

The AALC Pastor's Conference Session Three - Equipping the Sons of God

At the 2003 Annual Meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion Hartford Seminary Sociologist Adair Lummis expressed her convictions that the disparity of the number of men and boys in the church was not a concern. Her expressed position was that if “real men” or the jocks, support the church financially and do not hinder their wives and children from attending, why should there be any concern that many boys and men are not present? It is easy to default to Lemme’s position of just letting the men be because changing from the current course would take a tremendous amount of work and require significant, specific, and intentional effort by the whole church – clergy and laity, as they resist the indoctrinations of secular egalitarianism and the influence of legalism, pietism, and expressive individualism.

With that being said, that which was discussed yesterday is accomplished only by trusting in God, as He says through His prophet Isaiah, *“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it”* (Is 55:10-11). No program, no method, no gimmick, no revival, no “jumping the shark” will grow, retain, and draw boys and men to Jesus Christ. After all, it is He who chooses them (John 15:16). Only the work of the Holy Spirit through the Gospel of Jesus Christ and His means of grace can accomplish this incredible task as we confess in the meaning of the 3rd Article. No church program will work without the Divine Service’s solid foundation.

We read in the Augsburg Confession Art. 4, *It is also taught among us that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merits, works, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ’s sake, through faith, when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness, as Paul says in Romans 3:21–26 and 4:5(AC IV1-3).*

In the words of the Apology, this article of justification by faith is *“the chief article of the entire Christian doctrine,”* and in the Solid Declaration, *“without which no poor conscience can have any abiding comfort or rightly understand the riches of the grace of Christ”* (SD III 6).

To play off Zahl’s conclusion, to respond to man’s quest for “enoughness,” and cooperating with the Holy Spirit, the church must draw men back to corporate worship, which will, in turn, draw women and children as well. The church obviously cannot go back in time and return to a place and time when Christianity was front and center in men’s lives. She needs to play the field that is before her not of the past. She needs to return, or perhaps better said, to reform, once again around the authentic biblical understanding of justification that Zahl calls a “region of grace.”

Nearly 500 years ago, Martin Luther and the fathers of the Lutheran Confessions professed that the first and chief article is the doctrine of justification, *Of this article nothing can be yielded or surrendered [nor can anything be granted or permitted contrary to the same], even though heaven and earth, and whatever will not abide, should sink to ruin (SA II I 5).*

Yet today, the very institution to which Jesus Christ assigned the specific and unique responsibility of the proclamation of justification by grace through faith alone has forsaken her first love (Rev. 2:4) and has been reaching for anything and everything, other than the doctrine of justification, to right herself and to bring men back into her fold. If the church placed the doctrine of justification central in all her activities, just as she practiced before being emasculated, the sons of God would be equipped for spiritual battle and desire nothing more than to gather around Word and sacraments.

Drawing upon earlier Lutheran statements of faith, reformer Phillip Melanchthon composed the Augsburg Confession to present the Lutheran Confession to Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Augsburg in 1530. Melanchthon immediately follows the Article of Justification (Article IV) with the lifting up of the Office of the Ministry in Article V. *In order 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.* (AC, Art. V)

The Lutheran confessions emphatically state that it was to ensure the proper teaching of the Gospel and the faithful administration of Christ's holy sacraments that the Office of Word and Sacrament was created, in order to ensure people would obtain the true faith (AC IV 1-2).

However, the residual and lasting effect of early American revivalism, when coupled with American pietism, contemporary social justice, clergy's flagrant abuses, and exacerbated by expressive individualism, has resulted in discounting the perceived necessity of the Office of Word and Sacrament. At best, clergy are seen as commentators on life but are really irrelevant since they are freed from the burdens of real work and struggles. Regrettably, there are even those who claim to speak for the Lutheran Church as ecclesiastical authorities who have instead added doctrinal uncertainty to the faith. By placating to the zeitgeist, the spirit of the age, they openly reject biblical truths as clearly detailed in the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. These "authoritative" voices publicly dismiss doctrines that have always been central to Christian theology, such as the inerrancy and infallibility of Holy Scripture, the substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ, the existence of hell and eternal death, and the doctrine that salvation is through no other than Jesus Christ, to name just a few. Paul's warning to Timothy that people will not put up with sound doctrine but find that which is pleasing to the ear was exceptionally prophetic, not only in their time but today as well (2 Tim 4:3-4).

