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CONTENTS

Genesis in the New Testament (continued)

David Lau

An Exegetical Study Of Galatians 4:21 – 31

Steven Sippert

God's Word Is Still Our Great Heritage –Looking Towards the Future of the CLC

Michael Schierenbeck

BOOK REVIEWS:

Luther and His World

by Graham Tomlin

Free and Living Congregations—The Dream That Would Not Die

AFLC Heritage Series, Volume II

(Reviewer: David Lau)

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Genesis in the New Testament

David Lau

Genesis 12 and 17

First Reading: Genesis 12:1-8 Second Reading: Genesis 17:15-22

Texts: Hebrews 11:8-16; 1 Peter 3:5-6; Romans 4:19-22

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God. By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born as many as the stars of the sky in multitude—innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore. These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.

For in this manner, in former times, the holy women who trusted in God also adorned themselves, being submissive to their own husbands, as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord, whose daughters you are if you do good and are not afraid with any terror.

And not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah's womb. He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform. And therefore it was accounted to him for righteousness.

The great flood in the days of Noah did not wash away the sins of the world. After the flood God said: **“The imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth.”** Yet God in His mercy promised that He would never again destroy the world with a flood. The rainbow in the sky is God's sign to us that He will keep His promise forever.

Yet in spite of God's mercy, the earth dwellers after the flood became just as wicked as those destroyed in the flood. Noah himself became drunk on one occasion, and his son Ham made fun of him. Instead of obeying God's command to spread out into the world to repopulate it, the people lived together in Babel and built a tower to make a name for themselves. God intervened in their tower building project and brought it to an end by making it impossible for them to understand each other. They began to speak in many different languages—an event which forced them to spread out into the world on the basis of these different languages.

Still the scattered people did not worship their Creator who had made a covenant of mercy with them. In their sinful foolishness they invented gods and goddesses for themselves and worshipped these products of their minds and hands. In other words, they fell into idolatry, as the apostle Paul says: **“They changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed beasts and creeping things. They worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator.”**

Yet God in His mercy did not abandon idolatrous mankind. He had promised the Woman's Seed who would destroy the power of Satan, and He never forgot that promise. But since the world was becoming idolatrous, He chose one man and his wife to become the ancestors of a special, separated nation from whom the Savior of the world would be born in due time.

This morning we want to consider **WHAT GOD SAYS ABOUT** this man and his wife, **ABRAHAM AND SARAH.**

First of all, we want to point out that **THE ONE THING OF GREATEST VALUE TO ABRAHAM AND SARAH WAS THE PROMISE OF GOD.** The Bible describes Abraham or Abram as a very wealthy man and Sarah or Sarai as a very beautiful woman. Yet it was not their wealth or beauty that became the center of their lives. It was the fact that God came to Abraham with the promise: **“I will show you a land; I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great, and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.”** When God said these words, Abraham was 75 years old and Sarah was 65 years old. Although they had no children at the time, they had God’s Word as a reliable promise for their faith to trust.

Quite a few years later Abraham and Sarah still had no children. But the Lord God said to Abraham: **“One who will come from your own body shall be your heir.”** As a sign of this promise the Lord showed Abraham the stars of the sky and said to him: **“So shall your seed be.”**

Still Abraham and Sarah had no children. Without consulting God they then concocted a scheme by which Sarah gave her maid Hagar to Abraham so that he might conceive a child through her. The scheme seemingly worked, and Ishmael was born, but this was not what God had in mind. So again God came to Abraham and Sarah with the definite promise: **“I will bless Sarah and also give you a son by her. ... Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant.”** At this time Abraham was 99 years old, and Sarah was 89 years old. For 24 years God’s promise of a son had been the most important element in their lives, and now finally it was going to come to pass.

Surely the Bible has much to say about the faith of Abraham and Sarah, but let us remember that before there can be faith, there must first of all be a word and promise of God which faith then believes. God made the first move. God first came to Abraham and Sarah with the promise, given to them out of undeserved mercy and kindness. They were God’s choice, as it is written: **“I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious.”**

Our New Testament texts for today also emphasize the promise of God. The land of Canaan is called **“the land of promise.”** Abraham and his descendants Isaac and Jacob are called **“heirs of the promise.”** Of Sarah it is said: **“She judged Him faithful who had promised.”** All of these ancestors **“were assured of the promises, embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.”** In fact, they understood God’s promise as extending far beyond the earthly land of Canaan. On the basis of God’s Word they were desiring a better country, that is, “a heavenly country.” They were waiting **“for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.”** The **“promise of God”**—this was what was important to them. **“What God had promised”**—this was the center of their lives.

Of course, this was what God intended by giving them the promise. He desired to instill faith in their hearts through His promise, for **“faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.”** **“How shall they believe in Him of whom they had not heard?”**

Sarah heard God’s promise and believed it. **BY FAITH IN THIS PROMISE SARAH GAVE BIRTH TO ISAAC AND HONORED HER HUSBAND.** So it is written: **“By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born as many as the stars of the sky in multitude—innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore.”** Sarah’s faith was not perfect. At first she laughed when she was told she would become a 90-year-old mother, but finally God’s promise convinced her, and by faith she received strength to bring the baby Isaac into the world.

In keeping with this same faith, Sarah also gave an example to all believing wives in the honor she bestowed on her husband Abraham. For it is written: **“In former times the holy**

women who trusted in God adorned themselves in this manner, being submissive to their own husbands, as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord.” Because of God’s will, clearly expressed in the Old and New Testament Scriptures, we still today ask our Christian brides to promise not just to love, honor, and cherish their husbands, but also to obey them, even as Sarah obeyed Abraham. Those who trust in God, as Sarah did, will not find fault with the way He designed marriage. As they trust what God says about forgiveness and eternal life through Abraham’s Seed, Christ Jesus, so they will trust what He says about marriage.

Sarah, of course, had a believing partner in Abraham, who is even called in Scripture the father of believers. **BY FAITH IN GOD’S PROMISE ABRAHAM OBEYED GOD’S CALL AND LOOKED FORWARD TO A GLORIOUS FUTURE.**

When God first came to Abraham, He called him to leave Ur, his homeland. Then He called him again in Haran to journey west to the land of Canaan. **“By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going.”** Normally, it is not considered an asset for a person not to know where he is going. But Abraham had God’s Word: **“I will show you a land,”** and on that basis he went out in faith. And then **“by faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents.”** God said that this was his land to inherit, but he never owned any of it, except a very small burial plot.

Then when God told him in his old age that he would be that father of a great nation, Abraham **“believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.”** By faith in God’s promise of a Savior, Abraham was counted righteous in God’s sight. Again, when God specifically told Abraham that Sarah would have a son, he believed it. **“Not being weak in faith, Abraham did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah’s womb. He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform.”** In that same faith Abraham looked forward to **“a heavenly country.”**

What does all this mean to us? We have even more reason to trust in God, for we know how God kept His promise to Abraham and Sarah by sending His Son Jesus into the world: Jesus, Abraham’s Seed, the Woman’s Seed, the promised Crusher of Satan. Jesus offers us the benefits of His victory on the cross, the forgiveness of sins. By faith in Him we are counted righteous in God’s sight, just as Abraham was. Moreover, we have all of Jesus’ promises concerning the heavenly, eternal life that He has won for us, and therefore we, as pilgrims and strangers here on earth, can look forward in faith to the fulfillment of all of these glorious promises, just as Abraham and Sarah did. Let each one of us pray with the hymn writer:

Let me live a life of faith;

Let me die Thy people’s death. Amen! (TLH 459:7)

Genesis 18 and 19

First Reading: Genesis 18:20-32 Second Reading: Genesis 19:15-29

Texts: Jude 7; 2 Peter 2:6-8; Luke 17:29, 32

Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities around them in a similar manner to these, having given themselves over to sexual immorality and gone after strange flesh, are set forth as an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire.

God, turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes, condemned them to destruction, making them an example to those who afterward would live ungodly; and delivered righteous Lot, who was oppressed by the filthy conduct of the wicked (for that righteous man, dwelling among them, tormented his righteous soul from day to day by seeing and hearing their lawless deeds).

On the day that Lot went out of Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all.

Remember Lot's wife.

One of the most serious problems of our age is that many people think they can be Christians without accepting or believing what the Bible says. For example, the Bible says that God created the world in six days. But there are so-called Christians who say that it's not important to believe that; God might have created the world and everything in it by means of evolution over millions of years, they say. Or to take another example. The Bible says that God destroyed the original world He made by means of a universal flood that covered the highest mountains. But these so-called Christians say that that is just an old story which can't be accepted at face value. Anyway, they claim, it doesn't make any difference whether the flood happened or not, as long as you believe in Jesus.

Many other examples could be given of how persons want to be called Christians and yet refuse at the same time to accept what the Bible teaches about such things as the virgin birth of Christ, the role of women in the church, the sin of adultery, and so forth and so on. All of these teachings are reinterpreted or explained anew in such a way as to deny the plain truth of what the Bible actually says.

So it is now that in our evil and perverse society today we have people who want to be Christians and yet at the same time live according to what they call an alternative lifestyle. That is, instead of a man living in marriage with a woman, a man lives with a man or a woman lives with a woman and carries on a sexual life with a person of the same sex. Of course, this is a sinful lifestyle according to the Bible. Yet there are those who reinterpret the Bible and explain it in such a way as to defend their so-called gay way of life. They even organize what they call gay churches and go so far as to tolerate and promote gay pastors and teachers.

In view of this reinterpretation of the Bible, which is so prevalent today, it is important for us to study the Scriptures and read **WHAT GOD SAYS** in His Word **ABOUT LOT AND THE CITIES OF SODOM AND GOMORRAH**.

