

The Gospel Is the Power God Gives Us To Do His Work

John A. Braun

[Presented at the Michigan District Convention in Saginaw, Michigan in June, 2005]

The gospel is the power God gives us to do his work.” This topic may seem to be simply a restating of the truths of God's Word. In one sense, it is. Yet, in another sense, it is much more than that. It states a truth to be defended. Each generation must renew its grasp on the truths of God's Word because each generation faces new challenges and threats. The battlefield for God's people is never completely quiet.

It seems to me that the previous generation had to focus on two issues. The first issue was fellowship. Many essays were written to explore God's truth and to proclaim the conclusions reached by a study of his truth. The second issue was the inerrancy of the Scriptures. Challenges surfaced which called into question the character of God's word. Here too one can find many essays and books exploring this topic. A look at the libraries and journals, including our own *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, should confirm my observations, but you may have a different analysis. I won't argue. My point is simply that God's truth is always under attack, but not always at the same point.

Two things happen when God's people conclude one battle. First, they are fortified with the arguments advanced in the defense of the truth, and second, a new skirmish develops either over the same truths or different ones. The reality is always the same. When the advance of God's enemies is checked in one part of the battlefield, Satan continues to probe for weaknesses in our defenses and seeks to exploit those weaknesses. The new attack may be a frontal assault or an attack on our flanks attempting to surround us before we can muster a defense. Our Commander in Chief promises that the forces of hell will not overcome us, but he does not ask us to occupy quiet cots in our barracks, cleaning and oiling our weapons, and letting him do the fighting. We wrestle these spiritual forces, and Jesus asks us to fight the good fight of faith, resisting Satan as he prowls for souls.

The concepts of the gospel, the means of grace, and the work of the Holy Spirit do have familiar sounds that will stretch us back to the Scriptures and the Reformation. At the same time, we face a slightly different attack—not new, just different. Before us lies a conflict. We face a battle for the truth just as a previous generation did. Our weapons are the same even if the enemy has moved to another part of the battlefield. We may not be involved in a battle concerning the nature of the Bible in the same way as a previous generation was. Instead we may be involved in a battle concerning the nature of the gospel.

That you have sensed as much, I think, is indicated by the topic you have assigned to me. I thank you for this assignment. It has provided an opportunity for me to read and think through some of these issues. So let us survey the field together, find strength and comfort in the promises of God, articulate the truth simply, and pray God will help us wield the sword of the Spirit as his servants. To do this, we will define terms, assess two approaches, try to resolve a tension, and set a direction.

I. Defining Terms

Terms to Define: *Gospel*

The first term we must understand is *gospel*. Of course, it is "the good news." Every Christian church would nod in agreement with that simple definition. But in our world today, *gospel* or *good news* can have a variety of meanings. It may simply mean "some religious thought." In fact, it doesn't even have to be religious. One definition suggests that *gospel* is a type of music. That has religious connotations of course. Another definition suggests it is "something, as an idea or principle, accepted as undoubtedly true." We have used the word *gospel* in these ways, no doubt. But our focus today is the way the Scripture uses *gospel* as "good news."

What is the "good news"? The angels announced such "good news of great joy" (Luke 2:10): a Savior was born in Bethlehem. As we have discussed the good news in various contexts, we have often turned to God's

simple, straightforward summary in John 3:16. Our reading of the New Testament brings us to the apostle Paul and his definition: "Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel" (2 Timothy 2:8). Other definitions include the one provided by the Apology: the gospel is "the promise of the forgiveness of sins and justification on account of Christ" (Article IV: 127).

As you progress through these definitions, you should note a narrowing of the concept. At the same time you should come to sense the divisions that the gospel brings. Lutherans cannot assert "justification on account of Christ" without drawing fire from those who have different definitions and orientations. But the Confessions assert that justification is "the most important topic of Christian teaching" (Apology, Article IV: 120). We would not hesitate to define *gospel* in terms of justification as the Augsburg Confession does:

Likewise they teach that human beings cannot be justified before God by their own powers, merits, or works. But they are justified as a gift on account of Christ's sake through faith when we believe that Christ has suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness in his sight as St. Paul says in Romans 3[:21-26] and 4[:5] (Augsburg Confession, Article IV: 39, 40)

That's, certainly good news! I don't believe that we have a difference of opinion about this definition. I have a reason for spending a little time with it. We sometimes are not careful about expressing the gospel clearly. We take shortcuts. Ordinarily this is not a problem, because we understand the meaning without difficulty. Often we simply operate with a contextual gospel within our fellowship. For example, I can say, "God loves you." In our context that idea is understood to mean, "God loves you in connection with Christ." We use the shorthand to express what is not actually written in the words. If I were to take this simple sentence outside our fellowship, the sentence might suggest a different meaning. "God loves you" among Roman Catholics would not mean what it means to us. It would mean something different to Unitarians and something still different to a group of Jehovah's Witnesses. Even if we add the name of Jesus to this simple sentence, we can't be sure we share the same definition of the gospel.

Here's a case in point. In a recent issue of *The Lutheran*, an article by a professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, asked "Who is this Lord?" (*The Lutheran*, May 2005, p. 7). This article provides an example of what I mean by contextual gospel. At least, if we put the best construction on it, that's what it must be. One can understand the author as proclaiming the gospel. She uses the Hebrew word *hesed*, which we understand as God's faithful and committed love. For us that word always implies all God promised to do in Christ. Yet this short article does not mention Christ's redemptive work at all. One might ask how someone could answer the question "Who is this Lord?" without mentioning the keystone of God's love. Nevertheless, it is possible to view the article as proclaiming Christ. My context may allow for such a reading. However, a different context would suggest something different. From other articles I've read in *The Lutheran*, I would be suspicious of this vague presentation. In this case, the concept of gospel becomes muddy and gets clarified only by the context any reader will bring to it or by the context that the reader senses from its surrounding environment. We make meaning and define concepts often by the context.

Several points emerge from this little excursion. First, we must be careful about definitions, not settling for vague and imprecise language. Second, we must not assume that everyone who comes from another context shares our particular context and its implied definitions. Third, and most important, the gospel is specific "good news." Our witness—so often simply said, "God loves you"—needs to be specifically about Jesus. The gospel is not the good news that God loves and indulgently tolerates all humans. It is not the good news that all human activities and thoughts are wonderful and acceptable. Any good news without Christ is not good news at all. At best it is only a placebo that makes us feel better but hides our deep need for Jesus and presents a "gospel" without any power. We can anticipate our treatment of the power of the gospel here: This specific message of the gospel not only announces God's gift in Christ, but it also creates faith. Faith accepts the wonderful gift from God and claims it. Failure to accept God's free gift in Christ means facing life and eternity without the one and

only solution to sin and death. The gospel is the message about Christ and his work here on earth for sinners—Christ crucified, as Paul reminds us (1 Corinthians 1:18).

The work of Christ is for all humanity and its blessings apply to all. All are justified; that's an objective fact attested to throughout the Scriptures. The gospel is the good news of Christ. As "news" it is to be proclaimed so that others can perceive it. A quick look at any concordance under the topic "gospel" will reveal that *gospel* is most often used with the verb *proclaim* or *preach* (Acts 8:4, 8:40, 16:10; Romans 1:15; 15:19,20; 1 Corinthians 1:17; 9:14; 9:16; 15:2, and others). The Lord intended this message for all humanity: "all nations" (Matthew 28:19), "all the world" (Mark 16:15). Jesus did not limit the communication of the gospel to the language of the Old Testament even though the first Christians were Hebrews. Nor did he proscribe its proclamation in Greek. The message was to hurdle language barriers, as the first Pentecost indicated. Paul's work in the Mediterranean world carries the lesson that the gospel will also jump over cultural barriers. It moved from the Jewish synagogue to the Greco-Roman world. We are beneficiaries of additional cultural leaps to German, to English, and to American, as well as leaps from industrial and scientific modernism to whatever development of culture we live in today—whether that may be post-modernism or post-postmodernism.

Good news implies communication. Language is the most dominant form of communication, but in our world visual communication is also important. Simply, language is not the only way the gospel comes to us. It comes to us also through our other senses. Our eyes note symbols and representations of Christ crucified. We are concerned about biblical literacy and the ability of many in our own age to read and understand the message. But we are not the only ones to face this problem. A walk through the cathedrals of Europe should underscore the value of the visual arts to communicate the gospel. Music carries the gospel to our ears and heart; ask anyone about his or her favorite hymn. Even the melody is able to trigger memories of the message of the hymn. But here too the gospel conveyed in song and picture is not a general message of God's grandeur or power. The gospel is the specific message of Christ crucified for sinners. We sing "Jesus, Your Blood and Righteousness" and avoid songs that proclaim vague messages of love, peace, and joy, without Christ.

