

Liberalism: Its Cause And Cure – Chapter Six: The Cure



Martin Luther At The Diet Of Worms.

This is the continuation and final chapter of [Liberalism: Its Cause And Cure – The Poisoning of American Christianity and the Antidote](#) by Gregory L. Jackson, Ph.D.

There may be doctrines specific to Lutheranism in this article that may surprise you! If you haven't read the article before this yet, [Understanding Lutheranism](#), it might be good to read it first and to also listen to the short YouTube on it before you read this final chapter.

The attack on the Word of God which was once the sole ambition of only a few academic theologians in Europe has become a malignancy in America, one that threatens to overtake and destroy the vitality of the Christian faith. The malignancy has metastasized to such an extent that the victims of liberalism, ordinary church members, are sometimes found routinely reciting the speculations of Unitarian rationalism while innocently assuming they are correct interpretations of God's Word. For instance, a participant in Pastor Robert Sauer's Missouri Synod adult class blandly "explained" the feeding of the five thousand by noting that the great generosity of the young boy made the multitude share their own lunches, yielding the remarkable amount of leftovers.¹ How tragic to see a believer innocently reciting the rationalistic interpretation of the Bible which began this era of apostasy!

A member of a Baptist church verbally attacked Rev. Jerry Falwell on Ted Koppel's TV show (May 12, 1988) for daring to believe the Bible is infallible. The Baptist member confessed his doubt in the complete truth of the Scriptures. The image of Protestants whether Baptist, Methodist or Presbyterian – proclaiming only the truth of the Bible, has been shattered, providing disillusioned prospects for cults and the occult.

Lutherans resisted abandoning the Scriptures longer than the other denominations, doubtless because Lutheranism began with the reestablishment of Scripture alone. Yet today the vast majority of Lutherans in America are being taught by pastors who no longer believe, as Luther did, that the Bible has no errors or contradictions in it. Only the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, the Evangelical Lutheran Synod, the Church of the Lutheran

Confession, and a few other small Lutheran groups consistently maintain a position once considered undebatable among Lutherans.

People have sought cures for the ills of their denominations. They have formed special caucuses and published special newsletters to alert people to the doctrinal and social issues. Even those groups founded to promote the inerrancy of the Scriptures have found themselves compromising on the very issue which initially galvanized their leaders and members. And, just like Andover Seminary, which was founded to protest the liberalism of Harvard, these groups end up as clones of their erstwhile opponents. Truly, all man-made cures must fail, since they bear with them the seed of their own destruction, a reliance upon human ability.

Fuller Seminary, founded in 1947 to maintain the inerrancy of Scriptures, furnishes one poignant example of human failure. The school began as a conscious alternative to Princeton Theological Seminary, which had split already in 1929 over inerrancy. The faculty and students involved in the 1929 split became leaders of the neo-Evangelical movement in the United States: J. Gresham Machen, Cornelius VanTil, Ned Stonehouse, and Harold J. Ockenga. Ockenga, minister of Park Street Church in Boston, was instrumental in founding Fuller Seminary and the magazine *Christianity Today*. Although the radio preacher Charles E. Fuller ("Old Fashioned Revival Hour") provided the money for a seminary which taught inerrancy, his son, Daniel P. Fuller, a student of Barth, moved the institution step-by-step to a position of errancy, which is the Barthian or neo-orthodox view of Scripture. Fuller Seminary replayed the drama which every mainline seminary had already experienced. At first the liberal position on the Scriptures was not tolerated, so a moderate faculty member left Fuller by common consent. Next, a friend of the founder's son was hired as librarian, in spite of his position against inerrancy, but only if he did not teach. That restriction was dropped shortly. Then a president known for his opposition to inerrancy, David A. Hubbard, was hired. By 1962, the new position on the errancy of Scriptures was established at Fuller, yet the school continued to insist that the entire faculty held the position for which the school was founded.

When Harold Lindsell revealed "The Strange Case of Fuller Theological Seminary" in *The Battle for the Bible*, many Evangelicals denounced him for hurting the reputation of the seminary he helped establish, and felt compelled to leave when its purpose was deliberately and methodically compromised.² Once this was accomplished, the Fuller School of Missions was begun in 1965, with Donald McGavran as dean. Through McGavran and his disciples at Fuller—Win Am, John Wimber, and C. Peter Wagner—the Church Growth Movement has swept through most denominations in America, including the Lutheran groups.

Luther saw the flowering of the gospel during his own lifetime and experienced the same attacks upon the Scriptures which plague America today. He saw that people were looking for God everywhere except in the appointed means by which God chose to offer his grace to people: the Word and Sacraments. To accomplish God's will, we must return to his plan, the Word and Sacraments, relying on the Holy Spirit to work the will of God. What America lacks today is faithfulness to the Scriptures.

Conversion

Even in recent years, people have sought to improve the American religious scene by creating new institutions to advance Scriptural inerrancy, or by seeking to take over those denominations where inerrancy was severely compromised. The failure of those efforts reminds us that the goal of God's Word is not institutional but personal, showing us that he can indeed work through the weak and poor, even as he did when the Savior was born in poverty, shame, and weakness. Therefore we should not make power our goal, but seek to remain faithful to the whole counsel of God. Because God's will is that all people be saved, the gospel message of redemption from sin remains the central message of the church.

The power of historic Christianity has been a determined insistence upon the work of God alone in converting a person who is dead in sin and bestowing upon him a living faith in Christ Jesus as Lord and Savior, apart from any merit or cooperation in that person. At the same time, human reason has been at war against this gospel message, fueled by Satan's burning ambition to rob God of His glory and delude man into some palatable, reasonable, but insipid imitation of the gospel.

