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The Service of Women in and For the Church

Pastor Rolf David Preus

Editor: The following paper by Rev. Rolf Preus was presented on June 25, 2008 at the Summer Confessional Lutheran Free Conference. After seventeen years, it remains timely and worth reading alongside Rev. Kelter's piece.

When God made us in his image both male and female he established the foundation for marriage and the family. What is implicit in God's creation is made explicit in his law. When the first chapters of Genesis are regarded as religious myth and not the defining history of the human race the foundation for divine law governing men, women, children, marriage, and family is destroyed. The written law becomes arbitrary rules that don't make much sense. Once the rationale is gone, the law becomes a list of do's and don'ts that cannot be understood or easily applied.

Once God's law has been reduced to a list of rules there is no way to alter or eliminate a rule without causing confusion and offense. If women aren't required to wear hats in church anymore, why shouldn't they be permitted to preach? Why is one rule more sacred than the other? The same Bible addresses both. Some churches require women to cover their heads in church. They are very strict. Some churches permit women to leave their heads uncovered but do not permit them to vote. They are strict. Some churches permit their women to vote but do not permit them to preach. They are kind of strict. Some churches permit their women to preach but still remain guilty of sexism because they are liberal and liberals must always be inventing pretensions to guilt to take the place of the real sins that they refuse to admit.

So, where do you stand? Are you very strict? Strict? Kind of strict? Or liberal? How many rules do you have and how strictly do you enforce them?

There must be a better way to approach this. And there is. We begin by dispensing with all rules and resolving to determine what the service of women in and for the church is by taking to heart what God did and said when he created us in his image male and female.

In the beginning God made us in his image. Moses writes, "So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them." Genesis 1, 27 God did not create an androgynous human being. Essential to being created in God's image is being created either male or female. In his essay, "It is Not Given to Women to Teach: A Lex in Search of a Ratio," Bill Weinrich points out that our maleness and femaleness are not accidental properties of our humanity but constitutive aspects of being human. As Weinrich puts it: "There is no humanity,

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The Development of the Debate on the Ordination of Women in the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church (SELK) of Germany

By Rev. Gert Kelter

Regional bishop (Propst) emeritus, Hannover

The controversy over the permissibility, i.e. the scriptural and confessional conformity of the ordination of women to the pastoral ministry of the church has been virulent in the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church in Germany (SELK) since 1972, when the so-called "old" Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church (in Hesse and Lower Saxony), the Evangelical Lutheran (Old Lutheran) Church (in West Germany) and the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church (in West Germany) merged to form today's (SELK).

As early as the first church synod in 1973, the Epiphany congregation in Bochum submitted a motion to strike out Article 7.2 of the church constitution, which had been adopted by all church leaders in 1971 in the run-up to unification. This states: "This (i.e. the one ministry instituted by Christ) (i.e. preaching the word and administering the sacraments) can only be conferred on men."

The pastor and applicant of the Epiphany congregation in Bochum was Dr. Volker Stolle (b. 1940, retired since 2005), who was appointed Professor of New Testament at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Oberursel (near Frankfurt am Main) in 1984 despite his clearly articulated support of women's ordination. Stolle was and is probably the most determined fighter for women's ordination and has been the spiritual mentor of those who advocate the introduction of women's ordination in the SELK.

Since then, the conflict over the ordination of women has accompanied and often paralyzed church life in the SELK to varying degrees.

In 1975, a synodal commission on the "Ministries of Women in the Church" presented its report to the church synod. The result of the commission's work at the time was as follows:

"The majority of the commission is convinced that even today the statements of the New Testament do not give the church the freedom to open the way for women to the pastoral ministry leading congregations, to the pastoral office. A minority of the commission was not convinced of the conclusiveness of these arguments. The New Testament texts are not so clear as to deny women access to the pastoral office."

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The Development of the Debate on the Ordination of Women in the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church (SELK) of Germany

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After controversial debates, the 2nd Church Synod of the SELK (1975 in Bochum) finally decided unanimously: *“The synod unanimously acknowledges the result of the commission’s work, according to which the ordination of women to the sacred ministry in the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church is still not possible today. The Synod is convinced by an overwhelming majority that the statements of the Holy Scriptures themselves exclude such a possibility in a binding manner.”*

Although church synods and general pastors’ conventions have since repeatedly confirmed the incompatibility of women’s ordination with Scripture and the confession, the controversy continued and repeatedly had a negative impact on the general climate in the SELK, tying up energies and demotivating full-time and voluntary staff.

Most recently, after the Coronavirus scare, the conflict flared up again with renewed vehemence: The opponents of the current constitution (i.e. the proponents of women’s ordination) are vehemently pushing that a decision be made now.

Based on the 13th General Pastors’ Convention 2027, a so-called “Atlas on Women’s Ordination”¹ was compiled by a commission set up for this purpose, which was supposed to attempt to “find a solution to this issue [i.e. WO] and develop procedures that go beyond the possibilities of the negotiation strategies of previous years.”

Instead, the “Atlas” repeated the arguments for and against women’s ordination (which had already been presented in a paper published in 2000²) and ended up formulating six solution models, four of which envisaged the de facto and spiritual division of the SELK.

The 15th Church Synod (Gotha 2023) adopted the “Atlas on Women’s Ordination” as a “new approach to a debate that has so far been predominantly contradictory, to better understand and tolerate the respective doctrinal opinions on the question of the ordination of women.”

It set up a synodal “Scenarios” commission with the task of “before considering a possible amendment of Article 7 (2) of the Constitution and the insertion of Article 7 (3), the possible scenarios according to ch. 7 of “Atlas on Women’s Ordination” [Atlas

Frauenordination], to develop models of viable church structures for the scenarios (including decision-making paths under church law and possible consequences) and to prioritize them.”

This imaginary Article 7(3) would state that each congregation of the SELK could decide for itself whether or not to employ ordained women. This would correspond to “Model 4” of the “Atlas on Women’s Ordination” and would result in the SELK becoming a union church, contrary to Scripture and the Lutheran confessions, in which contradictory doctrines would be tolerated with equal rights.

In October 2024, this synodal “Scenarios” commission submitted an interim report to the Board of Superintendents, which stated that the “confessional relevance of the question of the ordination of women” must be “clarified together - as unanimously as possible - at the General Pastors’ Convention (2025)”. Only then will it be possible for the synodal commission to implement the task of “prioritizing the scenarios.”