The apostle Peter in his second letter says: **"Turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes, God condemned them to destruction, making them an example to those who afterward would live ungodly."** Why did God condemn these two cities? What was their wickedness? Jude says in his letter that their sin was **"sexual immorality,"** or fornication. They gave themselves over to this sin and went after **"strange flesh."** There can be no doubt then that **GOD INDEED PUNISHED SODOM AND GOMORRAH FOR THEIR SEXUAL IMMORALITY.** Peter calls it **"filthy conduct"** and **"lawless deeds."**

The book of Genesis first mentions the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah in connection with the dispute between Abraham and his nephew Lot. Their flocks had grown so large that it was necessary for them to separate from each other. In generosity that resulted from his trust in the Lord, Abraham let his nephew Lot choose first. Lot selfishly and foolishly chose the plain of Jordan by the city of Sodom, for it was well watered. Indeed Genesis says it was **"like the garden of the Lord."** But Genesis also says: **"The men of Sodom were exceedingly wicked and sinful against the Lord."**

Many years later, when it was time for Sarah, Abraham's wife, to give birth to Isaac, the Lord told Abraham that He was going to destroy the city of Sodom because of its wickedness. The account in Genesis goes on to illustrate the particular type of wickedness that was prevalent in the city. Two angels of the Lord, appearing as human beings, came to Sodom. Lot insisted that they stay at his house overnight, and so they did. But **"before they lay down,"** the Bible says, **"the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both old and young, all the people from every quarter, surrounded the house. And they called to Lot and said to him, 'Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us that we may know them.'"**

What did they want? What did they mean by desiring to know these two strangers in the city? Lot knew what they meant. He knew what they wanted. In a foolish, desperate attempt to protect his visitors, Lot offered his two unmarried daughters to the men of the city. He said: **‘You may do to them as you wish; only do nothing to these men.’** Surely it is as clear as it can be that the men of Sodom were interested in sexual immorality. They were interested in knowing these two angel visitors sexually. Their sin was the same as that which the apostle Paul described in his letter to the Romans. **‘The men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful.’**

If it had not been for God’s special protection, the men of Sodom would have destroyed Lot’s home in order to attack and rape his two visitors in their unnatural, wicked lust. No doubt, Sodom and Gomorrah were guilty of other sins also. The prophet Ezekiel mentions their pride and idleness and lack of hospitality. But certainly the one sin stressed by Genesis and also by Peter and Jude is their sexual immorality. God punished these cities for this specific reason. **‘Because of their fornication the wrath of God came upon them.’** On the very next day after the attack on Lot’s home, **‘the Lord rained brimstone (or sulfur) and fire on Sodom and Gomorrah.’** **‘Abraham looked toward Sodom and Gomorrah; and he saw, and behold, the smoke of the land which went up like the smoke of a furnace.’**

What had been like the garden of Eden was now a desolate wilderness. The Israelites from that time afterwards looked at that wilderness and remembered how and why God had punished these wicked cities. Let us also remember that Sodom and Gomorrah are intended to be examples for us today. Their lifestyle was not an acceptable alternative to the Lord. God labeled it ungodly, filthy, wicked, and so it was, is, and ever shall be. No reinterpretation of Scripture can change what God has said. **‘The scripture cannot be broken.’**

However, let us not forget that God remembered mercy in the midst of judgment. **GOD IN MERCY RESCUED THE RIGHTEOUS BELIEVER LOT, IN SPITE OF HIS MANY WEAKNESSES.** We may be surprised to hear Lot described as a righteous man. After all, did he not selfishly choose the plain of Jordan for himself? Did he not foolishly move his wife and family right into the city of Sodom? Did he not unfeelingly offer his own two daughters to the lusting Sodomites? Was he not so slow in heeding God’s warning that the two angels almost had to drag him forcibly out of the city? Was he not so weak that he pleaded with God to live in the city of Zoar instead of going to the mountains as God had commanded? Yes, Lot was a sinful fool, to be sure, a weak man, not at all strong in faith like his uncle Abraham.

Yet Lot was a righteous man in the only way anyone can be righteous in the sight of God. Even Abraham was righteous in God’s sight only by faith in God’s promise of a Savior. Lot had this same faith, and his faith was likewise counted for righteousness. By this same faith, and by this faith only, we are counted righteous today, and our many sins—yes, our sexual sins also—are forgiven.

The faith of Lot did show itself in those instances when he did what was right. He rebuked the men of Sodom for their wickedness, even though it was extremely dangerous for him to do so. He did finally get out of Sodom in time, and he obeyed God’s order not to look back, unlike his disobedient wife. Peter says of Lot that he was **‘oppressed with the filthy conduct of the wicked.’** **‘Dwelling among them, he tormented his righteous soul from day to day by seeing and hearing their lawless deeds.’** As foolish, weak, and worldly as he was, Lot was still a believing Christian, fighting against all the evil around him and within him. And God rescued him. As Jesus said: **‘On the day that Lot went out of Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all.’** But Lot and his two daughters had their lives preserved.

Lot is a good example of a believer who foolishly builds with wood, hay, and straw and suffers the loss of all he has in the fires of judgment; yet he himself is saved, as **‘a brand plucked from the fire’** (1 Cor. 3:12-15, Zech. 3:2). But **‘remember Lot’s wife.’** She did not

escape. Sodom meant more to her than the Lord's warning, and she consequently became a pillar of salt. Oh, let us be on guard against the entanglements of the world, the books, the movies, the organizations, the activities of the world that promote or tolerate sin, and specifically sexual sins, even the sin of sodomy. The Bible shows us that Lot was rescued, while his wife lost her own soul. May God be revered for His holiness and praised for His mercy. In these last days may He help us to **'remember Lot's wife'** as a warning that we heed in repentance. May He also lead us to see in Lot the sure mercy of our Savior at work—not only for him, but also for us. Amen!

Genesis 22

First Reading: Genesis 22:1-8 Second Reading: Genesis 22:9-18

Texts: Hebrews 11:17-19; Galatians 3:6-9

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, 'In Isaac your seed shall be called,' concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense.

Abraham 'believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.' Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, 'In you all the nations shall be blessed.' So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham.

It was many long years after the promise came to them when Abraham and Sarah finally had their son, whom they named Isaac. Abraham was 100 years old and Sarah was 90 years old when she gave birth to her first-born. How these aged parents must have treasured their beloved son for whom they had waited so long!

But then came that day when the Lord God said to Abraham: **'Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering.'** The words were clear. There was no mistaking what the Lord God had said. Abraham had been commanded by God to offer his only son Isaac as a sacrifice.

Abraham did not argue with God. He rose up early the next morning to do what God had commanded. It took them three days to reach the place of which God had spoken. But they went steadily forward, and finally Abraham and Isaac climbed the last hill together. Isaac was puzzled. Isaac was carrying the wood for the offering. Abraham was carrying the fire. But there was no sacrificial animal. Isaac asked his father: **'Where is the lamb for a burnt offering?'** Abraham did not say to Isaac: "You, my son, are the offering." Rather he said: **'God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering.'**

When they reached the place of which God had spoken, it soon became clear what the offering would be. After building an altar and laying the wood on it, Abraham **'bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, upon the wood. And Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son.'** God had commanded it, and Abraham was doing it.

How could he do it? How could he kill his own dear son? The letter to the Hebrews says: **'By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac. By faith Abraham offered up his only begotten son.'** It was by faith that Abraham did what he did. This morning we want to consider **WHAT GOD SAYS** in His Word **ABOUT ABRAHAM'S FAITH**.

First of all, we must understand that faith always requires an object. In other words, if someone tells you he has faith, the next question to ask him is: In what do you have faith? Or we ask him: In whom do you have faith?

Abraham's faith was not some kind of vague feeling in his heart that everything would turn out all right in the end. Abraham's faith was based on what God had told him repeatedly concerning his seed. Therefore, before there could be faith in Abraham's heart, there had to be a word from God on which Abraham's faith was clearly based. Therefore we say, and it is very

important that we say it: **GOD'S REPEATED PROMISES TO ABRAHAM CONCERNING THE COMING SAVIOR CREATED AND NOURISHED ABRAHAM'S FAITH.**

In our two texts from Hebrews and Galatians, three promises of God to Abraham are mentioned. These promises of God were made at different times in Abraham's life, and they were all interrelated. The very first promise God gave to Abraham concluded with these words, as quoted by the apostle Paul: **"In you all the nations shall be blessed."** Or in the words of Genesis 12: **"In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."** This promise informed Abraham that the promised Savior of the world would come from Abraham's family. That is, the Woman's Seed who would crush the serpent's head would descend from Abraham's ancestry. In this way all nations, all the families of the earth, would be blessed or would derive a blessing through Abraham.

By faith in this promise Abraham traveled to the land of Canaan. But his faith was tested continually. The first and prolonged test of his faith came about through the fact that he had no children and his wife Sarah was barren. How could Abraham be a blessing to all nations if he had no seed?

Abraham talked to God about this problem. He said: **"Lord God, what will You give me, seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?"** Abraham's faith in God's promise was weakening. I am to be a blessing to all nations? I don't even have any children. My heir is Eliezer. Lord, how are You going to keep Your promise to me?

At this point in Abraham's life, the Lord nourished and strengthened his faith by repeating and further explaining His promise. He took him outside in the dark night and told him to count the stars. **"So shall your seed be,"** He said. **"One who will come from your own body shall be your heir."** This promise of God built Abraham's faith up again, for it is at this point in the account that we read: **"Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness."** Notice that Abraham's faith is not explained here as a mere belief that there is a God. Abraham's faith was this: he believed what God told him about his Seed, and he believed that this Seed of his was to be a blessing to all nations of the earth.

Again, however, even after this repetition of the promise, Abraham's faith in God's Word was tested. For the years kept passing by; Sarah remained barren and Abraham had no child. Since God had said that this Seed should come from Abraham's body but had not said specifically that the seed should come from Sarah, Abraham and Sarah—without consulting God—decided to call on Sarah's maid Hagar to be a kind of substitute wife and mother. Perhaps Abraham could have seed through her. The scheme resulted in Hagar giving birth to Ishmael. But this was not what God wanted.

So God came to Abraham with another promise. Abraham had said to God: **"Oh, that Ishmael might live before You."** Let him be the seed through whom the Savior is born. But God replied: **"Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; I will establish My covenant with him." "In Isaac your seed shall be called."**

You see then how Abraham's faith was sustained by God's repeated promises concerning Isaac and the Savior of the world that would come through him. So also, if we are going to have the right kind of faith today, it will have to come from the same source: God's Word, God's promises. Do we sometimes find our faith getting weaker? Perhaps that is because not enough nourishment is being given to our faith. Faith grows when it is repeatedly nourished by God's Word. That is why we have our school devotions, instructions, Bible classes, Sunday School, family devotions, and our Sunday services. The words and promises of our Lord are presented in all of these endeavors so as to nourish and strengthen our faith in what God has promised to us.

Abraham's faith grew strong. **BY FAITH IN GOD'S PROMISES ABRAHAM WAS WILLING TO SACRIFICE HIS SON, TRUSTING THAT GOD WOULD HAVE TO RAISE HIM FROM THE DEAD IN ORDER TO KEEP HIS PROMISES.** You see, Abraham's whole

salvation revolved around Isaac. Isaac was not just a beloved son. He was that son through whom the world's Savior was going to come. To take that son and kill him was essentially the same as destroying God's Word and making it impossible for God to do what He had said. Abraham still believed God would do what He had said. His faith, however, now had in mind a stupendous miracle. Since he knew God to be almighty, Abraham believed that if he killed his son Isaac as God commanded, God would have to raise him from the dead in order to keep His Word. On this basis of faith, then, Abraham obeyed God, **"accounting that God was able to raise him, even from the dead."**

At the last moment God intervened to prevent Abraham from killing his son. Thus Abraham received him back from the dead in a figurative sense. That is, though Isaac had not really died in a literal sense, he had been dead as far as Abraham was concerned, and now it was as though he was alive again.

Abraham believed that God would raise Isaac. We also have been given a word concerning death and resurrection that beckons us to believe. God has told us that the promised Seed who was in Isaac is Jesus, and that He truly was put to death as the all-sufficient sacrifice for sin. God did more than take the knife in His hand to slay Jesus. He allowed Jesus to suffer desolately on the cross. **"He spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all."** Oh, how can God kill His own Son? He did it for us, to take away our sin, because He loved us! Then He raised Him from the dead on the third day for the forgiveness of our sins and the hope of eternal life.

This Good News of Jesus is presented to us again today to strengthen and nourish our faith. By faith in this Jesus who has come, we are counted righteous and forgiven in God's sight, even as Abraham believed God's promise concerning the coming Savior and was counted righteous in God's sight. By faith in Jesus we are children of God, children of Abraham also, and heirs of eternal life. May God grant and sustain such faith to us all. Amen!