The vehicles that carry the gospel change. What once was paint and pen or lute and harpsichord has become digital graphics software and synthesizer. Even the written word, has undergone changes—parchment and papyrus have given way to paper and to word processors and computer screens. The styles also change. In all the changes, we understand that the essence of the gospel is Christ crucified and risen again for sinners. Every generation has the task of proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ, that is, "the promise of forgiveness of sins and justification on account of Christ."

Terms to Define: *Power*

Our topic draws gospel and power together. Clearly Scripture also ties the gospel and power together. Paul calls the gospel "the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16) and the message of the cross "the power of God" (1 Corinthians 1:18). Paul reminded the Corinthians that his preaching was "with a demonstration of the Spirit's power" (1 Corinthians 2:4). Thinking of power in connection with God's Word is not limited to the New Testament. The account of creation rests on the power that attends God's words, "Let there be...". Centuries after creation, Isaiah compared the Word of God to a rain that accomplishes God's purposes (Isaiah 55:8-11).

A surface-level understanding of the good news or the gospel compares it to a newspaper article. We simply read the announcement of a new cure that God has provided for sin and death. But it is more than a newspaper article, no matter how large and impressive the headline. The Scriptures indicate that the gospel is not simply a sign on the road of life that points us to Christ and heaven. Nor is the gospel simply a statement of truth or a set of principles we are to follow, like the instructions you get with children's toys or new electronic gadgets. Yes, the gospel is good news, and we are charged with proclaiming it, but the gospel has power. Paul wrote to the Thessalonians of the gospel's power, "Our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction" (1 Thessalonians 1:5). "We preach Christ crucified," Paul reminded the Corinthians, "a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God

has called, both Jews and Gentiles, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Corinthians 1:23, 24). He also reminded the Romans that "faith comes from hearing" (Romans 10:17). Jesus prayed, "Sanctify them by the truth, your word is truth" (John 17:17).

What is the source of this power? The Holy Spirit. By our natural powers we could not believe, remain in faith, or produce good works. By nature we are "dead in...transgressions and sins" (Ephesians 2:1). The gospel is hidden from our natural minds—it's a mystery. We cannot comprehend the greatness of God's love in Christ without the work of the Holy Spirit. Simply review Paul's comments in 1 Corinthians 2:9-14. God also tells us clearly, "No one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:3). If we can say that without the Holy Spirit we cannot believe, we must also say that without the gospel we cannot believe. The power of the gospel is identified with the Holy Spirit and therefore the gospel has supernatural power. The writer to the Hebrews asserts that the "word of God is living and active" (4:12).

The gospel is supernatural because the Holy Spirit has tied himself to it. He works within the human mind and heart through this means. The supernatural power of the Word is not one thing and the Spirit's power another. These powers are the same. How can this be? Because God reveals that it is so, and it is his will that the Spirit binds himself to the gospel. Consider what the gospel does. Jesus said, "The words I have spoken to you are Spirit and life" (John 6:63). Paul told the Thessalonians that the word they heard from him is the word of God and "is at work in you who believe" (1 Thessalonians 2:13). And it is not exclusively a Pauline doctrine. Peter wrote, "For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God" (1 Peter 1:23). And James referred to "the word planted in you, which can save you" (1:21). A review of the passages cited in the previous paragraphs will confirm this thought.

Sometimes in our thinking we limit the power of the gospel and the work of the Holy Spirit to conversion. Certainly the Holy Spirit creates faith through the gospel. But he also sustains faith through the gospel and provides the strength to do good works. We assert according to Scripture that "God works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Philippians 2:13). The power to live as Christians in this world comes from the Holy Spirit through the gospel. God doesn't simply insert the battery and leave us on our own. His power continually comes to us through the means of grace. The gospel is a constant companion to Christian life, not just the beginning. We should note that the power for Christian life comes through the gospel. Without the gospel we have no power "to will and to act according to [God's] good purpose." Our faith simply cannot persist within our hearts without the gospel and the work of the Holy Spirit.

Three additional points should be made before we move on. First, God the Holy Spirit does work through the law as well as the gospel. The operations are different. The law cannot produce any of the effects we have attributed to the gospel. The law cannot convert, comfort, or produce good works. That power comes only from the gospel. The law crushes the proud sinful heart and drives it to despair. Because this is true, we often say that God has given us the Word—both law and gospel—as the power to work within the human heart. Second, the gospel has all these positive effects by the power of the Holy Spirit, but Scripture tells us that the work of the gospel is not irresistible. The writer to the Hebrews confirms this: "those who formerly had the gospel preached to them did not go in, because of their disobedience" (Hebrews 4:6). Third, the gospel also may produce a negative reaction. Not only does it convert the sinner, but it also hardens those who reject it. Remember that Isaiah was commissioned to that difficult task: "Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn and be healed" (Isaiah 6:10). Jesus quoted this passage to his disciples as he explained the reason for teaching in parables (Matthew 13:13-15).

As biblical Christians—that is, confessional Lutherans—we understand that the Scriptures teach us that the gospel does not come to us only through the words that articulate the message of Christ crucified. God determined that the gospel would also come to us in visible form, that is, in the sacraments. In the long history of the church, and in particular the history after the Reformation, we have had to defend this principle. Some believe that baptism is nothing more than a sign that we belong to Christ. They deny that the Holy Spirit is tied to the water with the word. Yet the Scriptures assert that important connection. Baptism is the "washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5) and has the power to "wash your sins away" (Acts 22:16) and

"save...you" (1 Peter 3:21). Just as persistent is the difference over the Sacrament of the Altar. While some suggest that Christ's body and blood are only symbolized by the bread and wine, they also assert that the sacrament cannot give forgiveness—the essence of the gospel. This idea fills its sails with human logic and sails against the clear words of Christ himself in the upper room and the words of Paul about the Sacrament of the Altar in 1 Corinthians 11:23-29. Both sacraments are the means through which the Holy Spirit accesses hearts and works in them.

We commonly use the definition of the *means of grace* as "the gospel in word and sacrament." The Lutheran Confessions provide an interesting summary of the ways God has chosen to access our hearts and provide us with the power to be his children:

We now want to return to the gospel, which gives guidance and help against sin in more than one way, because God is extravagantly rich in his grace: first, through the spoken word, in which the forgiveness of sins is preached to the whole world (which is the proper function of the gospel); second through baptism; third through the holy Sacrament of the Altar; fourth, through the power of the keys and also through the mutual conversation and consolation of brothers and sisters. (Smalcald Articles, Concerning the Gospel, Article IV: 319)

Does the Holy Spirit limit his saving activity to the means of grace? We conclude from Scripture that he does. Many of the objections to this idea are based on the transcendence of God. He is above time and space and the natural laws. He is supernatural—above nature. No one would argue against that, but the principle of God's transcendence is sometimes used to assert that God cannot be conveyed to us by words, water, wine, and unleavened bread. To assert that God cannot be confined seems like a reasonable objection, but God has given us a spiritual wisdom beyond human logic and experience. Jesus was born in Bethlehem—fully human and fully God. That defies our logic and experience. Yet in this way God chose to enter into time and space in the physical body of Jesus. That idea causes trouble for those who are controlled by logic and reason and not by the spiritual wisdom God imparts. Christ's birth is at least one instance where God in a way limits himself. The finite is capable of the infinite. Why is it difficult to believe that God could limit his work in our hearts to the gospel? In God's good wisdom, he also chooses to limit his saving activity within the hearts and minds of humans to the gospel in word and sacrament. It's his choice—freely made.

I know that objections to this idea continue to be raised, but we simply must let God tell us what he means. We can understand it because the Holy Spirit imparts such trust in God's Word. Let me suggest an illustration of the way God limits himself. In his wisdom God chose to create life on this planet. Almost all forms of life are water-based. Of course, God is not limited to creating life-forms of this type, but he did limit himself. Now he continues to preserve these life forms through the natural laws he has established. Water is essential. We have no assurance from God that he will work outside the limitations he set for himself. We must carry out our lives on this principle. Not, to do so would be fatal. Even if we can also assert that God can work outside the limits he has adopted, we dare not adopt a policy in defiance of his choice. He can perform a miracle and sustain life without water, but I wouldn't advise anyone to go without it. Once God limited his activity and power to a form of life that is based on water, he does not abandon it. In a similar way, God chooses to work in human hearts and minds through the gospel in word and sacrament. Could he work in another way? Of course. Can he work without the means of grace? Certainly. But we have no promise from God that he will. We must plan and act according to what God has revealed. So we are bound by the Scriptures to assert that God works only through the means of grace and then use the tools God has given to us. His decree and will remain in force and he pledges to continue to work through the means of grace. We dare not expect anything else.

