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IN CHRIST WE ARE SUPER-CONQUERORS

Romans 8:31-39

Paul Naumann

* The sermon below was delivered by Pastor Naumann at the midweek Communion service of the 2012 CLC Convention in Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

Peace to you all who are in Christ Jesus. Amen.

The Word of God chosen for our meditation this evening comes from the Epistle of Paul to the Romans, chapter 8, beginning with verse 31 as follows:

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things? Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written: "For Your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter." Yet in all these things 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.

In the name of our Redeemer God, *who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ*, dear fellow redeemed.

The shepherd David was an unlikely conqueror that day when he entered the Valley of Elah. He was youthful and of ruddy appearance, casting armor aside and carrying as weapons only a sling and a few smooth stones. Standing opposite him was Goliath, a seasoned warrior, a man who outwardly looked like a conqueror. With his experience of war, his heavy armor, and his fearful weapons, the giant certainly seemed an odds-on favorite to crush the youthful shepherd. By all appearances it would be an easy conquest. But the giant overlooked one important factor: God was on David's side. "*David said to the Philistine, 'You come to me with a sword, with a spear, and with a javelin. But I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts. . . . This day the LORD will deliver you into my hand. . . .'*" (1 Sam. 17:45-46). Goliath might have been a conqueror. Unfortunately for him, David—with God on his side—was a super-conqueror.

We are too! In verse 37 of our text Paul says that "*we are more than conquerors.*" By the way, in English that's five words; in Greek it's only one, *upernikomen*. We are literally "hyper-conquerors," or "super-conquerors." It's a paradox, isn't it, because sometimes it seems like Christians are the ones who face the most suffering and adversity in life. We don't look like conquerors, and a lot of times we don't feel much like conquerors either. Like the trembling soldiers of Israel, we tend to focus on how tall this fellow Goliath is, and how sharp his weapons appear to be, and we may even think to ourselves: "I wonder if anyone would notice if I just slipped out the back way?" But appearances can be deceiving. In our text this evening Paul strips away appearances and shows us the reality. He invites us, as it were, to step up into the Victor's chariot beside our Lord Jesus. From there we can survey all the fruits of Christ's triumph—fruits that He has given to us, which cannot be taken away. From this great vantage point, then, let us consider our theme tonight:

IN CHRIST WE ARE SUPER-CONQUERORS.

- I. We can be opposed, but we can't be defeated.
- II. We can be accused, but we can't be condemned.
- III. We can be persecuted for Jesus' sake, but we can't be separated from His love.

I. Prior to our text in Romans 8 Paul had touched on the subject of suffering. Not only do believers suffer, he says, but *“the whole creation groans and suffers”* because of sin and its effects. Perhaps the persecution of Christians had already begun in Rome. It was certainly going to increase exponentially in years to come. Soon the Roman government would inflict upon the Christians persecution, imprisonment, and for many a martyr’s death. But is such suffering cause for despair? Not at all, says Paul! Not for the elect of God! For *“in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.”*

There have been many great conquerors in history. Five centuries before Paul a renowned conqueror named Leonidas came on the scene. As king of Sparta and commander of the elite Spartan army, he had the status of a god among his people because of his apparent invincibility in battle. But in the year 480 BC Leonidas faced the vast army of the Persians at the mountain pass of Thermopylae, and he was defeated. He and his 300 Spartans were slain to the last man. Leonidas was a conqueror. But **IN CHRIST WE ARE SUPER-CONQUERORS**. For with God on our side **we can be opposed, but we can’t be defeated**.

Paul asks a question whose answer is self-evident: *“If God is for us, who can be against us?”* The pastors here tonight may recognize a conditional sentence in which the condition is assuming a fact and the conclusion poses a question that expects a negative answer. For it is a fact that God IS for us in Christ, and therefore NO ONE can be against us. **IN CHRIST WE ARE SUPER-CONQUERORS**. Of course, Paul doesn’t mean that no one can try to oppose us; rather, he means that it doesn’t *matter* who opposes us. No one can successfully do so, because with God on our side we can’t be defeated!

Now that wonderful truth brings up a difficult question: Why don’t we *live* like conquerors? Why does it often happen, when we’re faced with suffering or hardships, that we fold up into a little ball? We wring our hands and furrow our brows in anxiety. Like Peter on the Sea of Galilee, we see the boisterous wind and the billowing waves and we begin to sink. How often don’t we richly deserve the Savior’s rebuke, *“O you of little faith, why did you doubt?”*

Why *do* we doubt? There is no reason for it. Our salvation, God’s love for us, His providence and care, His protection in our lives—all this lies beyond the *possibility* of doubt. How do we know that? Paul answers with another rhetorical question: *“He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?”*

Those of you who are parents, you know something about this, for there is not much you wouldn’t do for your children. It’s not hard to imagine handing over everything you have—even your own life—for the sake of your child. But what would it take for you *to hand over your child?* To give up the life of your own son or daughter for the sake of a stranger—even worse!—for the sake of someone who by nature was your enemy? That’s what God did for us! *“For scarcely for a righteous man will one die,”* Paul said, *“yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us”* (Rom. 5:7-8). That’s what makes us truly invulnerable. That’s what makes us absolutely certain that God is for us and that He can withhold no gift from us. It’s the victorious fact that He already gave His Son. **IN CHRIST WE ARE SUPER-CONQUERORS**.

II. Erich von Manstein was a conqueror in his own right. For years as Hitler’s top general, von Manstein was an acknowledged military genius, responsible for many of Germany’s early victories in World War II. Some even claim that if he had been in charge rather than Hitler, Germany might have won the war. But how did this great conqueror end his career? In a courtroom in Hamburg, accused of war crimes, convicted, and condemned to years in prison. Von Manstein was a conqueror. But **IN CHRIST WE ARE SUPER-CONQUERORS**. For **we can be accused, but we can never be condemned**.

Here the Apostle Paul brings us into the courtroom, a familiar place for him because of his background as a lawyer. Trained under Gamaliel in the school of the Pharisees, Paul was a legal expert in the Law of Moses. Accordingly, then, verses 33-34 of our text can only be understood if you think the way Paul did—in terms of a courtroom. Paul says, *“Who shall bring a charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us.”*

Again, it's not that we'll never be accused. We're constantly accused. But bear in mind who the *plaintiff* is in this case. Does the devil accuse you? Why does that matter? Your offense isn't against the devil. The world on its part is constantly accusing Christians of all sorts of things. Who cares? You owe nothing to the world. If the accusations come from your own conscience, then remember: It isn't against yourself that you have sinned. God is the plaintiff here. He's the offended party. It is His Law you have broken. And when you come in repentance and pray the prayer of the publican, "God be merciful to me, a sinner," it is God who pardons you. Paul emphasizes that it is God Himself who has acquitted you, who has officially declared you not guilty for the sake of Christ. Who can overturn God's own decision? No one. Who can reopen the case that God has closed? No one. In Christ we have absolute immunity. Perhaps the simplest and most beautiful promise in all of Scripture lies in verse one of this same chapter, where Paul affirms: "*There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.*" The cross of Christ doesn't just answer condemnation; it makes all condemnation impossible. IN CHRIST WE ARE SUPER-CONQUERORS. For we can be accused, but we can't be condemned.

III. Napoleon Bonaparte was obviously a conqueror, whom many say was the greatest military leader in history. But at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, his enemies finally caught up with him, and the conqueror was conquered. Imprisoned on the island of St. Helena, he was oppressed and persecuted by his small-minded captors. There he died six years later, separated from his family, separated from his beloved army, and separated from the country he held so dear. Napoleon was a conqueror. But IN CHRIST WE ARE SUPER-CONQUERORS. **For though we can be persecuted for Jesus' sake, we can never be separated from His love.**

The question, again, is rhetorical: "*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?*" And again, it's not that they won't try. Paul mentions some of the factors that might tend to put a gulf between us and God: *tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, and the sword*. If you follow that progression, it's almost as if he's outlining a downward spiral that leads to martyrdom. And historically this is the way that the persecution of Christians commonly has gone. It begins with *tribulation*, literally "pressure," from society and from the government. This becomes *distress*, literally "narrowness," when restrictions are placed on believers and life in this world becomes difficult. This is followed by outright persecution, confiscation of Christians' property, subjecting them to want. Then comes actual physical peril, imprisonment, and finally the executioner's sword. "*For Your sake we are killed all day long,*" Paul says. "*We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.*" In the final stages Christians are regarded as little more than "slaughter-sheep," marked for death by their unbelieving persecutors. Could that ever happen here in America? I think the first step is already underway. Pressure on Christians is building from society and from government. Recent years have seen the disparaging and ridicule of the Christian faith become commonplace and accepted. Could the rest of the progression be soon to follow? In terms of what history has portrayed, it would be very unusual if it did not!

Well, even if it does, says Paul, nothing changes our relationship to Christ, *not one bit!* "*In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.*" The world sees the external things, and to the world we look like losers. But God shows us the reality. Our eyes have been opened so that we "*may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints*" (Eph. 1:18). The reality is that IN CHRIST WE ARE SUPER CONQUERORS.

But is this really what conquerors look like? Persecuted and suffering? Enduring *famine and nakedness and peril and sword*? It seems like a strange way to conquer. On the other hand, this was the way of our Savior, wasn't it? His road of conquest led through persecution and suffering, through Gethsemane, through Gabbatha, to Golgotha. On that first Good Friday Jesus stepped into your place and conquered sin, death, and hell on your behalf. He released you from the punishment your sins deserved, and with His own blood wrote your name in the Book of Life. The writer to the Hebrews admonishes us to look "*unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls*" (Heb. 12:2-3).

The early Christians in Jerusalem were not discouraged. When persecuted, they scattered the way sparks do when a rock is thrown into a campfire. They ignited a blaze across the then-known world, fulfilling Jesus' assignment, "You shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). And despite all the intervening conflicts and persecutions, here we are twenty centuries later, still blazing away. IN CHRIST WE REMAIN SUPER-CONQUERORS, still "showing forth the praises of Him who has called us out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9).

The greatest conquest, of course, is yet to come. "For I am persuaded", Paul says, "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." Through Christ's love we will win out to the end, for He who has begun His good work in us has promised to bring it to completion. No angel or demon, no height or depth, in fact, no created thing can keep us from the heavenly reward Christ won for us on the cross. How could it? The mighty Creator Himself is for us! Can any part of His own creation successfully stand against us? Ridiculous! Not even the cross was enough to separate Christ and His love from us sinners. Could any earthly trial or hardship accomplish what the cross could not? Could it separate us from the love of our Savior? Absurd! Nor can death itself stand in the way of our ultimate victory. Because even in death—yes, especially in death!—WE ARE SUPER CONQUERORS IN CHRIST. For "then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory.' O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory? The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 15:54-57).