Genesis 25 and 27

First Reading: Genesis 25:20-28 Second Reading: Genesis 27:1-23

Texts: Romans 9:10-12; Hebrews 11:20; Matthew 8: 10-12

And not only this, but when Rebecca also had conceived by one man, even by our father Isaac (for the children not yet being born, not having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls), it was said to her, "The older shall serve the younger."

By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come.

When Jesus heard it, He marveled, and said to those who followed, "Assuredly, I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel! And I say to you that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Abraham and Sarah had to wait for many years before God gave them the blessing of a son. Abraham was 100 years old and Sarah was 90 years old when their son Isaac was born. Strangely enough, when Isaac grew up and married Rebekah, the same thing happened to them. Isaac was 40 years old when he became married to Rebekah, and they had no children for 20 years. Apparently God wanted to teach all these people that children are not to be taken for granted, but rather they are to be received as special gifts from God.

The book of Genesis tells us that **"Isaac pleaded with the Lord for his wife, because she was barren."** In those days almost all parents desired to have many children. In Isaac's case, of course, there was a special reason for desiring children. God had given to Isaac the blessing of Abraham, namely that **"in his seed all the nations of the earth would be blessed."**

In other words, the Savior of the world was promised to Isaac and his family. Isaac and Rebekah would have to have children in order for God to keep His promise.

Thus Isaac's prayer for Rebekah was in keeping with the will of God. Genesis says: **"The Lord granted his plea, and Rebekah his wife conceived."** Now it was finally going to be possible for Isaac to pass on the blessing of Abraham, the blessing of the promised Savior, to the next generation. This morning we shall consider **WHAT GOD SAYS** in His Word **ABOUT ISAAC'S BLESSING**.

First of all, we note that **GOD REVEALED IN ADVANCE THE DIRECTION OF ISAAC'S BLESSING**. The apostle Paul says to the Romans: **"When Rebecca also had conceived by one man, even by our father Isaac, it was said to her, 'The older shall serve the younger.'"** What happened was that twin boys were conceived in Rebekah's womb, not identical twins by any means, but twins nevertheless. Before the twins were born, **"the children struggled together within her,"** and she asked the Lord what this meant. God's answer was that she was going to give birth to twins. **"Two nations are in your womb, two people shall be separated from your body, one people shall be stronger than the other, and the older shall serve the younger."**

This choice was made by God before the twins were even born. As Paul says: **"The children not yet being born, not having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls."** The usual procedure in those days was for the first-born son to get a double portion of the inheritance. But even before these two sons were born, God of His own free will chose the younger of the two to carry on the blessing of Abraham and the blessing of Isaac. This is implied by God's Word: **"The older shall serve the younger."**

Obviously, this was not some kind of reward given to the younger son by virtue of his merit or good deeds or special qualities. No, God chose or elected the younger son in advance, because that was what He wanted to do. It was pure grace on God's part. It was God's decision to make, which He made and revealed to Rebekah, and certainly she must have passed on this word from God to her husband Isaac.

When it was time for the twins to be born, it seems they were still struggling within her. **"The first came out red. He was like a hairy garment all over, so they called his name Esau,"** which means hairy. He was also given the name Edom, which means red. **"Afterward his brother came out, and his hand took hold of Esau's heel,"** as though he wanted to be first. **"So his name was called Jacob,"** which means heel-grabber or supplanter (someone that takes someone's place).

Grandfather Abraham was 160 years old when these twins were born. At that age he was able to see these grandchildren of his until they were 15 years old, and then he died. As the boys grew up, it was easily noticeable that Esau, the older son, was Isaac's favorite, while Jacob, the younger son, was Rebekah's favorite. **"Esau was a skillful hunter," "and Isaac loved Esau because he ate of his game." "But Jacob was a mild man, dwelling in tents,"** and **"Rebekah loved Jacob."**

Unfortunately Isaac allowed his personal feelings for Esau to interfere with the word and will of God. God had already made His choice of where Isaac's blessing should go. **"The older shall serve the younger."** By this word God Himself had already determined that the blessing should go to Jacob and that Esau should serve Jacob.

However, because Isaac loved Esau so much, he decided one day to give the blessing to his older son. He told Esau to go out to the field and hunt game and make savory food for his father. At the meal he would then give Esau the blessing before he died. At this point Jacob and Esau were 77 years old; Isaac was 137 years old and blind. He thought he would soon die. Actually God would allow him to live for 43 more years.

Rebekah overheard the conversation between Isaac and Esau. No doubt, what she should have done at this point was to remind her husband of what God had said: **“The older shall serve the younger.”** But instead of confronting her husband with the word and will of God, she resorted to trickery. She instructed Jacob to deceive his blind old father by pretending to be Esau. Since she knew how Esau fixed the game for eating, she would provide the meal Isaac was expecting. Jacob on his part was to wear Esau’s clothes and hairy goatskins on his hands and neck. Jacob resisted this scheme at first, but finally he went along with it, because he really desired to receive Isaac’s blessing. Rebekah and Jacob had to move quickly before Esau returned.

So there Jacob was at Isaac’s bed-side, lying to his father, saying to him: **“I am Esau your firstborn.”** Isaac was puzzled because the voice sounded like Jacob’s, but when he felt his hairy hands and smelled Esau’s clothing, he was satisfied. Thinking he was blessing Esau, he blessed Jacob with these words: **“Let people serve you, and nations bow down to you. Cursed be everyone who curses you, and blessed be those who bless you.”**

A short time later, Esau returned from the hunt, hoping to have Isaac’s blessing. At that point Isaac realized what had happened. He must have remembered then what God had said before the boys were born. For now he **“trembled exceedingly, and said, ‘Where is the one who hunted game and brought it to me? I have blessed him—and indeed he shall be blessed.’”**

You see, through Jacob’s deception GOD OVERRULED ISAAC’S FAILURE TO ACCEPT GOD’S DIRECTION. When Isaac said, **“I have blessed Jacob—and indeed he shall be blessed,”** this was his admission of guilt and the statement of his determination now to give the blessing to Jacob as God had directed from the beginning.

Man proposes; God disposes. We make our plans contrary to the will of God, but God still works all things out in such a way that **“all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.”** All things work together for good to God’s children—yes, even their blunders and failures. This certainly does not excuse Rebekah or Jacob or Isaac or Esau. They were all at fault, disobeying God in one way or another. But the end result was that the blessing went where God wanted it to go; it went to Jacob and served God’s plan of salvation.

Thus what the letter to the Hebrews says is true: **“By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come.”** FINALLY ISAAC BOWED TO GOD’S WILL AND BLESSED HIS SONS AS GOD DIRECTED. When Esau pleaded with his father to change his mind, Isaac remained firm. Isaac said to Esau: **“I have made Jacob your master, and all his brethren I have given to him as servants.”** Finally Isaac did pronounce a kind of blessing on Esau. He said: **“You shall serve your brother, and it shall come to pass, when you become restless, that you shall break his yoke from your neck.”** This prophecy was fulfilled when Herod the Great, a descendant of Esau, ruled over the land of Judea.

But the blessing of the Savior was unreservedly given to Jacob. Isaac called him in again and said to him: **“May God Almighty bless you, and make you fruitful and multiply you ..., and give you the blessing of Abraham, to you and your descendants with you.”** By faith Isaac spoke these words, trusting God’s original promise and obeying His Word.

Also by faith in God’s promise concerning the coming Savior, Isaac was counted righteous in God’s sight, just as his father Abraham was. So it shall be on the Last Day that **“many will come from east and west and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.”** Isaac will be there because of God’s grace. It’s the same grace which forgave Isaac’s sins. It’s the same grace which worked through the promise and created faith in Isaac’s heart. It’s the same grace which led Isaac to receive by faith the benefits of his own Seed, Jesus Christ, who lived and died and rose again for us all.

Shall we be there also in the kingdom of heaven? Not if we depend on or follow the wrong thing, like Esau did in depending on his being the firstborn, or Rebekah did in depending on her own scheming, or Isaac did in following his own feelings rather than the Word of God. Salvation has never been a matter of human efforts or privileges of birth or outward association. There is only one way of salvation, and that way is Jesus Christ, in whom Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all trusted in spite of their many flaws and failings. This one way of salvation is by grace alone, received by faith alone. May God forgive us for Jesus' sake the many times we have thought that we know better than He. May He teach us to rely alone on Jesus Christ, His Word, and His promises. Amen!

(To be continued)

An Exegetical Study Of Galatians 4:21 - 31

Steven P. Sippert

Editor's Note: In the 2004 spring semester the exegetical study below was presented to the seminary students in New Testament Exegesis class. The students, of course, had the benefit of having studied in depth the previous chapters of Galatians. The readers of this article would be well served to at least read Galatians 3:1-4:20 and refresh their knowledge of the apostle's flow of thought and the context which precedes the text being considered in this article.

Introduction: In the closing verses of chapter 4 Paul concludes the doctrinal portion of his letter with an allegory, which he draws from the Old Testament history of Abraham, his two sons, and their respective mothers. The allegory God inspired him to use makes a comparison of Hagar and Ishmael to the bondage of legalism under the old covenant and a comparison of Sarah and Isaac to the freedom Christians have under the gospel of the new covenant.

The exegetical study of this section has been divided into three parts. The Greek text is taken from the 27th edition of Nestle-Aland. The translations in italics are the exegete's. Parenthetical insertions introduced with the abbreviation v.r. indicate a pertinent variant reading. Other Scripture passages are quoted in the NKJV.

Verses 21 - 23: Λέγετέ μοι, οἱ ὑπὸ νόμον θέλοντες εἶναι, τὸν νόμον οὐκ ἀκούετε; γέγραπται γὰρ ὅτι Ἀβραὰμ δύο υἱοὺς ἔσχευ, ἓνα ἐκ τῆς παιδίσκης καὶ ἓνα ἐκ τῆς ἐλευθέρας. ἀλλ' ὁ μὲν ἐκ τῆς παιδίσκης κατὰ σάρκα γεγέννηται, ὁ δὲ ἐκ τῆς ἐλευθέρας δι' ἐπαγγελίας.

Tell me, you who want to be under law, don't you hear the Law? For it stands written that Abraham had two sons: one from the slave woman and one from the free woman. But the one from the slave woman has been born according to the flesh, whereas the one from the free woman through (v.r. the) promise,

λεγετέ μοι Based on context alone, we recognize the verb form as present imperative. Paul urges the Galatians to examine the legitimacy of their convictions in the light of God's Word.

οἱ ὑπὸ νόμον θέλοντες εἶναι The nominative participle with article serves as a form of direct address (since there is no distinct vocative form). It would seem from these words that the Judaizers¹ had convinced the Galatians, or some of the Galatians, to *want* to be under law as the sure way to be justified in God's sight.

τὸν νόμον οὐκ ἀκούετε; The use of νόμον with the article and the context of the following verses indicate that Paul is referring to the Pentateuch, named in the New Testament as "the Law," since the Law of Moses contained in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy was such a prominent feature of the books Moses wrote. Paul is about to use an account in Genesis to make his point. By including οὐκ in his question to the Galatians, he expects his

readers to agree with the assessment that wanting to be under God's law (His commands) goes against what God is saying in His Word, even the part of His Word that includes the law.

