

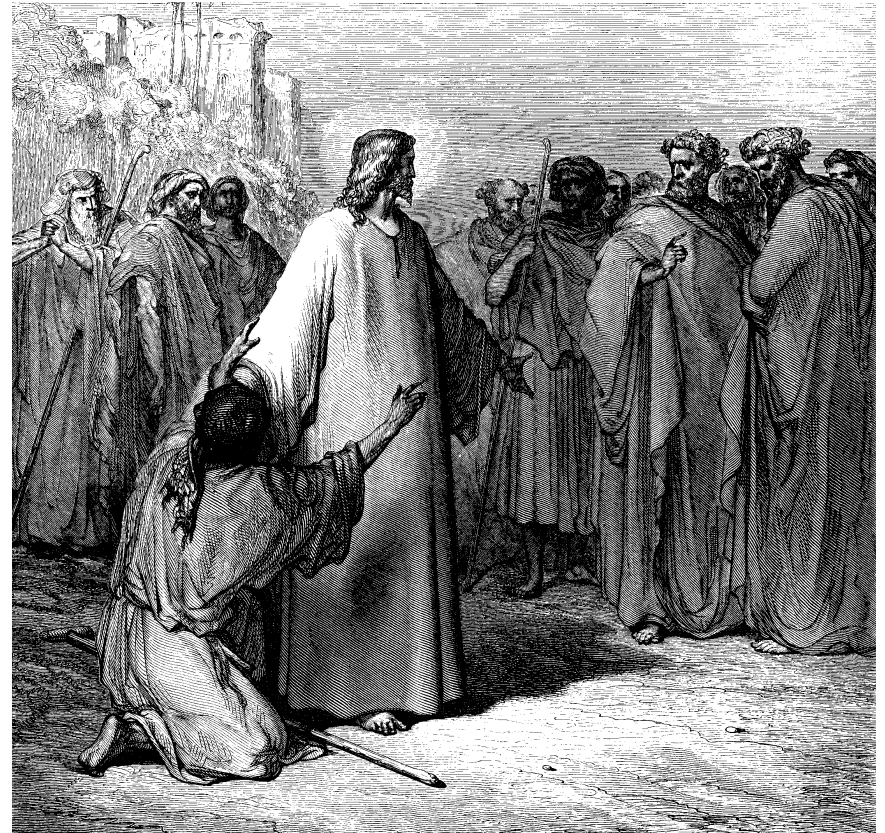
This faith of which James speaks, this faith we talked about yesterday, is the true faith. This faith cannot be seen. It is given to us by Word and Sacrament, and makes its presence known by a proper confession and by its proper and natural work. Jesus says a tree is known by its fruit (Matthew 7:16-20). If a person has a faith with no works—no love of God and neighbor, no pity, no repentance, no confession, no love of God's Word and Sacrament--does that one have true faith? Is that faith able to save him? We would all say "No!", because that is not faith in the One Holy Triune God.

You see, by God's grace you and I, who through Word and Sacrament have been given faith in the Holy Trinity, were freed from the law of works to save us. We no longer have to keep the law in order to be saved. Now we are free to keep the law of love. We are free to do good works to the glory of God and for the good of our neighbor. Our new man wants to do God's Law. It is as St. Paul writes in Romans 6:4, "Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life."

In this world it is true that our old nature still clings to us, but it is also true that the Lord uses His people—He works through them to make their faith complete and to glorify His holy name. He even uses sinners like me and you.

Lord, thank You that You do many "good" works through Your people. Amen.

THE LUTHERAN HERALD



TRINITY 14—TRINITY 17
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“Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, to which you were also called and have confessed the good confession in the presence of many witnesses” (1 Timothy 6:12).

St. Paul admonishes Timothy to “keep this commandment without spot, blameless...” The Church and her teachers are called to confess the whole truth in all its purity. Man’s heart and deeds are always tainted by the original sin that we inherited from Adam and Eve. But our confession can still be pure, because it is not a matter of our hearts or works; it is a matter of God’s Word.

False teachers will be obsessed with disputes and arguments over words, and they will claim that compromises can be allowed in one’s public confession because we are all imperfect. They ignore parts of God’s Word so they can justify their own interests that conflict with His clear teachings. The one who seeks, and clings to, a good confession is focused on that which comes from God, whereas the false teacher is often more focused on the sins of others in an effort to distract from his own.

