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Pastor Paul F. Nolting

Paul Fleischer

Pastor Paul F. Nolting, who long served as synod secretary as well as being on the synod's Board of Doctrine for a time, was undoubtedly one of the more influential and gifted pastors in the initial formation, earliest history and first quarter century of the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC).

Pastor Nolting was a theologian – a word we don't use lightly. He was a thoroughly scriptural man. Whatever doctrinal subject was under discussion – whether he was writing serial bulletin articles on a selected Bible doctrine, or whether he was speaking or writing at the synodical level (especially when a controversy was going on within this confessional Lutheran synod) – Pastor Nolting could be counted on to give clear witness to scriptural truth and orthodox Lutheran doctrine on the matter and to give bold testimony against doctrinal error in whatever form.

For many years Pastor Nolting produced (first on his own and with the help of congregation members, later with the blessing and support of the CLC) the weekly Ministry by Mail, which provided copies of weekly sermons to hundreds of subscribers. Those who received the sermons from Pastor Nolting would also receive a church bulletin, which typically contained far more than specific details of the Sunday service. The last two pages would often be a theological treatment of a portion of Holy Scripture or of some current, timely, even controversial issue which was in the forefront of an orthodox Lutheran synod's witness before a watching world.

In the years leading up to and immediately following the formation of the CLC, Pastor Nolting shepherded Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in Sleepy Eye, Minnesota. It was not a coincidence that Sleepy Eye would also be the site of one of the organizational meetings of the new synod in 1959. The pastor and members of Grace were instrumental in hosting, arranging and seeing to the conducting of such a meeting.

This writer happened to be pastor at Grace during the time the congregation marked its fortieth anniversary in 1999. For the first of two anniversary services held that year, the first pastor of the congregation, Paul F. Nolting, then retired and living in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, served as guest preacher on April 18, while his son Pastor Paul D. Nolting (Mankato, Minnesota), also a pastor-son of the congregation, conducted the liturgy.

To our knowledge the anniversary message delivered was one of the last sermons preached by the elder Nolting, whose physical health had begun to fail. Yet we remember the sermon well. The text was Ephesians 6:10-18; the theme was "STAND! ARMED FOR BATTLE!" We recall particularly the sermon's introduction. The preacher began by reminding the charter members and other celebratory anniversary guests of events which led to the formation of Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church. Some Christian congregations, it was pointed out, have come into existence as "mission" congregations; that is, they were formed as a result of the Spirit planting the seed of the gospel word in that location. Other Christian congregations, it was said, have come into existence as "stand-up" churches.

What is a "stand-up" church? Well, said Pastor Nolting, it is a church that comes into existence because its members have taken a stand for something. "That, members of Grace, is where you came from; that is what your

congregation is: a stand-up church!” The preacher went on to explain that, moved by consciences bound to the truth and purity of God’s Word, members of an already established Christian congregation had come out from among a former fellowship, because their former church had become guilty of promoting and defending false doctrine. They knew, as Scripture teaches, that the leaven of false doctrine inevitably grows and threatens even the gospel itself. Thus, to preserve within their midst the Word of God in its truth and purity, these “stand-up” members reorganized themselves into a new congregation.

After the attention-getting introduction the balance of the speaker’s message based on the chosen text was, as we recall, a holy encouragement to current members of Grace to “take up the whole armor of God ... and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth...” (Eph. 6:13-14). As he had done so often in the past – whether in front of Grace congregation or another congregation he was serving, or whether before a gathering at synodical conferences and conventions – the balance of Pastor Nolting’s sermon was a clear trumpet call to stand up for Jesus and His word of truth, upholding and defending orthodox Lutheran doctrine and its core teaching, the gospel of God’s unconditional love and grace toward sinners on the basis of the merits of His Son Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord!

When the anniversary service concluded, Pastor Nolting led an informal Bible class attended by many of the charter members of Grace. Much reminiscing took place, as pastor and congregation rehearsed details about the congregation’s founding.

Throughout his ministry Pastor Nolting was eager to take up “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” to address a variety of scriptural and doctrinal issues. With facile pen, with a balanced law/gospel presentation and with a holy concern to uphold the analogy of Holy Scripture, whatever the topic, Nolting addressed burning issues of the day and timely issues confronting the church militant.

For example, early on (while still at Grace of Sleepy Eye) a concerned pastor wrote in the congregational yearbook timely articles giving sound scriptural evaluation of the actions and inactions of the Wisconsin Synod in its then ongoing fellowship with an erring Missouri Synod in the old Synodical Conference. Also for the benefit of his congregation at the time Pastor Nolting wrote yearbook articles on “The Problem of the Isolated Believer.” These articles were compiled together as a tract of the same name to be distributed to a wider audience and offer practical pastoral counsel and encouragement for CLC members who found themselves “isolated” due to great distance from a CLC congregation.

After moving on from the ministry in Sleepy Eye, Nolting served at Holy Trinity Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church of West Columbia, South Carolina, where he produced an essay series (25-30 articles in Sunday bulletins during 1971) on the biblical doctrine of predestination. This series was subsequently compiled and reproduced in a 25-page booklet, which has been used as a study guide for students at Immanuel Lutheran College in Eau Claire. His ministry at Holy Trinity also led to the writing of additional essays, again in serial form in Sunday bulletins (November 1971-July 1972) on such subjects as “The Christian Woman,” “Church Fellowship,” which addressed in particular Close Communion, and “The Distinctive Characteristic of Christianity,” which addressed Freemasonry and Scouting. These articles were later compiled and printed in “Hard Sayings,” a 37-page booklet which for years and even to this day has made the rounds inside and outside the synod to those looking for a clear setting forth of scripturally based, orthodox Lutheran teaching on the matter at hand.

Throughout his years as a pastor serving congregations in many places, Paul F. Nolting demonstrated a sustained interest and proficiency in the areas of eschatology and prophecy. Consequently, his work in these areas resulted in a variety of bulletin articles and sermons as well as contributions to the *Journal of Theology* on the topics of “Dispensationalism” and the “Olivet Discourse” of Christ. One unique fruit of this study was his willingness to give seminars on prophetic books such as Daniel, Ezekiel and Revelation. Also, the intertwining of religion and politics (church and state) caught the attention of Nolting, as he exposed the “social gospel” for what it truly was and is: a distortion and pollution of the true gospel (“another gospel which is not another”). Like many of his writings mentioned so far, his refutation of the “social gospel” is available today as a CLC Bookhouse pamphlet.

In the late 70’s and early 80’s when the Third Use of the Law controversy was at the forefront in the synod, Pastor Nolting became one of the chief writers and presenters of the doctrine on the basis of Holy Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions. Again, many serialized articles appeared, which treated the subject from various angles. These articles were eventually brought together in the form of an extended presentation at a specially called meeting of the synod’s pastors in Mankato. Although there were questions not answered, a thorough discussion ensued, lasting some years, and the Spirit of God eventually brought about a scriptural unity. Nolting’s writings on the “Third Use” have lived on in more recent years, as the *Journal of Theology* reprinted his series in volume 43 (issues 3 and 4) and volume 44 (issue 1).

Now that another of the founding fathers of the CLC has gone to his heavenly rest through the merits of Jesus, we do well to remember those who have gone before us. Pastor Nolting, “being dead, yet speaks” through his extant,

Bible-based writings, many of which have served as edifying content of the pages of our synod publications.

This is just one long-time colleague's attempt to acknowledge some of the contributions, both written and oral, that the Lord of the Church has provided the Church of the Lutheran Confession through His servant, Pastor Paul F. Nolting. Blessed be his memory and his ongoing testimony and witness among us!

THE CHRISTIAN'S STATE: COMPLETE IN CHRIST AND KNOWING CHRIST

Paul F. Nolting

Editor's Note: In the course of selecting material by P.F. Nolting for reprinting in this issue, two Journal of Theology articles which he contributed in 1975 appealed to me as having common Christocentric ground and even as suggesting an overarching theme. Hence the title above has been added by the editor, not the author, and the two articles are here combined as one reprinting. Part I below originally appeared as "In Christ Jesus" in the September 1975 issue (Vol. 15, No. 3). It is suggested that the reader study through Colossians 1-3 in connection with part I and Philippians 3 in connection with part II, originally titled "Knowing Christ = To Experience the Power of His Resurrection and Fellowship of His Sufferings." Part II was written 30 years ago as a separate article in the December issue (Vol. 15, No. 4). The author's use of passages in the King James Version has generally been retained throughout both parts. Supplementary and explanatory endnotes have been included by the editor.

I. The Christian: Perfect and Complete In Christ Jesus

PERFECT AND COMPLETE IN CHRIST

This is the condition of each believer in Jesus Christ. So Paul wrote to the Colossians. In his letter Paul held aloft the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ, through whose redemption we have the forgiveness of sins, who is the very Image of the invisible God, the Firstborn in relation to all creation (for He is the very Creator of the universe), the eternal One, the Head of the Church, the Firstborn from the dead, the One in whom all fullness dwells, the One who brought peace and reconciled all things unto Himself, the Mystery concealing all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, the One in whom all the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily. What a heaping up of expressions, phrases, clauses – all exalting our Lord Jesus Christ above everything and everyone in heaven and on earth! Why this paean?

Theology is practical! Jesus Christ is exalted by Paul because in Him all believers are exalted. Colossians 2:9 is a memory passage for catechetical students because of its capsulated Christological truth: "In him – JESUS CHRIST – dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily!" So what? What benefit is this fact to the common Christian? Paul continued in verse 10: "And ye are complete in him" – that same JESUS CHRIST.

This is the truth that was being challenged and denied in Colosse, even as it is in our day. There were those who were peddling a "superior" form of Christianity, which consisted in subservience to the Mosaic Law (2:16), worshiping angels (2:18) and saying "No" to certain forms of matter (2:21). It was an effort to attain a superior sanctification and so a higher form of Christianity through legalism, the occult worship of angels and asceticism. To all these efforts, which were in fact a rejection of Christ, Paul said "No!" He exalted Christ because Christ exalts all believers.

The believer is *perfect*, or mature (τέλειος), and *complete* (πεπληρωμένος). These are synonymous terms, yet with differing concepts and emphases. A τέλος is a goal. The sinner reaches his goal, his maturity, the highest stage of development possible in this life when he is "in Christ Jesus." He reaches that goal the moment he is brought to faith in Christ, but the word has an eschatological overtone that points to a fuller maturity which shall be manifest when the sinner appears with Christ in glory (Col. 3:4). The word *complete* describes the Christian as a vessel filled to the brim, with no possible moral or spiritual excellence lacking or capable of being added when he is "in Christ Jesus." "Complete" is here expressed as a perfect participle, indicating that the moment a sinner is brought to faith in Christ, he is "complete," with this completeness continuing on as long as he remains in Christ.

