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Journal of Theology

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παιδεία

The very first issue of the *Journal of Theology* (Volume 1, Issue 1, February 1961) launched a series of essays on the subject of education, specifically Christian education.

In launching these essays in education, we can promise only to labor at a large task, that of discussing many aspects of the subject: education. Education is only part of παιδεία, which is “the whole training and education of children . . . whatever in adults also cultivates the soul . . . instruction which aims at the increase of virtue . . . chastisement, chastening” (Thayer). To which must be added τέχνη, for utility must not be neglected.

We do not intend “systematic” discussions, for we believe that philosophy of education interpreted as a system is a pitfall. We would rather confine ourselves to outlining guiding principles which take into account “how things go” in the work of education. A book was written a few years ago in which a philosophy of Christianity was called for. We hope that a Christian system of philosophy is never developed, for that would likely spell the end of growing understanding of the Christian way. Likewise for education: systematization can harm the subject, if by that is meant an intellectualization, an imposed way of thinking on the subject. Christian παιδεία must never have saddled upon it any view of things which happens to be current at the time. Together we would rather seek to understand better the many timeless things that the Word tells us about our growing up into Him which is the Head. And together we will pursue what pertains to learning in the sphere below, always under the aegis of the sphere above.

Education is a process, not a fixed being, some kind of entity that has been established once for all. It is partly an art, to which some are more nearly born than others. At the same time, it must be said that some verifiable body of knowledge concerning it has been discovered. Accordingly, it is our hope that essays in παιδεία will contribute to better performance by all who teach: in all likelihood there is a better way for each of us who do it.¹

¹ *Journal of Theology*, Volume 1, Number 1 (February 1961), pp. 10f.

Through the following decades, the *Journal of Theology* featured articles in this same genre and for the same purpose. The importance of Christian education in all of its avenues has not changed. In our present time, the value of Christian education is even more evident when it is set in relief against the vain philosophies of the world and the wickedness all around us. We need to encourage one another in praying for all manner of Christian education, supporting it, and in whatever capacity we are able to serve in it.

The παιδεία feature returns in this issue. We look forward to encouraging and supporting mutual motivation, support, and growth in Christian education by continuing παιδεία articles in the *Journal of Theology* whenever there is opportunity to do so.

Missiology Minute

This issue also includes the start of a new periodic series, “Missiology Minute.” This series will feature brief articles adapted from missiology lessons written by Professor Emeritus, David Lau. We believe these articles will provide beneficial review for our readers as well as potentially forming the basis for Bible classes in the parish ministry.

Professor Lau’s Introduction to the Series:

Missiology was one of the courses I was asked to teach when I began teaching at the Immanuel Lutheran Seminary in 1991. Since I had never experienced such a course as a seminary student, I was in doubt as to how to teach it. L. W. Schierenbeck, my predecessor, directed me to a book written by E. H. Wendland in 1981, *Missiological Perspectives*. I made considerable use of Wendland’s work while developing an outline for use in the classroom. Wendland himself had written this book when he was asked to teach Missiology as a Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary course that had not been taught before.

I taught this course on Missiology four or five times in the years from 1991 to 2005. After I retired from teaching, the CLC Board of Missions asked me to develop materials for teaching various seminary subjects—including Missiology—for the benefit of English-speaking inquirers in foreign lands who were willing to learn seminary subjects by means of a correspondence course format. Using my Missiology notes from the seminary, I drew up twenty-five lessons on the general topic of missiology. Although there are few direct quotations from *Missiological Perspectives*, I did follow, to a large extent, Wendland’s order of presentation.

Mentors, Manhood, and the Mountain: Helping Emerging Adult Men Navigate the Climb from Childhood to Adolescence to Manhood in the World (Part 1)

David L.W. Pfeiffer

A story was told to me of a high school senior who was required to make up an online class in order to gain his credit. If he didn't do the required work, he would not be able to graduate. Parents, teachers, friends were all telling him the same thing: He needed to get this assignment done. Time was running out. One adult asked him, "Do you want me to check-in on you every night and help you get it done?" He answered, "What's the point of that? I know I need to do it. If you help me get it done, then I won't really have done it, will I? If I just do it because you want me to do it, but I don't want to do it for myself, then I don't see what the point is. Either I will get it done or I won't. But if I get it done, it will be because I want to do it for myself."

This experience is not unique. In his book, *Failure to Launch*, Mark McConville relays story after story of high school graduates who are trapped in anxiety, crippled by depression, strained by family conflicts, and just plain stuck in the childish ways of adolescence. In previous years, his eighteen- to twenty-five-year-old clients dealt with *adult* therapeutic issues, but clients in that age group now are still dealing with *adolescent* therapeutic issues. They are fighting with parents, failing in school, lacking direction and initiative, avoiding and evading responsibilities. "These young adults were presenting with problems I would have expected them to have already outgrown," he says. As one father put it, "My son is twenty-two going on sixteen."¹

In one way or another, the senior year of high school confronts a young person with the tangible and troubling realization that life is changing. The guardrails, structures, and relationships which have defined the young person's identity throughout most of his life are deconstructed and new structures are quickly being revealed all around. The senior year of high school

Editor's Note: This study and writing was completed before Covid-19 and all of the subsequent changes and their impact on society. While the social landscape has changed since this writing, it is safe to say that the issues discussed here have not improved, but are, at least in some instances, exacerbated.

¹ Mark McConville, *Failure to Launch* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2020), 9ff

marks the beginning of a transition that can last a decade or more. It is a time of searching, a time of wandering, a time which Jeffrey Arnett calls “Emerging Adulthood.”² Looking ahead to this new period in his life, the senior student must learn to want answers for himself. What is the point of growing up and what does God have to do with it all?

In our study we are aiming to find the point of it all and, more importantly, why emerging young men are struggling to grasp the point and are afraid even to reach out and lay hold of it. Why is a twenty-four-year-old taking two classes at community college with no declared major while his younger sister has already completed nursing school and has submitted applications to three hospitals? Why does a thirty-year-old man live in an apartment with a buddy, having no marriage prospects and little ambition beyond Tuesday night volleyball and beer? What is going on in the mind of a high school senior who is standing on the brink of independent adulthood but is unable or unsure of how to take the next step? What is at the heart of this crisis, and how can we as parents, mentors, and congregations address it under the guidance of our Lord Jesus Christ?

The aim of our study is to explore ways that mentorship can help us in addressing this crisis.³

We will approach this study in two parts. The first part of the study will explore what the crisis is that grips the young lives of American men. This will be a study of the mountain of manhood and the three specific phases that characterize the transitions experienced during the climb up the mountain. We will also look at the nature of the challenges that emerging young men are facing.

The second part of the study will shift from the problem to suggested solutions. Here we will look specifically at the role mentorship plays in helping young men make the climb toward manhood. We will consider how older men

² Jeffrey Arnett is a professor in the Department of Psychology at Clark University in Massachusetts. He coined the term “Emerging Adulthood” and considers it the period between adolescence and settled adulthood: roughly ages eighteen to thirty.

³ Our study of mentorship will not address young ladies and the transition into womanhood. No doubt, there will be some parts of our study that apply to young women as well as men. While the mentorship of young women is an important topic that should be considered, there are nuances to womanhood that are uniquely different from the mentoring of young men and are beyond the scope of this study.

can address specifically and intentionally the spoken and unspoken cries for help among our young men. This will culminate in a specific discussion of how rites of passage can play an important part in mentoring young men into their place as leaders in a Christian congregation.

Part 1: Understanding the Challenges of the Mountain Climb

I. The Crisis of Adolescence

A crisis of identity grips young people during the emerging adulthood transition. After discussing common themes in the lives of students attending Immanuel Lutheran High School some time ago, the issues that stood out as the most startling to me were anxiety and depression. One student put it this way,

A few of us are the excited ones—you know, energetic and wanting to get out and do something. We try to get the others out, but most of the dorm students just stay in their rooms. When there is free time in the gym, there are only a few of us that make use of it. Most are gamers and spend their time in the dorm. I guess you could say they are depressed or anxious. And these are the smart ones, getting the best grades. But they are sad.

In 2017, Aaron Khetaity wrote an article for *First Things* magazine titled, “Dying of Despair.” Khetaity shows how major depression among adolescents has increased by 37% from 2005 to 2014. This is coupled with an even more alarming increase in deaths from drugs, alcohol abuse, and suicide. Angus Deaton calls these “Deaths of Despair.” Among the reasons for this, Khetaity highlights social fragmentation leading to loneliness and loss of hope. “The man without hope is the likeliest candidate for suicide.” It is evident that there is a crisis being experienced by many young men as they begin the transition from adolescence to adulthood.