γέγραπται γὰρ ὅτι Ἀβραὰμ δύο υἱοὺς ἔσχεν The perfect passive form of γράφω was an authoritative way to appeal to the Old Testament as divine confirmation and proof of what was being said. What God had written long ago still stood as His declaration of truth.

ἕνα ἐκ τῆς παιδίσκης καὶ ἕνα ἐκ τῆς ἐλευθέρας. Abraham's two sons had different mothers: Ishmael was born from the slave woman Hagar, and Isaac was born from his wife Sarah. Keep in mind that the status of the mother, not the father, determined the status of the child. Thus Ishmael was born a slave and Isaac was not. Also recall from the history in Genesis that Sarah offered her slave Hagar to Abraham as a child-bearing concubine in the misguided and sinful human attempt to bring about God's promise of an heir to Abraham.

ἀλλ' ὁ μὲν ἐκ τῆς παιδίσκης κατὰ σάρκα γεγέννηται Paul uses a μὲν...δε construction to contrast the difference between the two births. He also introduces the upcoming allegory through the perfect passive form γεγέννηται. Several grammarians call this a *perfect of allegory*: the perfect tense is used to refer to an OT event as a happening in the past which teaches something relevant in the present. The Genesis account of old can be applied to present circumstances because certain details in the birth of Ishmael have happened in a relevant way "according to the flesh." We note that (1) he was born in the ordinary, natural way with no involvement of the supernatural power of God; (2) he inherited his mother's status as a slave; and (3) he was born as the result of human meddling (on the part of Sarah and Abraham) with God's promise.

ὁ δὲ ἐκ τῆς ἐλευθέρας δι' [τῆς] ἐπαγγελίας. The circumstances of Isaac's birth were strikingly different and so much better: 1) he was born in a miraculous way to parents well past the age of child-bearing – cf. Romans 4:19-21; 2) he inherited freedom because of his mother's status; and 3) he was born, as Paul clearly indicates, *through God's promise*. A fairly well-supported variant has the Greek article τῆς before ἐπαγγελίας, which would focus all the more on the well-known Messianic promise which God had made to Abraham.

Verses 24 - 27: ἄτινά ἐστιν ἀλληγορούμενα· αὐταὶ γὰρ εἰσιν δύο διαθήκαι, μία μὲν ἀπὸ ὄρους Σινᾶ εἰς δουλείαν γεννώσα, ἣτις ἐστὶν Ἀγάρ. τὸ δὲ Ἀγάρ Σινᾶ ὄρος ἐστὶν ἐν τῇ Ἀραβίᾳ· συστοιχεῖ δὲ τῇ νῦν Ἱερουσαλήμ, δουλεύει γὰρ μετὰ τῶν τέκνων αὐτῆς. ἡ δὲ ἄνω Ἱερουσαλήμ ἐλευθέρᾳ ἐστίν, ἣτις ἐστὶν μήτηρ ἡμῶν· γέγραπται γὰρ· εὐφράνθητι, στεῖρα ἢ οὐ τίκτουςα, ῥῆξον καὶ βόησον, ἢ οὐκ ὠδίνουσα· ὅτι πολλὰ τὰ τέκνα τῆς ἐρήμου μᾶλλον ἢ τῆς ἐχούσης τὸν ἄνδρα.

which events are spoken allegorically, for these women are two covenants—one indeed from Mt. Sinai giving birth into slavery, which covenant is Hagar. Now “Hagar” is Mt. Sinai in the region of Arabia, but corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for it is a slave with its children. But the Jerusalem above is free, which is mother of (v.x. all of) us. For it stands written, “Be glad, you barren one who do not give birth; let loose and shout, you who experience no birth pains, because the children of the deserted one are many more than those of the one who has a husband.”

Paul's use of allegory must be understood in the proper light: he is neither practicing bad hermeneutics himself nor is he permitting any of his readers, then or now, to use an allegorical model in their interpretation of the Scriptures. We note especially that Paul has already made his point a number of times in chapters 3-4, using clear Scripture to do so. He ends with this allegory only as a fitting illustration of what he has been saying, not as a definitive proof. We recognize also that the Holy Spirit has used the true history of Genesis to convey "another meaning" which He intended all along. In this regard Ylvisaker has passed onto us the sound confessional Lutheran principle of old: "Only when the type [allegory] is innate can it be used in

argumentation.... The allegorical sense is to be used in argumentation only when it is innate or put into it by the Holy Spirit Himself.”²

ἄτινά ἐστιν ἀλληγορούμενα The indefinite relative pronoun ἄτινα is neuter, referring to the events which transpired rather than the persons involved. The verb construction appears to be a present periphrastic (present indicative of εἰμί + present participle). The present passive participle ἀλληγορούμενα translates literally as “spoken with another meaning.” It’s a hapax legomenon, occurring only here in the NT. Alternate ways of translating include “expressing something else” or “taken figuratively.” The linear action of the participle indicates that the additional meaning conveyed in the Genesis account continues to apply to the time of the present.

αὗται γάρ εἰσιν δύο διαθήκαι The demonstrative pronoun αὗται is feminine, pointing to the two women, Hagar and Sarah. These are equated to the two covenants. Paul draws out some of the details in comparing Hagar to the old covenant.

μία μὲν ἀπὸ ὄρους Σινᾶ εἰς δουλείαν γεννώσα, ἣτις ἐστὶν Ἀγάρ. Paul equates Hagar with the former covenant God had given and describes it in terms of its geographical origin (ἀπὸ ὄρους) and its spiritual limitation (εἰς δουλείαν γεννώσα – aorist active participle of γεννάω). Like Hagar bearing Ishmael as a slave, the old covenant issued from Mt. Sinai could only make its followers, its children, slaves of legalistic obligation to its demands and prisoners of the guilt and curse of sin.

τὸ δὲ Ἀγὰρ Σινᾶ ὄρος ἐστὶν ἐν τῇ Ἀραβίᾳ Over the years expositors have struggled with the exact reading of the text, the details of the text, and the intended significance of this first clause in v. 25. For the sake of brevity we can limit our focus to a few observations:

- The neuter article refers not to the natural gender of the person (that would have to be feminine) but rather to the grammatical form, perhaps similar in force to our use of quotation marks to refer to a word or phrase previously used in the context.
- Based on v. 24 and the rest of v. 25, we know that Paul equates Hagar with the old covenant and its effect on the Jews. Yet he makes this association between the word “Hagar” and Mt. Sinai, with the added phrase that the mountain is located in Arabia.
- It would appear that Paul is doing more than giving geographical information. Arabia, after all, was not the land God promised to Abraham and his descendants. The old covenant given to the Jews on Mt. Sinai originated from a place outside Palestine, far away from Mt. Zion. Israel and Mt. Zion were the chosen locales for God and His people, not Arabia and Mt. Sinai. Compare a similar distinction made in Hebrews 12:18-24.

συστοιχεῖ δὲ τῇ νῦν Ἱερουσαλήμ With the indicative verb συστοιχεῖ (lit. “to stand in the same line,” i.e. to match up or correspond to, with an instrumental/dative direct object³) Paul extends the comparison of Hagar to the city of Jerusalem at that “present” time. It was the Jewish center of worship under the domain of the old covenant. The Law of Moses in effect had directed the covenant people to come to this city to observe the commanded festivals, to participate in the commanded sacrifices, and to make proper use of the Temple. It was the primary site for the old covenant to be served by the Jews.

δουλεύει γὰρ μετὰ τῶν τέκνων αὐτῆς With these words Paul explains (γὰρ) why Jerusalem was like the slave-mother Hagar. Under the restrictions of the old covenant the holy city, centered as it was around the holy temple mount, had no freedom. It served as slave to God’s will and only for a time. Likewise, those who came to Jerusalem out of a legalistic compulsion to follow the Law of Moses were living in the same kind of bondage. Might there be a special significance of these words for the Galatian readers personally, if the Judaizers had indeed come from Jerusalem (cf. Gal. 2:12) and advocated that Gentile Christians observe the same Jerusalem-based festivals and rituals that the dispersion Jews were observing? If so, they were leading Gentiles into the same bondage which shackled the Jews.

ἡ δὲ ἄνω Ἱερουσαλήμ ἐλευθέρα ἐστίν, ἥτις ἐστὶν μήτηρ ἡμῶν Paul does not contrast the “present” Jerusalem with a future Jerusalem, but says that “*the Jerusalem above is free, which is mother of us (v.r. all).*” The variant reading πάντων has decent support, which includes the Majority, an early uncial dating from the 400’s, and Irenaeus according to a Latin translation.

The Greek ideal of a self-governing city with free citizens claiming it as their mother lends itself well to Paul’s extended metaphor. The heavenly Jerusalem has been properly understood by many as synonymous with the Holy Christian Church. This exact association is made by the writer to the Hebrews, who has equated “Mt. Zion” and “the heavenly Jerusalem” to the “church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven” in Hebrews 12:22 -23 Without explicitly saying it, Paul seems to imply that the new covenant, like Sarah, gives birth into the state of freedom. The new covenant brings about the fact that the heavenly Jerusalem is free, because God makes her free through the forgiveness of sins and the liberating power of the Gospel, which even sets the heart free to do God’s will with a volunteer spirit of grateful love and devotion. Because the Holy Christian Church has the Gospel in her possession, it fits the analogy of Scripture to think of this unseen entity as the “mother” of those who believe. Since the Holy Spirit has used the Gospel in Word and Sacrament, *as it is preached and administered by the believers* (the members of the Holy Christian Church), to create faith in new believers, Paul can rightly illustrate through allegorical comparison that the Holy Christian Church has, in a manner of speaking, given birth and become the mother of those who come to faith in Christ.

For Paul to extend his comparison this far surely has precedent in Old Testament prophecy, as he is about to point out in v. 27:

For it stands written, ‘Be glad, you barren one who do not give birth; let loose and shout, you who experience no birth pains, because the children of the deserted one are many more than those of the one who has a husband.’

γέγραπται γάρ· εὐφράνθητι, στείρα ἢ οὐ τίκτουσα, ῥῆξον καὶ βόησον, ἢ οὐκ ὠδίνοῦσα The prophecy of Isaiah 54:1 is here quoted verbatim from the Septuagint. Paul’s allegorical treatment of Sarah and Hagar is justified and reinforced by a similar theme expressed in the vivid imagery of the prophet. Isaiah exhorts the barren woman to celebrate with great volume in her voice – a striking thing to say to people whose culture told them to think of the childless woman as someone to be pitied, even held in contempt. From the earthly standpoint the image appears to be unreal, which suggests that the intended meaning is not earthly at all; it is a prediction of spiritual realities yet to come. What these spiritual realities might be is indicated in the next clause.

ὅτι πολλὰ τὰ τέκνα τῆς ἐρήμου μᾶλλον ἢ τῆς ἐχούσης τὸν ἄνδρα. Isaiah spoke this prophecy within a wider context, which included the warning of exile to come, namely that Jerusalem would be deserted by God because of Judah’s idolatry. The physical event would serve as a basis for a more significant and permanent spiritual truth. Jerusalem, here personified as a deserted woman, would have many more children than the married woman. In Isaiah 54:2-3 the prophet goes on to say, "Enlarge the place of your tent, and let them stretch out the curtains of your dwellings; do not spare; lengthen your cords, and strengthen your stakes. For you shall expand to the right and to the left, and your descendants will inherit the nations, and make the desolate cities inhabited." Paul has correctly understood Isaiah to be foretelling the growth of the Holy Christian Church, an event that would happen just as miraculously as the barren and deserted woman giving birth to numerous children. Just as it took a miracle of God to cause the dead womb of Sarah to bring forth Isaac, so also the conversion of believers can only happen through the miracle of God creating faith in hearts that are spiritually dead by nature.