In other words, the synodal “Scenarios” commission, which like almost all committees is made up of an equal number of supporters and opponents of women’s ordination, was unable to agree that this question is “relevant to the confession” at all. This is now to be clarified at the 15th General Pastors’ Convention, which will take place in Hofgeismar from June 23 to 27, 2025.

This documents an extreme point of ignorance. After the opinion that the question of women’s ordination was purely a question of order, an adiaphoron, had been openly communicated at the beginning, it has long since been undisputed in the SELK, also repeatedly confirmed by church synods and general pastors’ conventions, that the question of women’s ordination is 1. a doctrinal question (and therefore not a mere question of order), that 2. the current doctrine of the SELK states that the ordination of women is not possible for scriptural and confessional reasons and that positions deviating from this are merely doctrinal opinions that will only be tolerated as long as the debate on the permissibility of women’s ordination has not been finally and conclusively decided.

So now the question is raised again as to whether women’s ordination has any confessional relevance at all.

In October 2024, the church leadership and the Board of Superintendents decided to submit a motion to the General Pastors’ Convention 2025 that the General Pastors’ Convention should confirm the “implicit doctrinal decision,” as expressed in Article 7(2) of the SELK constitution “as scriptural and confessional” and to cite the arguments listed as counter-arguments in the “Atlas on Women’s Ordination” as the main reasons for this.

The term “implicit doctrinal decision” comes from the SELK’s College of Superintendents. I find it difficult because it says that Article 7(2) of the Constitution (“The office of the church can only be given to men”) is only an order (human regulation), but actually contains a doctrinal decision that has not existed elsewhere before. That is what is meant by it and is used in this way by opponents of WO, who want to say that although Article 7(2) is only an ecclesiastical order, it nevertheless contains a doctrinal decision.

I have a different opinion and therefore do not actively use the term “implicit doctrinal decision”: With the inclusion of Article 7(2), an *explicit* doctrinal decision was already made, the expression of which is Art. 7(2) of the Constitution. The synods and general parish conventions of 1973/1975 all stated that the statements

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of the Holy Scriptures bindingly exclude the ordination of women. This is the doctrinal decision from which Art. 7(2) arises. And this is still the official teaching of the SELK today.

A motion (from opponents of WO) may also be presented at the General Pastors' Convention in June, listing exactly which scriptures are the basis for rejecting WO. This is intended to turn the "implicit doctrinal decision" of Article 7(2) into an explicit doctrinal decision. The problem from my point of view is that this would mean admitting that there has not yet been such an explicit doctrinal decision, because it was only generally stated that the statements of Holy Scripture exclude WO, but not specifically which scriptures these are. Of course, if the motion were to pass, a lot would be gained. But if it were rejected, that would also be tantamount to a negative doctrinal decision or could be interpreted as such. So that is a risk.

The year 2025, the 53rd year after the founding of the SELK, the 508th year after the introduction of the Reformation in Germany, could be the last year of the existence of the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church if the 15th General Pastors' Convention in Hofgeismar and the 15th Church Synod, which is to take place from September 17 to 20 at a location not yet known at the time of going to press, were to decide (to be precise: assert) the compatibility of women's ordination with the Scriptural Lutheran Confession.

The General Pastors' Convention consists of all active full-time ordained ministers and must pass resolutions on questions of doctrine, worship and church practice (e.g. also church fellowship),

on which the Church Synod (49% congregational delegates [laity], 51% ordained ministers) can "take a stand". The Church Synod can accept or reject GPC resolutions, but may not pass its own resolutions on matters of doctrine, worship and church practice.

But even these constitutional principles are now facing loud opposition: supporters of women's ordination believe that the church synod should be allowed to introduce the rule that each congregation decides for itself whether or not to employ ordained women, for example, even without a prior decision by the General Pastors' Convention.

There are also divergent opinions on the question of whether the General Pastors' Convention may decide to delete or amend Article 7(2) of the constitution with a simple majority or only with a two-thirds majority and submit this to the Church Synod. It is clearly regulated for the Church Synod that a two-thirds majority is required to amend the constitution. Such an explicit regulation, according to which the GPC must also pass resolutions that would result in an amendment to the constitution by the church synod with a two-thirds majority, is unfortunately missing in the corresponding bylaws, although this would be the only logical legal requirement.

There is much to pray for!

1 <https://www.selk.de/index.php/weitere-kirchliche-stellungnahmen-orientierungs-und-arbeitshilfen>

2 "Die wesentlichen Argumente zur Frage einer Ordination von Frauen zum Amt der Kirche, soweit sie bisher in der SELK geäußert wurden (Pro- und Contra-Papier)." <https://www.selk.de/index.php/weitere-kirchliche-stellungnahmen-orientierungs-und-arbeitshilfen>



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The Service of Women in and For the Church

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no personhood, apart from male humanity, male personhood and female humanity, female personhood.”¹

What God wants men and women to do and to refrain from doing does not proceed out of his arbitrary will disconnected from what he made man and woman to be when he created us in his image. In fact, it is always to Creation that we must turn if we are to understand what it means to be male and female.

This is how Jesus approaches the subject. In defending the sanctity of marriage and condemning divorce, Jesus did not consult a list of rules gleaned from a body of principles established by deductions and extrapolations from the law. He appealed to creation. When the Pharisees pressed him for his position on divorce, St. Matthew records Jesus’ response:

And He answered and said to them, “Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh?’ So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate.” Matthew 19, 4-6

This is also how the Apostle Paul approaches the subject. St. Paul condemns both homosexual lusts (what today is called “orientation”) and homosexual activity by appealing to creation. He writes:

For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due. Romans 1, 26-27

What is natural? What is unnatural? Natural is that which accords with what God created us to be. God made them male and female. What is unnatural is that which perverts or distorts what God created us to be.

God as Creator is God as Lawgiver, Savior, and Judge. If God is not Creator, he has no authority to establish law. He has no authority to deliver from the law’s judgment. He has no authority to judge. Indeed, he is not really God at all.

The notion that the human species evolved from a primary organism has become established dogma throughout the educated classes in the West. This has effectively disconnected religion from creation. Naïve Christians assume that if we insist that God directed the evolution of man we can acquiesce to rendering as mythical the history of Genesis. But the history of Creation is the foundation upon which we must rely if we are to understand what it means to be a man and what it means to be a woman. The argument that it does not matter how God created us as long as we know that he created us is a false argument. It matters very much how God created us. There is a wealth of vital instruction for us in the details of Creation.

