

Journal of Theology

Summer 2016 Volume 56 Number 2

CONTENTS

From the Editor	3
In the Footsteps of the Reformers: Johann Esch and Heinrich Voes	5
<i>David J. Reim</i>	
In the Footsteps of the Reformers	
We Continue to Proclaim a Message of Salvation	11
<i>David W. Bernthal</i>	
We Are All Priests Continuing to Base Our Faith upon Scripture Alone	19
<i>David L. W. Pfeiffer</i>	
Go Forward with Joy in Your Step	36
<i>Wayne C. Eichstadt</i>	

Journal of Theology

Editor: Wayne C. Eichstadt / 11315 E. Broadway Avenue / Spokane Valley, WA 99206 / editor@journaloftheology.org / (509) 926-3317

Assistant Editor: Norman P. Greve

Business Manager: Benno Sydow / 2750 Oxford St. North/ Roseville, MN 55113 / bennosydow@yahoo.com

Staff Contributors: D. Frank Gantt, David T. Lau, Nathanael N. Mayhew, Bruce J. Naumann, Paul G. Naumann, John K. Pfeiffer, David J. Reim, Michael J. Roehl, Steven P. Sippert, David P. Schaller, Paul M. Tiefel II, Mark S. Tiefel

Cover Redesign: Rachel Naumann

Correspondence regarding subscriptions, renewals, changes of address, failed delivery, and copies of back issues should be directed to the Business Manager.

Correspondence regarding material published in the *Journal of Theology* should be directed to the editor.

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

© 2016 by the Church of the Lutheran Confession. Please contact the editor for permission to reproduce more than brief excerpts or other “fair use.”

The *Journal of Theology* is the theological journal of the Church of the Lutheran Confession. The *Journal of Theology* is designed to deepen the understanding and sharpen the skills of those who teach the Word of God. The *Journal of Theology* also testifies to the confession of our church body and serves as a witness to Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, and His unchanging Word.

The *Journal of Theology* is published four times annually (Spring, Summer, Fall, and Winter) by authorization of the Church of the Lutheran Confession (501 Grover Road, Eau Claire, WI 54701 / www.clclutheran.org). **U.S. Subscriptions:** \$20.00 for one year, \$38.00 for two years. **Foreign Subscriptions:** \$30.00 for one year.

From the Editor

Regular readers of the *Journal of Theology* will notice a number of changes beginning with this issue.

The *Journal* has become a little larger in size with a slight reduction in the number of pages. The layout and formatting of the text has also changed slightly. We hope these changes will promote good readability of the text.

The cover, while redesigned, still features a Jerusalem Cross: The center cross signifies Christ crucified—the substance of the message upon which we meditate and which we seek to share with the four corners of the world—represented by the smaller crosses. To serve profitably in this mission of our Savior, we follow the apostle’s exhortation: “*Meditate on these things; give yourself entirely to them, that your progress may be evident to all*” (1 Timothy 4:15).

Beginning with this year’s issues (Volume 56), we are shifting from identifying the issues by months to seasons—Spring, Summer, Fall, and Winter.

Among changes that are not so visible is the means by which the *Journal of Theology* will be coming to you. The *Journal* will now be mailed directly from the printer to you. This change should result in quicker and more efficient delivery of each issue.

While production costs have increased, the subscription cost for the *Journal of Theology* has not been increased in the past eight years. Consequently, we are now implementing a modest subscription increase to \$20.00/year, or \$38.00/two years. While coinciding with the formatting and mailing changes, an increase in subscription cost was needed regardless of those changes.

Due to a number of factors, the Spring 2016 issue of the *Journal of Theology* has not yet been published. That issue will be retroactively published, Lord willing, before the close of the year. Meanwhile, we will endeavor to have all upcoming issues published in a timely manner.

The December 2015 issue included an exegesis of Malachi 2:17-3:6. Regrettably, the correct Hebrew text was not inserted into the article before publication. We apologize for the inaccuracies. The article will be corrected and republished in the Spring 2016 issue.

Our title page states, “The *Journal of Theology* is designed to deepen the understanding and sharpen the skills of those who teach the Word of God.” To better serve those who teach the Word of God, we wish to be responsive to their needs and interests, and publish what will be of benefit in their work. To that end, we welcome reaction and suggestions which we may consider as we seek to serve our readers.

We pray that the *Journal of Theology* will continue to be a valuable tool as we uplift and edify one another with the saving gospel of Jesus Christ, and that it can serve as iron sharpening iron (Proverbs 27:17) to better equip each of us for the study and sharing of Christ’s life-giving Word.

This issue introduces the series “In the Footsteps of the Reformers.” The series comes from the chaplain’s devotions at the Thirty-Second Convention of the Church of the Lutheran Confession. The chaplain introduced the series as follows: “Paul said, ‘*Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ*’ (1 Corinthians 11:1). We follow Paul’s example because he was a great example of what it means to follow and serve Christ. So in the same way we want to follow in the footsteps of the reformers because they give us great examples of faithfulness to Christ and His Word. They didn’t just say that they made God’s Word the highest priority in their lives, they showed it with their actions and even with their very lives.” These brief glimpses of Reformation history and meditation on Scripture will continue through 2017 and the celebration of the Five-Hundredth Anniversary of the Reformation.

Two essays and the Communion Service sermon from the Convention are also included in this issue.

May the Lord richly bless your time in His Word!

Wayne C. Eichstadt, Editor



In the Footsteps of the Reformers

Johann Esch and Heinrich Voes

David J. Reim

“Do you believe the decrees of the councils and of the fathers?” “Those that are agreeing to the Scripture, Yes!” “Do you consider it to be a deadly sin to transgress the decrees of the fathers and of the Bishop of Rome?” “That is to be attributed only to the precepts of God, to bind the conscience of man, or to loose it.” “Will you retract?” “No, we will not retract anything. We will not deny the Word of God. We will rather die for the truth of our faith.”

Was that perhaps Martin Luther? No, it was two Augustinian monks in Antwerp, the Netherlands named Johann Esch and Heinrich Voes. Previously, some fellow monks had returned from the University in Wittenberg and shared the gospel message of salvation by grace alone with their fellow monks. The gospel was received with joy and now was being preached in the Netherlands for the salvation of many.

Just three years later, the convent was stormed and the monks were cast in prison and the convent was destroyed as having been defiled by this “heresy.” Some of the monks escaped and fled to Wittenberg and joined the reformers there. Others recanted their confessions, but three men—Johann Esch, Heinrich Voes, and Lambert Thorn—were cast into prison and tried for heresy. Lambert Thorn asked for four days to restudy the Scriptures. Johann Esch and Heinrich Voes refused to retract anything and were condemned.

On July 1, 1523, Esch and Voes were taken to the public market place in Brussels and were tied to the stake to be burned. They were asked again if they would recant and return to the Catholic Church. They replied, “We believe in the Christian Church but not in your church.” They were left for a half hour to think about their death and given one more chance to recant. They boldly cried out again and again, “We are willing to die for the name of Jesus Christ.” Then they gave thanks to God their heavenly Father for delivering them from the false priesthood and making them true priests of His holy order and for receiving them to Himself as a sweet-smelling sacrifice. As the fires were lit, they prayed loudly, “Lord Jesus, the Son of David, have mercy on us!” They joyfully sang hymns of praise to God until the smoke suppressed their voices.

These were the first Lutheran martyrs in the cause of the Reformation. Lambert Thorn remained in prison until 1528, when he also was put to death.

Where did these men get such courage and strength? Was it the courage that comes from many years of following Christ, knowing their time on earth was limited anyway? No, Heinrich Voes was only 24 years old, and Johann Esch was also described as a youth. No! Theirs was the strength and courage of knowing the truth of Psalm 46:

*“God is our refuge and strength,
A very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear,
Even though the earth be removed,
And though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea;
Though its waters roar and be troubled,
Though the mountains shake with its swelling.
There is a river whose streams shall make glad the city of God,
The holy place of the tabernacle of the Most High.
God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved;
God shall help her, just at the break of dawn.
The nations raged, the kingdoms were moved;
He uttered His voice, the earth melted.
The LORD of hosts is with us;
The God of Jacob is our refuge.”* (Psalm 46:1-7)

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.” What a powerful truth! God was a very present help to Martin Luther and the other Wittenberg theologians. He was present with them to give them the courage to stand up against the false teachings of the Catholic Church and proclaim the truth without wavering. He was also present with them to protect them from death so that they could continue proclaiming the true Word of God.

God was also present with Esch and Voes and Thorn. He gave them incredible strength and courage to hold onto and proclaim the truth in the face of grave danger, and God was a very present help to protect them in death as He ushered them into Paradise.

We should also know that God had a purpose for those who lived and those who died. God was not more favorable or a greater refuge to Luther than He was to Esch and Voes; He just had different roles for each in the same battle. All were very important to the spread of the gospel.

God spared Luther and others from death and used them to keep teaching the glorious truth of the gospel. God chose not to spare Esch, Voes, and Thorn; nevertheless, He used their deaths also for the spread of the gospel because their deaths did much to bring the gospel home to the hearts of people.

