

# Spiritual Renewal As Expressed In The Christian's Life

By Forrest Bivens

When the 1987 Synod convention called for “an intensive and extensive nurturing program which will encourage a spiritual renewal of our Synod’s membership,” it clearly envisioned expressions of spiritual growth. The pertinent convention resolution makes this clear by stating “that under God’s hand of blessing we seek the following fruits of faith:

1. A greater appreciation of the Means of Grace and the spiritual treasures in Christ which they bring us.
2. Substantially increased participation in worship, in the Lord’s Supper and in Bible classes.
3. Broader understanding of God’s mission for his church and of the ministry of all believers.
4. Substantially increased ministry on the part of God’s saints in service to one another and in outreach to the community.
5. Substantially increased financial support for all aspects of kingdom work that are carried on among us.
6. Further development of our congregations and our Synod as a body of Christians who care for and love one another in Christ.” (1987 *Proceedings*, pp. 101-102)

This is sanctification language. It speaks of change, growth, progress, improvement in behavior, production of good works and the keeping of the Law. The Formula of Concord uses the word “renewal” in the same way, speaking of “the renewal which follows justification” and “sanctification and renewal, which succeeds the righteousness of faith” (FC, SD, III, 18, 21). We obviously want more of this in our own lives and the lives of those around us.

The assigned thrust of this essay asks, “What does a spiritually renewed person look like? How precisely does spiritual renewal express itself in a Christian’s life?” How might we state the matter concisely yet accurately? The Anglican Bishop of Liverpool a century ago, J. C. Ryle, wrote words worth remembering:

What then is true practical holiness? It is a hard question to answer. I do not mean that there is any want of Scriptural matter on the subject. But I fear lest I should give a defective view of holiness, and not say all that ought to be said; or lest I should say things about it that ought not be said, and so do harm. (*Holiness*, p. 22)

Ryle makes a good point. It is assumed that more than a mere listing or cataloging of the wide variety of fruits of faith is desired at this time. Such a list, even if it could be compiled, would be tedious to read, probably incomplete, and something less than spiritual dynamite for our lives and ministries. On the other hand it seems that some concrete examples of holy living should be included lest we give the impression that holiness is largely undefinable, unobserved or impractical. This essay has chosen a middle ground, mentioning selected expressions of spiritual life in major groupings but making no effort to be exhaustive.

It is also assumed that this paper should “encourage” spiritual renewal, as the convention resolution phrased it, and serve as an instrument for self-examination regarding our lives and labors under God. There will be no progress unless we individually resolve to seek renewal in and for ourselves. Synods do not get renewed en masse; people do, one at a time. An attempt is therefore made to suggest appropriate resolves to be considered by the reader.

This material, then, is organized under three large headings. The first emphasizes the *radical* nature of true renewal and the second deals with the *relational* aspects of renewal as it expresses itself in the life of a Christian. The third offers personal *resolves* that might serve others and us as we seek and express radical and relational renewal.

## Part I: Spiritual Renewal Expresses Itself As Radical Change in a Christian's Life Expressed as an Ongoing Change in Heart and Mind

It simply will not do to equate spiritual renewal with the performing of external good works. Any definition of true renewal that focuses primarily on what we can observe, measure or, control in visible lifestyle is inadequate. Spiritual renewal denotes first and foremost a change of heart and mind, emotion and attitude, brought about by the Holy Spirit. For this reason we speak of the “radical” nature of this work. The Holy Spirit’s work is centered in our innermost being, our very “root” and fundamental level of existence. External expressions of renewal spring from this inner and antecedent work.

What is more, this radical ongoing renewal assumes and is based on a prior radical change—that of rebirth, vivification or conversion. Professor Armin Panning reminds us of this:

Basic to spiritual renewal is an underlying, previous newness. (A having been made “alive in Christ”) While at first sight it may seem to be merely an exercise in semantics yet it is important to catch the force of the prefix **re** in the term “renewal.” . . . There can be, no talk of spiritual renewal in the case of a person who has no spiritual life. . . . Spiritual renewal is a concept appropriate only to Christians, to regenerate people who have a new man who can be appealed to. (1988 Essay, “Alive in Christ”, pp. 4-5)

These two aspects of the Holy Spirit’s work are not to be confused with each other, nor are they to be separated from one another. “Since the word *regeneratio*, regeneration, is sometimes employed for the word *justificatio*, justification, it is necessary that this word be properly explained, in order that the renewal which follows justification of faith may not be confounded with the justification of faith, but that they may be properly distinguished from one another” (FC, SD, 111, 18). “First faith is kindled in us in conversion by the Holy Ghost from the hearing of the Gospel. This lays hold of God’s grace in Christ, by which the person is justified. Then, when the person is justified, he is also renewed and sanctified by the Holy Ghost, from which renewal and sanctification the fruits of good works then follow” (FC, SD, 111, 41).

Spiritual renewal, then, is a radical process based on a previous radical change. It expresses itself as changed hearts, minds and wills when the Holy Spirit brings God’s people to be conformed more and more to the image of God’s Son, from the inside out. It is sanctification in the “narrow sense” which is different but not separate from sanctification in the “wide sense” (which includes rebirth and justification). God *has given us* “rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.” He *has made us* “new creatures in Christ.” He *has brought us* to put off the old self and put on the new self. These are all past realities continuing to the present. This is justification language reminding us that we are *already perfectly renewed* as we cling to Christ Jesus in faith, personally possess Christ’s imputed righteousness, and joyfully acknowledge that in Christ we have been given fullness. Now the Holy Spirit continues his work of leading us to be “transformed by the renewing of our minds” and to put on the new self, which is “being renewed” (present continuous realities). This is sanctification speech reminding us that we *are not yet perfectly renewed* as we strive for maturity and growth in the grace and knowledge of our Savior.