Consider the specifics of the creation of woman recorded for us by Moses in the second chapter of Genesis. Moses recounts how God made Adam out of the dust of the ground, breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and Adam became a living soul. He recounts how God gave Adam the command not to eat the fruit of

the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. First God formed Adam from the dust of the ground. Then God gave him the responsibility of caring for the Garden of Eden. Then God commanded him not to eat of the fruit of the tree in the middle of the Garden. Then God gave Adam lordship over the animals as evidenced by him naming them. Only then did God create woman. Moses writes:

And the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam, and he slept; and He took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh in its place. Then the rib which the LORD God had taken from man He made into a woman, and He brought her to the man. And Adam said: “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.” Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. Genesis 2, 21-24

The divine command not to eat of the fruit of the tree in the middle of the Garden came to Eve through Adam. The divine command to care for the Garden of Eden came to Eve through Adam. Eve’s flesh and bones came from Adam. She was called woman because she was taken out of man.

The chronological order of Creation establishes the order for the right relationship between man and woman from the beginning to the end of time. God speaks to the woman through the man. The man spoke for God. God chose to speak to the woman through the man. When the man disobeyed God it was because he listened to the voice of his wife. God had not given to Eve the authority to speak on his behalf to the man. By listening to her voice and obeying her Adam acquiesced to her assuming the pastoral office. He made her his pastor. He ordained her. The ordination of a woman was the original sin.

This is what God said. He said,

“Because you have heeded the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree of which I commanded you, saying, ‘You shall not eat of it’: Cursed is the ground for your sake; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life.” (Genesis 3, 17)

God made Adam Eve’s pastor. He did not make Eve Adam’s pastor. This much is clear. Why? Why did God give preaching to a man to do and not to a woman to do? Asking the “why” question can be a dangerous activity in the theological task. God doesn’t need to explain himself to us. But there is something implicit that we would do well to make explicit. By implicit, I mean self evident. What was it? What do we learn from the creation itself that teaches us it was wrong for Eve to serve as Adam’s pastor and that it remains wrong as long as men are men and women are women?

Is it that God is our Father and the pastor is the iconic representation of God? Since a man can be a father and a woman cannot, is it wrong for a woman to represent God? Or is it that Christ is the bridegroom and the church is the bride? If a woman were to stand before the bride of Christ in the stead of Christ a lesbian kind of relationship would be depicted?

The argument from the fatherhood of God and Christ as the heavenly bridegroom is not grounded in the doctrine of creation so much as in the doctrine of God. It is an argument from who and what God is, that is, from God’s nature to the pastoral office. It disallows women pastors because having women pastors contradicts what God has revealed to us about himself.

There is much to commend this approach. The goddess movement has invaded even the church itself. It cannot be mere coin-

vidence that one generation gave us women pastors and the next generation gave us mother god. Several years ago I heard a sermon on a Grand Forks radio station preached by a pastor from a local congregation of the ELCA. It was Trinity Sunday. He asserted that while the church has traditionally addressed God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, it would be just as legitimate to address God as Mother, Lover, and Friend. When women stand in the pulpit and at the altar to represent Christ confusion about God results.

But there is a weakness to the iconic or representative argument against women preachers. The fact is that a woman can and does represent God by God's own command: "Honor thy father and thy mother." Both fathers and mothers speak and act as God's representatives. Why may a mother be an icon of the Deity in the home but not in the church?

Furthermore, the iconic argument against women preachers ignores the essence of the preaching office in order to focus on what is secondary. We Lutherans conceive of the pastoral office, not in terms of pastors, but in terms of preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments. It is not so much what a pastor is as it is what a pastor does.

It is true that one may not do what the office gives one to do unless one is entrusted with the office. The office and the functions of the office go together. We cannot understand the office apart from the actual carrying out of the functions. If we are to stay with the language of our Confessions we will speak of the pastoral office more in terms of what the pastor does than in terms of what the pastor is. The office is essentially functional. That is to say, it is not the office except insofar as it is functioning as the office.

At this point I would like to try to clear up a bit of confusion. In recent years the formless model of the ministry popularized by the Wauwatosa theologians and adopted as the official doctrine of the WELS and the ELS has been designated the functional view. This is a very misleading designation. The problem with the formless doctrine of the ministry is not that it defines the office functionally – one wonders how else a Lutheran could define it – but because it falsely claims that the preaching office is infinitely divisible. We may, according to this opinion, chop up the office into innumerable constituent parts and retain the essence of the office itself. Each new office formed requires a divine call, of course.

Parochial school teachers receive "divine calls" to teach children in the Christian day school because religion is on the curriculum. Sunday school teachers receive "divine calls" to teach Sunday school. Laymen receive "divine calls" for the sole purpose of giving the Lord's Supper to the pastor during the Divine Service twice a month. Sometimes, laymen receive "divine calls" to read the pastor's sermon and administer the Lord's Supper to the congregation when the pastor is off on a vacation.

The formless doctrine of the ministry does not reckon with the fact that our Lord formed the office when he established it. He did not simply toss out the duties of the office and tell his Church to assemble the duties into offices. He gave to the original office holders the duty to preach the gospel, to forgive and retain sins, and to administer the sacraments. These divinely ordained duties form the fullness of the office. The Good Shepherd (Pastor) wishes to feed his Church by means of the pure preaching of his gospel and the right administration of his holy sacraments. He has established the pastoral office to do just that. The pastoral office is Christ's office and remains Christ's office. The primary pastoral task is the

preaching of the gospel. It is public, both in the sense of official and in the literal sense of right out in the open. The public preaching is what receives emphasis in both the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions.

The formless doctrine of the ministry operates under a theological bait and switch that works like this. First, the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments are reduced to a theological abstraction such as "using the means of grace." This abstraction replaces the concrete and specific duties that God gave to the office that he actually instituted. Then, after the substitution has been made, various kinds of activities that could fall under the designation "using the means of grace" are assigned to various people, each of whom carries out a part of the ministry and since a part is of the same essence as the whole a part of the ministry is the ministry. There is no form to hold it together. Anything even tangentially related to the abstract concept of using the means of grace becomes the ministry.

The problem with this model is not that it is functional. It is that it distorts the functions that make the office the office. The right definition of the office is given in the Augsburg Confession and it is a functional definition. We read:

That we may obtain this faith, the Ministry of Teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Ghost is given, who works faith; where and when it pleases God, in them that hear the Gospel, to wit, that God, not for our own merits, but for Christ's sake, justifies those who believe that they are received into grace for Christ's sake. They condemn the Anabaptists and others who think that the Holy Ghost comes to men without the external Word, through their own preparations and works. (AC V, Triglotta)

There is nothing wrong with defining the office of preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments according to the function of preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments! This is precisely how the office should be understood. Being a pastor benefits no one. Preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments saves souls. One is not justified by seeing that a male of the species is a more accurate icon of the Savior than a female. One is justified by faith in the gospel that the preacher is called to preach.