The Roman emperor Julian, also known as Julian the Apostate, was the last non-Christian emperor of Rome. As a pagan who all his life had violently opposed the Christian faith, he was mortally wounded in the Battle of Samarra in AD 363. It's interesting that his dying words, uttered in Greek, relate closely to a term from verse 37 in our text (Do you remember that word I spoke about at the beginning?). As he was dying, Julian said: *Nenikekas me, Galilaie*; "You have conquered me, O Galilean." That Christ is a great conqueror the history of Scripture and the Church has shown. And His greatest conquest of all lies in the hearts of redeemed sinners like you and me. For each of us believers can say as well, with love and deep gratitude, "You have conquered me, O Galilean." His love has conquered us, and it has made us conquerors too. In fact, IN CHRIST WE ARE SUPER-CONQUERORS. We can be opposed, but we can't be defeated. We can be accused, but we can't be condemned. We can be persecuted for Jesus' sake, but—praise be to His infinite compassion and grace!—we can never be separated from the Savior's love. So says a familiar, comforting hymn (TLH 528:1):

*If God Himself be for me, I may a host defy;
For when I pray, before me My foes, confounded, fly.
If Christ, my Head and Master, Befriend me from above,
What foe and what disaster Can drive me from His love? Amen.*

TEACHING ABOUT EMOTIONS IN A CHRISTIAN'S FAITH-LIFE

James Albrecht

A boy sits in the snow by the side of the road, clutching his hockey stick and peering into the dark, cold night. Headlights approach, but it's just a pick-up full of rowdy college kids. He sinks back in dejection, muttering under his breath, "Come on, Dad! Where are you?"

A woman drive down a freeway at night. Suddenly her radiator begins to steam. She pulls off, looking for a service station still open. As she edges her way through a rough section of the city, hands clenching the wheel, her face betrays a deep fear, and her lips quaver, "Why is this happening to me?"

The two sketches above were actual scripts from two commercials. If they did what they were supposed to do, they should have triggered an emotional response in the viewer. Every day in this country, without our realizing, we are bombarded with powerful stimuli designed to impact our behavior. Television and radio commercials, ads in print—these are designed to stimulate our emotions and get us to spend money. Advertisers spend billions in research to figure out how to trigger the right feelings that will prompt us to purchase their products or services.

It is not just Madison Avenue that tries to exploit our emotions, however. Something similar happens in politics and even in Christian churches. The master of emotional manipulation, of course, is the devil himself. Think of the number of people who are led to despair of God's grace or those who make critically important decisions based solely on how they feel. More importantly, how often do spiritual convictions stem from the feelings people have instead of coming from the objective truth of God's Word.

With the spiritual ramifications especially in view, it is the intent of this essay to examine the role that emotions play in a Christian's faith and life and to note both good and bad effects.

I. Emotions have a good purpose.

There is no question that emotions play a key role in our lives as Christians. Christianity is not stoicism. Our Creator God does not tell us to face all things with a stiff upper lip. At the death of Elector John, Martin Luther expressed the following:

For there were some pagans who held that it was a manly virtue not to grieve or weep when a good and loved friend died, just as in our times the sectarians began to try and make sticks and stones of us by alleging that one must eliminate the creature altogether and not accept anything that is natural; even though father, mother, son, daughter, [or prince] should die, one must simply go on with dry eyes and with a serene heart. Thus these heathens were trying to re-establish virtue. But at bottom it is an artificial virtue and a fabricated strength, which God did not create and also does not please him at all. And the reason is that such a hard heart, which is not softened when a good friend dies, shows that he never did have any real liking or love for him, or he wants to be a hypocrite and appear to be so firm before men that they will praise him and say: Ah, there's a man who has a firm hold on himself!

This fabricated sectarian and heathen virtue we condemn and say that it is not right. For not only examples from the holy fathers but also the Word of God in the Scriptures declare that it is right and fitting, even godly, to mourn a good friend who has died, as Paul himself indicates in these words which he utters at the end of this chapter: "Therefore comfort one another" [I Thess. 4:18]. If one is to comfort oneself, then there must have been sorrow, grief, and mourning. Now obviously those to whom Paul is here writing were Christian people, who were pleasing to God and possessed of the Holy Spirit, and yet Paul does not disapprove of their grief but only that it must be Christian and in moderation. (*Sermons* 232)

God has created us in a way that we could experience joy, contentment, fulfillment, and gratitude. Though there was no sorrow prior to the fall into sin, feelings of grief, shame, sadness, guilt, and disappointment naturally have followed in the wake of sin's arrival. The sinless life of Jesus in this sin-filled world displayed a wide range of emotions, to be sure. There was sorrow at the gravesite of Lazarus and also on the hill overlooking Jerusalem. He displayed anger as He cleansed the Temple. He must have watched with disappointment and sadness as Judas rush down the path of self-destruction and also when He saw the rich young ruler walk away in love with his possessions. And at all times Jesus displayed an amazing compassion that defies our comprehension.

In his introduction to the series "The Old Testament Concept of the Soul," Heinrich Vogel refers to the soul's ability to have emotion as one of the defining ways that man was created to have dominion. He begins with these words:

We are accustomed to speak of the human being as consisting of body and soul, that is to say, that man has a mortal, material body which is subject to growth and development, to injury and disease, to

deterioration and to death. This body has weight and extension, it is located at one place at a time. . . . The soul enables man to premeditate his actions and then to carry them out, to plan a course of action and to follow it through to its successful conclusion. The soul enables man to communicate his thoughts to other human beings by the spoken or written word. It enables him to experience a great number of different emotions and to react to any of these. The soul in man makes of man not only the crown of creation, God's most complex creature, but enables him to occupy that position in this world which God had intended for man, "to subdue the earth and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth" (Gen. 1:28). (Vogel 33)

It is well attested by many that emotions play a critical role in human behavior. We note with agreement the observation of James Tiefel in an article on liturgy and worship: "Human psychology has observed that volition (the will) is affected by two factors: intellect (knowledge) and emotion (feeling). We human beings take action on the basis of what we know and how we feel about what we know" (94).

God expects certain emotions from us; these include sorrow over our sin, disappointment over our failures, calmness in view of His care and protection, fear of His wrath, righteous anger against sinful activities, zeal for His name, and being "of good cheer" over His pronouncement of forgiveness. A lack of such emotions usually betrays a mental or spiritual problem.

When the nation of Israel pushed away God's call to repentance and brushed off His warning about the fall of Jerusalem, God took from Ezekiel the "delight of his eyes." When his wife died, Ezekiel was to forego the normal outward signs of sorrow and mourning. He was specifically told not to bare his head, not to eat the food of mourning, and not to remove the sandals from his feet. All such signs of emotional sorrow were forbidden to him so that people would take note of his peculiar actions and apply the lesson to themselves in their relationship with God. Surely Ezekiel's non-display of grief became a powerful testimony to all who saw him.

It is interesting to note a number of words God has used to denote the seat of our emotions in physiological terms. Commenting on Job 19:27, which the writer translates as "Whom I shall behold for myself, and my eyes shall see, and not another; my kidneys are consumed within my bosom," Rudolph Honsey writes:

In Hebrew and other Semitic languages, the kidneys in particular and other vital organs in general are regarded as the seat of the tenderest and deepest affections, especially of love, desire, longing and anxiously awaiting something, as here. . . . Such imagery is also carried into the New Testament, where the word *σπάγγιον*, "entrails," is used. . . , which to the Hebrew mind expressed the deepest feelings of compassion. In our verse, however, it is another deep-seated feeling that is expressed: longing, expectation. In his misery, Job was looking forward to a far better life than this. As he gave thought to that Last Day when his Redeemer would rise up over his grave, clothe his body in a perfect skin no longer covered with boils or lacerated with sores, give him a glorified body out of which to look with his own eyes and see his Redeemer, he was so anxious and eager for that time to come that his very innermost feelings, described as his kidneys, were entirely spent and consumed within him. (193-94)

One could add that emotions at times can signal imminent danger. Victims of crime often say that if you feel uneasy about a situation that you're in, get out of it as quickly as possible. The feeling of danger may be the only warning you receive.

II. Emotions are a faulty guide for faith.

The problem is not that we have emotions, but that they are impacted by sin and can also become sinful. This problem can be the result of Satan's temptations, circumstances in life, one's sinful choices, actions, or failures to act, even chemical changes in the body. For example, God equipped women with special gifts for nurturing and caring for children. At the same time women deal with chemical changes (on a monthly basis during child-bearing years; menopausal changes thereafter) that can have a major impact on their emotions. Many elderly people are confronted with severe emotional issues that stem

from physiological changes in their bodies. A person can feel depressed if he fails to do the things he is supposed to be doing, such as going to work, cleaning the house, or providing for the family. A volatile situation can easily incite a surge of anger and the adrenalin flow that follows. The fact that one-third of Americans are taking some form of anti-depressant medication suggests a problem with our current lifestyle.

Not surprisingly, certain emotions are listed among the sins of the flesh, as Paul notes in Galatians: “Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like” (Gal. 5:19-21). Since these arise from within our own sinful hearts, there is no way to prevent them from coming, though we can and should control them with the Spirit’s power.

Less obvious but equally damaging is the tendency for sinful people to use their emotions as their moral compass in life. How one feels determines the rightness or wrongness of the course of his or her actions. Since we know that “the heart is deceitful above all things” (Jer. 17:9), we should be able to recognize how foolhardy this approach will be. Unfortunately, most people don’t see it that way at all. In his book *Emotions, Can You Trust Them?* James Dobson talks about Christian teenagers who asked God to indicate whether it was right for them to have premarital sex. Based on the feelings they had, they believed their actions were in accord with God’s will.

The problem of acting on emotion surfaces often in the biblical record. David had defied the odds against Goliath because he looked far away from himself and trusted in God alone. The same faith was displayed when David handed Saul the corner of robe that he had cut off in the cave. After sparing Saul a second time, however, David began to follow his feelings. The Holy Spirit records: “*And David said in his heart, ‘Now I shall perish someday by the hand of Saul. There is nothing better for me than that I should speedily escape to the land of the Philistines’*” (1 Sam. 27:1). Following the momentous victory on Mt. Carmel, Elijah felt great. He outran Ahab’s chariot to town. But the next day he began his flight into the desert, where he wanted to die. Elijah sank into depression because he followed his sin-corrupted feelings instead of God’s Word. One could argue that Abraham and Sarah felt okay about using Hagar as a surrogate. Saul felt okay about offering the sacrifice, keeping back spoils from the Amalekites, and even seeking the counsel of a medium.

The danger of acting on emotion seems to fall on one side of the Law or the other. Either it is antinomian—the feeling that there is nothing to repent of (“How can something be wrong when it feels so right?”), or it so condemns the individual that it leads to despair. Two passages spring to mind: “*If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us*” (1 John 1:8); “*If our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things*” (1 John 3:20). Luther likewise writes: “Without faith all other things are acts of presumption and desperation. The just person lives not by his attitude but by faith. For this reason you should not harbor any doubt on account of your unworthiness” (*Career* 271).

Not only are emotions unreliable, they can quickly change. Feelings of infatuation can give way to feelings of loathing. Feelings of confidence can turn into feelings of despair. The same Job who said, “*The Lord gives and the Lord takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord,*” also complained, “*You have become cruel to me; with the strength of Your hand You oppose me*” (Job 30:21).