### Expressed with an Ongoing Warfare

Any attempt to define or describe how true renewal expresses itself in a Christian must take into account the fierce civil war that rages within the believer. “The sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want” (Gal 5:17). The Apostle Paul’s graphic description of the relentless struggle going on within him (Ro 7:18-24) brings to mind the parallel warfare being waged deep within us all. The old self checks every good thing, seeks to prevent spiritual growth, obstructs renewal, assails and assaults the new self. Like the Sodomites in their reaction to Lot, indwelling sin heckles the new self: “This fellow came here as an alien, and now he wants to play the judge!” Even when apparently dormant, the sinful nature remains alive and active in preparing attacks against every movement of the Spirit within our spirits.

Because this is so, justification and sanctification, the primary radical change and the subsequent radical renewal, remain parallel realities throughout our lives—but never converge this side of glory. In Christ

we are perfect and yet we confess we have not already been made perfect (Phil 3:12). On the one hand we want to solve this paradox now. But we know better. We file our protest: "This isn't comfortable!" But we're not supposed to be. We live in tents, as did the patriarchs, admitting we are strangers and aliens on earth yet knowing we are heirs with them of the same promise. Spiritual conflict is in fact a sign of life, a sign that the Spirit is having his say in the shaping of character. So how does spiritual renewal express itself with the attendant struggle? Inconsistently or irregularly, we might say. At least let us admit that true growth and renewal cannot accurately be recorded on a wall graph, much less charted accurately in advance.

#### Expressed by an Ongoing Return to the Gospel

Other essays being prepared for perusal as part of the current renewal emphasis deal with the relationship between justification and sanctification as well as the application of law and gospel. The subjects are wisely selected and bring to mind the vital importance of how the Holy Spirit works to create and maintain true renewal. They also bring to mind one of the most dangerous delusions often conceived by those who look for spiritual renewal and growth. The danger is in viewing justification by faith as an "initial step" in the Christian life, one that gives way to a subsequent emphasis on sanctification.

True renewal will take place only as the objective gospel is maintained as central in the Christian's life. More than that, true renewal is expressed by Christians as they repeatedly return to the truth of justification as their greatest treasure. Whenever and wherever the truth of justification is heralded, the Holy Spirit is present to renew God's people. By this objective and unchanging message God's garden is watered, new life springs up and fruit is produced to God's glory.

When the gospel is abandoned or given second billing to sanctification and holiness texts, people are punished with a plague of Pentecostalism, shallow subjectivism or some equally impotent theology. If we ever betray the secret of our strength to the Delilah of "another gospel," we'll be shorn and humiliated. The Spirit of true renewal continuously leads the Christian back to the mainspring of sanctification, the gospel of life and salvation in Christ. This is the whole story of Christian ethics: "Therefore!" (Dt 5:15, Ro 6, Col 3). The fact that we died with Christ gives the right and responsibility to act like people who are dead to sin. The fact that we were raised with Christ is the basis of living for God.

#### Expressed with Ongoing Aspirations

Unlike Christ's work the work of the Holy Spirit is not substitutionary. He inspires, motivates and empowers us to do good works but we do them. While God works in us both the willing and the doing of what pleases him (Php 2:13), he never proposes to perform for us the actual willing and doing. We are called to work out what he works in.

Renewed Christians grow in their aspirations and desires to live new lives. This expression of spiritual renewal touches on the complex relation between God and the Christian, God's will and the Christian's will. We neither manipulate God nor are we manipulated by him; we are neither fascists nor quietists. As the new self grows and exerts its new will and resolve against the sinful nature, godly aspiration increases. New and renewed life therefore doesn't hang merely on what has been called "the slender thread of thankfulness." It expresses the growth of the new self nurtured by the gospel plus the bludgeoning of the old self by the law. We thus aspire to greater degrees of godly living.

#### Expressed in an Ongoing Reassurance of Victory

The renewed Christian echoes the refrain of Micah and the Israeli remnant: "Do not gloat over me, my enemy! Though I have fallen, I will rise" (Mic 7:8). All the more firmly established in God's justification of the sinner and all the more the recipient of the Spirit's sanctifying wisdom and power, the renewed Christian grows more buoyant and bountiful in expressing new life. Despite faltering and failures in the struggle against the sinful nature, renewed Christians grow in assurances and expressions of victory. Despite frustrated aspirations and broken resolves, growing Christians are better able to run the race marked out for them.

There is a fine blend of patience and perseverance that is not to be confused with presumption. It is the certainty of faith and conviction of hope based on and drawn from God's promises, not human hubris.

Assurance gives birth to fruitful and faithful service. Though always imperfect in Christians, this expression of renewal follows the perfect pattern of Christ (Heb 12:2, 1 Pe 2:21-23).

#### Expressed as Inner Transformation

We easily see that true renewal is not mere behavior modification or a cosmetic improvement of lifestyle. It is far more than a visible response to information; it is the expression of deep and profound transformation. Hatred of sin and love for God's law are not cosmetic qualities. "I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free" (Ps 119:32). The fruits of such deep transformation of heart, mind and will are many and varied, but all stem from the radical renewal worked by God in the Christian. Should the internal renewal be lacking, any external changes in behavior would remain unacceptable to God and unworthy of our attention. If "greater participation in worship, in the Lord's Supper and in Bible classes," "substantially increased ministry" or "substantially increased financial support for all aspects of kingdom work" are really our primary goals and desires, we are out of step with the Spirit. Such traits are evidences of spiritual life we will seek in others and ourselves but the inner, radical renewal is the true goal.