C. F. W. Walther writes:

Luther's remark about the enmity of all heretics against the grace of God is an important axiomatic statement. Every heresy that has sprung up was caused by the heretic's inability to believe that man becomes righteous in the sight of God, and is saved, by grace alone. That is the real rock of offense against which all heretics, all false teachers, dash their head.³

If we wander away from the tenets of grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone, then the height of our steeples, the depth of our carpeting, and the yield on our endowments will mean nothing.

THE LAW

We know that God is perfect, upholding his perfect law.

For thou art not a God that hath pleasure in wickedness: neither shall evil dwell with thee. The foolish shall not stand in thy sight: thou hatest all workers of iniquity. Thou shalt destroy them that speak leasing: the LORD will abhor the bloody and deceitful man. (Psalm 5:4-6 KJV)

When we rebel against the law, the law breaks our bones and crushes our arrogance. "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise..." (Psalm 51:17 KJV)

All of the work of conversion takes place through the Holy Spirit. "But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." (1 Corinthians 2:14 KJV).

The childlike simplicity of Luther's Small Catechism describes the work of the Spirit:

I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith; even as He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith...⁴

Here faith is not the result of the skillful evangelist who makes the Christian faith relevant by adding reason, nor is faith the accomplishment of the individual. Instead, it is the work of the Holy Spirit through the gospel. Hoenecke contrasts the scriptural position with that of the Schwaermer who dominate the American church scene:

Aus dem alien folgt die Verwerflichkeit des schwarmgeistlichen Grundsatzes, dass der Geist wirke ohne die Schrift. Geist nicht ohne Schrift, Schrift nicht ohne Geist, das ist gesunde Lehre. (From this follows the repudiation of Pentecostal principle, that the Spirit works without the Scriptures. Spirit not without the Scripture, Scripture not without the Spirit—that is sound doctrine.)⁵

First of all, the unpopular but necessary work of preaching the law in all its severity must be undertaken. As Luther writes:

Now God drives us to this by holding the law before us, in order that through the law we may come to a knowledge of ourselves. For where there is not this knowledge, one can never be saved. He that is well needs no physician; but if a man is sick and desires to become well, he must know that he is weak and sick, otherwise he cannot be helped.⁶

Knowing this to be true, C. F. W. Walther warns pastors:

If remission of sins without repentance is preached, the people imagine that they have already forgiveness of sins, and thereby they are made secure and unconcerned. This is a greater error and sin than all error of former times, and it is verily to be feared that we are in that danger which Christ points out when He says, Matthew 12:45: "The last state of that man shall be worse than the first."⁷

Here we have an answer for the apparent bloom of popular Christianity, without any lasting quality, TV empires founded on greed, crumbling from the effects of lust and corruption:

Unless the rocky subsoil in their hearts has been pulverized by the law, the sweet gospel is of no benefit to them.⁸

The preaching of the law is just as much the work of the Holy Spirit as is the preaching of the gospel. Luther wrote: "A penitent heart is a rare thing and a great grace; one cannot produce it by thinking about sin and hell. Only the Holy Spirit can impart it."⁹

While previous eras have been weighted down with law preaching, due to the impact of Pietism, our era is remiss in that area, due to the impact and the outward success of health and wealth theology. The absence of law preaching

is especially noteworthy among those who have abandoned the over emphasis of their tradition: Robert Schuller, who rejects the negativism of Calvin; Norman V Peale, who glibly endorses universalism. Jim and Tammy Bakker exchanged the drab poverty of Wesleyan holiness Pentecostalism for a legendary lifestyle of make-up, jewels, and luxury cars. The Bakkers' "Forgiven" campaign has been followed by their grieved denials of any significant wrongdoing. These leaders of American Christianity come from the Reformed/ Pietistic tradition.

How easy it is for us to move from objective justification to the believer's apprehension of salvation through faith, without annoying him with details about God's perfect law, the sinfulness of popular social trends, or the necessity of repentance. Preaching the law to show the need for repentance, and the work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of people, will continue to be the work of all gospel preachers, indeed, of all Christians. Luther commented: "True is the proverb and better than everything they have hitherto taught about remorse: Never to sin again is repentance at its best; and a new life is the best of repentance."¹⁰

THE GOSPEL

Nothing should make a Christian more confident in the work of evangelism than the assurance that God accomplishes everything through His Word according to His pleasure:

For you do not find Him; He finds you. For the preachers come from Him, not from you. . . Your faith comes from Him, not from you. And everything that works faith within you comes from Him and not from you.¹¹

This is the exact point where the Reformed, the Quakers, and the Pentecostals depart from Scripture. This is the heart of the Apostolic faith and the nemesis of all sects.