In McConville’s words, the transition from adolescence to adulthood is the most destabilizing of all developmental human experiences.⁵ A plethora of choices are suddenly thrust upon the young man. Where do I go to college? Should I go to college? What classes am I supposed to take? Where do I live? How do I live? Who are my friends and what do they mean to me? What do

⁴ <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2017/08/dying-of-despair>

⁵ McConville, p. 25

my parents mean to me now? What do girls mean to me? What should girls mean to me? What will I be when I grow up? What does it mean to grow up? Am I grown up? What's the point of growing up? All in all, this boils down to the question with which a young man wrestles: Who am I and for what purpose am I here? If he doesn't learn to answer these questions for himself, it doesn't matter much what his parents, teachers, and peers want for him; and it matters even less what they do for him. He must figure out who he is, or at least who he is becoming as a man and why it matters.

In times past, we find that this transition from childhood into adulthood was well defined and the path was clear. During the Middle Ages, a young man on the path to knighthood very clearly knew where to go and what must be done. At age six or seven, he became a page. During this time, he helped to serve food, complete chores, and he learned how to conduct himself. He was given a dagger, wooden sword, and a shield to practice the art of war with his peers while watching the older boys train more intensely.

At age fourteen, the page became a squire—an assistant to a knight. At this point, he was ready to go into battle alongside his knight, learning the risks and rewards. He saw the weaknesses and strengths of his knight and grew to appreciate the honor it took to be a knight.

At age twenty-one, the squire was promoted to knighthood, and it was time to leave boyhood behind. The soon-to-be knight was taken through an elaborate ceremony which culminated in leftover bruises. He earned the wounds of knighthood as the knight or king dubbed him with painful blows from the sword.

During each of these transitions in the young man's life, there were certain structures and experiences put in place by the adult world to guide and welcome the young man into full adulthood. As a result, the young man knew clearly when he had arrived there.

Today, such structures and transitions are not clearly defined. In places where the transition is marked by some sort of rite of passage, the experiences are weak. Seniors skip school or do a prank. They are taught how to sit in the right seat so they get the right diploma when they walk across the stage. They are shown how to turn the tassel. We are lacking the intentional purposes that will point to what we want; namely, to develop a mature man who knows who he is and what he is about. For these reasons, young men do not know what they are, or when they become it, or why they should be anything. There are

just far too many things to become! They ask, “Why should I become this thing rather than becoming that thing?” They are experiencing the crisis of adolescence—“twenty-two going on sixteen.”

II. Delineating the Three Phases of the Mountain Climb

McConville aptly characterizes the development from adolescence to manhood with the metaphor of rock climbing.

When you are rock climbing, you can only take one handhold at a time. You can't concern yourself with worrying about what lies beyond the next ridge. Nor do you expect the way to the top to be laid out in a straight line. You just need to find the next handhold. This is what life may be like for a college-age young man. He just needs to think about the next hold. He can't see clearly where it will lead or what will come next until he gets there. A young man needs to learn how to climb the mountain.

Let's expand on this illustration and see the path to manhood as a mountain climb with three distinct phases. First are the guarded steps leading over the hills of childhood into adolescence. Second comes the rock climb during which the young man takes more risk to find one handhold at a time. Finally, there is a cave which the young man must enter if he is to complete his journey. Each phase characterizes the experiences of a young man—adolescence, emerging adulthood, and manhood.

In the first phase of the climb, a boy becomes accustomed to the guardrails. The climb is straight, linear, and upward. You graduate eighth grade. You are confirmed. You go to high school. Up and up toward the goal of senior graduation. All along the way there are parents, teachers, and rules that are keeping you on that path. The assignments are given, and it is well understood that if you want to move up another step toward adulthood, you will have to complete the assignment. Most every young student would agree that the goal of every assignment is its successful completion. What is the goal of grade school? To be done with it. What is the goal of high school? To be done with it. A boy becomes accustomed to the understanding that he is expected to stay on the path and not deviate from it. If a boy deviates or he is failing to move forward, there are consequences, and there are older people who will put him back on track. The rules are the guardrails and the adults around him are the guards. For most American boys, there is little risk or responsibility that he must take to get there.⁶

⁶Michael Gurian, *Saving our Sons* (Spokane: Gurian Institute Press, 2017), 162-171

During this first phase of the climb, a boy learns about what it means to be a boy. The guardrails are in place, and the guardians are standing by, but since we know those guardrails are going to be removed eventually, this is the time to allow for exploration. Here and there a boy must be allowed to wander, to play in the woods, to get dirty. In little ways, it is good for him to get hurt. God has wired him for touching, moving, handling, and being loose. If we strictly try to fence him in or leash him to the desk, he will not develop the confidence and boy skills that he will need when he steps out of the stairs and onto the free mountain.⁷

As you transition from high school into college, the stairway opens up. You've arrived at the rocky rise of the mountain itself. This is the second phase. Now there is not just one path to the top. The guardrails are removed. You graduate high school and suddenly there are many paths. You cannot see where the paths go. As you proceed up the mountain, the paths give way to wide-open rock climb. At this point, if one wants to continue going up, the climber has to move forward one handhold at a time. This is not a linear path. You might try one step forward and then discover that it will not get you where you want to go so you reach out in another direction. This second phase encompasses the climb from the senior year of high school into the college years and beyond—what we commonly refer to as “emerging adulthood.”⁸

Eventually, though we cannot say when or how long this will take, a man reaches the third phase where he falls and discovers a cave. This is the time

⁷ Leonard Sax, M.D., Ph.D., *Boys Adrift* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 16-48

Leonard Sax's extensive research on childhood education is well worth the read. “Traditional kindergarten activities such as finger painting and duck-duck-goose have been largely eliminated, replaced by a relentless focus on learning to read and write. . . . Kindergarten has become first grade.” His research shows how the modern education system has addressed itself primarily to the learning styles of girls and has neglected some important learning experiences that cater to boys. He tells the story of a school in Switzerland where a child was blindfolded and taught to identify trees based on touch and smell. The teacher called it “Ohne Augen zu sehen”—to see without your eyes. (p. 29)

⁸ McConville describes how the boundaries in the parent-child relationship change over the course of the elementary-to-high school-to college transition. There are three stages that parents go through in these years: caretaker (elementary school), negotiator (high school), and consultant (college age). In stage one, Mom and Dad are responsible for the child's choices. His business is their business. They limit the risks to those he is able to take safely. This is the childhood stage. The goal of this stage is to let go and send away. Slowly, and in little ways, more and more responsibility is given to the boy. More and more risk is given to the boy's discernment.

when a man discovers who he is and what it means to be a man. This is a downward movement. A man needs to fall. Paul Miller calls it the “J” curve, saying that a man cannot go onward until he has gone downward with Jesus.⁹ When a man comes out of the cave, he sees the world differently. In the end, a man learns that the real goal of manhood is not to get to the top. While the upward climb of each phase was necessary, manhood involves coming down, lowering oneself in repentance, humility, and service to others. In the end, he learns to give up himself so that he can come back down the mountain to help others.

III. Understanding the Crisis During the High School Years

During his high school years, a boy is already searching out the meaning of manhood and wondering what it takes to be an adult. This is where McConville says the relationship between parent and child begins to revise itself. Mom and Dad can guard him with guardrails to some degree, but not in the same way as they did earlier in his life. Some boys will step outside the boundaries. They will step out of line. They will explore their wild side. Others will stay on the path, take one step at a time. But even those who are on the path are wondering and even worried about what lies outside of the boundaries. In both cases, the boys recognize that boundaries and structures have been put in place by the adult world. They are expected to walk that path in order to get to the next stage of life. Sooner or later, however, these curbs will be removed.

When I discussed the experiences of students living in the dormitories at Immanuel Lutheran High School, I came across one of the striking changes that has taken place over the last twenty years. Students are more connected. It used to be that Mom and Dad would drop off their fourteen-year-old son, shed some tears, and see him again at break. They might talk on the phone occasionally, but for the most part they said goodbye and the boy learned to accept his new community.

Today, things are different. Most every student has a phone and parents are able to stay connected to them constantly. Some students and parents text each other multiple times each day. Parents are able to check on grades, sports, friends, and laundry. They are able to continue to have some level of

⁹ Paul E. Miller, *J-Curve: Dying and Rising with Jesus in Everyday Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019)

parental control on how their children spend their daily time. But is it healthy for students to be constantly connected to their peers, to their parents, to their teachers? As one mentor told me, “They end up keeping their public face on all the time, it’s not safe to let your guard down.”

This also leads to a crisis of anxiety in the minds of many young adults.¹⁰ The fear stems from a lack of experience, a lack of risk-taking, and a lack of guidance. The adult world is a scary place. Being treated like an adult is a strange and far-away idea. Without experiencing the responsibilities and risks that go along with becoming a grown up, our boys will not have the skills and confidence that come from learning that some failure is normal and part of the growing process. Here and there during the elementary and adolescent years, the guardrails need to be taken down so our boys can see what life is like without them while also having good people around to help them get back on the path after they wander or fall.

The crisis is amplified in situations when the parent-child relationship does not change during the high school years. If this continues into college life, things will go badly.¹¹ The boy that was supposed to grow up and move on will not really move on and doesn’t grow up. He gets stuck. He ends up back in his parents’ basement playing video games for the next ten years. He ends up in continuing conflicts and arguments with his parents—he needing to take on more responsibility, they constantly nagging.