There are definite reasons why we have taken the time to highlight the radical nature of true renewal. Among them are these three:

1. It is profoundly true. It alone honors God in matters of Christian life and living. It alone meets our deepest needs for our earthly pilgrimage and will preserve us as heirs of the heavenly kingdom.
2. It is the loving thing to say. Lest consciences be burdened and diverted from Christ's righteousness we take the time to distinguish between justification and renewal or sanctification. We unanimously reject and condemn the error "that faith looks not only to the obedience of Christ, but to his divine nature as it dwells and works in us, and that by this indwelling our sins are covered before God" (FC, SD, 111, 63). It is also loving to stress that renewal is nevertheless a reality and equally God's will for us, lest anyone maintain the current renewal emphasis is unimportant. We also "unanimously reject and condemn" the error "that faith is such a trust in the obedience of Christ as can be and remain in a person notwithstanding he has no genuine repentance, in whom also no love follows, but who persists in sins against his conscience" (FC, SD, 111, 64; also Article IV, passim). We want the truths of Scripture to be maintained fully and in balance. From the start voices have expressed fear or concern that the renewal project was conceived as a "fund raiser," a "prelude to a fund drive," or as "just another program" with more sound than substance, more voice than verve. The loving response to such fears is to do our level best to see that radical renewal is made the goal and strengthen our resolve to keep it that way.
3. It is also practical. All true theology is practical. The following words, ascribed to Abraham Lincoln, find application in this matter: "A man watches his pear tree day after day, impatient for the ripening of the fruit. Let him attempt to force the process, and he may spoil both fruit and tree. But let him patiently wait, and the ripe fruit will fall at length into his lap." We know the truth: "Make a tree good and its fruit will be good" (Mt 12:33). Do we really want good fruit? So does God. So he renews the tree first, making it good for his good purposes. Then, when inner transformation is reality (though imperfect), God and the Christian are utterly serious about the fruit. Imputed righteousness signals the arrival of the indwelling Spirit who testifies with our spirit that we are God's secure children and new creations, created in Christ to do good works. Thus practical holiness as the Great Desideratum of the justified and renewed Christian. This, first and foremost, is how spiritual renewal expresses itself in the Christian. Radically.

#### Part 2: Spiritual Renewal Expresses Itself In Relational Changes in a Christian's Life. Expressed in Ongoing Relationships

Let us now shift our attention from the inner to the more external expressions of spiritual renewal in the Christian's life. This is what Paul observed in the Thessalonians: "We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers. We always remember before our God and Father *your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ*" (1 Th 1:2-3). Expressions of the inner renewal are observable and carried out in every day life for friend and foe to take note of. We have no intention of excluding our external good works or minimizing their value. We exclude them only in the matter of justification. "Our doctrine, faith, and confession" remains "that good works certainly and without doubt follow true faith, if it is; not a dead, but a living faith, as fruits of a good tree" (FC, Epit., IV, 6).

So how does spiritual renewal express itself in the Christian's life? Its scope is so wide! Renewal expresses itself in the Christian's emotions and affections, thinking and reasoning, memory and imagination, conscience and conduct—continuously. It is daily repentance. Growth in faith, knowledge, humility, reverence and in expressions of the "fruit of the Spirit" (Gal 5:22) is certainly evidence of the renewal process. Since faith expresses itself through love (Gal 5:6) and love is the fulfillment of the Law (Ro 13:10), we may highlight love as "the greatest" virtue and the it most excellent way" of expressing spiritual life.

Spiritual renewal is also expressed as we live out our lives in various ongoing relationships. Our relationship to God, ourselves, our fellow Christians and our neighbor are all affected by the radical renewal. We now attempt to summarize how this is so.

#### Expressed in Our Relationship to God

We need not spend much time establishing the fact that Christians love God. Beyond knowing and trusting God, Christians love him! We take this seriously. "If anyone does not love the Lord—a curse be on him" (1 Co 16:22). Also, "Grace to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love" (Eph 6:24). Now how does love for God make itself known? The following Bible verses give straightforward answer: "If you love me, you will obey what I command." "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching." "This is love for God: to obey his commands" (Jn 14:15, 14:23, 1 Jn 5:3). Obedience is pictured as a guarding, keeping, or holding tightly to the words and commands of the Savior. The duty is also a delight. "His commands are not burdensome." Willing, cheerful obedience to God is the reliable way of expressing love and renewal in our relation to him. Another way to describe the Christian's enriched affinity to God is suggested by J. C. Ryle:

Christ is in heaven, and we are upon earth. In what way shall the man be discerned that loves Him? Happily the point is one which is not very hard to settle. How do we know whether we love any person here on earth? In what way or manner does love show itself between people in this world—between husband and wife—between parent and child—between brother and sister—between friend and friend? Let these questions be answered by common sense and observations, and I ask no more. Let these questions be honestly answered, and the knot before us is untied. How does affection show itself among ourselves? (*Holiness*, p. 155)

It was God's idea first, of course, to use the pictures of a husband and wife, parent and child, brother and sister and friend with friend to teach us about the relationship between him and his people. While there are unique features in our relation with the Almighty, the analogies still illustrate though they limp. With that kind of backdrop we can more easily describe how certain behavior patterns are expressive of love and renewal. Here are four examples:

1. **The Christian likes to read and hear about God.** "How sweet the name of Jesus sounds in a believer's ear!" Giving attention to Bible reading and study, listening to Bible sermons and expositions, and spending time with those who talk about Christ are characteristic of growing Christians. "He who belongs to God hears what God says" (Jn 8:47). The person without the Spirit must view Bible study as a reading of someone else's mail, while the Christian treasures communication from the dear Savior. Christians do more than seek information and propositional truth from God's Word; they value the tone and flow of Scripture as it reveals the personality of God as well as his works on our behalf.

