preus. He has continued to oppose the PCM document, and his vocal opposition has brought about his suspension.

How does Rolf Preus believe that the matter should be resolved? If I understand him correctly, he is saying that the so-called "transference theory" is at fault. In his view Jesus instituted the pastoral ministry when He gave the Great Commission in Matthew 28, not to all of His disciples, but alone to His eleven apostles. Rolf Preus is apparently saying that both the Wisconsin Synod position and the Missouri Synod position were on the wrong track because of their insistence on the transference of the keys from Christians to those whom they called into the ministry. In his view the ministry has been passed down from the apostles to their successors in the ministry. This sounds like Grabau rather than Walther.

In concluding his lecture, he writes: "I nevertheless believe that if there can ever be a coming together of the two great synods of the former Synodical Conference on this vexing issue the Little Norwegian Synod—the ELS—will play an instrumental role in bringing it about. This will require setting aside the PCM document and starting over again. Finding the divine institution of the public preaching office in Christ's sending out of the eleven apostles will make a good beginning" (p. 59).

The next lecture by Steven Paulson, a member of the ELCA, deals with ecumenical questions. He calls Walther's "transference theory" an "unnecessary addition" (p. 63). At the same time he is among those who have opposed the ELCA agreement with the Episcopalians, arguing that ELCA acceptance of the apostolic ("episcopal") succession of the Episcopal Church USA "has made an adiaphoron into a theological necessity, thus contradicting its own confessional basis" (p. 64). He states the two positions side by side: "Preaching authority is then either handed over from below as if on loan by the royal priesthood, or its authority is held to continue from the apostolate selected and preserved by Christ prior to and above the church which the apostolate then creates" (p. 65). He admits that the ELCA has many other problems as well and really has no doctrinal position, striving at one and the same time to make common cause with both the Reformed and the Roman

Catholic.

The last lecture in Volume X is by George Wollenburg of the LCMS, who makes a stirring defense of Walther's "transference theory." In opposing apostolic succession, he says: "The apostles occupy once-for-all uniqueness in the church. Since they are personally and directly commissioned by the risen Lord as His personal representatives, they do not occupy an office which continues in the church, . . . as in the idea of apostolic succession in Roman Catholic theology. The apostles cannot pass on their appointment to someone else. This immediately removes the possibility that the pastoral office in the church is a continuing of the apostolic authority" (p. 82). He speaks for the freedom of Christians in connection with Gospel preaching and the administration of the sacraments. "There is no indication in the New Testament that questions such as who should preside at the Lord's Supper (the Eucharist), or who should baptize, received any attention" (p. 82). The hierarchy that developed among the early Christians is not something that was instituted by our Lord. Wollenburg's presentation of the historical development of ordination is enlightening.

When we come to Luther and the Reformation, we are reminded once again of the stupendous blessings God bestowed on His church through that man and his associates. Listen to a few of Luther's statements, quoted in Volume X, and rejoice in our heritage:

"The first office, that of the ministry of the Word, therefore, is common to all Christians." The second function of a priest is to baptize, ". . . as part of the public ministry of the church which belongs only to the priesthood. . . ." The third function is to administer the sacred bread and wine.

In this regard Luther says:

"We hold that this function too, like the priesthood, belongs to all. . . ."

"The fourth function consists in binding and loosing from sin. . . . Christ gives both the power and use of the Keys to each Christian. . . ." "The seventh and last function is to judge and pass on doctrines." It is the common right of all Christians (p. 86).

"The community rights demand that one, or as many as the community chooses, shall be chosen or approved who, in the name of all with these rights, shall perform these functions publicly" (pp. 86-87).