To extend the point of comparison beyond this seems to lack any solid verification from the words of Isaiah or the words of Paul. Perhaps nothing should be made of the “married woman” and who her husband might signify. Did Isaiah predict that believers in Christ, the spiritual miracle-children of the heavenly Jerusalem, would outnumber the Jews, the physical

descendants of Abraham? Would Christians, the followers of the new covenant, outnumber those who adhere to Judaism, the followers of the old covenant? Or was Isaiah giving us a vivid portrayal of the Holy Christian Church as a great multitude, the same image that we see through John in Revelation 7:9?

Verses 28 - 31: ὑμεῖς δέ, ἀδελφοί, κατὰ Ἰσαὰκ ἐπαγγελίας τέκνα ἐστέ. ἀλλ' ὥσπερ τότε ὁ κατὰ σάρκα γεννηθεὶς ἐδίωκεν τὸν κατὰ πνεῦμα, οὕτως καὶ νῦν. ἀλλὰ τί λέγει ἡ γραφή; ἔκβαλε τὴν παιδίσκη καὶ τὸν υἱὸν αὐτῆς· οὐ γὰρ μὴ κληρονομήσει ὁ υἱὸς τῆς παιδίσκης μετὰ τοῦ υἱοῦ τῆς ἐλευθέρως. διό, ἀδελφοί, οὐκ ἐσμὲν παιδίσκης τέκνα ἀλλὰ τῆς ἐλευθέρως.

Now you (v.t. we), brethren, like Isaac are children of promise. But just as then the one born according to the flesh was persecuting the one born according to the Spirit, so it is even now. However, what does the Scripture say? "Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman will in no way be an heir with the son of the free woman." Therefore, brethren, we are not children of a slave woman but rather of the free woman.

ὑμεῖς δέ, ἀδελφοί, κατὰ Ἰσαὰκ ἐπαγγελίας τέκνα ἐστε The variant ἡμεῖς ... ἐσμὲν (we are) has early and widespread support (uncials Aleph, A, 062; Majority; lat, sy, bo). If this wording reflects the original text, it would widen Paul's statement to include himself with the Galatians. The wording chosen by N-A would keep the focus on the readers, without excluding Paul and other believers.

Again Paul addresses the Galatians as "brothers" and places them as believers into the allegory. As Isaac was before them, they are children of promise. The preposition *κατὰ* here expresses the standard of comparison. The genitive *ἐπαγγελίας* is emphatic by virtue of its position before the head noun *τέκνα*. Isaac was born to Abraham and Sarah because of a promise God made. In fact, that same Messianic promise to Abraham gives believers the same distinction; we are spiritual descendants, born by faith, of Abraham and Sarah as the fulfillment of God's promise. Compare similar truths expressed in Romans 4:13-17.

ἀλλ' ὥσπερ τότε ὁ κατὰ σάρκα γεννηθεὶς ἐδίωκεν τὸν κατὰ πνεῦμα, οὕτως καὶ νῦν Paul draws one more parallel out of the allegory. In the Genesis account (see Gen. 21:9) Ishmael had scoffed at or made fun of the youngster Isaac – an example of persecution, which must have persisted, according to Paul's use of the imperfect *ἐδίωκεν*. Down through the ages nothing had changed. Abraham's physical descendants, the Jews, were persecuting Abraham's spiritual descendants, the believers. The history of Acts reveals a number of examples in chapter 14, including incidents of Jews persecuting believers in Galatia. In our day we note a similar kind of persecution: the religious community which adheres to a form of salvation by works does not live in harmony with those who cling to salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone. The persecution does not rise to the level of violence, but takes the form of words, even as Ishmael verbally troubled Isaac. Luther's words are so fitting: "If you want to become an enemy of the world, then just preach the gospel."

ἀλλὰ τί λέγει ἡ γραφή Paul quotes the words of Sarah in Genesis 21:10 by introducing them as ἡ γραφή. Sarah's demand regarding Hagar and Ishmael were not only affirmed by God. They became an applicable and authoritative part of His word. The allegory concludes with an expectation that the Galatians should hear and apply a similar command in their dealings with the Judaizers who were troubling them.

ἔκβαλε τὴν παιδίσκη καὶ τὸν υἱὸν αὐτῆς The command echoes down to the Galatians and to all who find themselves in a similar situation. Legalism (signified by the slave-woman Hagar, referring in this case to any practice of using the Law as certainty of salvation) and its proponents (signified by Ishmael, referring to the Judaizers) have no place in the fellowship of believers. They must go. Paul has retained the Septuagint aorist imperative form *ἔκβαλε*, perhaps to underscore the urgency of the command and the need to get it done.⁴

οὐ γὰρ μὴ κληρονομήσει ὁ υἱὸς τῆς παιδίσκης μετὰ τοῦ υἱοῦ τῆς ἐλευθέρου. Using the scriptural account of Sarah's words, Paul gives the reason why the Judaizers and their legalism had to go. The son of the slave will never (emphatic negative οὐ μὴ) be an heir with the son who was born free. What Sarah called for was not at all unusual. In the rich man's household the son and the slave were treated differently, even if the rich man was father of both. The son would be the heir of the estate; the slave would not. The rest of Scripture, especially this epistle, teaches us to think in a similar way regarding work-righteousness and faith in Christ alone. They can not and do not mix. Salvation by works makes one a slave and disqualifies him as God's heir. Only by faith do we have the status of a free son, God's son and the heir of God's fortune.

διό, ἀδελφοί, οὐκ ἐσμὲν παιδίσκης τέκνα ἀλλὰ τῆς ἐλευθέρου. Verse 31 serves as a bridge between the doctrinal truths Paul has been teaching and applying in chapters three and four and the practical admonition coming up in chapters five and six. The spiritual identity of his readers as "brothers" is to be the same as his. By faith in Christ they part ways with the slavery of their past (paganism) and the slavery currently on the scene (old covenant legalism). By faith they have Sarah as their mother, since they are members of the Holy Christian Church. By faith they have freedom now and a sure inheritance to come. It's time to send the Judaizers packing and live as the next verse exhorts all believers to do:

"Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage." (Gal. 5:1)

Endnotes

¹ For more on the Judaizers and Paul's dealings with them, see the chapter "Introduction to Galatians" (pgs. 1-13) of the Galatians-Ephesians volume in the *People's Bible* series (Armin J. Panning, NPH, Milwaukee, 1997).

² The Ylvisaker quotation comes as a translation of the Latin; C.M. Gullerud retained the Latin in his *Journal of Theology* translation (Norwegian to English) of Ylvisaker's Galatians commentary. See the June 1994 issue, p. 42.

³ The compound verb συστοιχέω has the preposition συν as a prefix. According to the eight-case system this preposition takes its object in the instrumental case to indicate association. However, many grammars and lexicons have designated the case of συν as dative in accord with the five-case approach.

⁴ Regarding the usage and force of the Aorist Imperative, see D.B. Wallace's discussion presented in his exegetical grammar, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1996), pp. 719-721.

God's Word Is Still Our Great Heritage Looking Towards the Future of the CLC

Michael Schierenbeck

Editor's Note: The following essay was third in a series presented to the 24th Convention of the CLC in 2000. Each essay addressed the theme "God's Word is Still Our Great Heritage" by considering what God through His Word has done, is doing and will do in the past, present and future of the CLC. Scripture quotations are taken from the New King James Version.

Introduction

As the young man glides by on in-line skates, you notice the jeans which appear to be at least a size too big, judging by the fact that they hang down six inches from the normal height. You also notice rings and studs protruding from places which you thought could never be pierced, and you wonder: Is this the future of our country? No doubt, previous generations had similar thoughts as they observed young people wearing pants far too tight and hair unconventionally

long. Thankfully, the future is flexible. While some hasty generalizations may turn out to be correct, one's guess about the future of a young person may be far off the mark as most grow up and out of the teenage years and make the transition to adulthood, leaving behind the destructive habits of youth. Often there is a return to and remembrance of and reliance on the foundation built and the values instilled by parents. It is not only difficult, but also impossible to predict the future of an individual.

The same is true when we examine the future of the Church of the Lutheran Confession and also the future of Christians. Our Lord has not permitted us to see much of this. In the Scriptures He has given us glimpses in generalities, such as the eventual triumph of Christ and His Church as pictured in Revelation. This is most important, and all that we need to know, and yet we crave specifics. When we talk about the future of a church body and the heritage of God's Word for future generations, generalities will have to suffice. There are no prophecies that deal with our synod or any synod in particular. It is a good thing that we are not shown all the details, for surely we would allow it to cloud our judgment and actions in the present. Gazing toward the future presents us two paths which are available—walking either with or without God's Word, which is the lamp to our feet and the light to our path. Which path will be ours as a synod? It is impossible to say. The intent of this essay is merely to show the two paths before us. We will examine the blessings involved when the Word is delivered from generation to generation and the difficulties and dilemmas that occur when it is not.

**I. Our future is dependent on the past:
The heritage of God's Word for us to pass on
was handed down to us by our forefathers.**

God could have chosen many ways to convey the forgiveness of sins, which He won for the world, to the individual. In His divine wisdom God has chosen to use the Gospel of Jesus Christ as the means through which faith is created. The Holy Spirit does not create faith without the Gospel. He does not strike into people's hearts randomly, like lightning striking the earth. Nor is there some Christian gene that is automatically passed on to children, like the genes which determine eye color or hair color. *'Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God'* (Rom. 10:17). God's plan of salvation involves His Word being spread from person to person.

Although we do not receive faith through genetics, each and every one of us has genetically inherited a corrupt, sinful nature. For us to become a child of God and an heir of eternal life, a spiritual rebirth is necessary in each one of us. *'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you'* (1 Pet. 1:3-4). This rebirth and adoption into God's family occur only when the Holy Spirit works through the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. Subsequent preserving and strengthening of that faith are worked only through that same Gospel.

In this connection I have heard it said that out of the Ten Commandments it is perhaps most harmful to disobey the Third Commandment ("Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy"), because in the despising of God's Word one cuts himself off from the way in which God works repentance and restoration. In the same way, when we fail to pass God's Word down to the next generation, we are in essence cutting them off from the source of salvation and failing to pass on to them a heritage of life. Our present status as an orthodox (correct teaching) synod is due in large measure to the heritage that we have received from our spiritual forefathers. The future of the CLC is dependent upon the transmission of God's Word to the generations who follow. More importantly, the spiritual future of our descendants is dependent on the Word of God which we give to them. There is both Biblical precedent and injunction to pass the Word down to the next generation. This directive was given very early in Bible history.

