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WE APPRECIATE THE MEANS OF GRACE

Introduction*

Daniel Fleischer

* From the Report of the President to the 1996 Convention of the CLC.

“WE APPRECIATE THE MEANS OF GRACE.” If I might say so, that theme addresses something about which not many are concerned, so that if it were to make the public press, hardly anyone would know of what we speak. It is so elementary, that even many in the church today would relegate the consideration of the theme to another time, long past. It is just for *that reason* that we have chosen it as the theme. But in the consideration of the theme there is a danger, namely that though the words and orthodox theme carry a fine sound, the meaning may easily be lost in practice. God forbid that should happen. **If we as individual Christians truly appreciate the Means of Grace, we will gladly hear and learn the Word of God and faithfully use the Sacraments** as they are instituted by the Lord for the welfare of our souls. **If the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) as a church truly appreciates the Means of Grace, it will place those means at the center of its preaching and teaching**, in theory *and* in fact. Dr. Luther said:

Since, then, the church has the command to dispense the forgiveness of sin in this way, no one should despise these means of grace, but everyone should use them gladly and often; for Christ certainly did not institute them without reason. No doubt He knew that we need such remedies, for the devil and our flesh certainly surprise us quickly and cast us into sin. Then where shall we go? For what the wages of sin are we well know. Therefore we must be afraid. We should go nowhere but to the flock to whom Christ has given the command to forgive sin through the Word, Baptism, and the Sacrament. (Ewald M. Plass, *What Luther Says*, St. Louis: Concordia, 1959, ¶ 2872, 918)

And again:

We must hear the Word that comes to us from without and not despise it, as some think. For God will not come to you in your private room and talk with you. It is decreed that the external Word must be preached and come first. Thereupon, after one has heard the Word and taken it to heart, the Holy Spirit

comes, the proper Schoolmaster, and gives power to the Word so that it strikes root. . . . Therefore we must grant the Gospel this honor and concede to it this glory that it is a means and a way and, as it were, a pipe, through which the Holy Spirit flows and comes into our hearts. This is why St. Paul tells the Galatians that they have received the Holy Spirit, not through the works of the Law but through the preaching of faith (3:2). And, writing to the Romans, he draws this conclusion (10:17): “Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” From this it follows that they act foolishly, yea, against God’s order and institution, who despise and reject the external Word, thinking that the Holy Spirit and faith should come to them without means. It will indeed be a long time before that will happen.” (Ewald M. Plass, *What Luther Says*, St. Louis: Concordia, 1959, ¶ 2872, 914)

As a church which takes our Lord’s assignment seriously, we further affirm, as we are confident our essays at this convention will attest, that the primacy and supremacy of the Means of Grace (Gospel in Word and Sacrament) must be and will be maintained and upheld in our theology as well as in our practice. We subscribe without qualification to the pertinent paragraphs of the *Brief Statement* of 1932, which address the subject of the Means of Grace.

21. Although God is present and operates everywhere throughout all creation and the whole earth is therefore full of the *temporal* bounties and blessings of God, Col. 1:17; Acts 17:28; 14:17, still we hold with Scripture that God offers and communicates to men the *spiritual* blessings purchased by Christ, namely, the forgiveness of sins and the treasures and gifts connected therewith, only through the external means of grace ordained by Him. These means of grace are the Word of the Gospel, in every form in which it is brought to man, and the Sacraments of Holy Baptism and of the Lord’s Supper. . . .

22. Since it is only through the external means ordained by Him that God has promised to communicate the grace and salvation purchased by Christ, the Christian Church must not remain at home with the means of grace entrusted to it, but go into the whole world **with the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments** [Emphasis added], Matt. 28:19,20; Mark 16:15,16. For the same reason also the churches at home should never forget that there is no other way of winning souls for the Church and keeping them with it than the faithful and diligent use of the divinely ordained means of grace. Whatever activities do not either directly apply the Word of God or subserve such application we condemn as “new methods,” unchurchly activities, which do not build, but harm, the Church.

Note: The following three papers have been edited for form, but not in substance or content. Any changes in wording are with the author’s approval – Ed.

I. THE MEANS OF GRACE: THE FORMAL PRINCIPAL OF THE REFORMATION

David R. Naumann

Isaiah 55:8-13: “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,” says the LORD. “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven, and do not return there, but water the earth, and make it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it. For you shall go out with joy, and be led out with peace; the mountains and the hills shall break forth into singing before you, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.”

God’s Word is our great heritage and shall be ours forever;
To spread its light from age to age shall be our chief endeavor.
Through life it guides our way, in death it is our stay.
Lord, grant, while worlds endure, we keep its teachings pure
Throughout all generations. Amen. (TLH 283)

John 8:31-32: Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, “If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”

With the witness of these verses of the Bible, along with a wealth of other verses—a complete Psalm (119), entire chapters (Romans 10, Mark 4), even whole books of the Bible (Proverbs, Galatians)—we are led by faith to the spiritually discerned truth that, as far as He has told us, in working salvation our

Triune God has limited Himself to the Means of Grace. Put simply, the Means of Grace is: the Gospel, in Word and sacraments. It is efficacious; that is, it has the power to produce the effects God intends.

Hebrews 4:12: For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

The power that is in the Means of Grace is nothing less than the almighty power of God. This is the power that was used to put faith in your heart. This is the power that is used to sustain that faith. The same power that was used to create light is what the Lord used to turn your “heart of stone to a heart of flesh.”

2 Corinthians 4:5-7: For we do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your bondservants for Jesus’ sake. For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us.

To deny the Means of Grace is to deny the one true Jesus Christ.

John 1:1, 14: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

At the time of the Reformation, some five hundred plus years ago, the visible church had all but forsaken the Means of Grace. It was a time that is commonly referred to in history books as “the dark ages.” Education was rare, superstition was rampant, and except for the “happy inconsistency” of perhaps a few isolated parish priests, true Christ-centered teaching was almost non-existent. But the Lord had reserved for Himself a number of men who had not “bowed the knee to Baal.” At a time when merely to be a Christian was synonymous with membership in the Catholic Church of Rome, the Lord accomplished what He pleased through His Word in the hearts of the men He chose to lead the Reformation. Indeed, we affirm that the Means of Grace was the “formal principal of the Reformation.” Without it, there would have been no real “reform.” Without the Means of Grace there might be a “Church of the Lutheran Confession,” but it would not be, as by God’s grace it is today, the only true teaching visible church of God on earth of which this writer is aware. Praise be to our ever living God for the Means of Grace! It is our continued prayer that He keep us in and through the Means of Grace unto that day when our salvation will be made complete.

It was vital to the Reformation that the true teaching of the Means of Grace was brought to the forefront of Christian instruction. For as we said and say again, without the Means of Grace, the Reformation would not have happened. Without the Means of Grace, we would not be here at the Twenty-second Convention of the Church of the Lutheran Confession claiming unity of belief, teaching, confession, and practice out of genuine church fellowship! What would you call the most important teaching of Scripture? Whatever you’d point to, it goes hand in hand with the Means of Grace, or it is absolutely worthless. For instance, “the true doctrine of justification is intimately bound up with the true doctrine of the means of grace. In order to keep the doctrine of justification in all its purity, one must ever maintain that the forgiveness of sins which Christ earned for mankind can never be appropriated by man through any other means than the Word and the Sacrament. Therefore, Walther said, the correct doctrine on justification stands or falls with the correct doctrine concerning the means of grace.”¹ Therefore no denomination of our day stands except for the Lutherans, and then only a small portion of them who still adhere to the historic Lutheran confessions as the correct exposition of the Holy Scriptures, and hence the Means of Grace. It has been truly said that the Means of Grace is the peculiar glory of Lutheranism. I do not know of a single heterodox Christian organization (that does not carry the name Lutheran) that correctly adheres to the doctrine of the Means of Grace. It is a blessing that we are able to look back in history and see the results of the Means of Grace working in the hearts of the Lutheran reformers. Those results are found in abundance in the recorded history and in the Lutheran symbols of the Reformation.

The following statements that come to us from the Lutheran symbols of the time of the Reformation are some of the finest confessions of faith regarding the Means of Grace. As we read these excellent quotes, keep in mind that these men were able to write them only because of power found in the Means of Grace by the God-given faith working in their hearts. Truly God does deal with us His children on a “grace for grace” basis.

From Article V of the Augsburg Confession, read in Augsburg, Germany, before the Emperor Charles V on Saturday, June 25, 1530: “That we may obtain this faith, the Ministry of Teaching the Gospel

and administering the Sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Ghost is given, who works faith, where and when it pleases God, in them that hear the Gospel, to wit, that God, not for our own merits, but for Christ's sake, justifies those who believe that they are received into grace for Christ's sake. They condemn the Anabaptists and others who think that the Holy Ghost comes to men without the external Word, through their own preparations and works."² From the Smalcald Articles of 1537: "In those things which concern the spoken, outward Word, we must firmly hold that God grants His Spirit or grace to no one, except through or with the preceding outward Word, in order that we may [thus] be protected against the enthusiasts, i.e., spirits who boast that they have the Spirit without and before the Word, and accordingly judge Scripture or the spoken Word, and explain and stretch it at their pleasure."³ Also from the Smalcald Articles: "We ought and must constantly maintain this point, that God does not wish to deal with us otherwise than through the external Word and the Sacraments. It is the devil himself whatsoever is extolled as Spirit without the Word and Sacraments."⁴ From Luther's Large Catechism: "I believe that there is upon earth a little holy group and congregation of pure saints under one head, even Christ, called together by the Holy Ghost in one faith, one mind, and understanding, with manifold gifts, yet agreeing in love, without sects or schisms. I am also a part and member of the same, a sharer and joint owner of all the goods it possesses, brought to it and incorporated into it by the Holy Ghost by having heard and continuing to hear the Word of God, which is the beginning of entering it."⁵ The following four quotes from the Formula of Concord of 1577 also deserve our study: "Both the ancient and modern enthusiasts have taught that God converts men, and leads them to the saving knowledge of Christ through His Spirit, without any created means and instrument, that is, without the external preaching and hearing of God's Word."⁶ "Since they can do nothing in these spiritual things, but everything is the operation of God the Holy Ghost alone, they will regard, hear, or read neither the Word nor the Sacrament, but wait until God, without means, instills into them His gifts from heaven, so that they can truly feel and perceive in themselves that God has converted them."⁷ "And by this means, and in no other way, namely, through His holy Word, when men hear it preached or read it, and the holy Sacraments when they are used according to His Word, God desires to call men to eternal salvation, draw them to Himself, and convert, regenerate, and sanctify them. 1 Cor. 1:21: *For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe.* Acts 10:5-6: *Peter shall tell thee what thou oughtest to do.* Romans 10:17: *Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God.* John 17:17,20: *Sanctify them by Thy truth; Thy Word is truth, etc. Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on Me through their Word.*⁸ "The declaration, John 6, 44, that no one can come to Christ except the Father draw him, is right and true. However, the Father will not do this without means, but has ordained for this purpose His Word and Sacraments as ordinary means and instruments; and it is the will neither of the Father nor of the Son that a man should not hear or should despise the preaching of His Word, and wait for the drawing of the Father without the Word and Sacraments. For the Father draws indeed by the power of His Holy Ghost, however, according to His usual order [the order decreed and instituted by Himself], by the hearing of His holy, divine Word, as with a net, by which the elect are plucked from the jaws of the devil. Every poor sinner should therefore repair thereto [to holy preaching], hear it attentively, and not doubt the drawing of the Father. For the Holy Ghost will be with His Word in His power, and work by it; and that is the drawing of the Father."⁹

The doctrine of the Means of Grace, though plain enough in Scripture, is found only in Lutheran circles. It is denied by the Reformed and by the Roman Catholic Church. The *Concordia Cyclopaedia* defines the Means of Grace as:

1) Unchangeable "The emphasis of Luther upon purity of doctrine is accounted for by the fact that he regarded the Word as bound up with human salvation. Were the Spirit assumed to work immediately, there would be no need of urging purity of doctrine."

2) Sufficient "The Roman Church has added five sacraments to the Scriptural two and supplements the apostolic doctrine by the traditions of the Church. The Reformed look upon prayer, giving, 'service,' as means of grace."