In view of these statements of Luther, it is clear that Walther's "transference theory" is really not his, but Luther's; and in fact, not Luther's either, but the Holy Spirit's teaching in the Scriptures. Wollenburg quotes other statements of Luther along these same lines. "Christ begins and institutes the office of the ministry of the external word *in every Christian*" (p. 87, emphasis added by Wollenburg). "This (whosoever sins ye forgive etc.) is not said alone to ministers or the servants of the church, but also to *every Christian*" (p. 87, emphasis added by Wollenburg).

There is a distinction between the priesthood of all believers and the public ministry. This distinction is brought about by a divine call. Wollenburg rightly says: "Such a call is not simply the inner conviction that God wants me to be a preacher. This inner conviction, without the external election or call of the church, does not make a minister of the gospel" (p. 92).

As far as ordination is concerned, Wollenburg says that "the absence of ordination did not prevent a man from teaching or preaching in the

church" (p. 87). He points out that Melanchthon and Chytraeus and even Chemnitz for a time were not ordained, but still were teachers in the church. The LCMS official teaching on ordination is stated clearly in the *Brief Statement* of 1932. But now, says Wollenburg, "ordination has been identified as the means by which the office in which Christ is present in the church is passed on from one minister to another—an apostolic succession" (p. 88). "Pastors . . . insist that only an ordained pastor may distribute the bread and wine in the holy communion, since everyone is to receive the sacred species from 'the hand of Jesus,' that is, the hand of the pastor. For the same reason he must commune himself, since he too must receive the body and blood of the Lord from the hand of Jesus" (p. 99, part of endnote 30). Worse yet, "at a convocation at the Ft. Wayne seminary, a student . . . informed me that no parent could absolve or forgive the sins of his or her children on behalf of God; only the pastor can absolve" (endnote 30, p. 99).

Unfortunately, Wollenburg continues to hold to the view of many in the LCMS that the local congregation and the pastoral ministry in the local congregation are particularly instituted by the Lord, in contrast to other groupings of Christians and other ministries in the church.

### **Congress on the Lutheran Confessions**

The Congress on the Lutheran Confessions began its series of conferences even earlier than the Pieper Lectures. The latest meeting took place in April of 2006. It was called Lecture Series No. 13 and National Free Conference No. 17. The 2006 topic was *We Confess; We Condemn—God's Will and Work in Lutheran Perspective*. This lecture series has been sponsored by the Luther Academy and the Association of Confessional Lutherans.

At a price of \$13.95 each from the same address which distributes *The Pieper Lectures*, the following lectures are available in paperback:

1995: *The Beauty and the Bands—Law and Gospel*

1997: *Church Polity and Politics*

2001: *A Justification Odyssey*

2002: *Feminism and the Church*

2003: *Contemporary Issues in Fellowship—Confessional Principles and Application*

2004: *Divine Multi-Media: The Manifold Means of Grace in the Life of the Church*

I wish to comment on the 2003 lectures contained in volume 10, which is entitled *Contemporary Issues in Fellowship—Confessional Principles and Application*. Ten lectures are included, eight by LCMS pastors or professors, one by a professor in Norway and one by Rolf Preus. These lectures are obviously reacting to the crisis in the LCMS caused by Pastor David Benke's participation in the September 23, 2001 interfaith event in Yankee Stadium, known as "A Prayer for America." In fact, one of the lecturers, Charles Henrickson, lays out in his presentation exactly what happened and what was said on that occasion, so that no argument could dispute what actually took

place. His conclusion was this: "To participate in such a service on its terms sends at best a mixed message: that Jesus is just one option on the smorgasbord of spirituality. Better to refrain and not participate on those premises" (p. 68). What is especially significant in this sorry episode is that Pastor Benke had in 1998 participated in a similar interfaith prayer service, had been admonished by then LCMS President Al Barry and had signed a statement which included these words: "My participation in this service was a direct violation of the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. . . . What I did was wrong. . . . I assure the Synod that I will not repeat this error in the future by participating as an officiant in ecumenical services" (p. 50). Nevertheless, when the opportunity arose in 2001 to potentially repeat his wrong, Pastor Benke did just that, encouraged in his wrong-doing by the new LCMS president Gerald Kieschnick. Sad to say, the majority of the LCMS membership seems to be supporting rather than condemning Pastor Benke's actions.

