

TABLE TALK

Official Publication of the LMS-USA

...these words... shall be upon your heart; you shall
teach them... and talk of them... Deut. 6:6,7



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Why Lent?

*"Happy are those... [whose] delight is
in the law of the LORD, and on his law
they meditate day and night."*

Psalm 1:1 NRSV

Lent provides for such opportunity. It should not be necessary for the disciplined Christian, however, with all that goes on in our lives, the fact that the church has historically set aside this 6 week period before the celebration of the Resurrection of our Lord as a time for self-examination, and reflection on matters of the soul and spirit; it's a good thing. The subject of the apostle Paul's preaching was evidently different from much of the preaching of the day. He made an issue of announcing that the subject of his preaching was "Christ Crucified." It is a message that is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those being saved it is the power of God. (see 1 Cor. 1:23,18).

The emphasis of the Sunday sermons, the special midweek services of the Lenten season, the special devotional materials that are available in this season, are all intended to draw our hearts and minds to the "one thing needful" (Lk. 10:42).

What is needful? It is that which the prophet Zechariah prophesied. "On that day a fountain will be opened to the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and impurity" (Zech. 13:1). In Him who suffered and died for sinners on the cross of Calvary, we find that open fountain. "There is a fountain filled with blood drawn from Immanuel's veins. And sinners plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains" (William Cowper: *There Is a Fountain*, st. 1).

Let us avail ourselves of the opportunity for the grace of God to work in and through us through Word and Sacrament in this holy season.

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And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast.

Ephesians 2:6-9

The Ground Is Level

*From: Stand Still and Move Ahead
Meditations on Ephesians*

by W. A. Poovey

[Used by permission of Augsburg Fortress Publishing]

If all men are in need of salvation, then all men stand in the same status before God. The second chapter of Ephesians begins with the democracy of sin. All men are sinners and thus sin makes us all akin. Paul, writing to the Gentiles says they are dead in sins and then proceeds to point out that his Jewish compatriots are no better. They are all in the same boat.

Grace reflects the same democratic spirit. Grace is a gift, Paul says, and anyone can receive a gift. If it is God who saves without any merit on our part, then all are equal. There is no room for boasting. We're all in it together, all participants in sin and all recipients of grace.

It's remarkable how hard it is to get that idea across to many people. We all want to draw distinctions. We think that God loves the white people or the American people or our particular class more than he does others. We want to think that we are especially blessed.

Probably some of this effort to make distinctions arises because no one wants to be a part of a mob. We

think that real democracy robs us of any personality. We feel the thrust of W. S. Gilbert's devastating verdict, "When every one is somebody, then no one's anybody."

But that's where we make a mistake. Democracy as taught in the Bible does not rob man of his humanity and his importance. Grace says that everybody is precious in His sight, everybody is important. There are no favorites because everyone is a favorite. God's grace is personal. He is concerned about everyone.

The story is an old one but it describes vividly what Paul is saying to the people at Ephesus. A certain minister in Washington, D.C. one Sunday morning received into the fellowship of his



"All that the Father gives Me shall come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out." Jn. 6:37

church a washer-woman and a supreme court judge. Commenting on this remarkable fact the minister pointed out, "The ground is level at the foot of the cross."

That's what Paul means when he insists that one can boast of his salvation. We all stand on the same ground. Kings and commoners, rich and poor, sinners and saints all are saved in the same manner. The kingdom of God is not a kingdom in the sense that there are distinctions among the inhabitants.

All are equally loved by the king.

You and I can open our hearts and receive the gift of grace. So can the richest man in town and the poorest beggar. The ground is level. Salvation is a matter of standing and receiving.