History has proven that drawing boys and men to Jesus Christ for life, nurturing biblical masculinity, equipping them for spiritual warfare, and calling men to their God-given role as head of the house cannot be accomplished through revival, pietism, legalism, or expressive individualism. These ongoing failures are exacerbated by repeatedly peddling a superficial theology that a man must be a "self-feeder" when it comes to faith or through the erroneous teachings of gospel reductionism. A competent under-shepherd of Jesus Christ must lead men; such leadership is only possible when the called pastor commands a thorough understanding of the proper distinction between Law and Gospel. That is, the called pastor is obligated to declare the Law's sharpness, followed closely with the proclamation of the true Gospel of Jesus Christ.

He is to proclaim liberty to the captives of sin via the Office of the Keys, and must remain a faithful steward of the mysteries of the means of grace.

Inasmuch as the Scriptures make clear that God gives the growth and that He has promised that His Word will not return to Him empty, any discussion of church growth should be approached with extreme cautiousness. It is God that eternally accomplishes what He desires (Is 55:11), and His accomplishments are not necessarily wrought through the temporal methods and techniques implemented by men. With that principle in mind, in a compelling study David Haskell, Professor of Religion and Culture at Wilfrid Laurier University, and colleagues examined the traits of growing mainline Protestant churches in southern Ontario. They found that churches whose pastors were theologically conservative and exhibited consistent Bible reading and prayer became the leading factor for the regrettably rare growing mainline Protestant congregations. While the study did not break the attendees down by gender, the conclusion is that clergy “pull” the congregation toward the direction of their own conservative theology. In other words, the study found that the pastor is the most significant influence upon the theological convictions of the average adherent, which of course, includes boys and men.

According to Dr. Harold Senkbeil, in his work “*Engaging Our Culture Faithfully*,” preaching in American Christian churches is generally found wanting. The Gospel is not preached, despite much talking about God’s love. There is little said about the need for the perfect life, passion, death, glorious resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation.

The stalwart orthodox Lutheran pastor Johann Konrad Wilhelm Loehe (d. 1872) in his book “*The Pastor*” quotes Byzantine archbishop Theophylact of Ohrid (d. 1170), “Doctrine is the virtue and the character of a bishop.” He further states that the sole purpose of the pastor is to shepherd and teach with the “main means that God gives the shepherds for this purpose, namely the divine Word.” It is the divine Word which comes from the mouth of faithful pastors as “sacred teaching and must save the hearts of their congregations.” Loehe also believed that the Word of God is the only way a pastor can fulfill his office as everything else is attached to it. German-American Lutheran minister C.F.W. Walther (d. 1887) regarded sound biblical preaching as the “most important task” in executing the office of public ministry. Hence, Walther warns that the preacher must go beyond exhorting the listener to believe, but rather must complete the act by showing how a person can realize a saving faith through repentance while being particularly careful to simultaneously encourage the serving of one’s neighbor through Godly works.

The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod’s President Matthew Harrison shares a powerful story about Hermann Sasse (d. 1976), who is considered one of the foremost confessional Lutheran theologians of the twentieth century. Once at a pastors’ conference, the speaker admonished his fellow pastors, “We need to preach more about the Gospel!” The venerable and revered Sasse came forward with aged yet determined steps and interrupted the speaker, declaring, “For more than fifty years, I have never preached about the Gospel. I have only preached the Gospel!”

Sasse’s comment echoes Walther’s uncompromising position that only the preached Gospel of Jesus Christ takes away all torment, fear, and anxiety of the heart and fills it with real peace and

joy. Walther reminds the pastor to be always mindful of the essential need to preach the Word focused on the specific needs of the hearers for the sake of individual and corporate spiritual upbuilding. Walther had a deep conviction that the preached Word would address the hearer's heart and conscience; thus, the preacher must ask what is most needed and how it is to be shared.