The Old Testament ceremonial laws had several functions (to reveal sin, to keep the Israelites separate from the heathen), but not to be forgotten was the critical purpose of pointing ahead to the Messiah. In Colossians 2 we find this description of the Sabbath and other ceremonial laws: they “*are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ*” (Col. 2:17). God laid before His people picture after picture of how payment for sin must be made and how that payment would come in the atoning blood of the Lamb of God. Here are just a few examples:

The Passover Lives were saved because the blood of the Passover lamb covered their doorposts; we are saved by the blood of Jesus, the Lamb of God (1 Pet. 1:18-19).

The Day of Atonement Blood sprinkled on the mercy seat atoned for the sin of the people; the shedding of Jesus’ blood paid for the sin of the world (Heb. 9:11-12).

The Scapegoat The high priest would lay the sins of the people on a goat to go into the wilderness, thus portraying the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29).

The Law of Moses and its ceremonial pictures were not meant for only one generation of Israelites. They were to be taught and carried out until the coming of Christ, the one who would fulfill all that God expected and all that God promised.

- [speaking of the Passover]“ *So this day shall be to you a memorial; and you shall keep it as a feast to the LORD throughout your generations. You shall keep it as a feast by an everlasting ordinance*” (Exod. 12:14).
- *"And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up"* (Deut. 6:6-7).
- *And Moses commanded them, saying: "At the end of every seven years, at the appointed time in the year of release, at the Feast of Tabernacles, when all Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God in the place which He chooses, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Gather the people together, men and women and little ones, and the stranger who is within your gates, that they may hear and that they may learn to fear the LORD your God and carefully observe all the words of this law, and that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God as long as you live in the land which you cross the Jordan to possess"* (Deut. 31:10-13).

The Lord provided these memory devices to keep the plan of salvation in front of the eyes of His people, not only as a way to remind the adults, but also as a visual aid for the adults to teach the children. Permit one more example to illustrate the point. When the children of Israel crossed over the Jordan into the promised land, the Lord arranged for them to cross over on dry land—in a fashion similar to the crossing of the Red Sea in their exodus from Egypt. A man from each of the twelve tribes was commanded to take up a stone from the Jordan river bed. The twelve stones were used to form a pile as a memorial at Gilgal. Why? *‘That this may be a sign among you when your children ask in time to come, saying, ‘What do these stones mean to you?’ Then you shall answer them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD; when it crossed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. And these stones shall be for a memorial to the children of Israel forever*” (Josh. 4:6-7). Even when the printed word was not readily available, God saw to it that opportunities existed for His message to be spread from person to person and generation to generation.

Several passages from the New Testament reiterate that same will of God for His people today.

- *‘And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord’* (Eph. 6:4).

- *"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you ..."* (Matt. 28:19-20).
- *'Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching'* (2 Tim. 4:2).
- *'So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God'* (Rom. 10:17).

In the history of the Christian Church several turning points may be observed in which the Word of God was utilized and had its intended influence on Christians, giving them a future far different and better than one without the Word. The occasions in church history when the Word was abandoned are far too numerous to mention. While one can easily look to and learn from these cases of what not to do, offered here are some positive examples in the history of God's people.

Hezekiah (2 Chron. 29-31) After years of spiritual decay there was a revival during the reign of King Hezekiah. 'Rubbish' and 'debris' in the temple were removed. Heathen altars were destroyed; worship of the true God was restored.

Josiah (2 Chron. 34:3-7) The nation of Judah again fell away from God soon after the death of Hezekiah. Josiah began to reign at age eight, and by age sixteen he was tearing down idols. As a result of restoring the temple the Book of the Law of the Lord was found (34:14). Can we imagine things being bad enough that it was lost? Using the Book of the Law, Josiah restored worship of the true God, including celebration of the Passover (ch. 35), to the people.

The Early Christian Church (Acts 15) Shortly after the ascension of Christ there was a debate among the Christians, as the Church began to integrate Jews and Gentiles. The question centered on whether or not the Gentile believers should be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses (Acts 15:5). The seeds of legalism were being sown. These Christians had come to a fork in the road—one path led ultimately to the belief that one was saved by works, and one path led to Christ as the Savior of both Jewish and Gentile people. By the grace of God the debate was settled with the Word of God found and applied from Amos 8:11-12. It was realized then that both Jew and Gentile were saved by grace, not by any deeds of the Law.

The Reformation The Reformation era was a tremendous turning point for the Church. In an age of spiritual darkness the Lord raised up Martin Luther and others to bring forth the seemingly radical idea of using Scripture as the final authority. In this wondrous spiritual 'fresh air' people were revitalized, as the fear and terror of the Lord were swept away for thousands. The three pillars of the Reformation—grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone—brought salvation and hope to those who were caught in the despair of self-righteousness and held under the thumb of tyrannical church leaders. The availability of the Bible to the common man in his own language changed the world and, even more impressively, changed people's hearts.

C.F.W. Walther and the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod In the mid-nineteenth century Saxon Lutherans emigrated to the United States under the leadership of a pastor named Martin Stephan. He was deposed after being charged with adultery. In dealing with Stephan and in the time following his departure, a dispute arose concerning the priesthood of all believers. These were some of the questions the people were asking themselves: 'Had the pastors the right to serve congregations? Had they been justified in leaving their congregations in Germany? ... Had they the right, if they were congregations, to call pastors and teachers? Had they the right to depose those now in office? ... What was a church? What was the office of the ministry? What were the rights and obligations of both clergy and laity?'¹ Three laymen were led to Matthew 18:20 (*'Where two or three are*

gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them") as proof of the priesthood of all believers and autonomy of the Christian congregation. The Lord also provided a new leader in C.F.W. Walther, who was grounded in Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions. In this way orthodox Lutheranism gained a foothold in the young United States.

The Wauwatosa Theology After a time there was a tendency toward *väter theologie* in the LC-MS and Wisconsin Synod. That is to say that there was a heavy reliance on the sixteenth and seventeenth century Lutheran fathers for explanation of Scripture passages instead of doing one's own exegesis (drawing out the intended meaning of a passage using the original language and context). Three Wisconsin Synod seminary professors helped to bring an emphasis back to Scripture. For the first twenty-five years or so of the twentieth century, Professors J.P. Koehler, August Pieper, and John Schaller trained men in what is referred to as the "Wauwatosa Theology." "They sought to realize the principle of *sola scriptura* more fully, in a practiced way in seminary training and theological work in general by dropping the undue use of and reliance on the works of the dogmatists of the 17th century, and stressing the importance of direct, systematic study of the Scriptures as much as possible in the original languages."²

The Formation of the CLC While the formation of the CLC may not be as significant in the history of the Christian Church as the other examples cited, it has certainly impacted the lives of us here today. In this age of ecumenism it is difficult for many to fathom a doctrinal debate over one verse or one word of Scripture; yet such was the case. At this crossroads in our synodical history the Word was turned to and used as the sure guiding light. How the Lord will continue to use this synod remains to be seen.

I grant that for an essay concerned about the future, a great deal of history has been considered. However, in order to know where we are going, we need to see where we have been. We learn not only from mistakes, but also from the positive examples and turning points in church history when the Word of God was properly applied. Our future as an evangelical and orthodox church body would be so improbable if we had not received this wonderful inheritance of the pure Word from our forefathers. Despite all the workings against Him, God has continued to provide His children with the knowledge of the Way to heaven. This knowledge has personally given individuals the certain comfort of sins forgiven, the certain hope of a bodily resurrection, and the certain promise of a blissful eternity spent with their Lord. In our congregations we have found the blessing of unified hearts and minds and are able to comfort and encourage one another with the hope that we share. In our synod we have used and continue to use this heritage to jointly pursue the spread of the Gospel with our combined resources. When doctrinal debates arise, we have the blessing of sharing the same foundational belief in the inerrancy and infallibility of the Scriptures, which we trust to lead us to a right knowledge of the truth.

Thanks be to God that the Biblical precedent of passing on the Word has been followed in the past, for it has allowed us to stand where we are today. A lesson to be learned is that the more things change, the more they stay the same. The Lord's will remains that His Word is not just for one group of people, but is to continue on for generations to come. His plan of salvation still involves His Word being communicated from person to person across the land and across time.

II. Our future depends on the heritage of the Word continuing on through Christian Education.

We frequently refer to this communication of the Word as Christian Education. Christian education is for life—a concept which can be understood in two ways. Christian education is for life because the topic centers on Christ through whom alone eternal life is found ("*Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we*

must be saved" – Acts 4:12). It is also for life because it is a life-long process. There will never be a point in one's life in which he reaches a pinnacle of understanding about God and His Word. Quite often adults give that impression to children when on the one hand they make sure that the kids go to Sunday School and confirmation classes, but on the other hand they themselves make no effort to go to Bible Class or attend church regularly or have devotions and prayers with the family at home. Is it any surprise that there is an exodus of young people from the ranks of active members?

Let us revisit the passage of Deuteronomy 6:6-7 in a bit more detail: *"And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up."*

It is not to be assumed that children will just "pick up" on Christianity without some sort of instruction. The command from God to the Israelites was to teach children diligently. Such diligent instruction of the Israelites was necessary because in spite of all the wonderful things God had done and would do for them—rescuing them from the Egyptians, miraculously sustaining them in the wilderness, routing their enemies and giving them a land flowing with milk and honey—they still ended up playing the harlot and chasing after false gods. More often than not, it happened after faithful leaders such as Joshua or one of the judges had died. The next generation failed to follow the path laid out by their departed leader. Because of the strong, natural inclination to reject God, the education of the young is vital. They need the life-saving information that is offered. It is truly education for the real world because nothing is more real than the life and death issues of sin and grace.

To teach their children diligently and effectively, adults need to know in their own hearts and minds the truths they are teaching. *"You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates"* (Deut. 6:8-9). God wants His Word to be a constant influence in the heart and constantly applied to matters of daily living. Using just an hour or so a week to think about God in church is nowhere near sufficient. The Pharisees misinterpreted this verse and made for themselves phylacteries—boxes with passages written on the inside, which they then strapped to their hands and foreheads. By literally placing God's Word on their hands and between their eyes, they felt that they had fulfilled God's command. However, nothing was further from the truth, as Jesus pointed out this hypocrisy of theirs in Matthew 23. Though the Word was right in front of them, it was not penetrating their hearts of stone.

We make the same mistake when we merely go through the motions of worship. Or we give the false impression that Christian education takes place only within the walls of a church building or Christian Day School. The children that we see in Sunday School and Vacation Bible School are, God willing, the future leaders of our congregations and synod. While it is true that the church body as a whole benefits from their training, it is even more important that we instruct them in God's Word for the benefit of their own souls.

The impact of Christian education will surely benefit the mission and work of the church. For example Christian education will provide the tools for mission work, as it gives the proper motivation for testifying of one's faith and imparts the proper message that one is to share.

When it comes to the task of mission work, it is altogether too easy to get caught up in numbers, gauging success with gains on the membership rosters of our congregations. In our day and age we also encounter the prevalence of the social gospel, namely the idea that Christianity is about feeding the body rather than the soul. Our mission is to proclaim Jesus Christ and Him crucified—to seek out lost sinners, bring to them a knowledge of their sin and helpless condition, and then enlighten them with a knowledge of their Savior Jesus and the healing balm of

absolution found in Him. Again the Word of God is absolutely necessary to keep a proper perspective of what mission work is.

