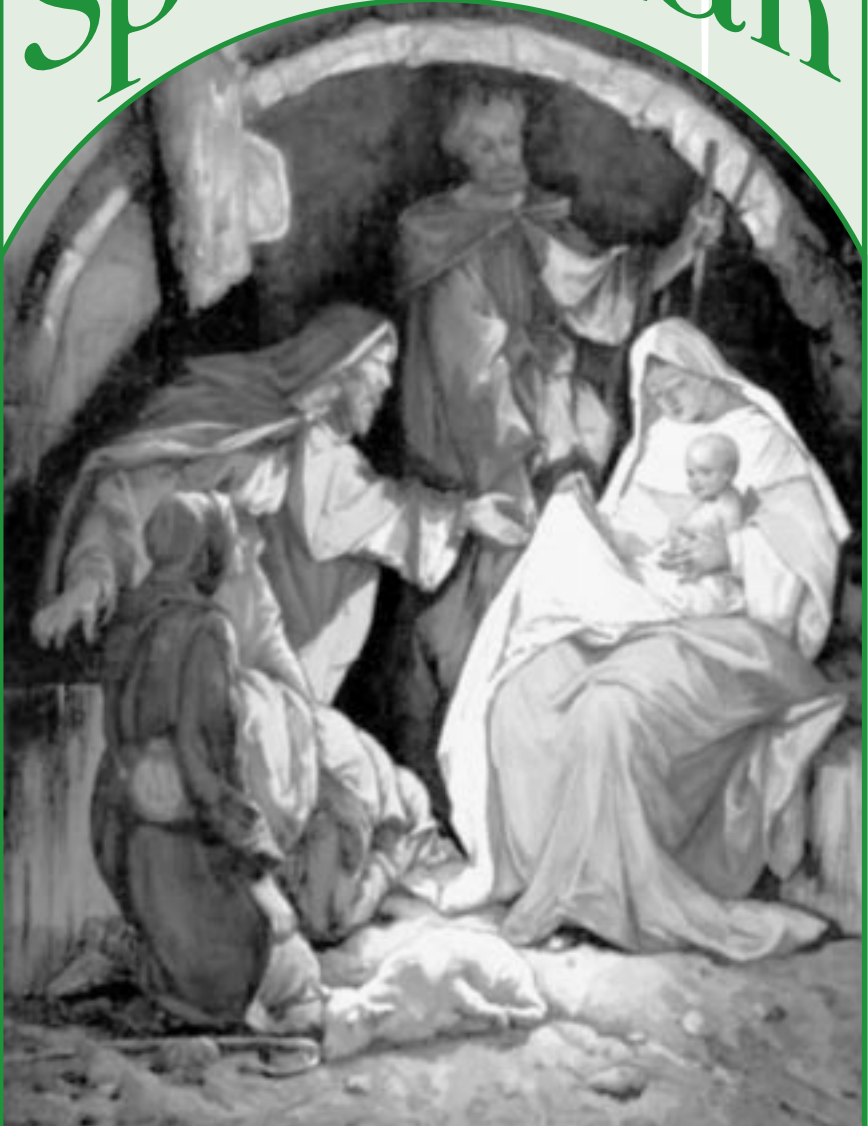


Lutheran Spokesman



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A Father's Heart

Having a father's heart is not something that I have always understood. In the past few years, however, the Lord has filled my life with joy and an appreciation of what it means to be a father by blessing me with three children. The thought that comes to my mind is, "Now I know what it means to be a father, and to have a heart full of love for my children."

It is true that I have come to a deeper appreciation and understanding of what it means to be a father and to have love for children. Does this mean that those who have not been blessed with the gift of children cannot fully understand or appreciate what our God means when He calls us His children? The answer is no. We have God's Word which opens our hearts and minds to know what God has done for us and what it means to be loved as His children.

A hymn penned by Martin Luther comes to mind when we think on this subject of God's fatherly love. "A

Father's heart He turned to me, Sought my redemption fervently: He gave His dearest Treasure" (TLH 387:4).

We are given a special look into the loving heart of God the Father at Christmas. The greatest act of love that we could *never* imagine was the Almighty God sending His only begotten Son to live and die for us. His heart is big and loving, through and through. We won't find any selfishness there. From that loving heart came the most valuable gift of all time and eternity, the Christchild.

"Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God!" (1 Jn. 3:1) This Christchild grew up, always doing the will of His Father. In His lifetime, He accomplished what His Father sent Him to do. He lived a life of perfection; He took upon Himself the weight of the world's sin; and He made the once and for all sacrifice that earned a place for us in

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God's Family. We experience the great love of the Father's heart in Christ Jesus our Savior. In Christ we are God's children, a part of His loving family.

He Loves Us

Another aspect of a father's love which has been made clearer to me through my own children is how a father loves his children for the sake of loving them. My children certainly haven't made my life easier by relieving me of any duties. On the contrary, caring for

children means more work, increased responsibility, and sometimes an aching heart that comes from dealing with their sin. I don't love them because they love me and do things for me. I love them because they are my own.

God looks at us in much the same way. "In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 Jn. 4:10). He sent His Son to make the perfectly complete sacrifice for our sins, because He loved us--period! He loves us for the sake of loving us. We didn't earn His love, nor do we make His existence any easier. His love is not an emotional reaction to us. He loves us because He loves us!

