

Our Use of Reformed Materials

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Near the end of His "Sermon on the Mount," Jesus spoke this warning to His gathered disciples: *"Always beware of false prophets, the kind who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. From their fruits you will know them thoroughly. People do not gather from thornbushes grapes, or from thistles figs, do they? Likewise every good tree bears beautiful fruits. But the rotten tree bears evil fruits. Every tree not producing beautiful fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruits you will recognize them"* (Matthew 7:15-20).

It's my guess that every one of Jesus' spokesmen gathered in this room today has somewhere in his or her files a form that bears the words of Jesus from John 21, *"Feed My sheep."* Those three words embody the precious privilege the crucified and risen Savior has bestowed upon each of you through a Christian congregation. As divinely called teachers, the Savior has placed into your spiritual care the bodies and souls of boys and girls which He has purchased for Himself at the price of His own blood. He has placed them into your care asking of you that you *"feed"* them, that you give them the nourishment they need in order to remain what Jesus made them at their baptism—His *"little sheep."* What a high and holy privilege the God of all grace has made yours!

But what will you feed them? With what will you nourish the souls God has placed into your care? What words will *you* speak to their ears? What songs will *you* put onto their hearts and lips? What sights will *you* place before their eyes? These are questions well worth considering, for God will hold *you* responsible for what your children "eat." Will you feed them a diet consisting of the *"beautiful fruits"* of orthodox Lutheranism as taught in the Scriptures and in our Lutheran confessions? Or will you place before them figs picked from thistles and grapes picked from thornbushes? Will you prepare for them fruit that is beautiful both on the outside and on the inside? Or will you prepare for them fruit that looks good on the outside but under the skin is full of bruises and bad spots? Another way of asking much the same thing is to use the thought passed on to me by your conference's planning committee. What should be our use of reformed materials? In answer to that question, we want to take a rather brief look at the history of the "reformed" and see who falls into that camp today. Secondly we want to undertake a comparative doctrinal study between orthodox Lutheranism and reformed teaching. Last of all, we would like to draw some conclusions about our use of reformed materials.

I. Church History with Emphasis on the Reformed—A Brief Overview

Humanly speaking, Reformed doctrine is generally traced back to Ulrich Zwingli, a Swiss pastor and reformer who lived as a contemporary of Martin Luther. Perhaps the most memorable incident from his life for us was his meeting with Luther at Marburg for a discussion on the Lord's Supper. One author sums up Zwingli's position on the Lord's Supper this way, "It was Zwingli's contention that Christ could not be 'bodily present in the bread and wine' because his body was up in heaven seated at the right hand of God."¹ We are all most certainly aware that Luther could not agree with this opinion. Logical or not, Christ's true body and blood were truly present in true bread and wine. Hence we see from the very earliest beginnings of what is called "Reformed" doctrine today, human reason was made the lord of Scripture rather than its servant. Despite their clear doctrinal differences, Zwingli still wanted fellowship with the Lutherans. That's because Zwingli's true goal was to put up a united Protestant military front against the Roman Catholic armies he was convinced were coming. So too we see that from its earliest beginnings Reformed doctrine has not held Scripture in the high regard with which it is often credited.

When Zwingli lost his life in battle, the Reformed torch passed to a young French law student by the name of John Calvin. Really Calvin came into his position in church history somewhat by accident. As he was

fleeing religious persecution in France where he had begun his opposition to the Roman Catholic Church, he happened to stop for the night in the city of Geneva. Things were a mess there, and Calvin hated messes. The city had rid itself of its Roman Catholic bishop some years back but now seemed to be a city adrift. The leader in Geneva at the time, a Frenchman by the name of William Farel, heard that Calvin was in town. Farel knew Calvin's talent for administration and so convinced the young man to stay in Geneva and put things in order.

Calvin did. Before long he drew up "Articles Concerning the Government of the Church." Among the provisions were the following: 1) a systematic discipline among all the citizens; 2) only 'worthy members' of the church could participate in the Lord's Supper; 3) a thorough instruction in the fundamentals of faith to prepare the young for the confession of faith and for a useful Christian citizenship; 4) the singing of psalms in the divine service; 5) and the establishment of a city commission to judge matrimonial questions according to the Word of God. To administer the work of the church Calvin instituted four separate offices: pastor, teacher, elder and deacon."ⁱⁱⁱ Despite his troubles, and Calvin had plenty of them in Geneva, he succeeded in putting things in order there, at least from an outward perspective.

Calvin also succeeded in publishing his religious teachings which he entitled *Institutes*. Since Calvin's influence seems to have outshone that of Zwingli, perhaps it would be good for us to take just a superficial glance at his dogmatics, for from this one can learn a great deal about the "flavor" of his theology. Calvin begins with an article on God. Following that is an article on Scripture and then an article on predestination. (It was Calvin who taught what even he called a "horrible decree," namely that God predestines some to damnation.) This stands in stark contrast to the orthodox Lutheran approach. The Lutherans begin with an article on the state of man in sin and move to the study of man's rescue from that sin through the redemption by Jesus Christ. These two very different approaches are quite telling. For they reveal that Reformed doctrine is concerned chiefly with a Sovereign God and His Word and will in regard to the elect, while the Lutherans are more concerned about God's gracious rescue of man condemned by sin to eternal death through Jesus' redeeming work. Revealed also is this major flaw that for Calvin logic and reason guided his path rather than divine revelation.ⁱⁱⁱ

