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## **The Official Writings that Prepared the Way for the Augsburg Confession**

John V. Klatt

"No creed but the Bible." So said the informational pamphlet put out by a Baptist church. It sounds good, too, suggesting to the reader that here is a church that goes by God's word alone and does not go by the words of men. But what such a statement really indicates is that here is a church that has no clear statement of what it teaches; here is a church that is unwilling to put down in print what it holds to be true and what it rejects as false.

An age of darkness is a creedless age; corruption in doctrine works best when it is unfettered by an explicit statement of that doctrine. Between the Athanasian Creed (probably about AD 434) and the sixteenth century, there is no new General Creed. Error loves ambiguities. (Krauth 215)

The truth is that correct human explanations of Scripture doctrine are Scripture doctrine, for they are simply the statement of the same truth in different words. ... A Lutheran is a Christian whose rule of faith is the Bible, and whose creed is the Augsburg Confession. (Krauth 184,185)

Lutheranism arose in a creedless age of darkness in which the truth of Scripture had been corrupted, in which the gospel of Jesus Christ had become obscured and overthrown by the traditions of the church of Rome. It was the task of the Reformation to formulate and put down in writing the truth in order to expose errors that had been taught for so long that the people assumed they were the teachings of Holy Scripture.

The Augsburg Confession exposed errors in the Roman church, demonstrating from Scripture why the Lutherans were teaching differently on some points. It served to defend the Lutherans from slanders that were being circulated about them, showing that they held to the truths that Rome still held, e.g., in the doctrines of the Trinity, the virgin birth of Christ, etc., and that they rejected the

errors of the Sacramentarians, Anabaptists, and others. To this day it stands as the defense of Lutheran doctrine, showing it to be that taught by Christ and His apostles.

This confessional document that has stood the test of time did not, of course, come into being suddenly or quickly, but it was the result of careful work over a period of months. It is well worth our while to consider how the Augsburg Confession took articles that contributed to and led up to the Augsburg Confession: the Marburg, Schwabach, and Torgau articles.

### **The Marburg Articles**

When Luther and others began to restore the true teaching of God' s word and the gospel of salvation by grace alone, the result was upheaval, unrest, and division. Such results were entirely to be expected, for Jesus warned that He did not come to bring peace but a sword (Matt.10:34). Where the truth is taught there will always be a division between those who believe it and bow to it, on the one hand, and those who reject it and set themselves against it, on the other. So also at the time of the Reformation: many rejoiced at the restoration of the gospel, while others saw it as a threat to the ecclesiastical structure of Rome. The Emperor saw the theological divisions in his realm as a threat to peace and order and a hindrance to his efforts to keep the Turks out of Europe. The reformers had their own concerns, fearing that the emperor would try to use the sword against them. Therefore there were various attempts to bring about unity, both doctrinal and political.

Luther' s concerns were primarily doctrinal, that the truth of the gospel be upheld. Political concerns were always secondary. He would not yield any of the truth for the sake of political expediency. One test of his resolve came at the Diet of Worms, where he was put under extreme pressure to take back what he had written. He refused, knowing full well that by so doing he was putting himself in danger. Another, different kind of test came at Marburg. Here it was not the crude pressure of Pope and Emperor, demanding the yielding of all. It was the subtle pressure of those who were in many things sympathetic and like-minded to yield on one point of doctrine: the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Lord' s Supper.

Ironically, the denial of the real presence had its beginnings in Wittenberg with Carlstadt. In him we have an example of false teaching stemming from ambition and pride.

He was one of those unfortunate human beings whose ambition far outstripped his ability. He wanted to be a leader like Luther, but he was never quite clear on what or where to lead and only created a muddle wherever he went. (Schwiebert 695)

Carlstadt began to teach that the bread and wine in Holy Communion are only symbols of the body and blood of Christ. After being forced out of Wittenberg and Orlamuende, he went to Strassburg where he published his views in a book: *Interpretation of These Words of Christ*. His views were not well received there at that time, and he was expelled by the town council. But his false doctrine eventually took hold in Strassburg, where Martin Bucer began to adopt Carlstadt' s views on the Lord' s Supper, after being influenced also by Christopher Honius of the Netherlands. Honius taught that the word *est* in the words of institution should be understood as *significat* (Schwiebert 697). The same views were taught by the Swiss reformers Zwingli and Oecolampadius, who began to attack Luther' s teaching of the real presence (Schwiebert 695,697).

Luther has been accused of being the main cause of the split between the churches of the Reformation. It should be noted, however, that Luther for a long time refrained both from attacking Zwingli directly and from responding to his attacks. Luther' s treatise *Against the Heavenly Prophets* (1524) was aimed at Carlstadt. In *Von den Bildern und Sacrament* (1525) Luther wrote against the denial of the real presence without mentioning Zwingli' s name (Sasse 111).

The controversy with the Sacramentarians led Luther to examine more carefully the teachings of Scripture on the Lord' s Supper and to sharpen his own understanding and teaching of this doctrine. He maintained that the words of Christ, "This is my body" must be taken literally, since there is no indication in the text or context that they were intended figuratively. The commentary on the Lord' s Supper in First Corinthians also supports the literal understanding of the words of institution and the real presence. Luther' s doctrine of the Lord' s Supper is drawn from the passages of Scripture that speak of the Lord' s Supper and from nowhere else. Zwingli reached his conclusions not by exegesis of Scripture but by reasoning that taking the words of institution literally involved one in "absurdities:"

a) that bodily eating and drinking could have a spiritual effect; b) that the body of Christ which is in heaven could be present with bread in many places on earth.

The roots of the controversy between Luther and Zwingli lie deeper than the doctrine of the Lord' s Supper. There was a difference in the Christology of the two men. Luther taught the union of the divine and human natures in Christ and the communication of attributes. What is true of the divine nature of Christ is true also of His human nature, which is why we need not stumble at the thought of the body and blood of Christ being present with the bread and wine wherever the Sacrament is administered. Zwingli did not recognize this communication of attributes, following the thinking of medieval scholasticism.

It is noteworthy that all schoolmen (at least of the later Middle Ages), share the opinion of Zwingli that the body of Christ must be in a certain place in heaven – which is, by the way, one of the arguments for transubstantiation advanced by Thomas: since the body of Christ is in that heavenly place, it can be present on the altar only through a conversion of the substance of bread into the substance of the body. (Sasse 120)

Debate raged between the Lutherans and the Sacramentarians, much of it personal and characterized by rancor. But by early 1529 the course of events convinced some that it was imperative that an attempt be made to bring the two sides together. The second Diet of Speyer had revoked the principle that the prince could determine the religion of his state. The evangelical princes protested this decision (for which they were called *Protestants*) and began to form a political union to protect the practice of the evangelical faith. This union included the princes of Saxony, Hesse, Nuernberg, Strassburg, and Ulm. The differences on the doctrine of the Lord' s Supper were seen as an impediment to a united front. Philip of Hesse brought the opposing parties together, extending to them an invitation to meet at his castle in Marburg (Schwiebert 700).

The meeting took place in October of 1529. In his opening statement Luther expressed doubt about anything new coming to light at the meeting. He was convinced that what he had written about the Lord' s Supper was in accord with Holy Scripture. But he and the others from Wittenberg had come because the Elector of Saxony and Philip of Hesse had requested it. Zwingli and Oecolampadius likewise said they did not expect to change their views which they had set forth in print at great length. And no agreement was reached on the doctrine of the Lord' s Supper at the Marburg Colloquy. But from this meeting came the fifteen Marburg Articles. They were drawn up by Luther at the request of Philip to state the points on which they agreed and to give a fair statement of the points on which they did not agree. The articles were signed by all the theologians of both parties.

Luther was surprised at Zwingli' s willingness to sign the articles, for several of them differed from what he had taught, and his signature did not mean that he had changed his views. The very next year after Marburg, Zwingli submitted his *Fidei Ratio* to the Emperor, in which he denied that the Word is a necessary means of grace, stating that the Holy Spirit does not need any means, since the wind blows where it wills. How then could he have subscribed to the eighth of the Marburg Articles?

That the Holy Ghost ... gives this faith or His gift to no one, without preaching, or the oral Word or the gospel of Christ preceding, but, by and with this oral Word, works and furnishes faith, as and in whom He will.

There are other inconsistencies between Zwingli' s teachings and the articles on original sin (4), baptism (9), confession (10), and infant baptism (14) (Sasse 223). Part of the problem is that some of the articles were understood differently by the two sides. This was true even of the article on the Lord' s Supper (15), which contains the words "the sacrament of the altar is a sacrament of the true Body and Blood of Jesus Christ." To his edition of the Articles, Zwingli added this note: "The Sacrament is the sign of the true body" (Sasse 226). The Marburg Articles in no way fulfilled the purpose they were intended to serve: to be a basis for union between the Lutherans and the Reformed.

### **The Schwabach and Torgau Articles**

For a long time it was thought that the Marburg Articles were prepared first and that they then formed the basis for the Schwabach Articles. Krauth, for example, writes,

On the basis of these XV (Marburg) Articles were prepared, by Luther, with the advice and assistance of the other theologians, the XVII Articles of Schwabach (Krauth 219).

But research in this century has discovered that the Schwabach Articles were drawn up in the summer of 1529 as a basis for the discussions at the meeting with the Zwinglians that had been proposed by Philip of Hesse, which took place at Marburg later that year. They formed the basis for the Marburg Articles. They became known as the Schwabach Articles because they were announced at Schwabach on October 16. They were also presented at the conference at Smalcald November 29 and so are sometimes referred to as the Smalcald Articles (not to be confused with the Smalcald Articles of 1537). Their purpose was to form the basis for an alliance of the Protestant states that could then present a united front to the Emperor in response to the edict of Speyer. Strassburg and Ulm did not agree with all of the doctrines as set forth in the Articles and refused on this basis to form an alliance with the Saxons and Brandenburgers. It was at this point that Charles V on January 21, 1530, issued the announcement that he would personally preside over a meeting at Augsburg on April 8 (Schwiebert 717).

With the Diet of Augsburg Charles hoped to reunite Christendom and present a united front to the Turkish threat. The Lutherans welcomed the opportunity to present a defense of the faith preached and practiced in their lands, though some were unsure of the intentions of Charles in calling the meeting. They were well aware that there were many who would want to use the occasion to have Charles move against them. Luther himself was opposed to the organizing of a political league to oppose the Emperor, recognizing that Charles was still their sovereign and they were bound to obey him, unless he tried to force them to give up their faith.

The Lutherans set about to prepare a defense of their faith to the Emperor. The Elector asked the Wittenberg theologians to draft a set of articles dealing with the abuses in the church which the Lutherans had corrected. These were to be presented along with the Schwabach Articles. This was done, and the resulting articles were presented to the Elector. They are referred to as the Torgau Articles because the order to write them came from Torgau and they were given to the Elector at Torgau. Luther refers to the Electors request for these articles in a letter to Jonas on March 14.

The Prince has written to us, that is, to you, Pomeranus, Philip, and myself, in a letter addressed to us in common, that we should come together, set aside all other business, and finish before next Sunday whatever is necessary for the next diet on April 8. (Bente 17)

Luther, Melanchthon, Jonas, and Dietrich met the Elector at Torgau on April 3, and from there they set out the next day for Augsburg. At Weimar they received the news that the Emperor would not be in Augsburg by April 8. They continued on to Coburg, arriving on Good Friday, April 15. There they celebrated Easter. It was decided that Luther should not go to Augsburg but stay at Coburg since he was still under the imperial ban. Melanchthon inherited the responsibility for preparing the Saxon defense.