Do you know what the word *martyr* means? We think of a martyr as someone who is put to death for their faith, and that of course is true, but the word itself means “witness.” These men gave the strongest possible witness to their faith by willingly giving their lives for it and showing their trust in God’s promise of eternal life. They were showing all the people of Brussels and all the world that it is even worth dying for Christ because He gives eternal life. Think of the witness they gave to the crowds gathered at their death when they sang hymns of praise to God as the fires were draining their life from them.

We see the effect of the martyrs’ powerful witness in two amazing ways.

Many believers were strengthened in their own battle. How did news of these men’s death effect Luther and the other reformers in Germany? Luther did not respond in sorrow and dismay saying, “Oh, what a tragedy! What a tragic end for those poor souls.” He did not respond in fear and trembling realizing the same could happen to him at any time. He also did not respond with indignation saying, “Lord, why did You let that happen?” No, he is reported to have said, “At last Jesus Christ has gathered some fruit from our work, and He again creates happy martyrs.” Instead of frightening people into submission as the Catholic Church had hoped, it made them even more bold to stand firm and to trust the Lord and proclaim His Word.

The other amazing effect of their witness is that many more people came to faith. A rich harvest followed the shedding of these martyrs’ blood. The more the church breathed threats against the believers, the more the gospel spread in the hearts of people. Brussels was turned in favor of the gospel, and later so was all of the Netherlands.

God was a refuge and strength and a very present help in trouble for these first Lutheran martyrs and thousands of others like them. Even though the earth was removed from them, God remained with them. He did not forsake them. He did deliver them from their enemies through the fire. They received the salvation of their souls in Paradise. Their persecutors were able to kill the body, but they were not able to harm their souls (Matthew 10:28). Not

even death was able to separate them from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:37ff). Jesus died for them and took the sting out of their deaths by removing their sin from them forever.

Martin Luther wrote in “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” “The old evil Foe / Now means deadly woe.” Satan proves this true time after time, but we also know,

A mighty Fortress is our God,
A trusty Shield and Weapon;
He helps us free from ev’ry need
That hath us now o’ertaken. (*The Lutheran Hymnal*, 262:1)

We can be inspired by these two young men and know that the God who was a mighty fortress for them and who made them bold and strong is the same God whom we serve.

In this age of doctrinal indifference, when the truths of the gospel are being eroded by a multitude of false teachers and when there are even more who simply don’t care enough to notice, we need the example of the sixteenth-century reformers and especially the martyrs. They remind us what a treasure we have in the Word of God, especially the gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins.

May we be inspired by them to hold onto the gospel and defend it from all error. Not a single, precious word of the Bible is a matter of indifference or unimportance, and there is nothing in the universe more precious than our salvation by grace alone.

Our lives are not being threatened, but the gospel is under attack today as much as ever. The souls of many are being lost because of it. Let us not cower in the corner, but stand up and proclaim the Word. Let us not fear the repercussions, but proclaim the message of God’s law and gospel to all whom we meet.

Do you still wonder if you could face such danger with such joyful confidence? These men were able to face death with joy because they had drunk from the “*river whose streams shall make glad the city of God*”—that is the refreshing water of life in the gospel. The gospel itself gives the joy and strength. There is tremendous strength in the gospel. When we know that our sins are completely forgiven and forgotten, that God is not angry with us and will not punish us, then why should we fear what men may do to us. “*If God is for us, who can be against us?*” (Romans 8:31).

The very first hymn that Martin Luther wrote was a ballad in honor of Johann Esch and Heinrich Voes. That hymn began:

By help of God I fain would tell
A new and wondrous story
And sing a marvel that befell
To His great praise and glory.
At Brussels, in the Netherlands,
He hath His banner lifted,
To show His wonders by the hands
Of two youths highly gifted
With rich and heavenly graces.

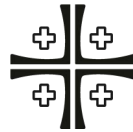
One of these youths was called John,
And Henry was the other.
Rich in the grace of God was one,
A Christian true his brother.
For God's dear Word they shed their blood
And from the world departed
Like bold and pious sons of God;
Faithful and lion-hearted,
They won the crown of martyrs.

This ballad continues for another 10 verses describing what God accomplished through these two brave, young Christians. The ballad is paraphrased in the hymn, "Flung to the Heedless Winds."

Flung to the heedless winds
Or on the waters cast,
The martyrs' ashes, watched,
Shall gathered be at last.
And from that scattered dust,
Around us and abroad,
Shall spring a plenteous seed
Of witnesses for God.

The Father hath received
Their latest living breath,
And vain is Satan's boast
Of vict'ry in their death.
Still, still, though dead, they speak,
And, trumpet-tongued, proclaim
To many a wak'ning land
The one availing Name. (*The Lutheran Hymnal*, 259)

Let us remember that "*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble*"—A Mighty Fortress! Then we, too, will follow in the footsteps of those brave reformers and proclaim the Word of God to all.



We Continue to Proclaim a Message of Salvation

David W. Bernthal

Essay delivered to the Thirty-Second Convention of the
Church of the Lutheran Confession

The Bible has much to say about the Christian's walk in life. Some references to the Christian walk encourage us to do so circumspectly, or with understanding, properly, in wisdom, and according to the Spirit. We are also commanded to walk in the light, rightly, by faith—not by sight, in God's statutes, and on His paths. It is only in the infallible, unchangeable, and unbreakable Word of God that we can find the correct paths or steps to take in this life. In other words, we seek the path trod by our Lord and Savior and follow Him (Ephesians 5:15; Romans 13:13; Colossians 4:5; Romans 8:1; 1 John 1:7; Proverbs 15:21; 2 Corinthians 5:7; Ezekiel 36:27; Isaiah 2:5).

So why would we encourage each other to walk in the steps of the reformers? Who were the reformers? First, we need to emphasize the fact that the Reformation did not begin, or end, with Martin Luther. Christ's followers have always been and will always be reformers—attempting to shape and guide their fellowman's heart and mind with the all-powerful Word of God. Whenever an Old Testament prophet encouraged the people to turn back to the Lord, or an apostle admonished others to turn from their sins, the goal was to reform the individual's heart in the image of Christ's. So a true reformer is any individual who is guided by the Scriptures to discern, with the power of the Holy Spirit, the true intended meaning of God's Word and then impart such knowledge to others.

This is where true reformers often come into conflict with the world. When man-made visible churches and organizations begin to teach and promote man's thoughts as equal to or even superior to God's, the reformer is compelled by his love for the Lord's Word and his fellowman to speak up.

The writer to the Hebrews reminds us, "*[W]e are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses*" (Hebrews 12:1). These witnesses are reformers—pointing out error, standing for what is right, demonstrating the clear path of God. It is good for us to follow in the paths of the faithful who came before us, inasmuch as they point out the clear path that Jesus walked, and that clear path of God leads to salvation.

But to what salvation are we referring? Which religion does not teach about some sort of salvation? All men hope for and desire a “better place” after the conflicts and trials of this life cease. That is why we see so many man-made paths to salvation preached and promoted in our world. Muslims believe the way of salvation is through observing the obligatory Five Pillars of Islam. Buddhism encourages its followers to end their suffering by following the Noble Truths, observing karma, and trusting reincarnation to improve their lot in this life and many more to come.

The majority of people—whether religious or not—believe in some aspect of the Golden Rule. If one treats others as he wishes to be treated and his good outweighs the bad when he dies, why shouldn’t he hope to be rewarded or “saved,” whatever that may mean. However, all man-invented ideas of earning, or finding, one’s salvation on one’s own is contrary to God’s Word. This is why we tirelessly and unapologetically preach salvation by grace and faith alone.

Salvation unto us has come
 By God’s free grace and favor;
 Good works cannot avert our doom,
 They help and save us never.
 Faith looks to Jesus Christ alone,
 Who did for all the world atone;
 He is our one Redeemer. (*The Lutheran Hymnal*, 377:1)

Salvation by Grace Alone

This is why our message is not just a message of salvation, but salvation by grace alone—the *sola gratia*, as expressed by Luther. The Scriptures are clear. The path to Heaven is one that only the perfect in body, mind, and heart can tread. “*He who walks in a perfect way, / He shall serve Me*” (Psalm 101:6). “*Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect*” (Matthew 5:48). God can not allow any imperfection into His holy realm. Even the angels that sinned were cast out of God’s holy presence. Therefore, all mankind would be left to itself to cast about for some path that could appease God in some way. The Lord makes it crystal clear, “*All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*” (Romans 3:23). No matter how close sinful mankind may think he is to keeping God’s law, all fall short. If you and I stand at the edge of a great crevasse, and I leap out ten feet and you make it twelve, yet the gap is twenty, we will both meet at the bottom.

Our God had a very different plan in mind. *“He knows our frame; / He remembers that we are dust”* (Psalm 103:14). Yet, He is also the One *“who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth”* (1 Timothy 2:4). If something was to be done to save mankind, God would have to do it. Before time began, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit convened to determine that salvation would come to mankind based on that blessed attribute of our God which is so rarely found among men, namely, grace. God, with the love of a Father pitying His helpless children, put into motion the plan of love and undeserved kindness that would enable sinners to live with their righteous God forever.