One of Calvin's students was a man by the name of John Knox of Scotland. Taking Calvin's doctrine with him, Knox returned home where he undertook a reformation of his own. What resulted was a church which went by the name "Presbyterian" on account of its congregational polity. In fact many Reformed churches in this part of the world took their names from the way they organized their church structure, something that to them was extremely important. What resulted were Episcopalian, Presbyterian and Congregational churches, all espousing Calvin's doctrine. A strong Calvinist church also started in Holland. England (the Anglican Church) too came under the strong influence of his doctrine through a number of political factors, sprinkled once in a while with a bit of religion, so intricately intertwined that it would take too long to unravel them. Calvin's Geneva was becoming Calvin's Europe.^{iv}

In the course of time, many in England grew tired of the political wrangling. They also had a great distaste for its negative effects upon religion. They desired a church that was rid of many of the vices they saw in theirs. They wanted a church that was pure, like Calvin's churches in Geneva. This group became known as the Puritans. Eventually they became so disenchanting with their churches in England, that they left for a new land—America. We know these people as the Pilgrims. They came to this country seeking the religious freedom to put into full effect the teaching of their Geneva Bible.

Back in England, yet another revival was getting underway through the preaching of a man by the name of George Whitefield. He was an Oxford graduate who during his college years had started the Oxford Holy Club. Because of his strict rules and practices and his constant talk about "methods" in regard to the Christian life, his fellow students termed him a "methodist." Two brothers, the sons of an Anglican priest, also came under Whitefield's influence while students at Oxford. Their names were John and Charles Wesley. The goal of the Oxford Holy Club was not really the reformation of anything. They were simply looking for a way to *feel* saved and to demonstrate it in their lives. The Wesleys learned much theology from their father who on his deathbed said to John, "The inward witness, son, the inward witness, that is the proof, the strongest proof of Christianity."^v In addition to that John learned much theology from a man by the name of Jacob Arminius.

Arminius had tried, unsuccessfully, to reform some of the teachings of Calvin so that natural man received more spiritual power. Arminius himself failed. But his teachings, taken upon the lips of Wesley, did not. This is tremendously important for the American religious scene. For Arminius' "freedom of the will," has nearly conquered the American religious landscape today.

Soon little Holy Clubs, or Methodist Societies as they were called, were springing up all over England. Before long they had found their way into America too. At the top of their religious agenda was the holy life of their members. Wesley himself defined a Methodist as "one who loves the Lord his God with all his heart, with all his soul, with all his mind, and with all his strength...Perfect love having now cast out fear, he rejoices evermore."^{vi} For Wesley, the cross of Christ was of minimal importance as far as the certainty of salvation was concerned. Far more valuable was the inner witness, the feeling of being saved. That together with the goal of perfect living formed the content of Methodist Societies both in England and in America where this branch of Christianity eventually got the name Pentecostal. Subjectivism reigned supreme.

As if this were not enough, there was still another spirit at work. There were those within Luther's reformation in Germany who felt Luther was dragging his feet, and that he was not jettisoning enough of Roman Catholicism. The most well-known of these malcontents was Thomas Muentzer. He urged the peasants to take up arms and reform the church and state by force. Back to the roots of the New Testament was his battle cry. The peasants listened, and an estimated 100,000 of them died. Muentzer too lost his life.

But his ideals lived on in people who came to be known by their enemies as the Anabaptists. They were most famous for their re-baptizing (hence the name) of adults who had received a Christian baptism as children, something they despised. More than being against infant baptism, however, the Anabaptists disliked the relationship between church and state inherent in the state-church system. As they searched their Bibles, they came to the conclusion that Christian churches consisted of believers in Jesus who had freely chosen to join Him. They were not simply counted among His followers because of the part of the world in which they lived.^{vii} Church and society were not identical.

Their message spread throughout Switzerland and southern Germany. "Anabaptists denied the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Lord's Supper. They practiced separation from all 'so-called' Christians whose lives did not give evidence of faith. There was a strong emphasis on repentance and doing good works. (This the Anabaptists called "discipleship."^{viii}) Whatever was not clearly taught or commanded by Scripture they regarded as forbidden. The importance of an individual making a personal decision in religious questions was stressed. The local congregation rather than larger groupings of Christians was emphasized. They advocated a total separation of church and state. From the Anabaptist movement has come the Baptist churches as well as the Mennonites, the Hutterites and the Amish."^{ix}

Europe had undergone a radical religious transformation. It had gone from one church to dozens of them. The single, state-church system seemed to be dead. In its place had been born denominationalism. In America it mushroomed. This was the land of the free. And yet on the other hand, this denominationalism disturbed many people. Strange as it seemed, many desired one church again. All should get back to Jesus and the holy life He advocated (according to their thinking). All should just be a Church of Christ, an Assembly of God. Camp meetings sprang up all over the frontier promoting this thought. And hence more American-style denominations were born with an emphasis on holy living.

Much the same thing was also happening back in Europe. Kings were trying to reunite religious denominations in their land, sometimes by force. One of the most important was in Prussia. King Frederick William III tried to unite the Lutherans and the Reformed in his land through the "Prussian Union." People were free to believe what they wanted. But the government would regard the two religious bodies as one. Some Lutherans objected and left Prussia. They came to America and eventually became the Missouri Synod. Other Lutherans bought into the Union. They too came to America and eventually joined the ranks of the Reformed as the United Church of Christ.

