

JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 54

DECEMBER 2014

NUMBER 4

CONTENTS

God's Servants Listen: A Review of Proper Biblical Hermeneutics	David Reim
Exodus 20:6 – Law or Gospel?	Egbert Schaller
Concerning Conversion	David Lau

The JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY is published at Immanuel Lutheran College, 501 Grover Road, Eau Claire, Wisconsin 54701-7199, by authorization of the Church of the Lutheran Confession. U.S. subscriptions: \$14.00 per year, \$27.00 for two years, \$40.00 for three years (Canada: \$18.00, \$35.00, and \$52.00; overseas: \$28.00, \$55.00, and \$82.00) payable in advance. Issues are dated as the months of March, June, September, and December.

Editor: Frank Gantt (ganttdf@sdplains.com)
206 11th St. East
Lemmon, South Dakota 57638

Assistant Editors: Elton Hallauer, Steve Sippert
Business Manager: Benno Sydow (bennosydow@yahoo.com)
2750 Oxford Street North
Roseville, Minnesota 55113

Staff Contributors: N. Greve, T. Kesterson, D. Lau, P. Naumann,
J. Pfeiffer, D. Reim, M. Roehl, D. Schaller, P. Tiefel, Jr.

Correspondence regarding subscriptions, renewals, changes of address, etc., should be directed to the business manager. Correspondence regarding material published in the JOURNAL should be directed to the editor.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

God's Servants Listen
A Review of Proper Biblical Hermeneutics
David Reim¹

It was early morning and darkness surrounded the child when a voice awakened him: "Samuel, Samuel!" Samuel did not recognize the voice, for he had not heard it before. It was the voice of the LORD God of heaven calling Samuel by name.

The timing of God's call was significant. It was "before the lamp of God had gone out" (1 Sam. 3:3). The golden lamp in the tabernacle was to be filled in the evening and morning so that it did not extinguish. The lamp represented the presence of God with His grace. The flame represented the faith in the hearts of the people, which burned with the oil of the Spirit. At this point in Israel's history it was dark, for "the word of the Lord was rare in those days" (1 Sam. 3:1). The sons of Eli who served as priests did not honor God. They abused their position by wrongfully taking the best of the offerings for themselves and by committing adultery with the women who came to worship. It's no wonder that the people "abhorred the offering of the Lord" (1 Sam. 2:17). The oil of the Spirit was low and the light of faith in the hearts of Israel was going out, or so it would seem.

Before the situation was hopeless and the light went out completely, God chose a new prophet to refill the oil of the Spirit by faithfully proclaiming His Word to Israel and so restore the light of Israel. Samuel became a great prophet—not because he could speak eloquently, or because he had a dynamic and persuasive character. He became a great prophet because he learned to listen carefully. He said, "Speak, LORD, for your servant hears." Samuel was given what every spokesman of God would need; it was. . . .

The heart of a servant

Samuel considered himself the Lord's servant even at a young age. He knew the first requirement of a servant was to listen carefully to what his master says. With a little instruction and encouragement from Eli, Samuel would also learn to speak everything the Lord had said. He did not take it upon himself to reinterpret the message as he thought it should be. He did not ignore the parts he thought were too harsh or unreasonable or irrelevant. He was not there to question or doubt anything he heard. Samuel was a servant of God who listened to God and then spoke what he heard.

It is that heart of a servant, the heart of faith, that is always needed as we approach God's Word today. The servant, who has the Spirit-worked fear of the Lord, sees God in His glory, majesty, grace, and wisdom and says with the Apostle Paul, "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! For who has known the mind of the LORD? Or who has become His counselor? Or who has first given to Him and it should be repaid to him? For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen" (Rom. 11:33-36).

With that Spirit-worked humble attitude of faith, we will approach the Bible with the longing desire to know everything that God has revealed in His Word. We will not turn to the Scriptures to find support for our ideas and beliefs, but will desire the Spirit to fill us with His wisdom and knowledge as revealed in His Word.

It is that heart of a servant that is lacking in many modern-day teachers of the Bible. We live in a time not all that different from Samuel's. While there are more Bibles in the world today than ever before, the Word of the Lord is becoming rare. The would-be servants in the visible church want to make themselves lords and decide for themselves and others what truth is, or make God a liar by declaring that there is no truth. They do not approach God's Word with a humble desire to know what God says, but with a proud heart that has already decided what they are willing to accept. Like Eli's sons, they abuse their position to mislead the people, and as a result have turned many away from following the Lord.

The Word of God is rare because many spiritual leaders deny the inspiration of Scripture. They do not consider the Bible to be the Word of God in all its parts. Modern Bible scholars have said that the Bible is full of errors and myths and that it is their job to weed out those myths. That usually means rejecting anything that cannot be explained by modern science, including all the content of Scripture that reports God doing the miraculous. Thus the historical-critical method of Bible interpretation has come into prominence, and in turn it has led to the rejection of much of Scripture, including the heart of the Gospel. With that approach to the Bible it is not possible to understand it properly, for the true meaning is rejected as a fable.

True biblical interpretation requires the understanding and acceptance by faith of the truth that “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God” (2 Tim. 3:16). That same truth also implies that all Scripture is infallible and inerrant. As Jesus said, “The Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35).

In circles where the inspiration of Scripture is accepted, the sufficiency of Scripture is often denied. Roman Catholics add the declarations of popes and councils as necessary for faith. The charismatics and others feel a need for additional revelation directly from the Spirit of God. They deny that God’s “power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him. . .” as revealed in Scripture (2 Pet. 1:3). There are countless books available, teaching people how to “listen to God’s voice.” This may sound good on the surface, like a renewal of Samuel’s desire. But they do not urge people to listen to God’s voice in the written word of Holy Scripture, but rather to an “inner voice” coming to them in various ways. In reality they do not want to listen to God’s voice as He has given it to us, but to other voices that appeal to their own sense of right and holiness.

Without the heart of a servant that knows the Bible is God’s Word and desires to hear God’s Word therein, the relevance of Scripture will be undermined, as we also see today. The Bible is not considered to be relevant for today’s society and its modern problems. The Seeker Movement, for one, wants to limit the presentation of divine truth to what unbelievers are willing to tolerate. Therefore they may have a “form of godliness,” but are “denying its power” (2 Tim. 3:5).

With this approach to God’s Word it is not surprising that a new movement is now arising that undermines the perspicuity of Scripture. Influenced by postmodern ideas about language, meaning, subjectivity, and truth, many suggest that the Word of God is not clear enough for people to be certain of any point of doctrine. In the Emerging Church members are much more interested in dialogue and conversation than in knowing the truth. The idea that there is one single truth is scorned in favor of subjective feelings and discussion of different thoughts. How convenient! If God’s Word is not clear, then we don’t have to take a position on homosexuality, premarital sex, or anything. Let’s just light some candles and incense, share our thoughts about Jesus, and feel good about ourselves just as we are.

The light of God is going out, it would seem. Before the light goes out completely, however, God has shown His grace in calling faithful servants who will listen carefully to His Word and will proclaim what they hear. Servants who know and believe that the Bible is verbally inspired by God and want to let God be God will desire to learn all truth from Him through the study and proper understanding of His Word. May we all be such servants through whom God will refill the oil of the Spirit and keep the light of faith burning in the hearts of His true children.

As such humble servants of God we will readily acknowledge our need for the Spirit and understand that the most important step in biblical interpretation is to:

Pray for the Spirit’s guidance.

We hear people say, “Well, that is your interpretation.” It’s as if we are free to draw our own interpretation as to what the Word of God means. However, the Bible is the Spirit’s writing, and like any writing the author has a single, specific meaning that He intends to express. The reader is not free to make up his own interpretation of what the words mean. We need to know what the Spirit meant with His words as they are given.

We are not left to guess what that meaning is. For God has promised:

“Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man things which God has prepared for those who love Him.” But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. These things we also speak, not in words which man’s wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. But he who is spiritual judges all things, yet he himself is rightly judged by no one. For “who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct Him?” But we have the mind of Christ. (1 Cor. 2:9-16)

Since the Word of God is “spiritually discerned,” the humble servant of God will approach God’s words with a threefold prayer.

1. We pray for the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, that the Spirit will open our minds to understand what He is saying. We pray with the Psalmist: “Open my eyes, that I may see wondrous things from Your law” (Ps. 119:18).
2. We also pray that the Spirit will open our hearts to believe all that He says. We must remember the purpose of the Bible. It is not just that we may know and understand history or philosophy or morality. Our goal is not only to understand the words and sentences, but to realize the heavenward goal that *“these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name”* (John 20:31). We read God’s Word so that we may grow in faith and love for God and increase in our desire and ability to glorify God with our lives. Therefore we pray as the Apostle Paul prays for his readers: *“That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power”* (Eph. 1:17-19).
3. We also pray for the Spirit’s guidance in applying His words to our lives and the lives of our members. There is one Spirit-intended meaning conveyed in every passage of Scripture. That is not to say that a given passage has only one application. There may be several applications that can be drawn from a passage. Therefore when we prepare to proclaim God’s Word, we begin with the prayer that the Spirit will guide us to understand His meaning and also to know how to apply it properly. When teaching God’s Word, we do well to distinguish between interpretation, explanation, and application.

Finally, may the warning of God in 2 Peter 3:15-16 ring in our own ears and keep us ever seeking the Spirit’s guidance to know the meaning He intends. “Consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation—as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people *twist to their own destruction*, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures.” We pray that the Spirit will preserve us from such folly.

With the Holy Spirit’s guidance we are ready to dig into God’s Word and listen. To that end we speak of Biblical Hermeneutics, from the Greek word *hermeneutikos*, which deals with the principles that guide the reader or interpreter in determining the intended meaning of a passage or text. However, let us state from the start that interpreting the Bible does not require any mystical formulas or special training. Everything the Spirit caused to be written in Scripture was written in a historical context, and it follows the grammatical rules in place of the language in which it was written. Therefore the only honest and proper method of interpretation is what is called:

The Historical–Grammatical Method

I. Understand the Bible in its historical setting.

The Bible is a historical book, and it is 100% historically accurate. We know it is so because the Bible, all of it, is God's Word and God's Word is infallible. Archeology also supports the historical accuracy of Scripture, as every archeological discovery relating to Scripture has shown the Bible to be historically accurate. We can know much about the history of the world from the record of the Bible.

It is also important to understand that the words of Scripture were written in a particular historical setting. Understanding each such setting can be quite helpful in understanding the meaning of a passage. For example, the things God told Abram to do when He confirmed His covenant with Abram in Genesis 15 are not difficult to understand. The language is simple. However, to understand the significance of the account and the gospel message proclaimed in it, it is necessary to understand the custom in Abram's day of cutting a covenant.

The New Testament Epistles were often written to address specific problems or questions in a specific congregation. So it can be very helpful to understand the historical setting in order to understand the Epistle and how it applies both to the original readers and to readers today. Often the historical setting is revealed in the Epistle itself, but it may not always be readily discovered by a casual reading. A review of the isagogical background, then, can be useful to prepare the interpreter in his task of properly understanding the meaning of the text.

While it is helpful to know the historical setting so as to understand the message, let us never suggest that the commands or words of Scripture were only the product of the customs and beliefs of the time and that they do not apply to us today. The only exception is when the context makes it clear that a custom was being used in applying a Bible principle to a specific place and time. We think of Paul's words about head coverings in 1 Corinthians 11. There he clearly says: "But if anyone seems to be contentious, we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God" (v. 16). In this case the customs can change, but the headship principle does not change, and it should be demonstrated in the actions of the reader through the customs of their own time and place.

It should also be noted that the Bible relates many historical accounts without commenting on the actions of the individuals in the narrative. We cannot interpret such silence about a person's sin as being an acceptance of or a condoning of that sin. When God's law identifies an action as a sin, we know that the person who committed that action was sinning, even though the account may not say so. For example, when Judah went into a harlot, God did not explicitly identify his action as sin, but made the offspring of that relationship a part of the ancestry of Christ. We cannot conclude on that basis that in some circumstances fornication is not a sin. Many clear passages tell us that every form of fornication is sin. So this event reported in Genesis is rather to be seen as evidence of God's overwhelming grace.