3) Efficacious "While it is true that the hearer of the word as well as the communicant and the subject of Baptism derive no benefit from the means of grace unless they have faith, it does not follow that faith makes the means of grace effective. The Word is a living word, the Sacraments true Sacraments (Christ's body and blood really present in the Lord's Supper), under all circumstances."¹⁰

This "power to produce effects" is there in every syllable of Scripture, although its power varies. "The effect of a message is determined by the content of the message. Not every teaching of the Word of God

will produce the same effect. Because of its peculiar content, the Law produces knowledge of sin and contrition of heart (Rom. 3:20); the gospel, being the glad tidings of the grace of God, produces faith and hope (Rom. 10:17). Thus the Scriptures are really able to make men wise unto salvation through faith in Christ (2 Tim. 3:15). With this Word of God the Holy Ghost is present, and opens hearts, so that they, as Lydia in Acts 16:14, are attentive to it and are thus converted.”¹¹ Faithful pastor and theologian Henry Jacobs of the mid-to-late 1800s wrote: “Is it not a limitation of God’s sovereignty and power to affirm that these acts are accomplished only through means? Theology does not deal with divine possibilities, but with what God has revealed concerning Himself and His various forms of activity. Not only have we no promise of His intervention otherwise, but He constantly turns us away from any expectation of such aid to the simple means, in and through which He promises to be always found with His entire efficacy.”¹² The Holy Spirit has always worked through the Word and that alone, or as Jacobs also said: “Spirit and Word, or Word and Spirit are never separated.”¹³ Throughout the period of the Reformation this great truth was one of the major doctrines that separated the Lutheran camp from the Reformed. Because the Word really is the power behind the sacraments, we sometimes refer to them as the visible Word. This, too, was an earmark of genuine Lutheranism. Article V of the Augsburg Confession says: “That we may obtain this faith, the Ministry of Teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Ghost is given, who works faith, where and when it pleases God, in them that hear the Gospel, to wit, that God, not for our own merits, but for Christ’s sake, justifies those who believe that they are received into grace for Christ’s sake. They condemn the Anabaptists and others who think that the Holy Ghost comes to men without the external Word, through their own preparations and works.”¹⁴ “The Sacraments are not mere symbolic expressions by which faith is strengthened (Calvin), nor are they mere acts of confession of faith (*notae professionis*, Zwingli), but are effective means by which God sows faith in the hearts of men.”¹⁵

There is a unity in the rejection of the Means of Grace by both the Reformed camp of the Reformation and also the Papists: It is called ENTHUSIASM. In truth, “enthusiasm” afflicts all mankind since the fall into sin. All of us, by nature, are enthusiasts. Article VIII of the Smalcald Articles defines enthusiasm for us; “In short, enthusiasm clings to Adam and his descendants from the beginning to the end of the world. It is a poison implanted and inoculated in man by the old dragon, and it is the source, strength, and power of all heresy, including that of the papacy and Mohammedanism. Accordingly, we should and must constantly maintain that God will not deal with us except through his external Word and sacrament. Whatever is attributed to the Spirit apart from such Word and sacrament is of the devil.”¹⁶ One thoroughly infected theologian was John Calvin (1509-1564), who wrote of the “secret instincts of the Spirit” within man: “I grant that doctrines ought to be tested by God’s word; but unless the Spirit of wisdom (*spiritus prudentiae*) is present, to have God’s word in our hands will avail little or nothing, for its meaning will not appear to us. . . .”¹⁷ “He also convinced them without the word, for we know how powerful are the secret instincts of the Spirit (*arcani spiritus instinctus*).”¹⁸ “. . . we are touched with some desire for strong doctrine, it evidently appears that there is some piety in us; we are not destitute of the Spirit of God, although destitute of the outward means.”¹⁹ Martin Luther summarized the deadly teachings of Zwingli and his followers: “They [the Zwinglians] divorced the Word and the Spirit, separated the person who preaches and teaches the Word from God, who works through the Word, and separated the servant who baptizes from God, who has commanded the Sacrament. They fancied that the Holy Spirit is given and works without the Word, that the Word merely gives assent to the Spirit, whom it already finds in the heart. If, then, this Word does not find the Spirit but a godless person, then it is not the Word of God. In this way they falsely judge and define the Word, not according to God, who speaks it, but according to the man who receives it. They want only that to be the Word of God which is fruitful and brings peace and life . . .”²⁰ Calvin and Zwingli can’t differ materially on their teaching of the Means of Grace because they agree, first of all, that Christ’s merit and saving grace do not apply to all who use the Means of Grace; secondly, that saving grace is not bound to the Means of Grace. In their rejection of the Means of Grace, their teaching on every single other doctrine of Scripture is off the mark and therefore of Satan himself. C.F.W. Walther quoted Luther and then explained him: “‘For the devil at all times assaults the grace of God; no heresy can bear the teaching of divine grace.’ (Martin Luther on Deut 4:24; St. L. III, 1691 ff.) Luther’s remark about the enmity of all heretics against the grace of God is an important axiomatic statement. Every heresy that has sprung up was caused by the heretic’s inability to believe that man becomes righteous in the sight of God, and is saved, by grace alone. That is the real rock of offense against which all heretics, all false teachers, dash their head.”²¹

This also holds true for the Roman Catholic Church. They insist that alongside of Scripture must go

the edicts of the Pope and all the traditions of the Catholic Church. Thus the “enthusiasm” of individual men parallels, and therefore supersedes God’s Means of Grace, His holy Word. Luther lumps together the error of both the Reformed and the Papacy: “For we can definitely assert that where the Lord’s Supper, Baptism, and the Word are found, Christ, the remission of sins, and life eternal are found. On the other hand, where these signs of grace are not found, or where they are despised by men, not only grace is lacking but also foul errors will follow. Then men will set up other forms of worship and other signs for themselves.”²² “From this it follows that they act foolishly, yea, against God’s order and institution, who despise and reject the external Word, thinking that the Holy Spirit and faith should come to them without means. It will indeed be a long time before that will happen.”²³

The outcome of the Enthusiasts comes down to two different schools of religious error: rationalism and irrationalism. The outright denial of the Means of Grace led to a horrendous collection of lies and false teachings, most of which are alive today and have spread like cancer. Francis Pieper commented: “Thus in heterodox churches, in order to defend false doctrine, God’s Word must continually be denied. It is rightly said: ‘It cost nine lies to maintain one lie.’ Whoever allows himself such liberties with the Word of God, let him beware, lest the devil also make this clear Word doubtful for him in the hour of death: ‘The blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, cleanseth us from all sin’ 1 John 1:7”²⁴ The evidence of really strange false teachings during the Reformation are historical fact and recorded for us to read. Francis Pieper comments on John Calvin’s bizzare deductive false teachings: “Because saving grace is particular, according to the teaching of the Calvinists, there are no means of grace for that part of mankind to which the grace of God and the merit of Christ do not extend. On the contrary, for these people the means of grace are intended as means of condemnation. Calvin teaches expressly: ‘For there is a universal call, through which, by the external preaching of the Word, God invites all, indiscriminately, to come to Him, even those for whom He intends it as a savor of death and an occasion of heavier condemnation’ (Institutes, III, 24, 8).”²⁵ Calvin also says: “If the Spirit be lacking, the sacraments can accomplish nothing more in our minds than the splendor of the sun shining upon blind eyes, or a voice sounding in deaf ears.”²⁶ How sad for Calvin (and all who follow him) when he writes; “Let the threatenings of the gospel terrify us, and humble us in time . . .”²⁷ Francis Pieper: “Reformed theologians, in order to support their denial of the *illocalis modus subsistendi* of Christ’s human nature, have sought, in their exposition of John 20, an opening in the closed doors, or a window, or an aperture in the roof or in the walls, in order to explain the possibility of Christ’s appearance in the room where the disciples were assembled.”²⁸ [Zwingli placed Numa, Aristides, Socrates, etc., among the dwellers in heaven] Zwingli: “A heathen, if he nurses a pious mind within himself, is a Christian, even though he is ignorant of Christ.” (Witus Winshemius: “Beware, my hearers, of the heaven of the Zwinglians: I should not like to live in that heaven; I should be afraid of the club of Hercules.”)²⁹ Pieper says; “Furthermore, consider this: All doctrines of the Bible are connected with one another; they form a unit. One error draws others in after it. Zwingli’s first error was the denial of the presence of Christ’s body and blood in the Lord’s Supper. In order to support this error, he had to invent a false doctrine of Christ’s person, of heaven, of the right hand of God, etc.”³⁰

So no matter what false doctrine of which heterodox church you care to point out, the false teachers are caught up in this very grievous error, namely this: they don’t rely on Christ and His Word but something that takes place within themselves. These errors have come down to almost every group that claims the name “Christian” today. And they have multiplied sevenfold. Irrationalism is found in the main Pentecostalist churches as well as the pockets of Pentecostalism abundant in nearly every denomination. Rationalism is the basis of the Baptist and nearly all Reformed groups. The recent “Church Growth Movement” is a perfect example of Enthusiasm run rampant in our day. Lutheran Americans have not been spared, but targeted. Lutheranism in America today, although prolific in name, is, doctrinally speaking, nearing extinction. My friends, this is a grim diagnosis.

The Means of Grace is the only hope of Lutheranism. Every year I watch again the inspiring black and white movie, “Martin Luther” with my confirmation class. We cheer on, not so much Luther the man, but what Luther upheld, namely God’s Word—grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone. We realize that, despite Luther’s incredible talents, he was merely an instrument created, sustained, and finally taken to heaven by God’s Means of Grace. It was the work of God that accomplished the Reformation. The efficacy, the power to produce effects, was in the Word in Luther’s day, just as it is in ours. It is the power OF GOD unto salvation. The Means of Grace relies on God’s work alone. Luther once said, “The devil is always plaguing the world by keeping people from distinguishing between the work of God and the work of men. . . . But you should know that though no human being believed Baptism and the Gospel, the Gospel and Baptism would still be right; for both are not mine but God’s Word and work.”³¹ What an

overwhelming relief and comfort it is to know by faith that the Holy Spirit has effectively been working through the Word to call, gather and enlighten us. Through the Means of Grace, He has given us the ability to believe and lay hold of the Way, the Truth, and the Life. The Means of Grace instills in us Christian hope—that absolute and sure confidence of complete forgiveness of sins, life and salvation in Christ Jesus our Lord.

My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness;
I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus' name.
On Christ the solid Rock, I stand; all other ground is sinking sand.

(TLH 370:1)

And we know that the efficacy of the Word is the ONLY method God uses.

John 14:23 : Jesus answered and said to him, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him."

Luther, when preaching on this verse, said: "Secondly, it is shown here that this Word precedes, or must be spoken beforehand, and that afterwards the Holy Spirit works through the Word. One must not reverse the order and dream of a Holy Spirit who works without the Word and before the Word, but one who comes with and through the Word and goes no farther than the Word goes."³² In the parable of the sower and the seed of Mark 4, the seed is the Word. It is the medium through which the Kingdom of God is brought to people.

This strict adherence to the Means of Grace is not found in any denomination other than confessional Lutheranism. Indeed, it can't be. Reformed theology has not improved since the time of the Reformation. Neither has it fared better since the time of Francis Pieper, who wrote: "Some time ago, a respected Presbyterian preacher in St. Louis confessed that if he in his congregation would try to have God's Word rule as it does with us, in four weeks his whole congregation would scatter. The sects owe their outward size mostly to this, that they play church instead of actually conducting themselves as God's Church. Neither do they rightly bear witness of the Law of God to man, nor do they act as true witnesses of God's grace. But, this is what the Lutheran Church does."³³ It is a true statement and valuable heritage that we may page back in the classic Lutheran works and find there in abundance strong emphasis on the Means of Grace. We name, for example, Johann Quenstedt (1617-1685), who has been called the "Bookkeeper of Lutheran orthodoxy" and whose most notable work is "*Theologia Didactica-Polemica sive Systema Theologicum*." Also the men of the Muhlenberg (1711-1787) tradition (The Philadelphia Seminary): Charles Krauth (1823-1872), author of "*The Conservative Reformation and Its Theology*"; Henry E. Jacobs, (born 1844), who wrote a prolific number of works including "*The Doctrinal Basis of the United Lutheran Church in America*"; Theodore Schmauk (1860-1920), author of many works, among which is "*The Confessional Principal and the Confessions of the Lutheran Church*." The staunchest supporters of the Means of Grace were, of course, Martin Luther (1483-1546) and C.F.W. Walther (1811-1887). Since they were surrounded by the "enthusiasm" of the Reformed as well as the Roman Catholic Church, supporting the doctrine of the Means of Grace meant the continual use of strong reproof and correction from which these men did not waver.

We appreciate the Means of Grace at the time of the Reformation. At the same time, we understand that the Reformation did not end, but continues to this day. The "peculiar glory of Lutheranism"—the Means of Grace—is the very thing that our great God is using now to keep us with Christ in the one true faith. It is an on-going process because the Holy Spirit continues to enter our hearts through Word and sacraments to create, strengthen, and sustain our faith. Every real sermon contributes to such a renewal. By faith, every reading of Scripture, every communion, every baptism works just such a renewal and continued reformation. The church literally lives by the Word of God. It wouldn't exist if it didn't constantly go through a renewal by the Word of God again and again. How has genuine Lutheranism survived the last 500 years? How was the CLC formed? Should we tremble and shake when our fellowship is tested? Did the men of 1960 possess something different than do the men of 1996 today? How will our young people continue to uphold the pure Word of God? How will you, yourself? The answer is simple: The Holy Spirit, who has created faith in your heart through the Means of Grace, will continue to strengthen and sustain that faith through the same Means of Grace unto the end.

It pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe (1 Cor. 1:21);
Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:24).

To God Alone be Glory

SOURCES

The greatest source for this study has been the Holy Spirit working through the Means of Grace - God's Word. The translation used has been the New King James Version.

Many thanks to Pastor Gregory Jackson, who currently serves the joint parishes of Faith Lutheran Churches of the CLC in New Ulm and Nicollet, MN. He has opened his computer data base to me and supplied me with a number of thorough papers and exhaustive collection of quotes on the Means of Grace. The majority of quotes in this essay were gleaned from his papers.

NOTES

¹ Edwin E. Pieplow, "The Means of Grace," *The Abiding Word*, ed. Theodore Laetsch (St. Louis: Concordia, 1947) 2:327.

² Augsburg Confession, *Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1921) Art. V, 45.

³ Smalcald Articles, *Conc. Trigl.*, Part III, Art. VIII, 495.

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⁵ Large Catechism, Creed, *Conc. Trigl.*, Art. III, 691.

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¹¹ Edward W. A. Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1952) 12.

¹² Henry Eyster Jacobs, *A Summary of the Christian Faith* (Philadelphia: General Council Publication House, 1913) 265.