Do not let false teachers confuse the issue. By the Holy Ghost and the faith He creates we are redeemed sinners who are made holy in Christ, but also are constantly called to repent of the impurity that comes from us. God’s Word calls us to confess His teaching without spot, blamelessly, because He Himself makes it possible.

We pray: Lord God, create in us a clean heart and strengthen us by Your Holy Spirit, so that we may give a good confession of Your truth for all to witness. In Jesus Christ’s name, Amen.

The Book of James is written to “the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad.” It is important to understand that this book was not written to unbelievers, but to those who already had faith in Jesus Christ. He is telling believers how those who have faith act and react to their neighbors. Jesus says to believers: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:37-39). James says the same thing that Jesus says.

When we were baptized we were given faith in Christ. St. Paul writes in Titus 3: “For we ourselves were also once foolish, disobedient, deceived. . . But when the kindness and love of God our Savior . . . appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. This is a faithful saying, and these things I want you to affirm constantly, that those who have believed in God should be careful to maintain good works. These things are good and profitable to men.”

It is in this faith that our Old Adam is by daily contrition and repentance drowned and dies with all sin and evil desires, and a new man emerges and arises to live before God in righteousness and purity forever. It is in this faith that the new man can act and react to his neighbor in a God-pleasing way, with works of righteousness.

Lord, by Your grace, produce good works in me, to your glory. Amen.

James' words about counting it all joy when you fall into trials sounds strange in our society because we don't like trials. Our old sinful nature doesn't like trials! We can not deny that trials produce strain and pain. However, James reminds us that when trials come, and when we by faith evaluate them rightly, we ought to bear them with joy. Our flesh will not like them, but the spirit will rejoice to gain from the trials what Christ intends that we should gain. In verse 3 James says that trials work patience, or endurance, or perseverance. Another word we might use is "constancy." These trials teach us that we can not rely on ourselves and our abilities, but we can always rely on our Heavenly Father.

What James writes here is very similar to Luther's explanation of the Third Petition of the Lord's Prayer, where he says, "How is God's will done?" Then he explains that "God's will is done when He breaks and hinders every evil plan and purpose of the devil, the world, and our sinful nature, which do not want us to hallow God's name or let His kingdom come; and when He strengthens and keeps us firm in His Word and faith until we die. This is His good and gracious will."

Indeed, in these verses James is showing us God's grace and His desire to keep us in His kingdom. Without trials, if our life were all ease and comfort, our old sinful flesh would soon neglect God's Word, faith in our Lord, and faith in His ability to keep us close to Himself.

Lord, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Amen.

"Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. That good thing which was committed to you, keep by the Holy Spirit who dwells in us" (2 Timothy 1:13-14).

God's Word calls the Church and her teachers to fold fast to a faithful confession of His teachings, but we are also called to do so in love. Our sinful nature makes it difficult for us to speak the truth in love sometimes. Our corrupt self-importance tempts us to use the Word of God as a club with which we can beat down those who are wrong, and revel in our own dominance rather than be truly concerned about helping them. We confuse being right with being truly righteous according to the Holy Spirit.

The whole point of God's Word is to save us from the suffering and condemnation that our sin brings. The Church's faithful confession of God's teaching addresses and condemns sin, but that is not the end goal. The real goal is to bring about true repentance, which is connected with the true faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. The Church's faithful message to the world is not just about law and commandments, it is characterized by Christ crucified. The cross of Jesus Christ shows us that there is truly death and sin that needs to be dealt with. But it also shows us that there is love and mercy that come through the faith that is given by the Holy Spirit who dwells in us.

We pray: Heavenly Father, grant us Your Spirit so that we may not only speak Your truth, but speak it in love, in Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Church and her teachers are to proclaim Christ crucified, and all that our Lord has commanded, so that sinners may know the truth, come to their senses, and repent. But the message of the truth becomes obscured if false teachers and misguided people are allowed to speak for the Church. They sully the good confession with foolish arguments, idle babblings, and cancerous practices.

St. Paul tells Timothy, “You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ.” He says this because maintaining a faithful confession in this broken world is not an easy task. From within, as well as without, the Church is confronted by those who twist or abuse God’s Word. The devil stirs up sin and temptation among us so that we become focused on the works of men, either ours or the works of others, so that we are distracted from faithfully proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And since it is a difficult task, it does require discipline and fortitude. A good soldier does not desert the faith or capitulate on his responsibilities.