¹⁰ In one example, McConville tells the story of a fourteen-year-old boy and his mother who had come to him for counseling. The boy refused to call the dentist and reschedule his appointment. The mom kept getting on him about it, but he just dug in his heels, not saying why. Turns out, he was afraid of what the receptionist would say. Would she yell at him? This was adult business, and he wasn’t ready to be treated like an adult. The simple solution was for the mom to make the call on speaker phone and show him how simple it was.

¹¹ Ben Sasse shares an experience from the time he served as president of Midlands University in Nebraska. He was shocked to find out that parents were calling and emailing professors to complain about the grades their children had received. Sasse says, “After spending the better part of two decades micromanaging and choreographing playdates, dance practices, extra tutoring for standardized tests and college entrance exams, music lessons, martial arts, select soccer and travel baseball, track meets, swim meets, art classes, language enrichment, and all the rest, it should come as no surprise that the kids have only the vaguest idea of how to make decisions for themselves. All that many of them have ever had to do by age 18 is to be dressed and in the car at the appointed hour.” [Ben Sasse, *The Vanishing American Adult: Our Coming-of-Age Crisis—and How to Rebuild a Culture of Self-Reliance* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2017), 47]

In *Saving our Sons*, Michael Gurian argues that American families—including social institutions—in general, do far too much for boys and expect too little of them. This social trend provides boys with a growth span of passive rather than active reward-gathering that limits male maturation in the male brain. Parents, teachers, and others intervene in normal male behavior patterns too much for males to emote completely, learn impulse-control fully, motivate themselves intrinsically, and mature into men by the normal age of adulthood.

Conclusion to Part One

In part one, we have seen that there is a crisis. Many young men are twenty-two going on sixteen—stuck in adolescence. They are unsure, afraid, or just not caring about how to get out of it.

As parents and adults, we are often afraid too. We are afraid that they will fail, that they will get hurt, that they will go through the pains that we experienced. So we try to push them along while keeping the guardrails up for far too long.

I would like to see us, myself included, do less for them and expect more. Let's allow more room in our children's lives for mistakes, getting hurt, and learning how to do difficult, important, and meaningful tasks for their own gratification and to serve others. This is not easy because it involves intention. We have to get out of our own self-centeredness and get into their world to patiently be by their side as they try, complain, try again, and keep on trying. More than just teaching them what to do and think, we want them to learn how to think and do. This equips them so that they can make their way up the mountain without the crippling fears and depressing views that will keep them stuck.

In part two, we will explore ideas for how to go about this with the help of mentorship.

(To be concluded in the next issue)



In Memoriam

Ronald Leo Roehl

(1933-2019)

Revelation 20:6 *Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such, the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ.*

Ronald Leo Roehl was born on October 20, 1933, God's gift to Ervin Roehl and his wife Leona nee' Hornburg. The Spirit of God gave Ron a part in the first resurrection, the rebirth of his soul from spiritual death through the gracious washing of Baptism. That faith was nourished by Christian education in his home-life, along with his two older brothers, Bob and Larry. That education was also supplemented by his faithful attendance at church and Christian Day School. He was confirmed in the Christian faith in 1947. Ron went on to Winnebago Academy for his High School years and then attended Bethany College in Mankato, MN, graduating in 1954 with a degree in teaching. Throughout his life, Ron enjoyed all kinds of sports including basketball, football, baseball, and track. He was a Junior College All-American in basketball and in 2008 was inducted into the Bethany College Hall of Fame.

Revelation 19:9 *Then he said to me, "Write: 'Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb!' " And he said to me, "These are the true sayings of God."*

On July 6, 1957, the Lord Jesus united Ron in a Christ-centered marriage with Eunice nee' Naumann and the two were lifelong companions traveling the path through life and toward Heaven. They were blessed with one daughter and three sons.

Teacher Ron began his teaching career in the Kingdom of God by starting a Christian Day School in Granada Hills, CA. He then was a teacher and coach at Fox Valley Lutheran High School in Appleton, WI.

Revelation 14:13 *Then I heard a voice from heaven saying to me, "Write: 'Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.' " "Yes," says the Spirit, "that they may rest from their labors, and their works follow them."*

Christian Ron, in 1959, became a founding member of the Church of the Lutheran Confession where he served many roles in the new church body. He was a delegate to most of the synod's conventions. He acted as the convention

moderator for twenty-two years. He was a member of various boards and committees throughout his lifetime. He likewise served his present church, Messiah Lutheran, as a voter, as president, as a member of different boards, and as Sunday school superintendent.

Professor Ron, in 1960, accepted the call to labor in the newly formed Immanuel Lutheran High School in Mankato, MN. In 1963, he was part of the school's move to Eau Claire, WI. Ron was not only an effective teacher, he also was a fatherly and loving mentor to young people going through a variety of struggles. He labored for Immanuel (and Jesus, THE Immanuel) in a number of ways outside of the classroom. He spent many seasons as coach for basketball, baseball, and track; served as Dean of Students for twenty years; developed the first computer system for the campus; and was integral in expanding the school's curriculum in a variety of ways. Any way he could find to serve, he served, including cleaning and maintaining the fish pond and getting the flag to half-staff when appropriate.

Citizen Ron served his community by helping to establish the Lowes Creek Little League and as a long-time election poll worker.

Throughout all the various ways Ron served, he always had a mild and gentle spirit but knew when to be firm, all for the Christian welfare of others.

Revelation 22:14 *Blessed are those who do His commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may enter through the gates into the city.*

The Roehls lived not by the labor of their hands, but by the labor of the Savior's hands by whose blood their robes were cleansed from sin and outfitted with Christ's righteousness. On January 19, 2019, Ron's dear wife Eunice entered the gates of Heaven. Little did we know that God's plan called for Ron to enter the same heavenly gates only forty-eight days later. In the last minutes of March 8, after a couple of weeks with health problems, Ron's earthly journey of 85 years, 4 months and 16 days ended with the Savior's special gift of eternal life.

Revelation 22:7 *[Jesus said] "Behold, I am coming quickly! Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book."*

The victory service for Professor Emeritus Ronald Roehl was held at Messiah Lutheran Church, Eau Claire, Wisconsin on March 16, 2019.

Hymns: 463, 552, 283, 371, 785 / **Organist:** Professor Paul Schaller / **Scripture:** Psalm 139:13-18, Ephesians 1:3-7, Psalm 130, I Peter 5:6-11, Romans 8:1-4 / **Sermon:** II Corinthians 5:19-21
Theme: God's Perfect Plan for the Near Perfect Man (Pastor Paul Tiefel)

παιδεία

Sensitivity

Ronald L. Roehl

At this time in the history of the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC), I regard it a great privilege to be appearing here before this confessional group of teachers. There are teachers' conventions going on all over the country during this week or next week. There will be many keynote speakers and others saying many things about the problems of education today. They will also talk about possible solutions, but in a very general way. They are wise enough to know there is a problem, but not wise enough to know *the* problem and therefore, certainly not wise enough to know the solution.

It is for this reason that I count it an honor to serve one of the few remaining groups that not only knows the problem but also knows where to seek the answers.

There are Differences

We were born into this world as miserable, wretched beings with only one outlook—that of eternal death and damnation. This is not too pleasant of a thought for those who understand what that means. But then a great and glorious thing happened. We were brought to faith through Baptism. Though we were totally unworthy, God loves us enough to send His Son to die for us, for our sins, and to give us baptism for the remission of sins. Sounds simple, but what a great love, a perfect love it must have taken to do such a thing for us when we were totally wrong!

As infants, we clung to mother and father and heard the things they heard. We also heard the things they said and even though we were protected by our parents, there were always outside influences that reached us.

Editor's Note: This article was written by Ronald Roehl as a paper for the CLC Teachers Conference (Saginaw, Michigan, October 9-11, 1985) and is now published in memoriam. Ron did not serve in a parish pastoral ministry, nevertheless he shepherded many souls both in and out of the classroom, as professor and as dean of students. Many of today's pastors and teachers within the Church of the Lutheran Confession received instruction in the Word from Professor Roehl. The blessings which the Lord worked through Professor Roehl's instruction are continuing today. We give thanks to the Lord of the Church for His servant (Matthew 25:21).

Soon it was off the knee and we were very aware of our parent's admonitions with a look, or a word, or a more stern reminder. Mom and Dad prayed with us at bedtime until we were "too old" for that sort of thing. It was during this period that we also had other little playmates with minds of their own and families of their own. We didn't always agree and so we were exposed to other ideas.

Then it was off to school—some to parochial schools and others to public school. It would be safe to say that there was wide exposure to different teachers and to different classmates. It would also be safe to say that we began to see much more of the world than we had seen previously.

Before long, confirmation instructions were upon us, and mornings were a time to look for and to learn of the will of God. Confirmation itself marked the time when many went in different directions. For our purposes, however, we needn't go into that aspect.