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II. THE MEANS OF GRACE IN OUR WORSHIP LIFE

Leroy P. Dux

The Evangelical Lutheran Church is a Means of Grace church. The essays of this convention could easily focus on the Means of Grace as part and parcel of our history, as the core of our present work and the foundation of our future. One cannot stress too strongly our reliance upon the Means of Grace. In fact, it is our confident dependence upon the Means of Grace that separates us from other Christian denominations in this world. Our Lutheran Confessions make our stance upon the Means of Grace a confession of our faith to the world; as such it is not a debatable question among us.

Article V. Of the Ministry

That we may obtain this faith, the Ministry of Teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Ghost is given, who works faith, where and when it pleases God in them that hear the Gospel . . .

They [we Lutherans] condemn the Anabaptists and others who think that the Holy Ghost comes to men without the external Word, through their own preparations and works.

Article VII. Of the Church

*. . . The Church is the congregation of the saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered. . . .*¹

In an age when many Lutheran churches are becoming ashamed of their evangelical, biblical and confessional heritage, we need to remember that the Means of Grace is the rich heritage and treasure of the Lutheran Church. Not only do we stand by the Means of Grace as a confession to the world, but we are happy to hold to the Means of Grace as a wonderful and glorious blessing in our Lutheran Church. As Lutherans, then, we should rejoice in and be thankful to God for the fact that the Means of Grace is employed among us as the very tool of salvation.

*The doctrine of the means of grace is a peculiar glory of Lutheran theology. To this central teaching it owes its sanity and strong appeal, its freedom from sectarian tendencies and morbid fanaticism, its coherence and practicalness, and its adaptation to men of every race and every degree of culture . . . The Lutheran Confessions bring out with great clearness the thought of the Reformers upon this subject.*²

In addressing the topic assigned for our study, we use the word “appreciate” to direct our attention in thankfulness for those gifts which are essential to the Christian Church. We are not using the word “appreciate” to place the Means of Grace on the same level as ice cubes in a cold glass of water, nice but not necessary. We **appreciate** the Means of Grace because God has provided us with this necessary tool for the establishment and strengthening of our own individual faith, which is also the very tool by which the Christian Church is to work at the task given her by God Himself. So, then, we would say that we **appreciate** the Means of Grace, in the same way a woman rescued from a burning house would tell us that she appreciated what the firemen did for her.

We are a Means of Grace church, so it is not surprising that we should appreciate the Means of Grace. Not only is this an appropriate theme for our convention, but if we look at the business of the convention, we see that the focus of our efforts is the Means of Grace. Our mission endeavors are guided by the belief that only through the preaching of the gospel and administration of the sacraments does the Holy Ghost work to create and sustain faith. Our synodical educational efforts are, first of all, to ground our young people in their own use of, understanding of and appreciation for the Means of Grace; and, secondly, to train them how the Word and sacraments are to be either applied, taught or handled in behalf of a congregation. Really, all the questions confronting our convention boil down to the use and application of the Means of Grace. We appreciate the Means of Grace best by putting it to work, by remaining confident that God’s blessing results from its use and understanding our privilege to administer it. A synod convention is not where we begin our appreciation of the Means of Grace; that appreciation must have started long ago in our lives, in the teaching and practice of the congregations to which we belong.

In teaching confirmation classes, one can never overemphasize the Means of Grace. Since the Lutheran Church is a Means of Grace church, her confirmands then need to know what the Means of Grace is. In spite of all the many questions Luther taught us to ask, he never devoted a special question to the Means of Grace. Following in Luther's pattern we will ask, "What is the Means of Grace?" The very heart of the Means of Grace is the gospel. The Lutheran Church is a Means of Grace church because we are a gospel church; we are truly evangelical. The gospel is that message of salvation by which not only is faith created, but also by which faith is strengthened. To answer our question, "What is the Means of Grace?" we would have to answer, "It is the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, the good news that He has accomplished our salvation, by which faith is created and strengthened. This gospel is presented to us in Word and sacraments." The old blue Missouri Synod catechism teaches this:

168. Why do you say that the Holy Ghost has done this in you by the Gospel?

*The Gospel is the means by which the Holy Ghost offers us the blessings of Christ and works in our hearts that faith by which we accept Christ and His salvation.*³

We say that the Means of Grace is the gospel, which is presented to us in the Word and sacraments. There is only one Means of Grace, that is the gospel. The way that this gospel is imparted to men is in the Word and the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. There is only one tool that the Holy Ghost uses in order to either create or strengthen faith, that is, the gospel. **"For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth . . ."** (Rom. 1:16). The gospel message is, however, presented to us in three ways: first of all, through the Word; secondly, through Baptism; and thirdly, through the Lord's Supper. In each of the Means of Grace, the effective component is the same, which is the gospel of our salvation. Each component of the means of grace differs in form—the Word stands without connection to earthly elements; Baptism employs water and is intended for both unbelieving infants and those who have been brought to faith and yet have not been baptized; the Lord's Supper employs bread and wine and is intended for believers who have publicly confessed their faith.

THE MEANS OF GRACE
IS
THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST
That gospel is presented to us in

The Word	The Two Sacraments
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Though the gospel in Word alone would be an overwhelming gift of God's grace towards us, God in His love offers the gospel to us in the sacraments as well. Yet it is in this very blessing of the means of grace that God's application of salvation comes under greatest attack. God did not get a bargain when Christ, His Son, paid for our sins with His life upon the cross. We were not a good deal for God. It is completely and entirely the result of God's love for us that He ordained a plan of salvation even before the world was created by which the sins of the world would be laid upon the back of the Lamb of God so that while we were still sinners Christ paid the price of our iniquity (John 1:29; Eph. 2:1-9). We did not in any way deserve God's love or the gift of salvation. Now that the plan of salvation has been brought to completion by Christ, God deigns to bestow that gift to the world not only through the Word but also through the sacraments. Yet, sinful man still not only rejects the offer of salvation, but even becomes so arrogant as to criticize the method by which God has intended to apply salvation to us.

6. Also, we reject and condemn the error of the Enthusiasts, who imagine that God without means, without the hearing of God's Word, also without the use of the holy Sacraments, draws men to Himself, and enlightens, justifies, and saves them. (Enthusiasts we call those who expect the heavenly illumination of the Spirit [celestial revelations] without the preaching of God's Word.)⁴

A. The Means of Grace in our Liturgy

Lex Orandi Est Lex Credendi et Agendi

=

The things we say are the things we believe.

(Literally, the rule of prayer is the rule of belief and action.)

Can we truly claim that the Lutheran Church is unique? Can we honestly say that apart from all other denominations the Lutheran Church is the only Means of Grace church in the world? The answer to these questions is critical because our doctrine dictates our liturgical practice (or at least it should). This is important because we not only live in a day of unabated doctrinal compromise called ecumenism, but also because we continue to endure attacks against our historic Christian liturgy. If we are not unique in our beliefs and if we are not scripturally different from the other denominations in this world (e.g. Roman Catholic, Methodist, Baptist, Christian Reformed, Greek Orthodox, etc.), what reason could we claim for our existence? If we do not differ from other denominations, why should we practice a worship life “hemmed in” by the liturgy and the doctrine of church fellowship?

When the term “Lutheran Church” is used above, it is meant to identify the Lutheran Church which holds itself to complete and willing adherence, first of all, to the Bible as the sole source and norm of doctrine; and secondly, which unashamedly subscribes to the Lutheran Confessions because they are a correct and faithful exposition of Biblical doctrine; and thirdly, which exercises such doctrine in her public and private practice both synodically and congregationally. May God graciously preserve the Church of the Lutheran Confession so that she as a synod can truly claim to be such a Lutheran Church. Many members of our synod’s congregations have left other Lutheran bodies because of a failure either to state the doctrine correctly or to practice the doctrine correctly stated. For that reason we could not include any erring denominations under the broad heading of Lutheran Church above because of the variety of errors which have led them to either confess false doctrine, or not to match their practice with doctrine which is stated correctly. The Evangelical Lutheran Church is not satisfied with a partial confession of the truth of God’s Word either on paper or in practice. The Church of the Lutheran Confession can call herself truly an Evangelical Lutheran Church only as long as she consistently confesses the whole truth of God’s Word in her statements, publications, and in the practices of her pastors and congregations. The knowing toleration of error, the promotion of error, silence when error should be opposed would make of the Church of the Lutheran Confession something less than a truly Evangelical and Lutheran Church body.

The focus of this paper is the Means of Grace in our Worship Life, both in our liturgy and in our preaching. The things that we say are the things that we believe (*Lex orandi, lex credendi*). The first questions that we will ask, then, are these: “Does our Liturgy really express our belief in the Means of Grace? Does our Liturgy truly enhance and support the continued belief in the Means of Grace?”

This would first of all imply that we are a liturgical church body. Indeed we are. While there have been at least three new Lutheran hymnals published in the last two decades, we of the CLC continue to use *The Lutheran Hymnal*, published by the Synodical Conference in 1941. References to our Lutheran liturgy will accordingly reflect that of TLH (1941); of course, those who use other Lutheran hymnals can apply the comments made in this paper to their liturgies *mutatis mutandis*.

(At this point we will not discuss the use or non-use of the liturgy or the so-called freedom to dispense with liturgy when it might please the pastor or congregation. We will just mention here that to callously dispense with the liturgy in the mistaken notion that thereby the church might become more appealing to prospective members or converts, would be like a doctor refusing to use a scalpel or antibiotics in treating the ill because they might not seem to appreciate their usefulness.)

We will see that the words we use in our liturgy identify us as a Means of Grace church as the Word and sacraments are presented to us.

THE INVOCATION

The invocation: **“In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.”** Perhaps because we have grown familiar with this phrase in our liturgy, we at times forget the bold confession we make at the very beginning of our service. Not only are we asking the blessing of the Triune God upon our worship service, but we are also telling the whole world that we are Trinitarian. This connects us to the Church of all time, the Church in which we find Adam, Noah, Moses and Abraham. This Trinitarian confession focuses our attention upon the great works of the Trinity in promising a Savior, completing the plan of salvation, and applying that salvation to rescue sinners headed for hell. To the Christian the Triune God is a Gospel-God, the holy and righteous God of the Bible, Who has provided us with the holiness and righteousness we need to stand in His sight, to be His children.

It is not incidental that the invocation should remind us of our baptisms as well. Just as the church service is begun in the name of the Triune God, so the life of Christian faith most often begins with the words of baptism as water is applied in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost.

THE CONFESSION OF SINS AND ABSOLUTION

With God's love clearly in mind and with our relationship with Him established on the basis of His coming to us, we then sincerely confess our sins before Him, who knows all. Let's take a look at our confession and absolution in the hymnal.

Beloved in the Lord! Let us draw near with a true heart and confess our sins unto God our Father, beseeching Him in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to grant us forgiveness.

Our help is in the name of the Lord.

Who made heaven and earth. (Ps. 124:8)

I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord.

And Thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin. (Ps. 32:5)

O almighty God, merciful Father, I, a poor, miserable sinner, confess unto Thee all my sins and iniquities with which I have ever offended Thee and justly deserved Thy temporal and eternal punishment. But I am heartily sorry for them and sincerely repent of them; and I pray Thee of Thy boundless mercy and for the sake of the holy, innocent, bitter sufferings and death of Thy beloved Son, Jesus Christ, to be gracious and merciful to me, a poor, sinful, being.

Upon this your confession, I, by virtue of my office as a called and ordained servant of the Word, announce the grace of God unto all of you and in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.⁵

The confession and absolution are the muscle of our liturgy. They are first of all built upon the very words of Scripture, beginning with 1 John 1:8,9:

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Secondly, this is the very core of our Christian faith--that our God in heaven has forgiven us our sins. That forgiveness is intended to be communicated to us both individually and corporately. That is why the pastor here is not afraid to tell the whole congregation, which may contain unbelievers, that their sins have been paid for by Christ. Through faith each believer then receives the forgiveness of sins which Christ has earned. Our desire to proclaim the forgiveness of sins is based upon the objective act of Christ's atonement, His payment for the sins of the whole world. Our personal assurance of that forgiveness is not based upon our emotions or any inner enlightenment, but upon the fact that Christ has redeemed us and that by the working of the Holy Ghost we are recipients of all of Christ's blessings through the gift of faith. "*Abraham believed God and it was accounted unto him for righteousness*" (Rom. 4:3).

INTROIT – GLORIA PATRIA – KYRIE – GLORIA IN EXCELSIS

The Introit, which contains the introductory thought for the day, is based upon a verse of the Psalms. Since the Introit (as well as the Collect and Gradual) changes each Sunday, we will not mention the specific Psalms upon which each is based. The sung responses also are based upon the Scriptures, most notable of which is the "Gloria in Excelsis," which is based on the song of praise sung by the angels when they announced our Savior's birth to the shepherds (Luke 2:14) and upon John the Baptist's confession of Christ as the Lamb of God (John 1:29).

While we will not get into any further detail behind these sections of the liturgy, it is important for us to understand that these parts of the liturgy are based upon God's Word and express the wondrous truths, hopes, and joys of our Christian faith.