The gospel is not magical like some incantation that will conjure up the power of the Holy Spirit. Neither is the power limited to a language, even the original Hebrew or Greek. God attached his power to the gospel—to the meaning, not to the form of the words, letters, or characters. Yet we prize the original languages because God chose to reveal his meaning in those languages. We spend significant amounts of time and money as a church body to train pastors to understand the style and idiom of the original languages. Because the power

attached to the gospel is no less than God's power, we must be careful to understand its internal and external essence, that is, its meaning and its original inspired form.

Some have separated the work of the Holy Spirit from the gospel. That produces a dangerous environment for distortions. If you separate the two, then you look for the confirmation of the work of the Holy Spirit in emotion, personal decisions, and extrasensory experiences. For example, you might sit quietly and wait for the enlightenment of the Spirit. Another possibility is to be carried along with Pentecostal fervor and excitement. Still another is to expect to know the will of God through personal dreams or revelations. These are not ancient aberrations. *The Lutheran* (January 2005) carried a story of a woman who planned to go to a church meeting to speak against the proposal softening the church's stand on homosexuality. But before the meeting, God allegedly revealed himself to her in a dream. According to her story, he told her to be tolerant of those with a different lifestyle. She was told not to judge them. The Holy Spirit was not limited to the objective Scriptures but, at least according to her perspective, spoke through dreams, in a way, different than what he said in Scripture. Throughout history such "revelations" have been notoriously problematic. No, the work of God depends on the work of the Holy Spirit through the gospel revealed in the Word. This gospel is an objective reality that has been revealed from God to humanity by inspiration. We will encounter different interpretations, glosses, and distortions of it, but the gospel did not come from the mind of man, as Paul asserts in Galatians (1:11,12). It is God's message. It is also his power.

Terms to Define: *His Work*

What is God's work here on earth? That question certainly can be answered in a number of ways. God works every day by his almighty power to uphold the world in which we live. He created the world and everything in it and preserves it daily. He calls the stars out at night, causes the sun to rise and set, knows the number of hairs we all have on our heads, and notices when one sparrow falls from the sky. What's more, he controls all these things for the benefit of his people and promises that everything will work for our good. So he works through bad times and good times, pain and joy, to accomplish his holy will. Over all this activity God has complete control; we receive the benefits of this work of God.

When God created Adam and Eve, they were perfect. His purpose for them was that they demonstrate their happy relationship with their Creator by avoiding the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God placed them into the Garden of Eden with the command not to eat from the tree and with the responsibility to work the garden and take care of it. Their part in God's work was to be fruitful, subdue the earth, and rule over God's creation. Obedience and work filled them with contented bliss. But once sin entered the world, things changed. God set about to bring his sinful creatures back into a peaceful relationship through the promised deliverer. The first promise in Eden achieved that reconciliation. In the garden, God worked through the gospel and regenerated Adam and Eve.

From that point on, the Scriptures record God's faithful adherence to his plan and humanity's sinful rejection of it. In addition to his work of preservation, God's work since the fall into sin has been to reconcile wayward humanity to himself. As part of God's creative work in this world, he has made us and given us all the gifts he has determined for us to have—intelligence, physical skill, aptitudes, and personality, among others. We are all different and therefore possess different gifts as God determines. So we are not simply rocks or waves that are manipulated by the power of God. We live, move, and think, but we nevertheless live, move, and have our being in connection with God. Even the ancient poets understood that (Acts 17:28). The purpose for the gift of life here is so that we "seek him and perhaps reach out for him and, find him" (Acts 17:27). Yet finding him can result only from the proclamation of the gospel.

All this is nothing new to any of us. God desires to reconcile his creatures to himself. He sent a Savior who undid the results of Adam and Eve's disobedience. But there is more. The work of Jesus is complete in every way—the world is justified through Christ. But it does us no good unless we receive God's gracious, completed gift. We cannot believe on our own, but God has charged the gospel with the power of his Spirit so that the gospel works faith and empowers humanity to grasp the completed work of Christ. God provided the

payment for sin and gives the power for each human to believe it when the Holy Spirit works through the gospel. His purpose has not changed since that first proclamation in the Garden. The gospel still is the power of God.

We note one more gracious gift of God. When Jesus ascended into heaven, he committed the gospel to his disciples. Jesus told his disciples to proclaim the gospel, be his witnesses, and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19, Mark 16:16; Acts 1:8). The Gospel of John also carries this imperative but in a slightly different way. Jesus told Peter, "Feed my lambs...sheep" (John 21:15-17) and indicated why his gospel was written: "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31). The book of Acts is clearly a record of how the apostles carried out the work of God after Christ's ascension.

The New Testament letters focus on the same task. But in the letters we not only see believers gathered by the power of the gospel. We also see them struggling to live as God's people. We note the flaws of Abraham, David, and other Old Testament believers, of Peter, Paul, the Corinthians, and a host of others. The gospel awakened their faith and gave them power to obey God's will, but they did not reach perfection and holiness in their journeys on life's road. The exhortations sprinkled throughout the epistles remind us that they did not yet attain the perfect sanctified life. They are saints by faith in the forgiveness of sins, but they were also sinners struggling to overcome their sinful natures. Being saints and sinners at the same time is an important biblical concept, one which Luther understood.

The sin of Adam and Eve was not a simple smudge easily erased so they could return to perfect obedience again. Their action distorted God's creation profoundly. Their sin left all their descendants with a sinful nature, corrupt and persistent. That nature is overcome by the power of the Holy Spirit in the gospel, but it is not yet obliterated. It continues to plague believers. Once faith enters the human heart, there is a new birth and a believer can perform good works. Those good works of a believer follow saving faith; they are fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-25). They are automatic in the sense that faith must produce good works ("Faith without deeds is dead," James 2:26), but the believer struggles to produce them.

I do not want any of us to think of this as an academic exercise or a historical review. We are all saints and sinners. Every day we stand in the grace of God in Christ and at the same time we are clay vessels weighed down with our sinful human nature. I see myself as a believer who has sprouted wings by God's grace. I aspire to do as God desires and soar in obedience to his will, but my heavy sin weighs me down. I anguish over this reality daily. I praise God that I can escape the burden of my sinful nature at least at times; God gives me the ability to do the impossible. But then I descend again. Like Paul I confess—as all of us must—"I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing" (Romans 7:18, 19). In my struggle against sin—and I would assert in yours too—I do what God wants, but then, immediately, the sin within me spoils my action. I cling to the forgiveness of sins, which cleanses every sinful thought even when it is attached to what I consider my best effort. It's not surprising to me that when Jesus pictured the last day and addressed the saints on his right, commending them for their works they ask, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you...?" (Matthew 25:37). Works, even our own good works, are not the primary focus of the righteous.

In addition, the works of the righteous are always tainted by sin. In this struggle the gospel becomes critical. Every day is a day of repentance—a turning from the impulses of the sinful nature to the full complete forgiveness of Christ. In the gospel—the message of Christ crucified and raised again—all who struggle with their own sinful nature find the power of the Holy Spirit. Then the fruits of the Spirit begin to emerge not because the believer has made some dramatic decision to do God's will but because God himself empowers him or her. Temptations abound to yield to the sinful nature, to the promptings of Satan, and to the allure of the world. One of the most dangerous temptations, in my opinion, is the pride that asserts repentance is not necessary and that Christian life can go on without the gospel. We need the gospel daily because we need its power to turn from sin and live as God's people here. Luther voiced this truth in the Large Catechism:

Forgiveness is constantly needed, for although God's grace has been acquired by Christ, and holiness has been wrought by the Holy Spirit through God's Word in the unity of the Christian church, yet we are never without sin because we carry our flesh around our neck. Therefore everything in this Christian community is so ordered that everyone may daily obtain full forgiveness of sins through the Word and signs [sacraments] appointed to comfort and encourage our consciences as long as we live on earth. Although we have sin, the Holy Spirit sees to it that it does not harm us because we are part of this Christian community. Here there is full forgiveness, both in that God forgives us and that we forgive, bear with, and aid one another...The Holy Spirit must always work in us through the Word, granting us daily forgiveness until we attain to that life where there will be no more forgiveness. In that life there will be only perfectly pure and holy people, full of integrity and righteousness, completely freed from sin, death, and all misfortune, living in new, immortal and glorified bodies (Large Catechism, The Third Article: 438).