It is probable that not one of us reached this point with all the same experiences, all the same ideas, all the same thoughts, all the same respect for others, all the same fear of God, or all the same level of sanctification. It is then apparent that we might reach different conclusions when faced with a particular problem. It is possible that the only constant was the Word.

On this basis, we realize that our children, our young people, and we ourselves will all be different and think differently.

What is Sensitivity?

Is it awareness of these differences that you, as a group, have noticed that prompted a request for a paper of this type, or what else is it that nudged you enough to want to dig into this? Is it flagrant actions that you notice? St. Peter writes in 2 Peter 2:13f, *"Their idea of pleasure is to carouse in broad daylight. They are spots and faults. They enjoy deceiving you while they feast with you. They have eyes only for an adulterous woman all restlessly looking for sin. They try to trap weak souls."*¹ I don't believe that this is what you had in mind.

The thing we are after is much more subtle. The attribute we want to know about concerns how we react to God's Word when it is brought to bear on a problem. It concerns how we react to rules and laws. It concerns our reaction

¹William F. Beck, *The Holy Bible, An American Translation (AAT)*, William F. Beck (New Haven, MO: Leader Publishing Company, 1976)

to parents and superiors. It concerns what we do on dates, how we talk to our peers, what we listen to, what we say, and how we play. The list could probably go on, but you get the message—sensitivity is a complex idea.

Certainly the loss of sensitivity could lead to the gross sins we heard about from Peter. We read in Ephesians 4:19, *“and they, having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality, for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness.”*² The opposite of sensitivity seems to be a hardening of the heart so that there is nothing else but debauchery. Reasonably then, sensitivity seems to have degrees. Sensitivity is that part of the mind or conscience which passes judgment on aspects of daily living as opposed to dogma.

How will I dress? How shady the story? Will I cheat on my school work? Will I publicly hold hands or walk with my arms around my present flame? Drugs? Alcohol? The list extends from subtly ignoring the Word to outright defiance and to taking no thought for one’s fellow man.

For the most part, but not entirely, we are in the area of *adiaphora* where we are governed by what we have become used to, by what we have seen allowed, by style, and, of course, by the times. These things that we have experienced are bundled up next to our level of sanctification, and now we have our sensitivity.

Conscience

We could at this point delve into some peripheral ideas but why fool around? The meat of the discussion will sooner or later come down to conscience—how it develops, what can happen to it, and how it controls our lives.

Obviously, if our conscience is not sharpened by the Word, it will not have the positive effect on our lives that we wish it to have. Christ must influence our lives and the Spirit must influence our consciences. If the Spirit does not influence the conscience, then something else will and anything outside of the Word of God will be negative. You are either *for* God or *against* Him.

For most people, the life they have with their families plays a great part in their character development and in the shaping of their conscience. It is no wonder that we as teachers have encountered problems. The breakdown of the family unit has caused such havoc that by the time children get to school

²This and all remaining Bible quotations in this article come from New American Standard Bible®, Copyright © 1960, 1971, 1977, 1995 by [The Lockman Foundation](#). All rights reserved.

we have as much “unteaching” to do as we have teaching. In my mind, the loss of sensitivity we see in people today is in large part due to this degeneration of the family unit.

Now, let’s take a look at ourselves! As teachers, we probably are inconsistent in our actions. Not because we set out to be so, but because sin hangs on our door as well as any other, maybe even more so.

When is the last time you were unfair to a student in grading, in disciplining, or on the playground? Are you an obstacle in the way of the Spirit building? Is our time for devotion at school quite mechanical and thoughtless at times? Is that helping the Spirit build? As parents or friends do we break the speed limit with our children or friends watching? Do we allow little things to get in the way of our hearing the Word?

The list could go on with things that are not what we would choose to do. The point is, as St. Paul says, we do them anyhow and our friends, children, and students see or hear. That R-rated movie, that loss of temper, that little exclamation, that unrighteous anger is noticed. These things are not of the Spirit and therefore, they will be negatives in the shaping of a Christian conscience—on the sensitivity of our youth.

The whole idea of sensitivity is not a scriptural topic as such. I found only one Bible translation that uses the word, “sensitivity,” and then only once in Ephesians 4:19 where “loss of sensitivity” was used instead of “callousness.” There we see the result of callousness, or the loss of sensitivity. Yes, it is serious when we see what a little leaven can do and what the result will be when the whole lump is leavened.

However, I think we can see that what normally is meant by sensitivity is how we react to the things of this world around us, and how we react to the Word of God as it is brought to bear on any topic.

It Must Be Taught

Sensitivity is a characteristic that must be taught. This concept lies in the area of application and this is always tougher than memorizing or dogmatics. Make no mistake, our dogma must be correct before we can properly apply it in our lives. But sometimes correctness in doctrine can lead us to a smugness from which we take license in our actions using freedom as an excuse. Peter warns against this possibility in 1 Peter 2:16, “*do not use your freedom as a covering for evil.*”

There can be a state of mind which allows us to think more highly of ourselves than we ought. There can be a pride in our doctrinal purity which might cloud some of our sound judgment. Our God speaks of this in Romans 12:3, *“For through the grace given to me I say to every man among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think, but to think so as to have sound judgment.”* It could be at these times of pride that we use our Christian freedom wrongly and insist on our “rights” when it is not the charitable action to take.

Think again of the concept of sobriety. If there is particular clothing that bothers someone spiritually, is it sensitive to wear it? Is that a saving thought or deed? To have “saving thoughts” is a beautiful concept. Its application, however, is not so easy. If you lose your temper and become defensive over your freedom to do what you want to do, are you having saving thoughts and are you sensitive to the feelings and souls of others? Just saying, “That’s the way I am, I like it, that’s the way it’s going to be,” is not good enough. The Spirit must build, the Word must shape, there must be transformation, not conformation. *“And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God”* (Romans 12:2).

Style, customs, TV, and movies give us all opportunities to let our sensitivity steer. It is not always, if ever, easy. That good “R” movie is hard to turn off especially if we are adults—the world says it’s OK if we are old enough. Did we really grow up believing that filth is only bad for us when we are young? Here we must show sensitivity to evil or our example will speak too loudly.

Lest You Despair

By now you are saying, “Enough, already! We get the point.” OK, but first one more aspect. As teachers and parents we see our youth are sensitive and receptive to the Word of God when it is applied to them or their actions. This, however, is often after the fact. Their conscience and sensitivity lead to many confessions and apologies. They have heard the Word, the Spirit has built.

How can we make this more widespread among our youth and make our youth more sensitive to the Spirit of the Scripture? How can we get them to live their faith? Like an inquisitive young kitten, they seek things a wary old tom would evade. Temptations to the youth are great as the sins of youth.

The Course Becomes Clear

Ephesians 4:19-20, *“And they, having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality, for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness. But you did not learn Christ this way.”*

The contrast between Ephesians 4:20 and 4:19 is so vivid that once we see it, the whole process becomes clear as to what must be done. In contrast to the callous unbelievers of verse nineteen, we see the Ephesian Christian of verse twenty who “did not learn Christ in this way.” We learn how Christ is “gentle and humble in heart,” and learning from Him gives rest for the soul. Jesus said, *“Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls”* (Matthew 11:29).

We and our youth must continue to learn Christ. To be Christlike should be our goal. We need to have saving thoughts so we can teach others by word and deed. These saving thoughts will bring a sensitivity to our lives toward the Word and other people. *“Make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others”* (Philippians 2:2-4).

We want our youth to see the Word applied in every area of our lives. How else will they know it to be good for every day of their lives? It is necessary for them to realize that they themselves, and not their environment, are responsible for their decisions. To some extent, our failure to teach correctly is a result of our failure to make the transition from the closely watched rural setting to the wide open, both parents working, fast-paced setting of the present day. You can't fight nuclear war with a .22. There just isn't enough powder. We need more of the Word applied to their lives. They need powder ready to use. We rob them if we don't give it to them. Christ has already dealt with our sins and theirs so let's spend some time on something we can do—telling of the love of Christ and what it will mean in our lives.

Walk in Love

Lack of sensitivity usually stems from a lack of humility and from selfishness. When we think ourselves better than we ought or when our thoughts are turned inward, we cannot be sensitive to God's Word or sensitive to other people. We strive to learn *“to walk in love, just as Christ also loved us”* (Ephesians 5:1).

Now for the part that makes us feel so helpless, yet at the same time so supremely happy—the knowledge that the success of this venture is in other hands. As long as we feel there are gimmick methods or some such thing to improve our sensitivity, we must fail. There are no gimmicks. The practice of love stemming from faith in our crucified Lord Jesus is the key to all sensitivity, and faith comes by hearing. What more can be said?

For now there is plenty to which we can give our attention, and pay attention we must, or we will drift away. *“For this reason we must pay close attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it”* (Hebrews 2:1).