Unfortunately, none of us is a good soldier by nature. We are all tempted to turn and run when the fight for maintaining the good confession becomes challenging. But again, our focus in such things is not our own heart or works, but the Word and Spirit of God. He is the one who makes us able to fight and be faithful, even unto death, so that the cross of Christ may faithfully be proclaimed to others. It is by this same cross and faith that He saves us all.

We pray: Lord God, keep us steadfast in Your Word so that we may faithfully repent, believe in Your forgiveness, and help others to do likewise, in Jesus Christ. Amen.

In chapters 11 and 12 the writer of Hebrews provides many examples of God’s people persevering in trials, both in the Old Testament times and in the early Christian Church. He makes it clear that these saints were able to overcome not by their own power, but by the blessing of the Lord. He makes it clear that what God’s people are to do has not changed from the beginning: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and you neighbor as yourself. This is God’s will for His people. He has brought us into His kingdom through water and the Word, and He “will never leave you nor forsake you.” Now we too may boldly say, “The Lord is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?”

Therefore, by faith you and I go outside our churches into a scary world of false teaching and immorality, “for here we have no continuing city, but we seek the one to come.” By the power of Christ we “offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name.”

In the world today we too are often persecuted and ridiculed for this faith. But we too know that the “God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, makes [us] complete in every good work to do His will, working in [us] what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.”

Thanks be to God that He has given us the victory through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

As we look at the lives of the Old Testament saints we read about yesterday, we probably think or say, “I could never stand up to what they faced” and “I could never follow their example.” And, unfortunately, throughout the Holy Scriptures we see many reports of people who did not follow their example. However, our reading for today encourages us to take inspiration from these great witnesses of faith. Only by looking to Jesus, the beginner and completer of faith, can anyone hope to emulate them.

When we look at the political turmoil in the world, we are fearful. When we look at the social turmoil in the world, we are fearful. When we look at the financial turmoil, we are fearful. When we look at the threat of bad weather, or the threat of illness, or wherever else we may look, we become fearful. So what are we to do?

Our reading tells us we are looking in the wrong place. It says, “Looking unto Jesus, let us run with endurance the race set before us.” In our baptism Christ has given us all the faith we need to live our lives in this world and endure to the end. But we need always to look to Him and His Word for the faith, the strength, and the ability to face whatever may come. When we look at ourselves, at our preparations for disaster, at our financial stability, at our efforts to remain healthy, we are looking at nothing of any permanence or ability to see us through.

When we keep our eyes looking unto Jesus, who gave us faith, who sustains faith, and who strengthens faith, then, and only then, can we remain faithful.

Lord, keep us steadfast in Your Word. Amen.

The mouths of the insubordinate need to be stopped. It is not actually loving to let every idle talker and liar continue to spew forth his rubbish. If one is found to be unrepentantly opposed to the truth of God’s teachings, he should be silenced and admonished, not accommodated.

Righteous love is not expressed in negligent tolerance. It is expressed in discipline and protection. Real kindness does not let others harm themselves or the people around them. But again, this must be done in love. Love does not seek to merely dominate someone, telling them to sit down and shut up. It tells the one in error to be quiet and listen to Jesus Christ. In the living Word of God we find true wisdom and real love, which brings grace, mercy, and peace. The foolishness of man that comes from our own blathering spreads selfishness, division, and confusion.

This importance of God’s Word and teaching is why it is important that the Church call faithful, qualified men into the office of teaching as bishops and others who serve in the Ministry of the Word and Sacraments. These men must uphold, speak, and correct according to the sound doctrine of God’s teachings. They must administer the gifts of God according to His commands, which include discipline and love, because these gifts are the most important things God has given to mankind. It is in these precious gifts of the Church, His Word and Sacraments, that we receive the grace, mercy, and peace that make up our salvation in Christ Jesus.

We pray: Heavenly Father, raise up faithful men to give us the gifts that our Lord Jesus Christ has given for the salvation of our souls and life everlasting. In His name, Amen.

Sound doctrine is not just a matter of books and theological debates. It is the very Word of God applied to every important aspect of life. This is another reason why the lies and compromises of false teachers are so dangerous and can not be ignored. Doctrine bears the wisdom of our Lord on how to live, for the young and the old, the single and the married, the employer and the worker, and so on. Doctrine is not merely about abstract philosophies; it is about the real life that every one of us experiences.

Neither is sin a philosophical abstraction. It is not just the idea that we have violated some system of order, but it is the very real problem of harm and damage that comes to us and those around us when we do evil. Sin and righteousness are matters of the spirit, and of the flesh and blood!