II. Follow the rules of grammar and language.

The historical-grammatical method of interpretation recognizes that the Holy Spirit has spoken to us in human languages, using the rules of grammar and language that people who knew those languages would have understood. Therefore, one cannot understand the Spirit's meaning if he doesn't follow the rules of grammar and syntax. This seems obvious, yet it is often overlooked or ignored.

A pointed example is the Roman Catholic interpretation of Matthew 16:18. Catholic theologians claim that the "rock" on which Christ builds His Church is Peter. However, that is grammatically untenable since the "rock" on which Christ builds His Church is the feminine form *petra*, and not a reference to Peter, which in Greek is the masculine word *Petros*.

In denying the deity of Christ, Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons choose to ignore Sharp's Rule. This rule of Greek syntax states that when there is a singular article with a singular personal noun followed by *kai* and another singular personal noun without an article, then both nouns refer to the same person. The one singular article governs both personal nouns. For example, in Titus 2:13 the Greek text means: "the great God and Savior of ours, Jesus Christ." The grammatical syntax here of Sharp's Rule

indicates that the “great God and Savior” is one and the same person. Then the verse tells us who that person is: Jesus Christ. Thus Jesus Christ is not only our Savior, but also our great God. Even if one doesn’t know about Sharp’s Rule, the point can still be recognized by all who want to learn from God’s Word and are not trying to justify a false belief about Jesus.²

The tense of verbs should be carefully observed. Millennialists and dispensationalists are waiting for Jesus to come again and establish His kingdom on earth. But if they would pay attention to verb tenses, they would understand that Jesus said many times: “The kingdom of God *has come near*.” It is a perfect tense that is used in these statements of Christ to the people of His day. The kingdom came near to them when Jesus was in their midst, seeking to claim them for His kingdom. The kingdom of God was near when He and the apostles preached the gospel to them. All who believed the message received the kingdom as they came under Christ’s divine rule at work in their hearts; and so it is today, as we learn from Colossians 1:13: “He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love.”

Understanding the use of tenses in Greek and Hebrew is important for gaining the true meaning of a text. The durative nature of the Greek present and imperfect tenses expresses an action that is ongoing. The perfect tense expresses a completed action that has lasting results, whereas the aorist simply refers to an action or event or condition without further description. For example Romans 3:23 not only tells us that all people “have sinned” (aorist tense), but that all people continue to “fall short of the glory of God” (present tense). Understanding of tenses is essential when it comes to passages like 1 John 3:8-9 where some translations say: “He who sins is of the devil,” and “Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God.” The use of the present tense in these statements shows that it is not the person who commits sin that cannot be born of God, but rather the person who impenitently *continues* in sin as a way of life—he is the one who shows that he is not born of God.

Every word in Scripture is carefully chosen by the Spirit and is important to the meaning intended by the Spirit. Overlooking even a single word can lead to a false understanding. Prepositions, for example, are crucial to language comprehension. One must pay attention to them. Baptists and others say that baptism doesn’t do anything. It is merely one’s public confession showing that he or she is united with Christ. They don’t pay attention to the preposition *dia* (“through”). “We were buried with Him *through* baptism into death” (Rom. 6:4). Baptism was the means through which God caused us to be buried with Christ.

Examining the text in the original Hebrew and Greek can also give increased depth of meaning from words that are difficult to translate, such as *chesed* in Hebrew, which is so rich in meaning that it includes many thoughts such as grace, tender mercy, steadfast love, etc. Also *parakletos* in the Greek, which is translated as “comforter, counselor, helper,” but literally means “called to one’s side.” The Spirit calls us to His side to provide whatever we need at the time, whether comfort, help, or counsel.

III. Follow the all-important rule of context.

A historical-grammatical reading of any writing has to pay attention to context. Every word and passage are written to make a certain point about the topic under discussion. You cannot remove the passage out of its context and make it say something the context is not addressing.

We say that *Scripture interprets Scripture*. That is what the rule of context is all about. We are not free to draw our own conclusion from a verse and say that this is what God is saying. We need to let the Spirit explain what He means. God says, “‘*My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,*’ says the Lord. ‘*For as the heavens are higher than the earth, are My ways higher than your ways, My thoughts than your thoughts*’” (Isa. 55:8-9). When we read our thoughts into God’s Word, we will get it wrong every time. Therefore we look for the Spirit’s own explanation in the immediate context, in the extended context, and in the whole context of Scripture.

A. The immediate context

Many words have various meanings and can be used in different ways. The immediate context always determines how a word is being used. For example, in Genesis 1:5 the word “day” is used in two different ways, and it is immediately obvious to the honest reader how it is used in each case. “God called the light *Day*, and the darkness He called Night. So the evening and the morning were the first *day*.” The first use of the word “day” refers to the daylight hours, whereas the second use of the word refers to a 24-hour period that marks the complete cycle of light and darkness. The reference to the “evening and the morning,” together with the ordinal number “first day,” make it very clear that this is its intended meaning. Now just because the word “day” can also be used to refer to a longer period of time, as in a passage that refers to “Noah’s day,” it does violence to the immediate context to impose that meaning of the word on Genesis 1:5. Words are to be understood in their basic sense unless the context requires that a less common meaning is meant.

It is often helpful to study how a particular word is used in other passages. For example, consider Luke 7:29: “And when all the people heard Him, even the tax collectors justified God, having been baptized with the baptism of John.” This verse shows us that the word “justify” does not mean to make righteous, for no man can make God righteous. It has a judicial meaning: to *declare* or *deem righteous*. However, we still keep in mind that the immediate context of any word must determine its specific use in that passage.

We also look to the immediate context to explain God’s meaning of thought. In the parable of the unfruitful fig tree in Luke 13:6-9, we might imagine all kinds of fruit that God is looking for. But Jesus doesn’t leave us to imagine for ourselves. He explains what fruit God is seeking from us in the preceding verse, which states the reason for the parable: “unless you repent you will all likewise perish.” Without repentance you will perish – without fruit the tree will be cut down. The first and most basic fruit of faith is repentance, without which we would be cut out of God’s kingdom and perish.

We should thank God that Hebrew poetry is nothing like modern poetry, which is often vague and open to various interpretations. Hebrew poetry uses different forms of parallelism and a balancing of thought rather than sounds of words. In Hebrew parallelism the immediate context of the second phrase gives the Spirit’s explanation of the first phrase, either by repeating the thought in different words, expounding on it, giving a contrast to it, or adding to the thought of the first phrase. In these ways Hebrew poetry gives more clarity to difficult concepts.

B. The extended context

The broader context, which includes the surrounding paragraphs and chapters, also helps us to determine the Spirit-intended meaning of a passage. It identifies the topic of discussion. Every passage has to be understood in that broader context.

Consider Matthew 24:40-41: “Then two men will be in the field: one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding at the mill: one will be taken and the other left.” By themselves these verses may sound like some sort of rapture of believers, but the larger context shows that this is not what the Spirit is saying. Jesus is talking about His second coming on the final Day of Judgment. Jesus is telling us that on the last day it will be just like in the days of Noah when people were going about life as usual and then sudden destruction came upon them. In that context, then, it cannot be understood to be speaking about some supposed rapture leading up to a supposed millennial reign of Christ on earth.

It should be remembered that at times a general principle is stated and applied to a specific point described in the context. That principle can rightly be applied in other situations of which the immediate context is not speaking. For example, in John 10:35 Jesus was defending Himself against the Jews who accused Him of blasphemy for making Himself equal to God. He states the general truth, “The Scripture cannot be broken.” That principle is always true in every situation.

C. The whole context of Scripture

Since the Bible is the Spirit's book and not the work of the men who recorded it, it constitutes a unified whole. Every word of Scripture is God's Word, and so it is infallible in all points. We can thus expect the context of Scripture to help us understand the Spirit's intended meaning in a number of important ways.

- Since God's Word is infallible, there are no contradictions in the Bible. Thus any understanding of a passage that contradicts another clear passage cannot be the correct meaning of that passage. We apply this hermeneutical rule to the following:

Justification by grace alone is clearly taught in Scripture. So when we come to a passage that seems to suggest some form of work righteousness, we know that such cannot be and we look more carefully at the immediate and extended context for the true meaning. Thus when James asks, "Can faith save him?" (James 2:14) or "Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar?" (James 2:21), we know that these are not saying that our works can gain God's grace and favor, for we have God's clear testimony that "by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight" and that "a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law" (Rom. 3:20, 28). The passages from James and Romans do not contradict each other. Since justification by grace alone through faith alone is established by many passages in so many different ways, the few passages that *seem* to contradict them must have a different meaning. A closer examination of the context shows that these passages are not presenting a different way of gaining salvation, but rather teaching another important aspect of faith: that it naturally shows itself in works. Therefore as James says, "Faith without works is dead." In James 2:14 the article of previous reference could be better translated, "Can such faith save him?" or "Can that faith save him?" In other words, can a verbal claim of faith that produces no works save anyone? No, it can't because it is not true faith at all. In that way Abraham was justified by works only in that his works were an expression of the faith in his heart, and so James brings it back to the same conclusion as Paul: "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness."

- The clear passages always help us to understand the more difficult passages, never the other way around.

Especially when it comes to the highly figurative and symbolic sections of prophecy, the Spirit often uses similar imagery in other places, which can help us to understand its significance. For example, the clear words of Jesus in John 5:24-29 help us to understand the two resurrections and the second death spoken of in Revelation 20.

- Passages in different parts of Scripture that deal with the same topic help to explain each other and add more depth of meaning and understanding. We can piece together the events of Judgment Day and the end of the world by comparing passages in various places that speak about it.

- Where the fulfillment of prophecy is recorded in the Bible, that is the Spirit's own interpretation of His prophecy.

The accounts of Jesus' birth from the virgin Mary in Matthew and Luke make it clear that Isaiah 7:14 is talking about a miraculous virgin birth and not just a young woman having a son in an ordinary way.

- Jesus declares to friend and foe that the Scriptures "testify about Me" (John 5:39). We should always seek to find Christ in the Scriptures and understand it according to what Christ has done and continues to do for us.

D. Understand all Scripture in the context of Christ and His work.

In reference to the Old Testament Jesus said that the Scriptures "testify about Me" (John 5:39). We should seek, then, to find Christ in the Scriptures and understand everything according to what Christ has done for us and continues to do. Everything revealed in the Bible should be understood in relation to our salvation in Christ, for this was and is the primary purpose for the Bible's existence: to reveal God's plan of salvation in Christ for all people.

The pre-incarnate Christ was active throughout the history of the Old Testament. In the very first words spoken, “Let there be light,” we see “the Word” in action, our Lord Jesus Christ creating this world and all things. He was present in successive ages, leading and protecting His people in the pillar of fire and cloud and as “the Angel of the Lord.”

Notice also that the Bible doesn’t try to cover or gloss over the sins of God’s people, not even the great heroes of faith. In those accounts we see how even steadfast believers desperately needed a Savior. From Adam and Eve’s first sin, to the murder of their son Abel, to the world’s corruption reaching the point where the only solution was the destruction of every living thing with a flood, we see that this world is desperately wicked and hopelessly lost without a Savior. Every account of God’s fierce judgment is a vivid reminder to us of where we all would be without Christ. We can see ourselves in Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and in the whole nation of Israel and know that we also need God’s grace and forgiveness in Christ.

As the depravity of man shows the need for a Savior, God’s grace would meet the need with glorious promises of the perfect Savior yet to come. From the first promise given to Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:15 to the last prophecy in Malachi, God was reassuring His people of His grace and forgiveness to be found and established in the Anointed One. At the same time He was teaching them what to look for so that they would not miss their Savior when He arrived. To this day these promises and prophecies give us the positive identification of Jesus as our Savior so that there is no doubt.

God did more than tell His people about the coming Savior; He also pictured Him in the ceremonial laws given through Moses. Those laws and sacrifices may seem quite arbitrary and even loathsome by themselves, but when we understand them as a picture of Christ and His sacrifice for us, they take on great meaning and beauty.

We also see the result of Christ’s sacrifice already conveyed in the Old Testament. Every time God’s people sinned and God forgave them and remained faithful to them, they had evidence that the Christ would come and fully pay for all of their sin.