Look around you. If you are reading these words alone, try to remember everyone whom you have seen during the past day. No one whom you have seen is excluded from God's grace. Everyone is welcome in the kingdom of God. This is real democracy. All are invited to participate in fellowship with God. Can anything be fairer than that? Ω

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This month, talk to you personally, for just
and this, our belief, our belief, our belief
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The Answer

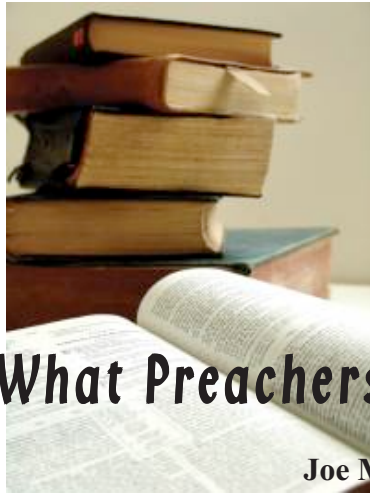
The last issue of *Table Talk* lifted up for us a problem... the problem of sin. As we saw, sin is a universal problem. It was, and it continues to be, an awful problem. It is a problem in every generation. It is such a devastating problem, that left to himself, man is helpless and without hope when it comes to dealing with it. But there is good news. There is an answer for us. For all of humankind - each and every one of us - is beloved. But rescue from condemnation is possible!

God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. (Jn. 3:16-17)

The apostle Paul speaks of this good news in his letter to the Corinthians: "For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures." (1 Cor. 15:3-8). Peter speaks of it also: "For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit" (1 Pet. 2:24).

In this issue of *Table Talk*, we are going to look at the answer to the problem of sin. It is not insignificant that the definite article is used in the sentence above. Some might think, and some actually believe, that there are any number of answers to this problem. But that is not so. In what God has revealed to us in the pages of holy writ, there is only one answer. God sent

Also in this issue ~
The 2009 LMS Annual Conference/Convention...
Salvation by the Grace of God through Christ...



The Lenten Season can be an especially busy time for the preacher. It is hoped the following article will be of some help and encouragement to those preparing sermons, but more than that, that it might be of benefit also for those in the pew.

What Preachers Keep Forgetting

by
Joe McKeever

This article is reprinted from
the October 2009 issue of
Pulpit Helps

I was sitting on the platform, ten feet off to the left and rear of the pulpit, studying the 300 people in the congregation. In five minutes, I would walk to the podium and, as the guest preacher, bring the sermon. The thoughts running through my mind were not helpful.

"They know all these things. I'm talking about the Church in this sermon, and these people are at church on a Sunday night, of all things. I might as well go into a diner and speak on the joys of eating or to a gym and talk about the need for exercise."

Then, sanity returned. I knew this was not the case at all.

Nothing cleared my focus better than remembering the times I sat where they sit. Many a time back then I needed a strong reminder from the Lord's spokesman of the proper value to be placed on the Church, of how solidly God feels about it, of the price Christ paid for it, of the assignments He has given it, and yes, reminders of the sorry way the Church is being treated by some of its friends.

There was a great need for this message, and on this night I would

deliver it as strongly as I knew how.

It's easy for preachers to fall into that little sinkhole which had opened up just in front of me, and think, "The people in this congregation do not need this; they already know it." In such situations, it's good for the man of God to remind himself of three facts:

1) It's amazing how few in the congregation know the most basic facts of the Christian life and biblical doctrine.

A friend who is a college professor sat at my dining room table one day and shared some of his recent experiences in teaching. He said, "Our standards are high and our kids are all excellent students who graduated at the heads of their high school classes, and yet, you would be amazed at their ignorance in some areas."

One day, just as a test, he asked one class, "How many states are there in the union?" A hand went up. "Fifty-three?" In the next class, the first student to answer gave a tentative, "Fifty-four?"

One day he asked a class, "Dur-

ing World War II, was the United States of America bombed and its major cities leveled by Nazi planes?" The student he called on said, "Sir, history is not my strong suit."

"They're even worse in geography," he said.

We laughed at these examples of ignorance in smart people. But I wonder if we would laugh as heartily at the spiritual and biblical ignorance of the men and women and young people occupying the pews in our churches week in and week out. The pastor must never assume the members know more than they do.

2) The fact that they may know these things does not necessarily mean they are living by them. We all know more than we are doing.