The very desire to tell others about Jesus also comes through the Bible. Without knowing that Jesus died for all, without the reinforcement of the Savior's love and the change of heart that He effects through the Gospel, there will not be the proper incentive to spread the Word.

- *"For God so loved the **world** that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life"* (John 3:16).
- *'Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ **reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation**'* (2 Cor. 5:18-19).
- *"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 unless they are sent? As it is written: 'How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, Who bring glad tidings of good things!' But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our report?" So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God"* (Rom. 10:14-17).

We also see a proper view of stewardship linked directly to the Christ-centered raising of children. Our society is geared toward the pursuit of material things, and the materialistic influence of this world is unavoidable. Worldly materialism needs to be countered with the reality of God's Word. The Lord has given us our bodies and our possessions on loan from Him. We are to take care of them to His glory and for the eternal welfare of ourselves and others. Thus Jesus said, *"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal"* (Matt. 6:19-20). This is a mind-set we will not find anywhere else but in God's holy Word.

Time and talents, which God has also given us, are to be used for the glorification of Christ, not for the pursuit of selfish interests. All Christians (ministers and laymen alike) have received from God abilities and gifts to use in the work of God's kingdom. Whether among their friends or in front of the TV or eventually on the job, our youth will hear the exact opposite from the unbelieving world. The view out there is to look out for number one and measure one's success according to acquired wealth. How easy it is to fall into that trap! The overabundance of goods in our country has not brought satisfaction. Greed has reigned instead. Consequently, we learn the tendency to think that the more we have, the more we want. The idea that time, talent and money should be dedicated to the Lord is a foreign thought. It takes the news of what God has done in giving up His Son and the promise of eternal life to change a person's attitude and inculcate the Biblical concept of stewardship.

From the inception of our synod Christian education has been emphasized in the formation and continuance of Immanuel Lutheran College. ILC was established with the understanding that without a training ground for workers in the church, this newly formed synod would very well fold up after a generation. In a cursory glance through our directory I number ILC graduates in the teaching and preaching ministry at approximately 75% of the total pastors and teachers serving in our church body. This is not to say, of course, that ILC is the only avenue for called workers to enter the active ministry in the CLC. The Lord has led several pastors and teachers to us from other synods, but if history holds true, the vast majority of called workers to serve the future needs of our church body will continue to come through ILC.

In addition to serving as a training ground for pastors and teachers, ILC is also a valuable asset for providing a strong foundation for lay members. ILC is no substitute for parents, but regardless of where our teenagers go to school, they are going to be with educators from six to

eight hours a day. It is invaluable to have these teachers be of the same mind and judgment, who center their teaching (whether in religion, science, history, health, etc.) on Christ. The chapel talks and the influence of Christian friends (future spouses?) all help to provide a Christian atmosphere, which makes ILC vital to the future of the CLC.

The debate which pits ILC against Missions in the discussion of how to distribute funds is really quite pointless. They are dependent upon each other. As part of the great commission, we are on the lookout for places to send workers into the harvest; at the same time we need workers to send. What we do to support our synodical school and what we do to support CLC Missions continues to be a symbiotic relationship.

III. The future is bleak without the unadulterated Word

While it is impossible to predict the direction of the CLC, it is safe to say that it will be either with or without the leaven of false doctrine. The path of truth to be followed has ditches on either side, which present diversions from the truth, better known as lies. The unwary Christian may easily wander into a ditch without even knowing it. Or he may sense the need to leave one ditch, only to be in the opposite ditch as an over-correction. Without the unadulterated Word of God as our guide, we end up either in the ditch of legalism or the ditch of liberalism. Legalism promotes salvation by works and uses the Law of God in a way that He never intended, namely to coerce behavior by using demands, threats and guilt. Liberalism, on the other hand, tends toward ignoring God's Law and His principles of truth and dismisses the problem of guilt by dismissing sin without proper atonement. Though they may appear to be opposite in nature, legalism and liberalism are really two sides of the same coin. In both cases man's word and opinion are put above God's Word.

It is very easy to slip into legalism because our flesh is already pulling us in that direction. By nature we want to think that we have a hand in our salvation. The flesh is ever inclined to add to or replace Christ's work with our own righteousness and our own efforts, as though Jesus had left something undone in the work of redemption. Decision theology therefore has a willing audience within our corrupted natures; it allows us a role to play in being saved by coming to Christ on our own accord.

More tempting for the future of our synod, I believe, is the subtle introduction of legalism by using the Law of God to motivate behavior. Only through the Good News of sins forgiven in Christ does God change hearts. Fruits of faith come as a reflection of love for God. Behavior which is truly God-pleasing comes from the inside out, from a heart that has been changed from stone to flesh (Ezek. 36:26). With legalism a change is to be wrought from the outside in, that is, the attempt is made to change the heart by first changing behavior. It is very tempting to go this route because guilt and fear are very effective tools for altering conduct, but the change brought about is only superficial.

One of the concerns in the discussion of the American Legion and organizations in general is that we could lean, whether intentionally or not, towards motivating actions with the club of the Law. We certainly want to encourage Christians to make God-pleasing decisions, but not for the mere reason that the synod at convention says, "Do this." The right thing may be done for the wrong reason, which does not facilitate true understanding of the issue. I am not stating that this has happened within our group, but we do stand at a crossroads. A God-pleasing life is not forced by coercion or threats or pressure, but rather flows from the love of Christ.

- *[Jesus Christ] gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works. (Tit. 2:14)*
- *We love Him because He first loved us. (1 John 4:19)*

In the December 1999 *Journal of Theology* an article by Pastor Steve Kurtzahn appears with the title "Temptations that Especially Confront the Orthodox Revisited." That article has helped us recognize that in reacting towards liberalism, there is the possibility of swerving into

the other ditch of legalism. The temptations for the orthodox he specifically mentions as legalism, arrogance, and lovelessness. In the beginning of his conclusion he states:

‘So how do we fight against these temptations that especially confront the orthodox? How do we prevent ourselves from falling into either one of the ditches on both sides of the road? Paul’s inspired words in Ephesians chapter 6 apply to us as never before: ‘Put on the whole armor of God that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil’ (v.11). We also dare never forget the central message of Paul’s proclamation, which should also be the focus of our ministry and proclamation: ‘And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified’ (1 Cor. 2:1,2).”³

Liberalism is also part of our nature. The tendency is there in each of us to ignore sections of Scripture that we either don’t like to hear or don’t understand. Liberalism has penetrated nearly every denomination. Many who are swayed by liberalism invoke love as the reason, claiming it loveless to practice church discipline, close communion and other limitations of church fellowship. However, as Scripture clearly shows, it is actually loveless to allow souls bound for hell to continue merrily on as if nothing were wrong. It is loveless to make no attempt to warn people who are on the path to destruction of the dangers of sin and impenitence. It is loveless to ignore God’s commands which are given for the protection of blood-bought souls.

The appeal of liberalism is also to the intellect. Note especially how the historical-critical method⁴ of interpretation allows for man to critique the Bible and decide whether or not a passage is truly from God and whether it is fact or fiction. Faith is thrown out of the window and trampled under by human reason.

Legalism or liberalism is the future when man’s opinion is put above the Scriptures. It is a tantalizing lie of Satan which encourages us to believe that we have a better way than God. It is tantalizing because not only is the Gospel foolishness to natural man, but such a lie inflates the pride and is very delightful to swallow. Satan is merely pushing the sinful flesh in a direction that it already wants to go. Christians throughout history have come to the conclusion that they had a better way than God: Abraham and Sarah thought that the child of promise should come about through an adulterous relationship with Hagar rather than waiting on God. Isaac and Rebekah each wanted the blessing to come to a favorite son with their help rather than submitting to God’s will. Samson thought more than once that he had a better way of doing things than God had.

Every false teaching stems from that same lie: I know better than God. Work righteousness, the belief that the sacraments are merely symbols, decision theology all stem from not taking God at His Word. So also the church growth movement, the social gospel, secular fund raising promotions within the church and other such ideas have their root in human wisdom asserting itself ahead of God’s wisdom.

Without reliance on Scripture as the final answer, the future of the CLC is bleak. The days of orthodoxy would soon be over. I have heard it said that the average length of time a synod remains orthodox is three generations. Some would assert that this occurs when former leaders are no longer around and the torch has not been passed, as was the case so often with the Israelites. Perhaps defenses hold up only so long against the assaults of the ungodly kingdom of the world. Whatever the case may be, I find such a statement alarming because I am part of the third generation of this synod.

IV. Our future is bright with the Word

The bleak future mentioned above is not necessarily ours. As far as leaders go, God does provide. After the death of Moses God provided Joshua. After Luther God gave the next generation Martin Chemnitz. By His grace, and despite our own alleged greatness, God can keep us focused on the truth. There is a bright future when we remain grounded in God’s Word.

While we can by no means make the choice to become a Christian (since we are by nature dead in trespasses and sin), after conversion we do face choices since the Holy Spirit has created the willing participant of the new man within us. There are choices between right and wrong that we make every single day. The wrong choices, encouraged by the old man, lead away from God and His promises. Satan would love to have us believe that as Christians we can wallow in the pleasures of this earth with no negative impact on our souls. He would love to have us believe that we will grow in the knowledge of our Lord simply by thinking about Him or praying to Him at the exclusion of hearing what God has to say to us in His Word. He would also be delighted to see the CLC rest on its laurels and not be concerned about the future so that, slowly but surely, God's Word is laid aside. This method worked well with the nation of Israel as many were gradually drawn away into idolatry. The northern kingdom was eventually taken away into captivity, never to return to the land of promise. The southern kingdom of Judah also experienced a period of captivity in Babylon until God sent them back home. He preserved a remnant of Judah because His promise of the Messiah was yet to be fulfilled.

We do not have a particular promise that the CLC in particular will remain steadfast. There are no guarantees of remaining orthodox until Judgment Day. When we talk about the future, the realization is there that it rests with God and His grace and mercy. He does make promises to those who abide in His Word, and in that Word we do find comfort as His people. The promises of God are received and applied through faith, which comes through the hearing of God's Word. Examination of the past reveals that a disconnection from the Word leads to the weakening and destruction of faith, as well as a failure to rely on the promises of God. While we can do nothing to merit God's favor and bring about His blessing, we have that awful power to throw it away.

The fact remains, though, that God does not leave His children without His help. The promises of protection that God has made for individuals may also apply to a group. The same spiritual weapons and armor given to the individual believer (Eph. 6) are available to a congregation and a synod. Consider these promises of comfort that God has revealed:

- *But now, thus says the LORD, who created you, O Jacob, And He who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name; You are Mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; And through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, Nor shall the flame scorch you. For I am the LORD your God, The Holy One of Israel, your Savior" (Isa. 43:1-3).*
- *"Have I not commanded you? Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go" (Josh. 1:9).*
- *"My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father' s hand"(John 10:27-29).*

It is a tremendous challenge for a group to remain true to God's Word. Christian congregations and synods are constantly under assault, and the orthodox even more so, as Satan strives to plant the leaven of false doctrine and watch it go to work. In this heathen world of immorality and debauchery where sins once taboo are now openly promoted, in a world where there is a strong push in religious circles toward sinful unionism (which seems to be leading back to Rome), the odds are stacked against us. But the challenge has never before been a problem for God. What sort of odds did Gideon and his band of three hundred have against the thousands of Midianites? What chance did the Israelites have against the fortress city of Jericho? Yet in both instances the Lord prevailed for His people.