Conclusion

To counteract our children’s ever-increasing exposure to the world’s darkness, we must see to it that they have an ever-increasing exposure to Light which can conquer that darkness.

We begin with the Word, we apply the Word, we get out of the way, and the Word does the rest. Our prayers should be to this end as we read in 1 Timothy 1:5, *“But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.”*



Thrivent Revisited

An Update on the Unionism Involved in This “Faith-Based” Organization

Bruce J. Naumann

Dating back to 2014, there have been a number of meetings between representatives of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS), the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS), and the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC). The main topic of these meetings was the Bible’s teaching concerning the necessity to separate from religious fellowship with false-teaching church bodies—the doctrinal issue that led to the founding of the CLC more than sixty years ago.

Other issues were also discussed, including the WELS’s teaching on the role of women in society¹ and the issue of membership in Thrivent, a fraternal insurance and financial services company.

There have been a number of fairly recent developments having to do with Thrivent and the WELS/ELS relationship with it. The purpose of this article is to provide a brief history of this issue and to report on where our respective church bodies stand on the subject today.

A Timeline of Relevant Events²

1872 – The Synodical Conference was formed on the basis of mutual agreement on the doctrines of Scripture. The original member church bodies included the Illinois, Minnesota, Missouri, Norwegian, Ohio, and Wisconsin synods.

Late 1800s – Church bodies of the Synodical Conference opposed having their members seek life insurance through membership in secret societies such as the Masonic Lodge.

¹ Naumann, Bruce J., “A Review of the WELS “Scriptural Principles of Man and Woman Roles” and its “Restatement,” *Journal of Theology*, Volume 58 Number 4 – https://www.journaloftheology.org/jtheo_arch/jt-2018-vol-058-num-04.pdf

² Much of this information was obtained from *Out of Necessity: A History of the Church of the Lutheran Confession*, David Lau (CLC Board of Education and Publications: 2009), pages 376ff.

1902 – Aid Association for Lutherans in Wisconsin and Other States (AAL) was chartered in the State of Wisconsin. Its founders were Missouri Synod Lutherans. Membership was limited to those affiliated with member churches of the Synodical Conference.

1918 – The Norwegian Lutheran Church of America founded a benefit society called “Lutheran Union,” also to provide an alternative to insurance from secret societies. In 1920 it merged with Lutheran Brotherhood of America to form “Lutheran Brotherhood” (LB). This was open to Lutherans of any denomination.

Early to mid-1900s – Generally speaking, LB served members of Lutheran churches who would later be affiliated with the heterodox Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), and AAL served members of the orthodox Synodical Conference. Both organizations not only provided insurance and financial services to their members, but also used company profits (as required by law for fraternal societies) to provide grants and matching funds to its constituent church bodies for various aspects of their work. During the days of the Synodical Conference, membership in AAL did not pose a fellowship problem since all of its members were in doctrinal agreement.

1963 – With the breakup of the Synodical Conference, AAL revised its membership policy to include “members in good standing of congregations belonging to synods *formerly* belonging to the Synodical Conference.” This was a turning point because constituent members were no longer necessarily in fellowship with one another.

1965 – After examining the advisability of having Immanuel Lutheran College (CLC) receive scholarships and grants benefits from AAL, ILC President Edmund Reim reported the following:

“From the foregoing it should be clear that the work that AAL is doing in these programs is church work, involving particularly the work of missions and the training of workers for the vineyard. . . . It was joint work with such as were no longer joined in the confession of their faith, hence unionistic in character. After the end of this year it will be work done in the name of Pan-Lutheranism and in furtherance of its cause. It is therefore evident that as a school we cannot solicit support from this source without denying the Scriptural principles to which our CLC stands committed.”³

³ Lau, *Out of Necessity*, p. 377

1966 – AAL again revised its membership policy, so that Lutherans of any synod could join. This involved AAL members in supporting the work of the American Lutheran Church (ALC) and the Lutheran Church in America (LCA) which were both patently false-teaching church bodies.

1978 – After intense study and discussion within the CLC, our convention resolved “that we encourage the constituents of the CLC to study the matter of involvement in unionistic insurance companies on the basis of God’s Word and in an evangelical manner seek to eliminate from our midst this unionistic leaven, so that by God’s mercy and grace in Christ Jesus we all act in accordance with God’s Word and speak the same thing.”⁴

1978 – In the WELS “Report to the Ten Districts” it was asserted that membership in AAL did not constitute the practice of fellowship with false teachers, but that membership in LB did.⁵

1978-1986 – A number of pastors, congregations, and members left the CLC over the issue of unionism in fraternal benefit societies. Some did not agree that membership in AAL or LB was unionistic. Others were convinced that certain pastors and congregations of the CLC were too lax in removing people from church membership who were still members of AAL or LB.

2001 – AAL and LB merged to form Thrivent Financial for Lutherans, known today simply as “Thrivent.”

2013 – Thrivent’s members voted to change its membership requirements so that those of any Christian denomination could join.

2014 – After some objected to Thrivent providing funding for Planned Parenthood (the nation’s largest abortion provider), Thrivent announced a “Financial Neutrality Policy” on issues such as abortion, sexual orientation, and guns. Thrivent acknowledged that their members hold a variety of views on such subjects and announced that they would withhold support from organizations that either supported or opposed these contested issues. For instance, funding would *not* be provided either to Planned Parenthood or to Lutherans for Life. The Wisconsin Synod then announced “Our synod’s

⁴ *Proceedings*, Twelfth Convention of the Church of the Lutheran Confession, p. 26

⁵ *Report Of The Committee On Grants As Submitted To The Ten Districts*, 1978 (WELS Seminary Essay File archive – tinyurl.com/wels-78-aal)

relationship with Thrivent, small and informal as it has been, has come to an end. As a result, regular meetings will no longer take place, and the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod will neither seek nor accept any funding from Thrivent.”⁶

2015 to present – During inter-synodical discussions between the CLC and the WELS/ELS, the issue of Thrivent membership has been discussed at length. Though the WELS and ELS have pointed out that they have distanced themselves from Thrivent at the synod level, they have so far declined to agree that individual membership in Thrivent is a unionistic practice.

Thrivent Membership: An Example of Religious Unionism

Religious unionism is the practice of church fellowship between those who are not agreed about the Bible’s teachings. The Scriptures teach that we are to exercise religious fellowship only with those who faithfully confess all the teachings of Scripture and thus are in doctrinal agreement.

Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them. For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple (Romans 16:17-18).

While we often think of church fellowship as involving mutual participation in the means of grace, it can also be expressed through material support of a ministry or cause. The Lord instructs us to refrain from such support when it comes to false teachers.

If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds (2 John 10-11).

Thus it is clear that conscientious, confessional Christians will not want to work together with those who contradict God’s Word. They will not share a common religious purpose with others that will help to further false teaching because doing so would contradict the Word of our gracious God.

⁶ Announced via the WELS online newsletter, *Together* (wels.net/faq/businesses-in-the-church)

The outstanding question is, therefore, this: Does individual membership in Thrivent involve a person in religious unionism? According to the WELS and ELS, the answer is “no.” In the same announcement from the WELS concerning its synodical disassociation from Thrivent, the subject of individual membership was also addressed:

This decision of the synod should not be understood to bind the consciences and decisions of congregations, organizations, or individuals. Individual members of Thrivent will need to make their own decisions regarding their use of Thrivent’s financial services, evaluating it with the same standards that they use to evaluate and patronize any other financial services company.”⁷

It is clear that the current position of the WELS is that individual membership in Thrivent is an adiaphoron—something that is neither commanded nor forbidden by God’s Word—and therefore, is a matter of Christian liberty. However, Thrivent is not like “any other financial services company.” The fact that Thrivent is a “fraternal” organization means that it is a Christian brotherhood or fellowship. This can readily be seen from Thrivent’s own Articles of Incorporation (emphasis added).

“The purpose of the Society is to associate Christians and their families who support the mission of the society and thereby enable them through membership in the Society to aid themselves and others with programs of:

1. Insurance and other benefits permissible under the laws governing Fraternal; and
2. Fraternal and benevolent activities in local branches; and
3. Assistance to Lutheran and other Christian congregations and their institutions; and
4. Assistance to such other lawful social, intellectual, educational, charitable, benevolent, moral, fraternal, patriotic or religious endeavors as the board of directors may determine.”⁸

⁷ wels.net/faq/businesses-in-the-church. The ELS position is the same. See the March, 1993 issue of the *Lutheran Sentinel* at tinyurl.com/sentinel-aal

⁸ thrivent.com/governance/files/3415.pdf

These same distinctions are explained in the December 2018 issue of *Thrivent Magazine*:

By definition, a fraternal benefit society is a not-for-profit organization that provides insurance to its members and carries out social good for its members and the public. The activities are carried out through a system of local branches; Thrivent calls them Thrivent Member Networks. Essentially, a fraternal benefit society combines the ‘member-owned’ characteristic of a mutual insurance company with the ‘social mission’ characteristic of a faith-based or service organization. Fraternal benefit societies, unique to North America, actually started in the U.S. in the late 1800s to provide mutual aid to new Americans underserved by commercial insurance companies and united by a common bond. Typical common bonds included ethnicity, religion and occupation. Christianity is the common bond uniting today’s Thrivent members. Thrivent is accountable to its member-owners—you—not third-party stockholders. This means you have a say in how Thrivent is run, and you share in Thrivent’s success.⁹

Observations

- 1) Thrivent identifies itself as a faith-based organization, whose “common bond is Christianity.”
- 2) Membership is required to purchase its products, with the company defining its members, as the government mandates, as “working in union to accomplish some worthy object . . . to aid and assist one another and promote the common cause.” In the case of Thrivent, this is a *religious* cause.
- 3) This distinguishes Thrivent from secular companies which do not require membership based on a common religious purpose.
- 4) Although Thrivent supports many fine charitable causes, it also supports false teachers, including deniers of the chief doctrines of Scripture such as the Trinity, Jesus’ virgin birth, His bodily resurrection from the dead, salvation through faith alone in Christ, and the sanctity of human life, among many other examples.