For we can definitely assert that where the Lord's Supper, Baptism, and the Word are found, Christ, the remission of sins, and life eternal are found. On the other hand, where these signs of grace are not found, or where they are despised by men, not only grace is lacking but also foul errors will follow. Then men will set up other forms of worship and other signs for themselves.¹²

Pieper saw clearly what many Lutheran leaders overlooked in the past and continue to overlook today:

The history of dogma tells this story: In those doctrines in which it differs from the Lutheran Church and for the sake of which it has established itself as a separate body within visible Christendom, the Reformed Church, as far as it follows in the footsteps of Zwingli and Calvin, sets aside the Scripture principle and operates instead with rationalistic axioms. The Reformed theologians frankly state that reason must have a voice in determining Christian doctrine.¹³

In many places, Luther emphasized the power of God instead of the works of man. He wrote about John 21:19-24:

Firstly, we read that this was the disciple whom Christ loved. This means that faith alone makes the truly beloved disciples of Christ, who receive the Holy Spirit through this very same faith, not through their works. Works indeed also make disciples, but not beloved disciples: only temporary hypocrites who do not persevere. God's love does not uphold and keep them, for the reason that they do not believe.¹⁴

In a sermon on John 6:43-44, he reiterated this message of grace:

Christ here says: Only he comes to Me and only he receives faith whom the Father draws to Me. This drawing is not done as the hangman draws a thief. It is rather a friendly inviting and drawing, as a gracious man attracts people to himself by being so friendly and pleasant that everybody is glad to go to him. In this way God also gently invites and brings people to Himself so that they willingly and gladly are with Him and near Him.¹⁵

Thus we see the compelling force of Luther's Gospel, an eloquence radiating from God's glory rather than from man's wisdom. Unfortunately, many people do not understand the enmity of the Protestant sects toward the means of grace. I have experienced this firsthand on several occasions. In one case, a Pentecostal woman ran from the room crying when a Lutheran pastor talked about infant baptism at a Lutheran retreat. Later, when I discussed infant baptism with a group of people, at their invitation, a member of the Assemblies of God glared at me, furious about my opportunity to teach them, even though I discussed both sides fairly and without polemics. At Wheaton College, at the Billy Graham Center, in the Cliff Barrows Auditorium, I discussed the same issue with a Baptist minister, who brought it up when I admitted to being a Lutheran pastor. When I pointed out that his practice of infant dedication was a tacit concession to the scriptural position, he broke off the conversation he had started. In short, the sectarians are well trained against the means of grace, and this principled opposition lies at the heart of decision theology, Church Growth methods, and Pentecostalism.

Some people think it is not fair to cite Zwingli as the well-spring of sectarian opposition to the Means of Grace. Moderate Lutherans and Calvinists plead that Calvin came closest to Luther. In fact, some of Calvin's statements can sound quite appealing to a Lutheran:

Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists.¹⁶

But Calvin can also be quite appalling, separating the means of grace from the Holy Spirit, just as he separated the two natures of Christ:

The nature of baptism or the Supper must not be tied down to an instant of time. God, whenever He sees fit, fulfills and exhibits in immediate effect that which He figures in the sacrament. But no necessity must be imagined so as to prevent His grace from sometimes preceding, sometimes following, the use of the sign.¹⁷

Calvin clearly divorced the Holy Spirit from the means of grace:

But the sacraments properly fulfill their office only when the Spirit, that inward teacher, comes to them, by whose power alone hearts are penetrated and affections moved and our souls opened for the sacraments to enter in. If the Spirit be lacking, the sacraments can accomplish nothing more in our minds than the splendor of the sun shining upon blind eyes, or a voice sounding in deaf ears.¹⁸

Although the Reformed will use the Word sacrament, the actual meaning of the term reflects Calvin's exegesis:

We must establish such a presence of Christ in the supper as may neither fasten Him to the element of bread, nor enclose Him in bread, nor circumscribe Him in any way (all of which clearly derogate from His heavenly glory. . .)¹⁹

Left unexplained by Calvin is how the church misunderstood for almost 16 centuries the Real Presence of the body and blood of Christ and the clear words of Holy Scripture: "This is my body."

THE WORD AND REASON

If we examine the relationship of the Word to conversion, the differences between historic Christianity and sectarian Protestantism become even plainer. Luther taught that the Word of God does not require the addition of human reason to make it relevant or effective. In contrast, Calvin insisted that human reason must be added, rejecting *nuda (sola, only) scriptura*. At the Chicago inerrancy conference in December of 1986, I witnessed two prominent Reformed theologians tongue-lash Dr. Robert Preus for adhering to *nuda scriptura*²⁰ Adding human reason to Scripture has been the hallmark of sectarian Protestants, as Pieper notes:

Reformed theologians, in order to support their denial of the *illocalis modus subsistendi* of Christ's human nature, have sought, in their exposition of John 20, an opening in the closed doors, or a window, or an aperture in the roof or in the walls, in order to explain the possibility of Christ's appearance in the room where the disciples were assembled.²¹

The great sectarian error is not one of ministerial reason in contrast to ministerial reason, for the Reformed, Pentecostal, and Baptist turn out in greater numbers than the Lutherans at inerrancy conferences.²² The question is not of placing reason above the Word of God, but beside it, in partnership with it, similar to the Roman Catholic doctrine of Mary serving as Co-Redemptrix with Christ.

Pieper has written:

Moved by rationalistic considerations, the Reformed reject Baptism and the Lord's Supper as means of grace; and some of them, in harmony with their principle, have rejected the external Word of the Gospel as a means of grace and substituted for it an alleged 'immediate inner illumination,' and then have fallen into outright rationalism.²³

The key word "effective," which shows up in sectarian evangelism material, is directly related to this false doctrine. Luther cautions us:

We must, therefore, be careful not to want to uphold the Gospel with our powers instead of with its own might. In that case it is entirely lost; and when one wants to defend it most effectively, it comes to naught. Let us shed all worry about the progress of the Gospel. The Gospel does not need our help. It is mighty enough by itself. Commit it to that God alone to whom it belongs.²⁴

If reason must be added to the Word of God to make it effective, then the Word of God alone is ineffective, quite the opposite of the clear witness of Scripture:

For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven,
and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth,
and maketh it bring forth and bud,
that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater:
So shall My Word be that goeth forth out of my mouth:
it shall not return unto me void,
but it shall accomplish that which I please,
and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.
(Isaiah 55:10-11 KJV)

Against the notion of a footloose working of the Holy Spirit, Luther states:

One must not reverse the order and dream of a Holy Spirit who works without the Word and before the Word, but one who comes with and through the Word and goes no farther than the Word goes.²⁵

Luther also advises us:

From this it follows that they act foolishly, yea, against God's order and institution, who despise and reject the external Word, thinking that the Holy Spirit and faith should come to them without means. It will indeed be a long time before that will happen.²⁶

Whoever now believes the Gospel will receive grace and the Holy Spirit. This will cause the heart to rejoice and find delight in God, and will enable the believer to keep the law cheerfully, without expecting a reward, without fear of punishment, without seeking compensation, as the heart is perfectly satisfied with God's grace, by which the law has been fulfilled.²⁷

EVANGELISM

Many Lutherans in America are suffering from a complete misapprehension of how the Holy Spirit works through the means of grace to convert people to a living faith. On the liberal side, evangelism is seen as membership recruitment. Even among pastors there is a profound sense of embarrassment when talking about the Christian faith, though other matters can be discussed in clinical detail without a blush. To some extent, liberal Lutheran church leaders have been attracted to demographic studies, sociological trends, and marketing techniques.

Oddly enough, some conservative Lutheran pastors have been attracted to sectarian evangelism methods. Pastors and congregations are easily swindled by that old whore Reason into figuring how well they are doing in terms of numerical growth and financial success. Using such yardsticks, the Mormons are the ones truly blessed by God. In contrast, if we listen to Luther, Walther, Pieper, and Hoenecke, we will proclaim the gospel with confidence, confidence in God, not ourselves.

PIETISM

The sectarian denial of the means of grace should be clear to anyone who has read Luther, Pieper, or Calvin. However, while the sects are merely silent about the only genuine cause of church growth—the means of grace—they are quite voluble about their own methods. These methods are the substance of Pietism and are at war against the article on which the church stands or falls—justification by faith. The methods are: unionism; judging the results (or emphasizing fruit rather than doctrine); and *collegia pietatis* (cell groups). Some people might want to soft-pedal this issue, or avoid it altogether, but they should not invoke Luther's name to support their timidity. The Reformer tells us:

Christendom must have men who are able to floor their adversaries and take armor and equipment from the devil, putting him to shame. But this calls for strong warriors who have complete control of Scripture, can refute a false interpretation, know how to wrest the sword they wield, that is, their Bible passages, from the hands of the adversaries and beat them back with them.²⁸ For every sect has always had one or more particular hobbies and articles which are manifestly wrong and can easily be discerned to be of the devil, who publicly teach, urge and defend them as right certain and necessary to believe or to keep. For the spirit of lies cannot so conceal himself but that he must at last put forth his claws, by which you can discern and observe the ravenous wolf.²⁹

Unionism

Unionism, which is often called ecumenism, is the practice of establishing or expressing unity without a common confession of faith. Whenever Lutherans have been forced into a church union with the Reformed or entered a union agreement voluntarily, Lutherans have had to concede key doctrinal positions, especially the Real Presence of the body and blood of Christ in Holy Communion and baptismal regeneration, both of which are clearly taught in the Scriptures. Unionism has always created doctrinal indifference, and doctrinal indifference has always promoted unionism. First the Lutheran confessions are conceded, then the Scriptures themselves. Theodore Schmauk, who struggled against the anti-confessional spirit of the last century, predicted this in 1905:

The modern radical spirit which would sweep away the Formula of Concord as a Confession of the Church, will not, in the end, be curbed, until it has swept away the Augsburg Confession, and the ancient Confessions of the Church—yea, not until it has crossed the borders of Scripture itself, and swept out of the Word whatsoever is not in accord with its own critical mode of thinking.

The far-sighted rationalist theologian and Dresden Court preacher, Ammon, grasped the logic of a mere spirit of progress, when he said: 'Experience teaches us that those who reject a Creed, will speedily reject the Scriptures themselves.'³⁰

The American religious scene has been dominated by Reformed theology from the beginning, starting with the Pilgrims who landed at Plymouth Rock in 1620, and continuing with the growth of Baptist, Methodist, and Pentecostal churches during the age of western expansion and revivalism. While the Protestant sects do not agree on many points of doctrine, they share a common origin: Zwingli's and Calvin's rejection of the means of grace. All non-Lutheran Protestants, whether Mennonite, Anglican, Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist, or Pentecostal, agree in rejecting baptismal regeneration and the Real Presence. They also agree in many ways in their emphasis on sanctification or the Christian life.

Because Reformed theology, from Zwingli and Calvin, took away objective certainty in salvation through the means of grace, they necessarily substituted subjective criteria, the feeling of being saved, and outward signs, such as membership in cell groups. Essentially, Reformed theology created Pietism, influencing key Lutherans.

We should not be surprised that Philip Jacob Spener, the founder of Pietism, is considered by Heick the first union theologian. Spener rejected the Real Presence and baptismal regeneration, but accepted chiliasm. Spener was the first Lutheran theologian to include theological errors among those covered by the forgiveness of sins.³¹

The Evangelical institutions, whether the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association or *Christianity Today* or Fuller Seminary, have been unionistic from the beginning. The result has been a compromising position on inerrancy, first on inerrancy itself, then on basic doctrines of the Bible. Many people today see the modern Evangelical movement, which Harold Ockenga initiated in his 1948 convocation speech in Pasadena, as being completely rudderless, driven by the wind, tossed back and forth, having no clear position on any doctrine of the Bible.