III. Emotions are a faulty guide for the church.

The majority of church bodies in America have elevated personal opinion and feeling to the place of Scripture. This explains how the ELCA can approve of gay and lesbian clergy, how the Reformed can deny infant baptism, how some professing Christians can believe that everyone has the right to interpret the Bible in his or her own way. How we arrived at this point in the life of the church is really no surprise. An emphasis on feeling and emotion has been integral to numerous movements in history, including the advancement of Pietism and the Enlightenment.

Such was the case at the turn of the 18th century in Halle, Germany. In regard to Hermann

Francke, a key figure in German Pietism, Richard Balge reports:

[O]ne of the peculiarities of Francke's pastoral work was that he urged people to pray for the kind of conversion experience he had undergone. In this he was not directing them to the objective truth of Christ's vicarious sacrifice and to his righteousness for us. His son-in-law Fresenius, who helped to continue the educational and charitable work at Halle after Francke's death, was not far removed from his mentor when he gave instruction for a "thorough" conversion "in a short time." In his *Book on Confession and Communion* he wrote: "Pray for grace. . . ! This prayer you should offer, not once or twice, but you must continue offering it daily with sighs and strong crying until you obtain grace, which assures you from your own experience that your heart has been truly changed." Thus the troubled soul or urgent seeker was directed to prayer and personal experience rather than to the timeless and universal truth of justification in Christ.

The neglect of objective preaching of universal reconciliation and justification was bound to lead to that legalism which characterized Halle under Francke's successors. The anthropocentrism which directed men to self, feeling and experience instead of to the Word, could easily become the anthropocentrism which enthroned reason in theology. It did. Historians are agreed that Pietism paved the way for Rationalism at Halle, especially at Halle. (Balge 3)

During the age of Enlightenment, Friedrich Schliermacher (1768-1834) was the prominent "theologian to attempt to reconstruct Christianity in terms of the Enlightenment." So says David Valleskey, who goes on to state regarding Schliermacher:

He hoped to win back the intellectuals by portraying religion not in terms of doctrines, dogma, creeds and confessions but rather as a living experience with God which he defined as a feeling of absolute dependence upon God. Salvation to Schleiermacher is God-consciousness. Sin is lack of God-consciousness. We are "saved" when we are drawn away from sensual self-consciousness to God-consciousness.

The place of Christ? He possessed a perfect God-consciousness. As Christ is preached we are drawn to his kind of God-consciousness and are "saved." Where does the Bible fit in? It records the inner experience of people like Christ and thus shows us what we must do. Schleiermacher's theology centers, then, not in God or the Scriptures, but in man himself who can rise to meet God.

In all this Schleiermacher is very careful not to say anything with which unregenerate human reason would disagree. In Schleiermacher's system, says Ramm, ". . . religion shines as true in its own light. It needs no artificial support from the outside like a miracle. It requires no credentials outside like the resurrection of a corpse. Religion is part of the fabric of the universe and is therefore as natural to man as the air he breathes and the water he drinks. Omit the scandal of the miraculous and nothing stands in the way of the intellectual's return to the Christian faith." (Valleskey 3-4)

Walther recognized the problem of stressing emotion over objective truth, a subject he addressed in his Thirty-Sixth Evening Lecture:

The so-called Pietists of former times and the preachers of the fanatical sects in our time not only made a false distinction between awakening and conversion and refused to regard those who were awakened as Christians, but they also mistook the inability to believe for not being permitted to believe.

When the Pietists had brought a person to the point where he considered himself a poor, miserable sinner, unable to help himself, and asked his minister what he must now do, the minister did not, like the apostles, answer him: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved," but, as a rule, they told him the very opposite. They warned him against believing too soon and against thinking that, after having felt the effects of the Law, he might proceed to believe that his sins had been forgiven. They told him that his contrition must become more perfect, that he must feel contrite, not so much because his sins would call down upon him God's anger and hurl him into perdition, but because he loved God. Unless he could say that he felt sorry for having angered his merciful Father in heaven, his contrition was declared null and void. He was told that he must feel that God was beginning to be merciful to him; he must get so far that he could hear an inner voice telling him: "Be of good cheer; thy sins will be forgiven thee; God will be merciful to thee." He must continue

struggling until his agony was over, and having rid himself of the love of sin and having been thoroughly converted, he might begin to take comfort.

Now, this is an awful method. The truth is, we are not to be converted *first* and *after that* believe; we are not to have a sensation first that we are in possession of grace; but without any feeling we are first to believe that we have received mercy, and after that will come the feeling of mercy, which God apportions to each according to His grace. Some persons are without feeling of grace for a long time. They behold nothing but darkness about them; they feel the hardness of their hearts and the powerful stirring and raging of evil, sinful lust within them. Accordingly, to point a person to the way of salvation, it is not the proper procedure to tell him that, even when he feels himself a poor, lost sinner, he may not yet believe himself saved.

True, no man can produce faith in himself; God must do that. A person may be in such a condition that he cannot believe, and God is not willing to bestow faith on him. A person who still considers himself sound and righteous cannot believe. “The full soul loatheth an honeycomb.” Prov. 27, 7. A soul spiritually sated and surfeited tramples on the honeycomb of evangelical consolation. (Walther 372-73, *emph. orig.*)

If one looks to his feelings instead of looking to God’s Word, then everything in his belief system becomes entirely subjective. This is the danger noted by Armin Panning, who writes: “Where experience and feeling have come to be the center of the Christian life, there it is easy to disparage creeds and confessions, to play down the need for purity of doctrine, and to see a common quest for holiness as the rationale for all manner of unionistic and interdenominational activity” (12).

In 1965 Wilbert Gawrisch prepared for the Doctrinal Commission of the WELS a study with the title “What is Heresy?” For the purpose of our essay here we draw from it a pertinent quotation of Professor Lehninger:

Because the solid rock of Scripture has been abandoned and the “believing subject” has been set as judge over it, the most diverse positions are championed in the Protestant churches of the world, also in those that call themselves Lutheran—as many positions almost as there are literary theologians. If Scripture is not the judge but is rather judged, every one has a right to his own opinion. If some one claims this for himself, fairness and common decency demand that he also grant this same right to any one else. Who can, who should decide on whose side truth and on whose side error lies? There is finally nothing left but to shrug one’s shoulders and to ask Pilate’s question. Under these circumstances it is easy to see how out of place, how pointless the use of the term “heretic” would be. It is after all not a matter of unshakable, certain doctrines, the denial of which one would have to call heresy, error, but finally only a matter of views, of human opinions. Be such speculations ever so brilliant and concealed under the mantle of science—they are, nevertheless, nothing but hypotheses, unproved and incapable of proof! No, indeed, in “scientific” theology concepts like “heretic” are not current coin. (qtd. in Gawrisch 19)

It might be fair to say that the majority of Christian churches today rely on an emotional appeal or response from their people. At first glance this appears to accomplish more, perhaps, than relying on the means of grace. Confessional Lutherans may be known as the “frozen chosen” by other denominations, but what matters are not the feelings that are stirred but the objective facts of sin and grace, repentance and salvation that are proclaimed from Scripture. Faith does affect our emotions, but faith is not an emotional decision or action. Faith holds to the objective Word. Faith tests our ever-changing feelings against the unchanging Scriptures.

IV. Conclusion

Emotions are a gift of our gracious God. They were intended for the good of mankind, but since they have been impacted by the fall into sin, they are no longer trustworthy. One should not neglect the emotions that God expects us to have, such as sorrow over sin, joy in His forgiveness, sadness and disappointment over the tragedies of this life. When Christians suffer from emotions that are out of control, the problem may be the result of changes in the body’s chemistry, which can be treated with

medication. Inevitably, every Christian will struggle with feelings that result from living in a sinful, perishing world, and so he or she needs to be directed to the unchangeable Word of our God. Having deceitful hearts, we tend to deceive ourselves, and therefore we should avoid making emotion-based decisions and rather seek to test our subjective feelings against the objective truth of God's Word.

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ANTINOMIANISM: The Danger to the Gospel in Our Day

Vance Fossum

* In the first installment of the previous issue of the *Journal* (52:2, pages 25-49), the writer traced the impact of Antinomianism on the opposing confessional stance taken by Luther and the *Book of Concord*. The previous installment then closed with the beginning portion of part III, "The Danger of Antinomianism to the Gospel in Our Day," which is the substance of the concluding installment below. Documentation of quoted material is again given parenthetically per MLA guidelines.

The purveyors of "Positive Thinking" and "Self-esteem"

For the past fifty years Norman Vincent Peale has appealed to readers of his *Guideposts* magazine with a religious philosophy that encourages the human spirit to rise above all that is "negative" in this life. Thus one finds it nearly impossible to find any reference to sin for which a person needs repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. That would be far too negative, a put-down for the human spirit. God is presented as a soft-hearted, kindly fellow who seeks to lift up the disheartened by encouraging the good that is within every person. The one who learns to think positively about God and himself will be able to see that whenever God closes a door, He always opens a window of greater opportunity. And so a positive outlook on life is said to be maintained.

Robert Schuller is probably Peale's most prominent disciple. His famous Crystal Cathedral stands as a monument to the human spirit and to the Antinomian doctrine of self-esteem. His *Hour of Power* telecasts are filled with personal testimonies of those who have overcome some difficulty in their

lives so as to discover that they *can do!* With the unceasing grin of the Cheshire Cat this smooth-talking huckster preaches “peace when there is no peace,” like the treacherous false prophets and priests who turned the hearts of Judah away from the preaching of repentance brought by Jeremiah (Jer. 6:14). Thus the Gospel is endangered because sinners who are not made aware of God’s wrath against sin will not be receptive to the true peace He offers in the Gospel of reconciliation.

The immensely popular Joel Osteen and others like him follow suit. The prophets of positive thinking have found that it pays! They also use the name of God without emphasizing either the justice or the mercy of God on the cross. On September 15, 2011, Osteen was interviewed by Sean Hannity on the Fox News Channel regarding his new book, *Every Day Is a Friday*. When Hannity asked, “What do you say to people who are troubled by their lives,” Osteen offered the following:

“Think positive thoughts.”

“Look for some good in a job you hate.”

“Say, ‘God, you are in control; You are directing my life.’”

“What you think determines how you feel.”

“Release your anger by remembering that God is in control of your life.”

The faulty assumption in such positive prating is that as long as one acknowledges the existence and operation of a loving God who wants to do good in our lives, we may exercise a positive control over the mind and the will, so as to put away bad thoughts and actions. But what happens to these “positive” thinkers when trouble follows trouble and the human spirit breaks? There will always be a limit to man’s ability to think positively about God and understand His working in a person’s life without the continual preaching of the Law and the Gospel.