In Colossians 1:28 Paul states that the purpose of his Gospel ministry is to "present every man perfect (τέλειον) in Christ Jesus." In 2:9-10 he writes, "In him – Christ Jesus – dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily, and ye are complete (filled up – πεπληρωμένοι) in him." In 4:12 Paul uses both terms, stating that the efforts of Epaphras, the founder of the congregation, had been directed toward this end, that "ye may stand perfect (τέλειοι) and complete (πεπληρωμένοι) in all the will of God."

A Christian is perfect, mature, complete, filled up “in Christ Jesus.” Outside of Christ he is as a fish lying on the shore or a mammal submerged in the waters – fallen from grace and doomed to death.

Wherein does that perfection, or maturity, and completeness consist? In Christ Jesus is all knowledge and wisdom – the key to all theology, the key to understanding God’s relations to man and the sinner’s relations to God. That knowledge is the personal realization by faith that God loved and loves sinners who stand condemned before the bar of divine holiness and justice and also that, despite the fact that all sinners are worthy of eternal death, God has forgiven all in and through Christ Jesus. Thus the highest and most lofty knowledge available here on earth is the knowledge of the grace of God in Christ Jesus.

In Christ Jesus is righteousness; in man is unrighteousness. The virtues of man apart from Christ, the very best that the noblest of men can produce, praised and rewarded as they may be by men, are nothing more than glittering vices when viewed in the light of God’s holiness. No man can stand divine inspection of his works. No man can pass the test or measure up to the divine norm. In Christ Jesus alone is there righteousness that satisfies the demands for unailing and undiminished love Godward and manward.

In Christ Jesus is sanctification. The believer sins in all his good works; yet he is nonetheless holy in all his works because all his sins of commission and omission that attend upon his good works are forgiven and covered by the righteousness of Christ.

In Christ Jesus we have reached the goal of human existence, the fullness of human potential here on earth. In Him we are perfect and complete. Apart from Him we are but dust and ashes, and the best that we can produce ourselves is nothing but filthy rags. In Him we live and shall live forevermore. Apart from Him is only death and eternal separation from God in the midst of indescribable anguish and torment.

COMPLETE IN CHRIST, YET EVER MATURING

Can one be complete in Christ, yet incomplete? Perfect or matured, yet maturing? Yes! This is not a contradiction, but a paradox. How so? St. Paul wrote with both a present or now point of view and with a future or eschatological point of view.

“In him – Jesus Christ – dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily. And ye are complete in him” (Col. 2:9-10). That was for the Colossians and is for all Christians the present reality, the “now” of our situation.

But earlier, when speaking of his Gospel ministry, Paul had written, “Whom (Christ) we preach, warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom; that we may present every man perfect (τέλειον) in Christ Jesus” (1:28). What does Paul have in mind when he speaks of “presenting” each and all of the Colossians? A line from his second letter to the Corinthians gives us the proper perspective: “We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ” (II Cor. 5:10). Paul’s perspective is eschatological, looking to the end time of final judgment, which likewise marks the time of the entrance into the final goal for the sinner, that of living ἐν δόξῃ (Col. 3:4).

We observe also that after stating that the Colossians were complete in Christ, Paul continues in a subsequent section, chapter three, to warn against the lusts of the flesh and to encourage the fruits of faith: “Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth...” (3:5); “put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering” (3:12). In 3:10 Paul speaks of the Colossians as people who “have put on the new man which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him.” It would appear as though the Colossians possessed all knowledge, but not so, for in the opening section of his letter Paul had told the Colossians that he had not ceased “to pray for you, and to desire that ye might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in (or by means of) the knowledge of God” (1:9-10). Paul prayed both for an increase of knowledge and for a greater effectiveness of that knowledge in the lives of the Colossians.

How are we to understand this paradox: the Christian has glorious completeness in Christ and yet experiences continuing maturing until that last great day? We understand it in this way: we and all believers are complete in Christ now by imputation. All of the gifts of Christ – righteousness and holiness, knowledge and wisdom, and sanctification – are wholly and completely ours by imputation, that is, by faith in Christ Jesus now. Yet it has pleased the Lord in His infinite wisdom to let remain in each child of God his sinful flesh, indwelling sin, which clings to him and remains stubbornly and unalterably contrary to every Word of God, both Law and Gospel, and remains persistently and consistently immune to any and every impulse of the Holy Spirit. So it is that we are both presently complete in Christ by imputation and presently ever maturing in Christ until the moment of death and/or the coming of our Lord at the end of time.

Consider these parallels: redemption is complete in Christ, yet we await a final redemption. “All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus”

(Rom. 3:23-24). “We ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body” (Rom. 8: 23).

Justification is complete in Christ, yet justifying is ongoing. The Gospel is the proclamation and thus the offer of “the righteousness of God” (Rom. 1:17, 5:17) in Christ, but “a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law” (Rom. 3:28). “Righteousness” (δικαιοσύνη) and “justify” (δικαιώω) are noun and verbal forms of the same root in Greek. The justification of the world is complete in Christ (objective justification); it is appropriated by faith in an ongoing action on the part of God (subjective justification) until the end of time, for we daily sin much and He daily and richly forgives all our sins.

So it is also with reconciliation: “God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself” (II Cor. 5:19). Thus the world was and is objectively reconciled in Christ. Then follows the appeal: “We pray you in Christ’s stead, be ye reconciled to God” (II Cor. 5:20). Again, reconciling is both complete in Christ and an ongoing action as each individual is brought to faith and continues in faith until the last day.

In his first letter to the Corinthians Paul testified that the Christian’s sanctification is complete in Christ: “Of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us ... sanctification” (I Cor. 1:30).¹ The same Paul concluded his first letter to the Thessalonians with the wish that “the very God of peace sanctify you wholly” (I Thess. 5: 23). We are sanctified, yet not wholly. What is lacking in our sanctification is stated by Luther in his well-known observation: “A pious man sins in all his good works.” Yet that we are completely sanctified is expressed by Augustine in this way: “All the commandments of God are fulfilled when whatever is not done is forgiven.” So we are now sanctified in Christ by faith by which the righteousness of Christ is continually imputed to us. We continue to be sanctified through the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit who works faith by the Gospel. And we await the time when we shall be sanctified in glory.

DISROBING – ENROBING

What activity is continually characteristic of a Christian who is at once complete in Christ and yet ever maturing in Christ, who is both justified and sanctified in Christ, yet ever being justified and sanctified in Christ? It is the spiritual activity that Scripture describes as disrobing and enrobing, undressing and dressing, putting off and putting on.

Again, at the beginning of Colossians 3 St. Paul stresses the tension and paradox between the now situation of the Christian and his future situation. Now “ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God” (3:3). Now we are dead to the flesh, the world, the devil and our sins, while being alive, righteous and sanctified in Christ. But that condition, which is ours by imputation of all the blessings of Christ to us, is hid from the eyes of the world and frequently from our own eyes! “When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory” (3:4). That’s the future, the last day and forever thereafter. Then and only then shall what is hidden be revealed. Then we shall be fully matured, wholly sanctified and glorified through Christ. What unspeakable glory awaits us!

How are Christians to manifest and give evidence of what is hidden now, but shall one day be revealed? By daily disrobing and enrobing, putting off and putting on. St. Paul gives this exhortation in verses 5 through 15 of Colossians 3, on the basis of which he then applies the essential activity to specific situations in which there is always a relationship of one to another: wives and husbands, children and parents, slaves and masters.

The first disrobing is expressed in a violent manner: “Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth” (3:5). Then follows an enumeration of some of the lusts of the flesh that are to be put to death. In verse 8 the call comes again to “put off all these!” What is to be put off? “Anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy communication out of your mouth. Lie not one to another” (3:8-9).

Next the entire matter is summed up: “Seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds” (3: 9). The “old man” is the spiritual sickness in which we are born that pollutes our thinking, willing and feeling.

Disrobing alone would leave us naked. So a complementary activity is necessary: “And have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him” (3:10).

What does this “putting on the new man” mean or involve or entail? It is the ethical activity of enrobing or dressing oneself in godly virtues. It is an exhortation to the Spirit-given “heart of flesh” (Ezek. 11:19) to enlist the members of the body “as instruments of righteousness” (Rom. 6:13) to the end that the Christian walk according to the law written in his inward parts and in his heart (Jer. 31:33). St. Paul expresses such an exhortation in his letter to the Colossians in these words: “Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; forbearing one another, and forgiving one another.... Put on charity.... Let the peace of God rule in your hearts.... Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.... And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him” (Col. 3:12-17).

Note carefully that these commands to disrobe and enrobe, to put off and put on, are directed to Christians, who

had previously been told and assured that they were and are “complete in him” – CHRIST (2: 10). What a gloriously paradoxical truth this is! We live day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute complete in Christ by faith, for His righteousness is constantly imputed to us. So we can live, always ready and prepared to die, so that we may live forevermore. Yet our Lord has not chosen to sanctify us wholly, except by imputation. He has left the cross of the flesh in us with the result that our daily, hourly, minute by minute life is to be a putting off and a putting on until the moment of death, when we put off the flesh permanently, and the moment of the resurrection, when we put on the new man wholly and eternally.

Paul expresses the same truths in the companion letter to the Ephesians, beginning in chapter four. The Lord of the Church established the public ministry of the Gospel to bring individuals “unto a perfect man” (εἰς ἄνδρα τέλειον). Beginning at Ephesians 4:17 and continuing to the end of the epistle, Paul spells out this maturing in terms of *disrobing* and *enrobing*, *putting off* and *putting on*.² He says in verses 22 and 24: “That ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man ... and that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness.” Specific examples of “putting off” and “putting on” follow, which in turn are followed, as in Colossians, by applications to persons in specific relationships.

A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE: CREATION TO RESTORATION

“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them” (Gen. 1:27). God wanted man to reflect His nature. Man in his intellectual, volitional and emotional life was to reflect the holy, moral will of his Creator, and that freely and willingly. In order that it might be evident whether man, who was created with a morally free will, would exercise that freedom of will in a way that reflected his being created in the image of God was the purpose of the test command in the garden. Man failed the test.

Scripture does not say in express words that the image of God was lost to man. It prefers, rather, to outline the degeneration of man over the centuries that led God to the determination that He had to destroy the first world. Having done that, God declared that judgment would be no cure, “for the imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth” (Gen. 8:21). Judgment could not even begin to enable man again to reflect the moral nature of his Creator.