Luther's comments move us to a clearer definition of God's work. His words come in the section on the holy Christian church. We should see, therefore, that the work of God is tied to the proclamation of the gospel. Through this proclamation, the Holy Spirit creates faith and then nourishes faith so that good works flow from the hearts transformed by his power. Jesus gave this task to the community of believers—the holy Christian church. To those assembled at the Mount of Ascension and every generation of believers after them. Now also to us.

Permit me one more thought concerning the work of God before we move on. The Augsburg Confession follows the article on justification with Article V, "Concerning the Office of Preaching."

So that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and the sacraments as through instruments the Holy Spirit is given, who effects faith where and when it pleases God in those who hear the gospel, that is to say, in those who hear that God, not on account of our own merits but on account of Christ, justifies those who believe that they are received into grace on account of Christ, Galatians 3[14b]: "So that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith" (Augsburg Confession, Concerning the Office of Preaching, Article V:41).

Since the means of grace, the gospel, is the only way the Holy Spirit creates faith, it is God's will that believers will train men to be pastors who will use the gospel for the work God has given the church. Public servants of God have the same gospel and the same power as every other believer, but their call into ministry entrusts the public proclamation of the gospel and the administration of the gospel to them.¹

II. Assessing Two Approaches

In our world today, the definitions I have just outlined are not universally accepted. Even among Lutherans variations exist. Sometimes those variations exist because of a different emphasis or a focus that obliquely skews the principles. At other times the variations are clearly in opposition to the definitions that Scripture and the Confessions provide. We confess that the Word is everything, and set about proclaiming its message. Luther wrote, "The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God" (*Luther's Works*, Vol. 31 p. 230). The Holy Spirit through the gospel has created a love for the gospel within me, and in you too. We treasure it because of what it means to us and our spiritual lives as well as what it means to the hearts and lives of all God's people. As I sit in the worship service with my fellow believers, I look

¹ A reading of Luther's little treatise on the public ministry can be helpful ("That a Christian Assembly or Congregation Has the Right and Power to Judge All Teaching and to Call, Appoint, and Dismiss Teachers, Established and Proven by Scripture" *Luther's Works*, Vol. 36, pp. 301ff).

around and see others who miraculously have come to hear the message of the cross. Each one is a miracle of the power of the Holy Spirit working through the gospel. You too are a miracle of the Spirit's power. By ourselves we could not trust Jesus. By our own thinking or choosing we could not believe in Jesus or come to him, but the Holy Spirit has performed a priceless miracle within us all. Here we are as believers together, members of God's family. When we gather together in worship, we are touched by the power of God in the gospel. Another aspect of this miracle is that God gives us the power to live for him. That is no less a miracle in our world of chaos, confusion, and violence.

The miracle of Pentecost raises our expectations about the proclamation of Christ crucified, and the work of the apostles recorded in the book of Acts underscores the power of the Holy Spirit working through the gospel. Yet when I have preached on the festival of Pentecost, I am usually disappointed. I have never seen three thousand converts and somehow I am not able to capture the excitement and fire of the day. I'm not alone. The work of proclaiming the gospel is difficult, and while success does occur, it often does not come in the dramatic way recorded in Acts 2.

When I look at other religions, I wonder why they seem to grow faster. It troubles me that the fastest growing religion in the world is Islam and the fastest growing "church" is the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—the Mormons. I also see large fast-growing Christian churches sprout up in different parts of the country. What are they doing that I am not doing? They are eager to tell me. Leaders of those churches have become the agents of change. They claim that those who do not change will become the dinosaurs of the visible church. Their books and articles influence others, and I wonder if there is something I should be doing differently. Do their suggested changes in methodology have merit? Do they move us away from the gospel? Perhaps we all grow impatient at the pace of God's work through the gospel, but we always wish to be the best servants of Christ we can be. My education is not over yet. I continue to learn so I might serve him better. With that in mind, some time ago I began to read.

My reading has led me to two conclusions. First, a conflict still persists between the theology of the cross and the theology of glory as Luther articulated it.² The conflict is not new, and it permeates, at least in my opinion, the discussions we have about methodology in the church. The differences between these two theologies color the literature on change and the church as well. Second, the literature I have read which diagnoses the ailments of the visible church and suggests remedies flows from concepts that are most often not Lutheran. For the sake of discussion, I suggest that the church of those offering certain formulas of Church Growth and the church of the Lutheran Confessions—that's us—are built on different foundations. Perhaps that is not very profound, but the differences create variations on the meaning of the gospel, the power of the Holy Spirit, and the work God has given us to do. In addition, they quite naturally produce variations on what believers in Jesus should do in the world we encounter on a daily basis.

The Theology of the Cross and the Theology of Glory

First, let us consider the conflict between the theology of the cross and the theology of glory. We, that is, natural human beings, have a thirst for glory. It is a dimension of our sinful nature. We see it all the time. It occurs in the development of formal theologies that take the form of books or schools of thought. But it also

² A theology of the cross clings to Christ's cross alone and claims no glory for any human effort or thought because a Christian's works are God's works and purified by the blood of Christ. It seeks to make Christ the center. A theology of glory clings to the value of human thought and effort in any relationship with God. It retains a persistent tendency to move humanity into the center. Luther wrote, "He who does not know Christ does not know God hidden in suffering. Therefore he prefers works to suffering, glory to the cross, strength to weakness, wisdom to folly, and, in general, good to evil. These are the people whom the apostle calls "enemies of the cross of Christ" [Phil 3:18], for they hate the cross and suffering and love works and the glory of works. Thus they call the good of the cross evil and the evil of a deed good. God can be found only in suffering and the cross, as has already been said. Therefore the friends of the cross say that the cross is good and works are evil, for through the cross works are dethroned and the old Adam, who is especially edified by works, is crucified. It is impossible for a person not to be puffed up by his good works unless he has first been deflated and destroyed by suffering and evil until he knows that he is worthless and that his works are not his but God's" (*Luther's Works*, Vol. 31:53).

occurs in the tendency of ordinary people to pick and choose what pleases them and their appetites. Unregenerate human nature adjusts theology to suit its own opinion. In other words, it creates theology rather than receiving it from God.

Human nature has devised countless schemes to appease God based on human effort. You have read about them. They come in the form of ancient primitive attempts to appease an angry god by offering something to him. But they also include more subtle forms that sail under the flag of Christendom. While contemporary Roman Catholics most often will say that they don't earn salvation, they maintain that we are justified by faith and works of charity. Theologies that require decisions for Christ offer an alternative that distorts the gospel and human depravity. Such human choices maintain one way to claim credit—decide to turn your life over to God. Still others turn away from the revelation of God and base their "truth" on their religious experiences and emotions. Thus they elevate human thought, experience, and emotion above God. The refusal to baptize infants has its roots in this approach. By waiting until the child comes to the age of reason and is able to decide, they operate with the glimmer of glory for sinful humans. They choose that approach rather than kneeling helplessly at the cross and trusting the power of the Holy Spirit in the water and Word.

Claiming theological glory for the human spirit operates in the world of "can do" optimism. The focus is often on *me* or *us* rather than on Christ and God. Theologies of glory are uncomfortable with sin, especially original sin and the bondage of the will. Sinful human limitations are minimized. These attitudes generally are moralistic, operating without the cross of Christ, and foster doing great deeds that will impress not only others but God himself. Concepts of God are brought down to earth. He becomes a "buddy" who is like us rather than a holy God who is all-powerful and separate from us because of our sin. Interestingly, to my way of thinking, these concepts confuse God's kingdom with the visible church, making the church a force for positive moral change in society. This finally blurs the line between the church and the state by working for a perfect state based on Christian morality. I'm not suggesting we should not seek to improve our society through the ballot, but if we mobilize church members for political action, don't we divert attention from the one thing needful?

The gospel of the theology of glory is a gospel, of love and morality. "God loves you" becomes a kind of gospel of preservation, that is, God loves you and will take care of all your troubles if you just trust him. In some cases the gospel becomes a goal to be the best human being you can be—a kind of how-to manual for Christians to become salt and light in this world. The cross of Christ is turned into a symbol of sacrifice for a noble cause, an exhortation to endure when everyone is against you, or even a road marker of future success raised by one who has traveled this way before. If Christ has been sacrificed for sin in this universe of thought, then it is the old Roman Catholic doctrine in new clothes. He gives you the start so you can live for him. Understand that this is a sampling of thoughts I've encountered. You will not find every one of them in every presentation, and they have a tendency to morph and change. Nevertheless this is the kind of theological soup we encounter and so do God's people in our care.