God gives us His Word so that we may know what is virtuous and what is harmful. However, because Adam and Eve's sins not only affected them, but everyone who descended from them, we all fail to recognize and do what is truly virtuous. By our nature we choose to do harmful things. But His doctrine teaches us. It shows us our need to repent, the things we should do, and, most importantly, how we are to see and believe His Gospel of our salvation in Jesus Christ. Doctrine affects real life because it is how we learn of our eternal life in Him.

We pray: Lord God, make us truly faithful according to Your Word and Spirit, so that we may do those things that are truly good and help those who need Your wisdom in mercy. In Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

As Lutheran Christians most of us believe the words of John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." When pressed hard we will say we believe we are going to heaven when we die. Hebrews 11 gives us a list of Old Testament saints who believed not only that God would take them to heaven when they died, but also that God was guarding them in this world too. They suffered many trials and tribulations because of their faithfulness to the Lord, but they steadfastly believed the Lord would deliver them. They lived their lives looking forward to the promise.

You and I live in the same sinful world. As Christians we too can expect all kinds of trials, tribulations, and persecutions because of our faith. We may not always have all the creature comforts that we enjoy now. We may have sickness and suffering; we may have to endure wars and pestilence. These things are common to this world, and will remain so to the end.

In spite of the troubles of the world, these Old Testament saints looked forward to the coming of the Messiah, the Christ, because in Him they knew by faith that they had the victory.

By that same faith you and I can look back to the fulfillment of God's promises and at the risen Christ and say, "O Death, where is your sting? O grave, where is your victory? The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who has given us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 15:55-57).

Lord, keep us steadfast in faith in You. Amen.

Lesson from the Book of Concord

The Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity

The Third Commandment.

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.

When, then, it is asked: “What is meant by the commandment: ‘Remember the sabbath-day to sanctify it’?” Answer: To sanctify the Sabbath is the same as “to keep it holy.” But what is meant by “keeping it holy”? Nothing else than to be occupied in holy words, works and life. For the day needs no sanctification for itself; for in itself it has been created holy. But God desires it to be holy to thee. Therefore it becomes holy or unholy on thy account, according as thou art occupied on the same with things that are holy or unholy.

How then does such sanctification occur? Not that we sit behind the stove and do no rough work, or deck ourselves with a garland and put on our best clothes, but (as has been said) that we occupy ourselves with God’s Word, and exercise ourselves therein.

And indeed we Christians ought always to keep such a Sabbath, and to be occupied with nothing but holy things, i.e. daily to meditate upon God’s Word, and carry it in our hearts and upon our lips. But because (as has been said) we do not all have leisure, we must devote several hours a week to the young, or at least a day to the mass of people, in order that we may be concerned about this alone, and especially urge the Ten Commandments, the Creed and the Lord’s Prayer, and thus direct our whole life and being according to God’s Word. The Sabbath is truly kept whenever time is devoted to earnest attention to this, and the practice of it; but that cannot be called a true Christian Sabbath where this is not done. For they who are not Christians can keep holiday and be idle just as well as the entire swarm of our ecclesiastics, who stand daily in the churches, singing, and ringing bells, but who keep no Sabbath day holy, because they neither preach nor practice God’s Word, but teach and live contrary to it.

For the Word of God is the sanctuary above all sanctuaries, yea, the only one which we Christians know and have. For though we had the bones of all the saints, or all holy and consecrated garments upon a heap, they would not avail us anything; for all that is a dead thing which can sanctify nobody. But God’s Word is the treasury which sanctifies everything whereby even all the saints themselves were sanctified. —The Large Catechism, §87–90

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 12: TITUS 2:15-3:3

TRINITY 14

“For we ourselves were also once foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another” (Titus 3:3).

Christian humility is an important characteristic that the Holy Ghost creates in us. Without it we easily fall into our natural state of being self-important narcissists. As we considered previously, Christians are tempted to think that because they have the wisdom of God’s sound doctrine and the forgiveness of sins in Christ they are holier than other ‘lowly sinners.’ Satan would have us glorify ourselves rather than God, and use His Word as a club to beat on others rather than help them.

But faithful preaching and teaching of His Word never lets us forget that we were once lost and condemned in our own sins, and even now we still sin constantly. His Spirit must teach us humility. That humility makes us able to see that we are no better than anyone else. We can only boast in Christ and His forgiveness from the cross. And His atonement has been accomplished not just for us, but for whoever believes and is baptized in Him!