THE SCRIPTURE READINGS

It would be impossible to imagine a Means of Grace church not making use of Scripture as an important part of the service. As Lutherans, however, our use of Scripture takes on importance and use unlike that of other church bodies. For us Scripture is not relegated to secondary importance after the traditions of the church and pronouncements of pope and council. For us Scripture is not simply a springboard to emotional upheaval or inner enlightenment. For us Scripture is not a moral code book which teaches Christian values by which we are to live as did the Pharisees of Jesus' day. For us Scripture is not a document we can dispute and dismiss on the basis of any so-called scientific or rationalistic arguments. Rather the Word of God remains for us what the Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy:

And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is

profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works. (2 Tim. 3:15-17)

Our Lutheran Confessions are explicit in the positive statement of this doctrine as well, that the Word of God is powerful and effective (Isa. 55:11); therefore we should be confident in its use and application. *“For Christ wishes to assure us, as was necessary that we should know that the Word delivered by men is efficacious, and that no other word from heaven ought to be sought.”*⁶

The Scripture readings, then, in our Lutheran services are more than just a brief pause before the sermon, when the people can sit down again after standing for the opening liturgy. The readings are confession and application of the fact that we believe that God’s Word is dynamic. While a pastor has to work diligently to hone and tune his sermon to address the needs he recognizes within the lives of his members, God’s application of the Word to His hearers will never miss the mark. When pastors and laymen alike remember the power God promises in His Word, both our reading of the Scriptures and our hearing will improve as our faith is to be nourished by this healthy diet.

THE CONFESSION OF FAITH

Both the Nicene and Apostles’ Creed are solidly and solely based on the Word of God. They have expressed for more than 1500 years the truths of our Triune God. It is most appropriate that Luther used the Apostles’ Creed as the basis of teaching the gospel in his catechisms. Every Lutheran catechumen knows that the study of the Ten Commandments in Luther’s Small Catechism reveals us for what we are, lost and condemned sinners. What a welcome relief when we then hear the gospel of God’s gracious love for us expounded under the three headings of the Creed. In connection with each person of the Trinity, we confess that they in love have worked together in providing the forgiveness of sins to the world. The longer Christology of the Nicene Creed only serves to enhance and further our appreciation and apprehension of the gospel of God’s Son sent to save the world.

With the rapid changes in Lutheran hymnals these days, a single warning should be sufficient to alert us that new is not always better. We should be reluctant to disturb the wording of the Creeds which have been for centuries a correct statement and defense of our Trinitarian faith.

THE SERMON

At this point we will save the discussion of the sermon for the second heading of our paper and treat it as a separate subject.

THE SACRAMENTS

In this section we will treat both the Lord’s Supper and Holy Baptism, not as thorough doctrinal studies of each, but only as they are the Means of Grace in connection with our liturgical worship. Normally the sacrament of Baptism is celebrated earlier in the service, sometimes just as the service has begun, or in other cases after the Scripture readings but before the Confession of faith. We treat Baptism at this place in the paper because of its relationship to the other sacrament, the Lord’s Supper.

Our old, tan Wisconsin Synod Catechism illustrates the close relationship between the Means of Grace and sacraments by placing these two questions next to one another:

325. *Which are the Means of Grace?*

The Means of Grace are the Gospel of Christ in Word and Sacraments.

326. *What is a Sacrament?*

*A Sacrament is a sacred act instituted by Christ, whereby He through earthly elements connected with God’s Word offers, gives, and seals unto us forgiveness of sins, life and salvation.*⁷

The Means of Grace is indeed the Word and sacraments. It is then most distressing when there are Christian churches in this world that despise the very sacraments instituted by Christ and empty them of all their meaning by falsely assuming that nothing really takes place either in Baptism or in the Lord’s Supper. The trend among Lutherans of our day is to abandon the use of the Means of Grace in the sacraments in favor of evangelism by entertainment. With my own eyes, I have seen an advertisement for a seminar on clown evangelism that was to be held in Ann Arbor, Michigan. A friend who is a pastor of an independent Lutheran Church formerly affiliated with the Wisconsin Synod had a Sunday School superintendent attempt to induce children to attend Sunday School classes by positioning a clown on the sidewalk near the church. Following that line of thinking, one might conclude that Jesus Himself could have done a much better job of finding disciples if He had only joked it up a little bit and hadn’t been so serious about eternal life issues.

We address the sacraments then with the same serious tone used in the beginning of this paper. We are a Means of Grace church; therefore of necessity we are also a sacramental church. In the struggle for truly confessional and evangelical Lutheranism in our nation, the converted pietist, C.F.W. Walther, boldly led the way then, just as he leads today. Walther directed our attention to the Word and sacraments in this way:

The doctrine of our Church then is this: The Word and the Sacraments operate in such a manner as to raise us up in faith and prompt us to lay hold of the blessings offered us.

In a general way Luther treats this subject in commenting on Deut. 4:28. He writes . . . : “See whether our new schismatics and fanatics are not leading the people to trust in their own works. Take the Anabaptists: what are they doing, and what do they teach? They declare that Baptism is worthless; they remove from Baptism the element of grace, so that there is no grace and mercy of God, no forgiveness of sin, in it, and baptism becomes an *evidence* of my own godliness *prior to* my baptism or a mark that I now *possess* godliness. They separate grace from Baptism and leave us a mere external sign, in which there is *not a grain of mercy*; all grace has been cut away. Now, if the grace of Christ has been removed from Baptism, there remains nothing but a mere work. Likewise, in the Sacrament of the *Lord’s Supper* the fanatics remove the promise offered us in this Sacrament; they tell us that what we eat and drink is nothing but bread and wine. Here, too, the proffered grace is cut away and renounced. For they teach us that the only good work that we do by communing is professing Christ; as to the rest, we merely eat and drink bread and wine in the Supper, and there is no grace in it for us.

“That is the result of falling away from the First Commandment: a person promptly sets up an idol in the form of some meritorious work, in which he trusts. . . .”⁸

Let us then pay close attention to our brief discussion of sacraments as the Means of Grace. We begin with Baptism.

Holy Baptism

Jesus gave only one command to His church on earth. The job of the Church Militant is clearly laid out before us in Matthew 28:19:

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you; and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.

This single command establishes for us the fact that Christ Himself instituted Holy Baptism as a sacrament upon which the church was to be built. Perhaps because we are so familiar with Baptism, our appreciation for it as a sacrament may have dimmed over the years. Perhaps we do not fully esteem the relationship between Baptism and Jesus’ command here to “teach all nations,” a command that unfortunately has been changed in many modern translations to imply that we are to “make disciples, [by which is meant ‘believers’] of all nations.” Baptism is a means of Grace. Baptism is intimately linked to the church’s teaching of all nations, and finally, one can be misled if we think that we are to make believers of all nations. We will address each of the above briefly.

Holy Baptism, a sacrament, is a means of grace. This is a bold statement in view of the fact that the Reformed (Calvinists and Arminians) have taught that Baptism is merely a symbol or sign of God’s covenant with mankind or man’s required response to God’s call of love. In either case the true, efficacious nature of Baptism was denied. Every good Lutheran boy and girl learns at an early age what Baptism gives or profits us. Our youth are taught to confess this about Baptism:

Secondly, What does Baptism give or profit?

It works forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe, as the words and promise of God declare.

What are such words and promise of God?

Christ, our Lord, says in the last chapter of Mark: He that believeth and is baptized, shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.⁹

Our Lutheran boys and girls still stand today with the heroic Lutherans who not only proudly confessed the truth of Baptism but also calmly condemned those who would abuse God’s people by withholding from them this great gift, this Means of Grace. We are not ashamed to repeat with the signers of the Augsburg Confession what we know and believe to be a true exposition of what the Bible teaches:

Art. IX Of Baptism

Of Baptism they teach that it is necessary to salvation and that through Baptism is offered the grace

of God; and that the children are to be baptized, who being offered to God through Baptism, are received into God's grace.

They condemn the Anabaptists, who reject the baptism of children, and say that children are saved without baptism.¹⁰

This condemnation of the Anabaptists was necessary because God's Word plainly teaches that Baptism is indeed a powerful tool by which faith is created in the hearts of the unbelievers. Paul clearly teaches this in Titus 3:5-7:

. . . he [God] saved us, by the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost; which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ, our Savior, that being justified by His grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

While it is easy enough for us to see from Scripture that Baptism is indeed a gracious water of life through which the Holy Spirit creates faith and in which forgiveness of sins is given to us, it may be more difficult for us to see how Baptism is related to Christ's command to "teach all nations." It is easier to make the connection if we understand what happens prior to and in Baptism. In teaching all nations Jesus is commanding the church to proclaim Christ, to make known what she believes. Teaching in this regard is essentially the same as confessing one's faith. Baptism indeed is a confession of faith; a confession, first of all, that we believe in the Triune God; secondly, that we believe Christ has forgiven our sins; and thirdly, that Baptism indeed is a means of grace. Baptism is what teachers like to call an audio-visual presentation.

From our earliest years, most of us have memories of babies being taken up to the baptismal font, where the pastor read certain passages from his black agenda book. Later the congregation would rise to pray for the baby; finally a hymn would conclude the rite. But the most important thing was the application of a little bit of water on the baby's head, together with the words, "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost." In the public administration of Baptism, a solemn confession was made to the whole world, a wonderful teaching of God's grace was being reinforced upon even the youngest members of the congregation.

Yet, an even more important teaching aspect of the sacrament of Baptism took place long before the parents, sponsors or witnesses carried the infant down the aisle of the church. That teaching had to do with the very basics of our spiritual lives. The pastor had to ensure that the parents understood not only the original sinful nature of the baby, but also he would have to pinpoint that God had an answer to what was a sentence of condemnation. The sinful and spiritually dead infant needed God's grace. The pastor would comfortingly teach the parents that the baby would be claimed as one of Jesus' children through the washing of regeneration. The pastor would teach that the baby would be brought to faith, not by some magical formula, not by some wizardry of the pastor's, but by the power of the Holy Spirit working through the water and the Word. "*Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God*" (John 3:5).

Here is where we find ourselves separated from those who teach that **we** are to make believers of all nations. Man's sinful tendency is always to claim far too much for himself. The Romanists claim that man can work out the rest of his salvation (or at least most of it) by a sufficient number of good works following his Baptism. The Arminians teach that man has some spark of spiritual life whereby he can at least make a choice for Jesus, or find Him (as if Jesus liked to play hide and seek). These days Lutherans are being bombarded with the arrogant theology that we somehow are the ones to make believers. How foolish that notion is! Yes, Jesus tells us to preach, baptize, teach and administer Holy Communion, but no where does He tell us that we are to manufacture believers. The creation of living believers from spiritually dead unbelievers is the work of the Holy Ghost. "No man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost" (1 Cor. 12:3). We can learn more than humility from this prayer of Dr. Luther:

Lord God, Thou hast placed me in Thy church as a bishop and pastor. Thou seest how unfit I am to administer this great and difficult office. Had I hitherto been without help from Thee, I would have ruined everything long ago. Therefore I call on Thee. I gladly offer my mouth and heart to Thy service. I would teach the people and I myself would continue to learn. To this end I shall meditate diligently on Thy Word. Use me dear Lord, as Thy instrument. Only do not forsake me; for if I were to continue alone, I would quickly ruin everything. Amen.¹¹

The Lord's Supper

In our Lutheran Hymnal, the Lord's Supper portion of the liturgy is found on pages 24 through 31. The liturgical setting into which the celebration of the sacrament is placed serves to highlight the gospel

nature of the Lord's Supper in which we receive the true body and blood of our Savior together in, with and under the bread and wine.

We will consider the Lord's Supper, then, as a Means of Grace, just as we did with the sacrament of Baptism. It is a Means of Grace, not simply because it was commanded by Christ for frequent celebration, "Do this as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me," but because of the promise attached to the Lord's Supper: ". . . which is given for you . . . which is shed for you for the remission of sins."

Our Lutheran confirmation students learn and confess the vital importance of the Lord's Supper as a Means of Grace when they are taught to answer Luther's question:

What is the benefit of this eating and drinking?

*That is shown us by these words, "Given and shed for you for the remission of sins." Namely, that in the Sacrament forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are given us through these words. For where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.*¹²

The Bible teaches and we confess that where forgiveness is offered, faith is the receiving organ by which that forgiveness becomes our own. Christ promises His body and blood in the sacrament, gives to us the forgiveness of sins, and desires us to receive the sacrament frequently. Counter to this are the positions of both the Reformed and the Roman Catholic, which on the one hand despise the promise of Christ, and on the other hand nullify the necessity of faith. Countering the Reformed teaching of representation, we confess the real presence of the body and blood of our Savior; reacting to the Roman teaching of *opus operatum* (that a benefit can be received from the sacrament even if one does not receive with faith), we confess that through faith alone we receive the blessings intended by Christ. Rome has said this:

*Canon VIII. If any one saith, that by the said sacraments of the New Law grace is not conferred through the act performed [ex opere operato] but that faith alone in the divine promise suffices for the obtaining of grace: let him be anathema [damned].*¹³

There is no surprise then that Lutherans must confess the following doctrine in accordance with Scripture and against the errorists:

Art. XIII Of the Use of the Sacraments

Of the use of the Sacraments they teach that the sacraments were ordained, not only to be marks of profession among men, but rather to be signs of and testimonies of the will of God toward us, instituted to awaken and confirm faith in those who use them. Wherefore we must so use the Sacraments that faith be added to believe the promises which are offered and set forth through the Sacraments.

*They therefore condemn those who teach that the Sacraments justify by the outward act, and who do not teach that, in the use of the Sacraments, faith which believes that sins are forgiven, is required.*¹⁴

In the Scriptures and in our Lutheran Confessions, we are taught that the Lord's Supper is indeed a Means of Grace by which the Holy Ghost forgives our sins and strengthens our faith. The implications of this for our personal lives of faith as well for our congregations are obvious. First of all, our personal use of the sacrament will be frequent, not because we must, but because we each understand the importance of receiving this assurance of the forgiveness of our sins. Secondly, our congregations then should attempt to make provision for the frequent celebration of the Lord's Supper. This paper will not attempt to debate the issues of why most of our congregations have the Sacrament only once a month, some of them twice a month, and perhaps even fewer of them weekly. However, it is an honest question that should be raised and addressed. Is our current practice, whatever that may be, faithfully carrying out the instructions of our Savior, who called for a frequent celebration of the sacrament? On the other hand, we would just as strongly urge an examination of any practice in which one's attendance at the communion table would be the result of family or peer pressure. Namely, the idea that one must receive or people will wonder why a person is not receiving the sacrament on a particular day.