On the other hand the cross of Christ removes from sinful human beings the possibility of doing anything that will merit the favor of God. You see, God doesn't need anything we do or anything we might offer to him. We are by nature bound in sin—dead, as Paul tells us. God must do everything spiritual for us; he even provides us with the power to do what he wants. By God's power in the law and gospel, we recognize the sin within, crush it, kill it, and turn to the sacrifice of Christ for our forgiveness. It's the cross because of grace, not glory or reward because of our lives or gifts. Where is boasting then? It is excluded.

We all know that, but we are not yet free from the theology of glory. The discussion earlier about the sinful nature's persistent intrusion into the Christian's life applies here. If we are not careful, we will be bewitched by the subtleties of the theology of glory. The sinful nature, which we still possess, has an addiction to turn grace into merit—to turn the cross and Christ into our glory and to focus our attention on us rather than Christ. We all possess a lust of the spirit that desires to take credit for our spiritual service to God, our leadership, our energy, or our positions in the visible church of God. The only cure is to drown the old nature daily—kill it at the cross—and to praise Christ for all he has done for us, including bringing us to this point in the history of the church as his disciples eager to serve him as he directs. We are his workmanship, "created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:10).

We know all too well that the old sinful flesh does not die easily but instead has the ability to revive and cause trouble again and again. *Addiction* is an apt term. The sinful nature is addicted to its own interests and glory. As with any addiction, our sinful nature does not go away when we give in to it, even if only a little. It only grows in power and intensity. It must be destroyed by daily repentance. This repentance can only happen by the power of the Holy Spirit working through the law and gospel. First the law to crush, then the gospel to empower and heal. Without this power, there is no change, and we perpetually pursue what satisfies our ego. We look for credit, merit, acclaim, acceptance by others, value, and human glory.

The danger is always present for us to abandon the power Christ gave us and adopt a theology that minimizes sin and Christ while turning our attention to human action. This danger seldom presents itself to us in the stark terms of the previous sentence. Most often it comes in stages as a gradual adoption of emphases, methodology, or practices that move us to depend more on human effort than on the gospel. The movement away from the gospel comes as a seductive illusion. Unfortunately, it's the frog-in-the-kettle syndrome. As the heat is slowly turned up, the frog becomes more and more comfortable with warmer and warmer water until it loses its strength. Eventually, it is too late for the frog to jump to safety.

Two Different Houses

As I read through some of the current literature on church growth and church health another illustration comes to mind. I recall Odysseus sailing past the Sirens. The Sirens were mythological creatures with great power. Their beautiful voices lured many sailors to their deaths. As ships passed by, their song was so compelling that the captains and crews would hurl themselves into the sea to their own deaths and leave their ships to crash on the rocks. Odysseus was warned about this danger and chose to tie himself to the mast of his ship in order to hear the Sirens' song. To avoid disaster, he took two more steps. First, he filled the ears of his crew with wax so they were not intoxicated by the Sirens' song. Second, he gave his crew strict orders not to untie him for any reason. Because Odysseus was tied firmly to the mast, his ship and his crew safely sailed past the Sirens.

So I have picked up books and reports that attempt to describe, diagnose, and treat the malaise that we find in the visible church. I think I've heard the seductive song without jumping ship or steering her toward the rocks. Some would say I have been seduced by the reading. Others would say that my ears are full of wax and that I don't hear what is an attractive answer to the problems the church faces. They would say that I just don't get it. You will have to decide for yourselves which version is correct.

As I read these books and articles, I become more and more convinced that they operate in a house different from the one in which God has placed me. And it's not just the obvious doctrinal errors. I usually skip over the sections that talk of decisions we make for Christ and skim passages that distort the sacraments. I expect these things to be present. Perhaps I should not be so tolerant. Maybe that's a manifestation of my growing tolerance for more heat or a symptom of being intoxicated with the literature. But I do sense the presence of more unfamiliar terms and, concepts in the material I read. Then I wonder how we can set the right course for the church in the next century so I must evaluate what I read. Here are some personal observations.

John Stott has a wide reputation as an author, commentator, and lecturer. In *Basic Christianity*, he writes, "Christianity is not just a creed; it involves action. Our intellectual belief may be beyond criticism; but we have to translate our beliefs into deeds" (9). That sounds fine at first reading, but he goes on to say, "But the promise rests on a moral condition. We have to be ready not just to believe, but to obey" (18). Does this sound like the Council of Trent to anyone else?³ In another book, *Baptism and Fullness*, I found this interesting quotation concerning John 7:37-39⁴ "...there are some passages in Scripture which deserve to be printed in letters of

³ If anyone saith, that the man who is justified and howsoever perfect is not bound to observe the commands of God and of the Church, but only to believe; as if indeed the Gospel were a bare and absolute promise of eternal life, without the condition of observing the commandment; let him be anathema" (Council of Trent, Canon XX). "Justification is not only the remission of sins, but also the sanctification and renewal of the interior man" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1994 Edition. Paragraph 1989).

⁴ On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink.

gold. Of such passages the verses before us form one" (52). Again at first glance that may not seem like a significant comment. One person's emphasis is simply different than another's. But I heard an alarm ringing when I read that comment. I remembered a quotation from Luther which talked about golden letters. Luther's comment reveals how the two houses are built differently. Luther commented on Isaiah 53:4⁵, "[Christ's] suffering was nothing else than our own. These words, OUR, US, FOR US, must be written in letters of gold. He who does not believe this is not a Christian" (*Luther's Works*, Vol. 17, p. 221). In juxtaposition with Luther, Stott's comments reveal a different approach, a different spirit—a different house.

Even Lutherans have caught the spirit represented by Stott. Concordia Publishing House released a book in 1992 entitled: *The Goal of the Gospel: God's Purpose in Saving You*. The thesis of the book is that Paul's letter to the Romans emphasizes Christian obedience. The authors admitted that after consulting 120 commentators they found no one who agreed with their approach. All those other commentators believed that Romans 1:16⁶ was the theme of the book of Romans. Nevertheless the authors claimed that the real key for today's church was obedience as found in Romans. The book states, "God wants to restore each of us to that loving, joy-filled relationship with him for which he created us in the beginning. He wants us to experience the blessings that he has in store for everyone who obeys his will" (24) and "Christians have always been very concerned about orthodoxy, or right doctrine. Here, our divine church consultant [Jesus] makes clear that orthopractice, or right living, is just as important as orthodoxy" (57). All this can be conceived in a correct way. Consider this sentence, "People everywhere need to hear the message of redemption in Christ Jesus so that they can trust in him and be moved to obey his will by the power of the Holy Spirit" (24, 25). At the same time, I sense these Lutherans are operating comfortably in the house that Calvin built. The book has been criticized by many in LCMS, although the book does articulate the position of many who consider the main purpose of a Christian to be a life of good works.

This emphasis causes me some difficulty for another reason. More could be said, but permit a little tangent here. Many years ago I injured my foot in a home accident. I filled my tennis shoe with blood while my wife drove me to the emergency room. I had to put my head between my knees to keep from passing out. Once we arrived at the emergency room, I opened the car door to walk inside. Tough guy, right? Fortunately, a muscular African-American ambulance driver was returning to his vehicle as I was just about ready to pass out from loss of blood. He picked me up in his arms and carried me inside. I didn't weigh as much then as I do now, but I was never as grateful for a gesture of concern and kindness as I was that day. I never saw him again, and I don't know whether he was a Christian or not. My point is that such gestures—such good works—occur in our world all the time. The newspapers carry stories of concern and sacrifice by people of many different religious orientations in many different circumstances. Christians do not have a corner on the market of good works—good, from a human perspective. When we place our emphasis on our good deeds we only make ourselves like so many others. Yes, we should perform good works, but our works are never purely good except through Christ. His forgiveness purges my good works—the good works of every Christian—of all the sin that still clings to them because of my sinful nature. A Christian's good words are not good because of their intention to help others or their results but because they are done in connection with Christ. In addition, they provide opportunities to share Jesus and his forgiveness with other people. Some of the writers provide that insight. Some do not. What separates me as a Christian from all others is what I believe about Jesus, not necessarily the form of my good works.