At Christmas we have a special opportunity to think on the love which the Heavenly Father has for us--a love which held nothing back, in spite of ourselves; a love which gave the greatest gift, His dearest Treasure.

—Pastor Mark Gurath



A Christmas Confession of Faith

Each and every Sunday that we gather in the House of the LORD for worship, we confess our faith in Jesus Christ--that He was "conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the virgin Mary."

Mindful of the danger of falling into the trap of mindless repetition (when something well known to us is repeated again and again), how much thought do we give to the statement of faith just mentioned?

What significance do these words

have for us not only during Christmas time when we celebrate Jesus' birth, but also each and every day we draw breath in this world?

A short while ago a married couple who are journalists in the news media were interviewed for a magazine arti-

cle concerning their family observances at this holiday season of the year. The focus of interest in this particular couple was the fact that one was a professing Jew and the other a professing Christian. The gist of the article was that the partners in this mixed marriage found no incompatibility between their respective beliefs, and therefore they were able to take part in one another's religious celebrations.

On the one hand, this article served the useful purpose of revealing the religious signs of the times; on the other hand, it added another piece of religious garbage on the heap of false ecumenicism, adding confusion for those who are not well grounded in Holy Scripture.

How can an avowed Christian say that there is no contradiction between celebrating the birth of man's only Savior from sin and the celebration of a religious tradition which denies Jesus as Lord and Savior and espouses work-righteousness?

Another question that naturally follows is: what do many who call themselves Christians today believe concerning the conception and birth of Jesus, and what does that mean to them?

Giving careful thought to Jesus' warning in which He said, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven" (Mt.7:21), what do the words cited above mean to us when we confess them?

A Special Child!

While the devil has deceived many into thinking that Jesus' conception came about through the natural biolog-

ical process of the joining of a man and a woman, and that Jesus was a natural-born human being like you and me, the Lord God opens the eyes of our understanding through the revelation of Holy Scripture--even as the angelic messenger helped Joseph to know how Mary, his betrothed wife, became pregnant, and what the special nature and purpose was of the child she was carrying in her womb (cf. Mt.1:19-25).

When Joseph found out that Mary was pregnant, it was natural for him to conclude that Mary had conceived a child by a man (just as it is natural for others to think that any child conceived in a woman is by a man). However, the divine message reveals that this was a supernatural conception, which is above and beyond the realm of what is natural! The angel reported to Joseph that "that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit" (Mt.1:20).

When giving the baby's special name, the angel of the Lord made known who this baby was by reason of this supernatural conception, and what He had come to do for sinful mankind.

What then is in the name of the baby who was born of Mary? His name "Immanuel" testified that He is the Lord "God" who had come to be "with us" in human form! And the name "Jesus" by which He was to be called meant that He is "Jehovah" who had come to be our "Savior" from sin!

This same Jesus spoke of Himself as being our only way of receiving God's gift of forgiveness and eternal life because He is the God-Man; Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (Jn.14:6).

So then, in confessing that Jesus "was conceived by the Holy Ghost, and

born of the virgin Mary," what are we saying? We are saying that the only religious observance at Christmas time that we have reason to rejoice in with great joy and thanksgiving to God is

the birth of Jesus, who is our Lord and only Savior from sin!

May this ever be our confession--and our reason for celebrating!

—Pastor Mark Gullerud



An Advent Devotion—

THE VOTING BOOTH

This article is not urging you to go out and vote in government elections, or to admonish you if you didn't vote last time. It is an Advent article, with focus on the Coming of Christ and reference to a Voting Booth of a different kind.

The Booth in the title refers to a small space, close quarters, usually temporary. The smallness reminds us of the inner room Jesus referred to in the Sermon on the Mount, where He says, "When you pray, enter into your closet . . . shut the door . . ." (Mt. 6:6).

The word "closet," by the way, is related to the word "close," as in "Close Communion" and is also the origin of the word "key," as in the Latin *clavis*. (We expect to see a series of articles on the subject of Close Communion here in the *Spokesman* in the near future.)*

Our churches and homes are usually very small spaced, when you consider the spaces of some buildings and of the size of the world. And all of them are temporary, especially our particular Voting Booths.

The word "prayer" and the word "vote" are very closely connected--in Greek, Latin, and English. The original meaning of the word "vote" was to "pray," and we still use the Latin root in words such a *vow*, *devoted*, *devotions*,

votum, and so forth.

Tying all this together, we see that our Place of Prayer is really our Voting Booth, but vastly different from any other voting booths in the world.

In our country we vote perhaps a handful of times a year. In the Kingdom of God, however, we vote hundreds of times a day! It is a common, frequent activity among Christians. It is Word-based--we cannot even begin to pray without using Scripture. Here we pull out the names and passages of God and tuck into these names and passages (and thus into the wounds of Christ) all our concerns and anxieties and plans and pleas.

Have you ever used the Suffrages in the front of *The Lutheran Hymnal* (page 112ff.)? You probably know that the word "suffrage" also refers to voting, as in "universal suffrage," for example.

And we use another spiritual "vote" word as well, the word "petition," which also happens to be used out in the secular world, often connected to voting.