Meanwhile the Emperor, staying at Innsbruck, was influenced against the Lutherans by the papal legate Campegio. In addition to this, the Emperor was upset at learning that the Elector had arranged for evangelical preaching in Augsburg. And, though the Saxons did not know it, Charles had received a poor Latin translation of the Schwabach Articles. Campegio advised the Emperor to "exterminate these stiff-necked heretics with fire and sword" (Schwiebert 721). Another factor was John Eck' *Four Hundred and Four Articles for the Diet in Augsburg*, a listing of alleged Lutheran innovations and heresies. It was full of slander against Luther himself and attempted to lump together the Lutherans with the Sacramentarians and even the Anabaptists.

The dedication opens with sheer flattery: All Catholics worship in the Emperor the vessel chosen by divine providence to defend the faith, etc. ... Then Luther is painted in darkest colors. With him, in spite of all fatherly admonition and warning, things have not improved but grown worse. ... But the generation of vipers which he has bred outdoes him, if such were possible, in this accursed horror. One heresy gives birth to another. Iconoclasts, Sacrament-defilers, Capernaumites, Neohussites, Anabaptists, modern Epicurites, fanatics, atheists join hands in endless ranks. (Reu 62)

This venomous work was placed in the hands of the Emperor and was being sold in the Augsburg bookstores.

Eck' s writing showed the Lutherans that they needed to do more in their confession before the Emperor than they had originally envisioned. At first it was thought that all that was needed was a defense of Lutheran teaching and practice in matters where abuses had been corrected. They now saw clearly that they also needed to say that they held to the historic teachings of the Christian faith in matters not under dispute. They had to show that they were not a sect but that their teachings were those of Christ and the apostles and of the early Christian church. For this the Schwabach Articles served as a good basis. They were drawn up for the purpose of distinguishing the Lutherans from the Sacramentarians, unlike the Marburg Articles which emphasized what they had in common. Melancthon himself, in a letter to Luther, acknowledges that the form of the Augsburg Confession was influenced by Eck' *Four Hundred and Four Articles for the Diet in Augsburg*:

Our "Apology" is being sent you, but in truth it is rather a "Confession." For the Emperor has not time to listen to lengthy disputations. Yet I have succinctly given nearly all the Articles of Faith, since Eck has circulated the most Satanic slanders against us. Over against these I wished to oppose a remedy. Please give judgment on the whole writing according to your spirit. (Reu 64)

Eck' s writing appears to have affected the Confession in more than just the addition of the articles of faith. In the content of the articles much contrast is drawn between the Lutherans and the Swiss and Anabaptists. Differences with the Swiss are pointed out in the articles on original sin, the two natures in Christ, the means of grace, the Church, baptism, confession, the sacraments, and secular government. And of course even greater effort was made to distance the Lutherans from the Anabaptists. Five times we find the words *damnant Anabaptistas*. There is also an effort to show that the doctrines taught by the Lutherans can be found in the writings of the church fathers, such as Ambrose and Augustine. There are more such quotations in the Augsburg Confession than are found in the Torgau Articles.

On June 25 the Augsburg Confession was read at the Diet to an audience that packed the hall and spilled over into the corridors and the courtyard.

At the Diet of Augsburg the Evangelical Confession prepared by Philip Melancthon and approved by Elector John and other princes and estates alike, written in both Latin and German, was read in German by the Chancellor of Electoral Saxony, Doctor Christian Beyer, in the so-called Bishop' s Court so loudly and distinctly that not only the assembled Emperor, Electors, and estates, before which he spoke, could hear it, but also outside in front of the room and even in the Palatinate and the Castle Court they could understand every word. The reading took two hours. After the reading Doctor Gregorius Pontanus took from Doctor Beyer the German text, which had been read, and gave it with the Latin copy, which he already had, to the imperial secretary, Alexander Schweiss, from whom the Kaiser took the Latin copy. (J.S. Mueller, *Annales* of 1700, quoted in Schwiebert 729)

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## **The Christian's Hope and Purpose in these Darkening Days**

Mark Gullerud

The thought expressed in the title above gives us occasion to direct our attention to certain prevailing conditions in the world today, which can be quite troubling to Christians. The focal point of this great concern is to be found in what lies behind the concept of "these Darkening Days." This expression, of course, is not referring to any kind of ecological problem in nature due to a burning out of the sun, but rather is pointing to the ongoing religious, spiritual and moral decline in society. During the course of just one generation we have witnessed this dreadful kind of darkness spreading and overshadowing the world at a frightening pace. With every passing day we learn of different segments of society falling to new lows.

These prevailing harmful conditions cause Christians to have grave concerns about the spiritual and eternal welfare of themselves, their family, their fellow believers, and all those many people who are living in spiritual darkness. Lest any Christian become paralyzed with fear, lose heart, and become discouraged in well doing, the Word of our Lord reminds us of the crucial purpose of life that He has given us to carry out until the end of time and He bolsters our spirits with His many gracious promises, which give us reason to look to the future with hope.

### **Ever Darkening Conditions**

Evidence of the ever darkening conditions abound in the external church, in civil agencies, and in society in general. Among the various religious denominations that bear the name of Christ there are many indications of the saving word of God being obscured, overshadowed, and in many cases even completely forsaken. The Bible, which is the only source and norm for faith and life, has often been relegated to the lowly level of being an imperfect product of human invention, with just a small percentage of it being acknowledged as containing divine religious truth. In the findings of the "Jesus Seminar," supposed Biblical scholars concluded that of the statements attributed to Jesus in the gospel accounts only about 20% were actually said by Him. Increasing numbers of religious leaders have made peace with Darwin, teaching that God employed evolution to "create" this world.

The liberal minded churchmen have been successful in promoting the faulty belief that Jesus is only to be viewed as an exemplary model of moral living, instead of the teaching that He is the divine Son of God who saved sinners from sin, death, and the devil through His sacrificial death and victorious resurrection. Since Jesus is not acknowledged to be the Savior of the world by some of these religious leaders, in place of this they teach salvation through work righteousness or promote the belief of universalism. And instead of tending to the spiritual and eternal welfare of souls, churches have become more and more involved in social and political activism. Yet, when it comes to the matter of churches providing moral leadership, different forms of sinful, immoral and perverse behavior have been countenanced, such as, abortion, extramarital relations, homosexuality, unScriptural divorces, etc. Even "Evangelicals," who hold to certain fundamental Christian beliefs, render a grave disservice to the gospel by mixing the law with the gospel. And in the relatively conservative camps of Lutheranism there is a trend toward increasing membership by using the human gimmickry of the "Church Growth Movement" while sidelining or giving short shrift to the gospel of Christ.

With very little spiritual light issuing forth from the different denominations the conditions of spiritual darkness in the world have increased to appalling and frightening proportions. In government agencies we find civil laws enacted which approve of abortion on demand, protect and encourage perverse manners of living, and liberalize divorce. There have also been efforts in promoting policies that show religious intolerance. Public schools have been active in indoctrinating youths with the godless teachings of humanism, evolution, value free sexual behavior, and even pantheism.

With society in general there has been a major break-down of the social order, due to a lack of spirituality. The nuclear family of husband, wife, and children, which is a foundational element of human society, is not predominantly found. There are increasing instances of sexual promiscuity, unwed couples shacking up, unborn babies being aborted, unwed mothers giving birth to babies, broken homes due to divorce, same sex couples, drug and alcohol addiction, youths and adults not

respecting their superiors, domestic violence and violence in the streets, ardent devotion to the god of mammon, and finally suicides.

### **Prophecy of these Darkening Days**

While the ever darkening conditions in the world cause us to feel distressed, disgusted, pained, and saddened, yet all this does not come as a surprise to us. Our good and gracious God made provisions to prepare His people for the coming of these dark and evil days. For through divine revelations in Holy Scripture the Lord God foretold what kind of conditions would prevail as the time grew closer for the final end of this world.

The apostle John prophesied of the coming of many false prophets in the last days who would oppose Jesus by denying Him as Lord and Savior:

*"Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour... Who is a liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist who denies the Father and the Son. Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father either..." (1 John 2:18,22,23).*

The apostle Paul foretold that in the latter times many would not be interested in hearing the word of God taught in all its truth and purity, but rather would go to religious teachers who would tell them what their fleshly ears want to hear:

*"For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables" (2 Tim. 4:3,4).*

The apostle Peter revealed that in the days leading up to the end there would be irreligious people who would reject the evidence of a Creator God, to whom they are accountable, follow the promptings of their fleshly desires, and scoff at the warning that the Lord will be coming on the last day to judge the world:

*"Knowing this first: that scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts, and saying, 'Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation.' For this they willfully forget: that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of water and in the water, by which the world that then existed perished, being flooded with water" (2 Pet. 3:3-6).*

As to the general prevailing conditions that would be found in society during the end times the apostle Paul prophesied:

*"But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!" (2 Tim. 3:1-5).*

### **Hope for the Christian**

Being surrounded on every side by forces of darkness, wickedness and evil, we are quite naturally concerned about its influence and effect upon us, our family, and all other fellow believers. Being aware of the temporal and eternal destructive ways of the world, we dread the thought of falling prey to its deceptive and tempting devices.

In the face of all this our Savior God gives us reason to have an uplifted spirit of peace, confidence, and hope, rather than a gloomy spirit of fear, doubt, and despondency. The message that Jesus gave to the apostles on Maundy Thursday, in order to prepare them for being disciples and ambassadors of Christ in a hostile world, is also helpful in giving us hope in these darkening times. In the gospel of John (chapters 14-16) we hear Jesus first of all impressing upon His followers that He alone is the way, the truth, and the life. While modern day society says that truth is only relative, yet as believers in Christ we know and are assured that the words and teachings of Jesus are absolute truth and that His revealed Word blesses us with the gift of forgiveness, life, and eternal salvation. Jesus' promise of sending the Holy Spirit as a Counselor and Helper is a source of great comfort, for in and through the word of Christ the Spirit of God guides the believer into all truth and strengthens and preserves him in the one true faith.

Using the picture of Himself as the vine and believers as the branches, Jesus also promises the believer His abiding presence and help in his life as a Christian. In that beautiful symbolic picture Jesus assures us that as we abide in Him, He will abide in us to bless us with a fruitful Christian life that will redound to the glory of God. At the end of John, chapter sixteen, Jesus concludes His preparatory message to His followers with the words: *"These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world"* (v. 33). What a powerful and hopeful statement by Jesus – *"be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."* Although the spiritual battle will be fierce and the warfare long, Jesus has assured us of gaining the victory through Him, because He was successful in conquering sin, death, and the devil by His holy life and sacrificial death. How can we be fearful of a conquered foe?! Listen to the confident and hopeful words of the apostle Paul as he speaks of the perseverance of believers who are faced with threats on every hand, which would try to separate them from their loving Savior and Redeemer:

*"We are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord"* (Rom. 8:37-39).

Add to this the comforting and reassuring promise of our Savior :

*"My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father' s hand"* (John 10:27-29).

### **The Christian's Purpose**

In the first epistle of Peter we are reminded that when our gracious Lord called us out of darkness into His marvelous light, He made us a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, who were given a very special and important purpose in life and that is to proclaim the praises of our Savior God to others (1 Pet. 2:9). Jesus elaborated on this purposeful role when He said in the gospel of Matthew:

*"You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven"* (5:14-16); and

*"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"* (28:19,20).