George Barna, has built a reputation on his research on the practices of Christians and Christian churches. I hope you will see the difference between his house and our Lutheran house through a couple of

Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him." By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believe in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified (John 7:37-39).

⁵ Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed (Isaiah 53:4,5).

⁶ 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.

quotations. Barna describes effective ministry, "Throughout this book, I will describe a ministry as being effective when lives are transformed such that people are constantly enabled to become more Christ-like. Effective ministries foster significant and continual changes in how people live. When your church is able to consistently facilitate a personal metamorphosis among its people, then it is operating in the realm of effectiveness" (*The Habits of Highly Effective Churches*, 15) Then he describes the six pillars of effectiveness, "They are the very aspects that characterized the Early Church: worship, evangelism, Christian education, community among the believers, stewardship and serving the needy. These might be considered the six pillars of church ministry" (17, 18).

As a Lutheran, I find these emphases different from my own. The Scriptures speak about the power of the gospel. However, in much of his work, Barna talks about the power of sociological factors that keep people in groups—especially church groups—relationships, communication, leadership, and positive experiences. Consider Barna's survey on worship. His conclusion suggests, "But America has a worship problem. Our surveys among regular church-going adults indicate that one-third of those people have never experienced God's presence. (83)...How is it possible that among individuals who make the effort to frequently attend church service—attending an average of more than 25 worship services in the past year—half of them have not experienced God's presence at all in the past 12 months, in spite of desiring that very outcome?" (84). I don't know what "experience[ing] God's presence" is. Is it some kind of Pentecostal emotional surge? Is it a kind of enlightenment or epiphany that is intellectual? What kind of transcendence are we expecting? The insertion of such a vague term raises questions in my mind about the validity of this research question. What are we measuring? Are we measuring the emotional value of worship? Certainly the question asks about "experience", not revelation, and has no concept of the Holy Spirit working through the means of grace. That concept is not prominent in the thinking in this literature. The house here simply is different from the Lutheran house I inhabit.

I treasure the announcement of God's gracious forgiveness in the absolution and the repetition of that powerful message throughout my worship experience. I simply trust what God says. I need the gospel message of absolution I find in Lutheran worship. Without it my time seems to be wasted. I still have an opportunity to see and talk with my fellow Christians and sing praises to my God, but without the gospel my spiritual life loses an opportunity to receive God's power. God works through the gospel. The Lutheran Confessions assert the truth:

It is indeed true that both the planting and watering of the preacher and the activity and desire of the hearer would be in vain, and no conversion would result from these efforts, if the power and action of the Holy Spirit were not added to them. For the Spirit enlightens and converts hearts through the Word that is proclaimed and heard, so that people believe the Word and say yes to it.

Therefore neither the preacher nor the hearer should doubt this grace and activity of the Holy Spirit but they should be certain that when the Word of God is preached purely and clearly according to God's command and will and people listen to it seriously and diligently and mediate upon it, God will certainly be present with his grace and give, as has been said, what human beings otherwise could neither receive nor take on the basis of their own powers. For the presence, effectiveness, and gift of the Holy Spirit should not and cannot always be assessed *ex sensu*, as a person feels it in the heart. Instead, because the Holy Spirit's activity is often hidden under the cover of great weakness, we should be certain, on the basis of and according to the promise, that the Word of God, when preached and heard, is a function and work of the Holy Spirit through which he is certainly present in our hearts and exercises his power there (2 Corinthians 2 [I Cor. 2:11ff or 2 Cor. 3:5-6]). (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Free Will, Article 2:555)

Rick Warren's popular concept has put millions of books in the hands of people. *Purpose Driven Life* and *Purpose Driven Church* continue to influence evangelical churches and even Lutheran churches, some in

our own midst. But Warren's *Life and Church* are different from mine. The obvious distortions are there concerning Baptism and conversion. But what I find so disturbing is the small attention given in his books to the work of Jesus in saving humanity. God is there; Jesus is too, but not very prominently. His emphasis is different. Warren suggests that our lives are tests and that God will be judging us on how well we use the gifts he has given. Jesus becomes an example: "Jesus honored God by fulfilling his purpose on earth. We honor God the same way" (55). "Jesus modeled a purpose-driven life, and he taught others how to live it too. That was the 'work' that brought glory to God. Today God calls each of us to do the same work" (310). Notice the theology of glory: we give God something. Warren's concept of obedience permits "complete obedience" and cites Noah as an example (72). But when we can provide only partial obedience, it's okay because God looks, at "the attitude of your heart" (76). Forgiveness? Christ? Repentance? Certainly a, different house. If you think we are only a few hair-splits different, listen to the quotation Warren chooses for 2 Corinthians 5:20⁷ "The Bible says, 'We're Christ's representatives. God uses us to persuade men and women to drop their differences and enter into God's work of making things right between them. We're speaking for Christ himself now; Become friends with God'" (283). Is this the gospel, or has he turned the gospel into the law?

Even Reggie McNeal, who spends a great deal of time challenging the latest fads in the church-growth and church-health phenomenon, reveals a different spirit. He writes about the church today confronting the unchurched with Jesus, a good thought at first glance. It is a refreshing emphasis after reading all the others. He analyzes the state of the visible church with some insight, but he does not know the gospel as the means through which the Holy Spirit works. And the Jesus he wants people to confront is not the crucified and risen Lord we treasure. Instead he is the compassionate Lord who helps people in all their difficulties. This Jesus will transform our world and remove its difficulties. We are invited to participate in that mission. McNeal ends up proclaiming a kind of social gospel citing a congregation that changed its building into, a community center and sent members back to school to earn a master's degree in social work (33). Brian McLaren suggests a similar kind of religion. His vision is eclectic, taking bits and pieces from many traditions to arrive at a composite spirituality. His religion is more ecological and social than soteriological. Experience and emotion shape religious thought and also replace the work of the Holy Spirit through the gospel.

In this environment it is not a huge step to believe that the ministry of the church depends more on dynamic leadership than the gospel. The problem is pastoral leadership, "Congregations that are not effective are often paralyzed by pastors who retain control over virtually every decision. Those pastors—who typically are not leaders—are often struggling with ego and self-image problems, resulting in their need to insist on making every judgment call. This behavior signals their failure to master one of the key arts of leadership: delegation" (Barna, *Effective Churches*, p. 41). Does this happen in our churches? Certainly it does. Yet the suggested prescription for a cure is not in repentance or the gospel. It's in change of method and style of leadership. Interestingly, Barna defines leadership: "To be an effective leader, one must be called by God to lead, possess the character of a person of God, and demonstrate a group of competencies that result in leadership. A leader implements the gift and ability to lead by motivating, mobilizing, resourcing and directing people to pursue a jointly shared vision from God. In other words, to be an effective leader you need not win the preaching award, nor must you be a great manager of the ministry, or a wise counselor of parishioners who have emotional problems. Such abilities are often counterproductive for a true leader. A great leader is more likely to delegate preaching, administration, counseling, fundraising, evangelism and program development" (31). I think this is a different house than the one Paul and the Lutheran Confessions built. Consider Paul's defense of his ministry in 2 Corinthians and his comment about emptying the cross of Christ of its power in the context of human wisdom and God's wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:13-2:16).⁸ For Barna and others, the paradigm for leadership shifts from herald of the gospel and faithful servant of Christ to dynamic leadership.

So much has been written on leadership recently, and much of it is good and helpful. Pastors and lay

⁷ We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5:20 NIV).

⁸ For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power (1 Corinthians 1:17).

leaders can learn to be better leaders, but we must remember that the gospel is the power of God, which he has entrusted to sinful, weak human beings—clay vessels.

A corollary to the discussion of leadership is in the word *delegate*. One of the buzz phrases in the evangelical and church-growth literature is that "Everyone is a minister." Yes, that simple sentence can be understood correctly. But I'm concerned about its misapplication in two ways. First, when using the word minister in this way, the phrase can be misunderstood as "Everyone is a public minister." This distorts the scriptural teaching and breeds confusion. It also feeds the idea that one does not need the visible church and the spiritual shepherd provided there. Several writers suggest that people are leaving the organized church in order to preserve their faith. Much more could be said about that, but here the idea of everyone a minister feeds the idea of an eclectic, idiosyncratic faith that caters to the appetites of the sinful flesh and its thirst for a theology of glory. Second, the use of this idea seems to bring people into the church to do God's work. Of course, that's not wrong, but let me explain. For example, a congregation might have a whole series of committees for education, worship, parenting, outreach, adult Bible study, teens, and others. Each of those committees might be composed of 3 or 4 people. In the life of a congregation that means 18 or more people come for meetings of the committees. Certainly it is important for them to be involved in the ministry of the congregation and the congregation needs to plan its work, but the church has just imploded and directed its human resources internally. Would it not be better to find a way for the church to explode and to get these people out in contact with others? Reggie McNeal expresses similar concerns and cringes at the recitation of the mantra "Everyone a minister" (45).