Adam and Eve had it coming. The one commandment they had been given in order to show their love for their God lay broken. They had eaten the forbidden fruit and were now filled with sin, guilt, and darkness. The penalty for this rebellious act had been made clear to them. Death—spiritual, physical, and eternal—was the just reward for their actions. But, our loving God stepped in to tell our first parents and all of their descendants, *“And I will put enmity / Between you and the woman, / And between your seed and her Seed; / He shall bruise your head, / And you shall bruise His heel”* (Genesis 3:15). God was telling mankind, “I will fix this. I will send the I AM at the appropriate time to make good the breach and restore the broken relationship between creature and Creator.”

It is true that God has given us the law to follow, but what does the law show us but our complete inability to make any contribution toward our own salvation? *“For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all”* (James 2:10). Even if by some unheard of miracle we could keep our actions in line with God’s law, we would still have to deal with being conceived in sin as David declares in Psalm 51—and what of our thoughts, words, and sinful hearts? Christ tells us they also condemn us (Matthew 5:28; Mark 7:21-22; Ephesians 5:4).

The Holy Spirit instructs us through the apostle Paul, *“But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), . . . 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. For we are His workmanship . . . ”* (Ephesians 2:4-5, 8-10).

When we were dead, grace found us and made us alive. It is by grace that we are not consumed by the righteous wrath of God. It is purely by grace that we are now even able to serve our Holy God for He has made us alive, cleansed us of our sin and guilt, and exchanged our filth with His righteousness—all by His saving grace.

What God did in His Law demand
 And none to Him could render
 Caused wrath and woe on ev'ry hand
 For man, the vile offender.
 Our flesh has not those pure desires
 The spirit of the Law requires,
 And lost is our condition.

It was a false, misleading dream
 That God His Law had given
 That sinners could themselves redeem
 And by their works gain heaven.
 The Law is but a mirror bright
 To bring the inbred sin to light
 That lurks within our nature. (*The Lutheran Hymnal*, 377:2-3)

Salvation through Faith in Christ Alone

Our message of salvation by grace alone must also be one of salvation through faith in Christ alone. It is truly an act of divine grace that mankind is able to be saved from his sins. It is a divine fact that this was accomplished by Jesus Christ dying for the sins of the world on the cross. Every last sin was paid for in full—this is the universal justification of our Savior God. Yet, how does an individual make that grace his own? As already stated, we cannot take a step toward our redemption; in fact, Scripture clearly teaches us we cannot even believe this great miracle without divine intervention. “. . . *no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit*” (1 Corinthians 12:3). So what do Scriptures teach about Jesus Christ and what it means to have faith in Him? What do reformers teach about faith—the *sola fide*?

During Jesus' ministry people debated and believed various “truths” about Him. Soon after our Lord removed His visible presence from this world, people began disputing over who He truly was, what He taught, and what He really accomplished. The Councils of Nicaea (A.D. 325), Constantinople (A.D. 381),

Ephesus (A.D. 431), and Chalcedon (A.D. 451) all gathered predominately to make definitive statements as to who Christ is.

Princes of the past and many of those in religious authority today are mainly interested in a harmonious reconciliation between disputing parties. When this is the case, it is often the consensus or the opinion of the majority that rules. But the true children of God are interested in God's truth. True reformers always look for the sure Word of God on which to stand.

Scriptures state, *"But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law"* (Galatians 4:4f). Jesus, conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary, became the Savior. Jesus Himself instructed Pontius Pilate, *"For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice"* (John 18:37). Jesus clearly explains the truth that He wishes all mankind to know: *"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me"* (John 14:6). Jesus also reassured Martha before going to Lazarus' tomb, *"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die"* (John 11:25f).

This belief of which Jesus speaks is no mere head-knowledge of who He was and what He did. The enemies of Jesus knew Him to be a miracle worker and heard His claim to be the Son of God. Even the devil and all his angels know exactly who Christ is and what He has accomplished. This knowledge of Christ, however, has no power to save. The faith of which Jesus speaks is a heart-knowledge of who He is and what He has done—a trust in the atoning work of our Savior. Jesus came neither to abolish the law, nor to set it aside, but rather to fulfill it.

Jesus Christ is the lynchpin to God's plan. Christ took our place. Jesus kept the law perfectly—honoring His Father and His Word above all, loving His fellow man above Himself. He took the punishment of God's full wrath upon Himself. The holy law of God which only accuses and never excuses us was nailed to that cross with Christ and on it was written, "Paid in full," written in Jesus' blood. This was not done just for the world, but for you, a lost and condemned creature—personally saved by your personal Savior!

How does one acquire such heartfelt, sounds-too-good-to-be-true knowledge, trust, and faith in the Savior? How can we believe this seemingly

unbelievable truth? This too is an act of God's divine grace. *"Therefore, as through one man's offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man's righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life"* (Romans 5:18). Our being saved through faith did not come about of ourselves, *"it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast"* (Ephesians 2:8b-9). In Romans 4, the Apostle Paul points to Abraham and David who were saved, not by their heroic deeds, nor deep dedication to God, nor their great understanding of His Word. Rather, their faith, given by God, was accounted by God for righteousness.

The Holy Spirit, working through word and sacraments, has the power to create, sustain, grow, and encourage saving faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus instructed Nicodemus, a Pharisee and ruler of the Jews, concerning the salvation that comes through faith when He declared, *"God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved"* (John 3:16-17).

God has created faith in our stone-cold, dead hearts to make us alive in Christ. This also gives us confidence to continue to proclaim and perform infant Baptism. Since babies are also born dead in their trespasses and sins, they too need this saving knowledge of Christ. *"But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit . . ."* (Titus 3:4f). Therefore, these *"little ones who believe in Me"* (Matthew 18:6), as Jesus stated, have the same saving faith in their hearts—the work of God and a miracle of God. Luke (18:15) even calls these *"little ones,"* βρέφη, or nursing infants.

Yet as the Law must be fulfilled
 Or we must die despairing,
 Christ came and hath God's anger stilled,
 Our human nature sharing.
 He hath for us the Law obeyed
 And thus the Father's vengeance stayed
 Which over us impended.

Let me not doubt, but trust in Thee,
Thy Word cannot be broken;
Thy call rings out, "Come unto Me!"
No falsehood hast Thou spoken.
Baptized into Thy precious name,
My faith cannot be put to shame,
And I will never perish. (*The Lutheran Hymnal*, 377:5,7)

Blessings of Salvation by Grace and Faith Alone

There are many conflicting messages in our world in regard to salvation. Sadly, the conflicts are not just between the Christian faith and non-Christian beliefs, but even among Christian denominations. However, the main crux of all of the debates comes down to these questions: "What have you done for your god?" and "What does your god do for you?" Nearly every religion has much to say about the first of these two questions. There are many rules and regulations, or works, which individuals do for their god. The worship of their deity, the carrying out of his will, and their trust in him is an accomplishment which the individual brings about. Then the faithful follower may expect his deity to grant some favor based on these good works.

Biblical Christianity completely reverses the order. What has our God done for us? Everything! He set up a plan and called us in eternity to be His children through His Son, Jesus Christ. Then He planted faith in our hearts to believe that this great gift of forgiveness and salvation is truly ours. As an outgrowth of everything that our gracious God has accomplished in us and for us, we are finally able to attempt to do something for our God. "*For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure*" (Philippians 2:13). We love our God because He first showed us what love truly is by sacrificing His only Son to be the payment for our sins (1 John 4:10, 19).

We still have our sinful flesh. The sinful world and Satan will plague us until the end of time. Even as the love of many grows cold, we, as the blessed redeemed of Christ, have His promise to strengthen us and be with us beyond the end of time. Our God assures us that we have a purpose in this life, "*But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of*

darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy” (1 Peter 2:9-10).

With this knowledge of God’s gift of grace and mercy, how can we go back to the deeds of the law as if they have power to save? *“Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight” (Romans 3:20).* We can not and must not go back to doing good works in order to obtain God’s favor any more than we should go back to the now useless animal sacrifices of the Jews. For, *“now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe” (Romans 3:21f).*

What a comfort! We are the heirs of Christ’s reformation. We follow in the steps of our Savior and in the train of many martyrs and reformers proclaiming to a dying world the truth of salvation by grace alone through faith in Christ alone! Amen!

Faith clings to Jesus’ cross alone
 And rests in Him unceasing;
 And by its fruits true faith is known,
 With love and hope increasing.
 Yet faith alone doth justify,
 Works serve thy neighbor and supply
 The proof that faith is living.