We pray: Lord God, grant us Your Spirit so that we may be truly humble, showing love and mercy to others as Jesus Christ has shown it to us. Amen.

Lesson from the Book of Concord

The Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity

ARTICLE I.

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.

This represents and sets forth most briefly the essence, will, action and work of God the Father. Since the Ten Commandments have taught that we have no other gods, it is natural to ask the question: What kind of a being is God? What does He do? How shall we praise, represent or describe Him, that He may be known? ... So that the Creed is nothing else than the answer and confession of Christians, arranged with respect to the First Commandment. As if you were to ask a little child: My dear, what sort of a God have you? What do you know of Him? He could say: First, indeed, my God is God the Father, who has created heaven and earth; besides Him I believe in nothing else as God; for there is no one else who could create heaven and earth.

But for the learned, and those who have acquired some scriptural knowledge, these three articles may be extended and divided into as many parts as there are words. But now for young scholars let it suffice to indicate the most necessary points, namely, as we have said, that this article refers to the Creation: that we emphasize the words: CREATOR OF HEAVEN AND EARTH. But what is the force of this or what do you mean by these words: "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker, etc. Answer: I believe and mean to say that I am a creature of God; that is, that He has given and constantly preserves to me my body, soul and life, members great and small, all my senses, reason and understanding, food and drink, shelter and support, wife and child, domestics, house and possessions, etc. Besides, He causes all creatures to serve for the necessities and uses of life—sun, moon and stars in the firmament, day and night, air, fire, water, earth and whatever it bears and produces, bird and fish, beasts, grain and all kinds of produce, and whatever else there is of bodily and temporal goods, good government, peace, security. So that we learn in this article that none of us has his life of himself, or anything that is here enumerated or can be enumerated, neither can he of himself preserve them, however small and unimportant a thing it might be, for all is comprehended in the word: CREATOR.

Besides this we also confess that God the Father has not only given us all that we have and see before our eyes, but daily preserves and defends against all evil and misfortune, averts all sort of danger and calamity; and that He does

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 26: HEBREWS 11:1-7

TRINITY 16

A story: a group of unbelieving scientists was convinced they had come upon the way to create human life in the laboratory. They summoned God to inform Him. (It is the way of this world that those who might scoff at the "notion" that faith is the substance of things unseen will nonetheless call upon a God in whom they claim not to believe.) "We have discovered how to create human life just like You," they said. "Be here tomorrow morning and we will show You." God humored them and showed up the next morning to find a large pile of dirt on the laboratory floor. "What's this?" He asked. "Dirt," they replied. "That's what You used to create Adam." "No, no," God said. "That will not do. Get your own dirt."

God speaks and it is done, creating that which is from that which is not. God formed man from the dust of the earth and His breath of life, breathed into that inert form and made man a living being, created in the image of God. God continues to breathe life into us through the working of His Holy Spirit, who is all-powerful, accomplishing God's purposes in Word and Sacrament. It is the Holy Spirit who gives us the ability to trust in that which human reason cannot begin to grasp.

We pray: I thank You, heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, my Lord, that You have breathed also into my nostrils and You have poured Your Spirit into my being, that I might trust in Christ and live. Amen.

The law, having a shadow of the good things to come, and not the very image of the things, could never with the same sacrifices which the Jewish high priests offered continually make those who approached perfect. The blood of Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, is far superior to the blood of bulls and goats, which could never take away sins.

By the will of God we have been made holy through the shedding of the blood of God's only-begotten Son. He was an offering not made continually, year by year, or even Sunday by Sunday, mass by mass, but once for all. When God, according to His mercy, saved us through the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, we were justified by His grace, becoming heirs according to the hope of eternal life. There remains a tension of now-and-not-yet. We are saints, and still we sin. Day by day, continually pressing toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus, we approach the throne of grace pleading only the merits of Jesus Christ.

We pray: I thank You, my heavenly Father, that You have caused my heart to trust in the blood of Jesus Christ, which cleanses me from all unrighteousness, delivering me from this body of death, strengthening me with Your promise that my sins and my lawless deeds You will remember no more. Amen.

all without our merit of pure love and goodness, as a friendly Father, who cares for us that no evil befall us. But to speak more of this pertains to the other two parts of this article, where we say: "Father Almighty."