The iconic argument is of limited value in understanding why God forbids women to preach. The reason a woman may not be a pastor is not primarily because this contradicts who and what God is. The reason a woman may not be a pastor is because it contradicts who and what a woman is.

A man is called to preach. He is not called to preach what is within him. He is called to preach what is outside of him. The word of the Lord always comes to the prophet. Only Jesus spoke from himself, on his own authority: "Amen, amen, I say to you." Only Jesus speaks from within. The preachers God sends speak from without. It is the external word. It is given by God to the man to speak.

But a woman does not speak from without. It is against her nature to do so. The greatest blessing that God bestows on woman as woman is within her. Moses writes:

So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. Then God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multi-

ply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” (Genesis 1, 27-28)

The very first blessing bestowed on man and woman was the fruitful womb. “God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply.’” What is this blessing? It is a human being made in the image of God. Where is this blessing? It is within the woman. Whether Cain or Christ, the woman is blessed in conceiving a child. She is blessed in nurturing the child within her own body. She is blessed in nursing the child at her breast. In each instance, the blessing is within the woman. And she brings God’s blessing to the child by giving to the child what is within her.

God blesses woman by what he puts inside of her. Eve’s baby is made in the image of God. Mary’s baby is the image of God. Within Eve’s womb lives the entire human race. So Adam calls her Eve because she is the mother of all the living. (Genesis 3, 20) Within Mary’s womb lives all the fullness of the Godhead bodily. (Colossians 2, 9) The woman looks within herself and she sees what no man can see. She feels what no man can feel.

Consider Sarah. It was an act of selfless love when she gave Hagar to Abram to become the mother of his son. She knew the risk she was taking. She was a woman! She knew she could not conceive. She knew Hagar could. She understood the nature of a woman as Abram couldn’t possibly understand. She was taking a risk. She was risking giving to Hagar a preeminence to which she was not entitled. And Hagar took advantage of the situation. She acted so high and mighty, so insufferably snooty, that Sarah had to throw her out.

Here is true love! She knew that God had promised a son to Abram, a son from his own body. She did not know that she was to be the mother. God had not said so. How could she know? She did not know that the child would be born outside of the laws of nature with which she was quite familiar. God had not said so. How could she know? She did not lack faith. She believed the promise. It was precisely because of her faith in the promise that God gave to Abram that she set out to get the job done in the only way she knew how. And what does the Bible say? It says: “And Abram heeded the voice of Sarai.” (Genesis 16, 2)

The woman has faith. But she may not preach. Eve believes in the promise. Why else would she have said at the birth of her firstborn son, “I have gotten a man: the LORD?” Eve believes the promise but proclaims the first murderer as God incarnate. Sarah believes the promise and gives Hagar to Abram, which is the source of conflict in the Middle East to this very day.

A woman cannot do what is womanly to do as a pastor. It is against her nature not to speak, act, and think according to what is inside of her, because her greatest glory is what God puts inside of her, the child who grows inside of her, who is nurtured by her and is sustained as she gives what is in her to give.

But the preaching office does not benefit us by the preacher giving us what is within him to give. It benefits us by giving to us what is outside of mere men and women. It is the external, not the internal, word by which the church is born and nourished.

Listen to what Luther writes in the Smalcald Articles about departing from the external word and relying on what is within. He says:

And in those things which concern the spoken, outward Word, we must firmly hold that God grants His Spirit or

grace to no one, except through or with the preceding outward Word, in order that we may be protected against the enthusiasts, i.e., spirits who boast that they have the Spirit without and before the Word, and accordingly judge Scripture or the spoken Word, and explain and stretch it at their pleasure, as Muenzer did, and many still do at the present day, who wish to be acute judges between the Spirit and the letter, and yet know not what they say or declare. For the Papacy also is nothing but sheer enthusiasm, by which the Pope boasts that all rights exist in the shrine of his heart, and whatever he decides and commands with [in] his church is spirit and right, even though it is above and contrary to Scripture and the spoken Word.

All this is the old devil and old serpent, who also converted Adam and Eve into enthusiasts, and led them from the outward Word of God to spiritualizing and self-conceit, and nevertheless he accomplished this through other outward words. . . .

In a word, enthusiasm inheres in Adam and his children from the beginning [from the first fall] to the end of the world, [its poison] having been implanted and infused into them by the old dragon, and is the origin, power [life], and strength of all heresy, especially of that of the Papacy and Mahomet. Therefore we ought and must constantly maintain this point, that God does not wish to deal with us otherwise than through the spoken Word and the Sacraments. It is the devil himself whatsoever is extolled as Spirit without the Word and Sacraments. Part III, Article VIII

We are not benefited spiritually by another giving us what is within him or her to give. We benefit spiritually when we are given what comes from outside of us.

Everyone born of the flesh, whether male or female, is a born enthusiast. As Luther notes, “enthusiasm inheres in Adam and his children from the beginning to the end of the world.” Enthusiasm is of the very essence of sin. A man is no less an enthusiast than a woman. Both Adam and Eve were led away from God’s objective word to inner feelings.

Both men and women are by nature enthusiasts. They look for the answer to their spiritual problems wherein those problems reside. They look within and trust in their own sin to save them. God justifies both men and women in the same way. They are justified by faith in the external gospel. Sin is sin and faith is faith. There is no qualitative difference between the sin of men and women or between the faith of men and women. There is no inherent spiritual difference between men and women. Furthermore, when it comes to imparting the truth that is written down in the Bible, in the Creeds, and in the hymns of the Church, this communication is neither male nor female.

We’re talking about preaching – not believing, not praising, not even catechizing – but preaching. Most preachers preach what is within them to preach. This is not what God calls preachers to do. God calls preachers to preach what is written. The preacher must, if he is to be faithful, direct himself away from what resides within and focus entirely on what stands as objectively true outside of himself or his experience of it. It is a rarity indeed when a man does this. It is not possible for a woman to do so. It is not just that it is against her sinful nature to do. It is against a man’s sinful nature as well. But it is against her womanly nature.