In this ever darkening world, Christians are privileged to serve as light-bearers of Christ, causing His glorious, saving light to be made known through the Christian witness and the Christian life. This we are led to perform so that through the propagation of the gospel of Christ the Holy Spirit might dispel the gloom of night in sin-darkened minds, giving them *"the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in face of Jesus Christ"* (2 Cor. 4:6). Blessed with a heart-felt knowledge of Christ, people are delivered from the kingdom of darkness and ushered into the kingdom of light, where they enjoy the saving grace of Christ and live as children of light, glorying in their Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. With the world about us growing darker with every passing day and with the end of the world drawing ever closer to its final end, we are impressed with the crucial need and the great urgency of diligently carrying out our God-given purpose of being light-bearers of Christ in the world. We might think of what Jesus said about His earthly mission and apply it to ourselves in the carrying out of our mission in life. He said, *"I must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day; the night is coming when no one can work"* (John 9:4).

The task of shining forth the light of Christ begins with our families. I recall one of my seminary professors telling the class that in carrying out the ministry of the Word one of the most important areas of concern would be that of the spiritual upbuilding of the family. How wise and how true that instruction was, for since those school days the family unit in society has been in a steady decline! And our Christian fellowship has not gone unaffected by this trend. In view of this, Christians need to redouble their efforts in extolling the virtues and sanctity of the holy estate of matrimony. Christians who are looking for spouses are to be encouraged to choose a mate who already shares a



common confession of faith with them or through their witnesses comes to embrace the Christian faith. And Christians who are married to a person that is not spiritually at one with them should never grow weary of bearing witness to their spouse of the truths of Christ. Christian parents may need reminding that they are the primary spiritual caregivers of their children. And they are to be exhorted ever to bring their children to Jesus by holding regular family devotions, rearing the children in the ways of Christian verity and love, and by helping their young to appreciate the Christian fellowship, which gathers together regularly around the Word and Sacrament.

When Jesus says to Christians that they are the light of the world; that a city set on a hill cannot be hidden; that as the light of a lamp is not put under a basket, but rather is put on a lampstand so that it gives light to all who are in the house, He again reminds all Christians of the reason and purpose for their existence: that light may shine in this dark world. We find the forces of darkness taking advantage of every opportunity, every forum, and every avenue to promote the spread of error, godlessness, and wickedness, in the work place, in community gatherings, in civil government, in the educational system, in the mass media and entertainment industries, etc. Are individual Christians, in turn, seeking out and making use of the different avenues and forums available to them to let their Christian light shine in the midst of this dark world, exposing and refuting error with God' s infallible truths, reproving wickedness with the righteous precepts of God, contending for the faith in the face of falsehoods, calling sinners to repentance and spreading the gracious message of forgiveness and life and hope wherever lives are ridden with guilt, fear, and despair? As Jesus said, none of His followers is to conceal or keep to himself the Christian light, but is to let it shine brightly in this dark world, so that his heavenly Father be praised and the gloom and doom of night be dispelled.

Knowing that we are living in the latter days of this world when many will be unresponsive to the Word and fiercely opposed to it, Christians should not become discouraged in the well-doing of letting their Christian light shine, nor should they give way to the temptation of watering down the Christian witness so that it is more appealing to the masses. Think of the days of Noah when the prevalence of spiritual darkness was greater than it is today. By the grace of God Noah faithfully prepared for the coming of God' s worldwide judgment in the Great Deluge by tending to the spiritual needs of his own family and by building the ark, which was to serve as God' s means for their deliverance. In addition to this, Noah also proclaimed a message of repentance and forgiveness through the Savior God to the godless children of men. He continued to carry out this important work faithfully for one hundred, twenty years, even though the flock of God remained as small as his own family for the duration of all those years.

In regard to the number of lost or rescued souls that will be delivered through the Christian witness from the wrath to come on the last day, no matter what the final count may be, we find comfort and hope in the knowledge of the efficacious nature of the word of God. The prophet Isaiah declares:

*"For as the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven, and do not return there, but water the earth, and make it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower and bread to the eater, So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it" (Isa. 55:10,11).*

As we live out our lives in the remaining days of this sin-darkened world, may the gracious promises of our Savior God give us an abiding hope in Him, and may the Lord enable us faithfully to serve as His light-bearers so that those whom God would have us serve will be delivered from the kingdom of darkness that leads to eternal destruction and brought into the kingdom of light that leads to eternal salvation.

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## **Evangelical Admonition: To what extent does it proceed from the Law? The Gospel?**

Paul W. Schaller

It has been more than twenty-seven years now since I was handed the certificate of marriage that had been completed by the officiant, my father-in-law. I still remember how I was struck by the way one of the blanks had been filled. It read in part: *I, the undersigned, a Minister of the Gospel, did on the 23rd day of June, 1972 unite in marriage\_\_\_\_\_* ... I am not sure just why those words "a

Minister of the Gospel" struck me so. What did I expect? "an ordained clergyman?" That is all the state would have required. "A licensed practitioner?" No, if there is one way that we would wish to describe ourselves, it is as a *Minister of the Gospel*. It was the gospel that our Savior suffered and died to create. It was by means of the good news of peace through Christ that the Holy Spirit persuaded us to trust Christ' s sacrifice for our standing with God. It is the gospel that is the power of God unto salvation. That is why it is of such great importance when a question is discussed which touches, as does this one, on the distinction between the law and the gospel, for this distinction lies at the heart of the gospel ministry.

As ministers of the gospel, we all know the two main teachings of Scripture, the law and the gospel. We know that these two teachings are the bases for the two religions of the world: the religion of those who try to come to God on the basis of their own works (fulfilling some law), and the religion of those who actually do come to God on the basis of His works in Christ, who fulfilled all law for us.

We are first, last, and always preachers of the gospel, and yet we continue also to preach the law, even to believers, who come to God on the basis of Christ' s works— His life, His death, and His resurrection. As long as believers still have the sinful flesh, it clouds their understanding and would have them come to God on terms which seem more fitting and glorious for the crown of God' s creation, namely their own doings and ideas. And this is as true of ministers as it is of parishioners. Thus we still need the law to knock such pins out from under us, to point out our sin, to show us that even our best works are tainted by the sin of pride, that no one will be declared righteous in God' s sight by observing the law. And so "through the law we become conscious of sin" (Rom. 3:20).

To accomplish this end of destroying the false hopes of the flesh which serve to divert people from the Good News, we do not soften the law or restrict its application. For the law surely declares God' s wrath upon all sin and pronounces His condemnation upon every form of rebellion against the King of heaven. But when, for example, it is suggested that the reason for the high suicide rate among young people in the State of Utah is that the Mormon Church has made the mistake of teaching them that God demands of them perfection in desires as well as in deeds, the law is softened, for God surely did express His will clearly already when He came to Abraham saying, "I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless" (Gen. 17:1; see also Deut. 18:13; 1 Kings 8:61; Matt. 5:48).

Now, the form in which the law comes is the *imperative*, the command *to do* or *not to do*, and when as law these commands come with their threatened punishment, the result is not really any improvement in human behavior. Just the opposite. Human nature screams bloody murder, and rebels all the more. "For I would not have known what it was to covet if the law had not said, ' Do not covet.' But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire ... When the commandment came, sin sprang to life..." (Rom. 7:6a,7b). And all of this so that sin may be seen for the deadly sting that it is, and Jesus' triumph over sin and death for the glorious victory that it is; for to preach the gospel remains our goal and purpose, even when we bring the law.

As a matter of fact, the law and the gospel dare not be separated. Those who try to do away with the law end up gutting the gospel. For it is the law which shows our sin, the very reason for Christ' s sacrificial death. If we were to lay aside the law, which is God' s own expression of his will for human behavior, we would end up with a "gospel" something like this: "Jesus Christ, God' s Son, \_\_\_\_\_ on the cross for all \_\_\_\_\_." We would not know death if we did not know sin, and "by the law is the knowledge of sin." There are those, of course, who will say that we can see our sins at the foot of the cross, and this is true, but insofar as it is true, it is not gospel that we see, but the wrath of God coming down on His only Son because He bears your sins and mine. This is what the law is all about. To proclaim to the heathen a gospel of forgiveness without acknowledging the reality of the sin and guilt which is thereby forgiven is to cast pearls before swine. A pearl to a pig is not as valuable as the swill which slakes his thirst and fills his stomach. He will trample it underfoot and turn to tear into the giver of such a "worthless" gift.

The law and the gospel are always together. A minister of the gospel should not wait even an hour to proclaim the gospel when he has brought the law. Those who would withhold the gospel for

whatever reason (to make the gospel more dramatic; to bring about a certain depth of remorse; etc.) are in danger of judgment day, for the law without the gospel is a terrible judgment.

Even when Nathan came to David (2 Sam. 12) to show him his sins of adultery and murder in all their ugliness, he also included mention of God' s graciousness in giving him his master' s house and his master' s wives, and the house of Israel and Judah, and if all this had not been enough, He would have given David even more. It was against this gracious God that David had sinned, as he acknowledged by saying, "I have sinned against Jehovah (the LORD)." The response from Jehovah' s prophet was immediate: "The LORD (Jehovah) has put away your sin."

Likewise, in the midst of Isaiah' s recitation of Israel' s unfaithfulness comes the heavenly refreshment:

Yet you have not called upon me, O Jacob, you have not wearied yourselves for me, O Israel. You have not brought me sheep for burnt offerings, nor honored me with your sacrifices. I have not burdened you with grain offerings nor wearied you with demands for incense. You have not bought any fragrant calamus for me, or lavished on me the fat of your sacrifices. But you have burdened me with your sins and wearied me with your offenses. I even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more. (Isa. 43:22-25)

So also Jesus did not end his "woes" (Matt. 23) without expressing His deep desire for the salvation of His people:

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are. Woe to you, blind guides! ... Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices ... you have neglected the more important matters ... you clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence ... you are like whitewashed tombs ... you testify against yourselves ... You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell? ... O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.

We are first, last and always ministers of the gospel, and therefore we bring also the law, but always distinguishing between the two, whether in public sermons or in private counseling. In September of 1884, as C.F.W. Walther was nearing the end of his life, he began some evening lectures which were to continue until November of 1885, thirty-nine in all, on the subject of properly distinguishing between law and gospel. But it was not because this subject was not important enough that it was relegated to evening lectures rather than daily classes. In these evening meetings the entire student body was present, and the topic was vital for all.

Walther' s successor at Concordia Seminary, Francis Pieper, also wrote about the proper separation of law and gospel in his *Christliche Dogmatik*, Christian Dogmatics, first published in 1924. When Pieper became a faculty member of Concordia, his younger brother, August, was studying under Walther. August in turn became a faculty member at the Wisconsin Synod seminary in Wauwatosa WI, and also wrote much about the proper distinction between law and gospel. His colleagues at Wauwatosa, John Koehler and John Schaller, had also studied under Walther, and likewise wrote articles in the *Quartalschrift* on this subject. No doubt a number of their students also wrote in the same vein in the next generation, for in the writings of one of them, Winfred Schaller Sr., appear thoughts and expressions which remind one of *Quartalschrift* writings and Walther. In the next generation, more was written. In 1976 a paper was delivered in Mankato MN by Pastor P.F. Nolting which contained points reminiscent of August Pieper' *Quartalschrift* articles in 1910.

Does this perhaps mean that it is time to stop reviewing the issue, that enough has been said and taught? By no means. It shows rather that the proper distinction between law and gospel is so important that each generation of believers has taken up the study of it. And what if some end up saying the same things that a previous generation said? One may note that each generation did not simply hand out copies of what the previous generation wrote. We also might expect some of the same things to be said because the enduring Word of Jesus Christ speaks the same to all generations, yes, even when heaven and earth pass away. Yet, although the teaching does not change, believers of each

generation need to hear that Word, to grow in grace, in knowledge, and in the wisdom to apply that Word in their daily walk.