⁹ Donna Hein, “A Fraternal Benefit Society for Christians.” *Thrivent Magazine*, December 2018. <https://www.thrivent.com/magazine/2018/december/>

- 5) Although Thrivent’s “Choice Dollars” program may be mistaken to mean that a member’s financial support can be directed only to those causes he or she chooses, the program does not actually do this.¹⁰

Based on these observations, we must therefore conclude that Thrivent’s members are an intrinsic part of the company and thereby supporters of its spiritual aims. When Thrivent supports the causes of false teachers, *its members* support the causes of false teachers.

It is not necessary—nor is it possible—to investigate how every company spends its profits before buying something from them. But Thrivent is not just a company from which you buy a product. You cannot purchase financial services from Thrivent unless you are a member of this faith-based organization. When you belong to this fraternal society, you are not simply a customer of a company; you *are* the company by reason of your fraternal membership and voting rights. Therefore, you bear responsibility for how the company’s profits are spent. That makes it much more than just a business arrangement.

As Jesus says in Matthew chapter seven, we are to recognize a bad tree by its bad fruit (Matthew 7:15-17). The ELCA, along with other liberal mainline protestant denominations, has abandoned the teachings of God’s Word on even the most basic Christian doctrines. The resulting fruits are plain to see when it comes to issues concerning the sanctity of human life and the biblical covenant of marriage. Rather than working together with false teachers for religious purposes, we are to identify and keep separate from them, as Paul wrote in Ephesians 5:11, *“And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them.”*

In the CLC, our practice has been to instruct our people from Scripture about the blessings of genuine Christian fellowship, along with the Bible’s instruction to remain separate from false teachers. Not only should we not worship with them, we should also refrain from making common cause with them for the support of false religious purposes. We are careful not to demand in a legalistic way immediate conformity to a certain standard of Christian sanctification. We are obliged, however, to give the same warnings concerning unionistic practices that God’s Word does. We then seek to lead our people away from the dangers of religious unionism, based on the truth of His Word and because of His love for us in Christ.

¹⁰ Thrivent’s description of the “Choice” program: www.thrivent.com/making-a-difference/files/28339B.pdf

The failure of WELS to recognize that membership in Thrivent is a matter of religious unionism is surprising given the fact that the WELS has a history of publishing correct principles that touch on the matter. There are several examples of this.

1. After a synodical study of the subject of fraternal insurance, the WELS issued a report to its ten districts in 1978. The report concluded, based on certain statements by the President of AAL, that membership in AAL did not constitute an exercise of church fellowship among its members (a conclusion with which the CLC did not agree). The report went on to state the following:

The situation with the Lutheran Brotherhood is quite different. The “Corporate Philosophy” statement of the Lutheran Brotherhood, which is a restatement of its constitution, contains two statements which cause misgivings for all who wish to remain obedient to the Scriptural principles regarding fellowship. These statements, intended to reflect “the ultimate purpose to be served by Lutheran Brotherhood,” are “To aid the Lutheran Church in extending the Christian faith” and “To promote the spiritual, intellectual, and physical welfare of its members.” These sentences make it plain that the Lutheran Brotherhood presents itself as a spiritual fellowship united in the confession of a common faith (‘the Lutheran faith’), in short, a church, and therefore fulfilling its purpose by doing church work. The Lutheran Brotherhood sees itself as ‘extending the Christian faith’ (mission work) and ‘promoting the spiritual welfare of its members.’ As long as this policy remains unchanged, we can draw only one conclusion: Yes, we would be compromising our confession by receiving grants from the Lutheran Brotherhood and by becoming members of it. We would be remiss in our report if we did not warn against involvement with the Lutheran Brotherhood in any manner.”¹¹

Since the merger of AAL and LB into Thrivent in 2001, the stated purpose of all of its constituent members is to “associate Christians and their families who support the mission of the Society and thereby enable them through membership in the Society to aid themselves and others with

¹¹ *Report Of The Committee On Grants As Submitted To The Ten Districts, 1978* (WELS Seminary Essay File archive – tinyurl.com/wels-78-aal)

programs of . . . assistance to Lutheran and other Christian congregations and their institutions.”¹² Whatever warnings that the WELS gave in 1978 concerning unionism through membership in Lutheran Brotherhood are even more applicable to Thrivent today.

2. In an essay by WELS Professor John F. Brug, titled “Working Together for the Truth—The Biblical Concept of Fellowship,” the author correctly states the following:

Today co-operation in Christian charity work is sometimes regarded as mere “co-operation in externals,” but it was not so regarded in the New Testament. The Macedonians urgently pleaded with Paul for the privilege of sharing (χάρις καὶ κοινωνία) in the service to the saints (II Corinthians 8:4). The goal of this charitable work was not merely to relieve human need, but to glorify God. “This service that you perform is not only for supplying the needs of God’s people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you proved yourself, men will praise God for your obedience which accompanies your confession of the Gospel of Christ” (II Corinthians 9:12-13). The spiritual motivation and the fellowship which is an essential part of Christian charitable work are emphasized throughout these chapters.¹³

On the surface, members of Thrivent may be under the impression that they are only involved in a business arrangement, one that has the added benefit of allowing them to recommend certain company profits to their chosen charities. Because of the stated purposes of Thrivent membership, they are also involved in “fellowship which is an essential part of Christian charitable work,” as Professor Brug aptly described it.

3. In 2021, WELS President Mark Schroeder wrote about the circumstances under which “cooperation in externals” with other church bodies would not violate scriptural fellowship principles:

WELS confesses and teaches that for church bodies to express unity and fellowship there needs to be full agreement in doctrine. Such fellowship is practiced when members of each church body can

¹² *Articles of Incorporation*, thrivent.com/governance/files/3415.pdf

¹³ Northern Conference, Michigan District, September 16, 1985 – <http://essays.wisluthsem.org:8080/handle/123456789/766>

commune in congregations of the other; when members gather together in joint worship and prayer; and when churches join together in carrying out mission work, schools, and other means of grace ministry. But where there is no unity in doctrine, there can be no practice of fellowship.”¹⁴

It may be granted that Thrivent is not a church as such. Still, its members certainly do cooperate together with other churches, by design and within the realm of “means of grace ministry,” to advance causes that include the work of false teachers.

In Conclusion

When a person examines both the Scriptures and the facts surrounding Thrivent membership, it becomes readily apparent that this is not a matter of adiaphora. Instead, the informed Christian will conclude that voluntary membership in this organization, which officially unites its members in religious purposes that support false teachers, is contrary to the Word of God.

We continue to pray that a genuine agreement on all matters of scriptural doctrine and practice can be found between the CLC and the WELS/ELS. It is encouraging to note that the WELS has recognized serious problems in Thrivent, to the extent that they no longer promote the company or receive synodical funds from it. However, one impediment that remains to finding agreement between our church bodies is our differing view on the practice of religious unionism through individual membership in Thrivent.

¹⁴ Mark Schroeder, “President’s Message: Cooperating in Externals,” *Forward in Christ*, Volume 108, Number 7, July 2021.

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Missiology Minute

God's Eternal Universal Plan of Salvation, Old and New Testaments

David T. Lau

Christian missionaries can do their work of proclaiming the gospel of Christ without all kinds of studies in methods and cultures and without being able to take advantage of modern means of communication. But there is one thing that Christian missionaries must have to do their work. They must have the Scriptures, either in written form or embedded in their memories. For the Scriptures not only give us the content of what we must proclaim, but also provide the basis and reason for mission work.

From the Scriptures we learn, first of all, that there is only one plan of salvation for all people. This plan of salvation goes back all the way to eternity. In His discussion of the coming judgment at the end of the world, Jesus told His disciples that on that day *"the King (Jesus) will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world'"* (Matthew 25:34). Jesus' apostle Paul taught the very same thing, writing to the Christians in Ephesus, *"He [God] chose us in Him [Christ] before the foundation of the world"* (Ephesians 1:4).