2. **The Christian likes to think about God.** When Bible study loses its contemplative dimension it easily becomes an exercise in scholasticism. The inspired writer eloquently describes the blessedness of the man whose “delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night” (Ps 1:2). Paul’s prayers for the spiritual growth of the Ephesians (1:15-23, 3:14-19) and the Philippians (1:9-11) include petitions for more knowledge—and more than knowledge. The renewed Christian seeks wisdom, insight, discernment, a grasping of the greatness of Christ’s love, and a “knowing” that “surpasses knowledge.” These are purely gifts of the Spirit who comes through the written Word. After declaring how “the Holy Spirit does not come without the Word, Luther added, “but he wants to come through the harp, that is, through meditation on the Word.” Contemplation and meditation on Scripture enriches the Christian and is expressive of prior enrichment.
3. **The Christian likes to be with God and talk with him.** “O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water” (Ps 63:1). A reading of this Psalm and others of David reveals the man’s deep and genuine love for the Person of God. In addition to his love for communion with God at the sanctuary and aside from the external worship aids provided at the tabernacle, David craved and regarded God his highest good and dearest Companion. A deepened devotional life (the central subject of another of the essays being prepared for our use) is characteristic of spiritual renewal. Christian prayer life is the same. In an essay called, “The Efficacy of Prayer,” C. S. Lewis observed: “Prayer in the sense of petition, asking for things, is a small part of it; confession and penitence are its threshold, adoration its sanctuary, the presence and vision and enjoyment of God its bread and wine.” The Christian understands this truth and gladly heeds the Savior’s words, “Go into your room, close the door” (Mt 6:6). This is from “the Spirit of grace and supplication” (Zec 12:10) who works renewal.
4. **The Christian likes to please God.** The new self, “created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness,” loves what God loves and hates what God hates. This applies to actions as well as attitudes. As stated above, the Bible links love for God and obedience to God quite inseparably. Love, like saving faith, is invariably described rather than defined in the Bible, for it is always active. Love for God will not and cannot be hid. The fruits of faith are many and varied, but are always done in conformity to God’s revealed will, his Law. The fulfillment of it is love for God and for neighbor. So a nurtured relationship to God enriches the Christian’s relationship to others.

#### Expressed in Our Relationship to Ourselves

“How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him” (1 Jn 3:1). An ongoing challenge of Christians is to see themselves as God sees them. Spiritual renewal increases our ability to do this more consistently. Our relationship to ourselves is enriched, also with love, though we are cautious in using the term self-love. It’s not that God’s Word denies a legitimate love of self; it rather assumes it. “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt 22:39). “No one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church” (Eph 5:29). But people without the Spirit know only a narcissistic love, a perverted form of self-love that enthrones self while dethroning God and denigrating the value and needs of other creatures.

Christian self-love is not this, but more of an appreciation of the value, abilities and destiny graciously given to the Christian through and on account of Christ. It is facing the truth of who we really are “in the Lord,” receiving our status and giftedness with thankfulness, and consecrating them with the word of God and prayer. It is not Robert Schuller’s self-esteem (“pride in being a human being”) that denies or obscures original and actual sin, but honest self-evaluation derived from a personal grasp of Christ’s imputed righteousness and

acknowledgement that we are fellow citizens with the saints and members of God's household. We will not continue to call unclean what God has made clean—including self.

Renewed Christians, with a growing appreciation of who they are in Christ, bear appropriate fruit. "Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure" (1 Jn 3:3). With more peace and comfort despite trials and persecutions, they are able to give more undivided attention to the work of the Lord and so in the long run do more. "Restore to me the joy of your salvation; then I will teach transgressors your ways." Assurances of the free distribution of spiritual gifts will not be met with false humility or paralyzing doubt. Gifts will be gratefully used and greater gifts eagerly pursued. When facing a hostile world the growing Christian will less succumb to a defeatist attitude even while counting the cost or paying the price of discipleship. We are considered as sheep to be slaughtered. We also remain more than conquerors through him who loved us.

#### Expressed in our Relationship to Fellow Christians

"Everyone who loves the Father loves his child as well" (1 Jn 5:1). The motive and the manner of mutual Christian love is clear: "Love one another as I have loved you" (Jn 13:34). Encouragements to and examples of love within God's family abound in Scripture, as we all know. It is a primary evidence and expression of rebirth and renewal. "We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers" (1 Jn 3:14).

Christian love helps keep us from hastily concluding that professing brothers are false brothers merely because we see them overtaken with doubts, fears and other sins of weakness. We learn to be moderate in our expectations of others from our own experience. At the same time love will lead us to warn and admonish those who live carelessly, grow satisfied with spiritual immaturity, seem to trifle with the grace of God, or appear deceived by formalism and self-righteousness. Love disciplines with tenderness and tenacity blended together. Love for our brothers is not limited to those in our external fellowship though these are the ones we will have most opportunity to serve, nourish, comfort and spur on toward love and good deeds. Love brings with it true ecumenism while indicting the false as unloving. Like its parent, faith, love is so active and expresses itself in so many ways, that we make no attempt to list or catalog its labors. It is the way a growing Christian serves as Christ to his brother.

#### Expressed in our Relationship to the Lost

In speaking about the Christian's relationship to unbelievers we will observe a tension that exists. On the one hand they are unregenerate enemies of the gospel, unwilling and unable to subject themselves to God's will in any way. They are of the world as well as in the world, and "anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God" (Ja 4:4). Love for God will not allow Christians to love what the world loves. In love, however, Christians want every worldling to come to repentance and be saved. We ponder the plight of the lost, which are as we once were: "separate from Christ" and "without hope and without God in the world." God does not desire the death of a sinner and neither do we. They are not just "the enemy;" they are the dearly loved enemy!

Spiritual renewal involves a growing awareness of the unbeliever's tragic situation and seeks remedy by petition and intercession, by witnessing and modeling the truth, by rebuking and exposing fruitless deeds of darkness and seeking to save the lost. Growing Christians do more than acknowledge the Savior's command to make disciples. They are nourished by the fact that the Savior sandwiched his mandate between an assurance of his authority and the promise of his presence. So "we proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ" (Col 1:28). This expression of love for the lost is not particularly to be viewed as a "church function" but a ministry carried out by Christians in all vocations. Love looks for the conversion of souls much more than the inflation of church rolls.