The host of the Lutheran podcast program, "Issues, Etc.", Todd Wilken invites Christians to ask three simple questions when evaluating sermons to answer the overarching question, "Did the preacher preach the Gospel?" Wilken's three questions are: 1. How often is the name of Jesus mentioned? 2. If Jesus is mentioned, is He the subject of the verbs? 3. What are those verbs? Wilken grants that this three-part diagnostic is not about answering every question to ensure proper preaching, as some bad sermons are found wanting because they lack a declaration of the Law or they lack the proper distinction between Law and Gospel. The three questions above merely aid the listener to determine if he heard the Gospel preached, as Wilken summarizes, "...a Jesus-less sermon is a Gospel-less sermon."

To give examples of the character of Jesus Christ to build up men is not the preaching of the Gospel. Indeed, the Gospel accounts show Jesus Christ as tender, inspiring, and empowering, but there must be so much more, as Luther writes, *"...it has been made sufficiently evident, that to preach the works, the life, and the words of Christ in an historical way, as things that once took place, and to form an external mode of life from the knowledge thereof, is not enough to make a Christian; as those preach, who are now considered to be the greatest men... Whereas Christ ought to be preached to this end—that faith in him may be drawn forth; that he may not only be Christ, but Christ to me, and to thee; and may work that in us which is spoken of him under the name of Saviour. And this faith is begotten and preserved by this—by preaching why Christ came; what he brought with him, and gave; in what way, and to what end, he is to be received."*

Concerning worship, Senkbeil asks more than rhetorical questions when he queries, *"What would happen if our worship services were not places where people go for a few helpful hints for living with a few jokes thrown in for good measure, or a spiritual pick-me-up, but an audience with the living God? What would happen if we began to take liturgy as more than form and ritual, as enacted reality, holy ground where we actually come into the presence of God to receive his gifts, then to praise him in word and song, with bodies and souls?"*

To retain males and reclaim the missing men who once grew up in her sanctuary, the church must be intentional in preserving her unique calling and character. This unique calling and character are seen in the liturgical worship of the living God and by deliberately encouraging her adherents to be "little Christs" to their neighbor as part and parcel of God's plan to draw all people, including males unto Jesus Christ.

Contrary to the contemporary idea that corporate worship services are all about praise and worship alone, Lutheran theologian and author Marva Dawn startles when she declares that the Divine Worship must kill; worship should not be seen as a safe place. The preached Word of God, she explains, must assassinate the self-righteous inward curving old Adam that desires to live in every man and then must quickly revive him with the balm of the Gospel of Jesus Christ (SC IV 12). The proper distinction between Law and Gospel must be integral to the whole message that the church brings to every boy and man, keeping in mind that if nothing substantial

is offered, men are fully capable of constructing their own religion, brazenly attaching the name of “Jesus” to many a false doctrine.

According to Murrow, men report that they are just plain bored with worship; they find holy things mundane. The immediate temptation is to change things up to treat the boredom; some call it “jumping the shark,” which is simply being reactive and addressing only the symptom of a far deeper malady. Confessional and orthodox congregations must strongly resist the temptation to adopt the practices of a neighboring Evangelical congregation by appropriating their practices as a template for drawing more people to attend worship. Lutheran apologist and lawyer, Craig Parton, warns that a worship style formed through revivalism, pietism, legalism, and expressive individualism cannot properly contain confessional and orthodox Christian doctrines, especially the chief doctrine, the doctrine of justification. As in the past, when clergy and churchmen are tempted to do what is popular in order to draw more people to worship, church growth will become a false idol, pushing the only Savior of men’s souls, Jesus Christ, to the peripherals of worship and, thus, the Christian’s life.

Men’s boredom with worship will not be resolved by spicing things up in order to hold their attention nor will such tactics draw greater numbers into the church’s nave. Quite likely this is simply chasing the wind. The key to this conundrum is to reform around that which is eternal. Senkbeil affirms Parton’s wisdom and adds that the church needs to resist the attraction of being irreverent and flippant in order to be seen as authentic or relevant. Instead, the church needs a “deeper sense of the holy.” In short, the church needs to press hard into the Third Article by relying faithfully in the Holy Spirit’s work as He “ calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth and preserves it in union with Jesus Christ in the one true faith” (SC II III 6)

[B]e filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ (Eph 5:18-21).