All blessing, honor, thanks, and praise
 To Father, Son, and Spirit,
 The God that saved us by His grace,—
 All glory to His merit!
 O Triune God in heaven above,
 Who hast revealed Thy saving love,
 Thy blessed name be hallowed. (*The Lutheran Hymnal, 377:9, 10*)



We Are All Priests Continuing to Base Our Faith upon Scripture Alone

David L. W. Pfeiffer

Essay delivered to the Thirty-Second Convention of the
Church of the Lutheran Confession

Having completed the newly erected St. Giles Cathedral in Staffordshire, England, in 1846 architect A. W. N. Pugin describes the ornate approach to the altar:

From the centre of the loft rises the great rood and crucifix, with the attendant images of our Blessed Lady and St. John, which are placed on pedestals united to the foot of the rood with rich tracery. The cross is crocketed at the sides, and terminates at the extremities with quatrefoils, containing emblems of the Evangelists, and surrounded with foliage (Pugin, "Lord Shrewsbury's New Church" 10-11).¹

A common feature of medieval gothic church architecture was the hanging "rood," an Old English word meaning "cross" or "crucifix." Under the "rood" Pugin's design included another common feature of late medieval architecture: "the rood screen." The screen marked the separation of the nave where the pews sat and the people watched from the sanctuary where the altar stood and the priests acted. The rood screen is a wooden or brass partition, usually with a series of window openings through which to look and an opening for the priest to enter and exit the area where the altar stood—the "sanctuary," or holy place. Pugin refers to the elaborate design of the "great rood" at St. Giles—a symbol of something even more elaborate which was separating the people from God in Luther's day.

Symbolically, the rood screen was intended to represent certain theological aspects of Old Testament worship and the functions of the Levitical priesthood. In Exodus chapters 26-29, God lays out the design for His meeting tent and describes the consecration of the priesthood. At every step in their approach to God, the people were to grow in their awareness of God's holiness. He tells His people, "*You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am*

¹ www.victorianweb.org/art/architecture/pugin/4.html

holy” (Leviticus 19:2). God is holy. His very being and presence define what is holy. That is to say, nothing sinful or unclean can exist in His presence, and He is the source of all that is holy. So He says to Moses, “By those who come near Me I must be regarded as holy; and before all the people I must be glorified.” For anyone to approach His presence without first being sanctified is unsafe and could be detrimental.

For this reason, God made the priestly covenant (Exodus 19) and consecrated the Levitical priesthood (Exodus 29, Leviticus 8). Under the high priest, Aaron, the priests of Israel were charged with the responsibility of safeguarding God’s presence and administering His holiness to the people through sacrificial worship. They were to conduct the divine service daily, to offer atonement for sin by animal sacrifice, and to bring God’s acceptance and blessing to the people. They were mediators, that is to say, they went between God and His people, administering His holiness to the people, so that the congregation would be sanctified. Through this covenant, Israel was granted access to God, His divine presence went with them, and His blessings were given to them.

Symbolically, the rood screen was intended to represent some of these theological aspects of the Levitical priesthood. Practically, it taught the people medieval Roman theology. The people were to be separated from God for their own good. Access to God’s holy presence was reserved for the priesthood and the priesthood was reserved for the ordained clergy who traced their succession to Peter through the pope. Only a priest could administer the holy things of God, and the elaborate rood screen represented the elaborate theological scheme that was separating the people from God in Luther’s day.

Such practices have led to a confused understanding of holiness as something which is achieved. Sanctification too often is relegated to a lesson on good works. It is something you do. God’s holiness becomes nothing more than moral living. If you can get your life right, then you can have a place in worship. To this is added those holy works which will aid you in reaching the sanctification required. The priestly orders and monastic life represent what God desires of us if we want our worship of Him to be acceptable. More and more these lessons on achieved sanctification separate the sinner and corrupt his conscience so that God is someone best kept at a distance.

On the other hand, some have reacted by tearing down the rood screens and together with them remove all talk of holiness. Church is treated like a

buffet line. Pick and choose what you like, ignore the rest. There are no restrictions on who may or how to come to Holy Communion; it is a come one, come all event where the bread is passed out like popcorn at the ball game. The priesthood of all believers is used to justify anyone and everyone having unmediated access into God's presence regardless of what state the heart and life are in. God loves sinners after all, and Jesus ate with sinners, so what difference does it make how you come to the altar, what state of mind you are in, how you have prepared yourself? God will accept you as you are, so we should too. With no sense of why on earth that screen was there in the first place, they tear it down and with it any talk of sin, repentance, or God's holiness. The service of the Word turns into a worship event, churches turn into concert halls, and liturgy turns into a performance worthy of Las Vegas. Jesus no longer functions as Mediator between God and man.

For Luther neither extreme was right. His attention to holiness was very real and led to a very real theology which he was determined to put into practice. Growing up, the holiness of God was something he was taught to recognize and even fear. Yet, as Luther grew in his understanding of the gospel—the good news which sets us free from such terror and wrath of God—he began to understand the life of worship as an enactment of God's grace and Spirit. Now he saw God's holiness as something He intended for sinners to receive, not something to avoid. Like grace and justification, holiness comes to the sinner passively. So Luther writes:

[W]e may distinguish sharply between Christian holiness and other kinds of holiness. . . . Christian holiness is not active but passive. Therefore let no one call himself holy on the basis of his way of life or of his works. . . . not on the basis of their own holiness, but on the basis of a holiness not their own, not by an active holiness, but by a passive holiness. They are holy because they possess something that is divine and holy, namely, the calling of the ministry, the Gospel, Baptism, etc., on the basis of which they are holy.²

Understanding holiness as something given through the gospel was central to how Luther articulated the Scriptural doctrine of the priesthood. He came to recognize the sacrilege that was taking place in the practices of Rome. They

² *Lecture on Galatians* (1535), Luther's Works, American Edition, Volume 26, p. 25

were failing in their true priestly duties—they were neither safely nor rightly administering God’s holiness to the people. They were inventing other sources of holiness not instituted by God. They were creating barriers which prevented sinners from receiving what God intended to give. The gospel was veiled behind the rood screen, putting the ministry in even greater danger of desecrating what God has called holy.

The goal of this essay is to explore Luther’s teaching on the priesthood of believers as the administration of God’s holiness through Jesus Christ. To that end, we will explore Luther’s teaching in three parts: **1) We are all priests who receive God’s holiness in the Word.** Here we revisit the Lutheran emphasis on the means of grace as the Spirit’s means to sanctify all believers as priests. **2) We are all priests who administer God’s holiness in worship.** Here we will explore how important it is that, as priests, all the baptized are involved in the ongoing care of God’s sacred things—namely, judging doctrine and calling faithful ministers. **3) We are all priests who participate in God’s holiness in daily calling.** Here we will discuss how prayer, vocation, and self-sacrifice are the daily functions of the priestly office in the world.

We Are All Priests Who Receive God’s Holiness in the Word

Professor John Kleinig notes in his work, “Luther on the Christian’s Participation in God’s Holiness,” that the Old Testament distinguishes between two degrees of holiness in the worship of the tabernacle. Such objects as “the anointing oil, the meat from the sin offerings, and the bread from the grain offerings were *most holy*.” However, “the priests who were sanctified by them were only holy in a secondary sense.” This distinction between “most holy” and “holy” identified the difference between things which communicate holiness—most holy, and things which receive holiness—holy. In other words, the priest was only holy because he came into contact with what was most holy (Exodus 30:22-29). The priest was then holy, but could not communicate holiness in himself. In this way, the “most holy things” in the tabernacle worship were akin to what we call the means of grace. What is most crucial to our worship life is to make use of the means chosen by the Spirit to communicate God’s holiness and grace. To use any other means than what God has instituted for this purpose is to take His name in vain. Through the means of the Spirit, God sanctifies His people for ministry in His presence.

Luther came to recognize the failure of the theologians in his day to make this distinction. With each passing decade, the list of things which were thought to communicate holiness in his day was growing and the sources of holiness changing. Already in his day, Rome recognized seven sacraments by which holiness was communicated. This included the belief that the ordination of the priestly clergy gave them the power to communicate holiness, that is, to sanctify. From here, it seems, all other errors begin.

It was taught that a churchly priesthood existed as a direct successor from Christ and the apostles. Ordination was the public ritual by which a common person entered into this succession. Beyond this, a sacramental power was placed into the rite of ordination, thereby conveying a certain power and immediate presence of Christ into the priest himself. By rite of ordination, the clergy was said to possess a special character (*character indelebilis*) which distinguished it from the common people—the laity. This granted the clergy a special authority to perform the priestly ministry. The priestly ministry included the most important and sacred duty: the sacrifice of the Mass. The priests had become their own means of grace. The very vestments that they wore and the tonsure into which their hair was cut were considered holy prerequisites for rightly serving God in the Mass. Without an ordained priest acting in the stead of the people, there was little hope of accessing God’s help and grace.

To aid the people in their struggle, other sources of holiness were added. Relics, such as the bones of saints or a piece of Christ’s cross, and other anointed objects were sanctified for use in worship. It was taught that by pilgrimages to visit certain relics of Christ and departed saints, the people could access holiness for themselves. This was to aid them in their piety and devotional growth.

Luther addresses these notions of “holy things” in his work, *On the Councils and the Church* (1539). He draws attention to “the principal item, and the holiest of holy possessions.” In a turn of phrase, he speaks of the “holy possession” with the same language that could be understood to mean “holy relic.” Luther identifies the only relic that actually communicates holiness.