We have a favorite petition at this time of the Church Year. It's the Second Petition of the Lord's Prayer: "Thy Kingdom Come!" In our catechism we learn that this Kingdom of God "comes indeed without our 'vote' (prayer), but we 'vote' in this petition that it may come unto us also."

All Christians have the right to a spiritual vote and to exercise their spiritual suffrage and to place their spiritual petitions before our gracious God, in Christ.

The Second Petition stands out most of all these perilous Advent days. Here we are "voting" for two things. First is that the Kingdom of Grace will continue to come to us and others through Word and Sacrament, and that repentance and faith in Christ Jesus may begin, increase, and abound before the End comes!

Second is that the Kingdom of Glory may soon come, that we and all believ-

ers may soon be ushered into heaven to be with Jesus. The first one is unconditional, because God has already given His Word and Spirit, so that we utilize it ourselves and also tell the message of grace to a fallen world. The second is conditional on what God wants to do and when He wants to do it.

So we wait, and hope and pray (vote) every day--in our homes, in our churches, and in our hearts. That's where our special Voting Booths are. Blessed Advent to you! Go in and vote every day, every hour.

—Pastor Em. Warren Fanning

* From the Editor: We were informed of a series of bulletin articles Pastor Fanning had written a while back on the subject of close communion. We are thankful that upon our request the pastor has agreed to share the series with our *Spokesman* readers. Watch for it in coming months.



Understanding Our Faith

—Pastor Daniel Fleischer
(From a series of bulletin articles)

True preparation for Christmas is not stressful. It costs nothing of a material nature. True preparation for Christmas is simply that we repent of our sins and rejoice in the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

TWO CHRISTMASES

As you read this, it is just a few weeks until Christmas. You have been or will be busy, increasingly so, preparing for Christmas. So how is your preparation proceeding? And what direction is it taking?

Some years ago we found this

unidentified quote: *"There are really two Christmases. The one is the Christmas which praises God for sending His Son into the world to save us from sin and to give us (eternal) life through faith in Him."*

The divine record testifies to the

reality of the Heavenly Father's love in promising a Savior from sin. It witnesses to the fact that the Father nurtured His promise through the centuries. This in itself was no small expression of love, because the people so often rejected Him. But He who is not willing that any should perish was not dissuaded. He is faithful! He sent and called John the Baptist to go before Jesus to call people to repentance. When the fullness of time was come, God sent forth His Son. The eternal Son of God took human flesh and blood, yet was without sin. He was conceived of the Holy Ghost and born of the Virgin Mary. In a manger the shepherds found Him, as it was announced to them. Finally, at the divinely appointed time the Lord Jesus died upon the cross.

From the first prophecy in Genesis 3:15 through the birth of Jesus, to the cross upon which He died, the message is one of God's faithfulness and love for all people. It reassures and comforts all that believe in the Savior Jesus Christ Who atoned for our sin. For such it is the message of life.

True preparation for Christmas is not stressful. It costs nothing of a material nature. True preparation for Christmas is simply that we repent of our sins and rejoice in the redemption



that is in Christ Jesus. This is one Christmas.

"The other Christmas is the nationwide carnival that comes at the end of December--the Christmas of Santa Claus, which confesses no faith at all and in which any unbeliever or infidel can join without prejudice to his private belief or unbelief." It is the Christmas the preparation of which is hyping the sale of goods, the success of which is determined by the welfare of the economy when it is over. It is the time of parties and festivities which, when it all is said and done, makes one yearn from exhaustion for the end of the season.

Much to their dismay, Christians get caught up in the tidal wave of this carnival too. If you don't believe it, just ask yourself how you respond when someone asks, "Well, are you ready for Christmas?" •



Great Lakes Pastoral Conference, Sept. 24-26, at Luther Memorial Church, Fond du Lac, Wis. (l-r), J. Fleischer, D. Schaller, P. Matzke, M. Gurath, M. Eichstadt, W. Schaller, M. Bernthal, T. Ohlmann, D. Baker, M. Gullerud, A. Schulz, Prof. M. Sydow, M. Wilke, T. Holland, D. Naumann

"Why is Christmas?"

"Why is Christmas?" This is the sort of question a child would ask. Children believe what they are told, but they ask simple questions to add to their understanding.

We are told in Luke 18:17, ". . . whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it." So it is good to ask this question, but as children we must accept the answer our Father gives in the Scriptures.

"How could God die?" This was the challenge a visitor posed to our Bible class one evening. To answer this question, let us first answer two others. First, how could man die--man who was made in the image of God?

Scripture tells us, ". . . just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned" (Rom. 5:12). Thus through Adam's sin, man forfeited the image of God in which he was created. Death is the inevitable result of sin.

The next question is, "How could God be born?" When Mary asked how she, a virgin, could give birth to the final heir of David's throne, the angel Gabriel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God . . . For with God nothing will be impossible" (Lk. 1:35, 37).

So Christ Jesus ". . . being in the form of God . . . made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondser-

vant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross" (Php. 2:6-8).

"Why would God do that?" We read that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation . . . For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor. 5:21).

So Christ took our sin upon Himself and became subject to death. Again, "Why?" "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (Jn. 3:16).