I suggest that we find a way to return to our Lutheran perspective of vocation. My mother was a minister—that is, a servant—in our home. She stayed at home to care for us, correct us, and make sure that we understood the importance of Jesus. My father was a minister too, but he was not a, public minister. He provided food and clothing for us, he loved us, and on the job he cared for the people he supervised. His gentle Christian example, thank God, was not lost on us. He also served his congregation in many capacities, but his ministry was not limited to "church." Luther suggested that God calls all Christians to be his servants wherever they are. They are to exhibit the fruit of the Spirit.⁹ Their role is to serve others. In that role they expose themselves to opportunities for sharing their faith. The gospel in their hands is no less a power than it is in the hands of a called servant.

The house in which God has placed me is Lutheran, and I believe it is Lutheran because it is biblical and correct. I am a sinful creature and yet God has made me not only a servant in his church but a public servant—a public minister of clay. My faith is dependent upon the gospel and it persists because the Holy Spirit continues to work within me by the same gospel. I do not wish to minimize my failures and shortcomings. I know them better than any of you because I try to hide the worst of them. So do we all. I wrestle not only with those things I fail to do for my Savior and his church, but I also wrestle with my own pride and arrogance when I think I've done something right. Both of these are only opposite sides of the same coin—I'm still a sinner. Yes, still a sinner, even after the boundless love of God for me in Christ that has made me a saint. I'm trapped in the daily conflict with my old sinful flesh. That means I daily repent—turn away from sin, access the blessings of my baptism, and turn again to my Savior for the assurance of his forgiveness. Tomorrow I will have to do the same thing. I will discover that I have not been as successful at living my faith as I resolved to do today. This is not an excuse for mediocre service or a license to be satisfied with less than my best. Instead, it is the only way I can grow and mature as a Christian. And it all revolves around the gospel of Christ crucified. That's power—power to believe, power to do good for Jesus, power to share Jesus, power I want to impart to all God's people who share my journey. The message of my sin and the grace of God in Christ are daily needs. They are profoundly practical, and I can't understand why someone would say that these are not practical in his or her day-to-day affairs.

What I sense in the examples I've cited from other writers operates in a different world of thought. For most of them, the power for Christian life is not dependent upon the gospel alone. The work of the Holy Spirit

⁹ The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law (Galatians 5:22).

is separated from the gospel. He works independent of it and can be felt and experienced. In that literature, the evidence for the work of the Spirit is the emotional high that often comes from contact with others, worship, and in those moments of private epiphany. The goal is obedience, Christian morality, and community. If I simply pray more fervently, try harder, and resolve to do better, I will achieve a better Christian life or at least I will move in that direction. If something is wrong in my life, it must be that I am not as committed, fervent, or earnest enough. In my opinion this approach fits well with our American concept of progress and self-confidence. But it poses problems for real-life defeats and the messy internal struggle with sin. I was at a conference recently where a former Evangelical professed his appreciation for his new Lutheran faith. He said that what he was looking for was a God for the bad days, not only one for the good days. I think that's what Lutheran faith offers. God loves us completely. I am his servant even on the days I fail and on those days when all the forces of the world are arrayed against me.

This thought came wonderfully to me as I attended the funeral of a one hundred year-old Christian some years ago. As I sat there listening to the gospel, I remembered a simple verse from Isaiah: "I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more" (43:25). What was so astounding to me that day was the simple word translated "for my own sake." God loved me because he loved me, for *his* sake. I know that he does not and cannot change. His love then remains sure and certain no matter what I experience. On good and bad days God loved me. In death, he still loves me. His love never depends on my prayer, attitude, or record of service. It was and is grace from beginning to end as Paul reminds us all. I have often returned to that little phrase "for my own sake" to find comfort and encouragement in my daily mood swings and when I am saddened by my failures or the failures of other Christians.

III. Resolving a Tension

No matter what you think about Barna, Stott, McNeal, McLaren and the others, you will have a tendency to rush to judge those who think differently. We have difficulty discussing these things. A rhetoric takes over that paints the other side in the darkest terms possible. On one side, some say that failure to accept the diagnoses they offer is a denial of the real world in our church and other churches. A corollary of this rhetoric is that we must adopt change or die. These advisers suggest that if we don't change we will become extinct in 50 years. They remind us that any change is better than no change. On the other side of the rhetorical table are those who claim that anyone advocating acceptance of these diagnoses and their proposed remedies are heading us away from the gospel and Christ. Once we lose our Christ-centered approach, they remind us, we will lose what is essential. Some say that leadership needs to provide the answers and take action. Others wonder what leaders are doing.

We have a tension created by differences of opinion concerning these matters and we have a tension involved with the discussion and resolution of these issues. I sense two opposing forces marshalling for some future showdown. Sadly, we are not talking to one another and not listening to one another. These tensions grow as additional problems swirl around the discussion. Financial difficulties turn up the heat of the debate. Questions about the relationship of synod and its leadership to district and congregational roles add fuel. The struggle over priorities fans the rhetoric and so do differing versions of the future of our synod. Fears that we have adopted a different doctrinal stance are not erased by assurances from those who appear not to be listening. All these things can leave us locked in an atmosphere of suspicion and cynicism. What shall we do?

We have to start with a respect for one another and a willingness to listen. I don't believe that we can carry out productive discussions while we are suspicious of one another and characterize one another in negative terms. Fingers are pointed at pastors for leadership failures and other problems. Other fingers point to laypeople who oppose pastors and confidently assert that business principles will save the church. God has drawn us all together in his church, and we share a confession to the truths of Scripture. Have we deliberately polarized ourselves because we fail to listen to one another? One side—actually both sides do this—develops alliances with others who are likeminded, forming a political power bloc. We do not talk about issues and solve problems together. Instead we test to see whose opinion has the most power and influence. The other side views

any dissent as a threat and seeks to isolate dissenters and marginalize them. Both sides have a tendency to accept simple solutions in the face of the complicated problems we face. Instant relief has its attractions even if one of them is not long-term benefit. The illusion of action—any kind of action—satisfies the need to address underlying problems without actually doing it. But iron sharpens iron as we carry out our work. We need to love one another as brothers. That too can only come from the power of the Holy Spirit working through the gospel. Perhaps one side is right and the other wrong. Perhaps both are wrong. Perhaps both are right. Shall we not return to the gospel for God's strength to repent and do better?

When we have achieved a culture of respect and love, then we must ask the tough questions. We cannot sidestep them or deflect them. We also have to challenge assumptions, analyses, and conclusions. How much can I learn from a writer who suggests that the promises of God are conditional? How important are suggestions that come from an orientation that does not understand either the gospel or God the Holy Spirit's work through it? Are we trying to pick grapes from thornbushes (Matthew 7:16)? Should we change our educational system? How much should we change? Why? Are we looking for dynamic preachers and leaders or faithful servants of Christ to proclaim the gospel? Are the church-growth and church-health leaders only contemporary manifestations of another gospel Paul already resisted on behalf of the Galatians?¹⁰ Are these writers nothing more than modern versions of the "super apostles" Paul defended himself against? Have we already passed the point of no return? Are we depending too much on human techniques? Are we like Uzzah who reached out to steady the ark of God and was struck dead (2 Samuel 6:6,7)? Have we failed to listen to the still small voice of God and instead become impatient enough to accept the wind, the earthquake, or the fire (1 Kings 19)? What techniques and strategies should we use in the work of the church? We will never be like the Amish and avoid all modern tools, but what about educational research on the way the brain learns? Outreach strategies? Computers? The Internet? Can any of these tools be compatible with the proclamation of the gospel and the work of the Holy Spirit? Which ones? When does the use of these tools and others jeopardize gospel outreach and empty the cross of Christ of its power? Tough questions? I sense that we are moving to a point where we cannot discuss them except with rancor and suspicion. We need to repent and treat one another as brothers.

IV. Setting a Direction

Confessional Lutherans understand the underlying problem of our humanity—sin. We realize that we are not what we ought to be. The law teaches us that but so does everyday life. Everyone wants to be successful, influential, powerful, and important. But such a state is not to be, here in this life. Life is not always a happy joyful march forward. No matter how happy the exterior, inside we all know something is wrong. Lutherans understand with Paul that "I have a desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing" (Romans 7:18,19). It's a problem of our human existence this side of eternity.