In these ways and many more we see that Jesus truly is at the heart of every chapter of the Bible. We won’t be able to understand the Bible properly unless we recognize that fact and utilize it in discerning God’s intended message as Law or Gospel. That is why the scribes and Pharisees could spend their life studying God’s Word and yet never really understand it, as they clung to the Law of Moses and sadly missed the Gospel of Christ crucified in their place. They were an example of what Paul writes in 2 Corinthians: “But their minds were blinded. For until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because the veil is taken away in Christ. But even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart. Nevertheless when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away” (2 Cor. 3:14-16). They missed the whole point of God’s Word and rejected the One they had been waiting for. May God preserve us from such a fate!

IV. Literal or figurative?

Many errors have risen because people have chosen to understand literal, historic accounts as figurative symbols and others have taken symbolic descriptions literally. It is, however, not up to the interpreter to determine if a passage is meant literally or figuratively. The Holy Spirit determines how He is using language and He makes that clear in the context. As with any writing that we encounter and seek to understand according to the writer’s intent, we take the content literally unless the context makes it clear that it is intended to be figurative.

A. Literal, straight-forward accounts: Much of Scripture is written as direct narrative of the history of God’s dealing with mankind in general and with His people in particular. Other sections of Scripture are written in literal, straight-forward language to teach spiritual truths. The humble servant will readily recognize this and understand these accounts in their straight-forward, historic, literal meaning.

Why, then, do some insist on taking Genesis 1 figuratively? It is not because the words are difficult to understand, or because the verses in some way suggest a symbolic portrayal. Yet they are taken symbolically because the interpreters are unwilling to accept the content expressed as historical narrative.³ They choose to believe the claims of unbelievers rather than believing God who knows all things, never lies, and simply tells us how He created the world. In order to justify their false belief, they must claim that Genesis 1 is a figurative account.

B. Figures of speech: We frequently use figures of speech in our speaking and writing because they give a more vivid picture of what we are talking about and enhance the understanding of our audience. Even if a person does not know the names of all the different figures of speech, like simile, metaphor, hyperbole, synecdoche, and so on, it is usually easy to recognize when a figure of speech is being used. Such figures are quite common in Scripture. Jesus said, “How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!” (Matt. 23:37). Jesus called King Herod a “fox” (Luke 13:32). God is described as “My rock and My fortress” (Psalm 71:3); and the Lord’s believing disciples are described as “the salt of the earth” (Matt. 5:13). With any figure of speech we need to look for the point of comparison—what exactly the speaker is using as the reference point, the known element to the audience from which the comparison is made. Jesus, for instance, did not call Herod a fox because he was hairy or went around on four legs; it is obviously referring to his cunning, crafty nature.

C. Parables: According to Jesus the parables He told would serve a twofold purpose. When asked why He taught in parables, Jesus replied, “Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given” (Matt. 13:11). Not that God doesn’t want some to understand and be saved. He wants “all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:4). But those who reject Jesus and refuse to believe the truth, the glories of His kingdom are kept hidden from them. On the other hand, for the humble servant who wants to hear and know God’s Word, the parables are a way to help him gain a better understanding of God’s kingdom by relating it to things that disciples then and now can know and understand.

Many come up with fanciful interpretations of parables when they let their imagination run loose. Human imagination, however, is not the way to determine the intended truth of the parable. The Spirit will guide us in understanding and will keep us from missing the point as we carefully observe three simple things.

1. The *Occasion*: What are the circumstances or the reason that led up to the Lord telling the parable to the audience? Understanding the reason for the parable will go a long way in helping us to understand the meaning of the parable as Jesus intended.

2. The *Narrative*: Look at the details of the parable itself. In some cases some knowledge of the way things were done at the time is useful to understanding the story Jesus told.

3. The *Lesson*: What is the lesson that is being taught? Wherever Jesus explains the parable, there is no question. In some parables, however, we must look for the point of comparison between the earthly story and the heavenly or spiritual meaning. Unless Jesus in His own explanation leads you to do so, do not try to make a point of all the details of the parable; look for the main point. When one identifies the main point of comparison, then some of the details can help fill out the application, but we should guard against forcing our thoughts into the details of a parable. The faithful interpreter should realize that any point of a parable must be something intended by the Spirit and not be of human origin.

D. Symbolic Images: Scripture in both Old and New Testaments makes wide use of symbols. The rainbow is a symbol of God’s faithfulness to His promises. The color white is a symbol of holiness. These are clearly and simply established in Scripture. However, the Spirit also makes use of symbolism in ways more cryptic. They come in unusual visions of strange beasts and horrific events, particularly in the prophetic books of Daniel, Ezekiel, Zechariah, and Revelation. These visions and prophecies are not an opportunity for the interpreter to let his imagination run free. The Holy Spirit will enable us to understand

the warnings and receive the comfort that these visions were meant to convey if we follow the same fundamental rules of biblical interpretation.

1. Knowing that Scripture interprets Scripture is especially important here. The imagery in Revelation, for instance, is often explained in other parts of the Bible. For example, the sharp two-edged sword that is seen coming out of Jesus' mouth in Revelation 1:16 is readily identified as the Word of God in Hebrews 4:12.

2. No vision from God will contradict any clear teaching of the Scriptures inspired by God, and therefore the interpretation of the vision should not contradict any clear teaching of Scripture either.

3. No new teaching is to be derived from symbolical portions. Symbolical sections reinforce truths taught plainly elsewhere and may add depth of understanding, but we should not establish any new teaching from them.

Again as stated before, let the Spirit explain what the symbolism is describing. For example, Revelation 21 on the surface seems like a beautiful description of what heaven will look like. Many take this literally and expect heaven to look like a glorious city made with beautiful jewels and really have streets paved with gold. But if one pays attention to the opening verses, John tells us what he saw and what this vision is symbolically representing. Verse 2 states: "Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband." Two symbols describe what this vision is about: the New Jerusalem and a bride adorned for her husband. The Spirit tells us what He means by the "New Jerusalem" in other passages, such as Hebrews 12:22-23 where He identifies the heavenly Jerusalem with "the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven." The description of "a bride adorned for her husband" is another familiar image of the Church, which is described as the bride of Christ in Ephesians 5.

Thus the vision of the glorious city, New Jerusalem, with streets of gold, gates of pearls, and foundations of jewels is not telling us what heaven will look like. Rather, it is describing the glory that all believers will have together. The true Church of God, which is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:20) and is made up of every believer, like living stones built together into a spiritual house (1 Pet. 2:5), will finally be complete in glorious splendor and God will dwell in it visibly forever.

E. Allegory: By the direction of the Holy Spirit in the book of Galatians, Paul made an allegory of Isaac and Sarah, Hagar and Ishmael, using them as an illustration of those under the bondage of the Law and those enjoying the freedom under the promise.

Unfortunately, in the second and third centuries after Christ an allegorical method of interpretation was developed and applied to texts that should only be taken literally. This allegorical method grew in popularity among theologians until the time of the Middle Ages. At that point it was acceptable for interpreters to find up to four meanings for a passage—the literal one and three more. This practice was greatly abused and opened the door for man to impose his own ideas on Scripture. Many times the plain, simple meaning of a passage was ignored or given mere lip service, while a deeper, spiritual meaning was sought as preferable. This gave the interpreter the freedom to make Scripture say whatever he wanted by accepting as literal what he liked and allegorizing the parts that were difficult to accept. This practice was so common with Roman Catholic theologians that the Lutheran reformers referred to Scripture as a "waxen nose" bent in any direction by the hands of the false teachers. There may be a proper use of allegory, as Paul did in Galatians 4 under the Lord's direction of verbal inspiration. In our day, however, caution is in order when handling God's Word, and that caution tells us that unless the context requires a figurative sense, the literal sense of a passage is the one intended sense that the Spirit has caused to be written, and with which we ought to be entirely focused.

Conclusion

Jesus has promised: "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed and you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:31-32). However, abiding or continuing in His Word

implies more than reading, hearing, and thinking about it; we are also to be humble servants seeking to know what the Lord is saying. Some people, like the Pharisees and scribes of Jesus' day and the higher critics in our day, spend many hours examining God's Word and yet never come to know the truth expressed therein. They are lost in their own ignorance because they are not reading to learn God's will, but rather are seeking to find ways to mold and reshape Scripture to their own ideas. They foolishly "twist the Scriptures to their own destruction" (2 Pet. 3:16).

Humble believers, who consider themselves servants of God, will honor the Scriptures as the Word of God. They will "tremble at His word" (Is. 66:5) and listen to God diligently, desiring to know what the Lord has to say to His people. They will approach Scripture with an honest heart, adhering to the given rules of language and expecting that God will communicate in that language what He wants us to know. Then Jesus' promise will be fulfilled; then all such followers of Christ will know the truth of the Word, and that truth shall set them free.

May we all be such humble servants who listen to God and then faithfully speak what we have heard from Him. May we heed the word spoken to Timothy: "Guard what was committed to your trust, avoiding the profane and idle babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge" (1 Tim. 6:20). Let us also take to heart the exhortation of Jude "to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ" (Jude 3-4). Above all, we pray that by His Word received and used properly, the oil of the Spirit will be refilled and the lamp of God will not go out in our midst.

Endnotes

¹ Pastor David Reim served as a CLC representative to the German Free Conference held in Grebenhein, Germany, at the end of August 2014. His original essay was presented in German to that conference. The English version of it appears in this issue with some revision.

² For a full explanation and defense of Sharp's Rule, see the *Journal of Theology* series called "The Greek Article and the Doctrine of Christ's Deity," written by Prof. Clifford Kuehne and published in the *Journal* issues of September 1973 through December 1974.

³ The historical-critical method is an example of such an approach. While claiming to be scientific in the methodology used, the conclusions drawn are invariably loyal to a naturalistic worldview. It is assumed *a priori*, presupposed as a given, that miraculous events do not ever happen, that God does not exert supernatural power on the affairs of men or the course of this world. This in turn leads to the immediate dismissal of any biblical report of the miraculous as contrary to reality and impossible. Thus the text itself is not taken at face value, but is treated by the historical-critical interpreter as a form of myth, fable, or thematic religious fiction.

Exodus 20:6—Law or Gospel?

Egbert Schaller

* The original of the reprint below appeared in the August 1965 issue of the *Journal* (5:3, pp. 1-14). It had this question as a subtitle: "***Are the Words of Exodus 20:6 to Be Received and Taught as Law or as Gospel Promise?***" After introducing this question with his own observations, Prof. Schaller provided an abridged translation of an 1895 *Lehre und Wehre* article done by "G.A.M" as the undersigned. At present the identity of G.A.M. is not known. Scripture quotations in this reprint are from the King James Version.

The first issue of Volume 34 of the *Quartalschrift* (1937 Theological Quarterly of the Wisconsin Synod) opens with these words of the sainted Prof. August Pieper:

We regard it as a gracious dispensation of God that in the previous issue of this periodical the doctrine of the distinction between the Law and the Gospel was once again brought into discussion. In the course of time, and especially during that period in which we were being troubled by notorious confusions [i. e., the Prot stant Controversy — E. S.], we had treated this subject somewhat more extensively; but at that time no general unanimity in the matter was achieved among us. Even today unclarity in this subject persists in many quarters. This fact undoubtedly also gave occasion for the appearance of this recent article in the *Quartalschrift*.

Having read this, it was natural that one should reach for the October 1936 issue of the quarterly; and there, on page 232, appears the title: “Do the Words of Promise in the Conclusion to the Ten Commandments Belong to the Law or to the Gospel?” The reference, of course, is to Exodus 20:6, which in the Decalogue forms a part of the development of the “First” Commandment, but which in Luther’s Small Catechism appears as a portion of the answer to the question: “What does God say of all these commandments?”

No one who is truly sensitive to the theological climate in our midst or, for that matter, to the state of his own heart will react to such statements, questions, and topics with the feeling that we have left behind us all the weaknesses and imperfections that gave rise to them in the past. True theologians will rather regard it as “a gracious dispensation of God” if time and opportunity are found for us also in our day to revive and review the discussion of such profound and timely subjects.

