

TABLE TALK

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



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Reformation In The Church On The 500th Anniversary Of The Lutheran Reformation

This issue of Table Talk is made up of papers presented at this year's annual Conference of the LMS, held this past June 10. The purpose of the Conference presentations was to make the Reformation of the Church relevant to the church today.



Martin Luthers Sermon, Detail From A Triptych, 1547 Oil On Panel by Lucas, the Elder Cranach

The first paper [page 2] focuses on the constant need for reformation in the church. Throughout the history of the church, from its very beginning on the Day of Pentecost, to the present time, there always has, and there always will be, a need for vigilance on the part of those who wish to be faithful to the Lord of the Church... to Him who has redeemed them and made them members of His Church. And this is especially true of those who are in positions of leadership in the church.

Luther would agree with the Apostle Paul. "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). Lucas, the Elder's painting illustrates this. Luther is preaching and in so doing, is directing the congregation's attention to the Cross.

The second paper [page 6] reviews the history of the church, actually it goes back even farther, into the old Testament Church history, and lifts up for us many of the persons whom God raised up to bring renewal and/or reform to the Church. God's Church will remain until the end of time. There will always be

reformers as needed, He will see to it.

The third paper [page 9] deals with the important issue of how the Word of God, the Bible, is to be interpreted. Jesus Christ and Him crucified must be central to the message of the church (1 Cor. 1:23-25). How does the church make sure this is accomplished?

Our fourth and final paper [page 12] looks forward to what lies ahead for the Church. We remember, history has made clear, that the 'true' church at any period, has always been a remnant church. So what can be said of the Believing Remnant of the Confessing Church of Christ in our time? What ought we to expect? What should we be about?

Do note that these papers are not going to be exactly as presented. In a couple of cases the papers followed, more or less, an outline and were not in printed form. The other papers have been edited down somewhat in order to fit into the format of this newsletter. Further, the good discussion that these papers engendered could not, of course, be included here.

The Church's Constant Need For Reform

Rev. John Erickson

When we confess, "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian Church," we should remember how, on the day of Pentecost 40 days after our Lord's ascension into heaven, the Church of Jesus Christ was born. On that day, in response to Peter's sermon, 3000 souls responded to the challenge, "Repent and be baptized... in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of... sins; and... receive the gift of the Holy Spirit..."

Life in this early church is described for us in the book of Acts. The Holy Spirit in the hearts of those early believers changed them. They were reborn. They had new interests. Many of the things they had held dear were set aside. "All who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need..." To the world all this seemed ridiculous. But these persons had experienced the love of God, the joy of the forgiveness of sins, and peace of heart and mind. The love of God overflowed in them and through them.

But... already there was trouble. Two church members did not completely trust God. Selling and sharing everything seemed a bit risky to them. So they kept back part of their property as a little insurance. However the biggest problem was that they had *pretended* to have given up all. Peter put an abrupt end to this "first we know about" false understanding/practice in the church. When their deception was revealed, Ananias, and then Sapphira, dropped dead.

And then there was persecution. The early church suffered persecution on two fronts. The Jews were stirred up as a result of this "new" religious movement to the point that many of the church's adherents were arrested and imprisoned, and not so few were put to death. Very early on we read of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. A man by the name of Saul was one of those persecutors. He was zealous in seeking out, arresting, and bringing back to Jerusalem all the Christians he could find. We can be sure this threat brought about compromise on the part of many.

There were also pagan persecutions. Jesus had warned the Jews that unless the Jews repented and turned to God, calamities would come upon them. About 40 years after He had sounded this warning (in 70 A.D) the Roman army besieged Jerusalem. After five months of horrible suffering, the Jews surrendered. The temple and the city were completely destroyed and the nation was scattered. This gave Christians freedom from persecution from the Jews, but they were now brought face to face with heathendom.

Rome ruled the then known world. The empire was held together by every possible means. By law, by commerce, by the military, and by emperor worship. Emperor worship was a chief method for creating unity. It was looked upon as the highest mark of loyalty to the government and all were expected to do it. Christians could not obey such a law. They were to worship only the one true God. This brought them into conflict with the Roman government. They were branded as disloyal and treated as traitors. Traitors were punished with death. Thousands were killed because they chose to obey God rather than men. And the killing was generally not done in the quickest and easiest way possible. Rather, the most cruel methods imaginable were employed (see Hebrews 11). For nearly 300 years the Roman government tried to root out the Christians in this way. Ten imperial persecutions swept throughout the empire. Again, how many compromised the faith rather than face persecution? Yet... when Constantine came to the throne in 306 A.D., it is reported that there were no less than eight million Christians throughout the empire.