God’s word is holy and sanctifies everything it touches; it is indeed the very holiness of God, Romans 1:[16], “It is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith,” and 1 Timothy 4: [5], “Everything is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.”

For the Holy Spirit himself administers it and anoints or sanctifies the Christian church with it rather than with the pope's chrism, with which he anoints or consecrates fingers, garb, cloaks, chalices, and stones. These objects will never teach one to love God, to believe, to praise, to be pious.³

The Word of God is the holy relic which actually touches us. It touches our ears, it touches our heart, and by it the Holy Spirit sanctifies us. Furthermore, the Word of God then defines all that is sacred and sanctifies what it touches. The holy things in the tabernacle were nothing more than things, objects, materials. There was nothing inherently special about the blood, the oil, the water used in the ceremonies. Rather, what was special was that these elements had the word and command of God attached to them. Because God commanded that something be used in His service and in His presence, His institution sanctified it for worship. In the same way, God's word and command sanctify water for use in Baptism and bread and wine for use in the Lord's Supper. *Sola scriptura*, by Scripture alone, is the only basis for accessing what is most holy in God's presence.

Luther goes on to list seven "holy things" including the office of the ministry, prayer, and the suffering of the cross. By this he does not mean that these all communicate holiness, but rather that these are the "principle parts of Christian sanctification."⁴ He means these as the way that "holy Christian people are externally recognized."⁵ Most significantly, the first three that Luther mentions are named as those which do have power to draw us into God's holiness so that we receive the Holy Spirit from God: the Word, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper. Each of these has been consecrated by God as instruments to bring us His holiness and grant us His Holy Spirit.

The Importance of the Means of Grace Today

Lex orandi, lex credendi. That is to say, "the way we pray is the way we believe." This ancient Latin phrase describes the connection between how we worship and how we believe. In other words, the manner, focus, and posture of our worship say something about what we believe. When walking into a

³ *On the Councils and the Church* (1539), Luther's Works, American Edition, Volume 41, p. 149

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 166

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 164

worship setting on any given Sunday, it does not take long to identify where the manner, focus, and posture are directed.

For so many churches, the means of grace is shrouded by various rood screens that they erect in their midst. In a high church setting the screen may be mysterious ceremonies and liturgics tied to ancient traditions and Old Testament symbolism. In a low church setting the screen may be the bright lights, the emotional experience, the charismatic leader, or the “God wants you to” vision of the prophetic, motivational church leader. In either case, how close are the people really coming to God’s holiness? Are they safely calling on His presence? Are they finding the Spirit where God has revealed Him?

The center of Lutheran theology is the means of grace, and that is a great and most precious treasure for us. It is our holy relic to which we should continue to make our weekly pilgrimage. What can we do to restore to the language of holiness a proper understanding of how God intends for us to receive sanctification, not accomplish it? Are we aware of how unusual and strange this pilgrimage can be for someone who visits our church but has never heard of Christ, never read the Bible, never thought about God’s holiness or grace? I suggest that a proper emphasis on the means of grace together with a right understanding of God’s holiness will help us remove the rood screen so that Christ can mediate His priestly office freely to the consolation of our conscience.

We Are All Priests Who Administer God’s Holiness in Worship

In the Old Testament, the priests were responsible for administering God’s holiness. It was their duty to make sure nothing unclean or impure entered God’s holy presence. They were to provide atonement for sins by offering sacrifices and to bless the people in the daily divine service. At the time of the Reformation, it was taught that this ministry of the priesthood never ended. According to Rome, it has continued in the New Testament, being entrusted now to the ordained clergy under the headship of the pope. This meant that administering God’s holy things was the responsibility of the ordained priest only. The appointing of bishops and priests as well as the ability to make doctrinal assertions was left to popes and councils alone to determine.

Yet, it was for this very reason that Luther took up this doctrine so frequently in his writings. The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers had to be emphasized because of what the Roman authorities were doing. The very

problem with their theology is that they failed to understand the symbolic nature of the priesthood. The priesthood of Aaron was always something pointing to Christ as the fulfillment of all sacrifices and to the office He would assume; it was not indicating the means by which a new priesthood would function under a pope. Our confessions state in regard to Hebrews 8:3:

[O]ur opponents twist passages from this very epistle against us—like this one, which says that “every high priest is appointed to offer sacrifices for sins. . . . The Scripture itself adds immediately that Christ is the high priest. . . . The Levitical sacrifices for sin did not merit the forgiveness of sins in the sight of God; as we have already said, they were merely a picture of the sacrifice of Christ which was to be the one propitiatory sacrifice.”⁶

Luther taught that because Christ was the head of the Church, all believers were equally members of His body and equally members of the priesthood. This meant that God had entrusted the administration of His holy things, not just to a select class of believers, but to all for the benefit of all. Writing *To the Christian Nobility* (1520), Luther calls for the common laity to take up their spiritual estate by right of Baptism. His hope is for grass roots reform that “God may help his church through the laity, since the clergy, to whom this task more properly belongs, have grown quite indifferent.”⁷

Luther then argues on the basis of 1 Peter 2:9 and 1 Corinthians 4:1 that all Christians are priests. Peter addresses the elect of God, namely the baptized believers who are sanctified by the Spirit (1 Peter 1:2). He encourages them to come to Christ as a holy priesthood and to offer spiritual sacrifices (1 Peter 2:5). Then Peter makes reference to the covenant formula from Exodus 19, “*you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, His own special people*” (1 Peter 2:9). Clearly, God’s covenant of the priesthood has come to the baptized believers, granting them the election to priestly status and priestly ministry. So Luther writes, “Therefore we are all priests, as many of us as are Christians.”

⁶ *The Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, Article XXIV, paragraph 53 (Theodore G. Tappert).

⁷ *To the Christian Nobility*, Luther’s Works, American Edition, Volume 44, p. 123

This places into the hand of the Church a significant responsibility and privilege. Luther summarized,

Where the gospel is rightly and purely preached, there a holy Christian church must be. . . . where there is a holy Christian church, there all the sacraments, Christ Himself, and the Holy Spirit must be.⁸

The foremost concern in this is that the holy things—specifically the gospel—are not desecrated by false teaching or misuse of the sacraments. For Luther, doctrine was everything. In a sermon on 1 Corinthians 1:4-9 Luther wrote,

[I]f we have the Gospel pure, we have the treasure God gives his Church then we cannot go astray nor want. . . . There is no defect in this, and it is effective and fruitful. The fact that some do not believe does not weaken baptism or the Gospel or the Church; they only harm themselves. . . . [W]herever the doctrine is pure, there also you can keep purity in baptism, the sacrament, absolution, the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, good works and all callings.⁹

It is of the utmost importance that Christians be active in testing what they are being taught. It is equally important that as priests they realize their right to dismiss false teachers and to call right teachers. Otherwise, they are left to the Babylonian captivity of the devil.

Luther had much to defend in this regard. It seemed there was an ongoing misunderstanding of what he was teaching. After a back-and-forth debate against accusations raised by Jerome Emser, Luther stated in a 1521 letter:

[A]ll Christians should be priests; yet not all should be consecrated by bishops, not all should preach, celebrate mass, and exercise the priestly office unless they have been appointed and called to do so. This was my final intention.¹⁰

⁸ *The Private Mass and the Consecration of Priests*, Luther's Works, American Edition, Volume 38, pp. 211f

⁹ *Sermons of Martin Luther*, editor and translator John N. Lenker, Volume 8, "Sermons on Epistle Texts," p. 301.

¹⁰ *Dr. Luther's Retraction*, Luther's Works, American Edition, Volume 39, p. 233

Luther consistently distinguished between the priesthood which belongs to all believers and the public ministry which also belongs to all believers but which is entrusted to individuals.

[S]ince a Christian congregation neither should nor could exist without God's word, it . . . must have teachers and preachers who administer the word. . . . [W]e must act according to Scripture and call and institute from among ourselves those who are found to be qualified and whom God has enlightened with reason and endowed with gifts to do so.¹¹

In most of these contexts, Luther stays away from speaking about ordination, which he viewed as a fine tradition, so that he might highlight more fully the scriptural doctrine of the divine call. Luther's aim was not to diminish the office of the public ministry as a God-ordained gift, but rather to defend the public ministry by restoring pure doctrine and by exalting Christ in the midst of the congregation.

For example, when problems arose in Bohemia in 1523, Luther wrote to a certain city regarding what he called "the chaos and Babylonian confusion" that Rome was inflicting. He urged them to "rid all Bohemia of these monsters." He continued,

I would confidently advise that you have no ministers at all. For it would be safer and more wholesome for the father of the household to read the gospel and, since the universal custom and use allows it to the laity, to baptize those who are born in his home, and so to govern himself and his according to the doctrine of Christ, even if throughout life they did not dare or could not receive the Eucharist.¹²

In *The Private Mass and the Consecration of Priests* (1533), we find another example. Here Luther accuses the bishops and priests of sacrilege. For Luther, it was indeed the duty of the priesthood to attend to God's holiness in worship. When false teaching and wrong administration of the means of grace were taking place, it was the calling of the priesthood to correct it. This is the ministry given to all believers, not just a higher class of spiritual elites. This is the reason why the Church elects and calls pastors.