Perhaps there would be some value in studying such questions in our congregations as thoroughly as we debate the color of the new carpet or the date of our next pot luck. (Having seen such debates I am confident that it is likely to be less "dangerous" to discuss the Lord's Supper, than to change the date of the annual potluck!) All in all, we would do well to address such issues and to study them not because we have nothing better to do, but because the Lord's Supper is indeed a most important part of our spiritual diet. Even though Rome got into trouble by emphasizing the mass to the detriment of the preaching of the Word, we should not let their abuse deter us from the more frequent use of the Lord's Supper. It should never be a matter of "either - or"—that either we hold preaching in its honored position and celebrate the Lord's Supper less frequently, or we celebrate the Lord's Supper more frequently and let our preaching slip. God intends for the sacraments and the Word to be used in such a way that they complement each other all for

the benefit of the souls His Son died to save.

B. The Means of Grace in our Preaching

THE SERMON

The Lutheran Reformation restored the office of preaching to its place of honor. Immediately prior to the Reformation sermons were not regarded as an integral part of the worship service. At that time church services were largely the monotonous recitation of the liturgy in the Latin tongue, undecipherable for the common people. The congregants were mostly passive observers of the ritual and not participants in the worship service. The priests performed the sacrifice of the mass, the choir chanted, the people paid, ate the host and were dismissed. Even today in Roman Catholic Churches the homily is of less importance than the ritual of the mass. In fact, it can happen that the mass will be celebrated without preaching; such, of course, is done in the number of private masses which continue to be celebrated in the church of Rome. Among some denominations, preaching must take on the role of a “pep-rally” where the preacher has to whip up the emotions of his hearers into some kind of religious frenzy. Those preachers unable to entertain in such a way are often held in low regard because they are dull, even if their message happens to be biblical. At times we Lutheran preachers feel the pinch because our members have at least glanced at TV preachers or heard a few snippets from radio preachers. What the world views as good preaching these days really isn’t.

Before we answer the question of what is good preaching, we need to understand the importance of preaching to our Christian faith. Preaching is not to be the exposition of the pastor’s thoughts, what he thinks about something; rather, it is to be the application of what God has said in His Word to the members of the congregation in which the pastor serves. With this in mind we appreciate Luther’s remarks about the sermon:

*Yes, I hear the sermon, but who is speaking? The minister? No, indeed! You do not hear the minister. True, the voice is his; but my God is speaking the Word which he preaches or speaks. Therefore I should honor the Word of God that I may become a good pupil of the Word.*¹⁵

It is not an exaggeration, then, when we look at the preached Word as a Means of Grace. As the sermon is to be a correct application of law and gospel, that gospel message, though preached by man, is the tool through which the Holy Ghost is able to accomplish either the creation of faith or strengthening the same. In the early part of this century a Lutheran author was allowed to publish this statement:

*To the Lutheran the sermon, as the preached Word, is a means of grace. Through it the Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth. It is a constant offer of pardon; a giving of life, as well as a nourishing and strengthening of life. In the Reformed churches the sermon is apt to be more hortatory and ethical. It partakes more of the sacrificial than of the sacramental character. The individuality of the preacher, the subjective choice of a text, the using of it merely for a motto, the discussion of secular subjects, the unrestrained platform style, lack of reverence, lack of dignity, and many other faults are common and are not regarded as unbecoming a messenger of God in His temple. Where there is a properly trained Lutheran consciousness such things repel, shock, and are not tolerated.*¹⁶

It is not too bold to assert that the preached word is a Means of Grace. This is in keeping with Romans 10:14-17:

How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach, except they be sent? As it is written, how beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things! But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Esaias saith, Lord, who hath believed our report? So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.

Every preacher can confess that there have been times when he has not been as well prepared as he would like to have been before entering the pulpit. Once in the pulpit all thoughts of inadequacy must be overcome by the thought that in spite of our failures and weaknesses, the flock must be fed. Preachers, too, dare not be motivated by the law, as if to say, “The damnation of souls rests in your hands if you fail at your task.” (Though that certainly can be the case). Rather, even sermons are to be a fruit of faith produced in the hearts of preachers by the conviction first of all, that their sins have been covered by the atoning blood of Christ.

The very best homiletics text book is C.F.W. Walther’s *Law and Gospel*. Even if a pastor should be completely inept at the technical aspects of delivering a sermon thematically or as a homily, if he should

be able to correctly divide law and gospel as Walther teaches, all will be well with his preaching and his flock. This book, which is a collection of Walther's lectures on law and gospel from September, 1884, through November, 1885, should be a well worn volume in every pastor's library. Regarding the matter of preaching out of one's conviction of personal sin and grace, Walther teaches us:

The second requisite for effective preaching is that the preacher not only himself believe the things he preaches to others, but that his heart be full of the truths which he proclaims, so that he enters his pulpit with the ardent desire to pour out his heart to hearers. . . . Then his hearers get the impression that the words dropping from his lips are flames from a soul on fire. That does not mean that the Word of God must receive its power and life from the living faith of the preacher; for the Lord says distinctly: "The words that I speak, they are spirit, and they are life." John 6:63. . . . But when a preacher proclaims what he has ever so often experienced in his own heart, he easily finds the right words to speak convincingly to his hearers. Coming from the heart, his words, in turn, go to the hearts of his hearers, according to the good old saying: *Pectus disertum facit*, that is, it is the *heart* that makes eloquent.¹⁷

The sermon serves as a Means of Grace by the presenting and applying of the gospel, but the relationship to the Means of Grace is broader than that. First of all, the sermon should encourage the people to turn their attention to the Means of Grace for spiritual comfort. Our Lutheran people, too, are influenced, intrigued and tempted to employ the means of the world in solving what are really spiritual needs. Not only is much of the modern counseling movement ineffective in dealing with the matters of eternal life and death; much of it is also at cross purposes with our biblical presentation of sin and grace. Secondly, the sermon serves to enhance the Means of Grace by teaching our people about the essence, importance, and use of the sacraments. In contrast to the emotional cheerleading of sectarian sermons, Lutheran preaching should not hesitate to be educational, laying the solid ground work of the foundations of our faith in a regular and determined fashion.

Without becoming dogmatic, I would simply add the encouragement to pastors and congregations not to abandon the use of pericopes. Pastors at times may feel pressured by circumstances within a congregation, or by the members themselves, not to use a regular system of texts in order to address the burning, current issues facing the congregation. It may seem appropriate at times to do this, and perhaps there are such emergency situations where this is the wisest procedure. However, we should not let emergency situations dictate our normal practice. Adopting a pericope creates discipline for the preacher as he must work through the texts assigned to him; gives peace of mind knowing that he doesn't have to scramble to pick out a text of the week; and also gives direction, as the congregation can have some reasonable expectation of where the pastor will be going with his sermons week by week. If the congregation is made aware of the pericope that the preacher is following, there might even be some members who would read the sermon text and study it themselves before the sermon is delivered. I firmly believe that the arguments used to support the use of a pericope outweigh those arguments against it.

FINAL COMMENTS

This paper will end where it began, with the assertion that we are a Means of Grace church. This means that we are a preaching and teaching church, presenting the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ to the world in our sermons, Bible classes, Sunday Schools, Christian Day Schools, and wherever else we can publicly proclaim His victory over sin, death and the devil. Being a Means of Grace church means that we have definite tools with which we work. Unlike the Reformed, who teach grace but have no sacraments and the Catholics who have sacraments but no grace, we not only have the great good news of salvation to offer the world, but we have the equipment to do it.

That equipment is not only the preached Word, but also the sacraments. We need not shy away from our sacramental heritage, and replace it with statistics, clowns, puppets and drama. Instead, like workmen commended by God, we go forth into the world, baptizing and communing, and thereby creating and sustaining faith. Let us be bold to hold on to our truly Lutheran heritage, confessing the faith of our fathers, using the great treasures of the gospel in Word and sacraments, so that the Means of Grace in our church will rescue hell bound souls from the devil's horrors and place them safely in the comforting hands of our loving God who has paid for all our sins with the blood of His Son.

Lord Jesus Christ, with us abide,
For round us falls the eventide;
Nor let Thy Word, that heavenly light,
For us be ever veiled in night.

In these last days of sore distress
 Grant us, dear Lord, true steadfastness
 That pure we keep, till life is spent
 Thy holy word and Sacrament,
 Lord Jesus, help, Thy Church uphold,
 For we are sluggish, thoughtless, cold.
 Oh, prosper well Thy Word of grace
 And spread its truth in every place.
 The haughty spirits, Lord, restrain
 Who o'er Thy Church with might would reign
 And always set forth something new,
 Devised to change Thy doctrine true.

A trusty weapon is Thy Word,
 Thy Church's buckler, shield, and sword.
 Oh, let us in its power confide
 That we may seek no other guide! (TLH 292)

NOTES

- ¹ Augsburg Confession, *Concordia Triglotta*, 45, 47.
² "Grace, Means of," *The Concordia Cyclopedia*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1927) 299.
³ *Luther's Small Catechism*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1943) 128.
⁴ Formula of Concord (Epitome), *Concordia Triglotta*, 789.
⁵ *The Lutheran Hymnal*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1941) 15,16.
⁶ Apology of the Augsburg Confession, *Concordia Triglotta*, 449.
⁷ C. Gausewitz, *Luther's Small Catechism*, (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1956) 191.
⁸ C.F.W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1928) 159,160.
⁹ Gausewitz 11.
¹⁰ Augsburg Confession, *Concordia Triglotta*, 47.
¹¹ Ewald M. Plass, *What Luther Says*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959) ¶ 2903, 926.
¹² Gausewitz 15.
¹³ Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, reprinted 1983, from the 1931 edition, published by Harper and Row) 2:121.
¹⁴ Augsburg Confession, *Concordia Triglotta*, 49.
¹⁵ Plass ¶ 3597, 1125.
¹⁶ G. H. Gerberding, *The Lutheran Pastor*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1915) 278.
¹⁷ Wather 112.

Special thanks to Pastor Gregory Jackson, New Ulm, Minnesota, for the use of his data base of quotes regarding the Means of Grace. Pastor Jackson is eager to share the fruits of his research into the entire topic of the Means of Grace.

III. THE MEANS OF GRACE AND MISSION WORK

The Word of the LORD Grows!

John Ude

Acts 1:1-3: "The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach until the day in which He was taken up, after He through the Holy Spirit had given commandments to the apostles whom He had chosen, to whom He also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to

the kingdom of God.”

Acts 28:30,31: “Then Paul dwelt two whole years in his own rented house, and received all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him.”

Many have suggested that the conclusion to the book of Acts is missing, lost or never finished. After all we have been told about Paul’s missionary journeys, arrest, trial, and imprisonment, why aren’t we told about the conclusion? But this is the myopia that results from staring at man’s accomplishments instead of God’s, that therefore can not see the whole theme, plot and climax of Acts:

The Word of the LORD Grows!

The Holy Spirit summarizes the message of Acts in its opening lines: Jesus is preaching the kingdom of God. The last verses of Acts emphasize that He still is. The whole climax of Acts is, then, just this, that Jesus is still preaching the kingdom of God. His Word is the powerful scepter that announces, establishes, and preserves His kingdom (Acts 6:7, 9:31, 12:24, 16:5, 19:20, 28:31). The plot of every page of Acts is that Jesus’ kingdom on this earth did not end with His death or His resurrection and ascension. Every page demonstrates that all authority in heaven and on earth is His NOW (Matt. 28:19f.). Every page demonstrates He is making disciples through baptism and the Word NOW. Every page demonstrates He is with us NOW and always, to the ends of the world, even to the end of the age. Jesus public teaching began in Nazareth with the declaration, “Today the Kingdom of God is come to you” (Luke 4:18f.). Acts closes with Jesus’ bringing that same invitation through Paul to Rome and to you, “Today the Kingdom of God is come to you.”

Thus these two powerfully conclusive verses emphasize: **THE WORD OF THE LORD IS NOT BOUND**. Yes, Paul is bound. He was bound for over two years in a Judean dungeon. He was shipwrecked. He has been imprisoned in Rome for two more years. What kind of a LORD and kingdom is this if He doesn’t have the power to free His own apostle?

But look again. As His Word promised, Jesus has brought Paul safely to Rome. In an age when prisoners had no rights, Paul is actually granted the freedom to live in his own quarters and preach the Word freely to the world. In fact, Philippians demonstrates that his very imprisonment was the opportunity for the whole prison guard and the household of Caesar to hear the Word (Phil.1:13; 4:22). Instead of Rome using others as it typically did, Rome is used by Christ to spread His Word into all parts of the world.

Acts shows that the Word was not bound by persecution, but like a great wind hitting a roaring fire the sparks spread everywhere, burning with the power of the Spirit. Paul himself had tried to confine its fire to Jerusalem and quench it there. But way off on the road to Damascus its sparks landed on him, set him on fire and spread more sparks throughout the world. Yes, once again in Rome many of the Jews rejected the kingdom invitation of the Word. But even in their rejection they became what they would not be willingly, witnesses to the truth of Christ’s Word. Prophecy was fulfilled with judgment falling on those who would not hear (Matt. 23, 24).