#### Expressed in the Lives of All Christians

Rather than multiplying words about how spiritual renewal expresses itself in Christian lives of love, let us note that the characteristics of new life belong to all Christians, not just some. With what seems to be increasing frequency we are confronted with the idea that there are various "kinds" of Christians, some that

express new life and some that do not. Some are labeled “believers” (who have “Jesus as Savior”) while others merit the title “disciples” (who have “Jesus as Lord”). Or a threefold classification of “convert, disciple and worker” has been used. The impression is given that some Christians are basically fruitless and we are to move people from a lower to a higher category of “better” Christians.

But by biblical usage the term “disciple” does not denote some “deluxe, heavy-duty model” of a Christian, one who is equipped for the fast lane on the straight and narrow way. The “basic” Christian is both justified and sanctified. To say otherwise is to rob weaker Christians of their certainty of salvation—or to give the false impression that true Christians can be fruitless. For the stronger, maturer or more gifted, it invites Corinthian division lovelessly grounded on human appraisal alone. It is, of course, common to observe widely differing maturity levels among the saints and our shared privilege is to seek ongoing growth for all.

It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. Everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher” (Mt 10:25, Lk 6:40). Spiritual growth and training in righteousness is God’s will for all his people, for all are reckoned to be like Christ in their justified state and all are called to behave like Christ in their accompanying sanctification. We are not to deny that weaker saints are fully students and servants of our Lord, but to “fully train” one and all. This again is an expression of spiritual renewal that furthers spiritual renewal.

### Part 3 Spiritual Renewal Expresses Itself In Renewed Resolves in a Christian’s Life Personal Resolves

By saying that spiritual renewal expresses itself radically and relationally this essay is saying what you already know. There are at least two reasons for this. First, there is fine precedent for doing so. Concerning all that God has given us for “life and godliness” and with the urging to “be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure,” the Apostle Peter wrote: “I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have” (2 Pe 1:12). An observation should not be overlooked: The Bible portions written to encourage growth (sanctification) in believers are all calls to remember, not calls to devise or improvise something new. The second reason for your familiarity with the subject matter is that you, the selected audience, are leaders among God’s people. This and the other three essays being prepared as part of the spiritual renewal project, are prepared specifically for pastors, professors and teachers within Synod. We generally take great care that we are not “hasty in the laying on of hands.” It would be to our shame if you readers were not already familiar with rebirth and renewal and their impact on Christian life.

Why then this review of the familiar? Not to breed contempt but, to increase conviction. “But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of” (2 Tim 3:14). It is our Father’s will that we individually grow in the understanding of who we are in Christ and in our resolve to be more and more like Christ. As noted earlier, the Spirit works renewal in Christians one by one. It is largely meaningless to speak of renewing a congregation, school or a synod. Any body of believers will experience growth in sanctification only when and to the degree that its individual members grow. Let renewal now express itself in our personal ambition to experience radical and relational changes.

There is another reason why our personal resolve to express renewal is important. We have the privilege to be in positions to foster and further spiritual renewal among those we serve. To say that renewal is the Holy Spirit’s work dare not be used to endorse passivism on our part. The Spirit works through means, his Word and Sacraments, and has appointed us to appropriate and apply the truth to others and ourselves with diligence.

It will not do to remain silent in anticipation of a grass roots renewal movement that will bear rich fruit aside from and divorced from the labors of leadership. Yes, God is perfectly able to bring this about. Yes, we cheerfully join to echo Moses in saying, “I wish that all the Lord’s people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!” (Nu 11:29) But on balance, doesn’t the Bible lead us to anticipate God using the Eldads and Medads and selected companions for such ministry despite the fact that all of Israel and all in the New Testament Church are designated priests and ministers of the Most High? This has no reference to a clergy/laity distinction, but rather a leader/led distinction. Laity lead as well—and we pray more so in the



future. Repeatedly God initiates renewal by calling individual servants who become agents of renewal for others. They take the lead rather than waiting for some committee to be formed. By training and position we qualify for such a task. With this in mind we may say, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said."

### The Resolve to Seek True Renewal

Our earlier review of the radical nature of true renewal has reminded us of exactly what we want. This is crucial to any renewal effort. Our way of defining the task will determine how we go about it. We dare not make achievement of empirical results our primary purpose. Numerical growth on church rolls increases in the number of dollars contributed or even improved behavior among our members is not our true goal. Radical renewal upon radical renewal is, in Christ and by the Spirit.

The philosophy that "bigger is always better" is a poison that has infected many congregations and church bodies. Bigger is sometimes just fatter. The renewed Christian is fully committed to growth in God's kingdom but is discerning enough not to equate kingdom growth with visible church expansion. Let us resolve to seek what we know to be God's will, leaving the rest totally in the realm of his providence. This attitude will help guide us as we appraise and select materials and methods for the task at hand.

The contemporary church growth movement with its various (and sometimes varying) presuppositions and principles seeks to further internal and external church growth. To some the movement is an attempt to program or even supplant the Spirit and the Word with human evaluation, goal setting and strategic planning. To others it is "a process, in which the Word of God is used in a maximum way for maximum effect," assuming the Spirit must do all the work. Admittedly, the divergent appraisals reflect differing definitions of terms and respond to widely diverse exponents of an evolving movement. Our call is to let Scripture define our terms, task and tools with regard to renewal and cheerfully set ourselves to the task. "Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil" (1 Th 5:21).