This is truly amazing! Because "God is love," Jesus was born to die!

The ancient Greek hymn written by St. Germanus says it well:

A great and mighty wonder,
A full and holy cure:
The virgin bears the Infant
With virgin honor pure!
Repeat the hymn again:
"To God on high be glory
And peace on earth to men!"

Since all He comes to ransom,
By all be He adored,
The Infant born in Beth'lem,
The Savior and the Lord.
Repeat the hymn again:
"To God on high be glory
And peace on earth to men!" (TLH 76:1,4)

—Submitted by Paul Bade,
member at Immanuel, Mankato, Minn.

(From the "Home Messenger," the monthly newsletter of Immanuel Lutheran Church, Mankato, Minnesota; Pastor Paul D. Nolting is the writer)

Religious Consumerism

We live in a consumer society, and in many ways that is wonderful!

Our economic system is among the freest in the world. Individuals with initiative can begin their own businesses and provide products and services to meet the needs of those around them. Those who successfully meet the needs of their customers thrive, while those who do not meet the needs will disappear.

The result of this for our society is a high standard of living, greater convenience, and a multitude of choices to satisfy our many desires. For example, recently my family went on vacation. We flew into San Francisco and rented a vehicle at the airport. There are no less than ten different car rental agencies at that airport. We chose Avis, because it offered a mini-van with unlimited mileage at a price \$150 lower than its competitors. What a blessing the mini-van proved to be, serving our needs while saving us money!

While our consumer culture can be a real blessing when it comes to renting a car or buying a washing machine, it can be real damaging if we transfer that consumer mindset into the area of religion. Within the last six months a number of people have commented to me: "Immanuel just isn't meeting our spiritual needs."

Such comments can be very helpful. They cause a pastor to re-evaluate his

ministry and that of the congregation (cf. 2 Corinthians 13:5). Is he spending enough time preparing his sermons so that they clearly present both the law and the gospel, as well as provide easy application to the lives of members? Is the congregation providing a program whereby the legitimate spiritual needs of all its members are being met?

The result of these particular comments has been personal schedule adjustments to provide more time for areas that need it, and staff discussions about areas of weakness in our program, together with suggestions regarding how we might strengthen those areas.

Those same comments, however, can reveal a disturbing trend towards "religious consumerism" in our society. "Religious consumerism" is the idea that the primary purpose of the church is to meet personal needs and desires. It is often combined with the attitude that if one church does not meet those needs and desires, the solution is simply to shop around until one finds a church that does.

St. Paul warns us that such attitudes reflecting a spirit of "religious consumerism" would arise during New Testament times. He wrote Timothy, "The time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching

ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths" (2 Tim. 4:3-4). Such attitudes indicate a lack of understanding both with regard to the message of Jesus Christ and the mission of His Christian Church.

As I evaluated my ministry and that of the congregation, I also tried to evaluate the level of involvement in our congregational life on the part of those who had made the statements. In each case the level of involvement was minimal. The individuals did not attend worship services or receive the Lord's Supper regularly. They did not often involve themselves in available organizations or events which offered them fellowship opportunities and would have afforded them spiritual growth. They were seldom, if ever, available for volunteer opportunities at church or with other members of the congregation. One might legitimately ask: "How can you expect a church to meet your spiritual needs, if you choose to remain uninvolved in congregational worship and life?" Even that question, however, misses the larger issue.

The message of Jesus Christ is a universal message of law and gospel, of sin and grace. It reveals our utter sinfulness and that of the entire world. It pronounces judgment upon all sin and asserts clearly that no human being can overcome sin on his own (cf. Romans 3:10-20). At the same time it shares with us God's universal solution for the problem of sin. The solution is through the redemption of Christ (cf. Romans 3:21-26). The message of Jesus Christ also describes the brilliant future God has in store for all who by faith accept it (cf. Revelation 21:1-7).

The message of Jesus Christ does

" . . . The message of Jesus Christ does satisfy our deepest needs and desires. However, if we avoid hearing God's Word, we will fail to understand our fundamental problem of sin and will inevitably fail to appreciate the significance of God's grace."

satisfy our deepest needs and desires. However, if we avoid hearing God's Word, we will fail to understand our fundamental problem of sin and will inevitably fail to appreciate the significance of God's grace. Then we will become selfish and self-centered, concerned simply about meeting our lesser needs and satisfying our personal desires.

The gospel message of Jesus Christ is much greater than any one person, for it is a message of universal grace and redemption (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:18-21). The gospel proclaims God's love for the world revealed in His Son, who was sent to deliver the world from everlasting judgment (cf. John 3:16-17). Failing to understand this ultimately undermines the mission of the Christian Church and our role within that Church.

The gospel message of Jesus Christ calls us, not to a life of satisfying self, but rather to a life of loving service and sacrificing self as we are moved by faith to build others up to the glory of God (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:15, Romans 12:1, Colossians 3:17)! We have been saved to serve (cf. Luke 1:74-75). Ironically, as we seek to meet the needs of others with the message of God's redeeming love, our own needs will be met, and we will find our personal desires are often fulfilled in the most unexpected ways (cf. Psalm 37:3-7)!•

CONVENTION ESSAY EXCERPT — #3

[Editor's note: The theme of our Synod Convention last June was "*Jesus Christ — Our Cornerstone.*" Three essays were presented on aspects of this theme. While we hope our pastors and delegates have been sharing these essays with their congregations, it is our intention to print a few snippets from these essays. The third essay (by Pastor Joel Fleischer, Calvary, Marquette, Michigan) was "*Christ is the Cornerstone of Our Message.*" This particular excerpt, part III of the essay, expands on the thought in the title below.]