Many would object that Paul could have done so much more if he had not tried to cross cultural barriers, or if he had been alert to felt needs and the receptivity axis.¹ They are offended in the apparent limitations of Paul’s ministry. Are we tempted to model our ministries after the world, the false teachers, the worldly successful? It was the beginning of the end for Israel when they wanted to be like the nations around them and have a king. It could be argued, and they did argue, that God would still be their King; they would still believe in Him and rely on His Word alone. But God did not see it that way. “They have rejected Me!” (1 Sam. 8:7). Saul claimed that he saved the best sheep and oxen to honor God. But God did not see it that way. “Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice” (1 Sam. 15:22). The God-fearing reformer King Asa was so outraged that anyone would suggest that his treaty with Syria against Israel was not showing trust in the LORD (not a good way to provide more opportunities for gospel outreach) that he threw Hanani in prison. But God did not see it that way. He had sent Hanani with the warning, “You . . . have not relied on the Lord” and the reminder “For the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong on behalf of those whose heart is loyal to Him” (2 Chron. 16:7-9). The greatest danger to our faith is not outright denial but accommodation to the world. The first step of the heart in that direction sets us on the slippery slope of trusting its ways and methods of success while we call on the name of the LORD.

Theology is to be the faithful application of God's Word, law and gospel, to create and nurture faith in Christ through the Word and sacraments unto everlasting life. But when practice determines theology instead of the other way around, that practice quickly becomes an aping of the latest sectarian success story.² Our goal is to preach the gospel, nothing more and nothing less, the good news that God has declared sinners righteous for Jesus' sake. "There is nothing more and everything else is less."³

This world has certainly concluded that the Word of God is bound. It has relegated it to antiquity, proved it unreliable, and identified all who rely on it to be hopelessly blind in the superstition and ignorance of the dark ages. We may indeed join the world in laughing at the Englishman who dresses in a tuxedo in a tropical rain forest at the right hour of dinner. But will we join the world in laughing at those who dress in, rely on, the Word of our KING to rule our whole life? As citizens of heaven (Phil. 3:20), our mission is to create little colonies of heaven in our homes, schools, and churches, where we daily delight in our Father's love, renew and rehearse His saving truths. If we just send our children to be trained by this savage world or let it take over their training right in the colony, what can we expect but that they themselves will become savages of this world! No prison of this world has been able to bind God's Word: not Rome's bars, Diocletian's fires, or Voltaire's pen. "The Word of God is the anvil that has worn out ten thousand hammers."

Did you ever consider why Jesus patiently waited forty years to bring His foretold judgment on Jerusalem? Yes, He graciously saved a remnant. But more, He graciously demonstrates to us that this most intense, ferocious opposition of the Jews to the gospel could not bind His Word, but only fulfill it. The Word is not bound. It's preaching the Kingdom of Christ; let us grow and go with it.⁴

THE WORD OF GRACE IS THE POWER OF THE LORD! Many would object that Paul could have done so much more with greater status, funding, and marketing strategy than he had available as a prisoner. They are offended in the apparent weakness of the Word. But Paul stood at Rome just as Jesus had stood in Nazareth: not in the might or power of man but only in the power of the Word of the LORD. Our call is to be witnesses (Acts 1), literally martyrs. Our goal and expectation is not to be the exalted and empowered world leaders. The sweet wine of earthly success is so intoxicating and addictive but Jesus calls us back to the sober reality of being faithful martyrs of the world-rejected King. Our Lord's marketing strategy is complete foolishness to the world. He did not send the angels to the Jerusalem Gazette but to despised shepherds, who made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this Child. He did not call the educated and influential, but fishermen, who spoke about the things they had heard and seen. What is startling about the coming of the kingdom of God is that Jesus was not like the politicians and religious hucksters of this world. He did not quarrel or cry out in the streets (Matt 12:19). But the good news got around quite well, didn't it? The Word grew by the power that is inherent in it. May our publicity not proclaim ourselves but herald the glad tidings of God.

Many Jews at Rome as at Nazareth were offended in Jesus' humanity, even His servile humanity. They wanted their Savior to have dramatic power over Caesar, to right every wrong in this world, and to spread a rainbow of economic prosperity for them. They wanted more than a Savior who would enter this world in a manger, live under the law, accept affliction and die on a cross. The gospel of Christ crucified remains a stumbling block (1 Cor. 1:23) to man. Portraying the gospel, the mission of the Church, as a band-aid for the problems of this world is a deceptive bartering of the gospel (2 Cor. 2:17) that distorts the source, need, focus, and purpose of the gospel itself.⁵

They were offended in His message giving the blessings of His kingdom, the forgiveness of sins and eternal life, in grace to those who have nothing to give in exchange. They wanted more than the grace that announced: in Christ your sin is removed, your guilt is covered, your sickness is healed; and the kingdom of righteousness, peace, and joy is yours. Wanting more than grace, they hardened their heart against the impulse of the Holy Spirit and the ability to receive the kingdom which the Spirit brings only through that Word of grace. The gospel of Christ crucified remains foolishness (1 Cor. 1:23) to man. Portraying the gospel, the mission of the Church, as something that can be made attractive to natural man is denying the cross (1 Cor. 1:18ff.).

Jesus' kingdom is not established by the politics of this world— not by eliminating abortion, nuclear warheads, or cruelty to animals. His kingdom power remains the Word that announces to those imprisoned in the stagnant cesspool of sin, "Christ has set you free and made you God's own holy child." That kingdom power does not remove the mangers and crosses of this world, but consecrates them by and for His grace. All the mighty signs of Pentecost were there to call attention to the Word of Christ crucified and arisen again (Heb. 2:3,4). The Church created at Pentecost had one formula, plan and goal for mission

work: “they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers” (Acts 2:42). It is through that Word alone that the successive Pentecosts of Acts come to men. “My Word shall accomplish what I please and prosper in the thing for which I sent it” (Isa. 55:11).

Any plan or sign, that becomes a substitute for relying on Christ’s grace revealed alone in the Word and sacraments, is from the devil (John 15:26; 16:14). Christ’s kingdom is coming to us when God gives us His Holy Spirit so that by His grace we believe His holy Word and lead a godly life here in time and hereafter in eternity.⁶ The one vision which is to sustain and guide us is of the HOLY, HOLY, HOLY upon His throne dispensing forgiveness (Isa. 6). The Spirit’s foremost mission goal is that the Word is taught “in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24; 8:31; Matt. 28:20). Behold what a powerful message the gospel is! It robbed Athena of her glorious Parthenon, “great” Diana of her splendid temple, and toppled all the gods and goddesses of Greece and Rome from their heavens. Paul was not ashamed of the gospel of Christ. He raised the banner of the cross over a world lost in sin and the Word of the Lord grew. When Jesus speaks, the winds and the waves obey; the sick, lame, and palsied are healed; and even the dead come back to life. When He gave His life on the cross, to save us, the sun hid its light, the earth quaked, rocks split open, believers came forth from their graves, the veil in the temple split from top to bottom, jeering Jews smote their breasts, and Roman soldiers said: “Truly, this is the Son of God!” No obstacle, not the gates of hell themselves, can prevent the witnessing of the Word from bearing fruit. For Jesus Himself is powerfully speaking through that Word. “I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ for it is the power of God to salvation” (Rom. 1:16).

Do you want more in your Savior than One who in the grace that brings your eternal salvation also calls you to accept economic squeezes, pressing afflictions, or family anguish with contentment? Wanting more than grace, the Jews became witnesses that grace despised is grace lost. Jesus came riding in the clouds of Heaven in judgment upon them and Jerusalem. The power in preaching the kingdom of Christ is the Word of grace. Lest we lose it, let us grow and go with it.

It is extremely interesting that Acts 28:30 suggests that the two years of Paul’s imprisonment have ended. In other words, apparently Luke knew the outcome of Paul’s trial, yet leaves us hanging in suspense. The Spirit does not tell us the outcome as an emphatic demonstration that this is not the story of Paul and his missionary journeys but of the Word of the LORD growing from Jerusalem even to the world. This climax reminds us that **THE LORD EQUIPS THE INSTRUMENTS OF HIS WORD.**

Paul was an instrument of that Word whom Jesus would continue to comfort, renew and equip, just as He did in the past. God’s Word intervened on the road to Damascus; the gospel was revealed to Him that he might preach Christ (Gal. 1:11-17), and holding fast the faithful Word (Titus 1:9) equipped him for every situation. The Holy Spirit does not anoint plans but people. He is not poured out on methods but on believers. He does not bless goals but the preaching of the Word. The humble pastor portrayed in Luther’s sacristy prayer “is a far cry from the strutting modern religious entrepreneur, whose mastery of ‘scientific’ technique guarantees him x per cent of statistical success for y percent of ‘effective’ effort.”⁷

Paul had one formula, plan and goal for mission work: “glorify the Word” (Acts 13:48). His sermon at Antioch delighted in the promises of the Word fulfilled, in the salvation the Word assured, and the power the Word revealed. Confidence in the power of that Word led him to preach with the authority of the Lord and the joy of the Spirit. He preached the Word continually and when He went on He arranged for the preaching of the Word to continue (Acts 14:21-23). The preaching of the Word will then be our highest priority. For only through His Word (John 17:17) does the LORD “give us His Holy Spirit so that by His grace we may believe His holy Word and lead a godly life here in time and hereafter in eternity.”⁸ Our highest priority will then be to surround our families, schools, churches and all who will listen with the Word of the kingdom. The preaching of the kingdom of God is not intended to be either a carnival offer of clowns and cotton candy nor a dusty dry reading, but a heralding with power which demonstrates we are among those so touched by its power that we are seizing it to ourselves forcefully (Luke 16:16; Matt. 11:12). “Preaching is sacred warfare, a titanic, life-and-death struggle with the Word for the minds and souls of the hearers, in the face of the triple alliance of demonic powers, world, and flesh (Matt. 13; 2 Cor. 10:4,5).”⁹ Open the Word and let the LION of Judah roar with power about the grace of the LAMB of God.

Be busy about preparing the best meal ever

- Go on eating the Word yourself.

From the best ingredients ever

- God’s Words are the Apples of Gold.

In the most careful way ever

- Set them in frames of silver.

For the best guests ever

- Kings and Priests in God’s Kingdom.

To provide the best dessert ever!¹⁰

- The Peace that passes human understanding.

With a third lesson in threes (The first was the denial and the second the restoration of Peter):

“What God has cleansed you must not call common” (Acts 10:15), Jesus equipped Peter to open up the tents of Shem for the Spirit to bring Japheth in. Our flesh has the strong tendency to look at the sinfulness of the world and consider ourselves superior, an exclusive club to be walled off from the sinful world. Only Christ’s impartial salvation daily equips us to set prejudice, partiality, and apathy aside and open the tents of the gospel. No matter how full His agenda, how pressing His responsibility, how personally tired He was, Jesus always had an eye open for that one lost lamb. The essence of mission work is not a program but personal concern—not sending out someone else but reaching out ourselves—not adding numbers to a church but restoring one to the Father. In Christ’s personal shepherding of you and me we are daily renewed and equipped for the unique mission of ever seeking that one lost sheep, to the praise of Christ, not ourselves.

With three lessons in oppression (Acts 13,14) Jesus equipped Paul to glorify the Word alone at all times. In Antioch Paul preached the gospel and a mob ran him out of town. In Iconium he preached the gospel and a mob gathered to stone him. In Lystra he preached the gospel and a mob did stone him and leave him for dead. In Derbe he preached the gospel and returned to each of those cities that had persecuted him preaching the gospel. Persecuted in one city he went on preaching to another. Where did Paul find the commitment to set out again with bandaged head and blackened eye? In that Word “To you the Word of this salvation has been sent” (Acts 13:26). God sent His Son to die for your sins and raised Him from the dead that by Him you might have everlasting life. Paul delighted in detailing all the prophecies of Christ fulfilled, in seeing a seed of faith arise in the midst of persecution and in revealing that the rejection by many was itself a fulfillment of God’s Word. Jesus warned about measuring success in earthly results even if it was Satan falling like lightning from heaven and said, “Rather rejoice because your names are written in heaven” (Luke 10:20).¹¹ Daily building on the rock of Christ’s Word creates compassion, not sentimentality; conviction, not self-advancement; and confidence, not arrogance. The Word creates in man the conviction that expresses conviction in the Word. Yet in our day Christian leaders glory in subjective experiences and community activities, clowns and comedy, group encounters and practical methods, cell groups and 12-step programs. The Word warns that those who do not glorify the Word will “marvel and perish” (Acts 13:41).