Hence we must infer and conclude, since everything which we have and are, and whatever is in heaven and upon the earth, are daily given and preserved to us by God, that it is our duty to love, praise and thank Him without ceasing; and in short to serve Him with all these things, as He has enjoined in the Ten Commandments.

Here we could say much if we would attempt to show how few there are that believe this article. For we all pass over it, hear it, and say it, but neither see nor consider what the words teach us. For if we believed it with the heart, we would also act accordingly, and not stalk about proudly, bid defiance and boast as though we had life, riches, power and honor, etc. all of ourselves, so that others must fear and serve us, as is the practice of the unhappy, perverted world, which is immured in darkness, and abuses all the good things and gifts of God only for its own pride, avarice, lust and luxury, and never once regards God, so as to thank Him or acknowledge Him as Lord and Creator.

Therefore, if we only believed it, this article must humble and terrify us all. For we sin daily with eyes, ears, hands, body and soul, money and possessions, and with everything we have, as especially do those who even fight against the Word of God. Yet Christians have this advantage, that they acknowledge themselves in duty bound to serve God for all these things, and to be obedient to Him.

We ought, therefore, daily to practice this article, to remember and consider in all that we see, and in all good that falls to or lot, and wherever we escape from calamity or danger, that it is God who gives and does all these things; that therein we perceive and see His paternal heart and His transcendent love toward us. Thereby the heart would be aroused and kindled to be thankful for all such good things, and to employ them to the honor and praise of God. Thus we have most briefly presented the meaning of this article, as much as it is at first necessary for the most simple to learn, both as to what we have and receive from God, and what we owe in return, which is a most excellent object of knowledge, but a far greater treasure. For here we see how the Father has given Himself to us, together with all creatures, and has most richly provided for us in this life, besides that He has overwhelmed us with unspeakable, eternal treasures in His Son and the Holy Ghost...

—The Large Catechism

[v.10:] “...an instigator of sects...”

That is, a person who follows other ways and teaches people to follow those ways rather than sound doctrine and that unique righteousness of faith and who is unwilling to come to his senses after receiving a warning from the sound words of Christ. Judge him according to the Gospel (Mat.18) until he should come to his senses and be ashamed, and “not as an enemy, etc.” (2 Thess. 3:15).

You have here the heretics, that is, those who despise the Word of God, who create sects, and keep themselves apart as if they were better than others. Even after receiving the warnings of God, they are unwilling to come to their senses. These must be cast out of the Church and considered as non-Christians and as heathen publicans, such as are all who have abandoned the Gospel and have found more perfect ways outside every Word of God. Today, as these people repay an egregious favor, they call “heretics” those who cling to the Gospel and try to kill them so that the blood of Christ and of all the upright people whom they have killed falls upon them. May God open the hearts of them all! Amen.

Johannes Bugenhagen, Annotations on Paul’s Epistles (1525)

There was a man who had joked for years that he had been born with absolutely nothing, and that now, in his old age, he still had most of it left. He was hardworking but uneducated, and, in the world’s eyes, a man who could never catch a break. Still, he had provided for his family as well as he could. They may not have had much, but, with God’s help, they basically had what they needed.

At the time of his death there was nothing to bequeath, no earthly wealth to transmit to the next generation, no need for a last will and testament. But he had seen to it that his children were baptized, that they were brought to church to hear the Word of God, and that they were further instructed in the faith so as to be admitted to the Lord’s Table. And in that his children received eternal riches that thieves cannot steal, that moth and rust cannot destroy.

By faith they became children of God, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ (Romans 8:16-17), who Himself was the heir of Abraham. They were given faith like Abraham, who had trusted God that, although at the time of the promise, without an heir, all the nations of earth would be blessed in his seed (Genesis 26:4).

We pray: I thank You, my heavenly Father, that through Holy Baptism I am a joint heir of life with Christ, who died and yet lives. Grant me a willing spirit to suffer with Him, that I may also be glorified with Him and the saints who have gone before. Amen.

How the great museums of the world would yearn to have on carefully guarded display the items listed in our text, the ark of the covenant and its contents. However, all these items and their use in Old Testament worship had to do only with fleshly ordinances. They could not fully address the conscience or the root of human sin in the heart.

It is not known where all these items have gone, but the veil that was in use between the two sanctuaries at the time was very likely destroyed in the calamity that befell Jerusalem as city and temple were destroyed in 70 A.D. But not before it was torn in two at the time of Jesus' death on the cross, signifying that by His blood we now have access to the Father.