It is relatively easy to know the difference between law and gospel. Our children can reproduce the charts rather quickly.

But while it is easy to know the difference, it is not so easy to apply it. Because our flesh is proud and does not want to depend on God' s mercy, we cannot by our own reason or strength believe on Jesus Christ, our Lord, nor come to him. But when the Spirit persuades us to receive by faith the gospel acquittal as **the** answer to the law' s condemnation, then we have properly applied to ourselves the distinction between law and gospel. Every true Christian has already made this distinction, from the tiniest tot who trusts that "Jesus died for me," to the oldest veteran who confesses "Jesus died for me."

As ministers of the gospel, we also want to distinguish properly law from gospel when applying the Word to others. When we see faults and failings in our congregations, how are we going to deal with them? If we need to show them their sinfulness, the law will serve well. But the law will only reveal sin, not remove it. Nor will a person' s heartiest New Year' s resolve remove the sinning. Only the blood of Jesus can cleanse the guilt, and only fruits of faith will be acceptable to God in the year ahead. "Everything that is not of faith is sin" (Rom. 14:23).

But the law does not work faith, as we know. Instead the sin which still clings to us, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produces wrath, rebellion and death. The gospel on our chart, however, does not come with guidelines for human behavior, but spotlights what God has done, while we also desire to encourage Christians in their daily walk.

Enter "Evangelical Admonition." There are many passages of Scripture that bring just such encouragement in Christian living. Sometimes it has been suggested that going and speaking to a brother, pointing out his sin (in a friendly way) is "evangelical admonition." But to reveal sin is a function of the law, which, as mentioned above, does need to be applied to unbelievers and also to believers because of our sinful flesh. J. P. Koehler, as you may know, speaks of "Evangelical Admonition" as another kind of talking, whose content matches that of the law, in that it addresses human behavior, but whose purpose is not to reveal sin, but to encourage the Christians to walk as the adopted children God' s word has declared them to be. "This talk is not gospel, ~~while~~ speaks of the great acts of God, but it treats of God' s will with regard to our activity. But it is also not law, which demands, threatens, condemns, and burdens us; quite the opposite, it proceeds from the gospel." ("Legalism Among Us" J.P. Koehler, *The Wauwatosa Theology*. II 257)

The other members of the Wauwatosa faculty also spoke of Evangelical Admonition. August Pieper spoke of it as a third form of divine teaching, a Christian *Verbindung von Gesetz und Evangelium*, a joining together, not a mixing, of law and gospel, with the law expressing God' s eternal will for human behavior, and the gospel, often in the form of a promise, providing the moving force to carry it out. He suggested that the content of this law/gospel encouragement would vary according to the percentage of new/old man at the time, with at least 51% being gospel since this encouragement is intended only for believers, e.g., "Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life" (*Theologische Quartalschrift*. VII 297). Perhaps this writer does not fully grasp the concepts of Pieper, but it would seem to leave it up to the reader to decide how much he needed each part of the exhortation when applying it to himself, and impossible for a pastor to apply to someone else without some special insight.

The third member of the faculty also took up questions touching on those passages sometimes referred to as evangelical admonitions. In the article *Gottes Wille und Befehl* (*Theol. Quartal*. XII 12, 1915), it is noted that although the grammatical form in which the law clothes itself is the imperative, not every imperative form is automatically law. When Jesus says, "Come unto me..." the form is imperative, but Jesus is not bringing the wrath of God, condemning to hell, or revealing sin. This kind of imperative is more closely allied to those which God used when creating the heavens and the earth, when all was good. The word of Christ is itself the power which draws us to Himself, rather than demanding some behavior from us. When Jesus called out, "Lazarus, come forth," or "Talitha, kumi,"

the creative word of Christ was surely the power, and not something within Lazarus or the daughter of Jairus.

Yet *within us* is precisely where the law looks, threatening and demanding that we produce behavior and attitudes in line with our Creator. However, because in me, that is in my flesh, dwells no good thing, the law is unable to produce anything that it calls for, not faith, not love. And so the law is powerless because of our flesh (Rom. 8:3). When the law says, for example: Love your enemies, this is easily understood by all, but this expressed will of God does not bring forth life. Instead sin seizes the opportunity to stir up our sinful human nature, and death is produced. "But in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it produced death in me through what was good, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful" (Rom. 7:13). Such is the weakness of the law because of our sinful human nature.

There are, on the other hand, commands which require nothing of us, but which as an effectual power produce in and on us what God wills. Example: *Preach the gospel*. It is also in the imperative form but it is not law. This command is not given to reveal sin, to work death, but to bring life, to create precisely what the Word says. By this command God sets in motion the preaching of the gospel in all the world. This is His will and it is accomplished by His Word. The same is true for the "sacramental" commands *Baptize* and *This do*. By these commands God moves the will of His children to want what He does. These particular commands have produced the work of the church through the ages, but it is the same when they are applied on an individual basis: "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation" (Acts 2:40), or "Believe in the Lord Jesus" (Acts 16:31). Even the call to "repent" is not given to reveal impenitence. It means "change your mind," and calls for a change of heart, which is God's gift. "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh" (Ezek. 36:26). All of these commands are not laws, but creative acts of a gracious God. This same may be said of "Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life." Some of these citations have at times been called "gospel invitations," but they all represent the gift of God, created by Him in us and for us. "By grace are ye saved through faith, and that (τῶτο) not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast" (Eph. 2:8).

So these evangelical admonitions, these encouragements to sanctification, are not law, do not really spring from the law, although they express the same eternal will which the law also expresses. They are applications of the gospel in that they answer questions like: "How shall I show my thanks to Him who called me out of darkness into His marvelous light? What is my Father's will for my life?" Of course, if it were not for our sinful flesh, we would not need such encouragements, for the new man would simply will and perform the Father's will. But that is just the kind of will that His words create in the heart of the believer. "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). "It is God who works in you, both to will and to do of his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13).

If the gospel imperatives were to be taken as moral law, then they would require some behavior on the part of humans, and that in order to be God's children. Such a mixing of law and gospel led to the so-called election controversy, which might also be called the conversion controversy. If Jesus' words "Come unto me..." were law which required some behavior of us, we have now fulfilled them and might take some credit for our conversion. Another example might be the conditioning of the gospel by proclaiming the wonderful and complete redemption accomplished by Jesus Christ, and then continuing with "BUT you have to believe it," as though it really depends on something that the hearer brings to the equation. Such a treatment would lead to synergism, Phariseism, and despair. Again, if the imperatives used in connection with the sacraments were taken as New Testament law, the means of grace would become a matter of rules which we follow, and free forgiveness could not be the benefit received in the sacraments.

Actually for the Christian as Christian, **every** expression of his Father's will is wonderful to hear. "For the children of God even the Mosaic imperative is no longer law, but rather an expression of the will of their Lord Yahweh, their Savior and Deliverer, to whom they belong completely, and to whom they want to so belong. They do not need first to decide to make his will their own. As soon as

they first ponder whether or not they want to act according to a clear word of God, they are already not thinking as children of God; for God' s children, according to their newly created nature, have the same will as God and they need only to become aware of God' s thoughts in order to know immediately what they themselves want." (*The Wauwatosa Theology*. II 157-158) [Original: "Gottes Wille und Befehl," *Theol. Quartal.* XII 12, 1915.]

Truly blessed is the man whose delight is in the law of the LORD (Ps. 1:2)! He loves to hear what pleases his Father. He sees the law, the statutes, the precepts, the commands, and the ordinances of the LORD as perfect, trustworthy, right, radiant, and sure; more precious than gold (Ps. 19). Such a view of the law is surely not worked by the law, but it is the view of the ransomed children of the heavenly Father!

How foolish, then, is a preacher who thinks that conditions in his congregation will improve if he thunders at his people with the Law and paints hell and damnation for them. That will not at all improve the people. Indeed, there is a time for such preaching of the Law in order to alarm secure sinners and make them contrite, but a change of heart and love of God and one' s fellow men is not produced by the Law. If any one is prompted by the Law to do certain good works, he does them only because he is coerced, even as the Israelites had to be coerced by the covenant of the Law. (*Law and Gospel*. C.F.W. Walther 384-385)

Nor were such ideas about encouraging good works new with Walther. Martin Luther, commenting on Romans 12:1, "*I beseech you, brethren, by the mercies of God,*" observed:

Paul does not say: I command you; for he is preaching to such as are already Christians and godly by faith, in newness of life. These must not be coerced by means of commandments, but admonished to do willingly what has to be done with the old sinful man in them. For any person who does not do this willingly, simply in answer to kind admonitions, is not a Christian; and any person who wants to achieve this result by force applied to such as are unwilling is not a Christian preacher or ruler, but a worldly jailor. A preacher of the law comes down on men with threats and punishments; a preacher of divine grace coaxes and urges men by reminding them of the goodness and mercy which God has shown them. For he would have no unwilling workers nor cheerless service; he wants men to be glad and cheerful in the service of God. Any person who will not permit himself to be coaxed and urged with sweet and pleasant words, which remind him of the mercy of God abundantly bestowed upon him in Christ, to do good joyfully and lovingly to the honor of God and for the benefit of his fellow-men, is worthless, and all that is done for him is labor lost. If he is not melted and dissolved in the fire of heavenly love and grace, how can he be softened and made cheerful by laws and threats? It is not a man' s mercy, but the mercy of God that is bestowed on us; and this mercy Paul wants us to consider in order that we may be incited and moved by it to serve God. (St. L. Ed. XII 318; Dau transl.)

#### **Recommended Reading**

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[The following article appeared in the initial year of our Journal' s publication. We are reprinting it here not only because it may not be readily available to a new generation of readers, but also because of its relationship to "evangelical admonition," which was discussed in the previous article.]

## **The Imperatives of Scripture**

E. Reim, April 1961

It is quite natural that in theological discussion we search for every legitimate argument that we can find to support the convictions for which we are contending. That this support must have its source in Scripture is a basic premise of our theological method. The dangers of putting reason on a par or even above Scripture are so obvious that we need not recount them here. But we need to scrutinize even our arguments from Scripture with constant care as to their relevance and validity. This is particularly necessary when we are dealing with a devious and evasive exegesis that would deprive a simple and clear passage of Scripture of its obvious meaning. Such attempts have been made with regard to Romans 16:17-18, in spite of the fact that this passage has long been recognized as a *sedes doctrinae* concerning church fellowship. Under these circumstances it would seem to be a conclusive argument to point out that such an exegesis involves a tampering with one of the imperatives of Scripture. This seems to be such a crushing reply that we leap at the opportunity.

But is this eagerness truly of the Spirit - or is this our flesh which is speaking? The intent of this article is to show that this depends on how we use the argument and what it is that we put into the term "imperatives." It is certainly true that each of these imperatives is the voice of God, is an expression of His holy and perfect will, and may therefore never be ignored with impunity. But simply to equate the term with "Law," to invest it with all the implications of threat and punishment, to forge the mere grammatical form of the imperative into a lethal weapon which we then proceed to swing like a bludgeon, - all this would mean that we fail to recognize the many different uses of which this "command" form is capable. It is this severe restriction of the sense of these terms plus the resultant meagerness of our own understanding of the function which also these imperatives fulfill with regard to the proclamation and application of the gospel which would make him who wields this weapon the first one to suffer from it. The following examples taken from the words of Jesus will illustrate the point.