Therefore, one aspect of the cure is to avoid unionism, which has always led to apostasy, and continue to maintain the scriptural principles of fellowship.

Results! Results!

The unionistic Evangelicals cannot deal with doctrinal matters, so they concentrate on results, with a simple-minded formula—if something works, that is, adds to the visible church, it must be God-pleasing. This is paying obeisance to the era of Pietism, which Walther criticized:

'Pay more attention to pure life, and you will raise a growth of genuine Christianity.' That is exactly like saying to a farmer: 'Do not worry forever about good seed; worry about good fruits.' Is not a farmer properly concerned about good fruit when he is solicitous about getting good seed? Just so a

concern about pure doctrine is the proper concern about genuine Christianity and a sincere Christian life. False doctrine is noxious seed, sown by the enemy to produce a progeny of wickedness. The pure doctrine is wheat-seed; from it spring the children of the Kingdom, who even in the present life belong in the kingdom of Jesus Christ, and in the life to come will be received into the Kingdom of Glory.³²

Our experience in Ohio, a tiny minority of orthodox Lutherans offering an unpalatable way of life, was not unknown to Luther.

Be not worried because of this! For even though a man preach and continue in the Gospel for many years, he must still lament and say: Aye, no one will come, and all continue in their former state. Therefore you must not let that grieve or terrify you.³³

Some pastors may be tempted to feel that they have not made the gospel appealing or relevant to church shoppers of the Me Generation. Knowing that conversion did not depend upon man, Luther wrote:

What business is it of mine that many do not esteem it? It must be that many are called but few are chosen. For the sake of the good ground that brings forth fruit with patience, the seed must also fall fruitless by the wayside, on the rock and among the thorns; inasmuch as we are assured that the Word of God does not go forth without bearing some fruit, but it always finds also good ground; as Christ says here, some seed of the sower falls also into good ground and not only by the wayside, among the thorns and on stony ground. For wherever the Gospel goes you will find Christians. 'My Word shall not return unto me void' (Isaiah 55:11)³⁴

Yet this is also true, that Christ often delays the bestowal of His help, as He did on this occasion, and on another, John 21, when He permitted the disciples to toil all the night without taking anything, and really appeared as if He would forget His own Word and promise.³⁵

The pietistic basis for the modern Evangelicals is utter nonsense, as Walther proves with this Luther quotation:

Now it is evident that fruits do not bear the tree, nor does the tree grow on the fruit, but the reverse—trees bear fruits, and fruits grow on trees. As there must be trees before there can be fruits, and as the fruits do not make the tree either good or corrupt, but the tree produces the fruits, even so man must first be either good or corrupt before he does good or corrupt works. His works do not make him either good or corrupt, but he does either good or corrupt works.³⁶

Cell Groups

The origin of the cell group is, once again, the era of Pietism, where Spener urged and organized the prayer and Bible study groups to inculcate "deep-toned piety," as the Franckean Synod once called it. The weakness of this approach is the distinction, then, between various levels of Christianity, the goal or promise of creating a higher, deeper, or better form of the faith. Heick has explained why Pietism is at odds with orthodoxy:

While Orthodoxy conceived of regeneration objectively as coinciding with baptism, pietism equated regeneration with conversion, conceiving of it as a subjective change in man. *The doctrine of baptismal regeneration, ardently defended by the Orthodox theologians, was rejected by the Pietists.* Regeneration is not complete, they taught, until the baptized responds to the promise of God with repentance and faith. Divine sonship is contingent upon conversion; only believers are sons of God.³⁷

Modern Evangelicals urge the creation of "disciples," one of their favorite terms, and "soul-winners," through various pietistic techniques. Walther, very much affected by his sojourn with Pietists, describes three of their leaders (Francke, Breithaupt, Fresenius):

These men were guilty of that more refined way of confounding Law and Gospel. They did this by making a false distinction between spiritual awakening and conversion; for they declared that, as regards the way of obtaining salvation, all men must be divided into three classes:

1. Those still unconverted;
2. Those who have been awakened, but are not yet converted;
3. Those who have been converted.³⁸

Hoenecke states how Pietism misleads people into accepting it as compatible with Lutheranism:

Wohl scheint auf den ersten Blick die ganze Differenz recht unbedeutend; aber in Wahrheit gibt sich hier die gefaehrliche Richtung der Pietisten zu erkennen, das Leben ueber die Lehre, die Heiligung ueber die Rechtfertigung und die Froemmgkeit nicht als Folge, sondern als Bedingung der Erleuchtung zu setzen, also eine Art Synergismus und Pelagianismus einzufuehren. (At first glance, the total difference seems absolutely insignificant, but in truth the dangerous direction of Pietism is made apparent: life over doctrine, sanctification over justification, and piety not as a consequence but declared as a stipulation of enlightenment, accordingly leading to a kind of synergism and Pelagianism.)³⁹

APPLICATION

Luther can tell us the bad and the good effects of the Evangelical sects:

When one heresy dies, another presently springs up; for the devil neither slumbers nor sleeps. I myself—though I am nothing—who have now been in the ministry of Christ for twenty years, can truthfully testify that I have been attacked by more than twenty sects. Some of these have entirely perished; others still twitch with life like pieces of dismembered insects. But Satan, that god of factious men, raises up new sects.⁴⁰