Let us make another resolve regarding the renewal project: not to consider our desire for it as cause for embarrassment or assume it is a sign of wholesale past failure in our ministries. We would not deny that God's judgment begins with his family (1 Pe 4:17) and that we are most unworthy servants. But let us show caution when tempted to indict the nurture previously given. Fairly late in his career Luther wrote, "I have written and taught but to no avail." His dear Wittenberg of the sixteenth century was often seen by observers as a cesspool of sin, especially when contrasted to the external piety and orderliness of Calvin's Geneva. Spiritual renewal is, simply put, a continuously needed and desired gift among Christians. The power and persistence of indwelling sin is great. True renewal and inner transformation simply do not come in as neat a package as purely external reformation. We must bear this cross. May our review of radical renewal help maintain our resolve to endure the trials while growing in our firm anticipation of triumph in glory.

### The resolve to seek renewal through the Word

"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16-17). In fact God's Word is essential for these purposes and results; it is the Spirit's chosen tool to bring about genuine renewal. A proper understanding of renewal's radical nature will lead us to use the Word because it is living and active and penetrates to our inmost being (Heb 4:12).

Let us, therefore repeat our resolve to seek renewal through God's Word. We are not referring merely to intellectual comprehension of isolated doctrines or biblical themes that may be outlined for memorization or presentation to classroom students. Renewal reflects the tone and flow of "all Scripture" as it reveals the living and loving Lord dealing with people, generations and nations. The grasp of the tenor and texture of God's self-revelation calls for reverent and thorough eisagogical and exegetical work. A dogmatic approach to Bible truth is far less suitable for this purpose.

Spiritual growth is not the result of mastering "what God says." It is being mastered by God with the Spirit molding and shaping our spirit as he wills. A serious historical-grammatical approach to Scripture, coupled with an equally serious spirit of contemplation, is the royal road to renewal. Let us resolve to immerse

ourselves in Scripture, prayerfully pondering the flow of God's salvation history and his self-revelation to us and to the world.

Not only as students but also as teachers among Christians we resolve to meditate on God's Word. Otherwise we may be proficient technicians or knowledgeable lecturers on Scripture, but the wooing and winning nature of the gospel will less likely be passed on. Trite phrases and predictable theological formulas soon grow tedious and boring to the hearer. In highest love God would catch our highest interest that we then love him in return and most cheerfully relay the message of mercy to others. We are also friends of the Bridegroom whose greatest privilege and joy is to hear his voice and allow the Bride to do the same.

#### The Resolve to Seek Renewal of Both Head and Heart

We previously noted that true renewal affects profound changes of heart and mind, emotion and attitude. The inner self is the Spirit's workshop and thus our target as we seek to have the Word brought to bear on others and ourselves. To seek renewal of the mind and thought life, however, let us be quick to acknowledge the human capability to erect seemingly impenetrable psychological walls around the mind. These are variously called presuppositions, mental screens or mental filters. Influences from tradition, culture, past experiences and natural temperament serve to filter all information that we receive. Our presuppositions, worthy or unworthy, derived from Scripture or not, are the grid through which we see the world and view information presented to us. Needless to say this has a tremendous bearing on a person's capacity to comprehend the biblical message, especially since scriptural concepts and terms have often been redefined or reshaped in the mind of the listener.

Examples of such ingrained presuppositions frequently found in people outside our religious circles would include the assumed validity of evolutionary and existential dogma and the historical-critical approach to biblical interpretation. The ability of religious cults to use genuine Bible vocabulary but attach wholly unbiblical definitions to the terms is another common mental screen that is hard to penetrate. We ourselves, moreover, can knowingly or unknowingly work with or confront in our midst mental filters that can thwart faithful efforts at achieving renewal. Examples would include equating all but the tutorial use of the law with legalism; equating spiritual health with academic doctrinal knowledge; fearing that universal justification is tantamount to universalism; and concluding that because the personally justified are motivated and directed toward Sanctification, evangelical admonition is unnecessary.

Other mental screens often found among our people are derived from the cultural and media biases and assumptions that surround them from dawn to dusk. The ability to see little or no relation between public profession of faith and personal morality, the claim that time and money management is at best only casually related to God's will for his people, and the assumption that allegiance to Christ is essentially a human decision that can be retained and maintained without reception of the gospel are powerful presuppositions to be faced on a daily basis.

The challenge to communicate God's law and gospel clearly and accurately despite darkened minds of hearers has been met from generation to generation and we may also rise to the occasion. But this will involve admitting the problem, exposing the false or inadequate mental screens, and presenting the whole counsel of God in a patient and balanced way—repeatedly. The Holy Spirit can then shape the perceptual framework to his liking, establish accurate presuppositions, and work radical renewal in the heart and mind. Let us resolve to do what Paul did: use divine power to “demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God” and to “take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Co 10:4-5).

A parallel and interrelated challenge that lies before us has to do with the human heart, referring to the center of emotional and volitional life. Durable mental screens are constructed from the material taken from hard, stony hearts. Even when the mind understands the truth as truth, the battle is not yet won. Living faith is more than mental knowledge or even agreement with God's truth. “The demons also believe—and shudder.” The unfaithful conduct of entrusted servants (Mt 25:14-30, Lk 19:11-27) and the disobedience of the second son (Mt 21:28-32) did not result from any deficiency in understanding *what* the master or father had said, but from a heart problem of the worst kind. “A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still.” Both

the wise and foolish builders (Mt 7:24-27) are described as hearing the Lord's words, but this did not necessarily lead to putting them into practice.

Let us resolve to beg the Lord to penetrate our hearts and then to speak to people's hearts. May none among us be content with intellectual assent to God's winsome words. Let us resolve to welcome and nurture radical feelings and fervent emotions as expressions of renewal. We will retain disapproval of spiritual life that consists only or primarily of feelings. But if we mean to shut out feelings or consider them of little value, we misread God's Word. A person may have good feelings and strong fervor without spiritual life, but the Bible also teaches that there can be no true life and renewal without feelings. The way we model witnessing to the lost, the way we communicate Truth in pulpits and classrooms, and the way we conduct our worship assemblies are evidences of how we resolve to speak to head and heart clearly and accurately.