Even righteous Job, who never forgot that God was in control of his life, experienced great trials and began to question how God was treating him. After pointing out that Job had no right to judge His working in Job’s life, God spoke to the man from a whirlwind: “Would you condemn Me that you may be justified?” (Job 40:8). Job was a Christian who had previously confessed his faith in his living Redeemer and his hope in the resurrection of his body unto everlasting life! Yet Job’s positive thoughts weren’t coming—not because he failed to “release his anger,” but because for a time he felt that he deserved better from God. It was not until God humbled Job and convicted him of his presumptuous attitude toward his Creator-Redeemer that he then said, “I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:6).

Those who steam about self as if one’s life here and hereafter only needs a positive push from God, a little direction, to improve it becloud the truth. Such preaching, however well meant, is used by Satan to increase the vaporous vanity of the flesh so that the human soul is not permitted to feel the hot wrath of God against sin. Pride is increased, and humility is even considered to be “low *self*-esteem.”

Peter’s timeless warning to “watch out” for our adversary, the devil, immediately follows this command: “Be clothed with humility, for ‘God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’ Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you” (1 Pet. 5:5-7). This is the saving principle employed by God in His dealings with Job. God indeed exalted his servant in due time. Though he did not have the Law delivered on stone tablets, Job was humbled by God so that he made a humble confession. Then to the humbled man God revealed His gracious purpose, namely, that God would bless Him more than before!

God graciously reduced the self of Job to the point where he despaired of self. Likewise, Peter prayed for his afflicted readers: “But may the God of all grace, who has called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you. To Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen” (1 Pet. 5:10-11). God alone must convince us of our false pride and presumption, and do so at times by means of various afflictions. So writes Luther: “Anything that preaches concerning our sins and God’s wrath, let it be done how or when it will, that is all a preaching of the Law” (qtd. in *Concordia* 955). As Peter says, to God “be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.”

Again, the “positive thinking” of self-esteemers does not warn sinners of the wrath to come because of their sins, so that they may seek the mercy of God in the Gospel of Christ. They only seek to

present God as one who rewards a person's efforts to do good and to be all that he can be. What about the effect of the self-esteem advocates in the raising of our children? How does a child learn to know he has done wrong, and that he deserves punishment for his disobedience, if the parent is always placing great emphasis on what a "good" little fellow he is?

We should not be so quick to agree with the psychology of our secular world that warns parents never to tell a child who has done wrong that he is "bad," but only that he has done something bad, and then when he has done something right, to praise him as a "good" boy. The desire of well-meaning parents and teachers may be to encourage the child rather than to put him down. And while it's true that the unrelenting criticism of children can ruin them for life, this does not mean that increasing their self-esteem is the solution. Christian parents and teachers know how to teach godly humility and also to encourage the child. Luther's advice to "let the apple lie close to the rod" is good pedagogy when consistently applied by those who use the Law to bring down and the Gospel to lift up and encourage children. The devil, however, is always at work trying to convince people of all ages that they are able to do good and be good apart from repentance and faith in their Savior.

How is the self-esteem pedagogy working for you? We would ask our society this question. The American experience over the past forty years ought to give the answer: Not so well, not even from a behavioral standpoint. For perhaps more than any modern method of behavior modification, the self-esteem emphasis has contributed to the "perilous times" we are experiencing in our own "last days." 2 Timothy 3 further explains: "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" (2 Tim. 3:1-5).

We believe from Scripture, and so we truly know, that while the promoters of self-esteem will produce stubborn, self-righteous children and adults, whether they are church-goers or not, only the Law produces a humble spirit, which by the power of the Gospel at work has that child-like faith so precious to our Lord. "On this one will I look," says the LORD, "On him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word" (Isa. 66:2).

Because of this danger to the Gospel, our goal as Christians must never be to build self-esteem, but rather to bring down the self-righteousness that inheres in every man, woman, and child. This can only be accomplished when the Law utterly condemns so that the power of the Gospel may save and impart the life of the Spirit, and the Christian learns with penitent David to find his happiness in the Lord: "Blessed (happy) is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit" (Ps. 32:1-2). "The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears, and delivers them out of all their troubles. The LORD is near to those who have a broken heart, and saves such as have a contrite spirit" (Ps. 34:17-18).

Is today's self-esteem preaching, along with its pedagogy, truly evangelical? Or is it merely a mind-over-matter approach to effect "positive" thoughts based on the lie that there is "a little good in every one"? If the Law is not delivered with its teeth, sin and God's wrath are not felt in the heart. Then even terrors of conscience may be reduced to little anxieties, which may be treated with human feel-good remedies, psychology, and philosophy, and not with the Gospel message of divine grace and forgiveness in Christ. But how then shall poor sinners experience the "fruit of the Spirit" which is "love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Gal. 5:22-23) when these are only worked out in the lives of those who, because of the Law, have died to self and have been reborn to a new life by the power of the Gospel?

The Church Growth Movement

Following a discussion of the danger presented to the Gospel by the purveyors of self-esteem and positive thinking, it seems natural to consider next the Church Growth Movement. C. Peter Wagner, a proponent of this method to "grow" the church, admittedly took his cue from Robert Schuller. Wagner writes:

There is no such thing as a patent medicine that will cure all of the ills of man and beast, nor is there

any universal method of evangelism that will help a church to grow.

As to the basic principle for discovering the proper method, though, I would have a hard time improving on Robert Schuller's maxim: *The secret of success is to find a need and fill it.* The methods used in growing churches, diverse as they might be, have all done this or they wouldn't be working. They have offered something which meets the needs of the kind of people they are ministering to. (qtd. in Koester 152, emph. Wagner)

We do not have time or space to delineate all that is wrong with this method of evangelism. However, at least two glaring errors stand out in Wagner's brief statement.

First, he gives clear expression to a goal that is not the goal of Christ, the Head of the Church, when he seeks the objective of "growing churches." Neither our Lord nor His apostles set forth a method for the growth of churches. Their only goal, as defined throughout the New Testament record, was the growth of the Holy Christian Church, the invisible "body" of Christ, not the growth of visible Christian bodies.

Second, because the goal is wrong, so its methods of evangelism are also wrong, being unscriptural and a contradiction of Christ Himself. The Evangel is the *Good News* of the forgiveness of sins through the redemption that is in Jesus Christ, nothing less! When our Lord commissioned His believing disciples until the end of time to "*make disciples of all the nations,*" He defined the methods He wanted them to use: "*baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,*" and "*teaching them to observe all things that*" He had "*commanded*" them (Matt. 28:19-20).

The growth of Christ's body, the Church, is carried on by the Holy Spirit through the ministry of Law and Gospel, because the greatest need is that a living Savior be preached to a dying world! Christ commanded His disciples to "be going" into "all the world" because every man, woman, and child must have this "one thing needful" (Luke 10:42). But if the Good News is conceived as something less than Christ's Evangel, then it may indeed be reduced to whatever satisfies the felt needs of the people one is trying to add to a congregation's roster. Thus churches whose goal is growth, rather than making disciples according to Christ's methods, are encouraged to find out what a community's main social problems are and seek to meet the perceived needs of that group.

As it is, without the preaching of the Law this method preempts the work of the Holy Spirit in convincing a person that his greatest need is the Savior from sin, death, and hell. However, we know that from the birth of the New Testament Church "the Lord added to the church" those "who were being saved" (Acts 2:47). While churches today may increase their numbers by a felt-needs approach, the Lord does not add to His Church those who feel that their earthly needs are being helped. Rather, He is adding those whom He is saving from the guilt and condemnation of sin, those who realize their essential problem and its only solution—that they are condemned to death because of their transgressions, but raised to life because of the free pardon of God's grace in Jesus Christ.

It's quite telling to note what Wagner quotes of Robert Schuller with approval: "He rarely quotes the Bible because he did a research project some years ago and discovered that unchurched people in Orange County don't believe the Bible. So he directs his sermons to their felt needs such as their family, their job, their financial situation, their self-esteem or their emotions, explaining how Jesus can meet those needs" (qtd. in Koester 161). This approach presents the "gospel" as if it were a message given to help troubled people with the problems and pains of their lives, rather than what it truly is: a message of pardon and peace to sinners struck down by the Law. When preachers refuse to teach what the Bible teaches to those who don't believe it, they are not only seeking to avoid the Law; they are *not* proclaiming the love of Christ for sinners in His Gospel.

When our Lord initiated the conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:7ff.), His purpose was not to discover her felt needs, but rather to save her soul by turning her from a false religion to Himself as her Savior. How did He do that? He uncovered her sin to her so that He might reveal Himself as the Messiah-Savior for her. Likewise, the concerns expressed by Jesus in John 6 regarding the multitude wanting to take and make him a bread-king stand in stark contrast to the felt-needs method of the Church Growth Movement. While Jesus rebukes their fleshly materialism (Law-preaching), He consistently presents Himself to the people as "the Bread of Life" that they needed to receive by faith so

that He might give them eternal life (John 6). Jesus always preached the Law *because* of the Gospel—because He loved them as they were: *lost in sin*, yet not knowing the darkness of their condition, not acknowledging their greatest need.

Neither did Christ's apostles manhandle the message of the Messiah in order to make it more easily received by the hearers of their day. They preached Christ crucified and risen for sinners, not Christ the miracle-worker, or Christ the helper of human needs. Their goal was not to improve people for this world, but to save them from a world that was perishing. Sanctification for them was seen as that separation from the world unto God for salvation, for which our Lord prayed on the night of his death: "*Sanctify* (i.e., separate unto Yourself) *them through Your truth; Your Word is truth*" (John 17:17). The Word of truth is nothing else than God's Law and Gospel as He defines them. As this "Word of the Lord grows" (Acts 19:20), so does the Church as the body of Christ.

In response to a felt-needs method of evangelism, those on the receiving end of all the help to improve their lives will naturally conclude that this is the love of Christ, this is the "good news." Then they are encouraged to believe that if they will only live their lives according to this love, they too will be Christians. However, the Gospel is ever and only a message of pardon and peace for those who have been condemned by the Law. To avoid the preaching of the Law in order to trim and tailor the Gospel to meet the emotional, psychological, and social needs of the hearer neither makes them Christians nor gives them what they truly need: the assurance of pardon and peace with God.

The Law and the Gospel are doctrinal principles or propositions that stand as they have been given by a loving God in the Holy Scriptures. Neither is to be changed or ignored (in the case of the Law) so that the preacher, counselor, or sympathetic friend may reach out to help another with life's problems and pain. If we as Lutheran pastors truly love those we desire to help, no matter what trial or trouble they are facing, then we must put our Savior's heart in action by using our Savior's method of Law and Gospel applied to them. Robert Koester says it well:

When people come to a pastor for help with emotional or family problems, he must always ask himself what his role is and how he is going to carry it out. If he immediately attaches himself to the needs of the counselee, he may find himself "using" the gospel to help solve the problem. "Let Christ into your life," he might say, "and you will find help." Or, "Christ can give you the help you need if only you will believe in him." We know that God will help us. But those phrases do not get to the heart of the law as God's will that carries with it eternal punishment if not obeyed. Consequently, the real gospel of God's forgiveness cannot truly be proclaimed. I realize how difficult this is as I am faced with these situations all the time. But a pastor must continue to wrestle with the matter, asking himself how he can use a situation to get to the law and gospel, rather than "using" the law and gospel to help the situation. The church body or pastor that ceases to do this will gradually shift his emphasis and tend more toward some type of social gospel. (181)

The preaching of "love" as if it is the Gospel of salvation

If the self-esteem building, positive-thinking, church-growth crowds are correct and the Gospel is to be presented as if it is the love of Christ, variously portrayed by what is done to help others, then its saving grace is not permitted to shine clearly in the sinner's heart. Jesus teaches that love is the fulfillment of the *Law* (Matt. 22:37-40). On the basis of this passage many in our day tell us that the New Testament Gospel message is *love* and that Jesus commands us to do it to fulfill the Gospel. But the purpose of the Lord's statement made to a pharisaic lawyer is not to show how the sinner can change his ways and save himself by love. The purpose of Jesus' summary of the Law in this passage is to convict the Pharisees of sin!