The other essays in the book deal with the Benke crisis less directly. David Adams points out that faithful confession of Christ's truth inevitably leads to opposition that shows itself in social pressure, cultural coercion and even persecution. As we consider what Christians around the world are undergoing for the sake of Christ, we may be tempted to declare fellowship with them because of what they are suffering. But in keeping with Scripture, Adams points out that "common suffering . . . does not free Christians from the obligation to obey the teachings of the Word of God and to avoid those whose teaching is contrary to the faith that we have received from God through His apostles" (p. 20).

He goes on to say that in an effort to minimize the hostility, Christians are tempted to make compromises with their opponents. Adams mentions five forms of compromise: compromise on the identity of God, compromise on the identity of Jesus, compromise on the nature of the gospel, compromise on the teachings of the faith and compromise on the mission of the church. In this connection Adams rightly says: "When ambiguity is employed as a conscious and intentional means of covering over disagreements so as to allow each party to interpret a statement in its own way, it is nothing other than a lie" (p. 25).

Another danger is that maintaining our institutions becomes more important than faithfulness to God's Word. Adams says in this regard: "We dare not allow our love for our institutions to elevate them beyond their place, lest they become yet more vain idols in the panoply of the gods" (p. 27). To his credit David Adams thus recognizes the dangers of synodolatry, putting synod above God. In another essay at another time (*The Bible in the History of the Lutheran Church*, volume IX in *The Pieper Lectures* series) Adams refers to an LCMS official who said to him: "I know that what you said about what the Bible says is true, but we have to do what is best for the Synod." In response Adams thought, "Doing what the Bible says *is* what is best for the Synod" (p. 41 of *The Bible in the History of the Lutheran Church*).

One would think that Adams would then conclude that he and others should separate from the Missouri Synod as a heterodox church body.



Unfortunately, he himself also seems to be putting synod or reason above the Word of God when he advises: "Today, those conservatives who are concerned about the theological drift of the Synod and who are considering leaving the Synod would do well to remember the lesson of the walk-out [when the false teachers at the St. Louis seminary refused to teach—DL]: the best way to ensure that your opponent wins is to leave" (p. 38 of *The Bible in the History of the Lutheran Church*). Should we not rather do what God's Word says and avoid those whose teaching is contrary to the faith? The "best way" is not to try to determine how to win or lose, but to obey God's Word, as foolish or as counter-intuitive as that may seem to us.

In a short essay Kurt Marquart discusses prayer fellowship. He refers to "the syncretistic joint service at Yankee Stadium, the passionate defense of which is entrenched in the top layers of the synodical bureaucracy, in defiance of Holy Scripture and our trinitarian creeds" (p. 34). This is very strong language, but he too has openly stated that now is not the time to leave the Missouri Synod.

The presentation by Dean Wenthe points out that the true God does not want to be put on a level with false gods. He declares: "Even some conservative publishers (like Eerdmans) are now toying with what they call pluralism, that is, that in this mix of religious options, all have equal validity" (p. 40).

Ronald Feuerhahn's essay discusses the modern concept of tolerance. He rightly shows that "being tolerant can be the opposite of loving. When, for instance, we 'rebuke' a brother for his error, we are expressing the greatest love to him in the hope of recalling him from error" (p. 78). He quotes Bo Giertz as saying: "The world likes to call itself tolerant, but there is one thing which it seldom tolerates, and that is a vibrant Christianity" (p. 83).

David Scaer in his essay shows the close connection between doctrine and practice. When the practice changes, the doctrine changes with it. Gradually people get used to the changed practice, and what they then believe matches the practice. He says: "Our people may react with astonishment to seeing Christian ministers standing side by side with official representatives of other religions, but if they see it often enough, they too will get used to it. . . . I suspect many of our people have already made the adjustment to view Christianity as one option among other religions" (p. 88). Surely he is right when he says: "Now the issue is the exclusivity of Christianity" (p. 88).