With a lesson in threes the Holy Spirit intentionally records that Paul was forbidden, prevented, and struck out (Acts 16:6,7,8) so that we would lift up our eyes to watch for the unveiling of the Lord’s unsearchable judgments. The LORD now opened the door for the rising of the Sun of grace over the continent of Europe, “Come over to us” (Acts 16:9). Yet according to God’s wisdom it arose in a humanly unspectacular way. Though three divine revelations brought them to Philippi, they went for some days without any contact at all. There were no news headlines, no multitudes, no church building, no programs, no bands, and no mass conversions, but just a few ladies gathered at the river. But these ladies did not despise the day of small things. Filled with all the riches of God’s kingdom, they were freed from this world’s competitive scramble to hold the treasures of this dying earth and the facade of self-righteousness and moved to live the contagious generosity of God’s grace. Through these humble beginnings the LORD made it clear for all Europe: “My Kingdom comes not through cathedrals, organizations, goals and plans of man, but through reliance on My Word to create, guide and preserve. I come to you not in the rending wind, nor shaking quake, nor consuming fire but in the still small voice of My Word” (1 Kings 19).¹²

Paul was confronted by the most appealing philosophies of man in Athens and the most appealing pleasures of man at Corinth. But with a lesson in three the Lord called Paul not to be fearfully swayed from preaching Christ and Him crucified alone (1 Cor. 2:2). “For I am with you, and no one will attack you to hurt you; for I have many people in this city”(Acts 18:10). A flower has many petals growing out of one sturdy center to make one beautiful flower together. So faithful preaching has many petals all held together in the one sturdy focal point of Christ alone. But any petal that does not originate and remain in that focal point, no matter how brilliant or appealing it may look, is not part of that flower and will fade and rot. Through the ages Christians and churches have often lost this one central focus. Reformation is the continual need to stay focused in Christ. In Luther’s day weeds had grown up covering the flower of Christ and secondary matters had replaced the central focus of Christ. We are heirs of the Lutheran Reformation only if we are daily turning our life back to the central focus of Christ alone. Institutional amnesia is the sad state of most of Christianity and most of Lutheranism. It does not know its past, its source, or its focus; and so it can not know its present, its future, or its life. Denying the centrality of sin and grace in Christ, most Lutheran churches have adopted a therapy model of helping people resolve their own problems. They view the world as a friend, the devil as a myth, and sin as the result of poor toilet training. But our problem is not primarily the difficulties of life in this world. Our problem is we, myself, the sinful wretch that I am. That

problem is solved only in the Father's redemption model of washing me clean in Christ and in Christ making me His own child. Yet, following the therapy model of man, churches have become social clubs where people gather for companionship and entertainment. They have become charity groups caring for the poor and downtrodden. They have become political groups to fight injustice. There are other groups which will do all of these things. There is one thing which no other group in society can do. Unless those who have come to know Christ proclaim Him to the world as the way to God, there is no one to do it. Christ alone washes and cleanses man in His holy blood and He does this alone through His Word and sacraments. He and His Word are our past, our source, and our focus. Walking in His Truth gives us a present with the ultimate purpose, bringing others into the future of eternal life through Christ alone. Paul carefully weighed all the wisdom of man and affirmed that we are only a flower, beautiful, eternal, and well pleasing to the LORD, when daily reforming all to Christ and His Word alone.

Both the oppression by the world and the progression of political action tempt us to put our trust in man's plans, weapons, and actions. But the "weapons of our warfare," Paul reminds us, "are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5). Jesus had the power to make stones bread. He could have really won the following of men by floating down out of heaven off the pinnacle of the temple. Take note: it is the devil that here invented "entertainment evangelism." Jesus affirmed, "Man shall live by every Word of God" (Matt. 4). It was Jesus' submission to the will of the Father enduring evil, even unto death on the tree cursed with our sin, which won the victory for us. It is only in His victory that "they shall not overpower us." If God spared not His only Son, will He not give us all good things? Yes, even then in all tribulation, we are more than conquerors in Jesus Christ who loves us" (Rom 8:31ff.). The Word is the divine impetus of God, a mighty onward movement of revelation, designed to carry man with it from glory unto glory. Reliance on fleshly weapons is a compromise with Satan. Through reliance on the Word alone in the midst of oppression, Jesus equipped Paul to preach in Caesar's house, the whole Roman Guard, Rome and the world. No matter where we are or how difficult the circumstances of our life may be, Jesus is equipping us through His Word to preach His kingdom to others.

It is in fact only when the Word makes us servants to the will of God that we are equipped to preach the kingdom. For its power does not lie in the might and intellect of man but in the Spirit who gives the faith to believe: "My Jesus died for me. My sins are forgiven. My salvation is secured and I belong to God." There is no end to the book of Acts. For Jesus will never fail to equip His people for preaching the kingdom of Christ. Let us grow and go with it, for every tongue will proclaim Jesus is Lord to the glory of the Father, either willingly or unwillingly. Which will it be for you?

To God alone be the Glory.

NOTES

¹ The Church Growth Movement is "The science that investigates the nature, function, and health of Christian churches as they relate specifically to the effective implementation of God's Commission to "make disciples of all the nations" (Matt. 28:19). Church growth is simultaneously a theological conviction and an applied science, striving to combine the eternal principles of God's Word with the best insights of contemporary social and behavioral sciences, employing as its initial frame of reference the foundational work done by Donald McGavran and his colleagues. (C. Peter Wagner, Ed. with Win Arn and Elmer Towns, *Church Growth: State of the Art*, [Wheaton IL: Tyndale, c1986] 284.) It was started by Donald McGavran in India in a reaction against the social gospel that had lost its authority and mission. In 1972 these principles were transferred to work in the United States. Prominent in its principles are the "Homogeneous Unit Principle" (Work within cultural barriers), "Felt needs" (reach people by offering remedies for perceived needs) and the "Harvest Principle" (science and sociology can determine conversion receptivity). It errs in the following:

- a. It is virtually silent about God's forgiveness.
- b. It never proclaims objective, universal justification in Christ.
- c. It makes faith a decision man makes to identify with a social group: "I accept. I submit. I evangelize."
It measures discipleship by obedience and responsible church memberships not simply faith in Christ .
- d. It is all about growing a church rather than the Word growing the Church. So their numbers may have very little to do with the LORD adding to His Church such as are saved.

- e. It separates conversion from the means of grace and teaches how you can come to the Holy Spirit and a religious experience rather than how the Holy Spirit comes to you. It views the Word and Sacraments by themselves as dull and boring. So it makes entertainment, crowd psychology, and pagan frenzy its means of grace. Scripture shows the treasure is that God comes to us in His Word and through it brings us to heaven, that the medium and attitude do affect the content and that the LORD calls for a joyous faith that listens to His Word with watchful and sober hope. CGM discards the treasure for animal heat.
- f. It sets goals for conversions and other divine matters. Scripture says the Spirit blows where He will.
- g. It determines its message by society's "felt needs" and so cuts the heart out of God's Word, avoids law and so perverts the gospel into a new law of man renewing himself. Those who know the least about faith determine its expression.
- h. It sets up levels of Christianity. This mixes justification and sanctification.
- i. It confuses the priesthood of all believers with the public ministry.
- j. It looks to man's abilities, spiritual gifts, to energize the church, rather than the Word and Sacraments.
- k. It accommodates cultural idolatry and prejudice instead of promoting the transcultural, transcendent Word of God's Salvation.
- l. It is completely unionistic, maintaining: creeds are to be discarded, all denominations are equal, theology only matters if it encourages or prevents church growth and numerical growth will occur. Scripture shows their idea that the removal of the divisions in Christianity will cause masses to rush in trivializes sin and grace and that their focus on the relevance of the message rather than the authority of that message is idolatry.

² Those that argue for adopting Evangelical style to compete in the marketplace while maintaining Lutheran substance have already rejected Lutheran substance. (R. Krause, "All Things to All Men," [*Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Spring 1996] 97.) "The real secret of true and God-pleasing growth is plain evangelical, biblical, confessional integrity." (Kurt Marquart, "*Church Growth*" vs. *Mission Paradigm: A Lutheran Assessment*, [A Luther Academy Monograph, published by Our Savior Lutheran Church, Houston TX, 1994] 143.) It has been argued that "the best approach to the Church Growth Movement" is the "spoiling the Egyptians" which God commanded in Exodus 12:36. (David Valleskey, "The Church Growth Movement," [WLQ, 88:2] 115.) This argument does recognize the importance of discerning the errors of the CGM and that this false teaching may be more subtle therefore more dangerous than secular philosophies. However, it fails to recognize the fundamental difference between the Egyptian's physical possessions and CGM's spiritual philosophies and between God's command to spoil the Egyptians and His command to not even listen to false prophets (Jer. 23:16). God commanded the children of Israel to spoil the Egyptians. Concerning material things which are used for idolatry God makes it clear that the creation itself is "good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by the Word of God and prayer" (1 Tim. 4:4,5). With the command to spoil the physical God provided for Israel's journey, the temple and the encouragement of their faith. God's command concerning false teaching is "What is the chaff to the wheat?" (Jer. 23:28). Luther could say that his enemies were his best teachers because they forced him back into Scripture. Certainly in that sense we can learn from the Antichrist. But we do not determine to spoil his treasures. In spiritual teaching the Word of God is the only treasure. And that treasure is being perverted by CGM and the Antichrist. The "spoiling of the Egyptians" rationale is really then a slipping on the slope of accommodating the world, trusting their ways and methods instead of the Word alone. "Dr. Mann remarked, 'he would not eat poisoned bread, though there was much good flour in it.'" (F. Bente, *American Lutheranism*, 4 vols, The United Lutheran Church, [St. Louis: Concordia, 1919] 2:121, cited by Gregory Jackson.)

Especially in periods of indifference to doctrine and creeds and confessions the faithful Christian is required to be very careful not to give the impression that he approves or tolerates the false position of the heterodox. When our people are told on every hand that the divisions in Christendom are not serious, that basically every church is good and that one religion is as good as the next, that all roads lead to heaven, and that the differences in teaching are only theological hair-splitting - what can they be expected to believe when even orthodox teachers and leaders join with heterodox in religious seminars, address each other's conventions, work together on joint committees for various religious projects, etc., etc. The trumpet must not give an uncertain sound. (*Concerning Church Fellowship*, [Church of the Lutheran Confession, 1961] 35.)

³ John Pfeiffer, Delegate Conference devotion, June 5, 1995.

⁴ Shall not our practice flow purely from God's Word and our prayer be: Grant, we beseech You, Almighty God, unto Your Church Your Holy Spirit and the wisdom which comes down from above, that Your Word, as befits it, may not be bound, but have free course and be preached for the joy and edifying of Christ's holy people, that in steadfast faith we may serve You and in the confession of Your name abide unto the end; through Jesus Christ, Our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, forever and ever. Amen. (*The Lutheran Hymnal*, [St. Louis: Concordia, c. 1941] 14.)

⁵ The "social gospel" falsely starts with the present need and stays with the present need. The CGM falsely starts with the present need as the power to produce man's change. Jesus certainly showed love and compassion for man in need and used human earthly needs as an opportunity to witness to our real need and its solution. His focus (John 4) is immediately on the spiritual need and the Spirit's power in the word. But whenever man made those "felt needs" the focus Jesus rejected and avoided it (Matt. 16:20, Luke 12:13, Mark 9:9, John 6:26ff.). But in CGM "How-to" seminars far surpass actual Bible study. Thus CGM becomes more a means of meeting human needs than glorifying God. "The felt needs approach is inherently dangerous to the Gospel message understood as the message of the forgiveness of sins." (Robert Koester, *Law and Gospel: The Foundation of Lutheran Ministry with Reference to the Church Growth Movement*, [published by Robert Koester, Oct. 1989] 98-106.)

⁶ Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism*, Explanation of the Second Petition.

⁷ Kurt Marquart, *The Church*, Vol IX in the "Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics" series, ed. Robert Preus, 123. (Cited by D. Lau, "The Relation of the Public Ministry and the Priesthood of All Believers in Regard to Current Lutheran Debates," *Journal of Theology*, 35:4.24.)

⁸ Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism*, Explanation of the Second Petition.

⁹ Kurt Marquart, "Church Growth" vs. *Mission Paradigm: A Lutheran Assessment*, (A Luther Academy Monograph, published by Our Savior Lutheran Church, Houston TX, 1994) 84.

O Lord God, dear Father in heaven, I am indeed, unworthy of the office and ministry in which I am to make known Thy glory and to nurture and to serve this congregation. But since Thou hast appointed me to be a pastor and teacher, and the people are in need of the teachings and the instructions, O be Thou my helper and let Thy holy angels attend me. Then if Thou are pleased to accomplish anything through me, to Thy glory and not to mine or to the praise of men, grant me, out of Thy pure grace and mercy a right understanding of Thy Word and that I may also diligently perform it. O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, Thou Shepherd and Bishop of our souls, send Thy Holy Spirit that He may work with me, yea, that He may work in me to will and to do through Thy divine strength according to Thy good pleasure. - Amen. (Luther's Sacristy Prayer)

"Nothing keeps the people with the church more than good preaching" (Apology XXIV, 50, [German] *Concordia Triglotta*, 400).

¹⁰ Roland A. Gurgel, "The Sermon, The Best Meal Ever," CLC Pastoral Conference, 1991.

¹¹ "The southern Baptist preacher likes to try to strengthen faith in his hearers by always talking about faith. But what really strengthens the Christian's faith is the message of the cross and the empty tomb. To strengthen faith we don't preach only about faith. How can we then increase in our people a real, genuinely scriptural and God-pleasing zeal for sharing the Word with others? It is not done by constantly harping on missions, missions, missions, and comparing how we have fallen short in this endeavor to other denominations. But this desire to share Christ with others comes from the faithful proclamation of law and gospel." (Stephen Kurtzahn, "The Role Of Law And Gospel In Evangelism," *Journal of Theology*, 35:4.48.)

¹² "Let our only goal be this, that we remain faithful to Christ and His teaching, and that we diligently use the means He has supplied for church growth, namely, the means of grace. "There is no other way of winning souls for the Church and keeping them with it than the faithful and diligent use of the divinely ordained means of grace. Whatever activities do not either directly apply the Word of God or subserve such application we condemn as 'new methods,' unchurchly activities, which do not build, but harm, the church (Brief Statement of 1932, #22)." (David Lau, "The Relation of the Public Ministry and the Priesthood of All Believers in Regard to Current Lutheran Debates," *The Journal of Theology*, 35:4.24.)

P A N O R A M A

WELS/ELS AND CLC DISCUSSIONS: 1987-1990 REVISITED

During the past summer two sources within the WELS brought to recollection the 1987-1990 doctrinal discussions which took place between representatives of WELS/ELS, on the one hand, and of the CLC, on the other hand.

I.