Now what are we really saying when we resolve to seek renewal of head and heart and to penetrate mental and emotional barriers wrongly constructed? We are not questioning the sufficiency or the efficacy of God's bare Word. Nor are we seeking to imply that a preacher or teacher is partly responsible for working radical renewal. The issue is *communicating* God's message in such a way that the hearer genuinely perceives the subject matter and so the Spirit can enlighten the mind and soften the heart for spiritual understanding, attitude and action. Otherwise we may in effect be speaking in a tongue unknown to our listeners, and no edifying can result. Uncommunicated gospel remains the power of God, but not for the salvation of souls. The package is to be unwrapped and entrusted to the intended recipients.

The example of Paul's various testimonies of the truth exhibits a fine, delicate balance between putting full confidence in God's "naked" Word and communicating it in a manner that suited the occasion and listeners. He variously reasoned, pleaded, urged, comforted and rebuked with conscious change of tone, clarifications, illustrations and emotional fervor. He could be "gentle, like a mother caring for her little children" or unyielding and brutal to expose false teachings and teachers. We already know this and work to imitate such patterns. But why? Because in our inner self we also are "in the pains of childbirth" until Christ be formed in others. So we also labor, struggling with all Christ's energy, which works so powerfully in us. God's ability to communicate effectively through Balaam's donkey is a not a license for us to settle for thoughtless parroting of the Lord's message. God's ability to communicate clearly through angels is unquestioned. His preference for using us mortals is equally unquestioned. He prefers normally to communicate "incarnationally," using humans to address humans, heart to heart and head to head. With highest praise to God for this privilege, let us resolve to use the language and thought patterns that might best reach head and heart.

The king's highway to achieving our resolve to be effective communicators has already been mentioned: Self-immersion in the Word of God. God is the Great Communicator as well as the Source of Truth. As we reverently and devotionally study how he spoke to our forefathers through the prophets "at many times and in various ways," we are tutored by the Spirit to accurately and effectively handle the word of truth. Let this remain our resolve as we seek renewal of heart and mind.

#### The Resolve to Seek Renewal through Law and Gospel

Let us again resolve to do what we have been taught and trained to do: to use law and gospel in furthering renewal. Let us continue to use them in tandem, properly distinguishing but never separating them from each other. Since we never get too proficient at doing this, our renewed resolve is most fitting. Since another essay in this series is dealing directly with the application of law and gospel, our words will be few. Yet anyone serious about real renewal will welcome some repetition.

Let us use the law to expose and condemn, to threaten and kill the sinful nature. One of the perceived culprits that opposes true renewal is the so-called "cheap grace" syndrome. Ever since Dietrich Bonhoeffer launched his attack on "easy Christianity" and "cheap grace" attitudes some fifty years ago, those yearning for renewal have repeated the phrase and decried the phenomenon. The reference is to offering people assurances of pardon and peace without calling for contrition and repentance. The result would be justifying sin without a true justification of the sinner. A subsequent result would be professing Christians who cling to sin and abuse God's grace as a cheap commodity obtained at a cut-rate price. The antidote is using law as law to condemn sin,

affirm God's holiness and hatred of sin, and pave the way for proclaiming the real grace of God, which is free but never cheap.

Let us also repeat our resolve to apply God's law to those who are regenerate and in whom renewal has begun. None of us dare say, "If I lift up the cross of Christ and talk of salvation by grace, then holy living will come naturally." If so, we speak foolishly, not knowing the Scriptures or ourselves. The reason? The sinfulness of human nature. The best of God's people still have hearts bent to backsliding and prone to forget God's love and man's duty. I dare not echo antinomian Agricola, "Hang Moses and the Ten Commandments!" Luther eloquently calls us to teach and admonish with the whole will of God:

St. Paul also knows that although Christians have begun to believe and are in a condition in which the fruits of faith should appear, this result is nonetheless not so quickly attained and realized. Therefore it will do no good to think and to say: The doctrine has been presented. This certainly is enough; for where the Spirit and faith are found, fruits and good works will follow of their own accord. For although the Spirit is present and, as Christ says, is willing and also at work in believers, still the flesh, weak and indolent, is opposed to Him. Then, too, the devil does not cease his efforts to bring to ruin, through temptations and allurements, that feeble flesh. Therefore we must not let people go on, as if it were not necessary to admonish and urge them through the Word of God to lead a good life. No, you dare not be negligent and remiss in this matter.... We, too, have not arrived at such a degree of perfection that our flesh and blood move and run to the performance of good works and to obedience toward God with the purist pleasure and delight, according to the will of the spirit and the direction of our faith. On the contrary, this is scarcely accomplished by the constant urging and prodding of God. What, then, would happen if such admonishing and urging were discontinued and we simply went on thinking (as many secure religionists are doing): Why, I myself am well aware of what I should do; I have heard it so often and for so many years, yes, have even taught it to others. I hold that if we were to stop preaching and admonishing for a year, we would become worse than any heathen. (E. Plass, *What Luther Says*, II, p. 659)

While renewing our resolve to teach and apply law as law we will also remember C.F.W. Walther's wise and utterly biblical advice to "allow the gospel to have a general predominance" in our teaching. The temptation is to give God's law center stage as an inducement to sanctified living. This is partly because we know God's law to be good and spiritual, partly because of our natural delusion that we can and therefore should obey God to gain his favor (*opinio, legis*) and partly because law thundering often brings quicker (though short-lived) external results in behavior patterns. No wonder people often equate this with the best of preaching

But does the emphasis on justification breed careless believers? No! The effect of God's grace brought home to the conscience is repentance. The knowledge of pardon leads to godly living (See Ps 32, 130, Tit 2:1114). The gospel empowers the pardoned sinner to say, "Teach me! Turn me! Create in me! Guide me!" There is no shortage of books, tracts, sermons or seminars on how to live godly, dynamic Christian lives. But most do not lead to victory over sin. They often breed sin by getting people to gaze at their own spiritual navel rather than at Christ who is our wisdom, righteousness, holiness and redemption. Unless sanctification is rooted in justification and constantly returns to it, it cannot escape the poison of subjectivism, moralism or Pharisaism. Again, since a companion essay is being provided for us on this specific subject, no more will be said here. Yet the resolve to remain truly evangelical is essential to radical renewal among us.