God's protection is for the long term because He is protecting the eternal soul. Our brethren overseas are facing persecution and attacks that are not present here in America, and yet the Gospel there is thriving. Our future safety as Christians in this country is not guaranteed by any means, but we are told, "*And I say to you, My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do.*" (Luke 12:4) With God on his side, the Christian has nothing to fear, for he knows that "*if God is for us, who can be against us?*" (Rom. 8:31)

Looking towards the future, it pays to keep your eye on the prize. The heritage of the Word brings with it the heritage of heaven. As children of God, adopted into His family through Holy Baptism, we have awaiting us the inheritance of everlasting life. That goal of heaven is what we look forward to as we come to convention and struggle to determine the best way to do the work of God's Kingdom. That goal keeps one going through the agonies of cancer, the grief of losing a loved one in death, and the frustration felt in battling sin and its effects. The prize of heaven won for us by our Savior overshadows everything else on this earth. Thus we are concerned about the heritage of the Word and passing it down to the next generation intact, because we do not want to come between anyone and the future in heaven which God wants him to receive.

God knows what the future of the CLC is. Only He knows how He will use our group as His instrument. Only He knows whether or not we will tumble over the edge into a pit of apostasy. Your personal future and the future of our synod is dependent upon God and His mercy. If He would withdraw from us for a moment, we would have nothing at all. Without Him we would have neither the fellowship of uniting with like-minded Christians nor the spiritual life of our Christian faith.

On this fortieth anniversary of our synod let us neither reflect on what we have accomplished nor project what we will accomplish. All glory belongs to our ever gracious God, who has helped us to this point and faithfully stands by His children. May He use the CLC for His glory and keep us steadfast in His Word through which we have come to know Him as our Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier. His Word is indeed our great heritage. Of all that we may hand down, it is the one possession in which our children and grandchildren and any other generation to come may find everlasting satisfaction.

*Oh, keep us in Thy Word we pray;
The guile and rage of Satan stay!
Oh, may Thy mercy never cease!
Give concord, patience, courage, peace.*

*And since the cause and glory, Lord,
Are Thine, not ours, to us afford
Thy help and strength and constancy.
With all our heart we trust in Thee. (TLH 292:4,7)*

Endnotes

¹ Walter O. Forster, *Zion on the Mississippi* (Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, 1953) p. 517.

² Curtis Jahn, *The Wauwatosa Theology*, Vol. 1 (Northwestern Publishing House, Milwaukee, 1997) p. 97.

³ Stephen C. F. Kurtzahn, "Temptations that Especially Confront the Orthodox Revisited," *Journal of Theology*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (Dec. 1999), p. 25

⁴ There are several aspects to the historical-critical method that can not be evaluated in this essay, but the bottom line clearly is that this method of interpretation allows scholars to judge

whether or not words and passages in the Bible are indeed God's Word, raising doubt as to what in the Bible is legitimate and can be trusted.

Book Reviews

Graham Tomlin: *Luther and His World*, Inter-Varsity Press, 2002. Paperback, 190 miniature (5x7) pages.

This book is one in a series intending to introduce important persons and epochs in Christian history to a present-day adult audience. In addition to the narrative writing almost every page contains a woodcut or drawing, some in full color. The margins on each page explain the drawings and present short excerpts from speeches and writings of the person whose story is being told. There are also inserts from time to time explaining concepts such as medieval theology or transubstantiation. At the end of the book we find a brief chronology of Luther's life, suggestions for further reading, an index, and picture and text acknowledgments. Other books in this series include *Francis of Assisi and His World*, *Faith in the Byzantine World*, and *Faith in the Medieval World*.

The author of this book, an Oxford professor, is not a confessional Lutheran. Nevertheless, he does a good job of presenting the most well-known details of Luther's life: his decision to become a monk, his transformation into a proponent of the Gospel of justification by faith, and the stirring events from 1517 to 1522. There are also paragraphs devoted to his marriage in 1525, the Marburg Colloquy of 1529, and the Augsburg Confession of 1530, but the author includes few details from this latter part of Luther's life. The *Smalcald Articles* of 1537, for example, are quoted once, but no historical background is given.

For the most part the book seems to be accurate in what it says, but I did find one unexpected error. Tomlin says that Luther and his wife had five children: three sons and two daughters. The historical fact, however, is that there were six children in the family. The one Tomlin omits was the youngest, a daughter named Margaret, who later married a wealthy nobleman.

The viewpoint of the biographer comes through, as we might expect, in connection with Luther's later struggles with such as Erasmus and Zwingli. Tomlin says in his concluding chapter 'The Legacy': "After Leipzig, Augsburg and Worms, he no longer thought that compromise could achieve anything. He found himself locked into an absolutism which meant that he could not engage with any of his opponents, be they the peasants, Erasmus, Zwingli or anyone else. It is as if he learned that stubborn and vociferous resistance was the only way to achieve anything, and he could not appreciate any other tactic" (p. 176). Fortunately, Tomlin saves these adverse comments for the end and thus does not let them affect the telling of the story. Tomlin apparently does not realize that Luther's conscience was bound to the Word of God not only in his stand against pope and emperor, but also in his so-called "stubborn" stance over against Erasmus, Zwingli and other fellow-reformers.

Nevertheless, Tomlin does seem to understand and appreciate the main point Luther discovered in Scripture and emphasized throughout his career: salvation through the Gospel of Christ. For example Tomlin quotes Luther as saying: "Sinners are attractive because they are loved, they are not loved because they are attractive" (p. 179). Again, "he (Luther) used to say that our righteousness lies not *intra nos* (inside us) but *extra nos* (outside us) – in Christ himself. The righteousness of Christians, in which they stand before God, is not their own righteousness, but is Christ's own righteousness, received by faith" (p. 179).

AFLC Heritage Series, Volume II: *Free and Living Congregations – The Dream That Would Not Die*, Minneapolis: Ambassador Publications, 2002. Hard cover, 286 pages.

This book has nine authors; each chapter has been written by a leader in the Association of Free Lutheran Congregations (AFLC). Two men in particular stand out in this history: George Sverdrup (1848-1907), long-time teacher at Augsburg Seminary and one of the founders of the Lutheran Free Church (LFC) in 1897; and John Strand (1916-1997), first president of the AFLC when it was organized in 1962 by those who opposed the merger of the LFC into the American Lutheran Church (ALC), which in 1988 became part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA).

The background of the AFLC is pietistic Scandinavian Lutheranism. The major area in which they are distinct from other Lutherans is their insistence on the principle (stated as the first “guiding principle” of the LFC): “According to the Word of God, the congregation is the right form of the Kingdom on earth” (p. 257). Thus the AFLC, as the LFC before it, is opposed to synodical bureaucracy. Each congregation is free to do what it thinks the Holy Spirit through the Word is leading it to do. The church body as such does no more than make recommendations and requests.

The constitutions of AFLC congregations indicate subscription to the ancient creeds of the church as well as to Luther’s *Small Catechism* and the *Augsburg Confession*. Their official documents make no mention of the other confessions included in the *Book of Concord* of 1580.

The chapter on the history of the LFC was written by Raynard Huglen, who served as an LFC pastor before the formation of the AFLC. The reason for the formation of the AFLC in 1962 is somewhat similar to the reason for the formation of the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) in 1960. The LFC had decided to join the ALC; the AFLC was formed to continue the principles of the LFC which were in danger of being discarded. Likewise, the CLC was formed to continue the teachings of the Lutheran Synodical Conference, which were being discarded to one degree or another in the member synods of the Synodical Conference.

The chapter on the history of the AFLC was written by Robert L. Lee, the current president of the AFLC. Forty-one congregations of the old LFC and some others formed the new AFLC; almost all of these are located in Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota. The organizing meeting took place in Thief River Falls, Minnesota, in October of 1962. It was a time of confusion and separation in many congregations as the LFC officially became part of the ALC in 1963. At the 1963 conference at Fargo, North Dakota, there were 435 lay people and 21 pastors present, representing over 65 congregations. Fifteen new congregations were established because of divisions in congregations that merged. A new church magazine, *The Lutheran Ambassador*, was being published. Almost from the beginning the AFLC supported mission work in Brazil, since a veteran missionary in Brazil found himself in agreement with the AFLC. A new seminary got its start in 1964, and by 1966 a Bible School was opened, which has grown to become the largest Lutheran Bible school in the world.

The AFLC has grown quite rapidly. By 1990 there were 200 affiliated congregations, many of them joining because of opposition to the formation of the ELCA in 1988. As of 2002 the AFLC was the fourth largest Lutheran church body in the USA, with the largest three being the ELCA, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS), and the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS).

Other chapters discuss the importance of congregational polity. “The founders of the LFC were unique in American Lutheranism in that they did not consider church polity an ‘open question’” (p. 67). Sverdrup considered synods and other church organizations as “non -biblical and unnecessary” (p. 94). He taught that the congregation should be free not only from synodical authority but also from the domination of its pastor. The pastor is the servant of the congregation. Free congregations emphasize the activity of the lay people, with emphasis on prayer meetings,

home devotions, personal evangelism and the priesthood of all believers in Christ. So-called lay preachers are common in the AFLC; this means that the lay preacher does not earn his living by ministerial work.

One of the last chapters describes what the AFLC calls the Annual Conference. The AFLC is not incorporated as such, but property is held and actions are taken by individual corporations within the AFLC. "There are four major corporations – Missions, Schools, ARC (Association Retreat Center), and the Coordinating Committee.... Each corporation is legally separated from the others with no oversight corporation to bind them together. The only tie between them is a spiritual one" (p. 190). Thus the decisions of the Annual Conference are not binding, but are rather recommendations to the various corporations. There is no delegate system in the AFLC. All members of AFLC congregations may attend and participate in the Annual Conference. The question then is raised: "What is to prevent hundreds of people from one congregation or one district from filling the conference floor and pushing through some adverse legislation." The answer is given: "Theoretically it may be possible, but it would be very difficult. First, resolutions are not considered binding. They are basically recommendations, so what serious problems could be created? Secondly, what about elections? ... Since only twenty percent of a corporation's members are up for election on any given year, it would take five years to completely change the membership of a corporation" (p. 206).

Twenty-eight pages in the middle of the book are used for pictures of AFLC personnel and church buildings. These pages no doubt help to make this book an especially cherished volume for AFLC members.

As for us, we are happy to have a book that tells the history and explains the principles of the AFLC. It is good that the Bible is recognized as the Word of God and that Luther's *Small Catechism* and the *Augsburg Confession* are recognized as teaching the Word of God. We are, however, among the Lutherans who regard church polity as an *adiaphoron*, something not prescribed by God's Word. It seems to me that one of the chief dangers in the AFLC structure would be the tendency for each congregation to go its own way and thus it would be very difficult to exercise any kind of doctrinal discipline. As it is, the AFLC, as I have learned to know it from other sources, does tolerate differing viewpoints in such teachings as conversion and eschatology or millennialism. Nor does the AFLC agree with us in our opposition to unionism.

By the way, Volume I of the AFLC Heritage Series is a devotional commentary on Paul's letter to the Romans. Volume III will be daily meditations from the writings of C. O. Rosenius.

- David Lau