A reaction to a forced union between Lutherans and the Reformed was not the only thing going on in the land of the Reformation. As orthodox Lutherans strove to identify themselves clearly, they spawned a group which have come to be known as the pietists. Pietists were people who were becoming disenchanted with all the

talk about right teaching, especially when they did not see it translate into what they considered to be right living. More and more the ancient liturgy of the Christian church as well as the sacrament of the Lord's Supper took on less and less importance. Christ *for* us was not the issue. Christ *in* us was. One of the ways that manifested itself was in the founding of Mission Societies. From these mission societies pastors came to America to proclaim their brand of Christianity. And from these pietistic mission society pastors came our own Wisconsin Synod.

By now many are no doubt saying, "Enough of all this history! Give us something practical." I would submit to you that this brief review of church history is eminently practical. From it one can see that all of the denominations we have named, denominations prominent in America today, are really first cousins whose forefathers are men like Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin, and Jacob Arminius, men with whom Luther could not find complete agreement in Bible doctrine. From this historical overview one can also learn that much of Reformed theology grew not out of someone's personal struggle with sin and the quest for the certainty of forgiveness as did the doctrine of Martin Luther, but was the reaction to disorder, discontent and a desire for greater holiness of living. This is of the utmost importance, for it has shaped both Reformed doctrines and Reformed emphases down to this very day. Last of all, and certainly not least, one learns that America from its earliest beginnings as a nation is basically a Reformed land as is her native tongue, English. Much of the religious material that fills bookstore shelves and publishing house catalogues as well as the radio and television airwaves is material which teaches Reformed doctrine and practice.

II. Orthodox Lutheranism vs. Reformed Sectarianism

Let us begin this brief catalogue of differences between Lutheran and Reformed doctrine with a look at Romans 1:16-17. It reads, "*I am not ashamed of the Gospel; because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the Gospel a righteousness from God is revealed a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written, 'The righteous will live by faith.'*" No doubt you are aware that it was purportedly through the words of this passage that the Holy Spirit led Martin Luther to a correct understanding of Bible doctrine.

What follows is a brief devotion based on this Bible text. As I read it, ask yourself whether or not you would be willing to use it in your classroom.

"Johnny, you ought to be ashamed of yourself. You know better than to take something that doesn't belong to you. That's stealing. That's a sin against the seventh commandment. I'm afraid that you'll have to stay in for noon recess today and think about what you did. I also want you to write out 100 times, 'Christians don't steal.' Maybe next time you'll think twice before you take someone else's property. I also want you to pray to God during recess so that He'll make your faith stronger and give you the power not to steal anymore."

Mrs. Applebaum then turned to speak to the entire class. "Children, we can all learn a very important lesson today. We all know that stealing is wrong, something to be ashamed of. The devil leads us to do it. And he's powerful. But this Bible passage tells us some good news. This Bible passage tells us we can have power too, the 'power of God' which is alot stronger than the power of the devil. We can have God's power in us to say no to the devil when he wants us to do shameful things. If we believe then we have God's power to do things that make God happy instead of things that are shameful. Children, we have to believe always that God will help us live a good, that what the word 'righteous' means, life when we believe in Him and pray for His power to be in us. Let's do that right now.

I hope that no one here today would even consider using this devotion, or one like it, in their classrooms. For while there is something of truth in it, by and large is it thoroughly wrong from start to finish. The devotion is wrong in its teaching on the Gospel. It is wrong in its teaching on faith. It is wrong in its teaching on salvation. It is wrong in its teaching on prayer. At best it is misleading in its teaching on the Christian life. It is wrong on its basic understanding of the text. So goes Reformed teaching.

Somehow we have bought into a terrible misconception that the Reformed are “just a little mixed up on the sacraments and on that ‘decision for Christ’ thing.” Oh how the devil must love such naivete. For the truth of the matter is, the doctrinal aberrations of Reformed teaching strike at the jugular of Scripture and hence also of orthodox Lutheranism—the doctrine of justification by grace through faith in Christ Jesus. Granted, the Reformed use many of the right words; their vocabulary sounds much like the Lutheran vocabulary. And the temptation is to think that they are saying pretty much the same thing we are. Yet the truth of the matter is, that when the words are given their proper reformed definitions, one can quickly see that Reformed doctrine is at bottom nothing more than Roman Catholic work-righteousness in different dress. I don’t know that many of us would ask, “What use should we make of Roman Catholic material?” Our thinking ought to be the same when it comes to Reformed material, for there really is little difference. We would do well to take to heart the evaluation of Dr. C.F.W. Walther on this point. In his magnum opus, *“The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel,”* he writes:

...the difference between the Lutheran and the Reformed Church is fundamental: it lies, not on the circumference, but in the very center of the Christian doctrine... What the Reformed Church lacks is just this—it cannot correctly answer the question, “What must I do to be saved?” In the very doctrine of justification, the cardinal doctrine of the Lutheran Church, the Reformed Church is not in agreement with us; it does not point the right way to grace and salvation. Few there are in our day who perceive this point. All the Reformed, and the sects that are derived from the Reformed Church, affirm that a person is saved by grace alone. But the moment you examine their practice, you immediately discover that, while they hold this truth in theory, they do not put it into effect, but rather point in the opposite direction.^x

We need not reinvent the wheel in making this comparison of Biblical, orthodox Lutheranism vs. Reformed teaching. In his book, *“Law & Gospel: Foundation of Lutheran Ministry,”* Pastor Robert Koester does a fine job for us. We shall by and large follow his outline.