One of these sources was the Summer 1996 issue of the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* (Vol. 93, No. 3), a theological publication produced by the faculty of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wisconsin. Under the title, "Romans 16:17,18," one of the papers delivered by Professor Armin J. Panning, former president of the WELS seminary, during the discussions has now been published. A footnote on the first page of the paper gives the information: "This paper was first delivered at doctrinal talks between the WELS and the CLC held at Eau Claire, Wisconsin, on January 13, 1988. It was agreed by both parties that the discussions should begin with two exegetical studies of this key passage. This was the WELS presentation." Prof. C. Kuehne presented an exegetical study of the same passage in behalf of the CLC representatives. This paper was published in this journal at that time (cf. March 1988, Vol. 28, No.1, 11-28).

Prof. Panning's paper was well-received in its discussion of the aorist imperative *ekklinate* in verse sixteen. The CLC representatives were encouraged by such expressions as: ". . . the aorist imperative is the better suited to call for an activity that speaks of a decisive and vital action which works in close harmony with but is subsequent to the preliminary and durative *skopein*. . . . The verb *ekklinoo* means 'to avoid; to separate from; to put distance between.' Though etymologically the verb derives from *klinoo* (to lean), the perfective prefix *ek* and the accompanying preposition *apo* leave no room for the idea of 'leaning away from' while retaining some form of contact. Rather, Paul is speaking of a clean break . . . The apostle is hardly condoning an indistinct and fuzzy situation in which the Christian continues to play footsie with evil. The imperative of *ekklinoo* calls for a clean break with errorists. That means a clear declaration that there no longer is any religious fellowship with former brothers in the faith. Every expression of joint worship and religious life is to be avoided. What Paul is here asking of the Romans is termination of fellowship, the earnest and loving testimony to errorists that their doctrine and/or practice is at variance with the gospel, and as such is putting their souls and their eternal salvation into jeopardy." These words, if they indeed represent the theology of WELS/ELS, seem to indicate a tremendous change from the 1955 resolutions of the WELS, which allowed for a unanimous judgment on the part of WELS that the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod was a causer of divisions and offenses "of long standing," followed by a postponement of the action called for by *ekklinate*.

Appreciation of Prof. Panning's discussion of *ekklinate* is subdued by his prior discussion of the verb *skopein*, "to watch, to observe, to keep an eye on." In this section, Prof. Panning declares: "With its present tense *skopein* speaks of an activity that has some duration. The text does not specify how long. It is the activity of watching or observing, which may be accompanied by other action. The verb itself does not specify by commanding one type of accompanying action or forbidding another. The situation observed during this process of observation admits of one or the other of two outcomes: It will or will not change." It is most interesting, at least to this observer, that Prof. Panning's thoughts on *skopein* immediately go to speculation about change or lack of it in those who are causing (*poiountas*) divisions and offenses, rather than turning to what the verse clearly lays out as the imperative course to follow when one has detected those who in an on-going way (present tense durative) are causing divisions and offenses contrary to the true doctrine.

It should, perhaps, be noted that Prof. Panning repeated much the same discussion on *skopein* in a paper presented at a subsequent meeting of WELS/ELS and CLC representatives in Milwaukee in February 1989. Thus it becomes clear that he understands the objects of *skopein* not as actual causers of divisions and offenses who must be forthwith avoided, but, rather, as potential causers whose true status must be determined through a change or lack of it. One of the CLC representatives made the following characterization of the meaning of the WELS interpretation: "We" [the ones addressed by Paul] "detect error among brethren and begin to 'observe' (verse 17a). In this 'observe' lies a process of dealing with brethren who have strayed into error, a process normally involving admonition. There are two possible outcomes: 1) If they are found to be weak brethren, then we continue to 'greet' them as brethren (verses 1-

16); 2) But if they reject the admonition and defend their errors, we recognize them as those who are causing divisions and offenses and begin to ‘avoid them’ (verse 17b).”

To continue to quote from the report of the CLC representative:

The CLC representatives repeatedly urged the WELS/ELS representatives to note the direct object of the verb *skopein*. That direct object is “those who are causing divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine.” We therefore deem it inappropriate for the WELS/ELS to apply the *skopein* of Romans 16:17 to the “observing” of brethren who may have strayed into error. We do not jump right away to Romans 16:17 in our dealing with such brethren. Rather, we will go to them to find out whether they simply misspoke or whether we misunderstood them. If neither of these is the case, we will bring Scripture to bear on the situation in an attempt to show them what God says on the matter, even as the Bible urges us to “convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching” (2 Tim. 4:2). So long as they are willing to be instructed in the Word and do not make propaganda for their error, we will continue to deal with them as weak brethren. Only if they take a stand against the Word, promote error, and thereby cause divisions and offenses in Christ’s church— only then will we apply Romans 16:17-18 to the situation. In that passage Paul urges us throughout our lifetime [emphasis added - Ed.] to keep on watching out (*skopein*) for those who are causing divisions and offenses, and now we recognize that these erstwhile brethren fit into that category. They have themselves already broken the fellowship, and our avoiding them follows promptly, lest their error works havoc among the simple.

The point made in the previous paragraph is worth repeating: We deem it inappropriate for the WELS/ELS to move at once to the *skopein* of Romans 16:17 when they suspect that brethren may have strayed into error. This could immediately inject a note of suspicion into our dealings with those who may merely have misspoken or who may be no more than weak brethren in need of our loving correction. . . .

. . . The watchfulness of this passage is specifically and exclusively the lifelong watching out for those who are causing divisions and offenses and are thereby a danger to Christ’s sheep. Romans 16:17-18 simply does not have anything to say about fraternal admonition, nor would it be right for us to import such admonition from some passage which is speaking about brethren [as Prof. Panning’s paper does. - Ed.]. We have no choice but to regard as invalid any interpretation of Romans 16:17-18 which in effect states: “When a person or church body with whom we are in fellowship causes divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which we have learned, we mark them immediately, then admonish, and if this proves fruitless, avoid them” (affirmed by the ELS in *Lutheran Synod Quarterly*, 2.4, June 1962, 21; reaffirmed by the ELS representatives at the 1989 meeting in Milwaukee).

It should also be mentioned that Prof. Panning’s interpretation of *skopein* as having a “positive slant” toward brethren (possibly weak), rather than toward those already recognized as causing (*poiountas*) divisions and offenses seems, to this observer at least, to be in remarkable agreement with the statement the WELS approved in its 1959 convention: “Termination of fellowship is called for when you have reached the conviction that admonition is of no further avail,” in spite of the fact that representatives of WELS/ELS expressed dissatisfaction with that 1959 statement.

In contrast to Prof. Panning’s paper, CLC statements aver that the *skopein* of Romans 16:17-18 is an activity of Christian life that is ongoing and unceasing, in which the Christian is to be constantly watchful for those who are causing divisions and offenses contrary to the true doctrine of God’s Word. Just as soon as the Christian has recognized that either an individual or a church body is, in an on-going way, causing divisions and offenses, he is to avoid them immediately, without delay. Anything else, such as referring *poiountas* to brethren at the first instance of a false statement, or waiting for the possibly positive outcome of admonition in the case of those already clearly recognized as having the status of causing divisions and offenses, is not in accord with the clear meaning of Romans 16:17-18.

II.

The other source that came to our attention was the June 1996 publication of WELS: “Report to the Twelve Districts.” In that report appeared the following paragraph, under the heading: “Other Contacts” (p. 101):

There have been no recent official contacts with the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC). It has been noted that the same arguments which were common years ago against WELS are reoccurring in

CLC publications. It is as if the 1987-1990 discussions and the theses on fellowship as jointly adopted by committees of ELS, WELS, and CLC never occurred. These theses and a report on the 1987-1990 discussions may be found in *Reports and Memorials for the Fifty-second Biennial Convention*, 1993, pp.232-242.

It is difficult to understand why the authors of this brief report are surprised that the earlier “arguments” (“accusations” would be more accurate) of the CLC against WELS are still being set forth from time to time in CLC publications. Even though theses on fellowship were jointly adopted by representatives of the three church bodies, it was never understood by any of the representatives that the disagreements in doctrine which separated us had been entirely settled. It was also recognized that there were other matters that had arisen since the separation of our church bodies that would need discussion because of our obvious difference in practice, such as our belief that membership in fraternal insurance societies such as AAL and Lutheran Brotherhood is unionistic. To us the failure of WELS/ELS to teach and practice as we do in that regard is an indication that we do not see eye-to-eye in the doctrine of church fellowship, despite the theses on fellowship. That being the case, why should we not still speak of past differences in doctrine and/or practice as still existing?

There is no mystery as to why the 1987-1990 discussions did not move forward from the point of the last meeting. We will offer two explanations. The first involves the desire of the CLC representatives to test the acceptance of the theses by both sides through an examination of past doctrinal statements of WELS/ELS, comparing them with the present theses. After all, we had found those prior statements to be false doctrine which obliged us to separate from those who made them, in accordance with Romans 16:17-18. Surely it can be understood that for us it is vital to make sure that the false statements are now disavowed by those who made them. However, the WELS/ELS representatives did not wish to make such a joint study of past resolutions while acknowledging that there were certain unclaritys of thought or expression in earlier documents. Their unwillingness left us still in doubt as to whether or not we were now speaking the same thing, not being able to put the old documents, with their contrary and opposing content, to rest. We were not willing to continue discussion under that circumstance.

We were willing, originally, to enter the 1987-1990 discussions on the understanding that we would be limiting the talk to those doctrines regarding which it was recognized by both sides that there was a clear disagreement. We had a full right to that expectation, for at its 1973 convention, WELS adopted a resolution summing up what WELS representatives concluded after a meeting between WELS and CLC representatives at that time, namely: “... be it resolved, a) That we express regret over the failure at that meeting to reach agreement on the doctrine under discussion.” It came, therefore, as somewhat of a shock when it was declared by a WELS representative at the last meeting that the difference between us was not a matter of doctrine. We had been declaring for almost three decades that a doctrinal difference had separated us from WELS/ELS and had published numerous articles setting forth our position as clearly as we could. It had been difficult at times, because of the insistence on the part of WELS, almost whenever the CLC was mentioned in their publications, to add the gratuitous comment: “The CLC is composed of a group of pastors who believe that the WELS did not act soon enough in separating from the Missouri Synod.” They continue to do that in spite of repeated corrections from us. We believe that there is no reason to continue doctrinal discussions unless there is a clear recognition and acknowledgement on both sides that it is a disagreement in doctrine that has separated us.

We believe that it would be beneficial to present the resolutions adopted by the CLC in its 1992 convention on this matter:

“1) We affirm that ever since the formation of the CLC in 1960 there has been a doctrinal difference between the CLC and the WELS/ELS on the matter of termination of fellowship with church bodies that have become causers of divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which we have learned, cf. Romans 16:17-18.

“2) We are convinced by Scripture (Galatians 5:9; 1 Thessalonians 5:21-22) that in order to resolve doctrinal differences it is necessary that previous official false statements and actions be clearly rejected. This conviction is reinforced by a study of church history.

“3) Since in the correspondence of the past biennium the representatives of the WELS/ELS have refused to acknowledge up to this point that this difference which separates us is a matter of doctrine, we urge the Board of Doctrine to terminate the present discussions with the representatives of the WELS/ELS, unless such discussions address this specific doctrinal difference from the outset.

“4) We encourage all members of the CLC to study the ‘Theses and Antitheses on the Role of Admonition in the Termination of Fellowship with Church Bodies’ (Revised by the CLC Board of Doctrine, February, 1990) and to restudy the pamphlet entitled ‘There is Still a Difference’ (1982), in order to gain a better understanding of this doctrinal difference.

“5) We thank our Lord for giving us the opportunity both to study God’s Word and to give testimony in this area of the doctrine of church fellowship. We pray that the Holy Spirit will use His Word and this testimony to accomplish His will to the glory of God and His saving Gospel.”

– John Lau

MORAL COLLAPSE

This article was printed in the June-July issue (No. 201) of “Information,” published by the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany.

In an article entitled, “*An Example of the Moral Collapse of our Age*,” the writer, Hans-Lutz Poetsch, vividly portrays the rampant spread of violent and pornographic literature in Germany as symptomatic of a pathetic moral decline. In the beginning of his article he outlines the base and degrading nature of this literature and how efforts to ban it are met with opposition and indifference, even among churches.

His concluding paragraphs are noteworthy, here presented in free translation:

This situation makes it clear that moral principles that had previously prevailed are rapidly declining. In the case of pornography, the concepts of “artistic and intellectual freedom” are so abused that there are no limits to what can be published and sold. The question is not, “Is it worthy, but will it sell.” A correct understanding of democratic freedom is overthrown in favor of so called “democratic rights,” which is nothing more than unrestrained libertinism. The suppression of the efforts of individual cities to ban pornography simply demonstrates that people no longer dare to set up opposition because they obviously no longer understand what democratic restraint really means. It is not surprising, either, that churches that have obviously come under the influence of such worldly ideology are indifferent to the matter.

What is our reaction to all this? **Whoever is serious about his Christianity must recognize that he is part of a hopeless minority**, particularly if he wishes to conform his moral behavior to the law of God! **It is no longer possible to rely on a basic public morality** that at the very least recognizes the simplest biblical precepts. It is not difficult to predict that, in view of these and similar developments, resistance to divine morality will only increase and in the not-to-distant future, Christianity will come under direct attack. For Christianity challenges those who represent and promote libertinism, and that is something they have never been able to endure.

In our congregations we will have to make it clear that to be a Christian means to swim against the stream, not only as far as our understanding of Christian life is involved, but particularly in how we live it, a life in direct contrast to the world!

– Robert Dommer