Yet God was determined that man should fulfill his original intention that he image or reflect the holy, moral nature of his Creator. The Father, who knew all things, including the tragedy of the fall into sin, predestinated us already from eternity “to be conformed to the image of his Son” (Rom. 8:29).

Then in the fullness of the time “God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law” (Gal. 4:4). In so living under the law, which is the verbalization of the eternal, immutable, moral will of God, the Son reflected in every relationship with His heavenly Father and His earthly family, with men and women, friends and enemies, the moral will of His Father. As a man among men, subject to the temptations common to man, He lived as “the image of the invisible God.” (Col. 1:15). Jesus lived freely and fully as God wanted Adam and Eve to live, as He wants all men to live and as all the inhabitants of heaven shall live.

Man, however, is born with no capability to live in a way that reflects the image of God. Something that was once man’s in the garden of Eden, but that had been lost, must be restored. The prophets indicated the need: “Thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power” (Ps. 110:3). “I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts” (Jer. 31:33). Our Lord made rebirth a prerequisite for entrance into the Kingdom of God (John 3:5).

When the Spirit of God creates faith in Jesus Christ, which also gives the sinner pardon from his sins and covers him with the protective shield of the righteousness of Christ, He simultaneously makes the sinner a new creature (II Cor. 5:17, Gal. 6:15).³

That which is new, completely different from the old, lives to do its work of reflecting the moral will of God in an environment of the old, which continues to oppose the moral will of God at every point. The result is that the life of a child of God is characterized by unceasing struggle (Gal. 5:17). The new creation – the restored image, the “inward man,” the “new man,” however he is called in Scripture – is to reflect the holy, moral will of God in the entire intellectual, volitional and emotional life of the child of God. Though this is impossible to achieve as long as the flesh remains, the Christian is to pursue this goal with unflagging zeal.

Because the Christian cannot and does not completely reflect the holy will of God in his life, Scripture speaks as it does. It exhorts the Christian, who is completely and perfectly justified and sanctified in Christ, decisively to put on the new man, who is already on but in a manner that needs continual renewing. Though the new man has been put on, the Christian never succeeds in reflecting perfectly the will of his holy Creator. As long as the Christian remains in faith in Christ Jesus, he is covered with the protective shield of Christ’s righteousness which grants him perfect sanctification. Yet during this same time, yea until death, he is exhorted daily to put on the new man and put off the old, that is, to live a life of daily repentance, until he loses his flesh in death and is granted the resurrection body in life hereafter,

henceforth to reflect completely and fully the holy, moral will of his Creator.

Until then the Christian at times cries out in anguish with St. Paul: “O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?” (Rom. 7:24). At times he talks to himself and exhorts himself as did the psalmist: “Why art thou cast down, O my soul? And why art thou disquieted within me? Hope thou in God!” (Ps. 42:11). So we live from day to day, ever and always complete in Christ, yet ever and always maturing until that day when we shall wholly, fully, perfectly, freely reflect the holiness of our God in an untarnished environment of love.

II. Knowing Christ = To Experience the Power of His Resurrection and Fellowship of His Sufferings

(Philippians 3)

Philippians 3 is autobiographical, but at the same time polemical, doctrinal and hortatory.

REJOICE IN THE LORD

“Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord!” (Phil. 3:1). This is to be the distinguishing feature of the Christian’s life. Paul is not talking about a belly laugh evoked by some type of humor. On the contrary, he is talking about the inner joy that is essential to good mental and spiritual health and acts as a gyroscope amidst the storms of life. That joy flows from and ever seeks renewed stimulation in the Lord.

What greater treasure could anyone possess? For this reason it must be guarded at all costs. So St. Paul warns frankly and forcefully against those who would destroy that source of joy. He calls those people “dogs,” “evil workers,” and “the mutilation.” In speaking that way, Paul would cause no small stir in most churches today that consider false doctrine to be wholesome variant opinions from spiritually fertile minds and deem false prophets to be eminent biblical scholars. Paul called his opponents “the mutilation,” which in the Greek is a play upon the word “circumcision.”⁴ By their insistence upon circumcision as a necessary supplement to Christ, they were not only advocating mutilation of the body but were actually mutilating and so destroying the spiritual life of those who followed them, for as Paul wrote to the Galatians, “Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace” (Gal. 5:4).

RIGHTEOUSNESS! BUT WHOSE?

Paul’s opponents emphasized righteousness, but they stressed a righteousness that man had to acquire by his own efforts. When it came to that kind of righteousness, Paul excelled all his opponents. He gave a brief biographical sketch to prove his point: “Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless” (Phil. 3:5-6). None of his opponents could marshal such a list of credits. If it was a matter of accumulating brownie points or merit badges with the Lord, Paul would have stood first in line.

But on the road to Damascus and later from Ananias Paul learned the basic spiritual truth: that any and all man-made righteousness is totally inadequate; that the harder man strives for righteousness, the farther he pushes himself away from it. The world considers it an indisputable truth that man must and can produce a righteousness that can be acceptable to God. Paul was taught that this highest wisdom of man is a pernicious, soul-destroying lie of Satan.

He expressed himself thus: “But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung that I may win Christ, and be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith” (Phil. 3:7-9).

In the moment of his conversion Paul was taught by the Spirit to look away from himself and to fasten his gaze solely on Christ. Righteousness is absolutely necessary for salvation. No one can stand before God without it! But the question remains: “Whose righteousness?” Not the sinner’s, for “all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags” (Isa. 64:6). The best that any person can produce can merit him nothing better than a one-way ticket to hell. Righteousness we need and have to have! That is why the Father dispatched His Son into this world. When Paul by the power of the Spirit “won Christ” and was “found in him,” he acquired by faith that righteousness which covers as a blanket the filthy rags of his own righteousness. From that moment on he found himself complete in Christ.

Knowing Christ means getting rid of what we have and must be rid of – our sins – and getting what we don’t have but must have – righteousness. Thus the expressions “to win Christ” and “to be found in Christ” in Philippians mean the same thing as being “complete in Christ” in Colossians. It is this blessing of forgiveness/righteousness that moves the Christian to rejoice in the Lord always.

In Philippians 3:8-9 Paul defined “winning Christ” and “being found in Him” in terms of righteousness, specifically in exchanging his own righteousness, which he characterized as being “of the law,” for the righteousness of God which is by faith in Christ.

However, Paul was not content to let the matter rest. He continued explaining and defining what he meant by winning Christ and being found in Him. It meant to know Christ by personal experience,⁵ that is, to experience “the power of His resurrection and fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death” (3:10). The eye quickly passes over these words and the tongue easily speaks them, but the mind must pause even to begin to grasp the content of these words.

EXPERIENCING THE POWER OF HIS RESURRECTION

When had Paul been taught to exchange his righteousness for the righteousness of Christ? It was when he experienced the power of Christ’s resurrection on the road to Damascus. Remember that this same Paul had consented to the death of Stephen as he kept watch over the clothes of those who stoned him (Acts 7:58; 8:1), that he was snorting out threats and death against the Christians (9:1) and that he was on his way to exercise his unholy zeal for the righteousness of the law by rounding up Christians who had been taught to exchange that righteousness for the righteousness of Christ (9:2). But his proposed career of championing the righteousness of the law came to an abrupt end when he was confronted near Damascus with the very One who had been condemned to death by the Sanhedrin, and justly so, as Paul believed. How could a dead man speak? He heard his name called, “Saul, Saul!” He heard his career analyzed in a way that he never could have thought of it: “Why persecutest thou me?” In that instant he experienced the power of the Lord’s resurrection, for the risen Lord stopped him in his tracks, smote him with blindness, gave him three days to ponder the error of his thinking and life and then sent him one of His faithful servants to bring him the assurance of forgiveness and the grace of baptism (Acts 9:3-18).

PAUL’S PREACHING

From that time on Paul lived a life created by the power of Christ’s resurrection to which he bore testimony in season and out of season. The power of the resurrection broke forth naturally and inevitably as the climax of Paul’s message, wherever and whenever presented. For example, St. Luke recorded Paul’s sermon at Antioch in Pisidia, where the preacher Paul reviewed the sacred history of his people, showing how that history came to a climax when God raised up the Christ by sending His Son in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, whose career came to a climax when God raised Him up from the dead, even as David had prophesied in the 16th Psalm (Acts 13:16-41).

Likewise, before the sophisticated Athenians Paul stood on Mars’ hill and proclaimed the saving counsel of God. The climactic feature of the resurrection was again presented as he spoke of the day of final reckoning when judgment would be conducted by the very man whom God had raised from the dead (Acts 17:22-31).

In his defense before King Agrippa St. Paul protested that he was being held under arrest for no crime except believing and bearing witness to the common promise that God had made and repeated throughout the history of the Jews, namely the resurrection of the dead (Acts 26:2-8), which is not an impossible philosophical dream, but a reality in Christ (v. 23).

RIGHTEOUSNESS

Paul’s basic concern was righteousness. In his Pharaic instruction he had been introduced to the great teachers and legal leaders of Israel. These were all men who set forth their explanations of the law, left their examples of living according to the law in their lives and then died. A dead man, however virtuous and noble and law-abiding he may be, can only leave an example and instruction for others to follow, nothing more. But the One who lived according to the law, innocently died under the law and arose again could do more. He could give His righteousness to others by imputation and through faith. Only a resurrected Man could do that. That is why the gift of righteousness and the resurrection are inseparable. To know the power of the resurrection is to possess by faith the righteousness of God in Christ.

CHRIST, THE SON OF GOD

To know Christ, that is, to have experienced the power of His resurrection, is to know Christ as the Son of God. Before Saul made that trip to Damascus, he thought of Jesus of Nazareth as a renegade, apostate Jew, who was endeavoring to destroy the great treasure and pride of the Jews, the law. Jesus was to him the worst possible enemy both of God and man, because he believed that His teaching undermined the law given by God through Moses and so also

undermined the one way of the people back to God, namely through the righteousness of the law. But when the Man he thought was dead called him by name and subsequently bestowed His grace and mercy upon him, Paul personally experienced that he was not dealing with a corpse, but with the living Lord.

So it was that after he had recovered from his traumatic spiritual experience, “straightway he preached in the synagogues” in Damascus. What did he preach? That this same Jesus of Nazareth, whom he had but recently considered a renegade and apostate Jew, “is the Son of God” (Acts 9:20). Later, when St. Paul wrote a letter to introduce himself to the Romans, he identified himself as a slave of Jesus Christ and an apostle of the gospel of Jesus Christ, who was “declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead” (Rom. 1:4). The resurrection bears witness to the deity of Christ; to experience the power of the resurrection is to know from personal experience⁶ that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.