Jesus said, "*If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them*" (John 13:17). The object of a lesson or a sermon or any training we do in church is never simply to transfer knowledge. "*Knowledge puffs up,*" said Paul in First Corinthians 8:1.

The end result of a sermon or a class is to change behavior. Over and over in Scripture, our Lord puts the premium on doing the will of God—never on knowing it or loving it or finding it or hearing, studying, teaching, or praying for it. "*He who hears these words of mine and does them may be compared to a wise man who built his house upon a rock*" (Matthew 7:24).

3) And, finally, even those who know these things and are doing them faithfully will appreciate the occasional reminder

of their value.

As a tither, I enjoy a good hearty sermon on giving. As one who prays daily and often, I love hearing a sermon on prayer. As one who loves the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, I appreciate a message on the role of the people of God in the world. There's always more to be learned, deeper insights to be gained, ideas to be shared on how to serve the Lord better.

The people of God—those born of the Holy Spirit, who love the Lord Jesus and are serving Him—tend not to be highly critical of the messages they hear from the pulpit.

They can enjoy hearing a hymn for the one-thousandth time. They hear the preacher of the hour proclaim the love of God for the fallen and their spirits soar. Tears flow, hearts are filled, praise ascends.

A major failing of mine as a young pastor was to constantly search for something new in Scriptures, themes I'd not heard "preached to death," facts and insights I felt

the people in the pews would find fascinating. I'm embarrassed to admit I shied away from preaching texts like Ephesians 2:8-9 ("salvation by grace") or John 3:16 because, "everyone knows those."

Bad. Wrong. Not everyone does, and even among those who do, they need the reminder. The rest of us—those who know and abide by these texts—we'd enjoy hearing them preached again.

One day I made a discovery that brought me up short. The second missionary journey of Paul brought him and his team to Athens, Greece. Luke makes this observation: "*Now all the Athenians and*

(*Preachers*, continued on next page)

(Preachers, continued from page 5)

the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new" (Acts 17:21).

It was the pagans who were addicted to new doctrines. That was a needed comeuppance. Reflecting on that, I thought of how many times in the Old Testament the prophets would say things like, "*ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is, and walk in it*" (Jeremiah 6:16), and "*remove not the old landmark*" (Proverbs 23:10).

A hymn I first learned to love as a small child in a tiny church in a West Virginia mining camp said, "I love to tell the story of unseen things above, of Jesus and His glory, of Jesus and His love." One line goes, "'Tis pleasant to repeat what seems each time I tell it more

wonderfully sweet."

The pastor must never fall prey to the thinking that the congregation needs to hear new things. To be sure, there is much in the "old, old story" which will be new to many of his hearers, and that must be preached, but even to those "born and raised" in the church, they need to hear the old message again and again. After all, in every congregation there are those with heads so thickened and hearts so dulled by worldly living that it takes the fiftieth hearing of God's message to penetrate down to the core of the heart.

So, preach it preacher. Keep telling yourself, "They need this. I have a message they are dying to hear."

But then, you knew this, didn't you? I just thought you'd appreciate the reminder. Ω

What - The Annual Conference/ Convention of the LMS-USA

When - June 23-24, 2012

Where - Christ Lutheran Church
Chetek, WI

For information, including information on lodging, call Christ Luth. Church - 715-924-2552

Or you can contact LMS President, Rev. Dr. Ralph Spears by email at - revralphs@sbcglobal.net

Pastors of the LMS - You are reminded that the LMS Ministerium will meet on Friday afternoon, June 22. Details will be forthcoming.

Abide in Me

As mentioned in the introduction to this issue of Table Talk (see page one), the days of Lent are a time for self-reflection and, if possible, some extra time spent in the Word and in prayer. A passage of Scripture well worth being given some consideration, is what we find in John 15, the parable of the *Vine and the Branches*, and specifically, to reflect some on what these verses have to say in connection with one's abiding in Christ.