Klaus Detlev Schulz discusses the issue of fellowship as it pertains to the foreign church bodies with which the LCMS is in fellowship. Overseas also there are divisions among Lutherans. There are those bodies which are members or associates with the Lutheran World Federation (LWF). Then there are those affiliated with the Missouri Synod. Beyond these are the smaller groups that work with smaller groups in the United States, like the bodies that are partners with the WELS, ELS or the CLC. In 2001 the LCMS declared fellowship with the Lutheran Churches of the Baltic States, even though this group holds membership in the LWF. Klaus Detlev Schulz calls this a "dilemma" and sees it as an example of "disintegration of denominational loyalty" (p. 114). Of course, "the existence of true believers

in other denominations is acknowledged," but still we must "exclude from our church fellowship" those that are caught in the "bonds of error or heresy" (pp. 116-117).

The doctrine and practice of church fellowship has to be taught. William Brege shows that this teaching is done in the pulpit, in catechesis and in the policies of our congregations with respect, for example, to the Lord's Supper. "When a congregation practices close communion the membership learns about church fellowship" (p. 123). The danger is that when so many exceptions are made to the policy, in effect there is no policy.

Knut Alfsvaeg from Norway examines the question of whether a different stance on homosexuality is divisive. God's Word in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 is plain: "Homosexuals . . . will not inherit the kingdom of God." But in Norway the absoluteness of this word is disputed. "Are the apostolic admonitions, including 1 Cor. 6: 9-10, allowed to maintain the weight Paul gives them as a line dividing those inside the church from those outside it? Or are they reduced to apostolic advice well worth listening to, but that in the final analysis one may dispense with?" (p. 138).

The book's last essay, authored by Rolf Preus, defends the traditional practice of the Synodical Conference. "We insist on full doctrinal agreement before we can faithfully acknowledge that church fellowship exists because the doctrine is God's. God tells the truth. False teaching contrary to God's Word will divide and scatter the flock. To tolerate false teaching is to despise the Shepherd whose voice calls the sheep into pasture. It is to despise the sheep who are helpless without their Shepherd. It is to despise the church and her fellowship, because the church is created and united by means of the pure gospel, and not by means of false teaching" (p. 151).

Yet in practice, Preus contends, what happens is that the synod's position becomes the test of orthodoxy rather than the Scriptures and the Lutheran confessions. "Orthodox synods invariably make the synod itself to be the norm of doctrine." What does he mean by that? "It *is* an orthodox synod, therefore its teaching is orthodox and since its teaching is orthodox it serves as the standard for what is orthodox." He uses the Wisconsin Synod as an example: "The Wisconsin Synod's position on fellowship is very simple and easy to understand. If you are in church fellowship with us you are orthodox. If you are not you are not. It is that simple" (pp. 155-157).

We have to admit that this poses something worth our thoughtful attention. It is very difficult for a synod that has been orthodox to admit the possibility of error becoming entrenched in its midst. Therefore we all need to continually reexamine our position in the light of Scripture to determine whether our position is truly orthodox. If other church bodies in the course of time have fallen from their orthodox confession, why would it be impossible for us to do likewise? Majority votes at conventions and even unanimous votes at conventions cannot determine true doctrine in a church body. Only the Scriptures can do that. Rolf Preus would like all confessional Lutheran synods to put aside their previous positions and come together to study Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions. He asks: "If confessional Lutherans can come together to confront the issues that divide them on the basis of the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions without regard to their respective

synodical measuring boards, how can good not come from such efforts?" (p. 162). Of course, from the previous review of the Pieper series we realize that Rolf Preus would also like all confessional Lutheran synods to give up Walther's "transference theory."