With the persecution experienced by the early Christians, one would expect it would be only those who firmly held to the true faith (faith proclaimed by the

Apostles) that would claim the name Christian. However, what this 'true faith' actually was became an issue quite early on. It would appear that within the first generation of the church we have what Paul (the former persecutor, Saul) shares with us in his letter to the Galatians. He was profoundly concerned because some of that congregation were deserting the call and working of the grace of Christ on their lives and "turning to a different gospel." There were those, who not so few church members were apparently listening to, who were "perverting the gospel of Christ" (Gal. 1:6,7).

In Galatians 2, Paul shares how he had to deal with those who were questioning his preaching/teaching of the Gospel. He told them of how James, Peter and John - "reputed to be pillars" of the church, had given him and Barnabas approval in so far as their ministry to the Gentiles was concerned.

In Acts 21 we have the first known formal gathering of the most strategic leaders in the Church. The issue at hand was to define the expectations for the growing Gentile church. According to Luke, Peter reminds the Council of how God had used him to bring the first Gentiles into the fold. Then Paul and Barnabas shared some of their stories. Next James speaks. [Of some interest - outside of some vague references in the gospels and one quick reference in Acts 12:17, this is the first mention of James, the brother of Jesus. Yet it seems that James is in charge here rather than Peter, the "rock."] It is James who states the decision of the Council: Gentiles would be expected to avoid three types of unclean meat, and to avoid sexual immorality.

It is again in Galatians 2 that Paul relates how he had confront Peter - yes, Peter - because Peter was not being faithful to his calling to preach and teach the true faith. He spoke of the freedom of the Gospel when among the Gentiles, while practicing something quite else when among the Jews. The point being that even among the Apostolic band there were temptations to compromise the truth of the freedom of the Gospel.

We might also think of the warnings of Paul to a next generation preacher, Timothy, how that people in the church "would abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons..." (1 Tim. 4:1). Back in 1 Corinthians 5:13, Paul exhorts the the church in Corinth of the necessity of judging those within the church and of expelling those who are not in alignment with the practice of the true faith. Peter (1 Peter 2), and Jude both make much of warning against false teachers, many of whom actually have been a part of the church.

Compromise (adding to, or taking away from the teaching of the Lord of the Church, or of the Apostles who the Lord entrusted with those teachings) began, as seen, in the first generation, of the church continued to be a problem in every generation since. Many of the false teachings that cropped up were given names, and although they were challenged, many of them remained, and have remained, an issue in the church and in Christendom up to our present day. The following is a listing of some of the major heresies.

Gnosticism. The heretical theory that salvation comes through some special kind of knowledge, usually knowledge claimed by a special elite group. Gnostic theories existed before Christianity, and the Gnostics adapted the Gospels to their own views and for their own purposes, even composing pseudogospels, embodying their particular ideas and doctrines. Gnostic ideas persist and surface in some form in nearly every major heretical version of the Christian faith.

Marcionism. A second-century heresy of Marcion and his followers, who rejected the Old Testament and much of the New Testament, except for the Gospel of Luke and ten of St. Paul's Letters. The Marcionists claimed to preach a purer gospel after the manner of St. Paul; for them Christianity was purely a gospel of love to the exclusion of any law.

Modalism. A form of Trinitarian heresy of the second and third centuries, Modalism held that there is only one Person in God, who manifests himself in various ways, or modes.

Montanism. A second-century heretical movement that professed belief in a new "Church of the Spirit". The Montanists believed they enjoyed the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This claim meant that their fanatically rigorous views concerning morality superseded the authentic revelation of Christ that had been handed down in the Church.

Sabellianism. A third-century heresy named after a theologian, Sabellius. The Sabellians believed that there was only one Person in God, with three "modes", or aspects, of manifesting himself as Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Jesus Christ was merely a temporary manifestation in the flesh of the eternal God.

Valentinianism. A form of the ancient heresy of Gnosticism based on the teaching of Valentinus, who lived in Rome between 136 and 165. The Valentinians claimed that the visible world had been created by the God of the Old Testament but that only the invisible world was real. Christ came to deliver mankind from its bondage to matter and the physical world; most of mankind, however, wholly engrossed in matter, would nevertheless end in eternal perdition.

Adoptionism. Adoptionism held that Jesus was not really God but merely a man to whom special graces had been given and who achieved a kind of divine status at his baptism. This idea that Christ as a man was only the "adopted" son of God proved to be a persistent heresy.

Anomeanism. A radical variant of Arianism (see below), Anomeanism held that the Son was "unlike" (Greek: animoios) the Father.

Apollinarianism. This heretical doctrine of Apollinaris, bishop of Laodicea in Asia Minor, held that Christ had a human body but only a sensitive soul and no rational human mind or human free will, these having been replaced in Christ by the divine Logos, or Word of God.