We begin with the “article by which the church stands or falls,” according the framers of the Formula of Concord, the doctrine of justification. Scripture and orthodox Lutheranism both teach that justification is a forensic, that is a legal, concept (2 Co 5:19). God the Father in His heart has declared the guilty to be not guilty solely on the basis of the redemption accomplished by Christ Jesus, the redemption of His vicarious atonement (Romans 5:18-19, 3:19-25). Hence in justification God imputes to the sinner the righteousness of Christ (2 Co 5:21). This is a fact of history, a fully, completely and totally accomplished fact (Jn 19:30; Ro 4:25). Grace, defined as the “favor of God,” and found wholly, completely and only in the heart of God, is that which caused God to justify the sinner through Christ. This legal declaration of “not guilty” solely on the basis of Jesus’ redeeming work is one which God has pronounced upon the entire world (2 Co 5:19); it is a universal justification. It is a declaration God has pronounced solely on the basis of the merits of Christ without any reference to the faith of an individual; it is an objective justification (Ro 4:25). (Therefore I am not saved because I believe. Rather I believe because I am saved.) Through this proclamation by God of “not guilty,” a proclamation made by Holy Scripture as well as by the sacraments, the Holy Spirit creates faith (Ro 10:17), that is He causes one to know and give assent that this is true as well as to trust the proclamation as God’s proclamation to *me*. Faith is the “receiving organ” of God’s gracious proclamation. The change for a sinner that results from justification is a change in his status before God (Ro 8:1). In response to this “not guilty” verdict from God on the basis of the redemption accomplished by Christ Jesus and received by faith worked by the Holy Spirit through the means of grace, the believer now has also had created within him a new man whose one and only desire is to serve God according to His revealed will in works of love (Ro 6:1-4). In this respect his faith becomes a living, busy, active thing. In this respect the Gospel is the power of God that is the motivation from God for a righteous life (Titus 2:14). Never, however, is this righteous life the basis or assurance either for faith or for justification. This is for us the classic distinction between “justification” and “sanctification.” For orthodox Lutheranism these two doctrines are and must be maintained separately even though in the life of a believer they never exist without or apart from the other.

Not so in Reformed teaching. While many of the right words may be used, the bottom line is that justification and sanctification are run together to produce what is essentially work-righteousness. Justification becomes much more ethical than forensic. A person senses that his life is not what he knows it should be. There are many weak spots in his life, call it sin if you want to. This is not good. Something needs to change. But there is good news. Something can change. New, awesome, dynamic, life-changing power can be yours. Rejoice; you can change! I will give you the information that can change your life and give you the control over sin that you want (The Gospel). Jesus needs to be Lord of your life. He needs to invade your heart, your mind, your soul. Jesus needs to move in and take control. When Jesus sits on the throne in your life then you will know that you are one of his children and that the forgiveness of sins is yours. So goes often the Reformed teaching of “justification.” Notice how it is cast in terms more properly belonging in the area of sanctification, namely a change in man and an ability to overcome the power of sin. (For more primary source material please see Pastor Senkbeil’s book “*Sanctification: Christ In Action*,” pp. 57-58).

Pastor Koester sums up the difference this way, “Reformed theology says that where there is life and salvation there is also the forgiveness of sins. Lutheran theology says that where there is the forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.”^{xi}

Closely tied together is the essence and role of faith. As we stated earlier justifying faith in orthodox Lutheranism is essentially knowledge, assent and trust. Justifying faith is knowledge of the *facts* concerning, Jesus Christ and the reconciliation God has accomplished through Him, which facts are revealed by God only in Holy Scripture. Secondly it is assent that these facts are true, that they report actual, historical happenings. Last of all, and this is the point which received the most stress from Luther because of the time in which he lived, faith is trust that these facts of history concerning God’s reconciling the world to Himself in Christ apply to me. God loves me. Jesus lived and died for me. I am at peace with God. Jesus has paid for my sins. The object of justifying faith from start to finish is Jesus Christ and His work of redemption. Faith always looks to something outside of itself; it does not navelgaze. Justifying faith has value and saves *because of its object—Christ Jesus*.

This faith too is the gift, the creation of God (Eph 2:8-9). By the proclamation of Holy Scripture either verbally or in the Sacraments, God the Holy Spirit is living and active and creates or preserves my justifying faith (1 Co 2:10b-14). Because I am wholly unable to, in fact dead set opposed to it (Ep 2:1; Ro 8:7), the Holy Spirit wins me to such knowledge, assent and trust. Hence indispensable to me are these means of grace, these channels of Word and Sacrament, by which the Holy Spirit accomplishes His saving work in me. When the devil tries to throw me into doubt and despair concerning my forgiveness and peace with God, it is to these means of grace to which I flee. For in them God promises to me again and again that I am His and He is mine. And God would not lie to me. Hence my faith is put at ease by the mercy of God at work in the means of grace. I treasure the means of grace chiefly for their Gospel proclamation.

But there is also another side to my faith. By faith the Holy Spirit also sanctifies me. “In this regard my faith is a transforming power, and the righteousness which manifests itself in the life of a believer, being a fruit of this faith, demonstrates this power beyond doubt. Luther’s forward to Romans gives classic expression to this thought: ‘Thus faith is a divine work in us that changes us and regenerates us of God, and puts to death the old Adam, makes us entirely different men in heart, spirit, mind, and all powers, and brings with it the Holy Ghost. Oh, it is a living, busy, active, powerful thing that we have in faith, so that it is impossible for it not to do good without ceasing.’”^{xii} In the area of sanctification faith has a “productive” role. In the area of justification, however, faith has only a “receptive” role. Again, this is an important distinction for the understanding of the two doctrines. In the life of the Christian they are not so nicely separated.