No longer are the 12 cakes of showbread on display to signify the presence of God. He is present in His holy Word and the blessed Sacraments, which declare and make real for us that the atonement emanates not from the mercy seat above the ark, but from the cross and the empty tomb. He is present at our altars, not as in a museum, merely pointing toward a glorious past, but to provide meaning for life today and holy assurance of a future.

We pray: We thank You, Father, for sending Your Son, Jesus, who is the propitiation for our sins; not only for ours only, but also for the whole world, for all who trust in Him. Amen.

[v.1:] "...a prisoner..."

Here he is no longer writing the titles of his apostolate to persuade that his preaching came from God. Here he forgets his own authority and mentions that he is merely a brother, as if to say: "I am now performing the duty not of an apostle or teacher but of a Christian man."

First, he gets to the heart of the matter as powerfully as he can and says that he is a prisoner. In this way, Philemon should not despise the entreaty of him who is being held in chains because of the Gospel, as he says later, [v.9]: "Moreover, I am now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ."

He also calls himself a prisoner that Philemon not despise him when he prays for him "whom he begot in his bonds" [v.10] for Christ. Paul is also praying for the man who served him while he was a prisoner—something which Philemon himself would have done, had he been present. That's how far Philemon was from having to disdain what the slave had done. In fact, he had to rejoice that this benefit had come to Paul through this slave, just as Paul says all these things later.

Next, Paul calls himself a prisoner that the Christian Philemon not add an affliction to Paul's affliction, if he not listen to Paul and despise with great energy Paul as he entreated now no longer for a slave but for his brother, something which he says later [v.20]: "Refresh my bowels in the Lord."

Johannes Bugenhagen, Annotations on Paul's Epistles (1525)

[v.3:] “because He is the brightness of glory...”

In His divinity, He is called “the Son” as a person different from the Father. God is the glory, His Son is the brightness of His glory; in fact, He is the glory of the glory of the Father, like the Father in all things, not of a different substance but of both the same substance and of the same name, and something which is added, “the expressed image,” not of the face, but of the substance of the Father. Christ therefore is the omnipotence of the Father, the wisdom of the Father, the righteousness of the Father, etc. He was indeed begotten of the Father but only the natural God as Father and, thus, one God with the Father.

That which follows [in v.3]: “He controls,” or rather, “He upholds all things with the word of His power,” that is, by Himself who is the Word and by whom all things are made and preserved and arranged, as he says [John 5:12]: “My Father is now working, and I am working.” What advantage would it be that He created all things, unless He also preserved and controlled all things? Therefore, in Christ is the whole of divinity, and all the glory of God is His.

In Christ we acknowledge our Father, because He is the brightness, glory, and image of the substance of the Father. We acknowledge Him through His word, provided His Spirit will have taught us. In the face of Christ, we now see the glory of God, but we do not see it in the face of Moses, as we read in 2 Cor. 3:13: “Through himself, etc.” This is the great esteem of such great majesty (which we have already described) in that He emptied Himself and served us in our sins so that He washed them away and became obedient to the Father, etc. (Phil. 2:8).

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When God the Holy Spirit moved the author of this Epistle to write, “Now this is the main point of the things we are saying,” He was not at all saying, “Here’s something to consider,” as in merely providing minor emphasis. He sets up for the reader, by referring to *the* main point, a whole series of comparisons between Jesus and the Jewish high priests, finally establishing the absolute superiority of Jesus’ sacrifice of Himself in payment for human sin.

For one thing, the high priests never sat in the performance of their duties, as a king seated in state. They were not, “in the order of Melchizedek,” both priest and king. The Jewish high priests served under the old covenant, which was not “faulty” as such. It was, after all, established by God as a temporary guardian, in anticipation of fulfillment by Christ. What is more, the “fault” lay not with the covenant, but with those who did not, indeed, could not, continue in the old covenant.

We rejoice in our age, by the Holy Spirit’s work in our hearts, to know the love of Christ which shines at the very center of that new covenant, through which God is merciful to our unrighteousness, and our sins and lawless deeds are remembered no more.

We pray: Lord of heaven and earth, grant that Your people always be filled with Your praises that You have planted a holy and living faith in our hearts, through which, by Your grace, we receive the benefits of Christ’s new covenant. Amen.