"God is love" (1 John 4:8), as demonstrated on the cross of Christ (John 3:16). Those who "will not perish, but have everlasting life" are not those who learn to do works of love, but those who "believe" in God's Son. Those who believe that they have been unconditionally loved by God through the sacrifice of His Son for sinners will love others, as Christ has loved them, because while the Law sentences them to death, the Gospel freely gives them forgiveness and life. This "new commandment" Christ could give to His disciples (John 15:12) only because the Spirit had filled their hearts with the "love of God" for

them, even though they were convicted of sin (Rom. 5:5-8).

If the Antinomian spirit lays hold of the preacher with the result that the Law is not preached to convict a man of his sin and God's wrath against him, then Christ's suffering and death lose their full sacrificial significance in utterly removing the wrath of God against the sinner. And if the Gospel is not permitted to have its intended justifying effect through faith in His merits and sacrifice alone, then the devil will be sure to distort the Gospel into a new law, with the deluded hope that the still comfortable flesh may strive to justify itself. Then Christ is made out to be chiefly or merely the giver of a new commandment that "you love one another," and the good news of the Gospel is perceived to be His example of loving God and man, which His disciples are to follow in *obedience*.

This is not the Gospel at all, for love was commanded in the Law before Christ came to reveal the surpassing and whole truth of the Gospel. It was the Law, not the Gospel, which Jesus Himself summarized as love for God and one's neighbor (Luke 10:27). When that lawyer, still unconvicted, tried to "justify himself," Jesus gave him the Parable of the Good Samaritan who showed mercy, and then He told the man to "go and do likewise." Our Lord was not encouraging the lawyer to do better because he could. Rather, Jesus wanted to awaken his conscience to the fact that he could not. The Gospel is never about our obedience, no matter how zealous we are to follow the example of Christ. The Gospel is about Christ's obedience in our place. It's not about our sacrifices of love for others, but His *mercy-filled sacrifice of love for us*.

The desire to make people feel better

The error of Antinomianism by those who seek the growth of churches has a strong appeal in our day. We live in a comfortable, cosmetic society. In general people want to feel comfortable wherever they go, especially in church or in the presence of Christians. They want to feel good right where they are, comfortable in their own skin. If they have known the Law in their past but have not felt its teeth, they may try to save face, seeking to justify themselves so as not to appear as though they are not good.

"Who is my neighbor?" the lawyer asked, "seeking to justify himself" (Luke 10:29). In order to rebuke his sin and convince the man that he could not justify himself, Jesus did not preach the Gospel. He made the Law more pointed and sent it straight to the man's heart so that he might feel its blow of death. Only then could he find, that is, be given life in his Savior! After telling the lawyer the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus told him: "Go, and do likewise." Did Jesus make him feel comfortable in taking such an approach? Are there not also many today who, like the lawyer, have a sense that they are not yet perfect before God and yet believe they can become perfect with a little urging from the pulpit—a tap on the wrists, a new assignment, or a gentle reminder to "love others as they have been loved"? These will not be helped by a preaching of the Gospel, not until their proud and self-reliant hearts have been crushed by the Law.

In another situation Jesus would not permit a certain ruler to call Him "Good Teacher," even though our Lord was that and more. The man wanted to be good in the eyes of God, and so he wanted to know what he should "do to inherit eternal life." Jesus did not permit the man to go away thinking that he had kept even the outward letter of the Law. So Jesus pressed the Law deeper into his conscience. "You still lack one thing," He said. "Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me" (Luke 18:18-22).

What about those who gather with the Christ-believing saints, like Ananias and Sapphira did, having a plan to appear as "good people"? These are also comfortable in their own skin and want their good standing verified. They expect to be made comfortable by the praise of men and of God because they have come with their monetary gifts, talents, or winsome personalities. When the infamous couple acted with such hypocritical mockery of God, did Peter attempt to remove their mask by reminding them of God's love for them? No, he tore the mask from their faces with the Law: "You have not lied to men, but to God." They dropped dead on the spot! Luke tells us that the news of this struck *great* fear in the hearts of all who heard it (Acts 5:11). It was a powerful preaching of the Law intended to serve as a lesson for all to repent of every form of hypocrisy and seek forgiveness in the Gospel of Christ.

The Law must be preached to our members too, lest they begin to think they only need a face-lift, a stretch or a tuck here and there, perhaps a little facial cream to hide their blemishes, or a mask in order to be or appear right before God. Lest the sinful flesh convince the Christian that God considers righteous those who do the best they can, or appear to do so, Peter wrote to Christians everywhere, quoting the Law in Leviticus: “*You shall be holy, for I, (the LORD, your God) am holy*” (1 Pet. 1:16).

It is also so in our feel-good society that people want more than the “good life,” more than wealth, health, and a loving family perhaps. They want to feel good about themselves in their standing with God, especially when compared with others. When calamity strikes, however, their sense of goodness may be shaken to its very foundation. This too is “good” in the eyes of our Savior, “who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:3-4). Those who stand on their own goodness must be made to feel how faulty their foundation is before God can bring them to the “knowledge of the truth” in Christ, the one truly good foundation on which sinners must stand by *faith*.

In such cases the danger to the Gospel and to the troubled soul is that a misguided friend or pastor may think that the evangelical thing to do is to make the person feel better about himself, when God’s desire is for that person to humble himself, confess his sins, and plead for mercy from the God who reveals Himself in the Gospel as full of grace and mercy toward sinners! It is also a form of Antinomianism to tell those who think themselves too good to suffer that they have shown themselves to be “good” people or to tell them that they should find peace and hope in this or that pleasurable distraction.

Perhaps many of us are acquainted with the popular book entitled, *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*, written by a Jewish rabbi some years ago. Rabbi Kirschner, who thought himself to be a “good” man who did not deserve to suffer the loss of his young child to cancer, even blamed God, concluding that God was powerless to prevent the “bad” thing that happened to him and his family. Because he was not convicted by the Law of the fact that he was not good, he reasoned that the problem was to be found in God. Since he believed from his Jewish perspective that God was good, he concluded that God must be powerless to prevent the “bad”—that is, what he, a “good” man, had determined to be “bad.” His book did much to spread the leaven of Antinomianism in our culture, both in the secular world and in the churches.

We are not called to preach the Law to make our hearers feel better or even to make them better Christians. Such preaching would give them the idea that the Law was given for that purpose and that it has the power to work a spiritual and God-pleasing change in sinners, which, of course, only the Gospel can effect. When we preach the Law, we are not to aim at building people up a few bricks at a time, so that they can feel good about reaching up to God by their own works and sacrifices. Rather, we must use the Law to tear down whatever bricks have been piled up by the flesh so that our hearers despair of reaching up to God at all. Only then will they be led by the Gospel to see God reaching down to save them by His grace through faith in their Savior.

***The Holiness Churches and all others
who set aside the Law by their traditions***

It is the same Savior who said, “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:17-20).

The Holiness churches subvert the Law’s effect and endanger the work of the Gospel within sinners when they teach that once a person believes that Jesus died for his sins, he himself truly becomes holy and without sin because thereafter God never requires of the believer more than he is able to do at any given time. This was the answer received from a devout member of the Church of the Nazarene

when she was asked, “How can you say that you have reached perfection in this life?” Other such statements, we know, have been made by those who preach that the Christian is able to reach “perfection in this life.”

In the attempt to make their case that they are “holy,” the Holiness bodies like to quote Peter’s words: “But as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, ‘Be holy, for I am holy’” (1 Pet. 1:15-16). They do not recognize, however, that Peter begins with a preaching of the Law. It is not relative goodness that God requires, but absolute perfection, with Himself as the standard applied! And then Peter follows with the Gospel by saying: “*You were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold*” (1 Pet. 1:18). That is, since our sins were too great to be paid for with these elements of the earth, the price of our redemption, our being bought back from sin and death, would be costly. It would be “*the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot*” (1 Pet. 1:19).

When Jesus said to His disciples, “You are already clean through the word which I have spoken to you” (John 15:3), He was not telling them that they were relatively clean because they were always improving in their obedience to His commandments. He was saying that through faith in the Gospel that He proclaimed to them, they were wholly clean before the holy God. So on that basis we realize that many are deceived and deceive themselves when they “say that they have no sin.” But as the Scripture makes clear, “the truth is not in” them. The truth, rather, is this: “*if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*” (1 John 1:8-9).

When Jesus warns in His Sermon on the Mount that “unless [our] righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, [we] will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven,” He is not suggesting that we will gain heaven if our righteous obedience to the Law is superior to the scribes and Pharisees. Rather, at a time when the Jewish leaders had extracted the teeth from the Law, Jesus put them back (Matt. 5:21ff.). Jesus did this to make the Law penetrate even the hearts of his disciples that they may always have the perfect righteousness of His Gospel imputed to them by faith.

Surely Jesus and His apostle are on the same page when Paul writes: “Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed . . . even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 3:19-24).

Where does Scripture ever say that Christians become so sanctified that they are no longer included in Paul’s words, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”? Mary, the mother of God, did not gain such a victory over sin; neither did Paul, who ever remained, as he confessed of himself, “chief” of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15). After his conversion and many years of service as the foremost missionary to the Gentiles, Paul recognized more than ever that in his flesh there was “nothing good.” Although he “delighted in the law of God according to the inward man,” he was ever aware of the power of his sinful flesh to bring him “into captivity to the law (i.e., principle) of sin” (Rom. 7:22-23). Generally, the Holiness preachers do not recognize the activity of the sinful flesh, which they ought. Therefore their hearers are not always convicted by the Law of falling short of God’s glory, and hence they are hindered from believing or rejoicing that they are justified freely by His grace in Christ.

Isn’t it also an especially insidious form of Antinomianism when man-made laws and traditions are upheld as pre-requisite to the righteousness that avails before God? For while it is true that many people burdened by law of any kind may indeed despair of themselves, as Luther did, this does not mean that one’s attention might not be drawn away from the Law of God to other laws or “traditions of men” by which they are encouraged to find acceptance with God.