In Reformed theology, faith has a much different definition and function. In many respects faith is where it all starts. Faith is the decision a person makes upon hearing the information contained in the “Gospel” to turn one’s life over to Jesus so that He can lead and guide one in holiness of living, in short become one’s Lord. The Word of God is important because it defines for me how I am to live with Jesus as the Lord of my life. Baptism is a command of God I obey later as a sign of my having given my heart over to Jesus. I know I have faith when I can *feel* in my heart that Jesus is there and when I can see in my life the change that He has worked. I am more sanctified and I feel more happy. Faith is essentially *decision* and *feeling*. Nor need it for that matter have any

basis in fact. And proof of faith is Christian living, the Lordship of Christ. This difference Pastor Koester sums up thus, “In Reformed theology, obedience becomes integrated with faith. Faith is viewed as an act through which a person fulfills the conditions necessary to receive an infusion of power by being united with Christ. Lutheran theology stems from faith in a fact. Faith is viewed only as the hand that receives the forgiveness Christ has won for the world. In Lutheran theology, faith is kept separate from our obedience, for the object of our faith is Christ’s obedience.”^{xiii} (For primary source quotations please refer to Pastor Senkbeil’s book, pp. 60-66.)

This difference leads us directly into another—the condition of natural man and his coming to faith. Orthodox Lutheran, Biblical teaching views man as one who is by nature spiritually dead, blind and at enmity with God (Ep 2:1, 1 Co 2:14; Ro 8:7). Man is totally unable and wholeheartedly unwilling to come to faith in Christ or to live for Him. He is born without true fear of God and without true faith in God as our Lutheran Confessions put it. He has been conceived and born in sin (Ps 51:5) and this original sin has resulted in a myriad of actual sins, each a rebellion against a holy God and well deserving of His everlasting wrath and punishment (Ro 6:23).

Rescue from this natural spiritual condition is God’s work. First God uses the law to confront a person with all of His demands. By that same law God then rightly accuses the sinner of not having met His demands. Then too God with His law threatens the punishment for sin—death. The *Smalcald Articles* put it this way: “The chief office or force of the law is that it reveal original sin with all its fruits, and show man how very low his nature has fallen, and has become utterly corrupt.”^{xiv} This leads a person to “terrors smiting the conscience through the knowledge of sin.”^{xv} One “becomes terrified, is humbled, desponds, despairs, and anxiously desires aid, but sees no escape; he begins to be an enemy of God, and to murmur.”^{xvi} All this, what we more commonly call “contrition,” is God’s doing even though it be for Him a “strange work.”^{xvii} Then, not because we have merited it by our sorrow but because of His grace, the Holy Spirit by the Gospel proclamation creates faith in the fact of redemption accomplished by Christ Jesus. This work of God is most commonly called “conversion.” It is also called at times “enlightenment” (Ac 26:18; 1 Pe 2:9) or “regeneration” (Jn 3:3-5). It is pictured as rising from the dead (Ro 6:10). The believer finds great joy in knowing that for Jesus’ sake God no longer holds him responsible for his sin but has fully forgiven it in Christ. Both of these things together—contrition and faith—define the word “repentance.” This work of God takes place “in an instant and in a moment.”^{xviii}

Not so in reformed theology. Here natural man retains a spark of goodness. He is not *totally* depraved. He may have his share of problems (sin). But there is within him both a desire and ability to be better, to live a more holy life which is what he really needs. (Notice how much this agrees with the non-Christian’s assessment of mankind in the American culture. No wonder Reformed doctrine is as popular as it is.) All he needs is a little nudge in the right direction and he can take it from there. The “Gospel” provides that nudge. When a person learns of the divine power that can be his, this awakens in him the desire to have it and thus he makes his decision for Christ. (Notice how the “Gospel” is defined as the possibility for power over sin.) He prays Jesus into his heart. This prayer becomes a means of grace, a channel by which the power of God becomes the possession of man. Conversion is a cooperate effort between man and God. Following this “conversion,” then, the one who has been “born again” dedicates his life to making those choices which are good, moral and right and which will advance his relationship with God. If “conversion” is inviting Jesus to come into your heart, the “Christian life” is seeing to it that He abides in every room.

This then determines and defines the worship experience. All of worship has chiefly this one goal of presenting the information of the “Gospel” in such a way that those “unbelievers” there are stirred to ask Jesus to come into their hearts and be the Lord of their life. The emotional, upbeat music, the theatrics, the absence of a stodgy, dull, repetitive liturgy all have this one aim and goal—to stir the emotions in such a way that the sinner is led to make his decision of faith the result of which will be untold power and joy. For many reformed this “conversion experience” is all-important. One simply must be able to present a moving conversion experience, or the validity of faith is in doubt. The other purpose for the worship service is to supply the Christian with the “how-tos” or the “10 steps” for accomplishing this or that in one’s life.

Orthodox Lutheranism views the worship service chiefly as a time when God serves man through the means of grace. The chief aim of this “service” is to give the sinner forgiveness and thereby reassurance of peace with God. Then also God serves His people by strengthening them and encouraging them to leave God’s house ready to serve God and others. Because of and in response to this service from God, the gathered believers serve God with words of prayer and praise. This by no means condemns us to “boring” worship. Yet the focus and aim is and remains very different.

One last topic before we bring this section to a close. There is much talk in Reformed circles about prayer. “Prayer Warriors” are often a mainstay of reformed congregations. Nor is that in and of itself wrong. Prayer is, of course, good, yea even commanded by God in Holy Scripture. Christians will pray; it is the nature of the case. And perhaps we in the Lutheran church would do well to pray more often, in short to follow the example of the Apostle Paul for whom it seems prayer was a daily and an important thing.