The issue of a proper distinction between Law and Gospel goes back to the Garden of Eden and has been a vital concern to God’s people through the ages. That the skill of thus rightly dividing the Word of Truth needs constant refurbishing is evident also among us. In our task of instructing old and young in the wisdom of the Word, it is essential that we do not teach Gospel as Law or Law as Gospel. Yet even in the simple terms of the Catechism a pastor or professor may not always properly distinguish them. How, for example, do you, the reader, answer the question concerning Exodus 20:6 as formulated above? What thoughts have you communicated to pupils or students upon the basis of that promise? Has it been treated as a commitment of the Law or as a pledge of divine grace associated with the Gospel?

Having formed the broad purpose of preparing for our theological *Journal* an occasional article dealing with some of the more difficult phases of catechetical instruction, the undersigned was preparing to begin by directing attention to this question when, in his study of the subject, the above-mentioned *Quartalschrift* article came to light. This discovery might well, of itself, have cast doubt upon the need and wisdom of attempting a new and original treatment of the topic. But it was then already too late for doubt because the *Quartalschrift* essay turned out to be the somewhat shorter twin sister of an earlier document which had already been investigated. It had appeared in *Lehre und Wehre*, the theological magazine of the Missouri Synod, Vol. 41 (July-October 1895), under the somewhat ponderous heading: “Does the Promise, Added to the Law at the Time of the Law-giving, That God Would Reward Those who Love Him and Keep His Commandments, unto the Thousandth Generation, Belong unto the Law or unto the Gospel?”

To borrow a phrase: What need have we of further witnesses? This is the sorrow of epigones that much of what they might undertake to do, others have done better before them. Nevertheless, there is a service that we can render. Even the best material is ineffective if it is not available. Much of the fine work of the fathers is out of print and is not found in the libraries of all our pastors and teachers. Moreover, as in the case of these articles, much was written in German and in that form is inaccessible to many. To preserve the wealth of our theological inheritance, our generation must re-discover it in translation.

Thus it is that the project above mentioned is initiated with the presentation of the *Lehre und Wehre* article. Certain liberties have been taken. To achieve fluency, the translation will at times be rather free; and to conform to the modern taste for brevity the material will be condensed without the loss of essential thoughts and without disruption of context. In this manner the scriptural witness both of *Lehre und Wehre* and of the *Quartalschrift* can be fully adduced in answer to the question as we have formulated it in the [sub]title.

* * * * *

Before ever He issued a commandment, God spoke at Sinai saying: “*I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage*” (Ex. 20:2). After God had promulgated the First Commandment and added the warning that as a jealous God He would visit the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate Him, He continued with this promise: “And showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me and keep my commandments.”

I. *This promise must be read either in terms of the Law or in terms of the Gospel.*

The Scriptures allow no third possibility. For they contain neither an evangelical Law nor a legalistic Gospel. In a sense the two great doctrines of Scripture, Law and Gospel, do indeed complement each other; but they are never interchangeable. The Gospel does not become Law merely because it is found in association with the Law, nor does the Law become Gospel when the latter is attached to it.

God has confirmed His Law both with threats and with promises; but the promises of the Law are conditioned by a demand for full and perfect obedience. “This do, and thou shalt live” (Luke 10:28; Lev. 18:5). Such performance calls for people perfectly sanctified, loving God with all their hearts, souls, strength, and mind, and their neighbor as themselves (Luke 10:27); and to them God pledges not merely temporal, but spiritual and eternal blessings as well. Transgression of a single commandment, however, merits all the condemnation of the Law. “Cursed be he that confirmeth not all the words of this law to do them” (Deut. 27:26; Gal. 3:10). So the Law not only imposes upon all men all punishments of body and soul for time and eternity, but deprives them of the true enjoyment of any and all temporal, spiritual, and eternal blessings as surely as all men have transgressed the whole Law. Not even the Christian, therefore, can of the Law and through the Law attain to or expect either the greatest blessing of all which says: “I am the Lord thy God,” or the other: “(I am) showing mercy.”

Since it is certain, however, that God has already fulfilled this promise for many thousands, it is clear that the promise must flow from the Gospel and has come to the believers through the Gospel. Even the promise attached to the Fourth Commandment: “That it may be well with thee and thou mayest live long on the earth,” cannot be dependent upon a keeping of the Law by the individual. For as he who keeps the whole Law, yet transgresses in one point, is guilty of all, so surely he who would receive any blessing of any single commandment must have kept the whole Law. Nor did God give to the world the promise: “While the earth remaineth, seed-time and harvest, and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease,” because the world had kept the Law, but for the sake of the promise of the world’s Savior. The many rewards of grace accorded good works cannot be derived from the Christian’s keeping of the Law, but must have their origin in the Gospel and bear its character.

The promise which introduces the divine Law has the following identifying characteristics:

- A. The words, “I am the Lord thy God,” involve a communion between God and man. Luther writes: “He saith not, I am the Lord your (plural) God, but: Thy God. Take careful note of the little word Thy; for it embodies vast power. So He says: I am the Lord thy God, as though He would declare: I will assume a very personal concern for each one as though he were the only person on earth.”
- B. The promise is that God will show mercy; and it is given to “those who love” Him.
- C. He makes His promise to those who “keep my commandments,” thus relating it directly to the obedience of faith of His Christians.
- D. He excludes every possibility of merit by promising to “keep mercy with them that love Him and keep His commandments to a thousand generations” (Deut. 7:9).

If we now compare Law-promises with the marks of this promise, the distinction is manifest.

A. God can say to no man by the Law: I am thy God, thy highest good, but must rather declare: I am thy Judge who must cast thee from Me into hell. The grace in this, that God is our God, is derived from the Gospel.

B. That there are people who love God in a world which hates God is not an achievement of the Law, but of the Gospel which generates Christians who alone can love God. “The Scripture”—that is, the Law graven in stone and expounded in the Bible—“hath concluded all under sin” (Gal. 3:22)—that is, all men and the thoughts and intents of their hearts.

C. The Law knows nothing of mercy. Through the Law God can exercise only His righteousness which deals according to merit. Even Christians, who sincerely though inadequately love God and uprightly, if imperfectly, keep His commandments, can be granted a bodily, spiritual or eternal blessing only by the mercy of God and never from God’s innate, immutable righteousness. All mercy has its roots in the Gospel. When God promises mercy to those who keep His commandments, He thereby makes it clear that He speaks, not of merit, but of an unmerited display of His goodness and benevolence, according to the Gospel which is in Christ Jesus.

II. *God Himself drew this promise from His covenant of grace.*

The words, “I am the Lord thy God,” are words of the covenant of grace which God established with Abraham and sealed by the rite of circumcision (Gen. 17:7-8). Its promise manifestly did not result from a keeping of the Law. God took the words from the terms of the covenant of grace and placed them as a heading over the Law.

In like manner, God Himself adduced the words “I . . . am showing mercy” from the covenant of grace. For we read, Deut. 7:9: “Know therefore that the LORD thy God, he is God, the faithful God, which keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations.” And after He has referred to the threats and called for the keeping of His commandments and statutes, He says: “Wherefore it shall come to pass, if ye hearken to these judgments, and keep, and do them, that the LORD thy God shall keep unto thee the covenant and the mercy which he swore unto thy fathers” (v. 12). Since God, then, had given an oath to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob pledging the mercy which blesses unto thousands of generations, by what right could we relate “the covenant and the mercy” to the covenant of the Law, which was consummated 430 years later and knows naught of mercy? (cf. Gal. 3:17-19). One must not overlook the fact that also in the promises made to the patriarchs (Gen. 18-19; 26:4-5), mention is made of a keeping of the statutes and ways of the Lord. Here, as in the words attached to the Law, “them that love me and keep my commandments,” God describes those persons who have been called into the covenant of grace and who, as their life of obedience testifies, rely upon the sworn, unconditioned mercy of God.

III. *By its purpose and benefit this promise is revealed as evangelical.*

No essential difference can be discerned between these words of promise associated with the giving of the Law and all other promises in which God graciously offers rewards to the works of Christian faith. Communion with God by faith is presupposed in every case. God must first be our God before we can expect Him to fulfill in us the promise attached to the Law. Only Christians can be promised and can receive a reward of grace for their good works; and such reward is due only to works done according to the divine Law, because no other works are good works. It is in every case an act of mercy when God rewards good works (Luke 17:10), and any divine promise to that effect is without reference to human merit.

When in His preface to the Law God identifies Himself as gracious and merciful by His promises and as the wrathful One by His threats, He would thereby clothe His Law with the proper prestige, thus promoting obedience. By His promise He coaxes His people to the keeping of the Law; by threatening He excites them to watchfulness against carnal security. Luther writes: “The temporal promises are the apples and nuts with which God coaxes His children.” Thus God continues still to entice us by promises of

temporal, spiritual, and eternal blessings. Thereby He encourages us to deny the world with its lusts (Heb. 11:26; Matt. 19:26), to show mercy to the needy (Matt. 25:34-40), to make a firm confession of Christ (Matt. 10:32), to practice meekness, humility, peaceableness (Matt. 5:1-9), to show a forgiving spirit (Matt. 6:14), to trust God for the supply of our bodily needs (Matt. 6:32), etc. The Law itself certainly requires all such things of all men as acts of willing obedience; but the Law can make no one willing or obedient. It can threaten and frighten transgressors with punishment, but thereby works only wrath (Rom. 4:15). Since the Law has suffered at the hands of all men and must therefore curse them all, it can never, by means of any promise, coax men to keep it. Since it demands a holiness possible only to the perfect, how might it lovingly invite obedience in sinners? It follows, then, that all those promises with which God encourages a keeping of His Law are evangelical in nature and can affect only Christians, who through Christ are reconciled with God and have been born again.

The divine promise is also a most glorious comfort whereby God strengthens the faith of His Christians in cross and tribulation. Holy men of God have been wont to use the promises of reward to good works as strengthening preachments for comfort. Daniel, prostrate in prayer before his God and relying solely upon the righteousness of Christ, nevertheless supports and confirms his faith with a reference to the fact that “the great and dreadful God” is also the One “keeping covenant and mercy to them that love Him” (Dan. 9:4). Moses, in peril of his soul at Pharaoh’s court, looked at the reward (Heb. 11:26); and this moved him to choose the shame of God’s people and leave the glory of this world behind. King Hezekiah in his mortal illness reminds the Lord of his uprightness of life, and the Lord acknowledges this as a prayer of faith (Isaiah 38). In his prayer David comforts himself thus with the certainty that God would hear him: “. . . Thou hast given me the heritage of those that fear Thy name” (Ps. 61:5). How often do we not read that God’s saints appeal to Him on the basis of their obedience of faith! (Ps. 7-10; Ps. 15; 1 John 3:7, 18-19; etc.)

How splendidly our Lord Jesus encourages His disciples through the macarisms and promises in the Sermon on the Mount! His expounding of the divine Law follows only after He has prepared the disciples, by extolling the beauty of their newborn state and reminding them of the promises due it, to follow and serve Him faithfully through cross and tribulation.

How it must cheer believers and strengthen their confidence in God while they walk through the wilderness of self-denial and renunciation when God promises that He will bless them with temporal gifts (Lev. 26:1-8; Deut. 30:9; 28:3-14; Ps. 37:4-5). How greatly this must help our feeble faith, which ever desires visible support when assailed by doubtful fears and despairings regarding our adoption, that God has promised us spiritual gifts which shall accrue to our obedience of faith and are thus designed by God to be witnesses and evidences of our faith (Deut. 26:3, 11-12; 2 Cor. 6:16; John 14:24). The Apology says: “And yet Christ often connects the promise of the remission of sins to good works, not because He means that good works are a propitiation, for they follow reconciliation; but for two reasons. One is, because good fruits must necessarily follow. Therefore He reminds us that, if good fruits do not follow, the repentance is hypocritical and feigned. The other reason is, because we have need of external signs of so great a promise, because a conscience full of fear has need of manifold consolation” (*Concordia Triglotta*, Art. III, p. 199).

How greatly also the hope of Christians, so deep and constant a need, is strengthened by the fact that the Lord Himself has established a direct relation between our obedience of faith and the gifts of eternal life (Matt. 19:28-29; Luke 12:33).