Faithful worship in its liturgy edifies boys and men is clearly described in the Scriptures and particularly in the Psalms. The Psalmist meditates upon God's Word and then sings back to God that which God has first told him through His Word. St. Paul encourages the Thessalonians and future Christians to hold everything accountable to the Word of God and hold on to what is good (1 Thes 5:21). Thus, since song is found to be good throughout God’s Word, St. Paul provides doctrinal support for the use of hymnody in worship (Eph 5:19).

When planning worship, pastors should always keep in mind the ecclesiastical axiom that goes, *Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi*, to paraphrase, “How you worship is how you believe.” Given its importance to worship, hymnody must be Christ-focused and not “me-focused.” The selection of appropriate songs for worship is a great challenge since many hymns which conflict with confessional and orthodox Christianity tend to sneak into Divine Worship. The pastor’s challenge is to select traditional liturgical hymnody, or even songs labeled “contemporary,” for worship that do not promote, implicitly or overtly, synergism or semi-Pelagianism.

Even with the assistance of musically trained laity, the pastor cannot neglect to assiduously supervise the content of the hymns or songs chosen. There is always a great temptation to choose the latest popular songs from Contemporary Christian Music (CCM) radio or Internet streaming. The first of three hazards of such a choice is that most of these songs are not in agreement with orthodox and confessional Christianity. Secondly, they are usually very hard to sing in a corporate setting as a large body, and finally, the target audience for these songs is generally the thirty-something mothers of two children, or lonely women, with little or no thought given to the spiritual needs of men.

In *Why Men Hate Going to Church*, Murrow briefly tracks historical changes in the church songs used in corporate worship, noting that before the popularity of CCM songs, the church sang about the Triune God and the merits of Jesus Christ. With the advent of CCM songs, the church now sings to God rather than about God. As a consequence, songs in most worship services today have moved away from singing about the God who creates, redeems, leads, and sanctifies His people, substituting in His place a new god who acts more like a lover or boyfriend. The choice of words in CCM songs has moved from the head to the heart, often using words that a heterosexual man would never say let alone sing to another man simply because of their perceived erotic undertones. Obviously, this inappropriate song wording does not apply to every CCM song, but the pastor must be very perceptive and selective in song choices as the Holy Scriptures never describe a man's love for God in such erotic or emotional terms.

“Shallow songs form shallow people”, warns Dawn. Hymnody and spiritual songs should never be dumbed down. Applying Dawn's principle, these questions need to be asked: 1) Does the choice of songs for worship edify a boy's or man's faith? 2) Does the choice challenge the man theologically and cause him to contemplate the mercy and faithfulness of God through grace in Jesus Christ?

Dawn notes that the best music for the glory of God should be consistently sought. The church should enjoy her freedom in Jesus Christ to select appropriate songs, both old and new songs that build up and edify the faithful while “[reaching] out to the culture surrounding the church with the church's best gifts, without dumbing down.” Murrow advises that men need familiar songs, in the proper key, that they can sing; songs that extol God's power without manipulating their feelings.

Therefore, faith is not a laughable, cold quality that snores and is idle in the heart. No, it is agitated and harassed by horrible trials concerning the nothingness and the vanity of the divine promises. For I believe in Christ, whom I do not see. But I have His Baptism, the Sacrament of the Altar, and consolation through the Word and Absolution. Yet I see nothing of what He promises. Indeed, I feel the opposite in my flesh. Here, then, one must struggle and do battle against unbelief and doubt. ~ Martin Luther

American Christianity typically views Holy Baptism in one of two ways:

- 1) Baptism is something the believer does for God because of Jesus Christ or
- 2) Baptism is something God executes upon the believer in order to create a new son of God through Jesus Christ.