What did Jesus say to those enemies of the Gospel who took pride in the fact that their tradition demanded the washing of hands before a meal? They were quick to declare that the disciples had “transgressed the tradition of the elders”; but they themselves were not convicted of sin against the Fourth Commandment by their traditional practice of Corban. Therefore, while they “came near to God”

with their lips, their proud hearts were “far from Him” (Matt. 15:1-9). Enamored with their obedience to man-made laws, they were not hammered by the Law of God, and indeed would not be hammered by that which they were convinced they had fulfilled relatively well. Paul the former Pharisee was likewise “alive once without the law, but when the commandment came, (i.e., when it convicted him) sin revived” and Paul “died” (Rom. 7:9). Only then did Paul really see Jesus by faith and rejoice in the Gospel of grace and forgiveness in Christ.

Here we suggest that the Holiness churches and other sects that emphasize obedience to Sabbath laws, dress codes, and abstention from certain foods, alcoholic beverages, etc., do harm to the Gospel. This they do not only by promoting a righteousness before God that is besides or other than the righteousness of Christ (legalism), but also by effectively distracting their hearers from the Law of God and even diluting its force for some. Proud hypocrites are then created when human laws and traditions—which are more easily kept—“make the commandments of God of no effect” (Matt. 15:6), with the result that the precious Gospel of grace does not seem so precious, or quite so necessary!

The “free spirit” of Antinomianism in moral and doctrinal relativism

What are the roots of the moral relativism that we see in society and in the church, that is, with regard to what is right and wrong? We are not surprised that in a world nearly overcome with the God-denying theory of evolution and secular humanism, God’s commandments are openly disobeyed and mocked. But the practice of moral relativism in the churches is the greater sin because while they still profess to believe in God, even in Christ, they yet effectively reject His commandments.

Luther’s “Freedom of the Christian Man” could have been misused as a false mantra for the spirit of Antinomianism in his day. Why, then, can’t the father of lies convince unwitting pastors and church members today that freedom in Christ from the Law means that the Christian is free to show love however he or she may define it, according to the circumstances at hand, and without regard for the commandments of God?

Why have we heard so often in recent times of pastors telling unmarried couples living together in fornication that they are not sinning against the Sixth Commandment as long as they “love one another”? Pastors and teachers who reason that it would be worse to lose their membership than to let them continue in their cohabitation are indulging in their own moral relativism, and they are teaching others to do the same! But where is the concern for the souls that may be lost because the Law was not preached, so that the sin might be repented of and those so entrapped might be returned to their Savior through faith in the Gospel of forgiveness? Surely the practitioners of moral relativism in the churches reveal the specter of Antinomianism.

Likewise, there is a growing attitude even among professed Christians that Christian freedom means they are free to disregard the hard sayings of God’s Word, so unpopular in the churches of our day, for the sake of a more open, loving, and so-called “evangelical” witness. How often have we not heard the charge that we are being legalistic when we expect obedience to all the teachings of Christ and the Apostles in the confession and lives of Christians?

We can therefore agree with the observation of LC-MS Professor David Scaer:

This free, open, and unrestrained “law-less” ethic is also at work in the church and is barely distinguishable from today’s secular ethic. Many pastors live with the frustration that even professing Christians claim freedom in what they will believe and how they will live. Any doctrinal standard is viewed as “law,” and requiring submission to it is regarded as “legalism.” In a former time, churches set standards of faith and life for members. Now this is often reversed and many churches adjust their standards for faith and life to fit the commonly accepted beliefs and behaviors of their members. (qtd. in Gurgel 124-25)

If we make justifying faith before God depend upon a person’s acceptance and adherence to all the teachings of Holy Scripture, as though our Lord has established a doctrinal standard to which every person must measure up in order to be saved, we are indeed practicing a form of legalism. For the Gospel of Christ in which truly justifying faith trusts is not about our obedience, but Christ’s; and

salvation is not about us making ourselves safe from sin and death, but Christ becoming our Savior by means of His cross.

That being said, some may be under a mistaken notion that the unpopular teachings of Scripture are legal demands because they seem to be added to the Gospel, which has already given us a right standing before God, so that nothing more is required of us. Yet the One who says to His disciples, “You are *already clean* through the word which I have spoken to you” (John 15:3), also says: “He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me” (John 14:21).

Is Christ preaching legalism? Hardly! It is not the Law that makes us clean from sin and produces love for Christ and the keeping of His commandments. It is the Gospel which does all that. Furthermore, Christ’s commandments include more than His words recorded in the four Gospels. He also includes the teachings of the Apostles when He says to His disciples: “*These things I have spoken to you while being present with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you*” (John 14:25-26). Are we to think that “all things” somehow excludes certain doctrinal principles defined by the Apostles in the New Testament?

Yes, the One who has already cleansed us and freed us from our sins against the Law also requires—and even brings about—our obedience to His commandments, for His love for us has been “poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us” (Rom. 5:5). And “we love Him because He first loved us” (1 John 4:19). This is not legalism, and neither is it legalism on our part as representatives of Christ to require faithful obedience to the teachings of Christ and His Apostles because of the Gospel.

Or are we to conclude that continuing in the very Word which Christ says makes us free means only that we are to hold to the article of justification through the cross? How else does one explain that many who leave our fellowship and charge us with some form of legalism end up in churches that profess faith in the cross of Christ and yet deny original sin? There is a sad irony, too, that in many of these churches baptism and the Lord’s Supper are denied as the means of grace (Gospel) and are recast as mere “ordinances.” That is, they are recast as law—what believers are to do to or for God! Yet the freedom of the Christian is not freedom from obedience to God’s Word; it is always a Spirit-wrought freedom in His Word. For Christ says, “*If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed, and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free*” (John 8:32).

Having said this, we do not contend that those who leave us because the hard sayings of Scripture are so unpopular, or because we emphasize the importance of doctrine in our preaching are guilty of Antinomianism *per se*. Because of a misguided notion of evangelical freedom in Christ, a believer may reject in weakness of faith what seems to him to be a legal requirement without evidencing a spirit of Antinomianism. However, we all need to be careful that the true freedom from the curse of the Law and its coercion, a freedom which is ours by the Gospel, does not become an Antinomian spirit which declares itself free from the Law of God and the commandments of our Lord Christ. For if the devil gets his way, we may also end up declaring our freedom from the means of grace, the Gospel in Word and Sacrament, as others appear to have done.

Rebuking sin and recognizing true contrition

Paul wrote: “Sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace” (Rom. 6:14). This is not an argument for Antinomianism but a declaration against legalism. By this Paul does not mean to say that the Gospel of grace is opposed to God’s Law; its opposition, rather, is to any form of legalism. Indeed, as Paul warned the Galatian Christians, those who have been freed from the Law by the Gospel but once again place themselves under the Law make the grace of God “of no effect” for themselves. They have denied the Gospel, in that they have chosen to add their contributions of works from the Law, as if the Law supplements divine grace.

The Law itself is “holy and good” because it comes from God. But the Law “kills” and “incites” disobedience (Rom. 7:7-12), while the Gospel alone gives life and works the willingness to obey God’s

will. So as long as the sinner truly believes in Christ as His Savior, the Holy Spirit moves him by the forgiving grace of God to obey the Law and fight against sin, no matter how many times he cries out against the cross he bears on account of his flesh.

Therefore when the Christian brother falls into sin, we must be careful not to minimize the threat to his soul, which would happen if we are lax in applying the Law. If we do that, then the Gospel will of necessity seem like a mere trinket to his heart rather than the life-saving treasure it is meant to be. And when religious people make themselves out to be good and righteous, and yet conduct themselves wickedly among us by living in sin, while seeking admission to the Lord's Table, we must not coddle them with the notion that we should not shame or embarrass them in front of their relatives by refusing to commune them. When the Baptizer "saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, 'Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance. . .'" (Matt. 3:7-8).

So also, when our people are down and depressed by their lot in life, part of the problem may be their discontent with God's working in their lives. They may be unthankful or even covetous. Naturally, we have no desire to make them feel worse by pointing out these sinful thoughts. And yet, in spite of our natural emotions, we have learned from our Savior that there is a higher love (*agape*), taught by His Spirit, which brings with it this wisdom: Godly love knows what is best and does what is best for the welfare of sinners. Because of this supreme love the Father sent His only Son to be "born under the Law" and to "redeem those who were under the Law. . ." (Gal. 4:4-5). Because of the Gospel, God placed His holy Son under the Law and its curse! Because of the same Gospel, we preach the same Law to expose the guilt of sin, along with the curse deserved by sin, all of which Christ removes through His blood.

Likewise, because of the Gospel which we intend and hope to proclaim, we are to preach the Law so that if the troubled heart has become hardened against God by fleshly thoughts, we may break up the crustiness of that ground and make way for the gentle rain of the Gospel. As the Apostle Paul longed to comfort the Corinthians by the same comfort with which he himself was comforted "in any trouble" (2 Cor. 1:4), we are to have the same goal in our ministry to troubled souls. At times we may need to discomfit them—make them feel worse—by the Law so that the Gospel may find a welcome place in their hearts and they find the true rest and peace in Christ that they need above all else. Is not the good doctor willing to make his patients feel worse if he is certain that his treatment will remedy their physical suffering?

Neither should we be under the notion that some emotional response of sympathy or fear when presenting or hearing the Gospel is a sign of genuine repentance. Those who preach the cross and the sufferings of Christ for sinners are preaching the Gospel. However, we need to be careful not to preach the Gospel as if it were theater so as to elicit some emotion from its audience. We also must learn to distinguish sympathy for the crucified Jesus from faith in Christ crucified for our sins.

The emotion of *sympathy* for the suffering Savior may be misinterpreted as Spirit-worked contrition for sin, such as that displayed by the "daughters of Jerusalem" who "mourned and lamented" the cross-carrying Christ, and yet they received His rebuke: "Do not weep for Me, but weep for yourselves, and for your children" (Luke 23:28). As we have seen from Scripture and the Confessions, the effecting of contrition is the proper office and function of the Law. To use the Gospel to evoke sympathy for the Savior and interpret this as contrition ends up being a form of Antinomianism.

So also, it may be that *fear* is the emotion brought forth when the cross of His suffering is presented theatrically in one's preaching. Perhaps even the powerful image of Christ's bloodied, cross-bound body in the Mel Gibson movie might have struck fear and contrition in the hearts of some. We should not think, however, that the Gospel of the cross is to be preached to make sinners afraid of God, or that it is to be considered a preaching of repentance in the place of the Law. In support of such a conviction we note what Luther wrote:

Yea, what more forcible, more terrible declaration and preaching of God's wrath against sin is there than just the suffering and death of Christ, His Son? But as long as all this preaches God's wrath and terrifies men, it is not yet the preaching of the Gospel nor Christ's own preaching, but that of Moses

and the Law against the impenitent. For the Gospel and Christ were never ordained and given for the purpose of terrifying and condemning, but of comforting and cheering those who are terrified and timid. And again: Christ says, John 16, 8: “The Holy Ghost will reprove the world of sin”; which cannot be done except through the explanation of the Law.” (qtd. in *Concordia* 955, 957)

We need to preach the Law to grind spiritual pride to powder so that the Gospel alone may be recognized as the only hope for the troubled soul. When we have finished our Law-Gospel sermon or counseling session, we should be happy to find that our listeners have found new hope—not in their relative goodness in obedience to God (i.e., as if their sin is only a small thing of weakness) or in their emotional feelings, all of which fall short of the glory of God, but in the goodness and forgiving grace of their God, who is fully satisfied by the atonement of His Son.