God's plan of salvation was not fully revealed to all from the beginning. Paul refers to God's plan as a *"mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ."* Nevertheless, although in part hidden, it was *"the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord"* (Ephesians 3: 9-11). God *"has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to in Christ Jesus before time began, but has now been revealed by the appearing of our Savior Jesus Christ"* (2 Timothy 1:9). *"He [Christ] indeed was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you"* (1 Peter 1:20).

Thus God's plan of salvation in Jesus Christ is *eternal*. There has never been a different plan of salvation other than the one devised by God in eternity.

In the last few centuries, dispensationalism has been taught by various Christian groups. This teaching claims that there are several different dispensations, each with its own plan of salvation. In the Old Testament dispensation, for example, they say that God gave His law so that people by

their obedience could be saved. But now, they go on to say, we are under a different dispensation in which salvation is attained by faith in Christ.

There are many reasons for denouncing dispensationalism as a false teaching, but the foremost reason is that dispensationalism denies that God's plan of salvation in Christ is eternal. Yet, that is the plain teaching of Scripture.

God's plan of salvation in Jesus Christ is also a universal plan intended for all people of all ages. There were at least two moments in history when all living human beings were exposed to God's universal plan. The first such moment was in the Garden of Eden, shortly after Adam and Eve fell into sin. God Himself announced the plan of salvation to all living human beings at that time. Directing His words at Satan, the deceiver, God said, *"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's plan of salvation involved a future contest between the woman's Seed and Satan. In this contest the woman's Seed would prove the winner, even though it would involve a real struggle. He would have His heel bruised while Satan would have his head bruised. "Bruised" is no doubt too weak of a term. Satan will have his head crushed. He will be defeated completely. The full explanation is given in Hebrews 2:14: *"Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself (the woman's Seed, Jesus Christ) likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil."* Jesus was most definitely the woman's Seed, a true human being born of a human mother (Mary), and the One who overcame the devil by suffering and dying in our place on the cross.

The second time when all living human beings were exposed to God's plan of salvation came after the great flood when Noah and his three sons and their four wives stepped out of the ark. Surely the promise given to Adam and Eve had been passed down to them through the previous generations, and they were all aware of what God had said. At that time Noah made a distinction between his three sons, declaring specifically: *"Blessed be the LORD, the God of Shem"* (Genesis 9:26). It is clear that God's plan of salvation would be carried out through the offspring of Shem, rather than that of Ham or Japheth.

Nevertheless, God's promise to Abram (a descendent of Shem), indicated that the blessings of the coming woman's Seed would be to all mankind. For God said to Abram, *"In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed"* (Genesis 12:3). This same promise was repeated in similar words to Abraham's son Isaac and to Isaac's son Jacob.

Moses, the spokesman the Holy Spirit used to write the words of Genesis, also indicated that God's promise of the woman's Seed was to be the means by which Abraham would be saved, for he wrote, "*And he [Abraham] believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness*" (Genesis 15:6). The way of salvation for Abraham and all others—Jew and non-Jew alike—is by faith in God's promise of the woman's Seed. This is the only way sinners can be counted as righteous in the sight of God.

It was God's plan to choose one particular nation, the children of Israel (Jacob), to receive and to pass on God's promise of a Savior. God put this nation in the land of Palestine, right at the junction of three continents, so that from Israel other nations and peoples would also learn of the coming Savior.

When the Israelites were about to enter Palestine, Moses told the people that God's blessings would be poured down on them, with this purpose: "*The LORD will establish you as a holy people to Himself, just as He has sworn to you, if you keep the commandments of the LORD your God and walk in His ways. Then all peoples of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of the LORD*" (Deuteronomy 28:9-10).

In those periods of time when Israel was obedient, this purpose was fulfilled. For example, in the days of King David and the early days of King Solomon, the blessings of God were poured out on the people to such a degree that the kingdom of David and Solomon became one of the most powerful nations on earth. Therefore at the dedication of the temple, Solomon included non-Jews as eligible also to pray to the God of Israel, and he asked God to hear their prayers. "*Moreover concerning a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, but has come from a far country for Your name's sake (for they will hear of Your great name and Your strong hand and Your outstretched arm) when he comes and prays toward this temple, hear in heaven Your dwelling place, and do according to all for which the foreigner calls to you, that all peoples of the earth may know Your name and fear You, as do Your people Israel*" (1 Kings 8: 41-43).

Among the non-Jews who most likely came to faith in the God of Israel in Old Testament times we can list Jethro (Moses' father-in-law), Rahab of Canaan, Ruth of Moab, the Queen of Sheba, Naaman of Syria, the Ninevites, and the sailors traveling with the prophet Jonah. Of course, there may have been many others whose names are known to God but are not recorded in the pages of the Bible.

It is repeated many times in the New Testament that God's plan of salvation was intended for all people. Jesus told Nicodemus: *"God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life"* (John 3:16). The apostle Paul compared Adam and Jesus with respect to the universality of their actions. *"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). In other words, what Jesus accomplished on the cross and through His resurrection obtained justification for all mankind—as many as were condemned by Adam's sin. The Bible clearly teaches God's desire to save all, Christ's life and death and resurrection for all, universal redemption, universal justification, and universal love of God for all peoples and nations without exception. Therefore Paul wrote to the Corinthians, *"God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them"* (2 Corinthians 5:19).

Notice how many times the word "all" is repeated in these words of Paul to his assistant Timothy: *"Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercession, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all"* (1 Timothy 2:1-6). The apostle John adds, *"This is the testimony of the apostle John also, who wrote: "He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world"* (1 John 2:2).

There is one grievous sin in particular that has interfered with the teaching of God's eternal and universal plan of salvation through Jesus Christ. This is the sin of racism. By racism we mean the notion of individuals or races of individuals that they are superior to other individuals and races. Because of this perceived superiority, they are unwilling to share the spiritual blessings of the gospel of Christ with others.

Certainly there are many differences between individuals and between races, but they are all the same with respect to two things: 1) They are all sinners who have disobeyed God and deserve eternal punishment, and 2) God wants them to be saved and live with Him forever, Jesus died to save them, and the Holy Spirit wants them to hear the gospel of Christ and be saved by

faith in Jesus. There is no human being of any race that God does not want to be with Him in bliss eternally. Since this is true of God, it should also be true of all of God's children by faith in Christ.

But the history of the world and of the church indicates that at times the sin of racism has been prevalent and has hindered the mission of the Christian Church. God's special blessings to the Jews led many of them to look down on all non-Jews. The prophet Jonah, for example, did not want to preach God's Word to the people of Nineveh because he was afraid they would repent and thus avoid God's judgment. Jonah would have preferred their judgment rather than their salvation. But God corrected Jonah's thinking.

In the New Testament, the work of the apostle Paul was obstructed by the Jews who did not want to share their Messiah with non-Jews. Since that time there have been many other instances of racism. In the United States, for example, there were times (and still are) when white people despised black people and black people despised white people. Yet, the same God has sent His Son to save them all alike, and those who believe in Christ are one Church in spite of differences of appearance, culture, language, and background. We should look at every individual we meet as someone for whom Jesus died.

Jesus' instructions to us are very clear. He says: *"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations"* (Matthew 28:19). He says: *"Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature"* (Mark 16:15). The apostle Peter was slow to bring the gospel to Gentiles. The Lord gave him a special vision to direct him to a Gentile home, where he then testified: *"God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean"* (Acts 10:28). *"In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him. . . . He is Lord of all"* (Acts 10: 34-36).

There is no basis for racism in God's creation. Paul told the Athenians, *"[God] gives to all life, breath, and all things. And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth"* (Acts 17: 25-26). He *"now commands all men everywhere to repent"* (Acts 17:30). Paul wrote to the Romans, *"Is He the God of the Jews only? Is He not also the God of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also"* (Romans 3:29). He wrote to the Galatians, *"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus"* (Galatians 3:28), and to the Colossians, *"There is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all"* (Colossians 3:11).

We can all look forward to the new heavens and the new earth, where there will be no racism. We will look, *“and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’”* (Revelation 7: 9-10).



Book Reviews

David T. Lau

Jason K. Lee and William M. Marsh, Editors: *Matthew* (Reformation Commentary on Scripture – New Testament I), InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois, 2021, hard cover, 504 pages, 55 preliminary pages.

This latest volume in the Reformation Commentary on Scripture follows the same pattern as the others. First, a general introduction, followed by an introduction to the specific book of the Bible, in this case the Gospel of Matthew. Then follows the main body of the work: a portion of the text (English Standard Version), an overview of the comments by various reformers, and then the individual comments themselves (of varying length). For example, the first section that is treated is Matthew 1:1-17 (the genealogy of Jesus Christ). Comments by eleven reformers are included, of whom only one is a Lutheran (Martin Luther himself). Two other well-known reformers are quoted (John Calvin and Thomas Muentzer). The others who are quoted in this section are Wolfgang Musculus (twice), Hugh Broughton, Christopher Blackwood, Cornelius Jansen, Richard Ward, Franciscus Gomarus, and Thomas Cartwright.