How wide this range of meaning can be is shown by two words, spoken in close connection with each other, parallel in substance if not in form [although the δεῦτε of Mt 25:34, the plural form of δεῖρο, may according to Thayer well be a contraction of δεῖρ ἴτε, and thus a true imperative even as to form], but which are nevertheless poles apart in their implications. In Matthew 25 the Lord describes the Great Judgment, when He shall say to those on His right hand, "Come, ye blessed of my Father," and to those on the left hand, "Depart from me, ye cursed" (verses 34 and 41). The one expression is a most wonderful invitation to enter upon full possession of a blessed heritage, the other a word of final judgment and banishment. The latter is fearful law, the former purest gospel. Yet the outward form of both words is the same.

It is instructive to observe how frequently this same δεῦτε recurs in the words of our Lord: in the "Come and dine" of the risen Christ on the shores of the Tiberian Sea (Jn 21:12), in the invitation to discipleship ("Follow me" - Mt 4:19; Mk 1:17), in the invitation to the marriage feast (Mt 22:4), in the invitation to share a few moments of rest with Him (Mk 6:31), but above all in the Great

Invitation: "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Mt 11:28). In each case the word that has the form of a command is in reality a most gracious offer to receive or to share a great and unmerited blessing. This thought gives us the key to another familiar word of the Savior, one which because of its somber setting is, however, often not appreciated as fully as it should be: "Enter ye in at the strait gate." For children of God who know what lies beyond that gate there should be not a moment's hesitation in recognizing this as another one of those gracious invitations to partake of a great and unmerited blessing. For whatever else these words may say - and we shall return to them presently - they first of all grant us a privilege that would otherwise forever be beyond our reach.

Closely related are the imperatives that confer a gift. They appear in almost every instance where the merciful Healer granted such blessings as the gift of speech and hearing ("Ephphatha" - Mk 7:34), of sight ("Go, wash" - Jn 9:6f), of health ("Be thou clean" - Mk 1:41), and of life itself as it was granted when the Prince of Life spoke those mighty words of command to the daughter of Jairus, the youth at Nain, and at the tomb of Lazarus. Sometimes these gifts were purely spiritual: "Receive ye the Holy Ghost" (Jn 20:22). And then there is the priceless gift of His blessed Body and Blood: Take, eat . . . Take, drink ye all.

Rather in a class by themselves are the imperatives of prayer. It is one of the little courtesies of life that in dealing with people we temper our requests with a "Please," or put them into the form of a question, even a conditional inquiry: "Would you be so kind as to . . ." We do not want to appear to be too demanding. Extreme need may indeed make one very importunate, as in the case of the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mt 15), or the disciples who so rudely broke in on their slumbering Lord with their despairing cry, "Lord, save us, we perish" (Mt 8:25). It seems strange, therefore, that Jesus should not only encourage a most direct approach in prayer ("Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you" - Mt 7:7), but would actually teach His disciples to be shamelessly importunate in their prayer by showing them the example of the man who was finally heard "because of his importunity" (Lk 11:8). For the important thing is that we secure those blessings that our Heavenly Father alone can give - be they great or small. So He has taught us to pray with imperatives: "Give us this day our daily bread," as well as "Forgive us our trespasses . . ."

It is quite natural that our Lord should also make constant use of the imperative in His patient teaching of His disciples. For so large a part of teaching is simply guidance, telling the learner what he should or should not do. But what made His teaching particularly precious was His constantly recognizable concern to provide and preserve for His disciples the priceless blessings of the salvation that He had come to bring. The Sermon on the Mount is full of such instances. It abounds in words of instruction. Following on the parable of the salt of the earth and the light of the world with its obvious bearing on the function of His followers in the world, He tells them, first positively, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven," and then negatively: "Think not that I am come to destroy the law or the prophets. I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill" (Mt 5:16 and 17). These were things they had to know and understand if they were to serve Him effectively. He spoke words of warning as well: "Agree with thine adversary quickly," as well as words of encouragement: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness: and all these things shall be added unto you" (Mt 5:25 and 6:33). In fact, some of these words serve several purposes at the same time. We have already noted the invitation that lies in the "Enter ye in at the strait gate." But that same word certainly offers encouragement to the weary traveler, just as on the other hand it warns against the dangers of the enticingly broad and easy way that leads to destruction. Elsewhere there are words of sound advice: "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust do corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven" (Mt 6:19f). It sounds a stern and much needed warning: "Beware of false prophets" (Mt 7:15). But in all these words, in each of these imperatives, we recognize the intense concern of the Savior for the well-being of His own, the concern of the Good Shepherd for His flock and each individual member of it.

These examples are enough to show how in most cases the imperatives of our Lord are bearers of blessings rather than terms of demand, threat, and compulsion. They lie in the area of grace and not of works. True, He could speak sternly also to His disciples, His reply to Peter's tempting



suggestion that He spare Himself the suffering and death that He had just foretold was a stunningly stern rebuke: "Get thee behind me, Satan!" (Mt 16:23). His dismissal of Judas ("That thou doest, do quickly" - Jn 13:27) was terrible in its implications. But among the many words spoken to the disciples these are rare exceptions. There is, however, one group of imperatives that call for special attention, those by which our Lord conferred upon His disciples the mission for which He had prepared them. It began when He sent forth the Twelve (and afterwards the Seventy - Lk 9:1f; 10:1) and commanded them, saying, "Go . . . to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And as ye go, preach, saying, the kingdom of God is at hand" (Mt 10:5-7). It became very personal when the risen Christ reinstated a fallen Peter with His "Feed my lambs, feed my sheep" (Jn 21:15-17). It was a truly royal mandate for them and for the Church of all time when He said, "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations," and "Preach the Gospel to every creature" (Mt 28 and Mk 16). These were imperatives indeed, and yet no one was driven or coerced by them - just as little as were those women at the Tomb who were told to "go quickly, and tell his disciples that he is risen from the dead" (Mt 28:7). This was no burden! It was a privilege to be bearers of such good news, of such an εὐαγγέλιον, a privilege for them as well as subsequently for His apostles. And though the words with which He told them how they were to conduct themselves, how they were to carry out their difficult assignment (see the rest of Mt 10) as well as how to function in a particularly trying situation (Mt 18:15-20) - though all these were indeed in the command form, yet they were most welcome directives for these disciples who still had so much to learn and who would have been hopelessly lost without this wonderful guidance and instruction of their Great Teacher.

It is therefore not surprising that these imperatives of Christ find a constant echo in the subsequent writings of these same Apostles, as well as of that one who was born out of due time. So we hear Peter warning as he had been warned ("Be sober, be vigilant" - I Pt 5:8), and repeating almost the very words that had been spoken to him: "Feed the flock of God" (I Pt 5:2). We hear John, teaching others as he had been taught: "Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another" (I Jn 4:11). We find Paul, massing his imperatives for the sake of his disciple: "Preach the word, be instant in season, out of season: reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine" (II Tm 4:2). But always one can hear that same note of concern for the welfare, the salvation of "the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood" (Act 20:28).

And so with Romans 16:17, "avoid them." It is an imperative, indeed. But before we stress the grammatical form for the sake of the annihilating weapon which it seems to press into our hands, let us recall its content and its intent. For it is precisely one of those protective words of which we have noted so many examples; indicating the concern of the Savior (and in this case also His servant, the Apostle) for the well-being and safety of the Church for which He gave His very life. "Lest by good words and fair speeches they deceive the hearts of the simple." This eighteenth verse which is so often forgotten or, if remembered, is made a bone of contention as to whether certain causers of divisions and offenses may really be called "belly-servers," throws a wonderfully clear light on the stern "avoid," letting us see it for what it truly is, namely an expression of the saving love of the Good Shepherd who cannot bear to see harm befall His flock. As He warned against wolves in sheep's clothing, so He warns here. Let us note this and we shall not have to resort to the "force of the imperative" for the sake of defending our use of the passage - or exposing the evil of evading it! We shall not want to treat these imperatives in that way. For we have found that so many of them are used to convey rich blessings, blessings that will suffer harm if we turn the words that bring them to us into harsh and forbidding commands.

But, it will be said, do we not weaken these words by this procedure? Are we not falling into some new form of Antinomianism? Not at all. For these are words that are addressed to Christians, to believers, to children of God, who recognize in these words the voice of their Heavenly Father, and who find in them an expression of His will, His gracious and good will. Their response has been formulated long ago: "I delight to do thy will, O my God: yea, thy law is within my heart" (Ps 40:8). This is what the Apostle meant when he wrote "that the law is not made for a righteous man, but for the lawless and disobedient . . ." (I Tm 1:9). For such willing obedience is worth infinitely more than any grudging compliance that may be exacted by the

threats and force of the law. And this is what the Father seeks in those branches that bring forth much fruit - because they abide in Him who is the true Vine, Jn 15:5.

But does this not indicate that men may after all ignore these words with impunity? Again we answer, By no means. To ignore these words that are such bearers of blessings is to incur the loss of those same blessings, whatever they may be. This may involve an absolute and irretrievable loss, as when the call to faith is scorned, for "He that believeth is condemned already" (Jn 3:18). It may involve a terrible, though *not* irretrievable experience - such as the one from which the Savior would have protected Peter, had he but heeded the warning. It may mean the loss of comfort and strength that could have been ours through prayer. And as for Romans 16 - to ignore this word of guidance and protection will certainly jeopardize or involve the loss of that specific blessing that the Lord of the Church is bestowing by this particular directive. Therefore also this passage may not be ignored with impunity. But what that specific loss may be, that is not for us to say.

We do well to leave that to God.

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## Sermons for a Building Project from the Book of Nehemiah

David Lau

### Sermon #5 on Nehemiah 6: 10-13

**Afterward I came to the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah, the son of Mehetabel, who was a secret informer; and he said, "Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple, and let us close the doors of the temple, for they are coming to kill you; indeed, at night they will come to kill you."**

**And I said, "Should such a man as I flee? And who is there such as I who would go to the temple to save his life? I will not go in!" Then I perceived that God had not sent him at all, but that he pronounced this prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. For this reason he was hired, that I should be afraid and act that way and sin, so that they might have cause for an evil report, that they might reproach me.**

Today on the basis of our text from the book of Nehemiah we want to talk about COWARDLY CHRISTIANS, particularly about Christian leaders who prove to be cowards at times when they ought to be making courageous confessions. One man comes to mind right away: Jesus' disciple Peter, who boasted that he would be loyal to Jesus even though all the others turned away. Yet, after Jesus was arrested, Peter was so cowardly that he was not even willing to admit that he knew who Jesus was, for fear of being laughed at or made fun of. How wonderful it is that the Lord Jesus looked at Peter after his three-fold denial, that he went out and wept bitterly, and that later he was restored to discipleship.

Our text tells us about a time when Nehemiah' s enemies did all kinds of things to make him afraid. They wanted him to be a cowardly Christian, but their efforts failed because Nehemiah was given strength by his God to remain firm and unyielding.

Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem were Nehemiah' s enemies. They had already been working hard to make Nehemiah' s project of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem fail. First they had made fun of his rebuilding efforts, saying that even a fox would be able to knock down his wall. Then they had threatened to attack him by force, but that failed also, for Nehemiah armed his builders and prepared them for enemy attack.