***May God grant us His grace to
preach the Law because of the Gospel!***

While we have said plenty on the subject, some may say too much about the danger of Antinomianism to the Gospel, and more will need to be said by others. Neither legalism nor Antinomianism will cease to plague the Gospel until the coming of our Lord. For those who claim to be heirs of Luther and the Reformation, who therefore desire to preach the Law only *because* of and to make way for the surpassing grace of Christ’s Gospel, the beat goes on. Walther was such, as we hear in these words:

Some, indeed, may say: “That is not the way for an evangelical minister to preach.” But it certainly is; he could not be an evangelical preacher if he did not preach the Law thus. The Law must precede the preaching of the Gospel, otherwise the latter will have no effect. First comes Moses, then Christ; or: First John the Baptist, the forerunner, then Christ. At first the people will exclaim, How terrible is all this! But presently the preacher, with shining eyes, passes over to the Gospel, and then the hearts of people are cheered. They see the object of the preacher’s preceding remarks: he wanted to make them see how awfully contaminated with sins they were and how sorely they needed the Gospel. (83)

In his Thirty-First Evening Lecture he also wrote:

This blindness concerning sin is the chief cause of the almost universal rejection of the Gospel in our time. People who fail to recognize the horrible nature of sin will decline to accept the sacrificial death of the Son of God for the reconciliation and redemption of this world of sinners; for they consider it utterly unnecessary and hence regard the story of the Gospel as a miserable fable.

It is therefore one of the most important requisites of a true, evangelical minister that he know how to depict for his hearers the true nature of sin in terms that are as plain and distinct as they are terrible, drastic, and impressive. For without a real knowledge of what an awful thing sin is man cannot understand and accept the Gospel. As long as he is not alarmed over sin as his greatest enemy and the most awful abomination indwelling in him, he will not come to Christ. (324-25)

Again in Walther’s words: “A Christian must regard himself as a lost and condemned sinner, or all his talk about faith is vain and worthless” (328). But how can the Christian consistently overcome the self-righteous talk of the flesh unless that enemy of the Gospel is continually beaten down with the Law? For as Walther said in conclusion to his Thirty-First Lecture: “Small sins become great when they are regarded as small” (332). Thus “evangelical preaching means that sin must be magnified. The minister must pronounce a severe judgment on sin, for He [sic] is to proclaim the judgment of God” (331). How can the “small” sin become “magnified” apart from the preaching of the Law?

To “rightly divide the word of truth,” as Paul exhorts preachers throughout the New Testament age to do, does not mean that the Law and the Gospel are to be separated from one another as far away as the sun is from the earth. They are to be distinguished from one another, the way Moses is distinguished from Christ, or the way the pedagogue who leads the child to school is distinguished from the teacher at the school. The Scriptures and the Confessions make it clear that the Law and the Gospel are to be used together, but without mixing them up and so adulterating either. The Law must be used to serve the Gospel.

We may have heard all this before, and hopefully it is so. But the Latin maxim holds: *Repetitio est Mater studiorum* (“Repetition is the mother of study” or learning). And the blessing for those we serve and for us also is in the saying and doing of what we have heard and learned. O Lord, forgive us whenever we fail!

Finally, as we apply ourselves to the constant task of “rightly distinguishing the word of truth,” may we never aim to please men, but “be diligent to present” ourselves “approved to God” (2 Tim. 2:15), who has called us into this blessed ministry. To that end we pray:

Lord, grant us Your love for others and the courage also in these last days to preach the Law *because of* the Gospel, and to this end that precious, blood-bought souls may know You as You truly are: “merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty. . .” (Exod. 34:6-7). Impel, direct, and bless our preaching of Law and Gospel so that the hearer receives the soul-saving truth of Christ which makes him truly free unto eternal life! Amen.

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THE PROBLEM OF SUBJECTIVISM IN CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN MUSIC

Paul Naumann

A debate has long been simmering in our circles over whether it is appropriate to use contemporary Christian music (CCM) in the worship service. There are many facets to this discussion, some of which are inherently difficult to resolve. For instance, while some criticize CCM as “lacking in reverence,” others point out, with some justification, that reverence is largely in the eye of the beholder. A song that seems irreverent to one may seem perfectly reverent to someone else. Similarly, many fault CCM for being doctrinally shallow, with a tendency to focus more on emotions and feelings than on the concrete truths of Scripture. Defenders of CCM object that this is painting with too broad of a brush, that there are good and bad CCM songs just as there are good and bad hymns in our traditional hymnals. Some, in fact, say that the term “contemporary Christian music” is itself so broad as to preclude any meaningful analysis or debate.

Is it all just a matter of taste? It might seem so. However, there is at least one aspect of contemporary Christian music that lends itself to assessment and analysis in a more concrete way, and that is its *subjectivism*.

CCM has long been criticized as too subjective, particularly when compared with traditional church music. Critics of so-called “ME-centered worship” say that CCM focuses too much on the feelings and experiences of the individual believer and not enough on the objective truths of God’s Word. Even

many Evangelicals acknowledge this assessment. Bob Kauflin is an Evangelical, non-denominational music minister at Covenant Life Church in Gaithersburg, Maryland. He is author of several books on worship and edits a popular online resource called WorshipMatters.Com. In an article with the title, “What About ‘ME’ Songs?” he writes that subjective songs should have a very limited place in the worship service: “Objective truth about God’s glory in Christ should be the main part of the songs we sing. If it isn’t, our songs will eventually drift into emotionalism and self-absorption. We lose sight of God and get caught up in our own emotions. We start to worship our experiences, become focused on how well we’re doing what we’re doing, and are more impressed with our feelings and actions than God’s.”¹

Most agree that excess subjectivism in the worship service is bad. But it may seem at first glance as though the discussion of subjectivism is just another one of those debates that can’t be resolved; that is, a song that seems subjective to one might not seem subjective to another. Colleagues have said to me, “Well, just because the song has a lot of *I*’s and *me*’s in it doesn’t necessarily mean that it’s subjective.” But a moment’s reflection reveals that that is exactly what it *does* mean, and it really can’t mean anything else.² The more one examines how we commonly define subjectivism, the more it becomes clear that the definition depends almost entirely upon *the frequency of use of the first-person singular pronouns, words like “I,” “me,” and “my.”* Any work—prose or poetry, sung or spoken—is considered subjective solely on the basis of how often words like “I” and “me” occur in it. And if that’s the case, then it should be a simple matter to quantify the subjectivity of any work. All we have to do is count the words “I,” “me” and “my.” If we can find the *ratio* of those words to total words in a song (or an album of songs, or a whole hymnal), then you have at least one rough means of measuring its subjectivity as compared with other works.

As it turns out, this is quite easy to do. For example, the entire text of *The Lutheran Hymnal* (c. 1941, Concordia) is available online and can be dropped into a word processing program. Using the statistical tools available in Microsoft Word, it is a simple matter to find the total number of words in *TLH*, count the first-person singular pronouns, and divide to get the ratio. The same can be done for other representatives of traditional church music, such as the *Lutheran Service Book* (c. 2006, Concordia).

But how does one arrive at that ratio for CCM? Given the range of sub-genres within contemporary Christian music, does the term “CCM” even mean anything? Some say it is so broad as to defy definition or analysis. While the first part may be true, the second is not. What I discovered is that it doesn’t really matter how you define CCM. The results to be found were clear: Almost any kind of contemporary Christian music turns out to be *much* more subjective than almost any kind of traditional church music.

Where to begin the comparison? Any evaluation of CCM must obviously cover a broad range of music, but Christian FM radio is probably the best place to start. Most people, when they hear the term “contemporary Christian music,” probably think of the music they hear on Christian radio stations. Where I live in western Washington, the dominant Christian station is Spirit 105 FM. I listen to it frequently, first because I’ve been interested in the CCM-vs.-traditional debate for some time and I like to know what I’m talking about. Secondly, though, it’s nice music to hear sometimes. A lot of it is catchy, and a number of these songs express worthy thoughts from a Christian perspective. Paul says, “*Whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things*” (Phil. 4:8). The kind of music I hear on Christian radio sometimes helps me to “meditate on these things.” At the very least it presents a welcome contrast to the woeful flotsam of what passes for music on most of the FM dial these days. Not even the sharpest critics of CCM should say that none of this music is ever appropriate to listen to under any circumstances.

At this point we should also stipulate another equally obvious fact: that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with *personal testimony*. Sharing personal experiences is one of the most effective ways for a Christian to witness his faith and proclaim the Gospel. The healed demoniac of Luke 8 wished to follow Jesus on His journeys. “*But Jesus sent him away, saying, Return to your own house, and tell*

what great things God has done for you.’ And he went his way and proclaimed throughout the whole city what great things Jesus had done for him” (Luke 8:38-39). First-person testimony is one of the most important tools of personal evangelism, and many have been won for Christ by the Gospel expressed to them from a personal perspective.

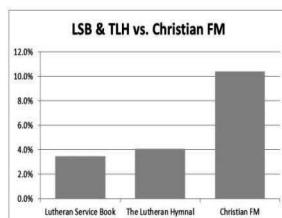
However, the main question under debate among us is not whether CCM is appropriate for individual use. Few would argue this point. The question that concerns us is rather this: Is CCM appropriate for *the corporate worship service*? That’s an entirely different matter. There may be a place and time for Christian songs that are deeply personal and subjective, but many feel strongly that it is not during the Sunday morning church service. WELS Pastor Bryan Gerlach speaks to this point when he writes: “Lutheran worship—for sound theological reasons—avoids subjectivism. This emphasis has its foundation in the doctrine of justification by faith, the article by which the church—and its worship—stands or falls. Lutheran worship stresses the objective presence, power and grace of God. Far more important than my subjective feeling about being saved is God’s objective promise which establishes my salvation.”³

As mentioned above, even some of CCM’s most ardent advocates admit that the genre has a problem with subjectivism. Brian D. McLaren is a self-professed “post-modern evangelical” and author of several books, including *The Church on the Other Side* and *A New Kind of Christianity*. He is also a Christian songwriter who, ironically, is highly critical of today’s Christian songs: “Let me make this specific: Too many of our lyrics are embarrassingly personalistic, about Jesus and *me*. . . . [I]t really feels like worship and Christianity in general have become ‘all about me, me, me.’ If you doubt what I’m saying, listen next time you’re singing in worship. It’s about how Jesus forgives me, embraces me, makes me feel his presence, strengthens me, forgives me, holds me close, touches me, revives me, etc., etc.” “We need songs that are simply about God. . . .”⁴

Most agree that excess subjectivism is to be avoided, at least in the corporate worship service. But how subjective is CCM really? Is this truly a problem, or is it perhaps only a perception, or even prejudice, held by those who are tied to traditional church music?