'Without Christ We Have No Future'

. . . After more than forty years as the Church of the Lutheran Confession, if we were to lose Christ crucified as our message and our purpose we would have to wonder if it has not been forty years wasted, for without the message of Christ crucified we have no purpose as a church body.

If Christ is not our message--and I don't mean the social, touchy-feely Christ of the majority of churches today, who came into the world to teach us to feed the hungry and to be nice to none another; I mean the Christ who gave His life to pay for our sins--if that Christ of the Bible is not our message, then we are just like the others. If Christ ceases to be the Cornerstone of our message, then why have we spent forty years striving for the truth? We could have saved ourselves a lot of trouble. Our pastors and teachers could be making large salaries; we could have avoided a lot of doctrinal ulcers; and we could all be members of mega churches.

Instead we are members of a small church body worrying about following God's Word and trying to figure out how we're going to pay for health insurance. We look to the fleshpots of our former church bodies and are tempted to believe that the depth of

their material resources outweighs whatever doctrinal differences may exist between us. But to do this is to miss the depth of the spiritual resources that God has blessed us with. Furthermore, our Lord never said that life would be easy for His faithful followers. How much money do you need to share Christ with someone else? It's as easy as speaking to your neighbor. Material resources are worthless if we are lacking in spiritual resources. Our Lord asks, "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?" (Mk. 8:36) We might ask ourselves, "What will it profit the CLC if we gain the whole world but lose Christ as our Cornerstone?"

. . . (An) unfortunate turning from the truth is found increasingly in almost every corner of Christendom. Even as many churches claim to have Christ at the center of their message, they change or ignore other parts of God's Word in order to make the Bible more palatable to unbelievers. They don't want to "scare anyone away" by proclaiming God's law to convict people of sin; they don't want to be "unfriendly" by turning anyone away from the Lord's Supper or by declining to pray with people of another faith;

they don't want to be ridiculed because science has "proven" evolution over against creation or because it is silly to the world to think that Jonah really spent three days in the belly of the great fish. After all, it doesn't really matter what we believe as long as we believe in Jesus as our Savior, right?

But how does it serve the gospel of Christ to give the impression that there is no difference between the various churches? Is it "friendly" to undermine a weak faith? Isn't it "unfriendly" to another person if he is allowed to remain in his error and put his faith at risk?

Was Christ concerned about ridicule when He stated matter-of-factly that Jonah was in fact "three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish" (Mt. 12:40)? And what of creation?

Does it matter if one believes these to be simple parables--nice stories that didn't really happen but were told merely to teach us a lesson? God says that these things actually happened! If I deny what the Bible teaches as fact about Jonah or about the six-day from-nothing creation, how do I know that what God says about Christ's sacrifice and resurrection are really true? If creation didn't happen the way God says it happened, I must then wonder if He is also lying to me when He tells me that "The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin" (1 Jn. 1:7).

To claim that one declares the Holy Scriptures and Christ crucified to be true, only to turn around and ignore or change what God says in His Word is to undermine the message of what Christ did on the cross.



SMORGASBORD

• A NEW SERIES

Concluded on these pages not long ago was a long-standing series on the parables of our Lord. Wanting to continue an in-depth look at another aspect of our Savior's earthly ministry, a new series is beginning this month under the title "The Discourses Of Christ."

A discourse is defined as a conversation, or more formally as a treatise, speech, or sermon. Divinely recorded in the four Gospels are discourses of our Lord such as His holy conversation with Nicodemus on the New Birth (John 3:1-21) and with the woman of Samaria on Himself as the Water of Life (John 4:1-26); other discourses of the Lord were first spoken by Him to the Jews ("Christ and the Father," John

5:16-47), to the people following Him ("the Bread of Life," John 6:22-59), to the scribes and Pharisees ("the Light of the world," John 8:12-30) etc. Recorded in John 14 is the Savior's discourse on Himself as "the Way, the Truth, and the Life"; in John 15 the discourse on "the Vine and the Branches"; in John 16 the discourse on "The Departure and Returning."

While John has recorded more discourses than the other Gospel writers have, there are a number of others. For example, we will not forget the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew chapters 5-7). At the conclusion of that Sermon we are told: "And so it was, when Jesus had ended these sayings, that the people were astonished at His teaching, for



Bd. of Regents: T. Barthels, V. Fossum, M. Beekman, (missing: D. Menton)



Bd. of Missions: M. Eichstadt, B. Naumann, P. Krafft, (missing: J. Mayhew)



Bd. of Education: G. Stelter, R. Roehl, D. Bernthal, D. Naumann



Bd. of Doctrine: D. Fleischer, T. Schuetze, M. Eichstadt, M. Bernthal, D. Schierenbeck, J. Schierenbeck, (missing: F. Paull, D. Lau)

CLC Board photos taken at June Convention; see also p. 18

He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes" (Mt. 7:28f). The astonishment that gripped Jesus' earthly contemporaries continues to grip those who pay attention to what He has to say, for no one else has ever spoken with the authority of the God-Man, the Christ of God.