Lutherans, also understand the solution—Christ. We understand the power of the gospel and address the problem of sin with the proclamation of the gospel. Through the gospel we receive power to turn away from all that is imperfect in our world and in ourselves. We daily repent and turn toward Christ. The strength we receive from the gospel gives us strength to battle sin within and temptation without. The battle is not over and will not be over as long as we are here in this life. Our victories are often muted or clouded by the next battle sometimes waged over the same territory. Lutherans understand the daily collision of sin and Christ. The battle rages, but the victory is ours already.

The Christian's contact with the gospel is empowering, refreshing, and life-giving. That contact is not spectacular nor is it often dramatic. It's not the fire, the wind, or the earthquake. Instead it's often contact with

¹⁰ You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? Have you suffered so much for nothing—if it really was for nothing? Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard? (Galatians 3:1-5)

the still small voice of the gospel. Through that message the Holy Spirit works to give us strength, comfort, and hope. We have a Spirit-born optimism based on the ultimate triumph and victory of Christ. We too shall triumph in Christ, even though we may not have any assurance that the visible church we know today will be successful in growing or solving her problems. God did not give us a gospel of perpetual happy thoughts that defies reality. The message God entrusted to us is his gospel, and it is power for day-to-day life with all its bumps, bruises, and barriers.

A recent observation by George Barna suggests that statistically the religious climate in American has not changed, "Nothing is more numbing to the Church than the fact that it is mired in a rut of seemingly unfathomable depths. The various creative approaches attempted over the course of this decade have drawn much attention but produced little, if any transformational impact. The incredible string of events that have set the stage for spiritual change and passion have ignited shockingly little change" (*State of the Church 2005*, p. 51). Reggie McNeal also disparages the visible church's infatuation with every church-health/growth fad and guru. As a confessional Lutheran, I do not want to out-evangelical the Evangelicals. I can't do that. The system of thought God has given me makes that a bad fit, one that is doomed to fail. Let me be known as a Christian who was and is committed to Christ crucified and risen again. My commitment is founded on the promises of God. He promises to work through the gospel to accomplish his work. I trust that the visible church to which I belong will be marked with the same commitment to the gospel. I know that the *una sancta* is, and with one of its apostles it confesses, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16). May God motivate us by his gospel to make the same confession.

INI

Postlude:

A Parable¹¹

Once a man was traveling through territory that was not familiar to him. He was on his way to a great city where he would find full peace and joy. He had a reliable map that provided accurate information for his journey. You could say that the map provided inspired directions, and the traveler learned to trust the map on his journey. Often the map provided him with courage along the road and hope when things were difficult. It also helped focus his thoughts on the destination when he was distracted.

One day as he traveled he came to a particularly difficult stretch of road. As he walked along the road, he discovered that many seemed to be deserting the road suggested by the map. They all chose to travel a smoother path that appeared to follow the same general direction of the difficult road. He grew uncertain and confused so he decided to ask for directions. When he passed a man on the side of the road, he told the man where he wanted to go and asked which road would lead to his destination. The man said that the smooth path was the right road. "Just stay on this road, and it will get you there." When the traveler asked if the man had ever followed the road, the man confessed that he had never traveled that road to the destination. But he said that many others said that the smooth road was the right one. He assumed they were wiser and smarter than he was and knew what they were talking about.

With that information, the traveler continued along the smooth road. At one point he stopped to check his map, and the smooth path seemed to move him away from his destination. He stopped to ask again. The man he talked to assured him that he was on the right road. The traveler protested, "But the map shows this path is leading in the wrong direction." The man looked at his map and said that it was old and outdated. "The newer maps have more current information," he said. He concluded by reminding the traveler that he had to get a better map because the old one did not include the latest survey information. The traveler protested, saying, "But the map has been reliable for many, many years." The man looked at him and with a scoff growled, "Don't

¹¹ Here is an adaptation of some thoughts first put on paper by John Bunyan.

be silly. It just doesn't work now."

So the traveler continued his journey on the smooth path. But each step made him more and more uncomfortable with the direction. A group of people were stopped along the road talking so he stopped to ask if he was on the right road. "Sure. Just keep following the road and you'll get there," they all agreed. But he asked if any of them had traveled the road to make sure it led to the destination. They said, "Well, no, but we all believe this road is the right one and so many others agree with us."

"But what about the map?" the traveler asked. "If you follow *that* map, you'll never get there." The traveler stood quietly for a moment and then decided to leave the smooth road and return to the rough road suggested by the map. When the others saw him leave the smooth path, they all laughed at him and called him a fool. But he chose to ignore the abuse and trust his map.

The journey was very difficult, but he continued to trust the map rather than turn aside, seek an alternative route, or stop. Finally he arrived at his destination. As he entered the great city, he was filled with the joy and peace that he knew he would find there. He lived there many years, and during those years he continued to look for those he had met along the other road, hoping that they would also arrive. But none of them ever found the way to the destination. He assumed that they were still wandering or that the road had actually led to a different destination. But even the sadness of knowing that they would never arrive did not diminish his joy and peace.

Bibliography

- Barna, George. *A Fish Out of Water: 9 Strategies to Maximize Your God-Given Leadership Potential*. Nashville, Tennessee: Integrity Publishers, 2002.
- Barna, George. *Growing True Disciples*. Colorado Springs, Colorado: WaterBrook Press, 2001.
- Barna, George. *The Habits of Highly Effective Churches*. Ventura, California: Regal Books, 1999.
- Barna, George. *The Power of Vision*. Ventura, California: Regal Books, 2003.
- Barna, George. *Think Like Jesus: Make the Right Decision. Every Time*. Nashville, Tennessee: Integrity Publishers, 2003.
- Becker, Siegbert. "The Gospel." *Abiding Word*, Vol. II. St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1960, p. 347-366.
- Bennis, Warren. *Why Leaders Can't Lead: The Unconscious Conspiracy Continues*. San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1989.
- Forde, Gerhard O. *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997.
- Forde, Gerhard O. *Where God Meets Man: Luther's Down-to-Earth Approach to the Gospel*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1972.
- Gaertner, Carl. "The Means of Grace in an Effective Church Program" *Abiding Word*, Vol III. St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1960. p. 394-425.
- Hoenecke, Adolf. *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*. Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Northwestern Publishing House, 1999.
- Kolb, Robert and Timothy J. Wengert (Editors). *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2000.
- Johnson, Spencer. *Who Moved My Cheese?* New York, New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2002.
- Luther, Martin. *Luther's Works*, Vol. 31. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Muhlenberg Press, 1957.
- McKim, Donald. *Introducing the Reformed Faith*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.
- McLaren, Brian. *A Generous Orthodoxy: Why I am a missional, evangelical, post/Protestant, liberal/conservative, mystical/poetic, biblical, charismatic/contemplative, Fundamentalist/Calvinist, Anabaptist/Anglican, Methodist, Catholic, Green incarnational, depressed-yet-hopeful, emergent, unfinished Christian*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2004.
- McNeal, Reggie. *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church*. San Francisco, California: Wiley,

- John and Sons Incorporated, 2003.
- Miller, Calvin. *Into the Depths of God: Where Eyes See the Invisible, Ears Hear the Inaudible, and Minds Conceive the Inconceivable*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House, 2000.
- Preus, Klemet I. *The Fire and the Staff: Lutheran Theology in Practice*. St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 2004.
- Schmid, Heinrich. *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1899. Reprint 1961.
- Senkbeil, Harold. *Dying to Live: The Power of Forgiveness*. St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1994.
- Senkbeil, Harold. *Sanctification: Christ in Action*. Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Northwestern Publishing House, 1989.
- Stott, John R. W. *Baptism & Fullness: The Work of the Holy Spirit Today*. 2nd ed. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1975.
- Stott, John R. *Basic Christianity*. 2nd ed. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1978.
- Stott, John R. *Our Guilty Silence: The Church, the Gospel, and the World*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1967.
- Vieth, Gene Edward Jr. *The Spirituality of the Cross: The Way of the First Evangelicals*. St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1999.
- Warren, Rick. *The Purpose Driven Life*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2002.
- Wolfe, Alan. *The Transformation of American Religion*. New York, New York: Free Press, 2003.
- Zwonitzer, Rodney E. *Testing the Claims of Church Growth*. St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 2002.