And that is why God did not make a woman to preach. For a woman to become a preacher is for her to deny what God made her. The highest honor that God bestows on Christian women is to make them faithful wives and fruitful mothers. (Genesis 1, 28)

God blessed them and said to them to be fruitful. He did not curse them with children. He blessed them with children. He did not give them a list of options from which to choose, depending on their own self-understanding and personal preferences. He made them male and female, he joined them as one flesh, and he blessed them to have children.

To deny that children are a blessing from God is to distort the very nature of woman and to steal from her the honor God gave her. (Psalm 127, 3-5) To argue that there is a higher calling for a woman than to the divinely instituted office of Christian wife and mother is to demean womanhood, to despise children, and to hold God's creative work in contempt.

While the Christian Church scurries here and there for any tiny shred of biblical warrant for extending divine calls to women to do this or that activity in the church – anything by which the service of women may be glorified – she stands in mute acquiescence to the demeaning of true womanly glory by adopting the standards of the current culture of death as her own. A fictitious “divine call” to serve as a day school teacher, DCE, DE, DCM, and whatever other D's the church dishes up cannot possibly sanctify womanhood when the same church goes along with a culture that treats children as mere commodities in the market of what women want. This culture of death has enshrined within its law the right to kill unborn babies because babies are no longer valued according to God's Word but according to the fickle and sinful desires of selfish men and women. The Church must repudiate this culture at its very root. The divine call that God gives to Christian women is rooted in the first blessing that God spoke to Adam and Eve in paradise. The Church has no authority to mediate this call. The Christian woman does not need the Church to sanctify what God has made holy. She needs the Church to give her loud and clear “Amen!” to what God sanctified in creation and again from the Virgin's womb.

A few years ago, my wife got into a conversation with an ELS pastor's wife who told my wife how blessed she was to have so many children. My wife agreed. The woman then shared with my wife her desire for more than the two children she had, but her husband did not want any more children. Naturally, this ELS pastor taught his parishioners that it was a sin for a woman to vote in the voters' assembly of the congregation. Is not the hypocrisy too obvious to deny? A man denies to woman what God blessed woman to do, and then, should she desire to do what a man is given to do, he denies her that as well. So what purpose then does a woman serve? Is it to please the man? Or is it to serve God? To assert the headship of man while deliberately disconnecting it from the blessing of the fruitful womb is pure male chauvinism.

There are women who, for one reason or another, do not marry. There are women who marry and are physically incapable of having children. There are women who can have children but might put their lives at risk if they did. There are many ways that a woman can fulfill her womanly nature without having and nurturing her own children. The fact that God withholds a blessing from one of his children does not diminish the blessing. God only knows why God does what he does and does not do what he does not do.

We do know that having and nurturing and providing Christian instruction for children is a high honor given by God to women to do and it is an ungrateful and perverse generation of Christians that treats what is holy as if it were common and of little value.

The Psalmist speaks for God and sets forth God's values when he describes in these words how the man who fears the LORD is blessed:

Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine in the very heart of your house, your children like olive plants all around your table.
Psalm 128, 3

Children are true wealth. This is not merely a socially conditioned opinion. It is God's infallible declaration, as the Psalmist also writes:

Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb is a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of one's youth. Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them; they shall not be ashamed, but shall speak with their enemies in the gate. Psalm 127, 3-5

Many Christians have wondered over the years why God appeared so tolerant of polygamy during the times of the Old Testament patriarchs. That God is patient should not be misconstrued to mean he is lax. The account of the family life of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is sufficient biblical proof that God disapproves of polygamy. Nowadays, with the exception of a little sect presently being persecuted by the State of Texas, polygamy is practiced consecutively rather than concurrently. Marriage is in disrepair. Christian couples divorce at a rate as high as those who don't confess the faith. Also among church goers men and women live together and enjoy the marital bed without first getting married. Fornication is celebrated by the popular culture. In the name of helping the poor, the Welfare State subsidizes illegitimacy. As the culture decays the Church appears more willing to conform to it than to challenge its assumptions and governing principles. You know the old saying, “When the church marries the culture she soon becomes a widow.” When the Church herself is a widow she can hardly depend on the Church for assistance.

The theoretical rejection of our identify as men and woman created in the image of God may be expressed by the adoption of the doctrine of evolution, but the real rejection takes place in the practice of planned barrenness. Despising the fruit of the womb is to despise the One who gives it and the one who bears it. When the motherhood of woman is despised, the fatherhood of God falls with it.

The Apostle Paul grounded his teaching on the service of women in the church solidly within the original and ongoing creation of God. His words to Timothy prohibiting women pastors need to be heard within their wider context. Listen to the inspired apostle:

In like manner also, that the women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with propriety and moderation, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly clothing, but, which is proper for women professing godliness, with good works. Let a woman learn in silence with all submission. And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression. Nevertheless she will be saved in child-bearing if they continue in faith, love, and holiness, with self-control. 1 Timothy 2, 9-15

The beauty of a Christian woman is her modesty and willingness to accept from God his gifts on his terms. This is what it means to submit. No one who understands God's gracious dealings with us will see this submission as in any way demeaning to the woman.

Note how the apostle points to the chronological order of creation. Adam was formed first. Implicit here is that God gave to Adam the command not to eat the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden. It was Adam who gave this command to Eve. It was Eve who was deceived. She was deceived because she trusted in her feelings. She was turned away from the external divine word to her inner feelings. The womanly feelings so vital in the care and nurture of a child are no basis for authoritative preaching. This vocation is closed to her.

But the vocation of Christian motherhood is blessed. So says the apostle. In fact, she will be saved in childbearing. This does not mean that she will be kept safe as she goes through the delivering of a child. It means that the woman, as she fulfills the office God gave her in creation as the wife of the man and as the mother of children, will be saved from sin, death, and eternal damnation. Earlier in this Epistle the apostle writes, "This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." 1 Timothy 1, 15 God saves us within a certain context. He doesn't rapture us out of the world when the world becomes too godless for us to tolerate. He saves us within the vocation to which he calls us. The woman will be saved as she lives within her vocation. She will be saved in childbearing.

When, in his First Epistle to Timothy, the apostle gives instructions concerning who should and should not be put on the list of widows to receive charity from the Church, he argues against including young women who are still of childbearing years. He says concerning them:

Therefore I desire that the younger widows marry, bear children, manage the house, give no opportunity to the adversary to speak reproachfully. 1 Timothy 5, 14

Is this just the notional opinions of an aging man? Or is this the divinely inspired instruction of Christ's apostle that women do what God has placed in their nature to do? It is not just a biological function common to the animal world. It is grounded in the original creation in the image of God. It is confirmed by the incarnation of the Son of God in the virgin womb of Mary. The apostle knows what is in the nature of a woman to do and he understands why the work is so precious.