In Reformed circles, however, much too much is attributed to prayer. It is described and exhorted as something that strengthens us, something that revives our weak and weary faith or quiets our guilty conscience. It is the Christian’s answer to worry we are told. It is a privilege that is even accorded, it would seem, to unbelievers.

This is not Biblical. Remember, prayer is a good work, a fruit of the Spirit. It lies in the arena of sanctification. Would we say that helping a little old lady across the street strengthens our faith? I don’t think so.

Prayer is not a means of grace. It is not one of the channels through which God deals with us either to bring us to faith or to preserve us in faith. The only means of grace by which God has chosen to work these miracles are God’s Word and the Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion. Prayer, in fact, is just the opposite of the means of grace. Prayer is our dealing with God as a fruit of as well as a benefit of God’s grace to us in Christ Jesus.

Yet at the same time prayer does not exist for us apart from the means of grace. We can pray because through the means of grace God the Holy Spirit has brought us to faith and prompted us to pray. Furthermore the means of grace define and direct our prayers as they reveal to us God’s name and His will. And often it is through the means of grace that God answers our prayers. To this point, Edward Koehler in his book, *Summary of Christian Doctrine*, says:

It has been said that the value of prayer is purely subjective, and that prayers have no effect beyond making a person feel that God will help him. It is true that prayer has this reassuring effect on our troubled hearts. *But the reason for this is that God has promised to hear the prayers of His children.* ‘I will deliver thee’ (Psalm 50:15). ‘He will fulfill the desire of them that fear Him; He also will hear their cry and will save them’ (Ps 145:19). (Emphasis added) It is for this reason that ‘the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much’ (James 5:16). Prayer does not work like an opiate, having no other effect than merely to quiet the troubled heart of him who prays. God actually answers prayer (Ps 65:2)...We do not pray merely to calm ourselves, but we call upon the living God, Who is able and willing to help us (Ps 50:15)...A means of grace is that, by and through which grace and forgiveness is *offered and conveyed* to man (emphasis his); in prayer, however, we *ask* for grace and blessings (emphasis his). The grace we ask for in prayer God offers and bestows on us through His Word and the Sacraments. In prayer we deal with God; through the means of grace God deals with us.”^{xix}

As ought to be more than obvious by now, orthodox Lutheranism and Reformed teaching are world’s apart on the two basic doctrines of Scripture: the law and the Gospel. In fact more than half of Walther’s *Law and Gospel* is directed at this very point—the great chasm between the Lutheran and Reformed in respect to law and Gospel. We shall let Pastor Koester point out the differences. “Reformed theology stems from the struggle a person has in achieving the kind of faith that will make moral transformation possible. Reformed theology, therefore, considers the law as a means toward accomplishing the goal of conversion by driving a person to make a moral choice for God. Lutheran theology, on the other hand, considers the law’s role in conversion to be the tool God uses to make a person realize he cannot measure up even if he would make a moral commitment to God. In Reformed theology, the law has been given primarily to make a person happy. In Lutheran theology the

law has been given primarily to make a person miserable; happiness comes later as the believers finds joy in serving his Savior. In Reformed theology, a person's preparation for the gospel is a process of realizing the effects of sin that lead him to want to amend his ways and serve God. In Lutheran theology, the effect of the law is sorrow over the guilt of sin that, unless the gospel intervenes, only drives a person further from God and makes him more rebellious than he was before."^{xx}

The differences between biblical, orthodox Lutheranism and the teachings of the Reformed are as different as night and day. It is not as so many suppose a simple matter of semantics. The differences are real, and they center on the very heart of Christianity. That then leads us to our third and final section.

III. What Use Can/Should We Make of Reformed Material?

Perhaps the most legitimate use of Reformed material would be our private study of it, not in the sense that we can learn some theology from it, but in the sense that by seeing what the false teaching is, we can understand better and appreciate more the beautiful fruit of Biblical, orthodox Lutheranism that our church fathers have bequeathed to us, and stand determined by God's grace to teach that and that alone.

This is something very different than regularly picking up Reformed materials for a casual browse to see if there is something that looks neat or to see what we can learn. For example it would seem sometimes that much of Dr. Dobson's "Focus On The Family" material finds acceptance in our circles. I will openly confess that I do not subscribe to any of his publications, which means that to a certain extent I will be speaking out of ignorance. Once in a great while, however, someone will pass something along to me. One such item that came across my desk was his December 1994 magazine. In it Dr. Dobson took time to answer the question of a reader. In this particular issue a set of parents were in deepest sorrow because one of their daughters had rejected her Christian upbringing both in word and in deed. They had prayed, they said, "until we're exhausted." They wanted to know what they should do. Dr. Dobson makes a number of points in his reply. At one point he seems to be quoting approvingly a Dr. John White. This is what Dr. Dobson writes:

Second Peter 3:9 says, "He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." To claim this great salvation, there is a condition. An individual must reach out and take it. He or she must repent of sins and believe on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Without that step of faith, the gift of forgiveness and eternal life is impossible. Said another way, the Lord will not save a person against his will, but He has a thousand ways of making him more willing. Our prayers unleash the power of God in the life of another individual."^{xxi}

There are a number of theological errors in his reply. One of the saddest among them, however, is that in his answer he never once even comes close to mentioning continued talking with the daughter on the basis of God's Word which alone is the power of God for salvation.

When our Synod was in the midst of its doctrinal discussions with the Missouri Synod over the doctrine of church fellowship, one of the Bible passages that took center stage was Romans 16:17 which reads, "*I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them.*" On the basis of that Bible passage and others, God led our Synod to the understanding that persistent errorists are to be marked and avoided. Since that is true, would not it also be right and wise on our part to mark and avoid the errors also? Indeed as God has said through the Apostle Paul, "*A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough*" (1 Co 5:6).