RELIABILITY OF CHRIST’S GOSPEL

To have experienced the power of the resurrection is furthermore to trust the reliability of the gospel of Christ without reservation. Paul’s gospel came under severe attack in Galatia. How did Paul defend himself and his message? Did he quote the highest Jewish authorities? Did he exalt his own intellect, his own spirituality and his own religious experiences to verify his gospel? None of this! He wrote, “But I certify you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached of me is not after man. For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ” (Gal. 1:11-12). He had received the gospel by direct revelation of the risen Lord. Thus it was that the experience of Christ’s resurrection gave Paul the certainty of the reliability of his gospel to such an extent that he could write, “Though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed” (Gal. 1: 8). How can anyone in the cacophony of conflicting voices on the religious scene today know what is truth or whether the gospel of Christ’s righteousness is the one true gospel? Knowing Christ, that is, experiencing personally by faith the power of His resurrection, gives that assurance.

FORGIVENESS OF SIN

Righteousness gives us what we need and do not have; forgiveness takes away what we have but must be rid of. To experience the power of the resurrection is to experience the certainty of forgiveness.

Paul brought his sermon at Antioch to a climax by proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus. What was the significance of that event? St. Paul stated it: “Be it known therefore, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sin: and by him all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses” (Acts 13:38-39). Contrary to the opinion of the Jews, the law was powerless to justify anyone. What was needed was forgiveness for daily transgression of the law. That forgiveness was assured through the resurrection. What is the connection between forgiveness and the resurrection? To the Romans Paul wrote that we are to believe “on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead; who was delivered for our offenses, and was raised again for our justification” (Rom. 4:24-25). Even as our sins caused His death, so the forgiveness of our sins caused His resurrection, for the Father was compelled by justice to acknowledge the holy life and sacrificial death of His Son as atonement for sin by raising Him. To the Corinthians Paul expressed the connection between the resurrection and forgiveness in this way: “If Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins” (I Cor. 15:17).

RESURRECTION LIVING

What are we to understand by resurrection living? God sent His Son to this planet not on private business, but for all mankind. Jesus was the second Adam, the Representative and Substitute for the race of mankind (Rom. 5:12-21; I Cor. 15:22, 45). He lived, suffered and died for all mankind. So also He arose and ascended on high for all. The effect of His mission to earth was to change the way men live – replacing enmity toward God with fellowship and selfishness with love toward all. To achieve this change in an individual there must be a spiritual dying and rising again, a dying of being at odds with God and with man and a rising again into a liberty which expresses itself in love toward God and man.

ROMANS 6

After showing the solution of mankind’s sin and resulting guilt and alienation from God to be the forgiveness and reconciliation found in Christ, Paul begins to discuss the new resurrection way of life that flows spontaneously from the blessing of justification. The general question was: should the justified sinner continue to live in sin in view of the fact that Christ died for all sin and offers forgiveness by grace? Paul rejects such a thought as blasphemous. Being

justified involves a break with the old way of living and the beginning of a new way. Paul reminded the Romans of their baptism as being in connection with Jesus Christ and His death. That was not a mere ceremony or a symbol or an outward sign of some grace previously and inwardly received. No, it was rather God's appointed and effective means for initiating the new way of living. "Therefore we are buried with him (Christ) by baptism into death" (v. 4). Christ died once because the penalty of mankind's sins was laid upon Him. His death removed the penalty of our dying eternally. But it also did something in the here and now. It caused in us a dying unto sin, thus replacing the former living in sin. Baptism is the means by which this dying is effected. That is one side of the new resurrection life. Paul continues in verse four: "That like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life." Christ was raised from death to live in glory. So also through the power of baptism we are to enter in upon a new way of life. Paul amplifies this thought by speaking of the crucifixion of "our old man," that is, our sinful nature. That is the negative of which the simultaneous counterpart is living unto God.

Such resurrection living is also called living in the Spirit, for it is the Holy Spirit who works in us the daily dying of the flesh and arising of the new man. In Romans 8:11 Paul put it thus: "But if the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you."⁷ What is the nature of Spirit-quickened or resurrection living? Again the combination of negative and positive: mortifying the deeds of the body and being led by the Spirit of God (Rom. 8:13-14).

COLOSSIANS 2 AND 3

In this epistle Paul was concerned about the question of whether the believer's doing and leaving undone was necessary to supplement the work of Christ. After assuring the Colossians that they were complete in Christ (Col. 2:10), Paul continued by describing the way of life that reflects this new condition. They were circumcised spiritually through the physical circumcision of Christ,⁸ which marked His being put under the law for them. That spiritual circumcision manifests itself "in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh" (2:11). Then follow the concepts of being buried and rising with Christ by the power of baptism. In Christ there is triumph over sin and sinning. It is all in Christ without the need of any supplementation on the part of the believer.

The believer is to live the resurrection life given to him: "If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God" (Col. 3:1-3). Resurrection living is daily dying to earthly things and living unto things above, ever waiting for that moment of glory "when Christ, who is our life, shall appear" and the believer shall "also appear with him in glory" (3:4). Then shall the tension of daily dying and rising be changed into continuous living in love with Him.

FELLOWSHIP OF HIS SUFFERINGS

The life of a believer is to be patterned after that of his Lord and Savior – by way of the cross to the crown. That is what St. Paul meant when he defined knowing Christ as experiencing also "the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death" (Phil. 3:10).

The Lord Jesus made this abundantly clear when he separated Saul unto Himself on the road to Damascus. Ananias was told by the Lord: "I will show him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake" (Acts 9:16). Paul's role as a persecutor was to be changed into that of one of many persecuted.

St. Paul soon learned to realize that knowing, that is, experiencing by faith the Lord as Savior, inevitably and unavoidably also involved experiencing the fellowship of His sufferings. During his first missionary journey Paul was expelled from Antioch, forced to flee from Iconium for fear of being stoned and then subjected to stoning at Lystra. Thus on the basis of his own experience with persecution and in the effort to confirm the new converts in the faith, Paul exhorted them to perseverance. What was the tenor of his exhortation? St. Luke preserves this fact-of-life statement of Paul: "We must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22).

The fact of life, the necessity of suffering for Christ's sake, was a concept that our Lord impressed upon His disciples again and again (Matt. 5:10-12; 16:24-26; 20:22-23; John 15:18-21). St. Paul also emphasized this fact of life for a believer again and again in his epistles.

In his first letter to the Corinthians Paul spoke of "standing in jeopardy every hour" and "dying daily" (15:30-31). In his second letter Paul spoke of the suffering of Christ as abounding in us (1:5). Further on in the epistle Paul spoke of "always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus" (4:10). Paul was learning from experience just what the Lord had meant when He told His disciples on the night of His betrayal: "The servant is not greater than his lord. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you" (John 15:20). In the eleventh chapter Paul enumerates a

veritable catalog of his sufferings, which included beatings, imprisonments, being stoned, suffering shipwreck, peril from hostile opponents and from those who hated the gospel (II Cor. 11:23-31). One almost begins to ache empathetically just from reading this biographical section.

In his letter to his beloved Philippians Paul makes the statement that “unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake” (Phil. 1: 29). We have been taught in catechetical instructions to think of faith as gift of God, but sufferings? Yes indeed, they too are a gift of God, for knowing Christ means to experience also the fellowship of His sufferings. Did not our Lord Jesus say, “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it” (Matt. 16:24-25)?

In his letter to the Colossians Paul wrote that he was rejoicing in his sufferings (Col. 1:24). Paul was not a spiritual masochist, as George Bernard Shaw depicted the Christian martyrs in his *Androcles and the Lion*. No, he was a realist who had learned to bow to the will of the Lord. He knew that to know and confess the Lord Jesus as Lord and Savior in this evil world, in which the prince of this world, the devil, is still on the loose, means to experience the fellowship of the Lord’s sufferings in one’s own body.

This was not an experience peculiar to St. Paul. St. Peter comforted and exhorted the believers scattered throughout Asia Minor in these words: “Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you. But rejoice inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ’s sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy” (I Peter 4:12-13). These words of Peter remind one of similar words St. Paul wrote to the Romans: “I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (Rom. 8:18). The glory comes later, the suffering now, for to be a Christian means to experience the fellowship of our Lord’s suffering.

CAPTURED, BUT NOT YET HAVING CAPTURED

We come now to a section in which the Spirit of God led Paul to use changing tenses, the active and passive voices, the subjunctive and indicative moods, and simple and compound forms of the same verb to express his thought. The Greek is a very flexible language. All the nuances are difficult to reproduce in English. The following is the passage:

“... That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death; if by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead, not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:10-14).

The key word (various forms of καταλαμβάνω) is translated “apprehend” in the KJV. That means to seize or get or arrest. A criminal is apprehended when he is captured or arrested. Paul speaks of himself as having been captured by Jesus Christ: “that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus.” St. Paul was referring to his experience on the road to Damascus. He was going to Damascus to apprehend or take into captivity Christians and bring them back to Jerusalem. But before he even arrived in Damascus, his plans were thwarted because he was himself captured by Jesus Christ. He was thereby released from unbelief and taken captive by faith, released from persecuting Christ and made a slave of that same Christ.

In that moment Paul got to know Christ. What that meant Paul explained as experiencing both the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His suffering. When would knowing Christ in this way come to an end? At the time when he would attain or arrive at the resurrection from death. The KJV translation, “if by any means (somehow) I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead,” may lead one to think that Paul was uncertain as to whether he would reach that goal. Paul was certain of attaining unto the resurrection, but he was uncertain as to how this would happen. Would he get out of the prison from which he was writing? Would he die a natural death? Or would he suffer martyrdom? How would he attain unto the resurrection? That was his question.

“Not as though I had already attained (got hold of, captured), either were already perfect (have already been made perfect or mature).” Is Paul talking about the last grand experience of the resurrection and saying that he hasn’t got there yet? That did not have to be said, for it was obvious – he was alive and writing in prison. What he had not yet fully captured or gotten hold of was knowing Christ by experiencing the full power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings. He had not been able to live the resurrection life to its fullest potential because of the drag of his flesh. Perhaps the Lord had much more, as He did have, to teach him about suffering for Him. Was Paul going to be a quitter in striving to penetrate the glory of the risen and living Christ in living the resurrection life and in bearing His cross? No,

“I follow after,” he said; I’ll keep working on this, “if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus.” He was determined to capture and thus to experience himself that for which he was captured by the Lord on the road to Damascus.