Whichever view is adopted will determine how one approaches the sacrament of Holy Baptism and will define how he identifies himself to God. Within the realms of revivalism, pietism, legalism, and expressive individualism, baptism becomes a work that the believer must do for God or to express his allegiance to God. As such, it becomes a simple act of obedience. So, if baptism is only an act of obedience, then it is no longer a means of grace; rather it becomes just another instrument of the Law. What is problematic here is that the Law cannot save. Indeed, such a notion defies the very Word of God, which clearly states that Baptism saves (1 Peter 3:21). In fact, the Scriptures teach that baptism is solely God's work, meaning it is not about the Law but all about the Gospel (Titus 3:5-6), thus making baptism a means by which God delivers His grace. Said another way, God is the only true actor in Holy Baptism (LC IV 10): it is He who brings everyone involved to the font. It is He who inspires trust and faith, through the Holy Spirit's gift, and it is He who grants eternal life to the baptized through Christ's merits (SC II 6).

Podles notes that to be an adopted son of God requires an initiation which entails a “sharp break.” Baptism, the application of God’s Word with water, is the “initiation” for the sons of God in two ways: one micro and the other macro. In the micro sense, Holy Baptism is an initiation that delivers a sharp break through the pronouncement of a new status: one becomes adopted into sonship with God and into His eternal kingdom (John 3:5-6; Rom 8:5). Thus, whenever a man doubts his status before God, he can refer to the fact that he was and is baptized into a new life through Jesus Christ’s perfect life, death, and resurrection (Rom 6:3 & 4). In the macro sense, Baptism is the first step of entry into God’s kingdom, resulting in a sharp break from eternal death to the joy of eternal life.

Even after the initiation of baptism, the battle remains real, even though physical eyes can’t see it. As the Christian remains a sinner, even after baptism, there begins a life long struggle as Luther stated: “...*the sooner a person dies after baptism, the sooner is his baptism completed... There is no help for the sinful nature unless it dies and is destroyed with all its sin. Therefore, the life of a Christian, from baptism to the grave, is nothing else than the beginning of a blessed death. For at the Last Day God will make him altogether new*”.

Only the regenerated soul can see with the eyes of faith the absolute need for Jesus Christ to be his mediator in his spiritual warfare against sin, the evil world and the devil (AP IV 86). The Gospel proclaims that through the perfect work and merits of Jesus Christ, the son of God is free from the danger of sin, death, and the devil, but nevertheless must in every way, every day, do spiritual combat with this unholy trinity (Rom 7:13-25). When the Law accuses, a man’s conscience or the devil charges that the man is not worthy of the love and mercy of God; it is then that man can readily point to the baptismal font and respond to such doubt with these comforting words, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:1). As succinctly explained by Luther: *So when the devil throws your sins in your face and declares that you deserve death and hell, tell him this: “I admit that I deserve death and hell, what of it? For I know One who suffered and made satisfaction on my behalf. His name is Jesus Christ, Son of God, and where He is there I shall be also!”*

Consequently, baptism signifies an ongoing status given to the sons of God. As a result, the baptized can proudly say that, “I am baptized” rather than “I was baptized.” This ongoing status

as a son of God, with the daily drowning of the old Adam through daily contrition and repentance, becomes the way of a Christian life (SC IV 12).

The ancient church saw baptism as a necessary prerequisite for participation in the Sacrament of the Altar, the Lord's Supper. So, it is right and salutary that baptism is identified as the entry point (the initiation) into the true faith, and from this point, with proper catechesis, the sons of God are sustained through the Sacrament of the Altar.