Their next scheme involved the spreading of a false report about Nehemiah' s intentions. They spread the lie that Nehemiah was rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem in order to rebel against the

Persian king Artaxerxes and establish himself as a powerful rival king. There was no truth to this report. As Nehemiah says, they invented this idea in their own heart. But their main reason for spreading this rumor about Nehemiah was to make him afraid. They told him about the false report that was being spread and then invited Nehemiah to meet with them in a certain town to discuss the matter. Five times they invited Nehemiah to meet with them, but Nehemiah knew they wanted to harm him or weaken him. So he simply refused to meet with them, sending them the message: **"I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down. Why should the work cease while I leave it and go down to you?"** Nehemiah knew that his enemies would do just about anything to prevent him from finishing the city walls. They were trying to make him afraid, so that he would stop working on the project.

At that time Nehemiah prayed: **"O God, strengthen my hands."** Nehemiah did not want to be a cowardly Christian, and therefore he asked God to give him strength and courage to keep working on the project until it was finished, in spite of all obstacles and false reports that his enemies threw in his path.

Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem were not yet willing to give up their efforts to halt Nehemiah' s building project. Yes, sometimes God' s enemies seem much more energetic and persistent in their attempts to hinder God' s people than the people of God are in upholding the truth of God' s word. This time Nehemiah' s enemies hired a prophet named Shemaiah to tell Nehemiah that his enemies intended to kill him by night and that he should therefore run from them and hide in the temple to save his own life. Shemaiah acted as though he was saying this for Nehemiah' s benefit, in fact that he was a prophet speaking God' s word of warning to Nehemiah. But, as the Bible says, Shemaiah was a **"secret informer,"** pretending to be on Nehemiah' s side when actually he was being paid by Nehemiah' s enemies.

What Nehemiah' s enemies wanted was for Nehemiah to believe this threat and to run to God' s temple to save his life, and then all the Jews would realize that Nehemiah was a cowardly Christian and unworthy of being their leader. As Nehemiah explains: **"Shemaiah was hired, that I should be afraid and act that way and sin, so that they might have occasion for an evil report, that they might reproach me."** In other words, Nehemiah' s enemies did not really intend to kill him at this time. After all, he was the great king' s cupbearer and he was authorized by Artaxerxes himself to rebuild Jerusalem' s walls. It would have been too dangerous for them to kill Nehemiah. But they wanted Nehemiah to think that they would kill him, so that he would run away and hide and everyone would see what a coward he was.

No doubt their little scheme would have worked in the case of many other persons. But Nehemiah was not a coward. He recognized how important his role was as the leader of God' s people. If he faltered at this point, the project might still fail, even though the work was almost completed. So his reply to Shemaiah was a model of courage and confession. Remember, he had asked God to strengthen his hands. And so here was his brave answer: **"Should such a man as I flee? And who is there such as I who would go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in!"**

Nehemiah had a job to do, and he was going to do it, in spite of the threats that had been made against his life. He was not going to hide in the temple, but he was going to keep on working on the project until it was finished, trusting that the Lord who had blessed this project from the beginning would protect him. Nehemiah recognized that if he in fear acted as they wanted him to act and ran to the temple, he would be sinning. After all, he was the leader. If he should flee, what about the others? If he did not have the courage to remain at his post, how could he expect the rest of the people to be bold or brave? **"Should such a man as I flee?"**

Now let us apply Nehemiah' s example of courage to our lives today. Would it not be fair to say that we who are Christians today tend to be cowardly rather than courageous? For example, let us say that we find ourselves at work or at play in the company of persons who say something derogatory about Christ or His Church. Do we ignore the situation or run away from it, or do we open our mouths in courage and love and say something in behalf of the truth? When people around us are speaking God' s name in ridicule or blasphemy, do we speak up in behalf of the holiness and majesty of our great God? When people around us are complaining about God' s ways, are we courageous enough and

loving enough to tell people about God' s love in Jesus Christ and His desire to save sinners by having His Son die in our place?

I do not say that we should cast our pearls before swine by rehashing the same arguments over and over again to people who have already rejected our testimony many, many times in the past. But let us not get tired of casting our pearls in new situations with new people, even though we may be in the minority and in fact may be all alone. After all, we are Christians, we are the representatives of Christ and His teaching to all those around us, and our Lord wants us to be courageous, confessing Christians, **"always ready to give a defense to everyone who asks us a reason for the hope that is in us,"** as Peter says.

As Nehemiah knew that it would be sin for him to flee in cowardice as his enemies desired, so we should know it would be sin for us to deny Christ and His truth in situations that call for a clear Christian confession. For Jesus said: **"Whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him the Son of Man also will be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels."**

Every Christian needs to be a courageous, confessing Christian, recognizing his own in-born cowardice, trusting in Jesus for forgiveness, asking God to strengthen his hands, and then speaking out in love God' s truth as the situation demands and also behaving in a consistent Christian manner in keeping with the gospel, even though others around him who are supposed to be Christians are following the crowd of evildoers or scoffers.

And if the ordinary Christian is to be a courageous confessor, then what about those to whom leadership has been entrusted: church officials, pastors, teachers, council members, parents? We hear of parents who are afraid of their own children, who are not willing to speak God' s truth which they claim to uphold to their own children, lest they be laughed at or ridiculed. Lay leaders in the churches are afraid to confront their pastors with the evidence of false teaching or ungodly conduct. Pastors are afraid to speak truthfully concerning their sin to prominent or influential members, lest they become angry and they lose their financial support. When such a spirit of cowardice prevails in a group of Christians, sinful practices grow unchecked. No one is bold enough to speak the truth directly to the persons who need to hear it, and ungodliness abounds.

It seems to me that one of the qualities most missing in Christian congregations today is the courage to confront sin when it occurs and boldly and lovingly to follow the Lord' s directives concerning church discipline. It' s not easy. It has never been easy. I, for one, have reason to consider myself the most cowardly Christian in the whole world. And yet my position as pastor demands that I open my mouth and deal with things that have to be dealt with. Time and again God has given me the strength to deal with things that I am afraid to deal with. Not that I can say I have attained a high degree of Christian bravery. Far from it! But I know that God does strengthen us by forgiving our sins of cowardice for Jesus' sake and by imparting to us His Holy Spirit, who is no coward when it comes to confessing Christ. Amen!

#### **Sermon #6 on Nehemiah 6: 15-16**

**So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of Elul, in fifty-two days. And it happened, when all our enemies heard of it, and all the nations around us saw these things, that they were very disheartened in their own eyes; for they perceived that this work was done by our God.**

Today our text from the book of Nehemiah brings us to the end of the great rebuilding project undertaken by Nehemiah and the Jews in Jerusalem in the year 445 BC. **"The wall was finished,"** says our text, **"on the twenty-fifth day of Elul,"** which corresponds to part of our months of September and October.

Who did this rebuilding? Nehemiah says: **"I hung the doors."** He says: **"I rebuilt the wall."** No doubt he did not mean that he did this all by himself, but that he was in charge of the project. At

another place he writes: **"We labored in the work,"** acknowledging the work of other builders who worked with him.

Certainly they all rejoiced when the work was done and **"the wall was finished."** They were probably exhausted from the long hours of labor as well as from the strain of working so quickly while being under pressure from Nehemiah's enemies. They were also under a strain because of shortages of food and deteriorating economic conditions. But now **"the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of Elul, in fifty-two days."** What a tremendous achievement in such a short time! The Jews under Nehemiah accomplished in fifty-two days what the Jews in Jerusalem had not been able to accomplish for the ninety-one years since they were first given permission by the Persian emperor to return to Jerusalem. In view of this splendid achievement we can understand that they would be patting themselves on the back and congratulating themselves on what they had been able to accomplish.

But there is another thing that Nehemiah wants to stress in our text: not the achievement of the builders, but rather: GIVING GOD THE CREDIT FOR THE GOOD WORKS they did. For he writes: **"So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month of Elul, in fifty-two days. And it happened, when all our enemies heard of it, and all the nations around us saw these things, that they were very disheartened in their own eyes; for they perceived that this work was done by our God."**

You see, Nehemiah wants to give God the credit for this rebuilding project. Even their enemies had to recognize that Nehemiah and his fellow-builders could never have completed this project on their own. The Lord God Himself must have been responsible for getting the wall finished, for these feeble Jews would never have been able to do it by themselves. Their enemies were discouraged, because it had become obvious to them that God was on the side of the Jews, and that is why their opposition failed to bring the project to a halt.

The Hebrew language has a very interesting word here. Our English text uses the translation: **"This work was done by our God."** Literally, the sentence reads: **"This work was done from with our God."** It was done from our God; God was the source of strength for the builders. It was God who originated the project. And it was also done with our God. That is, the builders worked with God, and God worked with the builders. God became their partner. They worked, and He worked with them, not of course as equal partners. God was the enabling partner that gave success to the project.

It is just as the psalm says: **"Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it."** The house has its builders, but unless the Lord builds with the builders, and the builders get their strength from Him, no house will be built. Even unbelievers can do no building of any kind unless God allows it or gives them the strength to do what they want to do. Isaac Watts is right in his hymn when he says: "On Thee each moment we depend; If Thou withdraw, we die." For so it is written that He **"upholds all things by the word of His power,"** and again it is written that **"in Him all things consist"** or hold together.

If even the strength to do evil works on the part of evildoers comes from God, then certainly the strength to do good works on the part of God's people comes from God. Yes, **at** only the strength but also the desire to do good comes from Him, for it is written: **"It is God who works in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure."** Nehemiah speaks correctly when he in his book speaks of one of the good projects he accomplished and says: **"My God put it into my heart"** to do this. Yes, anything good we do is done because God puts it into our hearts to do it. The good that we do is His work in us. For He is the One who gives us the will to begin it and also the strength to carry it out. **"So then it is not of him who wills nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy."**

Now let us apply these truths to our own congregation. We have been involved in a building project too, certainly not as extensive as rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. But it has been a pretty big project for us: in cost we have to measure it as being over \$160,000. In our case the project was not finished in fifty-two days. No, it's been over a year and we're not done yet. But we're coming close to the end. We are beginning to think of the day when we will be able to dedicate, officially and formally, the finished project to the work and glory of our God. I hope, when that day comes, that we will not just say: To God alone be the glory, and in our hearts and minds congratulate our own selves

for the work. No, it is true in our case as it was in the case of the Jews in 445 BC: **"This work was done by our God."** That is, from our God and with our God. God is the One who puts into our hearts any good thing that we plan to do. It is God who gives us our minds and muscles, our talents and skills. It is God who enables us to earn money through our jobs so that we can offer up a money offering to Him for this project. It is God who blesses our labors, and makes them prosper and succeed.

King David prayed to the Lord in his day: **"Blessed are You, Lord God of Israel, our Father, forever and ever. Yours, O Lord, is the greatness, the power and the glory, the victory and the majesty; for all that is in heaven and in earth is Yours; Yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and You are exalted as head over all. Both riches and honor come from You, and You reign over all. In Your hand is power and might; in Your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all. Now therefore, our God, we thank You and praise Your glorious name. But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to offer so willingly as this? For all things come from You, and of Your own we have given You."** How true it is! Whatever good works we have done in connection with this building project have been done by our God, that is, from our God and with our God.

And certainly the same thing is true of all our spiritual work as a group of Christians here in Messiah congregation. Do we believe in Jesus Christ as our Savior? How do you think this has happened? Do you think it is because any of us in our innate spiritualness heard of Jesus and instantly recognized Him as someone good and decided of our own free will to believe in Him? There are those who teach such a wrong view of things. There are those who teach that we ourselves can decide for Christ through the spiritual powers within us and therefore I suppose we ought to be able to congratulate ourselves for having made such a wise and sensible decision in contrast to those fools out there who rejected Christ.