Paul certainly was a hero of faith to the Philippians, but he did not want them to get the wrong impression. So he wrote to them: “Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended (captured, got hold of, arrived at the goal): but forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.” Paul was neither going to rest on his spiritual laurels nor live in the past, his old self. He was going to charge ahead to reach the ever unattainable prize in this life, fully experiencing the resurrection life and fellowship in Christ’s sufferings. That would be reached only after death had freed him from his flesh and the resurrection had given him his glorious spiritual body, like unto the glorious body of the living Christ.

WALKING ON EARTH AS CITIZENS OF HEAVEN

Paul turns from discussing in personal biographical terms (3:10-14) what it means to know the Lord Jesus to an earnest exhortation to the Philippians (3:15-21). “Let us therefore, as many as be perfect (that is, mature in Christian knowledge and understanding), be thus minded.” Let every mature Christian realize that though he has been captured by Christ, he still has not yet captured the full experience of resurrection living and fellowship with the Lord in His sufferings. “And if in any thing ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you.” Some of the Philippians might not have fully shared the vehemence with which Paul labeled the faith in Christ + works advocates as “dogs,” “evil workers” and the “mutilation.” Some might not have perceived the irreconcilable conflict between the righteousness of Christ and man’s own righteousness. Others might not have fully realized that knowing Christ means experiencing both the power of His resurrection and the bearing of His cross. Paul was confident that the Lord would supply what was lacking in their understanding. “Nevertheless, whereto we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us mind the same thing” (3:16). All were mature! Let all walk according to their Christian maturity, ever pursuing the goal of resurrection living.

With an appealing, endearing address of “brethren” Paul urged the Philippians to follow the example of him and others: “Be ye followers together of me, and mark them which walk so as ye have us for an ensample” (3:17). A good example can be more easily seen and is more distinctly outlined on the background of an evil example, even as white stands out more clearly on a black background. What does it mean to live a life of ever experiencing the power of the Lord’s resurrection and ever experiencing also the fellowship of His sufferings? Certainly not this: “For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ: whose end is destruction, whose God is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame, who mind earthly things” (3:18-19). Paul was not warning against the libertines, whose motto always is “Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die.” The biblical concept of “belly service,” having one’s belly as one’s god, means serving one’s own interests, whatever they may be – intellectual, emotional, religious, social, sensual or whatever.

The people Paul denounced as “dogs,” “evil workers” and the “mutilation” were quite possibly decent, upright people. But their “belly” was nonetheless their god. How so? Because they were trusting their own righteousness, their own moral capabilities, their supposed innate, natural ability to make the right moral decisions and so to produce a righteousness that would be acceptable in the sight of God. In so thinking, they were enemies of the cross. Did not the Lord on more than one occasion say, “I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Matt. 9: 13)? The “righteous” were those who supposed themselves to be righteous. They instinctively and militantly rejected the very thought that they needed a better righteousness than they had. The Lord depicted such a man in the parable of the marriage of the king’s son; it was the guest who refused a wedding garment because he was quite sure his own garment, his own righteousness, would pass inspection (Matt. 22:1-14).

In contrast to this evil example of people whose god is their belly, Paul wrote: “For our conversation (commonwealth, citizenship) is in heaven.” We live on this earth clothed in the righteousness of the Son of God who is in heaven. We strive for the righteousness of life patterned according to His life. So we live the resurrection life, ever anticipating translation from earth to heaven, “from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ: who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself” (Phil. 3:20-21). When Paul refers to his body as vile, he has in mind especially his sinful flesh which is constantly asserting itself and preventing him, as it prevents all Christians, from experiencing the resurrection living to its fullest extent. Paul teaches us to look forward to the day of death and resurrection when we shall put off the flesh and put on our resurrection bodies, ever after to live the resurrection life in glory with our Lord. This is the final and ultimate prize, the goal of all our striving.

SUMMARY

In Philippians 3 St. Paul has outlined the Christian life in biographical terms combined with concerned exhortations to his beloved Philippians. What does it mean to be a Christian? What does it mean to live a Christian life?

RIGHTEOUSNESS – WHOSE?

The basic problem is that of righteousness. There are only two possibilities. Either a person lives his life in a righteousness that is produced by inherent spiritual powers, a righteousness that is practiced according to some norm, religious or social or whatever. Or a person lives his life in a foreign righteousness which must be established by another and imputed to him.

St. Paul had been taught from youth on that he possessed a remnant of the divine breath once breathed into man, that accordingly he had a free will in moral matters, that he could exercise that will to live a moral life according to the *Torah* of Moses and that a merciful God would forgive any failings to live according to the *Torah*. He believed that the spiritual energy requisite for living in such righteousness was a gift of God for each man to exercise. And he exercised it with a will and a determination that caused him to excel in righteousness in the eyes of his peers.

This is the natural way for man to think and feel. It is the curse of sin fallen upon the mind of man, the *opinio legis*. All the great religions of the world and all the philosophers and moral leaders of mankind firmly believe that man can and must exercise the spiritual powers inherent in him to produce a righteousness that finds divine approval. Inasmuch as man fails, they believe God is merciful and forgives. It is a rare minority that imagines that perfection or perfection-plus can be achieved so that no forgiveness is needed.

EXCHANGING SIN FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS

As long as man clings to his own righteousness, he remains in unrighteousness. It takes a creative act of the Spirit of God to make a person realize that anything and everything that he produces in the line of righteousness is nothing better than “filthy rags” or “dung.” When that miracle is worked, the individual learns to cast his own righteousness (which is a euphemism for his sin) at the foot of the cross, even as we sing: “I lay my sins on Jesus, the spotless Lamb of God.” In exchange the Christian receives the righteousness of Christ, as we also sing: “Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness my beauty are, my glorious dress.” This miracle was wrought in Paul, as it has been in every child of God since the beginning of time. This St. Paul spoke of as “putting on Christ,” “winning Christ” and “knowing Christ.”

HAVING RIGHTEOUSNESS, PURSUING RIGHTEOUSNESS

At the moment one obtains the righteousness of Christ by faith, he begins a lifelong pursuit of the righteousness of life. The two go hand in hand. The one who is captured by Jesus Christ, as Paul put it, strives ceaselessly to capture the glorious blessing of walking in righteousness.

The child of God gets up in the morning and goes about his daily routine, ever striving to live his life as a student, parent, laborer, manager or professional man according to the norm of perfect love toward his God and his fellowman. But at the end of the day he must confess his shortcomings. He needs to be cleansed by the forgiveness of sin and covered with the righteousness of his Savior-God. He can neither live nor die without his Lord; so he sings: “Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes.”

Only a person who is clothed in the righteousness of his Savior-God can or will want to pursue righteousness, that is, living according to the divine norm of love. Paul spoke of himself as pressing onward in a race. The writer to the Hebrews exhorts: “Follow ... holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14). The Christian ever pursues, but never attains in this life. He is not misled by those who claim to have experienced the second grace, that of having completely gained the victory over the power of sin in this life, for the words of St. John have been engraved upon his soul: “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (I John 1:8). Yet the pursuit is not forever! It ends in the moment of death, when we discard this vile body, and in the moment of the resurrection, when we shall put on the glorious resurrection body. Would that we were there!

ENDNOTES

¹ The Greek here reads: ἐξ αὐτοῦ δὲ ὑμεῖς ἐστε ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ ὃς ἐγενήθη ἡμῖν σοφία ἀπὸ θεοῦ δικαιοσύνη τε καὶ ἀγιασμὸς καὶ ἀπολύτρωσις, which the NKJ renders: “But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God – and righteousness and sanctification and redemption.” Even as Christ became our wisdom, righteousness and redemption – complete blessings given from God to us – so also He became our sanctification (our state of being separated from sin and dedicated to God), a complete blessing and reality imparted to us from God. Note also how the Corinthian believers, with all their struggles against sin and their sin-plagued weaknesses, were addressed

in 1:2 as ἡγιασμένοις ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ (perfect passive participle); that is, they had been “sanctified in Christ Jesus” and continued to be set apart to God and belonging to Him by faith.

² The terms *disrobe* and *put off* are expressed in Greek by the verbs ἀπεκδύομαι and ἀποτίθημι, both of which can mean “to undress,” to take off clothing or armor. Likewise, the opposite terms *enrobe* and *put on* are expressed by a Greek verb commonly meaning “to clothe, dress or wear.”

³ 2 Corinthians 5:17 KJV: “Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.”

⁴ Cf. the Greek forms: κατατομήν (“mutilation”) and περιτομή (“circumcision”). To identify the “mutilation” in Philippians 3:2 as the false teaching opponents seems to be supported by verse 3, in which Paul makes the identification that “we are the circumcision.”

⁵ It cannot be asserted or determined that the author’s expression “personal experience” has to exclusively mean the circumstance that Paul’s conviction and faith were brought about by what he saw and heard in face-to-face contact with the risen Savior. While the expression will at times have Paul’s own experience primarily in view, our “personal experience,” and that of all believers living before and after Christ’s life on earth, will have to be understood as the knowledge, conviction, trust and experience of our own Christian faith. As the risen Savior Himself said: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:29).

⁶ See the second and third sentences of endnote 5 above.

⁷ The author’s exegesis of this verse seems to be that the Spirit “quickening your mortal bodies” refers to sanctification in this life, not the resurrection of the body in the life to come. Cf. the preceding verse (Rom. 8:10) for immediate context and possible support of this view.

⁸ Does the apostle mean that Christ’s own circumcision has been imputed to us? Such an intended meaning would apparently depend on an objective genitive (ἐν τῇ περιτομῇ τοῦ Χριστοῦ) being used.

ILC Commencement Address May 21, 2005

BE STRONG AND COURAGEOUS

John Pfeiffer

Beloved of the Father, redeemed by the Son, sanctified by the Spirit: grace and peace be unto you, especially you, the graduates of 2005.

Each year, we at Immanuel have the privilege of sending another cadre of young people into the world. Each one has the potential of being the nucleus around which the Lord can build a company of believers. Together they can carry on the battle begun by Christ – the battle in which the victory is assured, even though the fight goes on.

3400 years ago God was about to send Joshua into the land of Canaan. Many enemies faced him and his people. It was a time in which a man could be filled with fear, a time to doubt one’s own abilities, strength and wisdom. It was a time when one is tempted to run away from responsibilities. It was a time like this.

As we send forth this year’s graduates into the field of battle, let us hear what God said to Joshua.

After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, it came to pass that the LORD spoke to Joshua the son of Nun, Moses' assistant, saying: "Moses My servant is dead. Now therefore, arise, go over this Jordan, you and all this people, to the land which I am giving to them -- the children of Israel. Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given you, as I said to Moses. From the wilderness and this Lebanon as far as the great river, the River Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, and to the Great Sea toward the going down of the sun, shall be your territory. No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life; as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you nor forsake you. Be strong and of good courage, for to this people you shall divide as an inheritance the land which I swore to their fathers to give them. Only be strong and very courageous, that you may observe to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may prosper wherever you go. This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good

success. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go” (Josh.1:1-9).