### *Lutheran Quarterly Books*

Many years ago there was a theological magazine known as *Lutheran Quarterly*. Theodore Tappert, known among us for his edition of the *Book of Concord*, was one of its editors. In 1987 the publication was revived with the same name and purpose. The purpose is this, as spelled out in every issue: "to provide a forum (1) for the discussion of the Christian faith and life on the basis of the Lutheran confessions; (2) for the application of the principles of the Lutheran church to the changing problems of religion and society; (3) for the fostering of world Lutheranism; and (4) for the promotion of understanding between Lutherans and other Christians."

Since 2003 William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company has published a series of *Lutheran Quarterly Books* with the same aim as the periodical. Since most of the authors are associated with the liberal ELCA, we may wonder whether there can be any understanding of or sympathy for the Lutheran confessions expressed in these books. Here in chronological order are the titles and authors:

*Living by Faith: Justification and Sanctification*, by Oswald Bayer, \$20.00, 2003;

*Harvesting Martin Luther's Reflections on Theology, Ethics, and the Church*, essays edited by Timothy Wengert, \$30.00, 2004;

*A More Radical Gospel: Essays on Eschatology, Authority, Atonement, and Ecumenism*, by Gerhard Forde, \$22.00, 2004;

*The Role of Justification in Contemporary Theology*, by Mark Mattes, \$25.00, 2004;

*The Captivation of the Will: Luther vs. Erasmus on Freedom and Bondage*, by Gerhard Forde, \$20.00, 2005;

*Bound Choice, Election, and Wittenberg Theological Method: From Martin Luther to the Formula of Concord*, by Robert Kolb, \$35.00, 2005;

*A Formula for Parish Practice: Using the Formula of Concord in Congregations*, by Timothy Wengert, \$26.00, 2006.

Timothy Wengert, the author of the last-named book, is the ELCA theologian who collaborated with Robert Kolb, an LCMS theologian, as editor of one of the latest editions of *The Book of Concord* (2000). He has been Professor of Church History at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. Before that he served as pastor of an ELCA congregation in Roberts, Wisconsin.

The remarkable thing about Professor Wengert is that he is fond of the Formula of Concord of 1577 and made practical use of it as a Lutheran pastor. I say that this is remarkable, because most ELCA pastors do not seem to have much love for the Lutheran Confessions, especially for the detailed doctrinal positions of the Formula of Concord. It seems almost

unfathomable that someone like Professor Wengert can remain associated with the ELCA, which has not found it possible to confess the inerrancy of Holy Scripture, but has found it possible to practice church fellowship with Roman Catholics, Episcopalians and the Reformed, whose positions are specifically condemned in the Formula of Concord.

Professor Wengert's presentation and comments on the various articles of the Epitome of the Formula of Concord seem to be quite sound for the most part. His pattern in the discussion of each article is to present the historical background, then to give the text of the Epitome, then to comment on the text and then finally to give some suggestions as to how put the article into practice in the congregation. At the close of each presentation there are discussion questions.

In connection with his discussion of the Lord's Supper Wengert does not discuss the question of celebrating the sacrament together with Roman Catholics and the Reformed. He presents the confessional Lutheran position and then discusses such questions as what to do with the leftover elements. He teaches the real presence of Christ's body and blood, but avoids the question of participation together with those who deny the real presence. He says: "Sunday worship becomes the weak person's weekly encounter with our Savior, who strengthens us with his presence and excludes no one" (p. 135). This would seem to indicate Wengert's agreement with the concept of open communion. But this does not agree with Luther, who wrote in his Large Catechism: "We do not intend to admit to the sacrament and administer it to those who do not know what they seek or why they come" (*The Book of Concord*, Kolb-Wengert edition, p. 467).