The Christian does not go to the cross to find Jesus Christ; the son of God is to go to where he has been told to find Him, namely, in/with/under the bread and wine of the Sacrament of the Altar (SD VII 9-11). The Lord's Supper is all Gospel, and is necessary for the sons of God to be sustained and strengthened in order to stand in spiritual warfare. Luther wrote: *"The devil is a furious enemy; when he sees that we resist him and attack the old man, and when he cannot rout us by force, he sneaks and skulks about everywhere, trying all kinds of tricks, and does not stop until he has finally worn us out so that we either renounce our faith or yield hand and foot and become indifferent or impatient. For such times, when our heart feels too sorely pressed, this comfort of the Lord's Supper is given to bring us new strength and refreshment (LC V 26-27)."*

Finally, at the conclusion of the celebration and reception of the Sacrament of the Altar, the post-sacramental prayer of the Divine Service points the son of God to his vocation, *"We give thanks to You, almighty God, that You have refreshed us through this salutary gift, and we implore You that of Your mercy You would strengthen us through the same in faith toward You and in fervent love toward one another; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever."*

This prayer of Luther's indicates that not only is the Holy Supper the means by which the son of God receives by faith the forgiveness of sins and the promise of everlasting life, through the body and blood of Jesus Christ, but he is also called by the Gospel to live in fervent love toward his neighbor. Thus, the calling of the Gospel through the Lord's Supper strengthens and equips the son of God in his vocation to sacrifice himself in love for his neighbor, as Jesus Christ loves him.

Speaking of prayer. A son desires to have the ear of his father. A son yearns to be acknowledged by his father. Due to the relentless demands of the culture and sin, fathers are often not readily available to know their sons' joys, pains, and fears. American psychiatrist and author Frank Pittman calls this being "father hungry." Jesus Christ teaches his disciples that they have full access to their Father in heaven, that all sons of God can readily approach their heavenly Father "with the sure confidence that is firmly anchored in the Father's command and promise." Luther states that the sons of God never have to be anxious about the availability of their Father because He has promised always to be exclusively available: *"First, we must have a promise or a pledge from God. We must reflect on this promise and remind God of it, and in that way be emboldened to pray with confidence. If God had not enjoined us to pray and if he had not promised fulfillment, no creature would be able to obtain so much as a kernel of grain despite all his petitions."*

Additionally, Luther encourages all who would pray, “our Father in heaven,” that, “*Here God would encourage us to believe that he is truly our Father and we are truly his children in order that we may approach him boldly and confidently in prayer, even as beloved children approach their dear father* (SC III 2).

Like a boy who longs for the affirmation and love from his earthly father, each of the sons of God should cling tightly in faith to the words of his heavenly Father, with unwavering confidence that the Creator of heaven and earth knows each of his cares, concerns, needs, joys, and fears. Through the waters of Baptism, God is not a manifestation of the imagination to simply feel like an earthly father, but He is in fact “our Father.” We know the Father’s heart as we have seen it in Jesus Christ (John 14:9). He yearns for His sons to come to Him, even addressing Him with the term of endearment, Αββα (Gal 4:6) just as His only begotten Son addressed Him (Mark 14:36).

Senkbeil grants that while prayer is an indispensable part of the lives of the sons of God, prayer does not come easy. It requires discipline. It requires being intentional to find a quiet place to meditate upon the Word of God and raise up holy petitions. We pastors can’t assume that our boys and men know how to pray. He advises, “*Because our world is filled with constant stimuli, it is important to find a quiet spot for meditation—the church’s sanctuary, a room in our own house, a quiet path perhaps, or even driving our cars. To be quiet is the first step, then to listen—to listen not to the wild, racing feelings of our own hearts, but to the sure and certain promises of God’s word. So, like children, Luther reminds us, we begin by reciting the Creed or the Lord’s Prayer, a psalm, or some text of Scripture. It’s important that we speak out loud so that the ear can hear and the heart believe an objective word that cuts through the stream of conflicting thoughts that flow through our harried hearts and minds.*”

Stand up, stand up for Jesus, stand in his strength alone;
the arm of flesh will fail you, ye dare not trust your own.
Put on the gospel armor, each piece put on with prayer;
where duty calls or danger, be never wanting there.

~ Stanza 3 of the hymn, “Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus”, George Duffield Jr., 1858

St. Paul warns that the way of the son of God as he follows Jesus Christ is a way of high risk and danger, including affliction, persecution, and constant attack (2 Cor 4: 8-9). This constant struggle generates specific questions: 1) How is it that the son of God can be expected to withstand such incredible pressures and not be overcome? 2) How can he possibly stand up against everything the devil, the wicked and evil world, and even his own sinful flesh throw against him and expect victory?