Joshua stood on the banks of the Jordan. Across the river stood the fortified city of Jericho. Beyond that were other cities and other armies. Each one stood in the way of the destiny of Israel, their destiny ordained by God to rest in the promised land and there to bring forth the Savior of the world.

You, dear graduates, are staring across the river of time. In your future you can see the fortresses of the enemy. These forces stand in the way, hoping to prevent you from reaching your destiny. And what is your destiny? It is twofold: to serve the Savior of the world by proclaiming the Gospel of salvation and finally to rest in the eternal Promised Land.

As you go out among enemies that are fierce and powerful, cunning and deceptive, we send you forth with the exhortation of the Lord:

BE STRONG AND COURAGEOUS

I. Be strong and very courageous because God will keep His promises and He will not leave you nor forsake you.

II. Be strong and very courageous so that you may observe the instruction of God and prosper wherever you go.

I. Israel spent 40 years in the wilderness, preparing for the day that they would cross the Jordan. You have spent four, six, eight years preparing for this day. In some ways this is a day of joy. In other ways it may be a bit frightening. After all, there are forces in this world that want to take control of your lives and lead you down the pathway to disaster.

You and I have the Bible; so we know the outcome for Israel. The people of Israel, however, could not foresee the outcome of the battles with Jericho and Ai and Jerusalem and Hebron, Jarmuth, Lachish, Eglon, Gezer, Debir, Geder, Hormah, Arad, Libnah, Adullam, Makkedah, Bethel, Tappuah, Hephher, Aphek, Lasharon, Madon, Hazor, Shimron Meron, Achshaph, Taanach, Megiddo, Kedesh, Jokneam, Dor, Gilgal, Tirzah. All of these city kingdoms tried to hinder the destiny of Israel. But as many as they were, they all fell before the Hebrew armies. Israel, however did not know the outcome beforehand. Or did they?

As the moments tick by on this graduation day, you do not see what the next moment will bring. You do not have a book of future history, so that you know the outcome of your battles with the world. Or do you?

As Joshua gazed across the Jordan, the voice of God came to him: “*Arise, go over this Jordan, you and all this people, to the land which I am giving to them — the children of Israel. Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given you, as I said to Moses” (vv. 2-3). “No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life; as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you nor forsake you. Be strong and of good courage, for to this people you shall divide as an inheritance the land which I swore to their fathers to give them” (vv. 5-6).*

God essentially told Joshua and his people: be strong and of good courage, because I have given this land to you. Behold future history – God declares the future as if it were the past. The Hebrew students in our school understand this unique way of communicating. The verb which means “have given” is in a form that tells us that this is a completed thing. Even if the task yet to be is in the future, as far as God is concerned, it is done.

Such is the certainty that God says, “*No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life.*” No matter how strong or wise or large the opposition might be, no man would be able to prevent Israel from taking possession of Canaan. God’s plan to save the world from sin and death depended on it.

So, from the other side of the Jordan River Joshua had the sure knowledge of victory. *Be strong and of good courage.* Joshua did indeed take strength in the words of the Lord. God’s words gave him courage. He didn’t see the outcome, but he knew what it would be. God had given His word, His promise. Of course, we know the outcome. Not only did they take possession of Canaan, but 1400 years later the Savior of the world was born in this land. Israel’s destiny was fulfilled, because God had promised.

You too have a destiny. So I say, “Be strong and courageous.” Be strong because the Lord has given you His promise: *He that believes and is baptized shall be saved.* As you stand on this side of the river, you cannot see the outcome, but you have God’s word on it. What He has promised He will also perform.

Christ’s death and resurrection are the evidence and guarantee of the promise. God not only promised to save us; He put His own life on the line in order to do it. What kind of a promise would be harder to fulfill than this? Still, when the time came, God did not back down. Jesus did not run away. True to His word, Jesus accepted the cross, the torment, the God-forsakenness and so accomplished our redemption. Our sins are forgiven! We are saved, and as children of God we go into the world.

Joshua went into Canaan not only with a promise, but also with a companion. God said, “*I will not leave you nor*

forsake you.” God Himself – who by the power of His word had formed the land of Canaan, carving it out with a great flood, giving it first to the descendants of the son of Ham to prepare the land for Israel – this God would be with Joshua as he went in to take possession.

Every step of the way God was there, granting them victory after victory. Oh yes, they had to fight and suffer and die in the process. But in the end they took over the cities and fields, the sheep and cattle and all things.

This God is also with you wherever you go. In the New Testament we read: *He Himself has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” So we may boldly say: “The LORD is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?”* (Heb.13:5-6) Jesus also said it: *“Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the age”* (Matt.28:20).

Although you graduates are going to go in many different directions when you leave here, you will be going into one and the same world; you will be facing the same enemies. ND you will all have the same companion: the omnipresent God, the God of love, the God of power, the God of wisdom, the God of salvation. He will not leave you nor forsake you.

This means that you too, like Joshua, are assured of the ultimate victory. Oh yes, you will have battles to fight and suffering to endure. However, *no man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life.* With the sword of the Spirit and the shield of faith you will conquer. *For the LORD will go before you, and the God of Israel will be your rear guard* (Isa.52:12).

II. As a final word to Joshua God said: *Only be strong and very courageous, that you may observe to do according to all the instruction which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may prosper wherever you go. This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.*

God has told you what He will do. And He has told you what you should do. You have attended a school in which the Word of God dominates our instruction. Now God wants you to take it with you into battle. Read it; hear it; meditate on it; speak it; live by it. Do not turn away from the teachings of the Bible, neither to the right nor to the left. As God is faithful to you, be faithful to Him and His Word. *For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.*

You are standing on the banks of the river of time, ready to cross over into a new land. Be strong and courageous. God has promised that you shall have the victory. God has promised that He will go with you. The outcome is assured.

Take the Word of God with you now. With His Word God will continue to give you His promises and be with you in every battle you face. Thus your heart will be reassured time and again, until you cross the last river and enter the Promised Land. Amen.

THE PASTOR’S MENU FOR THE PULPIT

Finding balance between *sanctification preaching* and *gospel preaching*

Steven Sippert

At some point in his training or his ministry the pastor learns to think of his work as being spiritual cook and waiter to the congregation he serves. It’s a daunting task, to be sure, since the welfare of souls is at stake. He must avoid serving the spiritual toxins of false teaching. He must also recognize the specific needs of his members and decide if the sermon is the right way to meet those needs. In many cases he will reach the conclusion that the pulpit is the best opportunity he has to address the spiritual condition of the members and to serve them with law and gospel, as these are taught in the “meat” and the “milk” of God’s Word.¹ Shall he serve more meat than milk? Shall he serve more milk than meat? What can help him strike the appropriate balance for the congregation he serves? We turn to the unfailing wisdom of Scripture and the useful advice of homiletics for much needed guidance in the task of forming the pastor’s menu for the pulpit.

Clarifying the terminology

Sanctification preaching and *gospel preaching* should not be construed as mutually exclusive efforts. The difference between the two is more a matter of emphasis. Sermon texts on sanctification tend to deal with some aspect of Christian living, in which the Scripture text exhorts God's people to bear certain fruits of faith. *Sanctification preaching*, therefore, will seek to apply law as mirror and guide and to use the gospel not only to comfort, but especially to supply the necessary power to bring about the desired response. *Gospel preaching*, as defined and understood in a more restricted sense, refers to sermons whose texts focus primarily on Christ crucified and present the core truths of universal atonement and redemption and justification by grace through faith. In the task of *gospel preaching* so-called, the law is applied to expose the problem of sin and the gospel points exclusively to Christ as the only solution to this problem.

The differences between *sanctification preaching* and *gospel preaching* can be further explained in the following ways.

1. We note a difference in the intended goals.

Sanctification preaching seeks to revitalize the believer's faith so that he also responds with the effort to bear the specific fruit(s) of faith identified in the text.

Gospel preaching seeks primarily to make the believer's faith more firmly grounded on the solid foundation of Christ and His grace without direct reference to specific words and deeds of the Christian life – although applications made to appropriate attitudes (e.g. “fear not, for I bring you good tidings of great joy...”) and responses (e.g. “be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven...”) would certainly be expected on the part of the preacher.

2. We note a difference in the range of audience.

Because the sanctification text addresses believers only and because fruits of faith can only come from faith, *sanctification preaching* is ultimately directed to those who already believe in Christ.

Gospel preaching, on the other hand, can serve a wider audience, since it is capable of addressing the converted (so as to strengthen faith) and also the unconverted (so as to convict with the law and convert with the gospel).

The Scriptures which apply

In my search for the pertinent Scriptures which address the matter of homiletical balance, I found it striking that the same writer Paul was an advocate of feeding both “milk” and “meat,” depending on the circumstances before him. In the listing of the passages below we note that he is the prominent writer, although not the only writer. The passages, here italicized, are taken from the New King James Version and are followed with brief comments.

In Matthew 28:19-20 Jesus said to His New Testament Church: *“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”* As pastors lead people to be disciples of Christ, the pastors are directed to teach all that Christ has commanded. They conform to this directive by striving to proclaim all Bible doctrines from the pulpit.

In Acts 20:27-28 Paul said to the Ephesian pastors: *“I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God. Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.”* Paul expected these men to “shepherd the church of God” with the same “whole counsel of God” that they had received from him. This too is our goal as preachers and teachers of the Word today.

In 1 Corinthians 2:1-2 Paul said to the church at Corinth: *“And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.”* In the beginning of his ministry at Corinth Paul zeroed in on the message of Christ crucified. In dealing with the unconverted and the newly converted, Paul understood the great need for what we have chosen to call “gospel preaching.” Keep this in mind as we consider another statement of Paul to the church at Corinth.

To the same audience Paul addressed his rebuke in 1 Corinthians 3:1-3a: *“And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able; for you are still carnal....”* The core message of Christ crucified (2:2) was the “milk” (γάλα) Paul fed to the spiritually immature members at Corinth. Their inability to digest the “solid food” (βρώμα) of Scripture was the direct result of their “carnal” state, which had the crippling effect of their flesh stunting their spiritual growth. Note in particular how Paul continued the menu of milk rather than meat when dealing with spiritual immaturity.