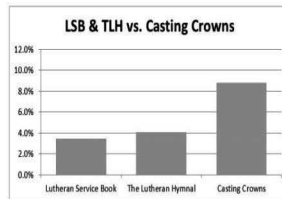
The benchmark for what represents traditional church music in our circles is arguably *The Lutheran Hymnal (TLH)*. There are 105,765 words in *TLH*. Of these 4,308 are first-person pronouns, principally “I,” “me,” and “my,” but also including “I’m,” “I’ll,” “I’ve,” “I’d,” “myself,” and “mine.” This represents a comparatively low ratio of 4.1%. Some have argued that modes of expression were different when *TLH* was published seventy years ago and that we simply use more first-person pronouns in our speech today. This is belied by the ratio we find in the *Lutheran Service Book (LSB)*, which was published just six years ago and contains many new hymns, as well as updated language for old hymns. Surprisingly, *LSB* has an *even lower* ratio of first person pronouns (3.5%) than *TLH*. The next question to ask is how these two representatives of traditional music compare to various forms of CCM.

We start with Christian FM radio? Here the data turned out to be relatively easy to gather. Each week *Billboard Magazine* publishes their list of the Top 25 Christian songs, which pretty much constitutes the playlist for most Christian FM radio stations. The Christian Top 25 for the week that I sampled (July 9-15, 2011) contained songs by popular individual artists like Laura Story and Jeremy Camp, as well as bands like Mercy Me and Casting Crowns.⁵ Those songs contain a total of 7,062 words, 725 of which are first-person pronouns; this gives a ratio of 10.4%. That is, the words “I,” “me,” and “my” can occur up to *three times more often* in the songs on Christian FM radio than in traditional church music.

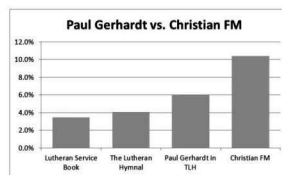


It's hard to escape the conclusion that a lot of the music on Christian radio is much more subjective than our traditional church music. It truly is, as McLaren aptly puts it, "all about me."

But Christian radio isn't the only representative of CCM, as its advocates are quick to point out. One acquaintance of mine said, "Oh, I realize that the Top 25 are pretty shallow and subjective, but I only listen to certain groups. My favorite is Casting Crowns; they're really good!" So I looked up all the lyrics to their recent album, *Until the Whole World Hears*. They may be really good, but they're also really subjective. The ratio of subjective words on this album is 8.8%. That is, out of every hundred words, nearly nine of them are first-person pronouns, like "I," "me," and "my." This ratio is slightly better than Christian FM radio, but still more than twice as subjective as traditional church music.

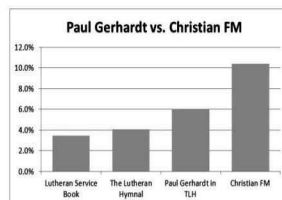


One colleague acknowledged the subjective nature of contemporary Christian music, but countered that certain of the Lutheran hymn writers, taken by themselves, were quite subjective too. His prime example was Paul Gerhardt. Gerhardt has twenty-one hymns in *TLH*, some of which are quite subjective. As examples one may think of "I Will Sing My Maker's Praises" and "If God Himself Be for Me." Taken as a whole, however, Gerhardt's hymns are still much less subjective (6.0%) than CCM.



One pastor remarked "What about the Psalms? They're very subjective!" This seems an obvious question to ask. Many familiar Psalms are written from the first-person perspective. And some of the Psalms were specifically intended to accompany corporate worship. Moreover, some CCM songs—as advocates are fond of pointing out—take their lyrics directly from the Bible, particularly the book of Psalms. Surely, they say, there can be no objection to this kind of song.

My objection is not that those songs are bad, but that they are *few*; they make up only a small fraction of CCM songs. Also, appealing to the analogy of the Psalms is something of an unfair comparison. After all, the songs King David wrote were directly inspired by the Holy Spirit. Casting Crowns can't make that claim. But even so, judging by the criterion of first-person singular pronouns, the Psalms turn out to be roughly half (or less) as subjective as the popular songs of CCM.



Taken together, it seems clear that CCM has a problem with subjectivism. By any definition CCM uses words like “I,” “me,” and “my” at least twice as often as traditional hymns, and in some cases it can be three or four times as often. In this it is merely reflecting the self-absorbed culture from which it springs. This kind of music is much more likely to focus on the individual rather than on the body of Christ, on the creature rather than the Creator, and on the worshipper rather than the One who is worshipped.

New worship music is constantly being introduced and evaluated in our CLC churches. No doubt, that process will continue, the only variables being the rate at which it is introduced and the nature of the new music itself. When it comes to CCM, a broad range of issues are under discussion. Some of them may eventually be resolved; some will probably remain a matter of taste. But as we have demonstrated, there is one issue quite central to CCM that is *not* a matter of taste. For when judged by the criterion of *subjectivism*, contemporary Christian music typically is “all about ME.”

Endnotes

¹ Bob Kauflin, “What About “Me” Songs?” *Worship Matters* <http://www.worshipmatters.com/2007/06/22/qa-fridays-what-2/>. Accessed March 2012.

² Here we may mention—and dismiss—those few hymns and songs that are written from God’s perspective; i.e., though they contain the words “I” and “me,” it is God speaking in the first person rather than man (e.g., *TLH* 421, “Come, Follow Me, the Savior Spake,” or Esterlyn’s CCM song, “Now You’re Found” on the album *Call Out*). These types of hymns or songs need not concern us much. They are relatively rare and, moreover, seem to occur in about the same ratio in CCM as they do in traditional music. Thus they do not significantly skew the numbers or conclusions of this essay.

³ Bryan M. Gerlach, “Our Lutheran Heritage in Worship” (delivered to the WELS Northern California Delegate Conference in Concord, CA, in May of 1987). Essay available online.

<http://www.wlssays.net/files/GerlachHeritage.pdf>.

⁴ Brian D. McLaren, “An Open Letter to Worship Songwriters” <http://brianmclaren.net/archives/blog/open-letter-to-worship-songwrite.html>. Accessed March 2012.

⁵ *Billboard Magazine*’s Christian Top 25 for the week of July 9, 2011, were as follows: 1) “Blessings” by Laura Story; 2) “Glorious Day” by Casting Crowns; 3) “Stronger” by Mandisa; 4) “You Love Me Anyway” by Sidewalk Prophets; 5) “The Way” by Jeremy Camp; 6) “Listen to the Sound” by Building 429; 7) “Reach” by Peter Furler; 8) “You are More” by Tenth Avenue North; 9) “Your Great Name” by Natalie Grant; 10) “I Lift My Hands” by Chris Tomlin; 11) “The Redeemer” by Sanctus Real; 12) “I Refuse” by Josh Wilson; 13) “Strong Enough” by Matthew West; 14) “Hold Me” by Jamie-Grace; 15) “Move” by Mercy Me; 16) “Hold Me Together” by Royal Tailor; 17) “Do Everything” by Steven Curtis Chapman; 18) “The Light in Me” by Brandon Heath; 19) “Suitcases” by Dara Maclean; 20) “Lift Me Up” by The Afters; 21) “Someone Worth Dying For” by Mikes Chair; 22) “Take Me into the Beautiful” by Cloverton; 23) “Waiting Here For You” by Christy Nockels; 24) “Trust in Jesus” by Third Day; and 25) “Rise” by Shawn McDonald.

Books Available from CLC Writers

Paul G. Fleischer: *A Book Review . . . and an Historical Perspective: Dean Norman A. Madson’s Association with the Church of the Lutheran Confession*, 2010, Morris Publishing, Kearney, NE; paperback, 276 pages.

David Koenig: *God’s Grace and Guidance in Our Foreign Outreach*, 2009, self-published; spiral, 94 pages.

John Lau: *Apologia*, 2008, Morris Publishing, Kearney, NE; paperback, 424 pages.

Eunice Roehl: *Throughout All Generations: Immanuel Lutheran College 1959-2008*, 2008, CLC Board of Education and Publications; spiral, 169 pages.

Lynette Roehl: *The Erskine B. Ingram Estate 1920-1963: God's Gift to Immanuel Lutheran College*, 2009, CLC Board of Education and Publications; spiral, 55 pages.

In recent years the CLC has become more active in the publishing business through its Board of Education and Publications. Along with the Sydow edition (2000) of *Luther's Small Catechism*, the accompanying Sydow workbook, John Reim's *Worship Supplement*, and the history of the CLC authorized by the 2008 CLC Convention, the board has added to its publishing efforts two books written by Eunice Roehl and Lynette Roehl. The former presents the history of Immanuel Lutheran College from its pre-CLC beginnings in Mankato, Minnesota, almost up to its 50th anniversary in 2009; the latter tells the story of the Ingram Estate in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, which the Lord put into our hands in 1963. In reading both of the spiral-bound volumes, which include many pictures, one is tempted to use the word "miraculous" to describe the way in which God worked out the history of our school which trains the called workers of our synod.

In his concern for the remembrance of Dean Norman Madson, Sr., who became part of the CLC at the very end of his life, Paul Fleischer has written a volume that includes Fleischer's own associations with Madson, the remembrances and reflections of many who knew him, plus a sizable appendix that gives us Madson himself in some of his last sermons. There is no doubt that Madson had a significant impact on those of Fleischer's generation.

John Lau, editor and contributor to the *Journal of Theology* for many years, has put together a collection of his writings in *Apologia*. The first section contains *Journal* articles on such matters as Luther's view of good works, Gospel Reductionism, and several Biblical studies. The second section contains his Panorama articles which comment on the goings on among Lutherans in the past fifty years. Several of these attempt to clarify the issues separating the CLC from the WELS and also from other Lutheran bodies. As a teacher of English literature Lau has included at the end of *Apologia* a few articles having to do with Shakespeare, Milton, and Robert Frost.

David Koenig, veteran CLC missionary to several countries in Africa and Asia, has done more than write about his own experiences and those of his fellow foreign missionaries. He has also included in his book, *God's Grace and Guidance in Our Foreign Outreach*, some important lessons to be learned from all these experiences. We make efforts, we make mistakes, we learn from our mistakes, and God is the guide through it all. The first section of the book recounts the labors of Fred Tiefel and his congregation in Japan. Next we are told of the visitations to Nigeria and India and what resulted from the contacts made. Since the early beginnings there has been an expansion of the work in other African and Asian countries. Even though the CLC is small, like Gideon's band of 300, the Lord has blessed our labors, although they are not so much our labors as the labors of the groups that the Lord has led us to find and to assist. Confessional Lutheranism is very rare in our world, but God will surely bless every effort made to preserve His Word in all its saving efficacy and to proclaim it in all the world.

All the books listed and reviewed above can be ordered from the CLC Book House, 501 Grover Rd., Eau Claire, Wisconsin 54701.

- David Lau