¹² *Concerning the Ministry*, Luther's Works, American Edition, Volume 40, p. 9

Why We Should Care Today

We have the same calling to administer the holy things of God as the believers did in Luther's day. One great blessing in a smaller synod is the ability to involve a higher percentage of the lay membership in synod dialogue and synod fellowship activities. The decisions of our synodical conventions rest in the hands of lay-servants who are equally called to minister in this capacity as is the clergy. On the congregational level, the calling of pastors is not controlled by bureaucracy or the dictates of higher authorities or the evaluation of candidates. Rather, our swift calling process places much liberty in the prayerful decisions of the local congregation and further brings us to trust the Holy Spirit who elects, calls, and places pastors and teachers in the public ministry.¹⁴

At the same time, it is a blessing that God has given pastors and teachers to the church. The priesthood of believers does not relinquish its right to teach, preach, and administer the sacraments by calling someone to do so. The called servant acts on behalf of the congregation. The congregation calls an individual into the preaching or teaching ministry, and the called servant does God's work on the congregation's behalf and under the authority of Christ and His Word.

Conflicts and divisions continue to remain in this regard. The Roman church has not changed its doctrine and still holds to its sacrament of Holy Orders. The Lutheran Church Missouri Synod continues working through over 20 years of conflict regarding its licensed lay-deacon ministries.¹⁵ The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America uses the priesthood of believers as a basis to push boundaries in the name of diversity—women and practicing homosexuals are both seen as scripturally authorized candidates for the preaching office. Many evangelical churches do not know how to make sense of the divine call and so leave an opening for their church leaders to assert their own agendas and authority over the people. In these large-venue churches, there is little accountability so that just about anyone who claims visions and prophecies is welcome to speak his heart. Overall, Christians are not being led to be

¹⁴ "In 1 Corinthians 3:4-8 Paul places ministers on an equality and teaches that the church is above the ministers. . . . For he says, 'All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas.'" *Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope*, paragraph 4 (Theodore G. Tappert).

¹⁵ For more discussion read, "The Relation of the Public Ministry and the Priesthood of All Believers in Regard to Current Lutheran Debates," David Lau, *Journal of Theology*, Volume 35, Number 4 (December 1995), pp. 2-26.

discerning in doctrine or to see the importance of calling someone who will attend to the holy things of God, namely, the means of grace.

These things are not beyond our struggles and weaknesses either, but thanks be to God who has given us the carefully balanced and scripturally based approach presented in *Concerning Church and Ministry*.

We Are All Priests Who Participate in God's Holiness in Daily Calling

The Roman Catholic doctrine defines "holy orders" as among the seven sacraments. To this was attached the holy works that could be done only by priests and monks. Luther saw this as an attack on the Holy Spirit who sanctifies each of us as "little Christs." The Roman priests would don the holy garments as a sign of their right to perform the sacrifice. Yet, Luther points out in his study on Psalm 110 that the "holy adornment" is given to all the baptized. He writes,

Here [the psalmist] pictures Christians arrayed in their priestly garments, gloriously and beautifully adorned for sacrifice and divine worship, like the garments which the Levitical priests were required to wear. . . . He endows them with the highest divine reputation and honor, for there is no greater name or honor before God and men than to be a priest. A priest is the kind of person whose proper office it is to deal with God, to be closest to God, and to be concerned with nothing but divine things. . . . [This holy adornment is nothing] else than the beautiful, divine, and various gifts of the Holy Spirit as St. Paul (Ephesians 4:11,12) and St. Peter (1 Peter 4:10) say, which were given to Christendom to advance the knowledge and the praise of God, a function which is carried out pre-eminently by the ministry of preaching the Gospel.¹⁶

Each of us who is baptized into Christ has been clothed with Christ (Galatians 3:27). Our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit who dwells in us (1 Corinthians 6:19). This means that all our work is holy work, for it is sanctified by the Word of God and prayer (1 Timothy 4:5). But these holy works are not

¹⁶ *Psalm 110*, Luther's Works, American Edition, Volume 13, pp. 294f.

far off, they are as close to us as our neighbor. Our priestly ministry is not reserved for sanctuaries behind rood screens, but the shrine of the Spirit is our very body, so that Christ comes with us into our daily vocation, prayers, and self-sacrifice.

The Roman clergy contend that their priestly sacrifice is the making present of the actual sacrifice of Christ when they celebrate the Mass. Luther, however, rejected this notion of the priesthood's work and instead remarked that there are two basic ways that we offer God a priestly sacrifice:

What sacrifices, then, are we to offer? Ourselves, and all that we have, with constant prayer, as we say, "Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." With this we are to yield ourselves to the will of God, that he may make of us what he will, according to his own pleasure. In addition, we are to offer him praise and thanksgiving with our whole heart, for his unspeakable, sweet grace and mercy, which he has promised and given us in this sacrament.¹⁷

The priestly sacrifice is that of ourselves in prayer and our words. It is our daily calling to take up the cross and follow Jesus, but this requires self-denial. That is to say, repentance is the suffering we endure, even as we turn to the needs of our neighbor and offer our bodies as servants for Christ.

Luther bases this understanding of the priest's sacrificial ministry on Romans 12. "*I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service*" (Romans 12:1).

Professor David Lau explains how there were two kinds of sacrifices in the Old Covenant. He says,

The sacrifices of atonement were to get rid of sin, for example, the sacrifice of the Lamb on Yom Kippur—the great Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16). The sacrifices of thanksgiving were sacrifices of firstfruits, or something similar, to show gratitude for forgiveness received.

. . . In the New Testament there are also two kinds of sacrifices: the atoning sacrifice brought by Christ, the great High Priest, to

¹⁷ *Treatise on the New Testament (1520), Luther's Works, American Edition, Volume 35, p. 98*

whom the Old Testament sacrifices pointed, as we read in Hebrews 9:23-26; and the sacrifices of thanksgiving brought by Christians, the holy priesthood, acceptable to God only through Christ, acceptable because Christ's atoning sacrifice removed the barrier of sin. Only because of the first are the second sacrifices God-pleasing. Only "by Jesus Christ" are men's sacrifices acceptable. Only Christians can bring sacrifices well-pleasing to God.¹⁸

The offerings we present before God in our priestly service are not to atone for sin or merit grace as the Roman church teaches. The atoning sacrifice has been made. It was this sacrifice to which all other sacrifices pointed. As the book of Hebrews states, ". . . *we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all*" (Hebrews 10:10). What we offer as priests is a fruit of thanksgiving, a fruit of sanctification. It is the peace offering, a free-will sacrifice which does not need to be produced under obligation or for some sort of gain. Rather, the first sacrifice of Christ compels us in the love of God to do the second. "*Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name. But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased*" (Hebrews 13:15-16).

God has revealed His presence to us in the divine service through the Word so that we might take God with us into the world. We are living sacrifices. The Spirit sanctifies us—not *in* our good works, but *for* good works. He does this by extending Himself through the Sunday service into our weekly prayer life. Luther wrote his *Small Catechism* for this very purpose—that Christians might have a small devotional book so as to exercise themselves in the Word of God and daily grow in their sanctification. These holy works are no farther than our neighbor—no farther than those in our household, families, station in life. To have the privilege to pray for those around us and have such access to God through Christ is a holy gift. To serve others in our daily office is the priestly work of Christ.

¹⁸ Unpublished notes from Professor Emeritus David Lau

Conclusion

In his treatise *Concerning the Ministry*, Luther identifies the priestly office of all believers as involving the following functions:¹⁹

Teaching the Word of God—“on which everything else depends”

Baptizing—“which was given even to ordinary women”

The Lord’s Supper—“what is given here is given to all”

The Office of the Keys—“to the whole church and to each of its members”

Sacrifice of Self—“only by one who has the Spirit of Christ”

Prayer for Others—“we make intercession”

Judge Doctrine—“if this prevailed, there would never have been a papacy”

Right to Call—“otherwise there might be a kind of Babylon in the church”

It is the work of the priesthood to rightly interpret and teach the rood screen. Whatever elaborate liturgical exercises or entertainment practices we might employ, whether they are trying to arouse a sense of reverence or to keep people engaged, if it detracts from these activities—especially if it shrouds the means of grace—it has no place in the service of God’s holy priesthood. Instead, we teach that the true entryway into God’s holy presence is only through Christ. This gives us an even greater sense of holiness, for the holy entrance into the sanctuary is through the very body and blood of our High Priest, as we read in the book of Hebrews:

Therefore brethren, having the privilege of access into the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, which has opened a new and living way through the curtain, namely, His flesh, and having a High Priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, since our hearts have been sprinkled from an evil conscience and since our bodies have been washed with clean water. (Hebrews 10:19-22, author’s translation).

God intends to share His holiness—He always has and always will. He wants us in His presence forever. To this end He gave His only Son. It was not with silver or gold or your empty practices given by tradition from your fathers that

¹⁹ *Concerning the Ministry (1523)*, *Luther’s Works*, American Edition, Volume 40, pp. 21ff

you were redeemed (1 Peter 1:18). No, you were redeemed with the precious blood (1 Peter 1:19). It was given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. It has been sprinkled on your heart in Word and Sacrament. Take and eat. Take and drink. Listen, O Israel. You are washed, you are sanctified, you are justified, in the name of Jesus and by the Spirit of our God (1 Corinthians 6:11). In short, you are a royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:9).