St. Paul also appeals to creation when he denies the preaching office to women in his First Epistle to the Corinthians. In chapter eleven, we read:

Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him? But if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her; for her hair is given to her for a covering. 1 Corinthians 11, 14-15.

A woman is a woman and a man is a man. Nature itself teaches us that a woman who seeks to rule over a man dishonors herself, whereas a woman who submits to her husband honors both him and God. The custom of a woman covering her head may or may not express this truth, but the truth remains true even when the custom has lost its meaning.

Later on, in chapter fourteen, St. Paul writes:

As in all the churches of the saints, let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but they

are to be submissive, as the law also says. And if they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is shameful for women to speak in church. 1 Corinthians 14, 33b-35

The speaking that the apostle forbids is the authoritative speaking that belongs to the preaching office. This must be understood. He is not forbidding any and all speaking. She may not speak authoritatively. The Lessons in the Divine Service and the sacramental portions of the Liturgy are divine and authoritative. This activity is closed to her. A woman may not preach. She may not participate in the preaching of the sermon. Why not? Because it is shameful, that's why. It is ugly, base, and disgusting. This is what the apostle is saying. It is not just a run of the mill act of defiance of authority or the breaking of a rule. It is obscene. It goes against nature.

Women do not serve the church when they seek out the preaching office. God has not, does not, and will not call them into this office.

Indeed, the best way for women to serve the church is not by seeking out an office in the church. The best service women can do for the church is the service they provide to their own husbands and children in their own homes. This is the service that God loves. It is certainly more valuable than whatever monetary remuneration is gained by hiring others to take on the domestic responsibilities while going out to compete with men for jobs, thus depressing wages while depriving children of their mothers. When a Christian wife and mother of small children leaves the children in someone else's care in order to accept an allegedly divine call to an alleged ministry of the church this is no service at all to anyone but is rather a burden upon the home and the church.

This is in no way to diminish the godly service that women do for the church as parochial schoolteachers. This service is not, strictly speaking, the work of the church, but it certainly is service for the church. The day school is acknowledged as an auxiliary organization of the church, but it is essentially an extension of the home, not the church, an office of the law, not the gospel. The day school teachers get their authority to teach, not from the church, but from the parents of the children. Since the school teachers do not get their authority to teach from the church the church has no authority to extend to them divine calls. The church has no more responsibility for teaching children than it does for teaching adults. When it comes to the teaching of children in a church sponsored school, fathers and mothers delegate their duties to teachers. There is nothing a parochial schoolteacher does that is not delegated to him or her to do by the parents. A Christian congregation may establish a Christian day school. This does not make the work done by the teachers of such a school the ministry of the church, not if we are using the word "ministry" to refer to the divinely established ministry of the Word.

We can and may speak of a ministry of mercy that encompasses every kind of good deed in which Christians rightly collaborate to do together. It may be providing help for widows who have no children to support them. It may be the establishment of a school to assist parents in their God given responsibility to bring up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. It may be an orphanage, a hospital, an old folk's home, or any other institution in which a Christian ministry of mercy can take root and thrive. There is nothing to prevent women from serving in such auxiliary

organizations of the church and much to commend them in doing so.

God excludes women from the ministry of the Word or the preaching office. Why? It is customary among conservative Lutherans to limit the service of women in the church to those offices in which women do not exercise authority over men. So then, is this all there is to it? Is it merely a matter of authority? Then what would prevent a woman from receiving a call to be a pastor – preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments, including the celebration of the Lord’s Supper – to a congregation made up entirely of women? She would not be exercising authority over a man if there were no men there.

Believe it or not, this rather absurd hypothetical has become the occasion for an ongoing theological discussion between representatives of the ELS and the WELS over the past few years. The sole reason why the WELS forbids women to serve as pastors is because this would give women authority over men. For this reason, while the WELS is not advocating that women be called as pastors to women (though the practice of women communing women is not unknown in the Wisconsin Synod), she is unable to say that the Bible forbids it.

Is that all that is at stake in the debate about women preachers? Is this solely a matter of who has authority over whom? It is hard to argue that a woman usher is exercising authority over the men in the pews, but there is something unseemly about it nonetheless. It just doesn’t look right. She should not be acting as a representative of the congregation. It is also difficult to conclude the case against women’s suffrage solely by an appeal to the authority of voters over voters. What authority does a voters’ assembly have over the typical male parishioner who does not attend such meetings and pays no attention to what they do and say? A better case would be made, I believe, by pointing out that the domain of a woman is in the home and that it is not proper for men and women to be thrust together in situations where this woman and that man are required to interact with one another without the protection provided by the intervening institutions of marriage and family. To put it simply: It is unnatural. This woman is with that man. They belong together. God made them one flesh. And he made her the mistress of the home. He placed her at the center of domestic life. He gave her children, entrusted her with their care, and gave her womanly gifts by which she can serve him and the whole church by raising Christian children. Why would such a woman leave her children at home in the care of a baby sitter or a henpecked husband so that she can go off to the voters’ meeting and do what the men do?

Men and women have been segregated from each other throughout history in a whole host of social arrangements. Why segregate them? When men and women are thrown together to do things together without marriage and family defining the way they are to interact with one another the result is conflict, confusion, adultery, and the consequent degeneration of the family. When marriage and children are at the center of the woman’s life, she finds her identify where God himself has established it in creation. Women without husbands and children are also benefited greatly by this stability and they require a stable family life as much as anyone.

The service of women for the church begins at a very young age. A young girl in her teens can offer the greatest service to the church by keeping her virginity for her future husband and choosing as a

husband a man who is sincerely devoted to the pure teaching of God’s holy word and faithfully attends an orthodox congregation to receive it. A man honors his wife by cherishing her not only as his woman but as the mother of his children.

Are there certain offices the church may create that are especially suitable for women more so than for men? Yes, there are. I am thinking specifically of the office of deaconess. It is not necessary, probably not even desirable that a deaconess be given her theological training by an institution of a synod. It certainly isn’t appropriate for men who are studying to be pastors in the church to be sitting next to women during their seminary training as these women receive instruction to be what God forbids them to be. A church that does not have a pastor competent to give a deaconess the theological training she needs is a church that should not have a deaconess.