1. "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser.
2. Every branch of mine that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.
3. Already you are clean because of the word I have spoken to you.
4. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you remain in me.
5. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.
6. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. Jn. 15:1-6 (ESV)

It is important to remember that what we have in these verses is a parable. There is a rule the we need to remember in interpreting a parable. The general lesson of the parable is the main thing. We must not dwell on the details in order to find some meaning in them.

With this in mind we will consider four lessons that might be found in these words of our Lord.

First - The unity that exists between Christ and those who believe in Him is very close.

It would be difficult to conceive of a union any closer than that which exists between the branch of a vine/tree and the main stem. That union is the secret of the branch's very life, its strength, beauty, and fruitfulness. Independent of the stem, the branch has no life of its own. The sap that flows from the stem is the origin and the maintaining power of all the branches leaves,

buds, blossoms, and fruit. In some way, separate the branch from the stem, and it will - it must - soon wither and die.

The union that exists between Christ and believers is just as close and just as real. In ourselves, as believers, we have no life, no strength, no spiritual power. All that the believer has that is of value comes from Christ. Believers are what they are, they feel what they feel, they do what they do, because they have in Jesus a continual supply of grace, help, and ability to do. Every bit of good about them is drawn from their spiritual Head, their Savior and Lord. Joined to Him by faith, united with him by the Spirit, they stand, and walk, and continue, and run the Christian race.

It is tremendous. As a true believer, we have no cause to despair of our salvation; no reason to think we will never reach heaven. Why? Because we are never left to ourselves

(*Abide*, continued on next page)

(Abide, continued from page 7)

and our own strength. Our root is Christ, and all that is in that Root is for the benefit of its branches. "Because I live, you also will live" (John 14:19). No wonder Paul could say, "...when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:10).

Second - There are false "Christians" as well as true Christians.

Jesus in our parable speaks of branches which appear to be united, which appear to be abiding, to the main stem, but which are not bearing fruit. We have here the clear but sobering truth, that there are those people who appear to be members of Christ, but who in fact have no vital union with Him.

There are multitudes of professing Christians (no matter the Church) whose "abiding in Christ" is only outward and put on. Some of them are "joined" to Christ by church membership. Some have been baptized, been confirmed, some may even be regular communicants, and talk much about religion. But at the same time, they lack the one thing that is needed. In spite of the fact that they attend worship services and hear sermons and share in the sacrament, they have no grace in their hearts; they have no faith; they have no inward working of the Holy Spirit. They are not "in" Christ. They are not "abiding" in Christ, and Christ is not with them. Their union with Christ is not real. The issue is the same as that which John was instructed to write to the church in Sardis concerning: (see Rev. 3:1) "I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead."



"If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you."

John 15: 7

Such "Christians" are seen pictured for us here as branches in a vine that do not bear any fruit. Such branches are useless. They are unsightly. The only fitting thing is that they be cut off and destroyed. They are drawing nothing from the main stem and they are only taking up space. This is the way it will be on the last day for false teachers and preachers of religion as well as nominal Christians. Unless they repent, they will perish (see Lk. 13:3).

Third - The only true evidence of a person being a true Christian, is the bearing of fruit.

We notice here that the individual who is "abiding in Christ," will always bear fruit.

What is the fruit we are talking about? What the New Testament calls "fruit" includes repentance toward God, faith to-

ward our Lord Jesus Christ, and holiness of life and conduct. Such are the distinguishing marks of an individual who is a living branch of the true Vine. There is no such thing as "dormant" grace and spiritual life. If there is no fruit, there is no life.

True grace is never idle. It never slumbers and never sleeps. It makes no sense at all to think that if we are living members of Christ then the example of Christ need not be seen in our characters and our lives. "Fruit" is the only satisfactory evidence of a soul's "abiding" in Christ; the only satisfying evidence of a saving union between Christ and our souls. Where there is no fruit of the Spirit to be seen, there can be no vital religion in the heart. The Spirit of Life in Christ Jesus will always make Himself known in the daily conduct of those in whom He abides. Jesus Himself declares, "Each tree is recognized by

its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thorn bushes, or grapes from briars" (Lk. 6:44).