All this is solely an operation of the Gospel. For the Law, whether it be found in the Old or in the New Testament, performs the office of death. It never lifts up, never strengthens faith and hope under the cross of life, never comforts the poor heart with incomplete sanctification as a witness to our state of grace. We therefore must conclude that these promises are evangelical in origin and in nature. Thereby we certainly do not wish to say that they are Gospel in essence; for the Gospel in its essence is the proclamation of the forgiveness of sins to the lost. But these promises flow from the Gospel and thus belong to it.

IV. *Certain objections which might be raised against our conclusions*

It will serve to confirm the correctness of our findings if we allow space for the examination of objections which might seem to some to be valid.

A. The argument may be advanced that there is but one Gospel, which has nothing whatever to do with our works or with the Law. This Gospel is “the divine doctrine of the gracious forgiveness of sins through faith in Christ Jesus unto eternal life.” This it is in essence and character, nature and effect.

We answer: Be it granted that there is but one Gospel, and that this is totally independent of our works. It is NOT true, however, that it has nothing to do with our works or with the Law. We believe, not only that the Holy Ghost “has enlightened me with the Gospel,” but that through the same Gospel He “sanctifies me”; and a sanctification without law and without works is non-existent. Through the Gospel God not only forgives us our sins, but delivers us from them. Not only does Christ thereby comfort fearful consciences, but in the process also persuades the comforted to walk the way of His commandments (Ps. 119:32). As true as it is that the Gospel never depends upon our works, it cannot be denied that our works depend upon the Gospel, in the sense that the Holy Spirit performs each good work in us through the Gospel. We must therefore carefully distinguish between what the Gospel brings about in the justification of the sinner before God and what it brings about in the ones who are justified.

B. Someone might further say: The evangelical promises are free promises of grace, while the law-promises are given subject to satisfactory conduct. Any promise which is conditioned by a demand that one love God and keep His commandments is a promise of the Law. Therefore the one under discussion must be a law-promise.

We answer: Most certainly a promise associated with the condition that the Law be kept is a law-promise. But the evangelical promise is unconditioned not only in justification, but also in the area of sanctification, since there is no merit of reward in the faith-obedience of Christians and God is not moved by the earnings of their obedience but desires and promises good solely out of mercy. As little as the promise of the Gospel is conditioned by faith, so little also is the obedience of faith, which has been wrought by grace, a condition of the promise. As a kindling of the first longing of the human heart for the grace of God in Christ, so likewise is the slightest longing to serve God in love and gratitude a divine work of grace in every respect. Grace does not become conditional merely because a command or even an act of man is involved, but only when human work or activity is substituted for grace or is made a contributing cause of the conferring of grace. For when God commands: Baptize! or: Eat and drink of the bread and wine in the Sacrament!—that also is an act, an essential activity without which there could be no Sacrament; and yet this is the sweetest Gospel in the form of a command, because God has connected His grace with the external signs. But He has not thereby replaced grace with human action or made this action a cause of grace. Martin Chemnitz speaks thus of Exodus 20:6: “The subject here is that mercy, Deut. 7:9, 12, which God confers upon the pious in order to show that this promise does not have its origin in human merit but in divine grace.”

C. It might further be pointed out that in His giving of the Law, God placed promise and threat in juxtaposition. Now since the threat certainly does not belong to the Gospel, the promise must be taken as corresponding to the threat. He who does evil will be punished; he who does good will be rewarded. Human reason must draw this conclusion, and for that very reason is so incapable of reconciling itself to the bearing of a Christian’s cross.

We answer: The fact that God utters this promise while giving His Law by no means makes the promise one of the Law. When our Lord sent His disciples into the world to preach the Gospel, He sounded the threat: “He that believeth not shall be damned.” But certainly the promise, “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved,” did not thereby become a promise of the Law. In recording the words of institution of the Holy Supper, St. Paul adds the warning: “Whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord”; yet the promise, “Given and shed for you for the remission of sins,” is not thereby made a law-promise. There is here no

correspondence between threat and promise; rather, the two stand in opposition to one another. In the human heart the truth is written that evil must be punished and the good rewarded; but in no unregenerate is it written that God desires to reward obedience to a thousand generations, for it is not a promise of the Law.

D. It could be pointed out that the true content of the Gospel is Christ and His merit, and that the promise of which we speak cannot be evangelically oriented because it makes no mention of Christ and His merit.

We, of course, reply: Only through Christ can God say to a people or a person: I am thy God! Only for Christ's sake and because of His merit can God show mercy to any man and bless him (Eph. 1:3); only through Christ is it possible for us to love God and keep His commandments, for without Him we can do nothing; only in Christ can God bless the descendants of a Christian unto the thousandth generation, for in Him all nations of the earth already are blest; only because of Christ's merits can God reward good works because only in Christ is the righteous God pleased with the person who performs the works and whose weaknesses and imperfections are covered through Christ's perfect obedience. The true content of the Gospel is Christ and His merit. This promise also, though the name of Jesus is not expressly mentioned therein, has Christ as its foundation, source, means, and ultimate object. Hence it must be a Gospel promise.

Concerning Conversion

David Lau

* In the June issue (*Journal* 54:2, pages 15-22) David Lau's article "Concerning Justification" appeared, mainly as an examination of the *Brief Statement* on the doctrine of justification in the light of Scripture. The same approach continues in the article below. The *Brief Statement* of 1932 deals with the doctrine of conversion in seven paragraphs numbered 10-16. Each paragraph, quoted in italics below, and the cited proof passages from the New King James Version will be considered one at a time. Citation of quoted material is documented per MLA guidelines. See Works Cited on page 52.

Brief Statement ¶10:

We teach that conversion consists in this, that a man, having learned from the Law of God that he is a lost and condemned sinner, is brought to faith in the Gospel, which offers him forgiveness of sins and eternal salvation for the sake of Christ's vicarious satisfaction, Acts 11:21; Luke 24:46, 47; Acts 26:18. (emph. orig.)

Acts 11:21 And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord.

This passage refers to the gracious effect of the preaching of Jewish Christians that were scattered after the stoning of Stephen. We are told that some of these men spoke also to the Greeks (the very first Gentile group to be gathered) and preached to them the Lord Jesus. God was with them in their preaching; Gentiles believed their teaching about the Lord Jesus; thus they "turned to" the Lord. In other words, they were converted to the Lord.

Conversion means a "turning"; in a doctrinal sense conversion means a "turning" to God. Scripture uses other terms in place of "turning" or conversion; these include illumination, awakening, quickening, and regeneration (being born again).

The above passage shows that conversion consists in this, that a man begins to believe. And what does he believe? He believes that which was preached to him, which in Acts 11:20 is described as "the

Lord Jesus.” Thus in the Scriptural sense a man is converted, quickened, regenerated, etc., when he first believes in the Lord Jesus. If he does not believe in the Lord Jesus, he is unconverted, not regenerated, etc., no matter whether he is a slave of vice or an outwardly righteous man in the sight of men.

This passage also teaches us that it is God who converts. The Christians certainly preached, but if “the hand of the Lord” had not been with them, no one would have believed and no one would have been converted. But since the hand (the power) of the Lord was with them, they were converted and did believe.

Many use the term *conversion* in another way. They believe conversion to consist in this, that a man who has some vice or failing corrects himself or is corrected in some way. True conversion should indeed result in the changing of a person’s way of life, his lifestyle, but man retains in himself some power and ability to make external and outward changes in lifestyle. A true change that affects the inward heart, attitude, and will can only be brought about by true conversion, which consists in being changed from unbeliever to believer in Jesus Christ. The outward lives of the converted and the unconverted may often appear similar. However, the converted man does what he does by faith in Jesus Christ. The unconverted man does what he does by his own power, and at heart he is still an enemy of God.

We use the term *conversion* loosely also in this way: when we speak of a person as a convert who switches his denominational allegiance from one church body to another. But unless that switch is accompanied by the first kindling of faith in the person’s heart by the Word, such a change is not truly conversion, nor is such a person rightly called a convert in the biblical sense of the word. Perhaps he was already a true Christian by faith in Christ even in his former affiliation. Or perhaps his change from one church body to another was just an outward change, and at heart he remained an unbeliever as he was before, making the change from one church body to another for earthly reasons of one kind or another.

Martin Luther taught this also. He said: “To turn to the Lord means to believe in Christ as our Mediator, through whom we have eternal life” (qtd. in Pieper II:454).

Luke 24:46-47 Then He said to them, “Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.”

Jesus spoke these words to His disciples in the time between His resurrection and His ascension. He sums up the entire message of the Scriptures and the message to be proclaimed in His name to the world in just a few phrases: His death and resurrection, repentance, and remission of sins. This, briefly stated, is the message of God’s Word. The message by which men are converted is twofold: repentance (sorrow for sin) and forgiveness of sins in Christ Jesus. The experience of a converted person is this: that he sincerely repents of his sin and turns to Christ in faith for his forgiveness. The knowledge of his sin and the despair because of his sin are brought about by the thundering truth of God’s uncompromising Law, but he is truly converted only when he in his terror of conscience and fright of God’s judgment believes the sweet Gospel that he has the remission or forgiveness of all of his sins in Christ Jesus.

On this passage Dr. Walther writes in his *Law and Gospel*:

Why is repentance required as well as faith? Our Lord gives the reason in these words: “They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick. . . . I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.” Matt. 9, 12, 13. With these words the Lord testifies that the reason why contrition (sorrow for sin) is absolutely necessary is that without it no one is fit to be made a believer. . . . Where there is no spiritual hunger and thirst, the Lord Jesus is not received. As long as a person has not been reduced to the state of a poor, lost, and condemned sinner, he has no serious interest in the Savior of sinners. (249)

W. H. Wentz in *The Abiding Word* adds another thought: “In God’s guidance and direction of the ways of an individual human being this preaching of the Law is often supported and furthered by crosses, afflictions, and misfortunes which come upon man, or it may be that God uses an abundance of earthly blessings to lead an individual to repentance (Rom. 2:4: ‘Or despisest thou the riches of His goodness and forbearance and long-suffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?’)”

(I:177-8).

However, the only means by which we are converted to God and by which others can be turned to God is the proclaiming of the message (the Gospel in Word and Sacrament) of repentance and remission of sins, the message that Jesus instructed His disciples to preach in His name to all nations.

The *Augsburg Confession* briefly sums this up in Article XII: “Now, repentance consists properly of these two parts: One is contrition, that is, terrors smiting the conscience through the knowledge of sin; the other is faith, which is born of the Gospel, or of absolution, and believes that, for Christ’s sake, sins are forgiven, comforts the conscience, and delivers it from terrors. Then good works are bound to follow, which are the fruits of repentance” (*Trig.* 49).

Acts 26:18 [Jesus called Paul . . .] **“to open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me.”**

This passage is a part of Paul’s explanation to King Herod Agrippa II, when Paul was held as a prisoner of the Roman government. Paul, in recounting the details of his conversion, tells how Jesus then called him to be a witness to Jews and Gentiles, **“to open their eyes,”** etc. Paul then continues: **“Therefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance”** (Acts 26:19-20).

This passage of verse 18 teaches us that the unconverted are blind (since their eyes need to be opened), they are living in darkness, they are in the power of Satan, they are not conscious of the forgiveness of sins, and have no share with the believers in Christ. Conversion consists in this, then, that their blindness becomes illumination, their darkness becomes light, their service to Satan becomes service to God, they receive the forgiveness of sins and the inheritance of eternal life, and they become a part of that glorious company of “sanctified” people, a people declared holy, claimed for God, and beginning to show holiness (devotion to God) in their lives by faith in Jesus Christ. How was Paul to accomplish this mighty change and for so many? Simply by testifying to the things he had heard and seen concerning Jesus Christ. The Good News of Christ itself is the power by which this change is made.

This passage also incidentally teaches that there is no third possibility. Either a person is a believer or an unbeliever, converted or unconverted, enlightened or blind, serving Satan or serving God, possessing forgiveness of sins by faith in Christ or not possessing it, being a part of the Church or not. Thus conversion is not a gradual process, so that during a certain period a person is in a neutral area between faith and unbelief. No, the very first and weakest spark of faith kindled by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel is already faith. Conversion is an instantaneous thing, a matter of a moment.