In Galatians 3:1 Paul said to the churches of Galatia: *“O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified?”* The Greek

verb προεγράφη, rendered in the NKJ as “clearly portrayed,” had this recognized meaning during the Koine period: “to publicly display on a placard or poster.” Paul was so clear and thorough in his presentation of the gospel to the Galatians that they could never claim ignorance as a reason for turning away from the truth. We note in particular how Paul stuck with the message of Christ crucified in the beginning of his work in Galatia. We also recognize the value of the same approach as a model for us, namely that we lead the people to see clearly, even with their mind’s eye, that Jesus was crucified to liberate them from the curse and bondage of their sin.

In 2 Timothy 3:15-17 Paul said to the pastor Timothy: “*From childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.*” As the pastor makes faithful use of the verbally inspired Scriptures, he can expect the Word of God he preaches to accomplish the five goals here mentioned. The Word will...

- 1) make the hearer wise for salvation through faith in Christ (σοφίσαι εἰς σωτηρίαν);
- 2) teach the truth for the hearer to learn (διδασκαλίαν);
- 3) expose the error for the hearer to avoid and reject (ἐλεγμόν);
- 4) correct the ways of sin and lead the hearer to repentance (ἐπανόρθωσις); and
- 5) instruct in the paths of righteousness and lead the hearer to sanctified living (παιδείαν τὴν ἐν δικαιοσύνῃ).

Paul also said to Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:1-2: “*I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching.*” Pastors have the God-given responsibility of representing the Lord as His spokesmen and proclaiming the Word that will convince or rebuke or exhort. This task they can expect to do over a prolonged period of time, recognizing the need for patience when results are slow to take place.

In dealing with the needs of Jewish believers, the writer said in Hebrews 5:12-14: “*For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.*” Again we note the writer recognizing the condition of spiritual immaturity, admonishing his readers for their lack of growth, but also granting that their spiritual diet would have to be restricted to “milk”² for the time being.

In 1 Peter 2:1-3 we hear Peter address his readers somewhat differently: “*Therefore, laying aside all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking, as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious.*” In a context that has no evident rebuke of immaturity, the apostle has exhorted his readers to desire the pure milk as the means of spiritual growth. The phrase “as newborn babes” can simply be understood as the point of comparison in the simile Peter used; it is not a reference to the level of the original readers’ spiritual growth. The simile illustrates the attitude for all Christians to have in the course of their spiritual life: even as newborns crave the breast milk of their mothers and depend on it, Christians are to crave the pure milk of God’s Word. Also, the expression “pure milk” (τὸ λογικὸν ἄδολον γάλα) does not convey the same intended sense as that of Paul to the Corinthians or that of the writer to the Hebrews. Peter expresses no contrast in the context between milk and meat. “Milk” here does not explicitly refer to basic Christian doctrines, as it does in the Hebrews 5 passage above. Peter simply refers to the unadulterated truth of God’s Word, especially the gospel,³ as spiritual nourishment to be desired by Christians and obtained for the sure edification of their faith.

This passage does underscore the guiding principle that “the pure milk of the word” is of great benefit to believers, regardless of the level of their spiritual maturity. As long as Christians are in this sinful, Christ-hating world, besieged by Satan and plagued by their flesh, the nuts-and-bolts preaching of sin and grace and the assurance of God’s promises will always be necessary for the survival of any believer.

From the homileticians

Two homiletical sources, *Preach the Gospel*⁴ (Joel Gerlach and Richard Balge, NPH) and *Preaching the creative Gospel Creatively* (Francis C. Rossow, CPH), have provided the following quoted material, which is arranged under these four categories: 1) the sermon as milk, 2) the sermon as meat, 3) preaching law and 4) preaching gospel.

1. The sermon as *milk* (for the benefit of the unconverted who may be present):

“Every sermon will contain ‘specific gospel’; that is, it will clearly present the way of salvation for the benefit of anyone who does not yet know and confess Christ as Savior and Lord. But the predominant purpose will always be to edify Christians who do make that confession” (*Preach the Gospel*, p. 4).

2. The sermon as *meat* (or solid food):

“The preacher who underestimates the growth level of his hearers will tend to preach down to them and thus fail to expand their horizons both in terms of a knowledge of the truth and of service to the Savior. Such preaching merely repeats the ABC’s, laying again and again ‘the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment,’ (He. 6:1f) without advancing God’s people toward maturity” (*Preach the Gospel*, p. 10).

“Sermons fail to proclaim the whole counsel of God also when they offer counsel and directive to weak Christians but seldom encourage mature Christians to strive in specific ways for higher levels of sanctification” (*Preach the Gospel*, p. 10).

3. Preaching *law in the sermon*:

“From the shelter of the pulpit it is not hard to lambast the world outside the church for its moral decay and degeneracy and at the same time leave the people in the pew with pharisaical thoughts about how fortunate they are not to be a part of that nasty, decadent world. Nor is it difficult to preach about sins of the gross variety that leaves pious and saintly Christians in the congregation unscathed.... God’s people know such things are sinful without regular reminders from the pulpit. It is the ‘little’ things in my life, the dark areas, which I need help to uncover and expose, things I don’t ordinarily think about, much less confess to my Lord with contrite heart; my unpleasant moods, my tendency to expose others to my frustrations, my failure to be kind, friendly, helpful, sympathetic to others, especially total strangers. We all need help to discover our ‘secret faults’ (Ps. 19:12)” (*Preach the Gospel*, p. 7).

Note how this directive to preach specific law turns the focus of the hearer on himself and exposes those sins which are often overlooked. On the basis of this Spirit-worked introspection the hearer is made more aware of his sinfulness and then led to repent and be restored by the proclamation of the gospel.

4. Preaching *gospel in the sermon*:

“Lutheran preaching distinguishes itself by its emphasis on the Lord’s active as well as his passive obedience. Active obedience has reference to the Savior’s perfect fulfillment of the law for all people from the moment of his birth to the time of his death. Passive obedience has reference to the Savior’s passion and death for the forgiveness of the world’s sins. Together the active and passive obedience provide the basis for God’s declaration that the whole world is righteous for Jesus’ sake” (*Preach the Gospel*, pp. 9-10).

In the next paragraph of *Preach the Gospel* the authors continue with this conclusion from the preceding: “It is possible to neglect the active obedience so that people are left with a truncated view of how God reconciled the world to himself in Christ. That view may rob them of the certainty of salvation God intends them to have. It frequently causes a person to look to something within himself rather than outside himself to God’s promises for the assurance of right standing with God” (p. 10).

In his book *Preaching the creative Gospel Creatively* Francis C. Rossow advocates the kind of gospel preaching that emphasizes all that Jesus did to secure man’s salvation, especially the damnation that He suffered. He urges preachers to lay before the people the God-forsakenness that Jesus felt as the full payment of our sin. This goal, Rossow cautions, is to be carried out responsibly, that is, in a way that does not cater to sensationalism. One can read more on this approach by consulting chapter 1 of his book.

The reminders above to thoroughly preach specific gospel will have the goal of turning the focus of the hearer away from himself and onto Christ, the only place where certainty of justification and eternal life can be found.

Maintaining the balance of milk and meat in the sermon

Ideally, every sermon preached will have the message of Christ crucified and the specific meat that is there in the text. To arrive at this balance more consistently, the preacher can strive to 1) know his audience, 2) use the pericopes and 3) preach the text with 4) concerted effort to distinguish between and properly apply law and gospel to the hearers.

1. Know the audience, even as Paul and others did with the apostolic church.

Does your congregation need more milk than meat? More meat than milk? Only the ongoing, concerted effort to know the members will help you answer these questions. Thus the sage advice of our theological fathers to visit members in their homes will be of great usefulness in the pastor’s sermon preparation. The more he can interact with his members and gain greater insight into their spiritual needs, problems, attitudes, habits, etc., the better equipped he is to determine what balance of milk and meat to feed the congregation at a given time.

2. Use the pericopes in choosing sermon texts.

As a general rule pericopes have the goal of laying out portions of Scripture that cover the “whole counsel of God” – all the doctrines of Scripture – in the course of a church year. Pericopes give direction for the pastor in using workable sections from the Old Testament, the Gospels and the Epistles. Pastors can use study clubs and conferences to share their own insights and evaluations of how effective a chosen pericope is in maintaining good balance between sanctification preaching and gospel preaching.

3. Preach the text in an expository manner on the basis of sound and thorough exegesis.

The pastor is trained to get the food of the sermon from the text. Good sermons have their foundation on good exegesis. The pastor’s exegetical work will focus on the original Hebrew and Greek to unearth all that God has put in the text for the edification of His people. In the process of careful exegesis we can look for specific law and specific gospel contained in the text. This can be done by asking two questions: A) What particular sin or sins does this text expose in the life of pastor and parishioner? B) What specific comfort or hope is offered by this text? Be alert to the text presenting either the active or passive obedience of Christ. Specific gospel in a text may be emphasizing the propitiation of the cross, the resurrection and exaltation of Christ, objective justification, the Lord’s promises for times of trial, the work of the Holy Spirit, the power of the means of grace or the doctrine of election, just to name some of the possibilities.

4. Make the right distinction between law and gospel that avoids mixing the two.

Homiletics professors and experienced pastors have advocated the following guidelines in this essential quest of “rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15).

A. After writing the sermon, identify the portions in which you explain or apply law and the portions in which you explain or apply gospel and answer these essential questions:

Is my presentation of law too general? Will the members understand it as applicable to the world or to others in the church but not to themselves? Have I held up the mirror of specific law that will cut to the heart and call for repentance on the part of all?

Are the gospel portions clearly presented? Is Christ crucified prominently displayed in the sermon? Does the gospel portion of this sermon make it clear that the certainty of salvation is entirely God’s doing?

B. When preaching a sanctification text, one must guard against the intrusion of legalism. The authors of *Preach the Gospel* warn of two ways this can happen:

“Confusion of law and gospel ... happens when we present the gospel and then follow it up with an encouragement to sanctification which treats the new life as something a Christian ought now to be able to produce instead of something God produces in and through his people” (p. 9).

“Or it happens when we use pressure words (must, should, ought) in a way that obscures the proper distinction between law and gospel” (p. 9).

To preach sermons that are milk to the weak and meat to the strong in such a way that law and gospel are properly distinguished for the edification of all is a challenge that we cannot meet on the basis of human reason, human creativity or human rhetoric. The Spirit through the Word must lead the way. Thankfully, the Lord has given us a Word that says what it means and means what it says. The power to convict, admonish, comfort, restore and strengthen is to be found in the clear words God has given us. That reassuring truth will give us greater resolve to carefully and prayerfully present God’s lifesaving Word to His blood-bought people.