Fourth - God will often increase the holiness of the true Christian by his providential dealings with him.

We have it in verse 2, "every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit."

The meaning of this is plain. In the same way the vinedresser prunes and cuts back the branches of a fruit bearing vine so as to make it more fruitful, so God works in the lives of believers to purify and sanctify them by the circumstances of life in which he places them.

Trials are the instrument by means of which our heavenly Father makes Christians more holy. By means of trials which he sends or allows in the life of the believer, God calls out their passive graces and tests/proves whether they can suffer His will as well as do it. By means of trials, our Father in heaven weans us from the world and draws them to Christ, to the Bible, and to prayer. By means of trials, He shows us our own hearts, and makes us humble. This is the way the Vinedresser prunes in order to make us more fruitful. Consider the true saints in Christian history, they are the best and truest commentary on this verse. It is rare indeed to find a well known saint in either the Old or New Testament, who was not purified by means of suffering, and who, like his Master was a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief" (Isa. 53:3).

Paul strengthened the Christians of Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, encouraged them to remain true to the faith with these words, "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). Life is not easy - in the world we will have trouble (Jn. 16:33). But let us learn patience in these days. Remembering the verses before us, let

us not murmur or complain because of the trials that we experience. The trials we face as Christians... as branches abiding in the true Vine... are not meant to do us harm, but good! "...God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness" (Heb. 12:10). God desires to see fruit in us, and He will not spare the pruning-knife if He sees that we need it. And we need not question the fact that in the last day, it will be evident that all was well done.

The above is drawn from J. C. Ryle's 7 volume work, *Expository Thoughts On The Gospels*.

J. C. Ryle was born at Macclesfield, and was educated at Eton and at Christ Church, Oxford, where he was Craven Scholar in 1836. He was an athlete who rowed and played Cricket for Oxford, where he took a first class degree in Greats and was offered a college fellowship (teaching position) which he declined. The son of a wealthy banker, he was destined for a career in politics before choosing a path of ordained ministry. While hearing Ephesians 2 read in church in 1838, he felt a spiritual awakening and was ordained by Bishop Sumner at Winchester in 1842. For 38 years he was a parish vicar, first at Helmingham and later at Stradbroke, in Suffolk. He became a leader of the evangelical party in the Church of England and was noted for his doctrinal essays and polemical writings.



After holding a curacy at Exbury in Hampshire, he became rector of St Thomas's, Winchester (1843), rector of Helmingham, Suffolk (1844), vicar of Stradbroke (1861), honorary canon of Norwich (1872), and Dean of Salisbury (1880). However before taking the latter office, he was advanced to the new see of Liverpool, where he remained until his resignation, which took place three months before his death at Lowestoft. His appointment to Liverpool was at the recommendation of the outgoing Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli. In his diocese, he formed a clergy pension fund for his diocese and built over forty churches. Controversially, he emphasized raising clergy salaries ahead of building a cathedral for his new diocese. He retired in 1900 at age 83 and died later the same year. He is buried in the All Saints' Church, Childwall, Liverpool. Ω

At the Lamb's High Feast We Sing

by Tim Shewmaker

At the Lamb's High Feast We Sing is the hymn of the day for the Fifth Sunday of Easter. This hymn ties together the Passover Feast and the sacrifice of Jesus, our paschal lamb. Because Jesus is risen from the dead and lives and reigns to all eternity, we can rejoice that we have the feast of heaven awaiting us. We receive what our liturgy calls a “foretaste of the feast to come” in the Divine Service, when Christ feeds us with His own body and blood, shed for us when He was slain once and for all to wash away our sins.

This hymn dates from somewhere between the 5th and 10th centuries. It was commonly sung throughout Europe and was the hymn for Vespers during the Easter season. It continues to be sung throughout the Christian church today because it is a true gem of our hymnody.

The image of heaven as a banquet, or feast, is common in the parables of Jesus, but I want to focus on the images of the victorious Lamb in Revelation.

Read Revelation 5:5-10 and Revelation 7:9-13.