"We need preachers who speak with the same kind of authority. 'Thus says the Lord' must be the basis for our preaching, not human philosophy or the speculations of the wise and learned people of this world." (*Matthew, The People's Bible*, Northwestern Publishing House, p. 116).

As our staff writers humbly expound on the Savior's discourses (see the first article in the series in this issue), may the Spirit of God increase

our faith in Jesus as the unique Son of God and only Savior of the world of sinners.

Speaking of new series, notice Pastor Fanning's article in this issue in which he refers to a series soon to begin on our biblical church practice of "close communion." A worthy, and edifying, review that will surely prove to be.

• **DAILY BIBLE READINGS INSERT (from the Editor)**

When we began a new pastorate earlier this year, we undertook house-to-house get-acquainted pastoral visits. In an overnight visit to an at-a-distance member family, we were delighted to find on the morning breakfast table a copy of "Daily Bible Readings For Home Devotions, 2002" from the

Lutheran Spokesman.

Husband and wife spoke of their appreciation for these suggested readings which they had been using all year long. "Pastor, will you read for us this morning?" After we did so, expounding a bit on the Holy Scripture, and offering prayer, the man of the house concluded our devotion by reading the suggested hymn verse of supplication and praise.

It does a pastor's heart good to witness the fact that--still today, may we say, in our postmodern, truth-denying day!--there are sheep who hunger and thirst for the green pastures and still waters of the Good Shepherd's word. More than that, that there are those who act on this holy hunger and thirst

by endeavoring to keep a regular (daily) schedule of family devotions centered around that saving Word.

Assistant Editor Paul Koch has again (as the last couple years) provided a camera-ready schedule of daily Bible readings, with theme thought and hymn stanzas for the new year. Notice, please, on the first page of the insert, Professor Koch's comments explaining the direction of those readings.

It is from the backdrop of the timeless, infallible Word of our God--which announces the birth of the Word made flesh to rescue hopelessly lost and condemned creatures--that we wish our readers a truly Christian Christmas season, and a truly blessed new year in the Lord!



The Discourses of Christ

Jesus And Nicodemus--John 3:1-15
Part One

Poor Nicodemus and Rich Jesus

(Keep your Bible open and follow along.)

Poor Nicodemus!

So affluent in his Jewishness, the religion professor with academic seniority came to the novice Rabbi for a personal consultation. He didn't know what he was in for, because he probably did not yet realize how poor he was in God's heavenly treasures--a poverty apparent to us, however, for it stands in stark contrast to the treasure standing before him in the person of his

Redeemer.

We wonder what his expectations were of Jesus. What drew him out of his comfortable home after sunset to sidle down darkened streets to the obscure dwelling where he would find Jesus? We pick up on clues in his opening comment, "Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him."



First of all, he was beginning to realize Jesus had cosmic significance; so here was his golden opportunity to interview a man sent from God on a mission to Israel. Indeed, Nicodemus had questions pressing on his heart. And without knowing it, he had come to the right person for God's answers; he could receive God's rich response to sinful humanity's deepest poverty.

Everyone in Jerusalem was talking about Jesus: what He was teaching and what He was doing--such as taking a whip to Temple entrepreneurs (ch. 2:13-17). Face to face with Jesus and behind closed doors, poor Nicodemus could let down his official guard and get to the bottom of such things. We find this attitude admirable; more people should be concerned about Jesus and His importance for their souls.

Our feelings for Nicodemus are flavored, of course, by knowing that he later tried to roadblock the official opposition mushrooming against Jesus (read ahead to ch. 7:51). And by the time of Jesus' funeral, poor Nicodemus contributed that expensive 100 lb. bundle of embalming spices (ch. 19:39); what did that mean about his spiritual poverty or his acquiring spiritual wealth?

Poor Nicodemus, so affluent and influential, yet so ignorant of God's ways, so stunted in the shade! But he

did come into the light (didn't he), the true Light that gives light to every one (ch. 1:9). And there in the gloaming, his eyes squinting before the splendor of heavenly Light, he tried to follow along as Jesus led him from one mystery to another.

What Was The Key?

Just about everything Jesus shared with him about the Kingdom was so puzzling! What did Jesus mean to say with His deliberate insistence about the necessity of being "born again"? Was there some miracle-way God could reverse the passage of time so a grown-up could return to infancy or even become a fetus again in his mother's uterus (v. 4)?

What was the key to understanding this whole business? So in his poverty Nicodemus kept asking for more, and Jesus kept giving of His riches.

You and I and every Christian rich in Bible knowledge understand the working of God in conversion, though the picture language threw poor Nicodemus for a loop (vv. 5-8). Of course, Nicodemus should have deciphered the mystery, because a Rabbi in Israel could be expected to know such things (v. 10)--that humans are by nature spiritually still-born, and that the Lord God has a remedy more marvelous than physical birth: by water and the Spirit-filled Word He regenerates, quickens, enlivens, and thus begets new life for spiritual still-borns.