But holy Scriptures simply do not teach anywhere that we can give ourselves credit for our decision to come to Christ and believe in Him. We are described in Scripture as being naturally blind and dead in sins and unable to make any progress out of our own spiritual darkness. It is written: **"God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ. ... By grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast."**

Jesus, God' s Son, our Savior, is God' s gift to us. The entire plan of salvation from beginning to end is God' s gift to us. Likewise, the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts to bring us to faith in Jesus is God' s gift to us. Paul says to the Corinthians: **"What do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you glory as if you had not received it?"**

Yes, there are a few passages in Scripture that speak about receiving Christ, but this receiving of Christ is never presented as our own accomplishment, as though we can take credit for it. John writes: **"As many as received Christ, to them He gave the right to become children of God."** Does this sound as though the receiving of Christ is man' s own accomplishment? John immediately rules that out by saying that those who believe in Jesus are born **"not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God."** To be sure, their believing in Jesus is **"of God."** It is from God, and not from themselves. For a dead man cannot bring himself to life, and we were all dead in sins. God alone must get all the credit for our conversion.

And then after we have been born again by the regeneration God Himself works in us by bringing us to faith in Christ, we become partners and co-workers with God. We work, and God works, but certainly not as equal partners. **"For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them."**

Paul and Apollos were successful pastors in Corinth, eloquent preachers of the grace of God. Did they give themselves credit for their good works? Paul says: **"I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase."** Yes, Paul did something, Apollos did something, they worked, and they worked hard. But if God had not worked with them and through them, nothing good would have come of it.

Next Sunday is our Mission Festival, and we will encourage each other to work hard to bring others to the faith. We will encourage each other to be witnesses and open our mouths for the Savior and testify of God' s love for us in Christ Jesus. But we ourselves cannot bring a single person to faith. The Bible says of Lydia' s conversion!"**The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul.**" This is the way it is. God works through us. God opens hearts by the words we speak. God therefore must get the credit for all our good works. May we always acknowledge and confess that our good works are "**done by our God.**" Amen!

### Sermon #7 on Nehemiah 8: 8-12

**So they read distinctly from the book, in the law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped them to understand the reading.**

**And Nehemiah, who was the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn nor weep." For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the law.**

**Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy to our LORD. Do not sorrow, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."**

**So the Levites quieted all the people, saying, "Be still, for the day is holy; do not be grieved." And all the people went their way to eat and drink, to send portions and rejoice greatly, because they understood the words that were declared to them.**

Today in our service we are remembering the Lutheran Reformation of the sixteenth century. It was at this time that the true gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ was rediscovered, so to speak, through the labors of Martin Luther and many others whom God sent as a blessing to us all.

I could have chosen many texts from Holy Scripture to help us remember the Lutheran Reformation today. But I decided to stick with the book of Nehemiah, for here in this text from Nehemiah we have Nehemiah and Ezra and all the Israelites rejoicing in the very same thing that the Lutherans rejoiced in so many years later. What was it that gave them such great joy? It was THE JOY OF HEARING THE PRECIOUS WORD OF GOD.

This morning, then, we consider this joy, first of all, as it showed itself in the days of Nehemiah and Ezra, then as it was in the days of the Lutheran Reformation, and finally as it ought to be and can be in our day.

Nehemiah, you remember, was the man authorized by the Persian king to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. The Lord permitted Nehemiah and the Israelites to finish this huge task in only fifty-two days. They recognized what had happened as the Lord Himself worked through them and blessed their labors.

But now that the walls were rebuilt, Nehemiah and Ezra devoted themselves to a task even more important than the building of the walls of the city. The walls were rebuilt for one main purpose: so that the Israelites would be free to worship the Lord God in the temple at Jerusalem without the threat of enemy attack. What was needed now was the restoration of the worship of the Lord that God Himself had appointed. The first step in such a restoration of worship was to hear from God' s own word how they were to worship Him.

So Nehemiah and Ezra gathered all the people together in an open square of the city. A platform or pulpit was made out of wood, and Ezra stood on this platform high above the people and read the word of God to them from the book of the law, that is, most likely, from the five books of Moses. The book of Nehemiah says that Ezra "**read ... from morning until midday ... and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. ... The men and women and those who could understand**" were all there.

Ezra had a number of helpers. Our text says: "**They read distinctly from the book, in the law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped them to understand the reading.**" Thus God' s word was not only read to them, but it was explained to them so that they could understand it. This, of

course, is what we still try to do in our sermons and Bible classes and other educational endeavors. We try to get people to understand the sense of what has been written.

It seems clear that the people in the square in Jerusalem did understand what was being read. For our text says: **"All the people wept, when they heard the words of the law."** As they heard and understood what God was saying to them, they recognized their sins, their failures as a nation and as individuals to live up to the high standards of God' s law.

But Nehemiah and Ezra did not want this day of reading God' s word to be a day of sadness. They said to the people: **"This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn nor weep. Do not sorrow, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."** So also the Levites **"quieted all the people, saying, 'Be still, for the day is holy; do not be grieved.' And all the people went their way to eat and drink, to send portions and rejoice greatly, because they understood the words that were declared to them."**

You see, the reading of God' s word first made them sad, for they recognized their sins. But then their leaders assured them of God' s love for them and pointed out that the joy of the Lord was their strength. The exact words of comfort that were spoken to them are not recorded, but one can think of the many words in the five books of Moses that would give them joy and assure them of the Lord' s faithful love for His oftensinning people. Just think how God promised a Savior to their fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, how God forgave the sins of the people after the golden calf incident, how the Lord taught Moses that His name was gracious and merciful. The ceremonies of atonement could have been explained to them all to give them joy, also the promise that God would one day send a great prophet like Moses to teach them God' s word.

Whatever was said, the people went home that day, rejoicing, **"because they understood the words that were declared to them."** They experienced THE JOY OF HEARING THE PRECIOUS WORD OF GOD. Their weeping was turned into rejoicing as they were assured of their Savior-God' s love for them.

Martin Luther had a similar experience over a long period of time. Yes, for a long time Luther did little except mourn and weep when he thought of the holy God and His requirements. Especially during his years as a Roman Catholic monk Luther was a sad and discouraged and even despairing man, for the words of God' s law made him mourn and weep, and he had no understanding of the true gospel of God' s perfect and total forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ. No one could comfort him, until the Holy Spirit Himself working through God' s word gave Luther the sense and helped him understand the reading. Particularly the Lord opened up to him the joyful news that we cannot save ourselves by our works, but that Christ alone is our Savior who has done it all for us, and His blessings become ours simply by faith, by trusting in what our Lord has done, and this trust or faith in Jesus is something God Himself works in us by His gracious promise. When the true meaning of the gospel got through to Luther, he was a changed man. He rejoiced greatly because now for the first time he really understood what the gospel was. The joy of the Lord was his strength.

As God had taught him, so Luther taught others. He wanted others to understand what God was really saying. He wanted others to experience the same joy he had experienced and was continuing to experience. So what did Luther do? He opened the book, read it, and gave the sense. That is, he translated the whole Bible into the language of the German people so that they could understand it. He wrote catechisms so that parents could better teach their children. He wrote hymns that gave the sense of the gospel. He preached sermons and wrote sermon books. And always the emphasis was on the law and the gospel, and the gospel as God' s final word swallowing up the law. To a people mourning and weeping because of their sins Luther said: **"Do not mourn nor weep."** Rejoice in your Savior!

There is no doubt that the gospel, the good news of Jesus' suffering and death for the sins of the world to win forgiveness for all, was the center of Luther' s teaching. The joy of the Lord was his strength. The gospel moved him to teach and preach and labor as he did, and God abundantly blessed his labors. The good news of God' s perfect forgiveness in Jesus Christ, rediscovered in the Reformation, was spread throughout the whole world in the years that followed, so that many, many were the people who rejoiced greatly, because they now truly understood the words of God.



Today our world needs a new reformation. For the basic teachings of law and gospel are becoming more and more scarce, even or perhaps we should say especially in churches that call themselves Lutheran. We also are not really into the word of God as we should be, and we wonder sometimes how much we really appreciate the fact that God' s word is still being taught among us in its truth and purity.

Are we still capable of mourning and weeping when God' s word points its finger at us and uncovers our sin and internal wickedness? Are we raising children whose consciences are tender and who are sensitive to what God' s word really says? Are we ashamed of our own evil thoughts? Do we recognize our worldliness and lust and greed and lovelessness and disinterest in the things of God? Oh, that we might see ourselves as sinners and mourn and weep, at least inwardly, like the Israelites in Nehemiah' s time and say with the publican in the temple: **"God, be merciful to me, a sinner."**

But once we are aware of our very real sins, there is no need for us to keep on weeping. But rather we need to hear with our ears the precious gospel of God' s forgiveness in Jesus Christ, and treasure this word above all else. As Martin Luther once wrote: "The first and chief article is this, that Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, died for our sins, and was raised again for our justification, and He alone is the Lamb of God which takes away the sins of the world. ... There is none other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved. And with His stripes we are healed. Upon this article all things depend which we teach and practice in opposition to the pope, the devil, and the whole world."

The joy of the Lord is our strength, and God gives us this joy and this strength through the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. May we always experience the joy of hearing this precious word of God and believing it. Amen!

#### **Sermon #8 on Nehemiah 9: 16-17**

**"But they and our fathers acted proudly, hardened their necks, and did not heed Your commandments. They refused to obey, and they were not mindful of Your wonders that You did among them. But they hardened their necks, and in their rebellion they appointed a leader to return to their bondage. But You are God, ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abundant in kindness, and did not forsake them."**

There are three great chapters in the Old Testament devoted almost entirely to the confession of the sins of Israel. It so happens that all three of these chapters are the ninth chapters of their respective books.

The first of these three confessions in point of time is the great confession of Daniel in the ninth chapter of the book of Daniel. Daniel spoke this confession at the end of the seventy-year period of the Babylonian Captivity foretold by God through Jeremiah. God had permitted the Babylonians to destroy the temple in Jerusalem and carry the Jews off into captivity because of their sins of idolatry and continued rebellion against God. Daniel in his confession says to the Lord: **"We have sinned and committed iniquity, we have done wickedly and rebelled."** But at the same time he says: **"To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness, though we have rebelled against Him."**

The Lord answered Daniel' s prayer by moving the Persian king Cyrus to permit the Jews to return to their homeland and rebuild their temple and restore their cities. It took a long time, but finally the temple was rebuilt and the worship restored according to God' s law.

But then about eighty years later the scribe Ezra led another band of Jews to Jerusalem, and after some time there he learned that the Jews who had returned to Jerusalem were repeating the same sins as their fathers that had brought about their captivity. Specifically, they were practicing intermarriage with the heathen in direct defiance of the commandment of their God. The great confession of Ezra is recorded in Ezra, chapter nine, where he confesses the nation' s sins to his God. He says: **"You our God have punished us less than our iniquities deserve, and have given us deliverance. O Lord God of Israel, You are righteous. Here we are before You, in our guilt."**

After Ezra' s great confession the people put away their heathen wives and promised to abide by God' s commandments in the future. Then twelve years later Nehemiah came to Jerusalem, authorized by the Persian king to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. When this task was completed, Nehemiah and Ezra set a special day for fasting and the confession of sins. On this special day the Levites presented a poetic summary of the history of God' s people, emphasizing the same two points that Daniel and Ezra had emphasized in their confessions, namely, REBELLION AND PARDON: that is, the continued rebellion of God' s people and the gracious and merciful pardon of their ever faithful God. Again it so happens that this confession of sins is recorded in the ninth chapter of the book of Nehemiah. It is from this confession of sins spoken by the Levites on the special day of fasting and mourning that our text is taken.