Melchizedek, the king of what was to become Jerusalem, whose name means “king of righteousness,” is depicted by the author of the letter to the Hebrews as a type of Christ. That he had no father, mother, or genealogy does not make him an angel, as some of the ancients believed, any more than there being no extant record of his priesthood makes him a fictional character. The point is simply to highlight that, as with Christ, the question of human descent is immaterial. What is more, Christ, being of Judah and not Levi, is even from the wrong tribe. Melchizedek, priest and king appointed for service by God Himself, was of such stature that even the patriarch Abraham, returning from victory in battle, made an offering and sought and received blessings from him.

Jesus Christ is made our great High Priest forever by His heavenly Father, not in order to offer bulls and lambs at the altar, but to offer once His own life for sinners. Whereas, the obsolete high priest entered into the presence of the Most High God but once annually, Jesus now sits forever by the Father’s side interceding for us for His own sake.

We pray: Holy Father in heaven, may the great joy and blessed relief of our salvation from sin and death move our hearts to be set on things which are above, making appropriate sacrifices to Him who has no need for burnt offerings, and always being glad to receive from Christ the blessings only He can give. Amen.

[v.5:] “For He did not subject to the angels...”

He is showing with another proof that Christ is far superior to the angels, namely, as I say, Christ according to His humanity, on the basis of Psalms 7. On the basis of this passage, he at the same time is busy with what the Hebrews might have been able to raise as an objection: “For we have seen Him despised and the least of men, etc.” (Isaiah 53:3). He says that this happened for the brief time of His passion for our sake, etc. For He was soon crowned with glory and honor and appointed over all things, etc.

[v.5:] “...the world to come...”

He means the kingdom of God which the prophets foretold was going to come and which would be far more suitable than all the kingdoms of the world, just as Isaiah calls Him “the Father of the age to come.” Because the kingdom of Christ is spiritual, all creatures have been subjected in spirit to Christ and to those who are in Christ. For all people are serving us to our salvation, even sheep, oxen, and fishes as well as sin, death, and hell. The reason that you do not see that all things have been subjected to Christ is that the flesh does not see these things which have to do with the spiritual kingdom of Christ, which consists in faith and hope. You will see what you have been waiting for when the Father will place all the enemies of Christ under His feet.

Johannes Bugenhagen, Annotations on Paul’s Epistles (1525)

[v.14:] “Having a great high priest...”

Because the author had started to speak about the priesthood of Christ; given the opportunity, he in the meantime has been interpreting the words of the psalm [95:7]: “If you will have heard His voice today, etc.” Now he returns to his subject and says: “Having therefore, etc.” We therefore begin correctly from this passage. However, in the beginning, he advises that, because he described earlier the very great majesty and excellence of Christ, we not flee from Him because of our awareness of our weakness and sins, because He Himself was tempted and made less than the angels for a short time, as he said before, “that He might become merciful, etc.”

The humbling of Christ, therefore, created for us a trust in His coming, because we know that He was cast down for our sake. However, His power creates a confidence in persevering, obviously because no one can snatch us from His hands, etc. “He has entered into, etc.” (See chapters 6 and 8.) He is alluding to the entry of the priest into the holy of holies once a year not without blood.

Johannes Bugenhagen, Annotations on Paul’s Epistles (1525)

[v.1:] “Let us therefore leave the simple teaching which begins in Christ...”

These words go together with the preceding ones. We therefore are leaving the primary rudiments in which little children receive their first instruction and as were sufficiently instilled in us. Now let us recognize and learn loftier teachings and those which are the stuff of full-grown men, and do this in the faith of Christ (Eph. 4:11 ff.).

[v.3:] “...if God permit.”

The rudiments are to teach and have regard only for the external Sacraments as well as some voluntary observances according to the ritual which the apostles had observed, as was the laying on of hands without which the Holy Spirit could then be given and was being given and is always being given to Christians. Those rudiments also include teaching us to say: “I believe in God the Father, etc.,” to teach you to abstain from fornication, false witness, etc., and to say the Lord’s Prayer. These alone are the sort of things which our men teach where they are the best, namely, the perfection of faith and how rich it is to be in God, as those who don’t know and are unable to teach in this way.

The people therefore err along with them, when they never truly come to their senses and always are stuck in the same mud-hole. They nevertheless invent a repentance from dead works once a year for themselves. They therefore are wrong and are not Christians until God has mercy on them and opens for them the way of salvation that they may learn not to cling to external works in vain like little children but to hope for salvation through Christ Jesus in God alone. We must call forth such people to better things, as you see here. We shall hear another judgment about those who truly knew Christ and later blasphemed His grace, which is terrible wickedness.

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