In his discussion of Christ's descent into hell Wengert allows for open questions in areas where Scripture has given us clear answers. It is no doubt true that we do not have much information on Christ's descent into hell, and that there is little for us to say on this point. But Wengert compares this teaching with the doctrine of creation and argues: "In a similar way we can view the story of creation as answering not *how* but *who* created the heavens and the earth. Those who read Genesis 1-2 literally will view the world as created in six twenty-four-hour days. Those who read the same text figuratively will not. However, when the former spend so much time defending their creationist theories or the latter spend so much time disparaging them, and when either group anathematizes the other, then everyone loses" (p. 160). Thus Wengert considers the how of creation as an "open question."

In this same chapter on the descent into hell Wengert defends the view of the old Iowa Synod that millennialism is also an "open question." He says on pages 158-159: "The question of the millennium (Christ's 1,000-year reign on earth) arose for Lutherans in America. Leaders in the Iowa Synod, as it was then called, objected to other Lutherans' certainty that such a reign would not happen by arguing that some doctrines are 'open questions' that do not require a final answer. This concept of open questions, based in part on this article in the Formula, later passed into the constitution of the original American Lutheran Church (1930-60)."

Wengert's comments on the article concerning predestination are

good. He says: "The concordists' view of predestination is broken, that is, God's election extends only to the righteous. This position makes no logical sense. After all, the rational argument goes, if God chooses some for salvation, surely God, by passing over others, has ipso facto chosen those others for damnation. Yet, as we will see below, reason has nothing to do with election and only confuses the issue. The concordists' point is rather that for believers God's choice alone is 'a cause of their salvation, which God brings about'" (p. 190).

At the close of the book there is a helpful glossary containing persons, terms and concepts from the Reformation and post-Reformation periods.

### In Conclusion

What shall we say in conclusion about all these recent writings of those who want to be known as confessional Lutherans? Certainly we can learn some valuable history and consider explanations and applications of Scripture contained in these writings. We can gain insights into how to deal with many current issues on the basis of Scripture and the Confessions. But in general the problem with almost all of these writers is that they confess with their mouths and not with their actions. They seem to rejoice in the heroic words and deeds of Luther and the confessional Lutherans of previous times. But in our own time, when the situation in the Lutheran churches is so critical, all they do is talk and debate. It seems that most of them cannot even conceive of the possibility of actually separating themselves from the church bodies which they themselves have demonstrated to be heterodox.

Our predecessors who founded our church body in the late fifties and early sixties of the previous century were also confessional Lutherans. But they did not just write papers about false teaching and practice. They did not just discuss the meaning of Romans 16:17-18 and how it was understood by previous generations. They took action because they believed that God's Word gave them no choice. They might not have been scholars to the same level of accomplishment as the authors of the books under review. But they were sincere in their desire to do what God's Word told them to do. They boldly left the fellowships which they believed had become heterodox. Their leaving was bold because there was no church organization they could join at the time. Pastors and teachers resigned from their positions, or their synods and congregations removed them from their positions because of their testimony, and there was no place for them to go. They temporarily lost any source of income and had to trust their Lord's promises to provide for their needs. They learned to know from personal experience a little bit of what Luther and the early Lutherans learned from their experiences: the hatred of the world and the criticism of Lutherans who wanted to play it safe.

In contrast, the authors of the books we are reviewing, for the most part, fall short of being confessional Lutherans, because they are compromising Melanchthonians. Perhaps like Melanchthon they are worrying too much about what will happen to them or their church bodies if they act on the principles they espouse. Men like David Adams and Kurt Marquart say things so well, but then they strongly advise their loyal church members against separating from a church body that has made its heterodox position

plain for so many years.

May the present generation of confessional Lutherans in our Church of the Lutheran Confession remember that confession means more than talk and discussion. At times, in obedience to God's Word it means action; it means sacrifice; it means willingness to suffer and even die for the cause of Christ. It also means depending ever and always on the grace of God and the power of the Spirit of truth as the only way to be faithful to the orthodox confession He has given to us.

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