If you want to know who these persons are and what roles they played in the Reformation, you need to consult pages 397-475 of this book, where we find brief biographical sketches of all the persons quoted in this volume, and also others.

Wolfgang Musculus (1497-1563) was a German Reformed pastor and theologian. Hugh Broughton (1549-1612) was an English Puritan Hebraist and theologian. Christopher Blackwood (1608-1670) was an Anglican priest who became an English Baptist pastor. Cornelius Jansen (1585-1638) was a Dutch Catholic bishop who championed Augustine's teaching of grace; after his death his views on grace were accepted by a large group known as the Jansenists, who were considered heretics by many Catholic authorities.

Richard Ward (1601-1684) was an English Anglican pastor who wrote a commentary on Matthew. Franciscus Gomarus (1563-1641) was a Dutch Reformed theologian who took a strong Calvinistic stand on predestination against Jacob Arminius and his followers. Thomas Cartwright (1535-1606) was an English Puritan preacher who took a stand for presbyterianism against the Anglicans and spent some time in jail as a consequence of his views.

Through the stories and views of these men we are reminded that the Reformation era was an exciting and a dangerous time to be a theologian with strong views. Lutherans were not alone in fighting against the domination of the Roman Catholic Church in Europe. These men were serious about their Christianity, even though in many cases the devil in his cunning led them into battles against genuine Christian truth and into a misleading of simple Christians.

For my own amusement, I tabulated the number of quotations by the sixteen Lutherans who are quoted in this volume, Martin Luther himself was quoted fifty-one times, much more than any other. Those who came next were Niels Hemmingsen (a Danish theologian), Philipp Melanchthon, Martin Chemnitz, and Aegidius Hunnius. Here are some quotations from these men who were associates and students of Luther, the recognized leader and pioneer of the reformers.

Martin Chemnitz, with reference to the term “keys” in Matthew 16: “The preaching of the Word is not a vain and useless babbling of words. . . . The Holy Spirit is present in this ministry . . . and wants, by this means as with a kind of keys, the kingdom of heaven to be unlocked and many to be brought into it.” Sinners should know that “if they want to enter the kingdom of heaven, the approach and entrance is not given and granted to them except through these keys” (p. 212).

On the parable of the unforgiving servant **Hemmingsen** says, “The Ten Commandments contain the parcels of the debt. There is demanded of you the fear of God, love, faith, and patience in the first commandment. . . . Inasmuch as you have not performed this obedience and discharged yourself of it, you have run up unpaid debts. . . . But what is to be done in this case? . . . We must acknowledge the greatness of our sin; we must be sorry from our heart that we have not paid what we ought; and upon trust of Christ, we must flee unto our heavenly Father, desiring forgiveness and release of the debt” (pp. 241-242).

On the education of little children (Matthew 19: 13-14) **Melanchthon** had this to say: “It is the duty of parents to commit each (child) to Christ, just as the age of each permits. They should bring the very young children to baptism and see to it that they become members of the church of God. . . . After they come to the point where they can be taught, parents should educate them. . . . Parents also should commend their children to God in constant prayers. . . . It is necessary to educate

children about God and the Son of God, and little by little to instill in them the whole teaching of the gospel, and to accustom them to prayer and the acceptance of the Son of God” (p. 249).

On Mary’s anointing of Jesus and the disapproval of Judas, **Hunnius** remarks, “The Lord sees and approves the woman’s work as good and holy. . . . Christ, therefore, being soon to die, interprets the woman’s deed as having been done by the secret and unspoken impulse of God, so that it became indeed a symbol of his imminent passion and death. . . . The deed of this holy woman is celebrated even today, memorialized for all down the ages in the writings and records of the blessed Evangelists” (p. 335).

We conclude with **Hunnius’** discussion of Jesus’ suffering on the cross: “*My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?*” The sense of divine wrath against the sins of the world wrung this sad cry from him, all the sins that were laid on him, without exception, and that he was then bearing before God. And in that moment, he truly felt what it was to be abandoned by God and to be cast away from the enjoyment of his countenance and benefits. . . . The heavenly Father poured out his infinite wrath like a hurricane on him because of our sin” (p. 365).

Christopher Boyd Brown, Editor: *John 13-21 (Reformation Commentary on Scripture – New Testament V)*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois, 2021, hard cover, 332 pages, 51 preliminary pages.

In this volume of this series we are introduced to yet another obscure Lutheran from Reformation times: Alexander (Ales) Alesius (1500-1565). The section containing biographical sketches (pp. 241-313) calls Alesius a “Scottish Lutheran theologian,” a rare bird indeed. The sketch continues, “Following the martyrdom of his theological adversary Patrick Hamilton (1504-1528), Alesius converted to the Reformation and fled to Germany. In 1535 Martin Luther and Philipp Melancthon sent him as an emissary to Henry VIII and Thomas Cranmer. He taught briefly at Cambridge, but after the Act of Six Articles reasserted Catholic sacramental theology he returned to Germany, where he lectured at Frankfurt an der Oder and Leipzig” (p. 242).

Among Alesius’ writings are commentaries on several Bible books, including the Gospel of John. “His commentary on John, making particular use of rhetorical analysis, originated in his lectures as a professor in Leipzig” (p. xlvi). The editors chose thirty-three of Alesius’ comments on John 13-21 to be

included in this volume, along with comments by more well-known Lutherans such as Philipp Melanchthon, Johannes Brenz, Caspar Cruciger, and, of course, Martin Luther himself. As in the other volumes in this series, comments from non-Lutherans are also included, such as Reformed, Anabaptist, and Church of England scholars, as well as a few Roman Catholic writers.

In connection with the foot-washing on Maundy Thursday, Alesius wrote: "The washing . . . was an image of the daily forgiveness we need throughout life. . . . Sin truly exists in all the saints, and is never idle, but at every hour bears fruits worthy of death, if it were not forgiven for Christ's sake" (pp. 9-10). On the same topic Alesius wrote, "Christ teaches him [Peter] the difference between reconciliation of the person in baptism and ongoing forgiveness in daily repentance, which is signified by the washing of feet" (p. 13). Thus it was not only Luther who stressed *simul justus et peccator* (simultaneously justified and sinful).

In John 14:12 Jesus tells His disciples that they will do greater works than He did. Alesius explains, "Now that He is reigning, He does greater things through His servants than He did formerly when He bore the servant's role. Only a few were converted by Christ's preaching in Judea; the apostles brought all nations to the knowledge of the true God" (p. 48). Indeed there is no greater work than being participants with the Holy Spirit in the work of conversion, greater even than Jesus' miracles of power. Luther taught the same thing, saying in one of his sermons on John, "Where such works are wrought as to convert someone to Christ, strengthen them in his faith, and preserve them in a godly life, one may well boast that this is a work . . . which is performed solely by the power of Christ the Lord and is as great as or greater than raising the physically dead" (p. 47). Faithful preachers of the gospel should never consider what Christ is doing through them as something insignificant or pointless.

In John 14:23 Jesus said: "*If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word.*" In explanation of these words Alesius comments, "Christ wants us to regard the preservation of doctrine as something so precious, and commends it to us so insistently, because this is the one thing above all others on the basis of which He measures our love for Him. . . . And this is a great comfort: that we are able to establish for certain, that we truly love Christ, and are loved by Him, if we preserve the purity of the doctrine of the gospel" (p. 58). Johannes Brenz was in perfect agreement, writing: "Faith is the most faithful custodian of the Word of God, nor can anything else compare to its custody of the Word. . . . Where the word of Christ is received in faith, there the Father and the Son make their dwelling" (p. 58).

John's Gospel concludes with John's account of the central events of Christ's mission: His crucifixion, death, and resurrection. Alesius and the other Lutheran commentators featured in this volume certainly recognized the importance of these events. Luther summarized its value for us sinners in one of his sermons on John: "Christ's suffering is the fulfillment of Scripture and the accomplishment of the redemption of the human race. . . . Sin has been blotted out; God's wrath appeased; death overcome; the kingdom of heaven won and heaven opened" (p. 179). With regard to Christ's burial Luther proclaimed, "There is nothing lacking: all my sin, misery, and affliction are buried with Him. . . . For His death and burial took place for us so that through His death and tomb my sins and those of all who believe in Him might be put to death and buried" (p. 185).

As a conclusion to this brief review, listen to Aegidius Hunnius (1550-1603), orthodox teacher at the University of Wittenberg in the following generation, make his testimony concerning the risen Christ's salutation to His disciples: "*Peace be with you.*" Hunnius wrote, "Peace is the highest blessing that Christ obtained for us by His death and resurrection. For "He is our peace," and "the prince of peace," who took away the cause of division between God and human beings – that is, sin. For it was our sins that made a separation between ourselves and God. But He then reconciled us to God in the body of His flesh and in His glorious resurrection" (p. 198).