It may be and often is impossible for any Christian to state the exact moment of his conversion. The apostle Paul could and the jailer at Philippi could, but most of us, no doubt, cannot. Also, it may be true of some that they have been converted more than once. In other words, they believed, they fell away from the faith, and they were reconverted. Such delving into our past is not important, however. The important thing is that at this very moment we are certain that Jesus Christ died for our sins and that we have forgiveness of sins in Him. God wants us to be assured of that fact and so has the Gospel preached to us for this very purpose: to give us this assurance and thereby strengthen and preserve the faith that we have.

In the history of the Christian Church, Pietists (both Lutheran and Methodist) taught that no one could be a Christian unless he had ascertained the exact day and hour of his conversion. There is no Scripture, however, to support that assertion. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, taught: “I know because I feel.” He believed he was a Christian because he had an emotional experience of conversion. God, however, does not want us to base our faith on our subjective, emotional feelings, but always and surely on His objective promises given in His Word. In believing the simple Word of God that *“He died for all,”* you have absolutely positive assurance of forgiveness—more than anyone can have who trusts his emotional feelings. The certainty in such believing is not the act of it, the faith itself, but the object,

that which is believed. The certainty of the forgiveness received is the truth that Christ made full atonement for all sins, dying in place of all sinners.

On the doctrine of conversion many smaller sects make the same mistake of attaching too much importance to the emotional feeling of conversion (rather than to the written Word of God). In his book *The Small Sects in America* Elmer Clark lists the subjectivist sects and Pentecostal sects that make this mistake. Subjectivist sects include some Methodists, United Brethren, Church of the Nazarene, Holiness churches, and various Churches of God. Pentecostal sects include various Churches of God, Assemblies of God, Pentecostal Assemblies, etc. Of these the author writes:

Perfectionist sects believe that an emotional reaction constitutes proof that the soul has come into direct relationship with God, and this for them is the final authority. . . . The outpourings of the Holy Spirit are arranged in an ascending series: first, conversion or forgiveness; then holiness or the “second blessing,” which purges the nature of inbred sin; finally, in many cases, the gift of tongues or other ecstatic phenomena. . . . These sects preserve the revival technique, the most effective device ever developed for stimulating the emotions. . . . These sects define conversion: God enters the soul through an emotional upheaval which leaves a consciousness of sins forgiven and a great and joyous witness thereto. (Clark 221)

This definition ignores the fact that people are different emotionally. Although conversion takes place in a moment, the convert does not necessarily have an emotional upheaval. There is also such a thing as quiet joy in the forgiveness of sins. Besides, emotional upheaval sometimes is self-deceiving. In revivalistic gatherings emotional people may only get carried away by the music and mass hysteria and deceive themselves into thinking they are converted—although, as long as the Word of God is proclaimed, including the Gospel of forgiveness of sins won by Christ, genuine conversion may also take place.

It may be hard for us to believe that everyone who is not a Christian—here understood as one who believes in Jesus Christ as his Savior from sin—is in the service of Satan, for in outward good works the unbeliever appears to be on the same level as the believer. However, we must maintain what this passage of Acts 26 teaches, as stated by Pieper in *Christian Dogmatics*: “All who do not believe the Gospel are thinking and doing what the devil wills; they are completely in his power” (I:509). This does not mean that the unbeliever can do no good works in an external way. The same writer teaches that “fallen man, to a certain extent, still can render an external, or civil, righteousness. . . . This civil righteousness does not amount to much. The innate concupiscence and the enticement of the devil, who exercises dominion over the non-Christians. . . , is so strong that the restraining power of natural probity, education, culture, and other props of civic righteousness proves itself but a spider’s web” (I:555-6).

The *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* teaches in Article XVIII on “Free Will”:

The human will has liberty in the choice of works and things which reason comprehends by itself. It can to a certain extent render civil righteousness or the righteousness of works; it can speak of God, offer to God a certain service by an outward work, obey magistrates, parents; in the choice of an outward work it can restrain the hands from murder, from adultery, from theft. Since there is left in human nature reason and judgment concerning objects subjected to the senses, choice between these things, and the liberty and power to render civil righteousness, are also left. For Scripture calls this the righteousness of the flesh which the carnal nature, *i. e.*, reason, renders by itself, without the Holy Ghost. Although the power of concupiscence is such that men more frequently obey evil dispositions than sound judgment. (*Trig.* 335)

Brief Statement ¶11:

All men, since the Fall, are dead in sins, Eph. 2:1-3, and inclined only to evil, Gen. 6:5; 8:21; Rom. 8:7. For this reason, and particularly because men regard the Gospel of Christ, crucified for the sins of the world, as foolishness, 1 Cor. 2:14, faith in the Gospel, or conversion to God, is neither wholly nor in the least part the work of man, but the work of God's grace and almighty power alone, Phil. 1:29; Eph. 2:8; 1:19;—Jer. 31:18. Hence Scripture calls the faith of man, or his conversion, a raising

from the dead, Eph. 1:20; Col. 2:12, a being born of God, John 1:12, 13, a new birth by the Gospel, 1 Pet. 1:23-25, a work of God like the creation of light at the creation of the world, 2 Cor. 4:6.

Ephesians 2:1-3 And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others.

In this passage the apostle Paul describes the condition of the Ephesians, and also of all people, before conversion. The “you” refers to the Ephesian believers in their former state, either as Gentile pagans or Jewish unbelievers; the “we all” includes Paul in his former state as a self-righteous Pharisee; the “others” refers to all other people in their natural, fallen state of unbelief.

Before their conversion the Ephesian Gentiles, as unbelievers, were all dead, Paul says. They were “*dead in trespasses and sins.*” Not physically dead, but spiritually dead. That is, they could do no good things in God’s sight; they had no spiritual life by which they could do good and be acceptable to Him. As dead trees they, of course, could bear no living fruit and in that state merited God’s judgment.

In the past their physical life had been lived “*according to the course of this world.*” Having no spiritual life of faith, their physical life was not conducted in line with God and His Word. What they did in their lives was—as also the whole world around them—controlled by the prince of this world, the devil or Satan. His influence pervades the atmosphere in this world; his domain is the minds and thoughts of the “children of disobedience,” the unbelieving and disobedient human race. Another way of translating this verse would be: “according to the prince of the domain of the spiritual atmosphere now at work in the children of disobedience.” Thus the Gentile Ephesians before their conversion, as all unbelievers, as the world in general, were in the sole control of Satan and were dead as far as spiritual life is concerned—dead in trespasses and sins, dead to good, separated from God and the true life that is found only in Him.

But then in the last part of the passage Paul speaks of himself and others like him as being no better by nature. Our conduct in times past was directed by the lusts of the flesh; our conduct was governed by selfish desires and the thoughts of our own minds. He sums up the sorry state of all: they are “*by nature children of wrath.*” As we are born, we are God’s enemies; God is angry with us because we are sinners. Even before we have committed any actual sins of our own, we are already subject to God’s wrath because of our inherited sinful nature. We along with everyone else—Jews, Gentiles, all mankind—share the sin of Adam and thus are dead to anything good. Our inherited sinful nature will only lead to more and more sins that we commit, as we continue to be spiritually dead people, fully deserving God’s wrath and judgment. Well, it is such dead sinners whom God quickens or brings to life through the Gospel. In the words of Stoeckhardt: “Thus every unconverted, unregenerate person is subject to the influence and rule of Satan, and through Satan’s powerful activity, through the devil’s trickery and shrewdness which has become the very principle of his existence, he is held and bound, in all that he does and in all that he omits to do, to disobey and resist God” (121).

Because of the teaching of this passage and other similar passages, we confess with Luther in the Third Article of the Creed: “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him” (Gausewitz 6).

A corpse can do nothing at all to help itself. It can only remain dead. Hence we confess in the *Formula of Concord*, Thorough Declaration, Article II (Free Will):

Now, just as a man who is physically dead cannot of his own powers prepare or adapt himself to obtain temporal life again, so the man who is spiritually dead in sins cannot of his own strength adapt or apply himself to the acquisition of spiritual and heavenly righteousness and life, unless he is delivered and quickened by the Son of God from the death of sin.

Therefore the Scriptures deny to the intellect, heart, and will of the natural man all aptness, skill, capacity, and ability to think, to understand, to be able to do, to begin, to will, to undertake, to act, to work or to concur in working anything good and right in spiritual things as of himself. (*Trig.* 885 ¶11-

12).

We also confess in this same article of the *Formula of Concord*:

Namely, that in spiritual and divine things the intellect, heart, and will of the unregenerate man are utterly unable, by their own natural powers, to understand, believe, accept, think, will, begin, effect, do, work, or concur in working anything, but they are entirely dead to what is good, and corrupt, so that in man's nature since the Fall, before regeneration, there is not the least spark of spiritual power remaining, nor present, by which, of himself, he can prepare himself for God's grace, or accept the offered grace, nor be capable of it for and of himself, or apply or accommodate himself thereto, or by his own powers be able of himself, as of himself, to aid, do, work, or concur in working anything towards his conversion, either wholly, or half, or in any, even the least or most inconsiderable part. . . . (Trig. 883 ¶7)

That everyone is "by nature a child of wrath" is, briefly stated, the doctrine of original sin. This doctrine we confess in Article I of the *Formula of Concord* in these words: "Christians should regard and recognize as sin not only the actual transgression of God's commandments; but also that the horrible, dreadful hereditary malady by which the entire nature is corrupted should above all things be regarded and recognized as sin indeed, yea, as the chief sin, which is a root and fountainhead of all actual sins" (Trig. 861). We confess to God both original sin and actual sin in the Order of Morning Service, saying that "we are by nature sinful and unclean and that we have sinned against Thee by thought, word, and deed" (*Lutheran Hymnal*, p. 6).

It is because of the Scriptural teaching on original sin and conversion that we must take our stand against Scouting. In the Scout Oath or Promise the Scout says: "On my honor I will do my best—to do my duty to God . . . to keep myself morally straight." The *Handbook for Boys* declares duty to God to include "such things as worship, faithfulness to Almighty God's Commandments, gratitude, helping others." "Morally straight" means in their words: "A morally straight Scout knows how to love and serve God in the way He wants him to" (qtd. in Tract #7: 3).

How can a Christian say the Scout Oath or Promise after studying Ephesians 2:1-3 and other related passages on original sin and conversion? Surely it would be in conflict with God's revealed will and truth, as noted in these words about the Scout Promise:

It implies that the Scout can on his honor, by his ability, do his "duty to God." . . . The Scriptures tell us that natural man is born in sin, that he is an enemy of God, that he cannot please God. They teach that our first duty is to repent of our sins and believe in Christ Jesus. They insist that only he who believes in Christ can do work acceptable to God. Scouting disagrees with the central teaching of Scripture when it leaves faith in Christ completely out of the picture and then supposes that Scouts can do their "duty to God." . . . If through our advocacy of Scouting only one boy is strengthened in the belief that he can do his duty to God without our Lord Jesus, that will be a tragedy that can never be justified or compensated for by any bodily or earthly benefits Scouting may bring. (Tract #7: 6, 8)

Genesis 6:5 Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

In the pre-Flood era there were two main families, the children of Seth and the children of Cain. The children of Seth, men like Enoch and Methuselah, were believers trusting in the promise of Eve's Seed. The children of Cain, on the other hand, took after their father and became increasingly more ungodly, though they excelled in such matters as farming, music, and metalwork. As time went on, the children of Seth became indifferent to the truth and mingled freely with the Cainites, especially by mixed marriage. The children of Cain became more wicked, tyrannical, and violent, so that God in the above verse deemed the wickedness of man to be "*great in the earth.*" This wickedness of man was a natural, inevitable development, because "*every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.*" What a man does is based on the thoughts of his heart. Man's heart in the pre-Flood era had only evil thoughts continually. Therefore God sent the world-wide Flood. Noah, his three sons, and their wives were saved, for Noah still believed in God's promise of Eve's Seed, even as Hebrews 11:7 states in some

detail: “By faith Noah, being divinely warned of things not yet seen, moved with godly fear, prepared an ark for the saving of his household, by which he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness which is according to faith.”