But poor Nicodemus struggled to comprehend: "How can these things be?" The answer to the first puzzle triggered yet a second: if there indeed be a prerequisite "second birth" in order to enter God's Kingdom--as Jesus claimed--what about the mecha-

nism God uses to get His miracle accomplished?

Well, as Jesus pointed out (vv. 8,12), it's like the weather: everybody talks about it, but only God can do something about it.

Rich Jesus invited the heart of poor Nicodemus to receive the working of the Holy Spirit--so he would know by personal experience the new birth himself. By recognizing Jesus as God's answer to sin, by embracing the sweet reality of God's grace in Jesus, Nicodemus could have new life for himself, too.

Rich Jesus had so much to give him, as He still gives to poor sinners: --the testimony of the Triune God (vv. 11-12); --Jesus' own arrival (for business, not pleasure) from heaven to personalize God's plan of salvation (v. 13); --and even a sketch of the heavenly blueprint, that He is the prototype of Moses' serpent on a pole (vv.14-15). Surely Nicodemus would recall the

blessed and saving function of the brass serpent God ordered Moses to raise up on a cross as antidote for those afflicted by the venom of the snake! (Num. 21:6-9)

Now figure out the meaning and take the application--for yourself, too!

Rich Jesus gave poor Nicodemus coinage of the Realm to pocket in his heart, that he be no longer wretched, miserable, poor, and blind (Rev. 3:17-18), but rich indeed in the treasures Jesus offered him: ". . . that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life."

Only in heaven will we know if poor Nicodemus was begotten again by water and the Spirit to enjoy the heavenly treasures endowed by Jesus. Until then we join other poor folks at Jesus' feet (and beneath the cross) to receive of Him riches that endure unto everlasting life. God grant it! Amen!

—Prof. Em. Paul R. Koch



*(From the editor: This article was not solicited by us, yet it was brought to our attention and we feel it is timely. As an official organ of the CLC, the **Lutheran Spokesman** is always ready to carry articles which give a clear witness and testimony to the synod's doctrinal confession. The article was written by Pastor Joel Fleischer, Calvary Lutheran Church, Marquette, Michigan.)*

Aid Association for Lutherans/Lutheran Brotherhood Is This Still An Issue?

In 2001 the Aid Association for Lutherans (AAL) merged with Lutheran Brotherhood (LB) to form Thrivent, becoming "the largest fraternal benefit society in the world."¹ With the merger of these companies, it is

necessary for us to examine the new organization in order to determine whether or not our valid objections to AAL/LB are still relevant to Thrivent. As believers in Jesus Christ who enjoy the freedom of the gospel, we do not

want to label anything as sinful that is not. On the other hand, we dare not gloss over something that is contrary to the Word of God.

Furthermore, in recent months those who have left the CLC citing "legalism" on the part of the CLC following the CLC Convention's statement on the American Legion have alleged that the differences that existed between the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) and the CLC no longer exist. One example of the continuing differences has been in the different assessment and action regarding fraternal insurance companies. The CLC has recognized such companies as involving their members in religious unionism. The WELS has not. With the merger of the two largest Lutheran fraternal benefit companies, is this still an issue? Or have they changed their practice?

The objections of the Church of the Lutheran Confession regarding the AAL centered around their statement that, "*When a Lutheran buys AAL insurance protection, he also becomes a member of our fraternal family and automatically participates in projects which serve Lutherans and Lutheranism in special ways.*"²

The name chosen for the merger, *Thrivent Financial for Lutherans*, gives us our first clue that religious unionism continues to be business as usual in the new company. The fact that it is "for Lutherans" is emphasized in that, "*A Membership Sponsor Declaration is required for all non-Lutheran applicants.*"³ "*As a fraternal [sic], Thrivent Financial is required by charter to limit membership to Lutherans, eligible family members and others who meet the eligibility*

rules."⁴

In its "Mission and Values Statement" *Thrivent* states:⁵

Mission

Thrivent Financial for Lutherans is a faith-based membership organization called to improve the quality of life of its members, their families, and their communities by providing unparalleled solutions that focus on financial security, wellness and caring for others.

Vision

Our vision is to be the organization that Lutherans, Lutheran congregations and Lutheran institutions seek first when pursuing their financial goals. More than creating financial solutions, we add the unique capability of enabling Lutherans to demonstrate their care and concern for others.

Our Core Values

Thrivent Financial was founded to help Lutherans care for and support one another in time of need, guided by the principles of the Christian faith. We remain committed to this rich fraternal heritage as we strive to achieve the highest possible good for members, staff and society. We hold these values to be essential as we work to fulfill our mission, vision and strategies.

Concerning their "Fraternal Programs," *Thrivent* notes:⁶

*As the country's largest fraternal benefit society, **Thrivent Financial for Lutherans** does more than offer financial services. We offer hope and help to Lutherans, their families and their communities. Find information here about how you and your family can:*

- + Learn through educational programs and resources.
- + Get involved in your community and volunteer to help others.
- + Financially help Lutheran

churches, schools and organizations.