But now these sects are our whetstones and polishers; they whet and grind our faith and doctrine so that, smooth and clean, they sparkle as a mirror. Moreover we also learn to know the devil and his thoughts and become prepared to fight against him.⁴¹

The time has come for all orthodox Christians to repudiate modern

Evangelicalism, to carry out the scriptural admonition to “observe and avoid those who cause fatal errors”(Romans 16:17, author’s translation). Francis Pieper warns us:

Hence indifferentism here is surely not in place. On the contrary, we must challenge the teaching of any operation of the Spirit independently of the Word within the Christian Church, and combat it as a foreign element that has penetrated into the Christian doctrine and as a deadly enemy of living personal faith.⁴²

Evangelism methods borrowed from Reformed, Quaker, and Pentecostal theologians cannot possibly be doctrinally neutral. This is supported by Luther:

In philosophy an error that is small at the beginning becomes very great in the end. So a small error in theology overturns the whole body of doctrine.. That is why we may not surrender or change even an iota (*apiculum*) of doctrine.⁴³

Modern Evangelicals would like us to learn their methods, and keep our confession of faith, that is, to be as indifferent as they are about doctrine. But Luther could not agree with such backpedaling:

Doctrine is our only light. It alone enlightens and directs us and shows us the way to heaven. If it is shaken in one quarter (*in una parte*), it will necessarily be shaken in its entirety (*in totum*). Where that happens, love cannot help us at all.⁴⁴

In matters concerning faith we must be invincible, unbending, and very stubborn; indeed, if possible, harder than adamant. But in matters concerning love we should be softer and more pliant than any reed and leaf and should gladly accommodate ourselves to everything.⁴⁵

Orthodox Lutherans may feel alone and envious in their small churches, especially in those places where their faithfulness is needed most. They can look around and see that the liberals and Evangelicals have built huge churches which dwarf their own. They may feel like failures, especially the pastors. But Walther, quoting Luther, has this to say to each and every pastor:

Now, the Lord in this passage speaks, in particular, of preachers or prophets, whose real and proper fruit is nothing else than this, that they diligently proclaim this will of God to the people and teach them that God is gracious and merciful and has no pleasure in the death of a sinner, but wants him to live, moreover, that God has manifested His mercy by having His only-begotten Son become man. After this fruit, which is the principal and most reliable one and cannot deceive, there follow in the course of time other fruits, namely, a life in beautiful harmony with this doctrine and in no way contrary to it. But these fruits are to be regarded as genuine fruits only where the first fruit, namely, the doctrine of Christ, already exists.⁴⁶

The poison which has disabled American Christianity is false doctrine, introduced in small doses. The cure is not ours, but God’s pure doctrine from

the inerrant Word of God. Each Christian has a role, however humble it may seem, in God's Kingdom, as Luther wrote:

And yet, one single Christian believer, by his preaching and prayer, can be the means of salvation to uncounted multitudes. In spite of Satan's hatred and desire to hinder, many people hear the Gospel, receive baptism and become teachers of the faith; and through the influence of the Gospel the sacredness of home and country are preserved.⁴⁷

God keep us steadfast in His Word.

A NEW APPROACH

The history of Lutheranism, ever since Luther died, and even before, is so discouraging to read that one is tempted to believe that God himself opposed the Reformation from the very beginning. Luther's trusted co-worker, Philip Melancthon, began to undo the Augsburg Confession a few years after it was written and later wavered in the face of opposition from Roman Catholics. Various leaders who drew their initial insights from Luther sought to impose their unique views upon Scripture. Not only were the Protestants divided, but even Lutherans fell to bickering among themselves instead of confessing together the truth of God's Word. As a result, the Book of Concord had to be written to end the discord among the Lutheran factions.

In the following years, Lutherans faced determined opposition from the followers of Zwingli and Calvin, as well as from the Church of Rome. Dabblers in church history have been quick to portray Lutheranism as a middle course between the Medieval rituals of Rome and the gospel-centered preaching of the Protestants. This moderating position seems to be enhanced by the Roman view of Lutherans as too Protestant, by the Protestant view of Lutheranism as too Roman.

The mistaken view of Lutherans is derived from the degeneration of the visible church in the centuries following her establishment by Christ and the apostles. The church was created by and built upon the Word of God. The sacraments of baptism and communion cannot be separated from the Word, because the earthly elements of the sacraments derive their power from the Word, just as iron alone cannot start a fire unless heated. The Word is the power of the sacraments, just like the glow in the iron. The Zwinglians, Calvinists, and Pentecostals refuse to believe that the Holy Spirit works with the Word and the earthly elements of the sacraments.

The Medieval church lost the power of the Word, while retaining a distorted view of the sacraments. The image most people have of Catholicism comes from the Medieval errors which were codified and preserved by Rome at the Council of Trent, which met from 1545 to 1563. Although the Council of Trent is normally presented as the Counter-Reformation, a cleansing of corrupt practices, it really meant that the worst errors of the past would be the foundation of all future Roman teaching. At the center of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation was the battle for the gospel itself, for the authority and clarity of the Scriptures.

Luther battled for the scriptural doctrine of salvation through faith, apart from the works of the law, while Rome chose to continue the system of works and indulgences, purgatory, and masses for the dead. Thus Luther's work was not a revolution itself, though it seemed to be radical in contrast to the corrupt state of affairs, but a conservative Reformation, honoring the past where the foundations were sound.