Perhaps we would do well to bear in mind the lesson of this illustration. When I come home for lunch, being the creature of habit that I am, I always go and get the mail. In order to do so, I must walk through some snow and mud. I have no choice. When I get ready to go into the house, I of course wipe off my feet. I wipe, and I wipe, and I wipe. But you know what? No matter how hard I wipe, I always seem to track some muddy snow into the house and onto the clean floor. Such is the case with false doctrine. No matter how hard we try, it often sticks to us without our even realizing it. Or to use another illustration, you can't play by the fire and expect to come away not smelling like smoke.

The dangers of Reformed teaching are substantial and they are real. If followed to completion they lead one away from Christ and into damning work-righteousness no differently than Roman Catholicism. But often

the Reformed dangers are more sinister because they are more subtle. Luther said to Zwingli at Marburg that the two men were of a “different spirit.” Many things between the two men appeared to be identical. But they only appeared that way. Sometimes the errors can be a *wrong emphasis* or a *wrong focus* or a *wrong approach*, things that are easily overlooked if one is not looking for it or worse yet if one is unaware of it. Reformed teaching is most certainly a wolf in sheep’s clothing.

There are a number of areas where we need to pay especially close attention. Perhaps the greatest is in the area of music both for the children of our elementary schools and high schools as well as for our adult choirs. One hears selections at times that are, shall we say, less than Lutheran. Many, if they don’t say the wrong thing, say nothing at all. They are just short, catchy and easy to sing, little ditties,—exactly what people want. They appeal to the emotions. One thinks for example of the “Wee Sing” cassettes. Well-intentioned people have given them to my children as a gift. The kids enjoy listening to them and can learn the songs very quickly. We have seen kids videos of this nature too. As I was preparing for today I played the cassette through with an ear for the theology being taught. In the entire tape I did not hear one single clear and explicit reference to the cross of Christ, His dying there for the world, or the forgiveness of sins. The closest thing I could find in the area of justification was the song, “Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so.” That’s the closest the tape came to a biblical, Lutheran teaching on the means of grace too. Now granted there may be some songs on there that don’t really teach anything wrong. There may be some songs that I could use in a certain setting. But a whole “Christian” tape that never really gets around to talking about Christ too much?! Don’t you think that ought to send up at least a little red flag?!

It might be interesting sometime this summer to sit down and go through the music you taught the children or the adult choirs during the past year. Develop from the texts a theology. Don’t read your definitions into the words used in the music. Use it as it is. See what kind of theology it taught. (This past Saturday our congregation was privileged to have a choir from DMLC present a concert. With this paper in the back of my mind, I listened closely to the texts of the numbers that were sung. The concert was absolutely beautiful. And to a song, the music was thoroughly Lutheran and Biblical. There was nothing that even smacked in the slightest of Reformed theology. My point is this—beautiful music and Biblical, Lutheran songs are not mutually exclusive propositions.)

The author once received the following suggested guidelines for choosing appropriate music for our worship services. These guidelines deserve to be in the minds of those who choose music for our schools and choirs and to be applied as a litmus test on every piece of music being considered.

1. Does the song glorify God in Christ Jesus? Many songs have lots of “Hallelujah—Praise” words, but are not up to the standards we would like to see for our worship services. *They fail to give the reason for praising the Lord: forgiveness of sin, life and salvation through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.* (Emphasis added)
2. Does the song have a clear conception of sin and grace? Lutherans believe the Bible’s teaching that we are conceived and born as corrupt, damned sinners, and that the sinful nature we possess until our dying day is strong and leads us to sin daily and much. Many modern songs from a Reformed background talk about the “troubles” that God helps us overcome while giving little or no acknowledgement that our own sins account for the vast portion of our troubles. Lutherans also believe that our salvation is by God’s grace (undeserved love) *alone*. The doctrine of justification is the chief article in all of Scripture. Salvation is not a “God’s part-man’s part” proposition. Any song which gives an indication that a person’s free-will decision is what made him a Christian, or makes anything man can do a condition of salvation (if you turn your life over to the Lord, everything will be alright) and blessing, is unscriptural and may not be used.
3. Does the song have a clear conception of the means of grace? The Holy Spirit comes to us through Word and Sacrament. *Prayer is not a means of grace.* Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are not ordinances to keep as law, but they are sacraments—vehicles by which God conveys His undeserved love to the sinner whom He has declared forgiven for Jesus’ sake and makes salvation his personal possession. Many modern songs that come out of the Reformed church deny the doctrine of the

means of grace completely. They expect Christians to find comfort in their having made Jesus the King of their lives, but not in the objective truths of the Gospel (what God has done for us in Jesus.) (Emphasis added.)

4. Is the song Lutheran? Our Lutheran hymnody is rich in beautifully conveying Scripture's most profound truths in song. When selecting music for its modern style, we must not be content with merely a pretty melody and something that stirs up our emotions. And it ought to be a concern that we choose music not so much because, "There's nothing really wrong with it," but because it actually says something. (Here we might add this thought that it is not wrong to have our children and even our choirs learn some of the great hymns of the Lutheran church with the goal that they sing these in the worship service. Hymns committed to memory are often the chief "Bible" many retain. How important for them to have memorized good biblical, Lutheran theology.)