**REBELLION AND PARDON.** This is the history of God' s people. The Levites said!"**They and our fathers acted proudly, hardened their necks, and did not heed Your commandments. They refused to obey, and they were not mindful of Your wonders that You did among them, but they hardened their necks, and in their rebellion they appointed a leader to return to their bondage.**"

What a sad time this was in the history of God' s people! The reference is to the children of Israel in the Sinai wilderness on their way to the promised land. These people had been slaves in Egypt. They had witnessed with their own eyes the ten plagues that God had brought on the Egyptians to set the Israelites free: the flies, the frogs, the locusts, the hailstorm, the death of the firstborn, and so forth. Moreover, that generation had seen with their own eyes how God had rescued them from the pursuing Egyptian armies by opening a path on dry ground through the Red Sea and drowning their enemies. They had heard the voice of God speaking to them from Mt. Sinai. They had experienced the blessings of manna, or bread from heaven, and water from a rock. And yet that generation, so richly blessed, forgot God' s wonders, hardened their necks, and rebelled against their God in unbelief.

This is the way it happened. Twelve spies were sent out by Moses to look over the land God had promised them. The spies returned with the report that the land was indeed a rich land, a land of milk and honey. But they also said that the people who lived there were giants, and they had walled cities, and the Israelites would never be able to conquer them or occupy their land. This was the report of ten of the twelve spies. Only Joshua and Caleb among the spies reminded the people that if their great and mighty God promised them this land, He would certainly keep His promise and give them the land. They should therefore go and fight with confidence. But their encouraging voices were drowned out by the unbelieving weeping of the vast majority of the people. The book of Numbers reports: "**All the children of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron, and the whole congregation said to them, "If only we had died in the land of Egypt! Or if only we had died in the wilderness! Would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?"**" They even said to each other: "**Let us select a leader and return to Egypt.**"

What unbelieving rebellion! How could they have doubted the word of their God who had already proved His power and mercy before their very eyes! "**But they hardened their necks, and in their rebellion they appointed a leader to return to their bondage.**"

Well, this must have been the end of them, right? Certainly God at that point must have destroyed them all and wiped them off the face of the earth in His righteous wrath! But no, He did not. It is true that He said to Moses: "**How long will these people reject Me? And how long will they not believe Me? I will disinherit them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they.**"

But God said this only to incite Moses to carry out his task as an intercessor and mediator. Moses then prayed: "**Pardon the iniquity of this people, I pray, according to the greatness of Your mercy, just as You have forgiven this people from Egypt until now.**" Moses also reminded the Lord of the name He had given to Himself, namely: "**The Lord is longsuffering and abundant in mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression.**"

And the Lord replied: "**I have pardoned, according to your word.**" Yes, God pardoned the rebellion of His people in the wilderness and did not destroy them. The nation survived, even though they were now required to wander in the wilderness for forty years. Then, when all those that were

twenty and older were dead, their children were led by their gracious God into the promised land of Canaan. Only Joshua and Caleb, the two faithful spies, lived to enter the land that God had promised. Through this forty-year delay the people were reminded of their sins; at the same time God did not break one word of His promise to bring the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob into the land God promised to their fathers.

For this is the way God is. The Levites describe Him in these words: **"But You are God, ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abundant in kindness, and did not forsake them."**

When God makes a promise, He keeps it. As Paul wrote to Timothy: **"If we are faithless, He remains faithful, He cannot deny Himself."** It is God' s nature to be faithful to His word, to carry out what He has promised. There is no way that God could have destroyed His people completely, for He had said to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob: **"In you and in your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed."** God simply could not have wiped them off the face of the earth. The Savior of the world had to be born from this people. Their sins could not change God' s promise. In fact God could not have wiped out the rest of the people and formed a new nation from Moses. For Moses was of the tribe of Levi, and God had promised to the tribe of Judah: **"The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh comes."** Shiloh here refers to the promised Savior.

The Lord always finds a way to keep all of His promises, even though individuals who continue to rebel against Him must eventually be damned eternally. But the Lord always preserves for Himself a repentant remnant, who receive His merciful pardon and through whom He carries out His word. He does not forsake His people. He did not forsake the Israelites in the wilderness. He did not forsake the Jews in Nehemiah' s time. Nor does He forsake us today.

After all, He sent Jesus as our Savior from sin, and for His sake, because of His suffering and death, He forgives us all our sins. Even though we have often been disobedient and rebellious, He is ready and eager to pardon us. Our sins have already been punished in Jesus Christ. The pardon is there, if we will only receive it in faith. God wants to forgive us. God offers us His forgiveness. Even today through the absolution pronounced by the pastor in this service our gracious God extends His abundant forgiveness to us.

So also in this very service Jesus Himself offers to us pardon for our rebellion in His body and blood given and shed for us for the remission of sins. His own body and blood are being offered and given to us today by means of the bread and wine of the Sacrament. You can trust what He says as He gives you His body and blood. For this is the kind of God He is, **"ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abundant in kindness."**

He did not forsake His people in days of old, nor will He forsake us today. As it is written: **"God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew. Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace."**

God in His grace keeps on forgiving our sins for Jesus' sake! May He lead us to confess our disobedience and rebellion with Daniel, Ezra, and the Levites, and cling in faith to His word of pardon! Amen!

(to be continued)

## **Book Review**

Hermann Sasse: *This is My Body – Luther's Contention for the Real Presence in the Sacrament of the Altar*. Adelaide: Lutheran Publishing House, (rights assigned to Augsburg) 1959.

Within a few years of its printing, this book was recommended for reading by every Lutheran pastor, once every two years. This is the third time I have read it, and again I found it very stimulating and informative. In spite of the fact that although Sasse comes close, he never really is satisfying to the CLC reader in the realm of fellowship. But this in no way detracts from the wealth of history and information he provides, together with a few good insights and admonitions.

The book does not so much set out to prove that the *verba* mean what they say, as it does to deal with those (particularly Zwingli) who deny what the *verba* say. And all this over against Luther's simple confession of the Biblical doctrine.

The Table of Contents lists seven chapters plus two appendices, together with three indices (Topical, Scripture Passages, Modern Authors).

The climax of the book is the Marburg Colloquy. Sasse sets the stage by taking us back fifteen hundred years to give us, first of all, the Medieval Background. This is a very helpful section, which imparts information that is always enlightening to the point of astonishing. Then he gets into the preparations for the Colloquy, and finally the Colloquy itself: the primary sources; the texts; the four sessions; and the final two days of negotiations. The fifteen articles and the ten signatories are on pages 216 to 220. Sasse then deals with the results, the most important being "that the difference became unmistakably clear" (229). Is the sacrament a means of grace or not, and are the *verba* to be understood in their simple literal sense, as an essential article of the Christian faith, or not?

Sasse depicts Luther's growth in appreciation for the *Sacramentum Sacramentorum*: How Luther sees, e.g., four errors in connection with the sacrament (83-84), how he knows the difference "between a philosophical sign, which denotes something that is absent, and a theological sign, which denotes something present" (90), and how since 1520 it was evident for Luther that "the real gift and fruit of the Lord's Supper is the forgiveness of sins."

Zwingli had never studied theology. His understanding of the sacrament was a mix of Thomism (reason plus revelation) and Erasmian humanism. He had a legalistic understanding of Christ, and "remained a man of affairs, an ever-active politician, who never could understand Luther's idea that the minister of the gospel should not meddle in politics" (95). Early on he tried to spiritualize the Catholic doctrine of the mass, in which stage he showed "not the slightest traces of a figurative understanding" of the *verba*. But that final stage came by 1524, urged on by Honius and Gansfort (97-98). Now the idea of a miraculous presence was given up, Sasse reports. John 6:63 becomes Zwingli's "diamond." Two incompatible positions were now fully developed; there would be no possible compromise between Luther and Zwingli (101). The contrast, says Sasse, could be described thus: "Luther retained the Real Presence ... because he was convinced that (it) was deeply rooted in Scripture"; Zwingli, having abandoned Thomism and Erasmianism, accepted Honius' clarity, "even if such clarity was reached at the expense of the inexhaustible depth of the divine Word." For Zwingli this sacrament was no means of grace. It was man's performance. It was the end of the sacrament.

Pages 114-150 contain more on the irreconcilable differences between Luther and Zwingli: *est versus significat*; Christology (two natures); *unio sacramentalis*; consecration; and fruits of the sacrament. Luther "demanded only that the words of Christ should not be made a matter of doubt, compromise, or distortion. He could never admit that the meaning of these words should be regarded as a minor issue on which several opinions could and ought to be tolerated, as Zwingli thought. Pages 155-156 deserve a reading.

Sasse shows how church and government were involved in the Marburg build-up, and how the confession would be subordinated to a federation, and doctrine to politics. For Zwingli it was impossible to separate the two.

Luther went to Marburg as a confessor, not as a negotiator. He was prepared to make concessions in the realm of philosophy (e.g., ubiquity), but not with regard to the word (s). The result and aftermath means recognizing its irrevocability (239), which falls into line with many other

doctrinal decisions made in the history of the church. It was "conflicting concepts of the Sacrament, as they had already become evident at Marburg, that caused the negotiations and discussions of the next two generations to end in the same failure as at Marburg" (241). Calvin, whose influences had already pervaded the Lutheran churches, would prove to be no *via media* between Luther and Zwingli.

The hopeless controversy was destined to continue, and how utterly this attempt had failed became evident. Pages 241 to 261ff. show the three factors which determined the discussions and controversies between Marburg and the Formula of Concord. One is the Erasmian utopianism of Bucer, another the defection of Melancthon, and the third being the attempted *via media* of Calvin.

Some parts from pages 271 through 289 are worth quoting, after which Sasse settles on the durability of the *verba*, the historicity of the institution of the sacrament by Jesus, and the failure by anyone to overcome the old controversy over the meaning of "This IS my body." But note page 284 and the preservation of the Lutheran position. Luther: "The adversaries of the Real Presence were unanimous only in their denial" (293). This sacrament is no puzzle (295). See 296 for Sasse' s case for the unity of Scripture, and how Luther saw that a false interpretation of the words of Institution must necessarily lead to a destruction of the word of God.

Page 298: Under the heading of the "meaning of the Real Presence," Sasse notes that it "was for Luther, and it is still today, the great test whether we are able to found our faith on the word of God alone, or whether we still have need of some support from human sources." For the next twenty-five pages he examines these five phrases: 1) Word and Sacrament, 2) In Remembrance of Me, 3) For the Remission of Sins, 4) Sanctorum Communionem, and 5) Come, Lord Jesus!

His comments on page 320 and elsewhere find one wanting to push Sasse further into a discussion of close communion. He seems to stress the sacrament itself so much, so as to create a "gospel reductionism" that concerns itself with the sacrament only, without regard to the other teachings of Scripture, as encompassed in the Great Commission of Matthew twenty-eight.

Sasse' s great fear (332) is that the sacrament has been lost among Christians, even among Lutherans, together with a loss of respect for the word of God (339). He does us all a service throughout the book, and in the appendices, by pointing us to the beauty and the power of the word written, and of the confessed Lutheran position, which (352) are not of human origin, not formed by a decision of man' s will, nor by *contract social*. His concluding words are: "Just as the church stands or falls with the Gospel, so she stands or falls with the Sacrament of the Altar. For the Sacrament is the Gospel ..."

The recommendation to read this book every two years should still stand.

– Warren Fanning