Note well the statement in the Mission Statement: "*Thrivent Financial for Lutherans is a faith-based membership organization.*" By its own admission *Thrivent* (AAL/LB) continues to be a pan-Lutheran organization that proudly lumps all of its members into its Lutheran family of confession and support, regardless of real, doctrinal differences between the various members and the different Lutheran churches to which they belong.

Consider Romans 16:17: "Mark those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them." Avoiding false teachers means that we refuse to be partners with them in religious matters. Simply buying a product from a company does not make you a religious partner with them. However, membership in *Thrivent* is different. Since it is a fraternal benefit society for Lutherans, your membership does make you a religious partner with the WELS, ELS, LC-MS, and ELCA.

While it is not necessary, nor is it possible, to investigate how every company spends its profits before we buy something from them, *Thrivent* is not just a company from which you buy a product. You cannot buy insurance from them unless you are a member. When you belong to this kind of fraternal society, you are not simply a customer of the company, you ARE the company, by reason of your fraternal membership and voting rights. Therefore, you are responsible for how the company's profits are spent, and that makes it much more than just a "business arrangement." *Thrivent*

Financial for Lutherans calls itself your religious "brother" in many ways — in fact, that's what the word "fraternal" means.

2 John 1:10-11 says, "If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds." Surely we do not want our money and involvement to help along the "evil deeds" of promoting false doctrine and even immorality, as is happening in many "Lutheran" churches and schools.

The question can be summarized in this way: "Is it pleasing to our Lord that His child be a member of a fraternal society that, in addition to its other activities, supports and promotes false teachers?" The answer from Scripture is "no," and that is why membership in fraternal Lutheran benefit societies, including *Thrivent Financial for Lutherans*, is not compatible with our Christian life and witness.

1 www.thrivent.com/about-us/history.html

2 1972 summer edition of "AAL Correspondent"

3 www.thrivent.com/joinus/membership.html

4 Ibid.

5 www.thrivent.com/about-us/missionvision.html

6 www.thrivent.com



Bd. of Trustees: J. Ude, J. Sandeen, E. Lang, P. Radichel

New Pastor in Georgia

In an evening service on September 29, 2002, Nathanael Mayhew was installed as the pastor of Zion Lutheran Church in Lawrenceville, near Atlanta, Georgia. Pastors Paul Tiefel Jr. and Vance Fossum conducted the service.

Pastor Tiefel gave a sermon on 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 entitled "Nathanael the builder, he can't build this!" As many members of the CLC know, Nathanael had a year and a half off between his graduation from the seminary at ILC and his acceptance of the call issued by Zion. During this time he worked in construction in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. While the Lord in His perfect timing was patiently leading Nathanael back into the ministry, the Holy Spirit was at the same time sustaining the members at Zion until the two were brought together. The installation message therefore held special application for both shepherd and flock. While Nathanael has no power on his own to produce results, he has the needed tools. These tools are the gospel in Word and Sacrament. And with the Holy Spirit as the general contractor, the end result may not be as evident to us now, but it will be very dramatic--the salvation of souls.

There were also several other com-



Nathanael Mayhew family

forting Scripture readings. Following the sermon, participating in the laying-on of hands were Pastors Karl Stewart, Vance Fossum, and Paul Tiefel along with Glenn Oster and Board of Missions member Peter Krafft.

Several members from sister congregations in South Carolina and Florida were present for the service and potluck that followed. The little facility that serves as the church was packed to capacity, and there was much joy in the Christian fellowship.

Pastor and Debra Mayhew are settling into their home very well. They enjoy the mild weather and the beautiful area. Their three children (Luke, age 4, Katherine 3, and Hope 1) are



Lawrenceville installation: P. Tiefel, G. Oster, P. Krafft, N. Mayhew, V. Fossum, K. Stewart

also adjusting to the recent move. The family is looking forward to the arrival of the latest member due in March.

May the Lord of the Church bless the Word, wherever it is sown, including the Atlanta area.

—Submitted by Pastor Mayhew
at the request of the *Spokesman*



Announcements

Ordination/Installation

In accord with our usage and order, Nathanael Mayhew, who was called by Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church, Lawrenceville (Atlanta area), Ga. to serve as pastor, was ordained and installed on Sunday, September 29, 2002. Assisting in the service were Pastors Vance Fossum and Karl Stewart, Board of Missions member Peter Krafft, and Glenn Oster.

—Pastor Paul Tiefel

Installations

In accord with our usage and order, Bruce Naumann, who was called by Grace Lutheran Church of Sleepy Eye, Minn. and Faith Lutheran Church of New Ulm, Minn. to be their pastor, was installed on August 25, 2002. Assisting in the installation were Pastors Keith Olmanson, Norman Greve, Elton Hallauer, and Douglas Libby (installation address)

—Pastor L. Dale Redlin
—Pastor Douglas Libby

In accord with our usage and order, Theodore Barthels, who was called by St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church of Austin, Minn. to be its pastor, was installed on November 10, 2002.

—Pastor David Schierenbeck

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To our readers:

A truly Christian
Christmas season,
and a truly blessed
new year in the Lord!

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Ask your pastor for more information or visit www.lutheranspokesman.com or contact Pastor Joel Fleischer, phone (906) 228-3566; e-mail: jflei@clclutheran.com, or 448 West Ohio, Marquette, MI 49855.