So Luther indicates in his *Large Catechism* when he writes, “All this, then, is the office and work of the Holy Spirit, to begin and daily to increase holiness on earth through these two means, the Christian church and the forgiveness of sins.”²⁰ Holiness and sanctification are gifts that come through the Holy Spirit. This reminds us that the Spirit is not ours to possess or own, He is only ours to receive. For this reason, let us constantly receive Him in the Word, be renewed by Him in our Baptism, and call upon Him in every trouble.

There is nothing easy about this office. It is, in fact, impossible. False teaching and sinful works are born and bred in our sinful nature. We try to do sanctification and find only failure. So in His grace, God touches us first. He gives us what is His—He gives us His holiness in the means of grace. He touches us in the water and in the Word consecrating us a priesthood and a possession of His own. He sanctifies us by His Spirit so that we can do holy works in His Spirit.

Only a proper emphasis on the means of the Spirit and Christ can bring about such sanctification and the fruits thereof. Right preaching of these gifts is what cleanses our conscience from sin and dead works so that we can approach God in confidence. It is our calling as priests to administer these great blessings to one another according to the Word of God, to call pastors and teachers who will do this for us and with us, to take these blessings into the world, to pray and call on God’s name against the devil and all evil, and to share these gifts with our neighbor.

All this is ours through Christ our High Priest in whom we are consecrated into the priesthood. It is Christ alone who truly has the right of access to God. “*For Christ has not entered the holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us; . . . He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. And as it is*

²⁰ *Large Catechism*, The Creed, paragraph 59

appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment, so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation” (Hebrews 9:24-28).

Bibliography

- Bainton, Roland H. *Here I Stand: a Life of Martin Luther*. New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1950.
- Kittelson, James M. *Luther the Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986.
- Kleinig, John W. “Luther on the Christian's Participation in God's Holiness.” *Lutheran Theological Journal* 19.1 (1985): 21-29. www.johnkleinig.com
- Kleinig, John W. “On Eagles' Wing.” *Lutheran Theological Journal* 21.1 (1987): 16-27. www.johnkleinig.com
- Kleinig, John W. “Sharing in God's Holiness.” *Lutheran Theological Review* 2nd ser. 8.1 (1995): 105-18. www.johnkleinig.com.
- Lenker, John N., editor and translator, *Sermons of Martin Luther*, Volume 8, “Sermons on Epistle Texts,” Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, reprint of 1909 edition.
- Tappert, Theodore G. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959.
- Winger, Thomas M. “The Priesthood of All the Baptized: An Exegetical and Theological Investigation,” Concordia Seminary Thesis, St. Louis, 1992. Brock University. Web.
- Luther, Martin. *Luther's Works: American Edition*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House.



Go Forward with Joy in Your Step!

Wayne C. Eichstadt

Sermon at the Worship Service of the Thirty-Second Convention of the Church of the Lutheran Confession

Grace be to you—fellow sinners, peace be to you—fellow strugglers, in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Text: *Psalm 119:105*

*Your Word is a lamp to my feet
And a light to my path.*

A student from the University of Erfurt was making his way home with a companion. The footsteps of these men were undoubtedly light upon the path as they made the journey together. Students in those days loved to have a sword at their side and this man was no different. Along the way, this young man accidentally ran his sword into his leg and severed a major artery. His companion's footsteps quickly took him back to town to seek help, while the wounded man tried to slow the flow of blood. As his leg swelled he cried out with a desperate plea: "Mary, Help me!"

Sometime later, the footsteps of the same young man once again took him along the return path to Erfurt after a visit at home. A thunderstorm came up along the way and when lightening struck close, he fell stunned to the ground and prayed: "Help, dear St. Ann, I will become a monk!"

The university student in both of these events is Martin Luther. These events recount physical footsteps and things that happened along the way, but they are also an intersection between physical footsteps and the figurative footsteps of Martin's spiritual life. Spiritually, Martin's footsteps followed his instruction dominated by the law, were absent of a true understanding of salvation by grace, and were touched with the superstition of the day.

Martin Luther's path spiritually had at this point left him afraid, angry, burdened heavily by sin's guilt, and growing more despondent and hopeless with each passing attempt to find peace. In one of his hymns, Martin Luther wrote:

Fast bound in Satan's chains I lay, / Death brooded darkly o'er me,
 Sin was my torment night and day, / In sin my mother bore me;
 Yea, deep and deeper still I fell, / Life had become a living hell,
 So firmly sin possessed me. (*The Lutheran Hymnal*, 387:2)

Martin looked to Mary in order to find comfort, but comfort was not with St. Mary.

Martin cried to St. Ann for help, but help was not with St. Ann.

Martin became a monk, deprived himself, beat himself in order to attain peace with God, but peace was not in the monastic life.

It wasn't until Martin Luther heard the still small voice of the gospel declare: "*The just shall live by faith*" (Romans 1:17) that he found the comfort, the help, and the peace he so desperately needed and for which he so intensely yearned.

We are beginning a year-long celebration of the 500th Anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation. We seek to study, pray, worship, and go about our business as children of God while walking in the "Footsteps of the Reformers"—a path which is ultimately and truly in the footsteps of Christ, our Savior.

As we consider going forward from this point—as individual children of God, as Christian congregations, and as a church body—where do we go from here? Using the words of the psalmist, God's encouragement to each one of you in your own personal life as a child of God; and to each of us in our congregations whether pastors, teachers, or laymen, children or adults; and to each of us as a body of believers bonded together in Christ—God's encouragement for each of us in all of these facets is, "**Go Forward with Joy in Your Step!**" **I. Your footing will be well grounded with truth** and **II. Your path will be illuminated by the Spirit.**

Your Footing Will Be Well Grounded with Truth

God frequently illustrates the contrast between sin and holiness as the contrast between darkness and light. It is a description to which we can easily relate. In deep darkness you can't see where you are going, you can't find your way. We are born with sin, separated from God, with no way to get out. The guilt of sin hangs over us as does the judgment of God upon that sin. Sin's

effect in this world and in our lives is what leaves us sorrowful, worried, fearful, disappointed. The darkness of unbelief, the darkness of sin, the darkness of sin's effect in this world all leave us in darkness and gloom. This is why the prophesy of Isaiah is able to bring such joy and hope: *"The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, / And upon those who sat in the region and shadow of death / Light has dawned"* (Matthew 4:16).

The solution to darkness is having a light source. The psalmist said: *"Your Word—a lamp to my feet."* God's Word is the light source to provide light to our feet as we step forward day by day. Sure and steady walking begins with sure and steady footing where you are. God's Word is the lamp to our feet to provide that sure and steady footing whatever the terrain.

Martin Luther did not have that light for his feet nor the spiritual footing while he was trying to find peace within himself and within his law-obedience. At that time he was looking to the darkness to provide light, and that never works. *"Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law"* (Romans 3:28). God's Word is the lamp to our feet so that we have sure footing with which to go forward.

The light of the law shines upon our feet and reveals footsteps walking and following sin. It shows us that there is no solid footing of ourselves—really no footing at all of any kind. Our own footsteps take us headlong over the cliff into destruction. We need the light of God's law to convict us in our sin, to reveal ourselves for what we really are. Without it, we would continue in darkness, falsely convincing ourselves that "I'm OK with God because I feel OK with Him and I feel pretty good about myself." The light of God's law says, "You're not OK. You are under God's wrath and punishment, you have no footing and standing with God. You are a condemned sinner!"

We need the law to take our own contrived footing right out from underneath us; but then the gospel creates new footing upon Christ the Cornerstone—a foundation to build upon. It is a foundation which stands against all the ravages of sin and Hell. It is a foundation that provides sure footing regardless of any storm that sin's effects might bring.

The light of God's Word brings the light of Jesus—who is the Light of the World—into our lives and makes them new! We are redeemed! We are ransomed! We are set free! Jesus has paid the price for our sins by laying down His perfect life on the cross. The gloom and darkness of being entrapped in sin

are gone because Jesus has taken our sins upon Himself and given us His righteousness in their place. The cloud of God's judgment upon our sin is gone!

Consider what this means for your footsteps in life.

Living in darkness is living in fear of the just judgment of God, or denying any judgment and living in denial of sin and ignorance of the reality. Living in the light means rejoicing to know you are at peace with God and are His beloved child.

Living in darkness is potentially acknowledging God, but living in the light is *knowing* Him as He has revealed Himself in His Word.

Living in darkness means standing on your own and facing the failures and limitations of sinful human beings. Living in the light means confidently going to God—the Creator of heaven and earth—for anything and everything. Oh, what a difference the light makes to our footing, to our footsteps, to our entire being! *“For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light”* (Ephesians 5:8). God's Word is a lamp to my feet—*there* and there only is the light source to give us this footing.