#### The Resolve to Seek Renewal with Evangelical Admonition

Our resolve to seek renewal through law and gospel should include the companion resolve to use them so inseparably in the delicate "art form" that has been called "evangelical admonition." This pertains to the so-called third use of the law and merits our devout attention. Professor J.P. Koehler offers this definition and description of this way of speaking:

This speech is not the gospel of the mighty deeds of God, but rather it speaks to us of God's will concerning our actions. But neither is it law that demands, threatens, condemns, and presses us sorely; rather it proceeds out of the gospel. For that reason it hastens to point to the connection between God's will and the gospel. Not only does it picture how the grace of God has redeemed us by the blood of Christ, but also how this grace proceeds to create all promised good in us and to free us from the filth of sin. So this address lets the impulse to creative doing flow from the gospel. That is not the preaching of the law, but the gospel of sanctification (*evangelische Ermahnung*), which is always a part of evangelical preaching, just as the Holy Ghost always creates love with the first stirring of faith, and as we see a fine example of such speech in the Sermon on the Mount.

Let us resolve to cultivate and use this kind of speech more and more. Let us teach good works (sanctification) in the way Scripture does, keeping God's grace in Christ (justification) in the foreground. Let us learn again how a true preaching of the gospel will directly or indirectly involve a preaching of sanctified living. We want an insistence on renewed living that encourages the new self rather than only rebuking the old self. We wish to stress what the law says but in such a way that the gospel remains prominent to strengthen and empower. Evangelical urging uses the same vocabulary as law proclamation but maintains a different tone. This is the Word of God communicated in a way that the loving voice of God is perceived, appreciated and responded to.

Our resolve to become more of masters in using this form of speech again leads us back to a diligent study and prayerful pondering of the written Word. By receiving the message the way God gives it we grow in our desire and ability to imitate him in passing the words on. Our resolve is again to view the personality of God that it might be more fully duplicated in us and imparted in our teaching. Our hearts will be filled and from the fullness of the heart our mouths will speak.

#### The Resolve to Seek Renewal while Loving Each Other as Brothers

“Now about brotherly love we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. Yet we urge you, brothers, to do so more and more” (I Th 4:9-10). Love for fellow saints is a cherished gift from God and a key expression of spiritual renewal. Let us resolve to grow in love and in words and deeds expressive of brotherly love. As leaders among God's people we understand how important this virtue is for our own spiritual well being and the welfare of those entrusted to our care, who also follow us as we follow Christ.

Our resolve is not simply to be “loyal to the organization” for the survival or expansion of the institutional church. Our resolve is to guard tongue and hand that we treat brothers as brothers, implying testimony and discipline, encouragement and rebuking—but requiring love in all things. It is undoubtedly no mere coincidence that the chapter dealing with taming the tongue (James 3) begins with the reminder that spiritual teachers are judged all the more strictly because of their position. Let our resolve be to repudiate gossip and slander even when passed on in the name of neutral information.

The temptation will remain among us to decry any expansion of “bureaucratic machinery” and “program pushers” in administrative positions, assuming that synod structure is being placed above or against kingdom concerns. The temptation will likewise remain for organizational overseers to lament what appears to be local parochialism and offer solutions without the benefit of an on-site appraisal of how the kingdom fares in a given locality.

Let us resolve to observe together how terrifically frustrating our ministries can be in this world. We echo Luther as he commiserated with godly rulers who found the going rough: “The world is a sick creature. It is a fur piece with neither hide nor hair that is sound.” Pastors and teachers scrap for time to devote themselves to the diligent and devotional study of Scripture that renewal might flourish through their ministries. Administrators also seek and make plans for renewal emphases but are unable personally to apply law and gospel in many classrooms and congregations to further the cause. Let us resolve to remember our shared frustrations.

Let us resolve to confess the presence of a pope within each of us that ultimately seeks a renewal that is neither radical nor truly relational, but merely a reaffirmation of personal prestige. The tendency is to do what we want at the expense of our gracious God's honor and our fellow laborers' good name. These and similar temptations are like the poor; they are always with us.

Let us also resolve to "be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires" (Ja 1:19-20). The diligent perusal of Scripture again and again reminds us how difficult it often is to appraise another's faith and life without divine declaration. Judas from Kerioth, until the fourteenth of Nisan, was well respected and deemed worthy of special trust among the Twelve. Lot appeared so calloused and unworthy of emulation but is declared by God to be a "righteous man" whose "righteous soul" was terribly distressed and tormented over the lawlessness around him. Relational renewal, flowing from heart and mind, will check improper tendencies and nourish the mutual and brotherly application of law and gospel. Concerning this we may be quick to speak

Let us therefore resolve to seek radical and relational renewal for and with one another as dearly loved brothers. This resolve, when formed and fruitful, will gracefully adorn our already magnificent calls to serve God's holy people.

#### The Resolve to Seek Renewal Starts Here

"You are those who stood by me in my trials" (Lk 22:30). The frail disciples, whose comprehension of scriptural utterances was so often so tenuous, had a devotion to Jesus of Nazareth that was undeniably strong. This made a difference and set the stage for ongoing renewal. Jesus was their "first love" and he remained so, because he chose them, justified them, sanctified them and glorified them. This is the fertile soil on which renewal will flourish. It is also the heart of the blossoming flower that renewal becomes. We can ask for nothing greater.

Let renewal and the expressions of renewal begin with us. Let them begin with me. Radically, relationally, with resolve and in reality.