But a deaconess can be a tremendous benefit to the church specifically in serving women in a way that a pastor cannot. While private confession and absolution is a great blessing to the church, there are matters that are simply inappropriate for a woman to discuss with a man who is not her husband. God only knows how many pastor / parishioner relationships that began with a woman confessing her sexual sins to her pastor were concluded by the two of them sinning sexually together.

A woman can speak from within herself to another woman in a way a man cannot. No, this is not the ministry of the word, but it is a blessing from God. A woman can listen, understand, and give woman to woman counsel that no pastor can give.

But such service doesn’t even need a formal position. Women do what God gives them to do. A mother’s wisdom is not to be despised. One man’s wife can help another man’s wife to be a faithful Christian wife. Pastors should encourage women to go to women to get the kind of help that a woman can give.

Hanna held no office in the church, but in giving Samuel to Eli she made a greater contribution to the ministry of the church than Eli himself did, for his sons were worthless. Mary held no office in the church, but she stands until the end of time as the symbol of virginal purity, motherly devotion, Christian faith, and humble obedience. It is to these mothers in the faith that we would direct our daughters and wives, to find in them models to follow.

The preacher preaches what God gives him to preach. He subordinates all relationships to the pure doctrine, because the law is designed to condemn sinners, not to enable them to do better and the gospel is a message of an objective absolution that is not contingent on how you feel or what is inside of you, but upon the vicarious obedience of Christ who died for us all. The work of the preaching office is very male indeed. As women seek to establish relationships and to fix so many things at the same time, the pure preaching of the gospel always subordinates relationships to the truth.

But the woman who may not preach cannot help but praise her God. For he puts down the mighty from their seats and exalts lowly mothers, stuck in the drudgery of caring for babies, cleaning up other people’s messes, and wondering when the job will ever be done. God says that their service is holy, and for Christ’s sake it is. It is precious to God and it is indispensable to the church.

1 From “It is not Given to Women to Teach: A Lex in Search of a Ratio,” by William Weinrich, *Church and Ministry Today: Three Confessional Lutheran Essays*, John A. Maxfield, Editor, Luther Academy 2001.

The Supremacy of Doctrine in Worship

There is an old phrase first attributed to Fifth Century theologian, Prosper of Aquitaine, which says, “ut legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi.” This is translated as, “that the rule of praying should establish the rule of believing.” This Latin phrase has become known as *lex orandi, lex credendi*, a principle that points out the unity between the liturgy (*orandi*) and what is taught or believed (*credendi*). It can make for a helpful observation and warning. If you claim to believe in baptismal regeneration but then refuse to baptize babies, for example, then one should wonder whether you actually have that belief about baptism. Doctrine and practice go together. It also often happens that a practice will develop, and then a formulated doctrinal position will follow. For example, people offer prayers to saints, and eventually a dogma about the saints’ intercession and merits follows.

While this slogan can be helpful as far as historical observations and warnings about bad or thoughtless practices are concerned, we should be careful not to mix up our priorities. While the liturgy certainly does help reinforce and guard what we teach, true Christian teaching does not find its source from the liturgy. The Scriptures alone are the one rule and norm for our teaching. It is with this in mind that we should consider the liturgy and all other corresponding ceremonies in the church. Doctrine, based on clear Scripture, must reign supreme.

I have noticed a trend over the years from those who react against so called Contemporary Worship. Instead of focusing their critique on the revivalist theology behind such practices and responding with a case for teaching the Doctrine of the Gospel in all its articles, many emphasize instead the experience of the ancient ceremonies and how they give one a sense of history and timelessness. That may be true, but it’s a moot point on its own without an emphasis on doctrine. The revivalist worship styles fail to emphasize doctrine in three ways. First, they take away the liturgy and hymnody of the people, which is unmatched in its usefulness to teach the faith. Second, they take for granted the doctrine while adopting measures that implicitly deny the inherent efficacy of the Word and the hostility of the natural heart toward the truth of God. Third, they don’t consider the unity of the church, pitting outreach against concord. This third point seems to be the one that is most emphasized by their critics. Unity in worship certainly is very important. However, let’s not fall into the same ditch while we fight to retain what has been passed down.

The phrase, “The rule of worship establishes the rule of faith,” is worse than useless if we don’t make it abundantly clear that first, the rule of faith is based solely on Scripture, and second, it is even more accurate to say that the rule of faith establishes the rule of worship. When Lutherans criticize contemporary worship but then uncritically adopt a distinction like primary theology (worship/liturgy) and secondary theology (teaching and study of Scripture), which undermines *sola scriptura*, then they have no leg to stand on at all. In our defense of the historic liturgy, we don’t need to give it a higher authority than the Scriptures themselves.

Incense is a nice ceremony if used to teach the gospel. But to call it a means to reach a timeless place smacks of enthusiasm. If a defense for the historic liturgy and ancient ceremonies is not based on a conviction that didactic preaching is the main activity of the service, then it isn’t a good defense. In the end, what is the difference between the claim that ancient ceremonies give a sense

of timelessness and that Contemporary Worship gives a relevant and authentic worship experience? It’s no wonder when these two “worship styles” often blend together into some mushy hybrid. If our unified goal were to teach, without worrying as much about what we resemble, then I believe our church services would look a lot more alike, even while having some different ceremonies. What we resemble, of course, matters. It’s what people notice more. The rule of worship (liturgy) does have a reciprocal effect on our rule of faith (doctrine). This is a good argument against aping after revivalism. But shouldn’t it all the more warn us against the mystical spirits of those who obfuscate Scripture and the central article of justification by means of a supposedly timeless worship experience? A focus on what we resemble is getting the cart before the horse. Why should we retain the liturgy and edifying ceremonies? Why should we sing hymns? Because, and in so far as, they teach the Doctrine of the Gospel in all its articles.

If you are adding pomp and ceremony to your services, this doesn’t mean you have returned to a sound confession. Sure, if done well, you can use ceremony to help reinforce the confession and doctrine. And yes, you might hear someone say that he likes your church because of its timelessness or something like that. He probably means simply that he can tell that you take the teaching of doctrine and the worship of God seriously. That’s fine. To the pure all things are pure. But your burden, i.e. the yoke Christ has placed on you, is to emphasize the doctrine. While I don’t agree with the translation in Ephesians 4, which says “equipping the saints for the work of ministry,” it is nevertheless a thoroughly biblical sentiment. Pastors should equip their parishioners to confess the faith, not tossed around by every wind of doctrine, but able to teach the truth in his or her station in life. If the liturgy is not primarily about this didactic purpose, then it slips into enthusiasm, no better than the revivalism of the sectarians. On the other hand, if didactic preaching and being equipped to confess the gospel is the emphasis, then it shouldn’t surprise us that a sense of timelessness would follow. But we should remember that there is no foundation you can build on than that of Christ Jesus, the foundation of the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures, which has the gospel of Christ as the chief cornerstone.