The Lamb of God was slain, but He has risen and conquered death and He is our victorious King. All who are washed in His blood are cleansed from their sins and will receive the eternal joys of heaven. Here's how we sing that in stanza 1:

At the Lamb's high feast we sing
Praise to our victorious King,
Who has washed us in the tide
Flowing from His pierced side.
Alleluia!

Stanza 2:

Praise we Him, whose love divine
Gives His sacred blood for wine,
Gives His body for the feast—
Christ the victim, Christ the priest.
Alleluia!



We gather in the Divine Service for a foretaste of the feast to come. What do we eat and drink at this feast? We eat and drink the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. He is also the host of the meal. Our resurrected Lord gathers us, feeds us, forgives us, and loves us. It's no wonder, then, that this hymn comes only one week after Good Shepherd Sunday. He is also our high priest, who intercedes for us before the Father in heaven. Jesus gave us this sacred meal in this famous passage from Matthew 26:26-28 (**Read passage**).

Stanza 3:

Where the paschal blood is poured,
Death's dread angel sheathes the sword;
Israel's hosts triumphant go
Through the wave that drowns the foe.
Alleluia!

For this stanza, we should get some background on the Passover (paschal means Passover).

Read Exodus 12:21-27.

As the last plague against Egypt, the angel of death was sent to kill every firstborn. Where the blood of the paschal lamb was placed on the doorpost, the angel would “pass over” that house and leave the firstborn unharmed. The firstborn of Israel were saved by the blood of the lamb. The Israelites were then led to the Red Sea, where they passed

through the waters unharmed, but all of Egypt's army was swallowed up and drowned. This story is not just the story of ancient Israel; it is our story as well. We have been saved from death and judgment by the blood of our Lamb, Jesus, and we have passed through the waters of Holy Baptism and into new life. We see this in the next stanza.

Stanza 4:

Praise we Christ, whose blood was shed,
Paschal victim, paschal bread;
With sincerity and love
Eat we manna from above.
Alleluia!

God redeemed His people by the blood of the lamb and led them through the waters. He then fed them with bread from heaven (manna) for the duration of their journey. The Lord's Supper is our manna from above, as we are fed and nourished in the faith until we reach life everlasting.

Read John 6:28-35.

Stanza 5:

Mighty Victim from the sky,
Hell's fierce pow'rs beneath You lie;
You have conquered in the fight,
You have brought us life and light.
Alleluia!

We have already seen from Revelation that Christ has conquered death and lives forever. He brings light and immortality to light through the Gospel (2 Timothy 1:10). This victory is for us!

Stanzas 6 and 7:

Now no more can death appall,
Now no more the grave enthrall;
You have opened paradise,
And Your saints in You shall rise.
Alleluia!

Easter triumph, Easter joy!
This alone can sin destroy;
From sin's pow'r, Lord, set us free,
Newborn souls in You to be.
Alleluia!

A quick note on stanza 7; the second line would probably read better as "This can sin alone destroy." That line confused me for a long time as I thought the stanza was saying that, although Christ had won the victory, sin was still going to destroy the triumph of Easter. I knew that couldn't be right! Rather, we pray in stanza 7 that God would give us the final victory over sin and death. These two stanzas relate closely to 1 Corinthians 15:50-56 (**Read passage**).

The final stanza will give us a glorious doxological ending, praising each person of the Trinity for the



blessings He gives us. What a joy to sing the song of salvation with this glorious hymn!

Stanza 8:

Father, who the crown shall give,
Savior, by whose death we live,
Spirit, guide through all our days:
Three in One, Your name we praise.
Alleluia!

The above article can be found at: <http://musicalcatechesis.wordpress.com> and is reprinted with permission of the author.

The LMS-USA is Lutheran Church body describing itself as *Biblical, Confessional, Evangelical, Liturgical and Congregational*. It is a 'Forum' in which there is an on going discussion of theological issues and concerns among clergy and lay alike. The LMS-USA meets annually for a Theological Conference and this publication, besides carrying news of the Ministerium and Synod, functions also as a vehicle for this continuing dialogue.

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