Genesis 8:21 **And the LORD smelled a soothing aroma. Then the LORD said in His heart, “I will never again curse the ground for man’s sake, although the imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth. . . .”**

At this point in the biblical record the Flood is over. Noah and his seven companions are the only living human creatures. Noah offers a sacrifice to God, which God accepts: “*And the LORD smelled a soothing aroma.*” God accepted the sacrifice because Noah was a believer in the Promise. God said He will not send such a curse as the Flood upon man again, a curse which destroyed every living thing except the fish of the sea and what had been kept in the ark. The reason for God’s mercy and patience is the same reason He gave before the flood for sending the flood: that “*every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.*” Before the Flood man was by nature evil. When God sent the Flood as a curse upon man, it was a showing of His anger against man’s sin and also as a lesson to all people for all times about the reality of God’s judgment. The Flood points ahead to the Day of Judgment, not a day of water but a day of fire, when God again will destroy—but this time permanently—and there will be new heavens and a new earth.

After the Flood, even though the only people alive were Noah’s family of believers, God must still say that “the imagination of man’s heart is evil.” The Flood eliminated many, many unbelievers, but not unbelief; it destroyed many sinners, but not sin itself. Therefore because man is still by nature sinful, God sees no purpose in sending another Flood. One Flood suffices to show God’s anger at man’s sin. What man needs is not a cursing flood, but a cleansing Savior, who was already promised as the woman’s (Eve’s) Seed—Jesus Christ, Son of Man and Son of God, our Victor over sin. Man’s sinful nature shall not change, but by faith in Christ the guilt of sin is removed. By faith in Christ there is a new man alive within the Christian that fights and struggles against the inbred sinful nature until death. The Christian never becomes perfect in this life. Though God sees the Christian as perfect because of Christ, the Christian remains imperfect until eternity. The Christian retains, as we all know and experience, his sinful nature to the grave.

Romans 8:7 **Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be.**

This passage teaches that the fleshly mind of natural man hates God. Natural man is not indifferent to God, but actively hostile against Him. He shows this by his resistance to God’s Law and God’s will. When natural man is forbidden by God’s Law, he resists all the more. No one by nature can please God, or do his duty to God on his own honor.

The Christian has the same carnal mind, which is God’s enemy. The Christian must therefore constantly struggle against his inborn enmity against God, against his inborn tendency to parade his good works before God, rather than humbly receive as a penitent sinner God’s gifts of grace. The proud spirit of believing that one can actually do something for God is part of the natural enmity against God, for such a spirit refuses to accept either God’s judgment of us as sinners or His gift of forgiveness to us in Christ.

In reference to this passage, Pieper notes from “Luther and the Formula of Concord” that “the flesh of the Christians never becomes pious in this life, but retains throughout its characteristic of ‘enmity against God’” (III:240). We know from experience the truth of these words in the *Formula of Concord*: “For the old Adam, as an intractable, refractory ass, is still a part of them [Christians], which must be coerced to the obedience of Christ, not only by the teaching, admonition, force, and threatening of the Law, but also oftentimes by the club of punishments and troubles, until the body of sin is entirely put off, and man is perfectly renewed in the resurrection. . . .” (*Trig.* 969, 971).

We may ask: Is it not pleasing to God when an unbeliever does an externally good work, like giving to charity, working at the job faithfully, etc.? No, “*those who are in the flesh cannot please God*” (*Rom* 8:8). No matter what an unbeliever does, he is unable not to sin. Pieper addresses the point in this

way:

Even when natural man desires to do things externally good, e. g., feed the hungry, clothe the naked, etc., he is not moved by the love of God, but he acts, at best, from natural compassion. Such works are praiseworthy in the natural domain or in the civil domain, and they have . . . their temporal reward; but they remain sinful before God because they do not comply with the demands which God's Law makes on every man. God's Law is . . . a spiritual Law (Rom. 7:14). It is not satisfied with works that are performed from any kind of motive, but demands very definitely that love of God be the motive of every act of man. Matt. 22:37: "Thou shalt love the Lord, thy God, with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind." (I:544)

In addition to Matthew 22:37, note the concluding clause of Romans 14:23: ". . . *for whatever is not from faith is sin.*"

What do others think of the Christian doctrine of original sin and man's absolute inability to serve God by nature? First of all, we note that all heathen religions know of no such doctrine, for nearly all other religions besides Christianity teach a form of salvation by works. Of course, if salvation is by works and if anyone will indeed be saved, then man must have some ability by which he can work some good in God's sight. Hence all man-made religions have, either implied or clearly stated, a denial of original sin and man's natural inability to do good.

A scholar by the name of Monier-Williams testifies to this point as quoted in *Christian Dogmatics*:

" . . . I have devoted as much time as any man living to the study of the Sacred Books of the East, and I have found the one keynote, the one diapason, so to speak, of all these so-called sacred books, whether it be the Veda of the Brahmans, the Puranas of Siva and Vishnu, the Koran of the Mohammedans, the Zend-Avesta of the Parsees, the Tripitaka of the Buddhists – *the one refrain through all – salvation by works.* They all say that salvation must be purchased, must be bought with a price, and that the sole price, the sole purchase money, must be our own works and deservings. Our own holy Bible, our Sacred Book of the East, *is from beginning to end a protest against this doctrine.* Good works are, indeed, enjoined upon us in that sacred Book of the East far more strongly than in any other sacred book of the East; but they are only the outcome of a grateful heart—they are only a thank-offering, the fruits of our faith. . . . [T]here is only one sacred Book of the East that can be their mainstay in that awful hour when they pass all alone into the unseen world. It is the sacred Book which contains that faithful saying, worthy to be received of all men, women, and children, . . . that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." (qtd. in Pieper I:15-16)

Cicero, one of the world's greatest thinkers, said: "As soon as we are born into the light, we are taken up immediately with all depravity and cast about in the utmost perversities of opinion; we seem to have imbibed error almost with our mother's milk" (qtd. in Pieper I:541). But at the same time he, along with most other outstanding thinkers of yesterday and today, believed that human nature is basically good and vices stem from evil environment and corrupt influences. Although babies and children are perhaps more innocent than we, in terms of the level of sins perpetrated against God and man, they are not truly innocent, because they have inherited corruption.

Christian churches have gone astray also on the doctrine of original sin. Many deny the inability of man by nature to do good. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that the ability to do good is not lost, but only weakened, and that man is able to cooperate in obtaining grace. Arminianism (a system of theology used by Methodists and others) teaches that the two causes of faith or conversion are God's grace and man's cooperating will, and that without man's cooperation God can accomplish nothing. Some Lutherans soon after Luther fell into the same error of saying man has the ability to apply himself to God's grace and thus is not truly dead in trespasses and sins, as Scripture teaches, but only half dead or seemingly dead. Methodists teach that original sin is not really sin, as also do the Catholics.

It is absolutely necessary that we maintain as truth our own inability by nature to do good, our own natural, inherited deadness in sins, our own fleshly enmity against God, so that we continually appreciate and depend on the undeserved grace of God. For if there is in us the slightest ability to do

good, if the fact that we are Christians is to be based in the slightest on who we are or what we have done, or that we are in some slight degree better than others, then what need is there of Christ or His grace? If we are saved because we are better than others or not quite as bad, or we resisted God a little less, then we are not saved alone by grace, but by works. When we deny original sin and our natural inability, we become Pharisees setting ourselves above others.

Luther said: "In that Christ says, 'The first shall be last,' He strips you of all presumption and forbids you to exalt yourselves above the whore, even if you were like Abraham, David, Peter, or Paul. And when He says: 'The last shall be the first,' He asks you never to despair and forbids you to place yourself beneath any saint, even if you were Pilate, Herod, Sodom, and Gomorrah" (qtd. in Pieper I:568).

Standing in our own righteousness, on our own honor, we are worse than the worst sinners; we are adulterers and thieves and murderers and liars. However, as repentant sinners clinging to Christ, we are as perfect as any saint, as perfect as Christ Himself, and fit occupants of the heavenly mansions that we receive as heirs of God. "***But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more***" (Rom. 5:20).

I Corinthians 2:14 But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.

"*The things of the Spirit of God*" are the Gospel of Jesus Christ and Him crucified, the preaching of the cross. This Gospel is not according to the wisdom of this world, for the preaching "of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing" (1 Cor.1:18), and the preaching of "Christ crucified" is "to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness" (1 Cor. 1:23), for "no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God" (1 Cor. 2:11).

The natural man, that is, the man who is not converted, who is still an unbeliever, cannot possibly understand the Gospel. In fact, he considers the Gospel as foolishness. There is no exception to this. No one by his natural understanding can understand God or the things of God. The Spirit of God alone understands God in all His grace, power, and glory. God is known to a person only when the Spirit reveals Him to that person. So we confess in the *Formula of Concord* that "when even the most ingenious and learned men upon earth read or hear the Gospel of the Son of God and the promise of eternal salvation, they cannot from their own powers perceive, apprehend, understand, or believe and regard it as true. . ." (*Trig.* 883).

A man of his own free will can decide to attend a church service; he can decide to read the Bible, even to join a church; but he cannot decide of his own power to believe what he hears or reads. The Holy Spirit works that faith in him through the power of the Word, and no man can set a timetable for the Spirit or force His hand. Thus we confess in Article V of the *Augsburg Confession*: "For through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Ghost is given, who works faith, where and when it pleases God, in them that hear the Gospel. . ." (*Trig.* 45).

The Gospel of Christ is "the power of God to salvation to everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16), and faith comes by hearing the Word of God (Rom. 10:17). "*It pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe*" (1 Cor. 1:21). When Paul preached Christ and Him crucified, his speech and his preaching were not with enticing words of human wisdom, but in "demonstration of the Spirit and of power" (1 Cor. 2:4). To those whom God has converted by His powerful and gracious Word, the Gospel is no longer foolish, but the precious power and wisdom of God providing their only hope of salvation. Those who believe do not glory in themselves or boast of their ability to believe, but boast only of their gracious Savior, as it is written: "*He who glories, let him glory in the LORD*" (1 Cor. 1:31).

Because the Gospel is not understood by natural man and is regarded as foolishness by him, it is a hopeless task to prove the truth of Christianity by scientific or philosophical argumentation. Christianity needs no such proof. The Gospel proves its power in the hearts of men (remember the jailer at Philippi). A man crushed by God's holy Law, who clings in faith to the saving Gospel of forgiveness in Christ, needs no scientific proof.

Philippians 1:29 For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but

also to suffer for His sake.

Paul tells the Philippian Christians that they have been given two gifts: 1) believing in Christ and (2) suffering for His sake. Thus the very act of believing in Christ and His Gospel is not man's accomplishment, but a gift of pure grace. Thus we confess simply in the *Formula of Concord*: "He works faith" (*Trig.* 891 ¶26).

Ephesians 2:8-9 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.

In the preceding context Paul told the Ephesians that when they were dead in trespasses and sins, God converted them. They did nothing to convert themselves. They were not able to in the former state of spiritual death. Their conversion was a matter of grace, God's undeserved love and mercy in Christ Jesus.

Also, their conversion was through faith. The Word was preached to them, and they believed it (Eph. 1:13). But their faith was not of themselves; it was God's gift of grace to them. They had, therefore, nothing of which to boast, as far as they themselves were concerned. No man may boast before God, not even a believer. Boasting, merit, works, self-decision are all excluded in conversion. Our explanatory catechism states it this way in Question 226: "Why . . . is it that you believe in Jesus Christ, your Lord? It is not because of anything I have done or was able to do; I owe it all to the grace of God" Gausewitz 138).

Ephesians 1:19 And what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power.

We are believers. How did this happen? It was not our work, but God's work, for we believe "according to," or because of, "the working of His mighty power," the same almighty power by which He raised Christ from the dead (Eph. 1:20).

In the New King James passage above we take note of how a comma separates the word "believe" from the words "according to the working of His mighty power." Punctuation (here a matter of English translation) is not inspired. The impact of it in this instance is to steer the reader away from connecting the words after the comma directly to the word "believe." But there is no compelling reason to do that. Rather, we should think of these words as modifying "us who believe," and thus they teach that our believing is due to God's power causing it (our faith) to exist.