God's Word is a lamp to our feet to give us this sure spiritual footing and it also becomes our defense. In Ephesians chapter 6, the Apostle Paul describes the “Armor of God” with which we are able to stand against the wiles of the devil: the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, and *“having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace”* (Ephesians 6:15). The footing that the light of God's Word gives to our feet is not only salvation, it is protection against temptation and the efforts of those enemies who seek to pull us back into darkness.

The psalmist wrote:

*“Truly God is good to Israel,
To such as are pure in heart.
But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled;
My steps had nearly slipped.
For I was envious of the boastful,
When I saw the prosperity of the wicked.
. . . Surely I have cleansed my heart in vain,
And washed my hands in innocence.*

*. . . When I thought how to understand this,
It was too painful for me—
Until I went into the sanctuary of God;
Then I understood their end. (Psalm 73:1-3,13,16-17)*

The Word was the light that kept the psalmist's feet from slipping, chased envy from his heart, and opened his eyes to understand the end of the wicked and his own salvation.

The light of God's Word that provides footing for our feet is so strong and so significant that it penetrates into every aspect of our lives. There is a temptation to compartmentalize our spiritual footing in one place, and our career footing in another place, and in another place our family footing, and so on. God's Word is a lamp to your feet in whatever calling they take you and in the various vocations of life. All of the reasons for joy and celebration at having this light for your feet are reasons to carry that light into every place you go and into every corner of your life.

This personal spiritual footing is a reason for us to go forward with joy—the joy of salvation. It is the joy of waking up each morning and knowing that the Lord's mercies are new to you that day. It is waking up and rejoicing to know, "I'm a baptized child of God, I may a host defy!" It is the joy of waking up and knowing that I am at peace with God, for He has declared me righteous on the basis of Christ's atoning sacrifice—and having that joy in every moment of the day. God's Word is a lamp to our feet for just this purpose, and to chase away the clouds of darkness that can still come and hover over us as we walk through this valley of sorrow, even while being led in paths of righteousness for His name's sake (Psalm 23:3).

The world is a dark place filled with sorrow and trouble. *"In the world you will have tribulation,"* Jesus says, *"but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world"* (John 16:33). Go forward with joy because your footing will be well-grounded with truth—the truth of God's Word.

Your Path Will Be Illuminated by the Spirit

Twelve years after Martin Luther travelled along the stormy road on the way back to Erfurt, his physical footsteps led him to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg where he posted his Ninety-Five Theses. To Martin Luther, his path was clear. He saw error in the church, he had the truth of

God's unchanging Word which he sought to proclaim, and proclaim he did! Emboldened by the Spirit and armed with the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God (Ephesians 6:17), Martin Luther posted his theses and began walking down the path that God used to restore the teaching of the true gospel and to serve souls in what we have come to call "the Reformation."

Martin Luther didn't choose that path. Martin Luther didn't contrive that path. Out of love for his Lord he followed the path that was illuminated by the truth of the Scriptures because *God's Word is a light to our path*.

This is where we find ourselves as children of God: We have the footing given to us by the gospel, but where do we walk? What is our path? This is where we find ourselves as a church body: We have the joy of our salvation, we have the heritage passed down to us through the Reformation, but where do we walk? What is our path?

The path that stretches out in front of each of us is not a straight, smooth, friendly road. Rather it is like driving down a street in a large, busy, and unfamiliar city . . . at night . . . with road construction at every turn. Large flashing neon signs create distraction from the road in front of us. All of the ordinary signs combine with detour signs and add to the confusion. There are bumps and potholes to avoid and wrong turns that are too easily made. In short, it is chaos . . . unless there is a way of clear navigation and focus to guide safely along that path.

God's Word—a light to our path. If we are looking to find our path going forward, we will not find it in the distractions of the world nor in the pitfalls of being caught up in the cares of the world. Our path forward isn't going to be made clear by the philosophies of the world which are not according to Christ. "*Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ*" (Colossians 2:8).

The path ahead for each one of us is pockmarked with the holes of our failures and sins as well as the bumps of our pride and sense of self-sufficiency. Day by day we have the potential to detour ourselves away from the Light into all kinds of trouble. We are and ever remain the foolish sheep who stubbornly like to go our own way being convinced that *this* time it is a good idea. We will not find our path forward in ourselves any more than we can find our spiritual footing in ourselves. But, God's Word is a light to our path, and the still small

voice of the gospel is our navigator. There is a great deal to navigate—but go forward with joy because the Spirit will illuminate the path, and then we are able to go forward with confident steps.

The light of God's Word illuminates the path ahead and prevents wrong turns as we listen to God's direction telling us *"do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world"* (1 John 4:1).

In a world that dismisses God's Word as trite, worthless, and laughable, its trampling of the Word can leave us a little beleaguered; but step forward with joy because the Spirit illuminates that path and reassures you, *"[W]e did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty. . . . And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit"* (2 Peter 1:16ff). *"I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation"* (Romans 1:16).

The path ahead can seem pretty gloomy and discouraging as we live what Paul foretold, *"[A]ll who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution"* (2 Timothy 3:12). We can easily fall into the "Elijah mentality" and want to give up all hope (1 Kings 19). Let's not be pulled down with discouragement but lifted up and encouraged to go forward with joy by the promises of our Savior who has called us to this work. The path ahead is illuminated with words of strength and promises such as *"[B]e steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord"* (1 Corinthians 15:58).

God illuminates our path with encouragement through His Word when we consider that the work of God's Kingdom goes beyond us and beyond our church body. There is reason for encouragement and joy whenever and wherever the gospel is preached. As the apostle Paul wrote, *"Some indeed preach Christ even from envy and strife, and some also from goodwill: The former preach Christ from selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my chains; but the latter out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is preached; and in this I rejoice, yes, and will [keep on rejoicing]"* (Philippians 1:15ff).

Fear of all sorts can seize even those whose footing is well illuminated. Fear can seize us because the path can appear uncertain and treacherous. As Peter began to sink in the water when he lost his focus on Jesus, who was enabling him to walk on the water, we too can lose focus and become infected with fear. The Spirit illuminates the path with the assurance, *“There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear . . . ”* (1 John 4:18).

The wisdom of God reminds us,

*Two are better than one,
Because they have a good reward for their labor.
For if they fall, one will lift up his companion.
But woe to him who is alone when he falls,
For he has no one to help him up.
Again, if two lie down together, they will keep warm;
But how can one be warm alone?
Though one may be overpowered by another, two can withstand him.
And a threefold cord is not quickly broken.* (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12)

This practical wisdom of friends helping one another is translated into our spiritual lives and the path before us by the writer to the Hebrews, who says, *“Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, . . . exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching”* (Hebrews 10:23ff). The Spirit uses a Christian fellowship led by the Word to benefit one another as iron sharpens iron (Proverbs 27:17). A Spirit-created unity and fellowship navigating the future with the truth of God’s Word is cause for rejoicing and stepping forward with that joy!

When Martin Luther’s footsteps led him to the Castle Church door, the Spirit had led him to declare in Thesis 62, *“The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God.”* The gospel is a treasure buried in the field for which the man sold everything that he might buy the field. The gospel is the treasure that is worth sacrificing all else in order that it might be obtained and held. The gospel is the heritage that has been passed down to us and which by God’s grace we will pass to each new and succeeding generation.

*Give ear, O my people, to my [instruction];
. . . I will open my mouth in a parable;
I will utter dark sayings of old,
Which we have heard and known,*

*And our fathers have told us,
 We will not hide them from their children,
 Telling to the generation to come the praises of the LORD,
 And His strength and His wonderful works that He has done.
 . . . That the generation to come might know them,
 The children who would be born,
 That they may arise and declare them to their children,
 That they may set their hope in God,
 And not forget the works of God. . . .”* (Psalm 78:1ff)

Each anniversary of any event with which God has blessed us becomes a vista along our path from which we can look back with wonder and awe at God’s mercy, grace, and blessing—and give thanks. It is a vista from which we can look and pray for God’s continued blessing, and step forward confidently because the God who blessed us in the past is unchanging and is already in the future ready to lead us into it.

King Solomon came to such a vista at the dedication of the temple and said, *“Blessed be the LORD, who has given rest to His people Israel, according to all that He promised. There has not failed one word of all His good promise, which He promised. . . . May the LORD our God be with us, as He was with our fathers. May He not leave us nor forsake us, that He may incline our hearts to Himself, to walk in all His ways, and to keep His commandments and His statutes and His judgments, which He commanded our fathers”* (1 Kings 8:56ff).

God’s Word is the lamp to our feet to provide personal footing in Christ and our salvation and all of the blessings that flow from it.

God’s Word is a light to our path to enable us to step forward with joy and no matter what anyone says and no matter how much anything changes . . . that truth does not change and never will! *“The grass withers, the flower fades, / But the word of our God stands forever”* (Isaiah 40:8).

Jesus, lead Thou on Till our rest is won;
 And although the way be cheerless,
 We will follow calm and fearless.
 Guide us by Thy hand To our fatherland. (*The Lutheran Hymnal*, 410:1)

Till we safely stand . . . led by His Word—a lamp to our feet, a light to our path. Amen.