Now, you might say, “The primary purpose of the worship service is to deliver the gift of salvation.” And you would be right. But how does the Holy Spirit do that? Through teaching the gospel. The gospel isn’t merely for some kerygmatic speech event. If the gospel is for proclamation, then this means that it is for teaching. Christians need to be informed and reinforced on what they believe, teach, and confess, as well as what they reject. If you look at our Lutheran hymns from the 16th and 17th Centuries, it’s hard to miss the great emphasis on original sin, the judgment of God, the atonement, efficacy of the Word, and the bearing of the cross. When these hymns are ignored or passed over for those deemed more timely, ecumenical, or whatever, then one should wonder what the priority is.

Striving for unity and concord, if focused on clear and thorough teaching of Christian doctrine, should not be a mere baptizing of whatever is seen to be the status quo. Even while we shouldn’t needlessly bash a congregation’s ceremonies or lack thereof, we also should not overly praise them either. Focus on doctrine, and you will save both yourselves and those who hear you.

A Greater Righteousness

A Meditation on Matthew 5:20-26

The righteousness taught by religious elite is always the standard in every culture. Sometimes they call themselves conservatives. Sometimes they call themselves liberals. Sometimes they call themselves strict. Sometimes they call themselves progressive. They are always more educated than you. Or at least that's what they think. But either way, this is the righteousness by which the world judges you and me everyday.

Jesus says that our righteousness must exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees. Our righteousness must exceed that of the religious elite. In other words, our righteousness must exceed what the culture deems as righteous. A tragedy occurs, and all the religious leaders gather together, each worshipping different gods or having different teachings about God himself. But they are seen as men of peace. Everyone praises them for their unity. They are very righteous in the eyes of the world. But your righteousness must exceed that. A church concentrates less on doctrine and more on social ministry, feeding the poor and giving people motivation to lead fulfilling lives. Your righteousness must exceed that. Or a church figures that it has its doctrine down pat, so they move on to concentrate on what they deem more practical matters. The preaching of the gospel is slowly replaced with a preaching of "going out and witnessing" with less and less instruction on what that witness is. I recall attending a youth retreat in which the pastors only talked to the kids about how they can make a difference in this world. It was almost completely void of any doctrinal content and instruction. Christ's atoning blood, the means of grace, the free gift of salvation – all of this was either obscured or completely passed over by do-good messages, which they could just as well hear from the Boy Scouts, a fraternity, the Salvation Army, or the Masonic Lodge. Natural man loves to feel spiritual, but he is never driven by peaceful trust in God's promises. Instead, he is driven by a frantic drive to get out and make a difference, whatever that means. Meanwhile, the actual works that are pleasing to God are often overlooked, like remaining chaste, honoring your parents, and learning to forgive as you have been forgiven. Your righteousness must exceed any kind of self-motivated activism.

Your righteousness must not come from your own efforts, innovations, political ideology, or even religious exercises. It cannot come from your own desires, no matter how good they may seem to be. We know that out of the heart proceeds every sin (Matt 15:19). Your righteousness must meet up to God's law.

This is why God gave the law on Sinai. He is setting the record straight that salvation has come from only him and not from any human efforts in being good and virtuous. His law demands love. You must love God with everything you have, even your entire heart, and your neighbor as yourself. His law guards his institution of the home, the authority of parents, the purity of marriage, as well as the protection of your neighbor's property, body, and reputation. Nothing concocted by men, no matter how pious it may look, can hold a candle to the righteousness required in God's

law. Your righteousness must meet up to this.

This righteousness of the law is given as a witness against all self-made goodness manufactured in us (Deut 31:26). In other words, it accuses the sinful heart, even in its most sanctimonious attempts to be good before this dying world. And yet, even as it accuses, it also instructs. It sets the standard of what is pleasing to God. God's law is a reflection of what God is like. Hidden behind the cloud and thunder are notes of God's inmost desires. He desires truth in the inward heart (Ps 51:6). Hidden behind his instructions about sacrifices and religious ceremonies is his desire for mercy rather than sacrifice (Hos 6:6). In his demands to love God and your neighbor, he sets the terrifying mirror before the hypocritical heart of man, revealing the latter's lack of this divine love. Yet, hidden in these demands is God's delight in such love, which covers a multitude of sins. The law, weakened by the flesh, can't deliver what is hidden behind it. The Son of God must come and fulfill it, as the "Law" goes forth from Zion. His righteousness must shine forth by the obedience of the Son. This is the righteousness that exceeds all, when the Son of God puts himself under the law to redeem all who are under the law's condemnation.

While Jesus teaches us about his own obedience, his own fulfilling of the law, and the righteousness he freely gives to us (Matt 3:15; 5:17; 6:33), he teaches us what that righteousness is. He teaches us that his righteousness consists in seeking peace with the one who is at enmity. It is in being content with what God has given you and resting in his fatherly promise.

St. Paul says that through Jesus' obedience righteousness and life came to all men, just as sin came to all through Adam's disobedience (Rom 5:18). Your righteousness is revealed in the gospel of Christ (Rom 1:16,17), received by faith. Your righteousness consists in reconciliation with God and the forgiveness of all your sins. This is why Christ admonishes us to seek peace with one another. His blood has broken down the hostility between us and God, as well as among ourselves (Eph 2:14ff).

When I was in college, my brother and I got into a nasty argument on our way to church. Sitting in different parts of the church, I found that I couldn't go up to take the sacrament with a good conscience. I was about to receive the most intimate declaration of God's righteousness and peace in my mouth. How could I do this while still letting my enmity with my brother sit? Right before the Sanctus, as I was about to run over and apologize to my brother, there he was standing by the pew. He put out his hand to shake mine, telling me he was sorry. I said, "I'm sorry too." We forgave each other. This was in light of the righteousness of our Savior, whose obedience is reckoned to us as salvation and whose body and blood are delivered into our mouths to nurture us in what we cannot muster up by our own strength. Our anger didn't produce the righteousness of God. But thanks be to God that we found that righteousness in Christ. It gives us peace, which excels all understanding!

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A Greater Righteousness

A Meditation on Matthew 5:20-26

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