The answer does not lie in the might, the will, or in a man’s character, as all are flawed by God’s standards and will fail. A son of God can only hold the field of spiritual battle equipped with the whole armor of God (Eph 6:10-20).

Nevertheless, the threat is dreadfully underestimated, even among American Christians. According to Barna, 45 percent of American Christians believe the Bible is not accurate, and 59 percent of American Christians somewhat to strongly agree that Satan is not a real supernatural

being but merely an anthropomorphic explanation of evil in the human experience. Walther dedicates precious space in his work, *American – Lutheran Pastoral Theology*, concerning the devil's demonic activities with his fallen angels. In fact, Walther gives specific guidance when visiting the possessed, and like Luther, he puts no stock in fetishes and such but rather places his faith in prayer, the Lord's Prayer, and the Apostles' Creed. Lutheran missionary and pastor, Robert Bennett agrees with Luther's approach to spiritual warfare. Bennett notes that Luther was adamant that the Divine Service with God's Word and sacraments, accompanied by prayer, is the ideal fortress from which to defend against the devil's attacks.

Disclosed through the Holy Scriptures, Satan's battle plan includes the obliteration of the sons of God (Rom 8:22; Gal 5:17; Eph 6:11 & 12; 1 Peter 5:8). With his legion of fallen angels (Matt 25:4), he is at war with Jesus Christ and His Gospel. Those who have been baptized into Jesus Christ are now targets of his demonic assault. The devil attempts to usurp God's Law by formulating a devastating case against God's adopted sons in order to persuade the sons of God to become dejected and defeated by the knowledge that they are in utter disobedience. Indeed, the devil weaponizes God's own words by leveling the charge that there is no possible salvation for lawbreakers. The devil's strategic objective is to replace the joyous and sweet exchange of the cross with the deep dark despair of eternal damnation. Satan would have the sons of God to either follow the despairing advice of Job's wife, "Curse God and die." (Job 2:9), or he would confound the sons of God into misplacing their trust in their own self-righteousness; that is, in their own goodness and obedience. To do this he attempts to train them that to obey God's Law is simple child's play (Mark 10:20) and so long as one does better than a lesser sinner, there is no need for repentance (Luke 18:9-14). To resist the devil's plan, God, the master of all logisticians, has equipped his sons with the highest quality of armor in His eternal inventory (Eph 6:13-18a):

- The helmet of salvation: Acts 4:12; Rom 1:16; 2 Tim 3:14-15.
- The breastplate of righteousness: Rom 5:6-8, 18; 2 Tim 3:16; Titus 3:4-5.
- The belt of truth: John 8:32; John 14:6; Eph 4:15; 1 John 1:8.
- The shoes of the gospel of peace: Eph 6:15.
- The shield of faith: Eph 6:16.
- The sword of the spirit: Matt 4:1-10; Heb 4:12.

After an earlier age of intense martyrdom and with the legalization of Christianity, the medieval church stressed that to battle sin is to be a "soldier of Christ." It was taught that the real authentic warfare was not found in everyday life and vocation but rather was found within the fortress of monastic life. Celibacy was designated a primary battlefield, invoking drastic means to quell concupiscence with actions incited by strict monastic vows. There is also no shortage of contemporary Evangelical references encouraging the Christian to make the armor of God into offensive weaponry.

However, a closer examination of Ephesians 6:13-18a reveals that this armor is more suited for a particular type of warfare. The nature of this battle requires that the armor and related tactics be defensive in nature and should not be taken on to the offensive battlefield, for offensive battle with Satan is reserved for Jesus Christ alone. If the sons of God were to be deployed to directly attack evil, they would quickly lose heart and be rapidly defeated by their own sinful and tainted nature. Spiritual warfare isn't about wielding spiritual weapons and aggressively driving out the

enemy in order to gain ground. Rather it is about holding the line and deflecting or absorbing the attacks of the enemy just as St. Paul encourages, “So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter” (2 Thes 2:15).