Luther's student, Martin Chemnitz, proved in *The Examination of the Council of Trent*, with a careful study of the Scriptures and the Church Fathers, that Lutheranism was nothing more than the teaching and practice of the church's first centuries. While Luther made it impossible for Rome to appeal to Scripture, Chemnitz made it just as difficult to appeal to Jerome, Augustine, and Ambrose. Although Lutherans are not Roman Catholics, we are truly catholic, tracing our doctrine back through the centuries to the martyrs and saints who first stood for the truth and, in many cases, died for the Word.

Tragically, Lutherans have been drawn from their catholic heritage by identifying with the Zwinglian and Pentecostal sects which first attacked Luther for maintaining what no one doubted in the previous sixteen centuries. While the Protestant sects taught the inerrancy of the Scriptures until rationalism took hold of the various denominations, they never taught that God gives rebirth through baptism or that the body and blood of Christ are truly present in the elements of communion.

In one Baptist seminary, the church history course starts with the apostles, then begins again with the Reformation, as if the intervening fifteen centuries were of no consequence.

Lutherans, in their fear of Romanism, have often been unafraid of sectarian Protestantism, adopting the worship, the robes, and even the doctrine of those whom Luther tied in vain to teach from Scripture.

R. C. H. Lenski, published by the ELCA but almost unread in the ELCA, admonished an earlier audience of Lutherans who envied in their age the growth of the sectarians:

Paul offers no excuse for preachers who desire to eliminate certain teachings of the gospel on the plea that they can thus reach and attract more people than if they insisted also on these teachings. Paul intends to omit, even in his own mind, any addition to the gospel, any admixture, any sugar-coating of it by human, worldly wisdom. [Text: "For I decided not to know anything among you save Jesus Christ, and him crucified" 1 Corinthians 2:2.]⁴⁸

If we measure success by numbers rather than by purity of doctrine, then the Scriptures must be altered, diluted, and perverted to have the greatest possible appeal at the moment. The smallest points of doctrine will grow in significance, as Lutherans wander away from the truth in search of error's success.

The power of the Word of God, which the sectarians cannot understand, comes from the Word alone. We do not need to make the Word reasonable, appealing, or relevant. The Trinity, incarnation, virgin birth, atonement, and

resurrection of Christ are beyond human reason, absurd to the world, yet transcending everything the world can imagine. Adding reason to the Word, the fundamental weakness of Roman Catholicism and sectarians alike, must eventually yield to placing reason above the Word. The saying is true, as C. P. Krauth said, "Young Arminian, old Socinian". In other words, the person who adds reason to the Word in his youth will become a Unitarian in his old age. Every denomination which has given reason a place along with Scripture has succumbed to Unitarianism as well, from the Reformed, who formerly taught inerrancy, to the Roman Catholics, who once condemned evolution and the historical-critical method of studying Scripture.

The weakness of adding reason to the Word is revealed in the latter stages of degeneration. The Word is God-centered, but reason is me-centered. God does not abide any idols in the human heart. Reason starts with the self and ends with the self, unless brought under submission by the Word. Even then, the battle is never won completely. We can tie up a pig ever so tightly, but we cannot keep it from squealing, as Luther said.⁴⁹

We should view ourselves as catholic in doctrine and worship because the faith of historic Christianity has been God-centered rather than me-centered, universal rather than parochial. In honoring the faithful witness of past leaders, we honor God's work in such people as Adolph Hoenecke, C. F. W. Walther, Martin Chemnitz, Martin Luther, John Hus, Augustine, Athanasius and Justin Martyr. We should study the orthodox dogmatists of the past—Chemnitz, Selnecker, Gerhard, Calov, Quenstedt—because they were primarily students and teachers of the Word, as Robert Preus has shown.⁵⁰

We should study the Lutheran Confessions and use them diligently in our growth as Christians, not because they are another Bible, but because they show us the disorders of the past, and the cure, which is the proper understanding of God's Word.

Many cures of the past have started with action plans, goals, and objectives. Many church leaders have said to one another, when trying to adopt a secular fad, "How can we baptize this concept and use it in the church?" only to wonder years later why the newest trend failed them so utterly. Many church members have joined a movement in good faith, for the good of the church, only to find the movement in a continuing state of flux and confusion.

By placing our faith in the Word and sacraments, knowing that "God gives the growth," our self-confidence diminishes and our confidence in God grows. No one can reject us, so how can we fail to take the message of the gospel everywhere? People will hear the gospel, and the Word will open their hearts, just as it opened the heart of Lydia: "And a certain woman named Lydia, a seller of purple, of the city of Thyatira, which worshipped God, heard us: whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul." (Acts 16:14 KJV). If they reject the Word, they are rejecting Christ, not us.

Knowing that the strength of the church comes from the means of grace, we need not be ashamed of the pure doctrine of Scripture, or catholic worship using the historic liturgy, or the sacraments. We should heed God's warning

to the Israelites, after they conquered Canaan:

Take heed to thyself that thou be not snared by following them, after that they be destroyed from before thee; and that thou enquire not after their gods, saying, How did these nations serve their gods? even so will I do likewise. Thou shalt not do so unto the LORD thy God: for every abomination to the LORD, which he hateth, have they done unto their gods; for even their sons and their daughters they have burnt in the fire to their gods. (Deut. 12:30-31, KJV).

How strange that Lutherans would even consider aping the worship of those who deny the means of grace, who deny baptismal regeneration, who deny that Jesus Christ really meant, "This is my body!" We should not worry about convincing the world that we are friendly, that our nursery will take the worry out of being a parent, or that our church has something for every age group and hobbyist. We should simply tell them the truth, if we want to remain orthodox Lutherans: that we still teach what Luther taught, and that he taught what the church catholic once taught, as handed down from Christ and the apostles, and preserved by the fathers of the church.