Another area in which this topic might find some application is in the area of discipline. How easy it is for us to practice a discipline which more resembles Reformed than Lutheran doctrine. By that I mean how easy it is to fall into the practice of motivating "good" behavior simply by means of the threats and coercions of the law. It will no doubt produce *results*, and quickly. Yet it does not result in *fruits*, the very thing with which, the Christian is concerned. Only the Gospel can produce *fruits*.

Another area that deserves our consideration is videos. In addition to putting out perhaps the majority of music, it is the Reformed camp that puts out a great deal of the video material also. I suppose that if the purpose for showing the video is to sharpen the skills of a student in picking out false doctrine, a video might serve a good use. Is this, however, the way videos are most often used? One wonders how effective a fifteen-second disclaimer is either before or after a powerful, moving video is shown. Not to say that this can quite easily give the impression that the false doctrine contained therein is minor and of little consequence.

Perhaps an example of what I mean. A number of months ago I made a very foolish decision. I decided to invest in a series of Bible History videos for our three children. They were produced by the Family Entertainment Network. The literature promised that the videos were faithful to the Biblical text. The workbooks had pages giving the specific Scripture references for various parts of the video. In addition the animation was superb. What a nice thing for the kids, we thought.

How disappointed I was when I sat down to watch one of the first videos we received—Abraham and Isaac: from Genesis 22. As one might expect, not every single word that the characters in the video spoke was a quotation of the text. The writers took some poetic license. That is understandable. Nor was there a line that in and of itself was really wrong.

Yet the whole video was wrong. The whole video was wrong because the whole emphasis and approach was wrong. The key sentence in the lesson of Abraham and Isaac is the line where Abraham says to his servants as he and Isaac are about to go up Mt. Moriah, "*We will worship and then we will come back to you*" (Ge 22:5). Abraham knew full well that the promised Messiah was to be a descendant of his son Isaac. God had told that to Abraham a number of times. In chapter 21, for example, God says to Abraham, "*It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.*" What a conundrum this poses for Abraham. If Isaac is sacrificed not only does he lose his son; but he through whom the Savior is to be born will die with no offspring. What is to happen to God's promise of the Savior?! God's command to sacrifice Isaac is about far more than Abraham's losing a son. It is about the world's losing a Savior. That this is in fact the chief point of the lesson God confirms for us in Hebrews 11 where He says, "*By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, 'It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.'* Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death" (vv. 17-19). This lesson is chiefly about the promise of the Savior and God's honoring that promise no matter how dark, dismal and seemingly impossible the circumstances.

But how does our superbly animated video portray it? It portrays it as no more than a beautiful example of a believer's obedience to a command of God. It takes a lesson that is oozing with the Gospel and casts it in

terms of the law. Perhaps not one word is spoken incorrectly, yet the entire video is wrong. How do you show something like that and include a brief disclaimer?

Even less useable one would think would be any sort of devotional materials for the classroom that are written by reformed authors. If one would have to speak a disclaimer about a devotion which by its very nature is to be a correct exposition of a Scripture text, it should hardly be considered a devotion. Let us be careful, then, when we visit our neighborhood Christian book store. Most of the material there comes from the reformed.

Conclusion

In the book of Revelation God grants the Apostle John this bizarre revelation.

The fifth angel sounded his trumpet, and I saw a star that had fallen from the sky to the earth. The star was given the key to the shaft of the Abyss. When he opened the Abyss, smoke rose from it, like the smoke from a gigantic furnace. The sun and sky were darkened by the smoke from the Abyss. And out of the smoke locusts came down upon the earth and were given power like that of scorpions of the earth. They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any plant or tree, but only those people who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads. They were not given power to kill them, but only to torture them for five months. And the agony they suffered was like that of the sting of a scorpion when it strikes a man. During those days men will seek death, but will not find it; they will long to die, but death will elude them. The locusts looked like horses prepared for battle. On their heads they wore something like crowns of gold, and their faces resembled human faces. Their hair was like women's hair, and their teeth were like lions' teeth. They had breastplates like breastplates of iron, and the sound of their wings was like the thundering of many horses and chariots rushing into battle. They had tails and stings like scorpions, and in their tails they had power to torment people for five months. They had as king over them the angel of the Abyss, whose name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek, Apollyon.

The Church down through the ages has seen these words as describing false doctrine that would come upon the earth as a punishment from God. What is interesting to note is the description of the false doctrine. The locusts are wearing crowns of gold—a sign of success. What they have done has apparently worked. Their faces are human faces. They don't appear as anything out of the ordinary. In fact their hair is like women's hair. Not only do they not appear unordinary, they seem to be completely harmless. But then they open their mouths. And when they do, they reveal that theirs are like the teeth of a lion. The danger of false doctrine is not in its outward appearance. It looks harmless enough. But in the end it devours. Beware of false doctrine.

In closing let us leave ourselves with these words of the Apostle Paul spoken to his young co-worker Timothy, “*Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth*” (Timothy 2:15).

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ⁱ Prange, Victor. *Why So Many Churches?* NPH, p. 22.

ⁱⁱ Prange, op. cit. p. 28.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Calvinism: Its Essence and Its Menacing Impact Upon American Lutheran Doctrine and Practice." Rev. E. Arnold Sitz. Printed in "*Our Great Heritage*," v. III, pp. 608-614. NPH.

^{iv} *Ibid.* p. 30.

^v *Ibid.* p. 51.

^{vi} *Ibid.* p. 54.

^{vii} Shelly, Bruce L. *Church History in Plain Language*. Word Publishing, pp. 266-267.

^{viii} *Ibid.* p. 271.

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- ^{xiii} Koester, op. cit. pp. 96-97.
- ^{xiv} Smalcald Articles, p. 479, paragraph 4. (Triglotta)
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