The whole armor of God is issued from God’s armory to every one of the sons of God upon baptism, which of course, begs the question, how often do we think about the baby being equipped with armor? Baptism places the regenerated son of God in Jesus Christ, and therefore into His holy armor. Thus, even in the ever-present spiritual warfare of this fallen world, the sons of God are protected from the fiercest assaults. The armor of God permits the sons of God to stand, resist, and endure all the attacks of the enemy, flaming darts and all. Spiritual warfare is about assuming a robust defensive posture in Jesus Christ alone. Indeed, Jesus Christ has seen to it that the sons of God are nurtured and He continues to well equip them for the fight. Through the Divine Service, the church serves not only as the armory of God for equipping the sons of God, and it also serves as a field hospital ready to tend to the wounds of the battle weary and inspire those whose courage has faltered. For the offense we have the very real power of God’s proclaimed Word, a power that cannot be found anywhere else. Jesus Christ defends and sustains His church with His body and blood and with His words of forgiveness issuing forth from His under-shepherds’ lips. He then teaches the sons of God how to pray (Matt 6: 7-13; Luke 11:1-4), and answers every petition with an emphatic “Yes, yes, it shall be so!”(SC VI III 21). In this way, Jesus Christ goes on the offense by safely delivering His sons of God from the temporal and spiritual battlefield of evil (SC VI III 18-20).

Summary

The historic, confessional, and orthodox Lutheran theology is more urgently needed at this moment than at any other moment in the church’s history. The church must return to her first love, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, in order to stem the tide of male attrition. Through intentional efforts the church must seek to raise boys into men in the fear and love of the Lord. Further, it must train males to live out their holy vocations as boys, man, husband, father and wiseman even as they worship their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Past tactical attempts to target boys and evangelize men have ultimately resorted to the same old methods of revivalism, legalism, and pietism, while even appealing to the flawed concepts of rationalism and expressive individualism of men. The historic, confessional, and orthodox Lutheran Church must intentionally pursue a strategic reformational movement, continually emphasizing the church’s chief doctrines, most especially the foundational doctrine of justification. The eternal relevance and importance of extending God’s kingdom, proclaiming the Gospel and the Lord Jesus Christ must be made abundantly clear as the central mission for the boys and men of the American church.

The historic, confessional, and orthodox Lutheran doctrines and practices must equip the son of God for spiritual warfare with particular focus upon the efficacy and importance of the vital role played by the confessional Office of Word and Sacrament; that is, the man who goes by the title of “Pastor.” Indeed, the Lutheran confession subscribes to the belief that such men are called by Jesus Christ to *“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which He obtained with his own blood”* (Acts 20:28). For *“This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful”* (1 Cor 4:1-2). In short, this office’s primary purpose is none other than the proclamation of Christ and Him

crucified (1 Cor 1:23). There is no license to deviate from Scripture by addition or subtraction or by doing anything else. Those who presume to occupy this office yet fail to preach the lifesaving Gospel are practicing not only a lack of spiritual leadership but gross incompetence as well, all at the expense of boys and men's eternal souls. One is reminded of the modern proverb that the worst an incompetent medical doctor can do is kill his patient. By way of contrast, it must be noted that the worst an incompetent pastor can do by impeding someone's faith is to lead him into unbelief or even eternal damnation.

Further, it needs to be clearly noted that Christ Jesus is not powerless, nor is He unaware of these hazards. The gift of the Divine Service acts not only as a primary weapon in wars of the spirit but it also serves as a defensive shield for the protection of sons of God from the potential incompetence of all pastors who, like those in the pews, are also beggars. The Divine Service also ensures that the Word of God and the means of grace are accurately and faithfully delivered to the sons of God by the way of reading, preaching and singing of God's Eternal Word. The Divine Service is none other than the sons of God hearing what God has done for them through the perfect life and works of Jesus Christ, while they, in turn, speak, sing and pray, repeating back what their God has done for them. When practiced with doctrinal integrity, the Divine Service kills self-righteousness while the Law convicts through accusation and then spiritually resurrects the sons of God with the proclamation of the Gospel. This all results in the sons of God being properly fed, nourished, and equipped with the full armor of God.