Instead of trying to say that we are just like everyone else, when we are not, we can define ourselves boldly as a small minority of Lutherans in the world, only 5% of Lutherans in America: orthodox. One Jewish lawyer reacted to "Lutheran orthodoxy" with a half-hour discussion about doctrine and a desire to remain on the mailing list of a Wisconsin Synod congregation. His son died of Tay-Sachs, the degenerative disease which afflicts some Jews. A Jewish doctor responded to "Lutheran orthodoxy" by asking, with a smile, "Do you eat kosher?" He was delighted with the answer, "No, we read kosher." His only son died in an accident. Conversations with the physician have involved the Messiah, eternal life, and bearing the cross. Neither father would have been interested in a World War II discussion group.

The cure, which is the Holy Spirit, working through the Word and sacraments, does not require more talent, more persuasive speech, better graphics, a laser printer, or more attractive pastors. What the world loves, God despises. What God loves, the world hates. God wants us to cling to the Holy Scriptures, the infallible revelation of his mighty deeds, from the six day creation to the raising of the dead when Christ returns on the last day. The world adores success, but God honors faithfulness, lifting up the weakest of the weak,—Gideon, Deborah, David, Mary, Paul—to reveal his power, to show that his grace is sufficient. The closing statement of the Formula of Concord expresses with simple eloquence what it means to be a confessing Christian:

We have no intention of yielding aught of the eternal, immutable truth of God for the sake of temporal peace, tranquility and unity (which, moreover, is not in our power to do). Nor would such peace and unity, since it is devised against the truth and for its suppression, have any permanency. Still less are we inclined to adorn and conceal a corruption of the pure doctrine and manifest, condemned errors. But we entertain heartfelt pleasure and love for, and are on our part sincerely inclined and anxious to advance, that unity according to our utmost power, by which His glory remains to God uninjured, nothing of the divine truth of the Holy gospel is surrendered, no room is

given to the least error, poor sinners are brought to true, genuine repentance, raised up by faith, confirmed in new obedience and thus justified and eternally saved alone through the sole merit of Christ.⁵¹

NOTES

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3. *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, ed., W. H. T. Dau, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1928, p. 163.
4. *What Luther Says, An Anthology*, 3 vols., St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, I, p. 353.
5. Adolf Hoenecke, *Evangelische-Lutherische Dogmatik*, 4 vols., Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, IV, p. 17.
6. Martin Luther, *The Sermons of Martin Luther*, 8 vols., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, II, p. 370.
7. Walther, p. 123.
8. Ibid., p. 119.
9. *What Luther Says*, III, p. 1212.
10. *What Luther Says*, III, p. 1214.
11. *What Luther Says*, I, p. 345.
12. *What Luther Says*, II, p. 914.
13. Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 3 vols., St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, I, p. 25.
14. Luther, *Sermons*, I, p. 250.
15. *What Luther Says*, I, p. 347.
16. Benjamin Charles Milner, Jr., *Calvin's Doctrine of the Church*, Leiden: Brill, p. 100; Insti. IV.i.9.
17. Milner, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Church*, p. 121.
18. Milner, p. 119; Insti. IV.xiv.9. In contrast, consider Luther's statement: "They [the Zwinglians] divorced the Word and the Spirit, separated the person who preaches and teaches the Word from God, who works through the Word, and separated the servant who baptizes from God, who has commanded the Sacrament. They fancied that the Holy Spirit is given and works without the Word, that the Word merely gives assent to the Spirit, whom it already finds in the heart. If, then, this Word does not find the Spirit but a godless

person, then it is not the Word of God. In this way they falsely judge and define the Word, not according to God, who speaks it, but according to the man who receives it. They want only that to be the Word of God which is fruitful and brings peace and life..." *What Luther Says*, II, p. 664f. W-T 3, No. 868.

19. Milner, p. 128; *Insti.* IV.xvii.19.

20. Gregory L. Jackson, "*Biblical Inerrancy: Summit III*," *Christian News*, Dec. 22, 1986, p. 1.

21. *Christian Dogmatics*, II, p. 127; See also I, 25ff., III, 324.

22. Siegbert W. Becker, *The Foolishness of God, The Place of Reason in the Theology of Martin Luther*, Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1982.

23. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, I, p. 91.

24. *What Luther Says*, II, p. 572.

25. Luther, *Sermons*, III, p. 329; Pentecost, Third Sermon; John 14:23-31.

26. *What Luther Says*, II, p. 915; W 17 II, 460; SL 11, 2325f.

27. Luther, *Sermons*, I, p. 99; Third Sunday in Advent; Mt. 11:2-10.

28. *What Luther Says*, I, p. 419; Eph. 6:10-17.

29. Luther, *Sermons*, IV, p. 282f.; Mt. 7:15-23.

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36. Martin Luther, St. L. XIX, 1003f. Cited in *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, p. 306; Mt. 7:18.

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38. *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel*, pp. 362-363.

39. *Evangelische-Lutherische Dogmatik*, III, p. 253.

40. *What Luther Says*, III, p. 1270; W 40, I, 36f; SL 9, 14; Preface, Galatians Commentary.
41. *What Luther Says*, III, p. 1269; W 30 II, 212; SL 14, 307f.
42. *Christian Dogmatics*, III, p. 161f.
43. *What Luther Says*, III, p. 1365; Gal. 5:9.
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45. *What Luther Says*, I, p. 412f.
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THE END

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