ENDNOTES

¹ It needs to be understood that the biblical expressions “meat” and “milk” are not necessarily referring to law and gospel respectively (i.e. meat does not necessarily refer to law and milk does not necessarily refer to gospel). Nor do these expressions necessarily refer to sanctification preaching as the meat and gospel preaching as the milk. In at least one New Testament passage the milk and meat distinction expresses the difference between basic doctrines of Christianity and more advanced doctrines. Thus we recognize that the Spirit’s intent and the context will have to decide what is meant in each instance of occurrence.

² “Milk” in this passage seems to be equivalent to “the first principles of the oracles of God,” the basic teachings of Christian doctrine.

³ That the gospel is primarily meant is supported by the general context of 1 Peter 1-2, the immediate context of 1:25 and 2:3 and the analogy of Scripture, namely the truth that spiritual growth cannot occur apart from the gospel. Note also the well-supported Nestle-Aland reading εἰς σωτηρίαν (omitted by the Majority text and Textus Receptus; hence not translated in the NKJ).

If these words are part of the original text, then the spiritual growth is here defined as “unto salvation” – a result that can only happen through the gospel.

⁴ *Preach the Gospel* has been the homiletics textbook used at Immanuel Lutheran Seminary for many years.

USING THE LUTHERAN SYMBOLS

John Pfeiffer

INTRODUCTION

We are living in an era in which confessionalism is becoming less and less important. For many it is enough that someone professes to be a Christian, even though he refuses to actually follow Christ. If anything, this era should be one in which confessionalism is more important. The freedom and emptiness with which the names “Lutheran” and “Christian” are tossed about should lead people to desire more specificity from those who profess Christianity.

The names “Christian” and “Lutheran” are used dishonestly. “Christian” was once a name used for those who followed Christ in their confession and life. “Lutheran” was once a name used to designate those who followed the Lutheran teachings. Today, however, one may deny the doctrine of the Trinity or the deity of Christ and still be called a “Christian” and a “Lutheran.”

Christ, however, states that a true disciple is one who continues in His Word (John 8:31) and that those who believe in their hearts will also confess with their mouths (Rom.10:9-10).

With the conviction that confessionalism is a necessary part of Christianity, we take another look at the formulations which constitute the Lutheran confessions and seek to answer this question: what is the proper use of these confessions?

DEFINING THE NAME

SYMBOL according to its confessional sense is derived from the Greek verb συμβάλλω (*throw together, put together, compare; confer, consider*); hence two things are “put together” for the sake of comparison. The Greek substantive σύμβολον came to refer to something used as a means for recognizing and identifying.

Thus the *symbol* and the statement of a person are brought together to determine whether the statement agrees with the *symbol*. The *symbol* is a “measuring line” (“Rule of Faith”¹) against which a man’s confession is set. If the two are in agreement, the man is accepted as one of the brethren.

“A symbol, therefore, is a creed, or an authoritative formulation of faith or doctrine distinguishing Christians from non-Christians, or orthodoxy from heterodoxy, or denomination from denomination.”²

THE NECESSITY OF SYMBOLS

THE NEED TO CONFESS THE TRUTH

Holy Scripture contains all that God would have us know regarding faith, life and godliness. His Word is truth. No confessional statement measures up to Scripture in power, content and authority. The most that a good confession does or can do is echo Scripture. Indeed, all who believe the contents of Scripture will echo them, as the following Scriptures clearly teach.

“Everyone therefore who shall confess Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever shall deny Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven” (Matt.10:32-33 NASB).

“The mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart” (Matt.12:34 NASB).

“For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20 NKJV).

“If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved; for with the heart man believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation” (Rom.10:9-10 NASB).

What is in the heart will manifest itself from the mouth. Confession of faith is the natural result of faith. It cannot be otherwise. The wording of each believer’s confession may be slightly different, but the content will be the same. From the New Testament we note two examples:

Peter: *“Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God”* (Matt.16:16).

Ethiopian man to Philip: *“I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God”* (Acts 8:37).

SYMBOLS ARE A REVELATION OF THE FAITH OF MAN,

NOT A REVELATION OF THE TEACHINGS OF GOD.

THE NEED TO REFUTE ERROR

“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God” (1 John 4:1-3 NASB). The words of the apostle John arose because of the presence of false teachers. The Gnostic errorists were already spreading their doctrinal venom. John wrote his epistle partly to combat this error. Since the Gnostics denied the reality of the flesh of Christ (they regarded all matter as evil), John called upon the believers to test the teachers that came among them by requiring this confession: “Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.”

It is the appearance of error on the religious horizon that necessitates the formulation of specific confessions. These confessions serve the purpose of identifying those who, while claiming to accept the Scriptures, deny certain truths found therein. When this happens, those who believe the truth will search the Scriptures, drawing together the declarations which the Spirit has dispersed throughout the Bible. These declarations they collect into a unit, and on this foundation they build a well-worded confession.

Symbols are the necessary result of the battle between the Church and the forces of Satan. They draw the battle lines and call upon all men to join the ranks of God's army and fight the Old, Evil Foe. Once a correct confession has been formulated – once the line has been drawn – those involved cannot remain neutral. If they do not embrace the confession of truth, they place themselves among the opposition, even as Jesus said: *“He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me scatters”* (Matt. 12:30).

Moreover, as symbols increasingly refine the confession of truth, Satan is compelled to refine his errors. Likewise, as Satan refines his errors, symbols must increasingly refine the confession of truth. Thus it becomes necessary to write new symbols. This is not because the fathers failed in their confession, but because there was not a need for them at that time to address the specific issue that must now be addressed.

Regarding the necessity of symbols, see pages 847-849 of the Book of Concord (Triglot).

Regarding the symbols of Lutheranism, see pages 849-855 (Triglot).

Regarding the necessity to refute error, see pages 855-856 (Triglot).

It is essential when formulating a confession that a clear declaration of the truth is made, as well as a clear refutation of the error. A document intended to unite two parties who have been separated by doctrinal differences must address those differences. If it doesn't, the document fails to be a symbol, for it does not specify the battle lines. Rather, it allows the enemy to join the ranks of those who fight for the truth. This can only result in the slaughter of the faithful.

THE USE OF SYMBOLS

Symbols do not replace the Holy Scriptures!

At all times the Bible remains the only source and norm of faith and life. Symbols are of value only insofar as they present an accurate account of the teachings of the Bible.

Before any man embraces the symbols, he should be convinced in his own mind that these are indeed an accurate account of the teachings of the Bible. It is not enough to “take the fathers’ word for it.” When students of the symbols stop testing them on the basis of Scripture, then the symbols will be accepted on the basis of their own authority – an authority made equal to the Word of God. When men begin to regard human symbols as being on an equal level with Scripture, then the stage is set for errorists to “*invalidate the Word of God for the sake of*” their tradition and teach as their “*doctrines the precepts of men*” (Matt. 15:6, 9 NASB).

The Bible, not the symbols, is the tool with which to fight error.

Only by “*holding fast the faithful word*” will one “*be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict*” (Titus 1:9 NASB).

When doctrinal questions arise among conservatives, one will discover that both parties in a disagreement believe that they are supported by the confessions. Thenceforth the confessions cease to be a basis for resolving the questions. Continuing to argue on the basis of the confessions poses the risk of making the confessions the norm for doctrine.

- The Bible is the *norma normans* (the norm that norms).
- The confession is the *norma normata* (the norm that is normed).

Only after a conclusion has been reached on the basis of the study of Scripture (whether or not all parties agree on the conclusion) should there be references to symbols. These references should be made only with the understanding that they represent the common confession of the fellowship and of the fathers.

If one discovers that his own teaching is in conflict with the symbols of the church, this should cause him to return to a study of the Scriptures. It should not be the confessions which cause him to reject his teaching, but the Word of

God. The confessions should cause him only to question his teaching and then to study Scripture for confirmation of the truth.

The symbols are a standard.

The symbols of the church are indeed a standard, but one which men raise only after their study of Scripture. The symbols are the “here-I-stand” of the confessors. They serve to set forth the position of those who have made their study. They show what a man believes and not what God teaches. Only the Bible shows what God teaches. Anyone else who wishes to subscribe to these symbols must make his own study. On that basis then the symbols can become his standard.

Thus we use symbols to distinguish the orthodox from the heterodox. If one claims to have made a study and then rejects any part of the accepted symbols, the symbols will serve to reveal that he is heterodox. But this revelation will only be apparent to those who have made a *quia* subscription to the symbols.

We subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions because (*quia*) they agree with Scripture (as to doctrinal content), not insofar as (*quatenus*) they agree with scripture. A symbol that receives only a *quatenus* subscription is of little value, for it never reveals what a man believes.³ Any errorist in the spectrum of heterodox and sectarian false teaching will be able to subscribe *quatenus* and later insist that the portion of the symbol which refutes his error is not in accord with Scripture.

Only such a symbol as deserves *quia* subscription can serve as a true “symbol,” a true “measuring line” to distinguish truth from error and orthodoxy from heterodoxy.

It will be seen that the attempt to make this distinction has led the faithful from simple to more complex confessions of truth. At first the only necessity was to distinguish believers from unbelievers. However, once this was accomplished, the Enemy began to refine his errors and to promote them from within the external fellowship of Christianity (cf. Acts 20:29-30; 2 Pet.2:1; Matt.18:7; 1 Cor.11:19; Deut.13:3). This necessitated more complex confessional statements, so that one could distinguish the orthodox from the heterodox.

The church dare never find security in the symbols.

While we do require our pastors and teachers to declare themselves regarding their subscription to the Lutheran Confessions, this should not make us feel secure from the intrusion of error. False teachers are frequently more than ready to be hypocrites, declaring with their mouths that they subscribe *quia* to the Confessions, while with their hearts believing something else.

The church must continue to “*test the spirits to see whether they are from God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world*” (1 John 4:1). While the confessions may be used in the attempt to identify the false prophets, the Scriptures themselves will be the final test and will prove such a prophet to be false.

ENDNOTES

¹ We recognize “Rule of Faith” as a synonymous term, derived as it is from Latin and Greek usage: *regula fidei*, κανὼν τῆς ἀληθείας (measuring rod, rule of the truth).

² Pg. 13, *Christian Symbolics*, E.H. Klotsche, The Lutheran Literary Board, Burlington, Iowa, 1929.

³ To further illustrate the insufficiency of a *quatenus* subscription, cf. the following observation made by C. M. Gullerud in his *Journal of Theology* article “Our Subscription to the Book of Concord” (Mar. 1979): “A *quatenus* subscription commits one to the Book of Concord only insofar as it is true to the Word of God. This would be meaningless since a person could subscribe even to the Book of Mormon on those terms” (Vol. 19, No. 1).