When the *Brief Statement* refers to Ephesians 1:19 for biblical support in paragraph 11, it stands in line with Stoeckhardt's position (old Missouri Synod) over against Lenski's position (Ohio Synod). A closer examination of both positions is the subject of two companion articles done by Edmund Reim, which first appeared in the *Journal* in the October and December issues of 1961. In the December 2011 issue (51:4) both parts were combined as a reprint: "The Power of God, Ephesians 1:19" on pages 15-20 and "Ephesians 1:19 Text and Context" on pages 21-25.

For more on the impact of this verse along with Ephesians 2:1-10 in the area of conversion, see Stoeckhardt's excursus on the doctrine of conversion, pages 130-141, in his commentary on Ephesians.

Brief Statement ¶12:

On the basis of these clear statements of the Holy Scriptures we reject every kind of synergism, that is, the doctrine that conversion is wrought not by the grace and power of God alone, but in part also by the co-operation of man himself, by man's right conduct, his right attitude, his right self-determination, his lesser guilt or less evil conduct as compared with others, his refraining from willful resistance, or anything else whereby man's conversion and salvation is taken out of the gracious hands of God and made to depend on what man does or leaves undone. For this refraining from willful resistance or from any kind of resistance is also solely a work of grace, which "changes unwilling into willing men," Ezek. 36:26; Phil. 2:13. We reject also the doctrine that man is able to decide for conversion through "powers imparted by grace," since this doctrine presupposes that before conversion man still possesses spiritual powers by which he can make the right use of such "powers imparted by grace" (emph. orig.).

Ezekiel 36:26 “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.”

Note that this Old Testament passage ascribes conversion and regeneration to God alone. What we cannot do to or within ourselves, He does. This doctrine of monergism, God working alone to convert unbelievers to believers, is taught in the Old Testament, as this passage attests. Thus when Jesus talked to Nicodemus about the second birth, being born of the Spirit in John 3:3-6, He expected “the teacher of Israel,” based on what the Old Testament had taught in Ezekiel 36 and other places, to “know these things” (John 3:10).

Philippians 2:13 For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.

Even the desire to believe in Jesus is already God’s work in us. We cannot, of our own free will, even want to believe in Jesus. Nor can we even be considered neutral towards Christ. Our natural condition is enmity, hatred, opposition to Christ and His Gospel. Thus even the smallest spark of desire for Jesus or trust in Him is already a creation of the Holy Spirit, working through His means of grace.

Brief Statement ¶13:

On the other hand, we reject also the Calvinistic perversion of the doctrine of conversion, that is, the doctrine that God does not desire to convert and save all hearers of the Word, but only a portion of them. Many hearers of the Word indeed remain unconverted and are not saved, not because God does not earnestly desire their conversion and salvation, but solely because they stubbornly resist the gracious operation of the Holy Ghost, as Scripture teaches, Acts 7:51; Matt. 23:37; Acts 13:46.

Acts 7:51 “You stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you.”

These are the words of Stephen addressing the Jewish mob shortly before they stoned him to death. What was natural for the Jews in their history is also natural for all mankind: resistance to the Holy Spirit and His working on the heart through the means of grace. But this resistance cannot be blamed on God, whose first desire is always to save, not to judge or condemn.

Matthew 23:37 “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!”

Even Jesus in His strong desire to save the residents of Jerusalem was hindered by their resistance and their unwillingness. But dare we blame Jesus for this? Dare we blame God for not wanting to save these people, when it is so obvious that saving them was His earnest desire?

Also to be noted is that the last words, “you were not willing,” do not imply that believers were willing of their own accord or power. One may not infer the opposite thought because of what Jesus said here, which only teaches that the fault for the unbelief of these people was their own.

Acts 13:46 Then Paul and Barnabas grew bold and said, “It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles.”

Was God to blame for this rejection of the Gospel that Paul and Barnabas proclaimed? Did God, before the world began, condemn these individuals to an eternal damnation, and is that why they refused to listen? No, Paul does not blame God for their rejection. He blames them, and them alone. God did not judge them as unworthy of eternal life; they themselves judged themselves to be unworthy by their rejection.

In an effort to make the teaching of the Bible reasonable and logical, John Calvin was led to teach the doctrine of double predestination, namely, that God from eternity chose some to be saved and others to be lost. This led him and his followers to teach that Jesus did not die for all, but only for the elect, whom He wanted to save. This, of course, robs the Gospel of its comfort for all lost sinners.

Brief Statement ¶14:

As to the question why not all men are converted and saved, seeing that God's grace is universal and all men are equally and utterly corrupt, we confess that we cannot answer it. From Scripture we know only this: A man owes his conversion and salvation, not to any lesser guilt or better conduct on his part, but solely to the grace of God. But any man's non-conversion is due to himself alone; it is the result of his obstinate resistance against the converting operation of the Holy Ghost, Hos. 13:9.

Hosea 13:9 “O Israel, you are destroyed, but your help is from Me.”

Throughout history Christian thinkers have been tempted to comprehend or explain things that no one can fully understand. On this point of doctrine God's Word is not logical, but theological—that is, above and beyond our human logic. Calvinists and synergists alike consider our Lutheran confession on this matter untenable, because it refuses to take sides between Calvinism and synergism. But we have to maintain, as Scripture does, both teachings without compromise: God's universal grace and man's universal resistance to God's grace. We do so with the Lord's words of Isaiah 55 in mind:

“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are Your ways My ways,” says the LORD. “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts” (55:8-9).

Brief Statement ¶15:

Our refusal to go beyond what is revealed in these two Scriptural truths is not “masked Calvinism” (“Crypto-Calvinism”) but precisely the Scriptural teaching of the Lutheran Church as it is presented in detail in the Formula of Concord (Triglot, p. 1081, §§ 57-59, 60 b, 62, 63; M. p. 716f.): “That one is hardened, blinded, given over to a reprobate mind, while another, who is indeed in the same guilt, is converted again, etc.— in these and similar questions Paul fixes a certain limit to us how far we should go, namely, that in the one part we should recognize God's judgment. For they are well-deserved penalties of sins when God so punished a land or nation for despising His Word that the punishment extends also to their posterity, as is to be seen in the Jews. And thereby God in some lands and persons exhibits His severity to those that are His in order to indicate what we all would have well deserved and would be worthy and worth, since we act wickedly in opposition to God's Word and often grieve the Holy Ghost sorely; in order that we may live in the fear of God and acknowledge and praise God's goodness, to the exclusion of, and contrary to, our merit in and with us, to whom He gives His Word and with whom He leaves it and whom He does not harden and reject. . . . And this His righteous, well-deserved judgment He displays in some countries, nations and persons in order that, when we are placed alongside of them and compared with them (quam simillimi illis deprehensi, i. e., and found to be most similar to them), we may learn the more diligently to recognize and praise God's pure, unmerited grace in the vessels of mercy. . . . When we proceed thus far in this article, we remain on the right way, as it is written, Hos. 13:9: ‘O Israel, thou hast destroyed thyself; but in Me is thy help.’ However, as regards these things in this disputation which would soar too high and beyond these limits, we should with Paul place the finger upon our lips and remember and say, Rom. 9:20: ‘O man, who art thou that repliest against God?’” The Formula of Concord describes the mystery which confronts us here not as a mystery in man's heart (a “psychological” mystery), but teaches that, when we try to understand why “one is hardened, blinded, given over to a reprobate mind, while another, who is indeed in the same guilt, is converted again,” we enter the domain of the unsearchable judgments of God and ways past finding out, which are not revealed to us in His Word, but which we shall know in eternal life, 1 Cor. 13:12.

1 Corinthians 13:12 For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known.

This statement of the apostle Paul is plain enough to support the truth that in this life there are some things we are not able to know. Since they are not revealed to us, believers should recognize the limitations and not attempt to fill in the blanks with reasoned suppositions that have no basis in Scripture.

Brief Statement ¶16: (emph. orig.)

Calvinists solve this mystery, which God has not revealed in His Word, by denying the universality of grace; synergists, by denying that salvation is by grace alone. Both solutions are utterly vicious, since they contradict Scripture and since every poor sinner stands in need of, and must cling to, both the unrestricted universal grace and the unrestricted “by grace alone,” lest he despair and perish.

Thus our confession on conversion agrees with what has been stated in the *Brief Statement of 1932*.

In conclusion we append a few statements of the synergistic false teaching once present within the Augustana Synod, the Iowa Synod, and the Ohio Synod (now part of the ELCA) that the *Brief Statement* rejected. The false teaching in these statements below is underlined, and each statement has an endnote.

“God . . . earnestly endeavors to take away the resistance from some as well as from the others, but that by some His gracious purpose is frustrated because they stubbornly and willfully resist the grace offered to them, whereas in the others God’s work is accomplished because they do not willfully resist, but let God’s work be done on themselves” (qtd. in Wicke 21-2).¹

“For this reason the responsibility rests with man as to the outcome of this gracious activity on the part of the Spirit. . . . In other words, man must permit the power of the Spirit to become operative in his life, if he is to be converted” (qtd. in Wicke 22-3).²

“The fact that, of two men who hear the Gospel, resistance and death are taken away in one but not in the other—has its cause in the will of man.has its cause in the fact that one constantly, stubbornly and willfully resists God’s grace, while the other lets the Holy Ghost overcome his natural resistance” (qtd. in Tract #4: 5).³

“After God has done all that is necessary for the conversion and salvation of all men, . . . it depends to a great extent, yea, we may boldly say, everything depends on the conduct of man over against this grace of God and the means of grace: Whether he lets the grace operate on himself which he can do by the strength inherent in him, or whether in spite of it he wilfully thrust it away” (qtd. in Buenger 66).⁴

The Lutheran theologians who wrote the above statements believed that they were being faithful to the teaching of Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions. Synergism can be very subtle. But the moment we give even the least credit to man with regard to his own conversion, we are being unfaithful to Scripture and denying the *sola gratia* of the Reformation.

May God preserve His true teaching among us so that we may always give God the glory, not only for our justification, but also for our conversion, sanctification, and glorification.

Endnotes

¹ According to Harold Wicke (and others) in *A Catechism of Differences*, the above statement was made “by Dr. G. Fritschel, a leading theologian in the former Iowa Synod . . . in Brobst’s ‘Monatshefte,’ 1872, p. 99” (21).

² According to Wicke, this statement came from Prof. C. G. Carlfeldt of the Augustana Synod (22).

³ This statement of Dr. Fritschel (Iowa Synod) came from “Monatshefte, 1872, p. 80” (Tract #4:5).

⁴ According to Buenger, this statement came from a May 1885 issue, page 76, of the Ohio Synod publication *Kirchenzeitung* (66).

Works Cited

Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod. St. Louis: Concordia, 1932.

Buenger, J. *Missouri, Iowa, and Ohio: The Old and the New Differences*. No date.

Clark, Elmer. *The Small Sects in America*. Revised Ed. New York: Abingdon Press, 1949.

Gausewitz, C. *Doctor Martin Luther’s Small Catechism Explained for Children and Adults*. Revised Ed. Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1956.

- Pieper, Francis. *Christian Dogmatics*. 3 vols. Ed. T. Engelder. St. Louis: Concordia, 1950.
- Stoeckhardt, George. *Commentary on St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians*. Trans. M. Sommer. St. Louis: Concordia, 1952.
- Tract No. 4: "Doctrinal Differences between the Synodical Conference and the American Lutheran Church: The Doctrine of Conversion." Confessional Lutheran Publicity Bureau (Elizabeth, IL). No date.
- Tract #7: "Our Position against Scouting." *Continuing in His Word* (published series of tracts). Conference of Presidents, Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States. 1954.
- Triglot Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Ev. Lutheran Church*. St. Louis: Concordia, 1921.
- Walther, C. F. W. *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel*. Trans. W. H. T. Dau. St. Louis: Concordia, 1929.
- Wente, W. H. "Conversion." *The Abiding Word: An Anthology of Doctrinal Essays for the Year 1945*. Vol. 1. Ed. T. Laetsch. St. Louis: Concordia, 1955 (1946).
- Wicke, Harold. *A Catechism of Differences: A Popular Study of the Doctrine and Practice of the Various Lutheran Bodies in the United States*. Fifth Ed. Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1956.