Arianism. A major heresy that arose in the fourth century and denied the divinity of Jesus Christ. For Arius, there was only one Person, the Father. According to Arian theory, the Son was created ("There was a time when he was not"). Christ was thus a son of God, not by nature, but only by grace and adoption.

Donatism. A fourth and fifth century African heresy holding that the validity of the sacraments depends upon the moral character of the minister of the sacraments and that sinners cannot be true members of the Church or even tolerated by the Church if their sins are publicly known.

Macedonianism. A heresy named after Macedonius, an Arian bishop of Constantinople (d. ca. 362,) whose followers denied the divinity of the Holy Spirit: the Spirit was declared by them not to proceed from the Father but to be a creation of the Son.

Monophysitism. A fifth-century heresy holding that in Christ there is only one nature (Greek: mono, single; physis, nature), a divine nature. Thus, Monophysitism denies the true human nature of Christ; this human nature is absorbed into Christ's divine nature, according to Monophysitism.

Monothelitism. A heresy that arose in the seventh century as a result of Byzantine imperial efforts to accommodate the Monophysites (see above). Monothelites accepted the orthodox doctrine of the two natures, divine and human, in the Person of Jesus Christ but held that these two natures had only "one will" (Greek: monos, single; thelein, will).

Nestorianism. A fifth-century heresy claiming that there are two distinct Persons in the Incarnate Christ, one human and one divine. According to Nestorianism, it is unthinkable that God was born, crucified, and died; nor could Mary really have been the mother of God, but only the mother of a human being conjoined to God.

Novatianism. The Novatianists adopted a moral rigorism similar to that of Donatism (see above). Those guilty of grave sin were excluded from the Church permanently, and absolution was refused to those guilty of the sins of murder and adultery.

Pelagianism. Pelagius argued that the Church's teaching that in order to do good, divine grace in the soul was necessary. This canceled human free will. Pelagianism included a cluster of other beliefs and essentially entailed a denial of the Church's doctrine of Original Sin.

Priscillianism. A fourth-century heresy originating in Spain and combining forms of both Modalism and Gnosticism (see above). It denied Christ's divinity and real humanity, holding that human souls were united to bodies in punishment for their sins.

Semi-Arianism. A modified form of Arianism (see above) that flourished after the Council of Nicaea had condemned Arianism in 325. The Semi-Arians were often "moderates" who wanted to forge a "compromise" between those who held to the Church's strict teaching concerning the divinity of Christ and Christ's consubstantiality with the Father and those tempted by Arianism to deny many great truths.

Subordinationism. A general name for all the fourth century heresies that admitted only God the Father as God.

The Didache is a very interesting first century document that allows us to see how the 1st century Christian churches were organized and how they may have been governed. It is important to know that this document represents the Jewish Christian churches more than it does the Gentile churches, but it is still instructive. The Didache is, more or less, an early Minister's Manual. It gives very practical guidelines for baptism, fasting, prayer, the Lord's Supper (the Eucharist), and how to take care of traveling preachers and prophets. You can view the Didache at - <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/didache-lightfoot.html>

It should be noted that in the midst of the various heretical teachings, there were, at the same time, and in each century of the church, apologists who stood for the truth of the Word/Gospel. The result of the efforts of these men and of church councils are the Creeds [the Apostles' (middle of second cent.), the Nicene (325), and the Athanasian (as late as the sixth cent. ?)] and various documents that detail what the Church has come to accept as Scripture/Bible based teachings and practices. An interesting history of the Ecumenical creeds can be found at, <http://www.augsburgfortress.org/media/downloads/9780800627416Chapter1.pdf?domainRedirect=true>

It can be seen that the creeds and other of the documents of the Church were written in reaction to various false teachings that continued creeping into the church throughout its years of existence. It continues to happen today, even as Peter and Paul told us it would. As far as false teachings are concerned, it really is true, "there is nothing new under the sun." What continues to crop up today is nothing other than maybe a little different spin on one of those ancient church heresies. It is important today for the church leaders, but also for the men and women in the pew, to have biblical answers to the heresies of our times so people are not misled and turned away. The creation of new creeds is not necessary as we have the historical creeds, and, for the most part, there are no 'new' heresies, but rather old heresies with new faces.

Another issue throughout the centuries of the church is the danger often times inherent in the clergy and the willingness of so many church members to put their trust not so much in the truth, as in an individual. There is also a danger, and again, it is nothing new [the Old Testament prophets dealt with it and so did our Lord in His day] that the worship service can very easily become a performance, with a passive audience.

Clearly Berean principal is something that every true believer, clergy and lay, needs to be aware of, and not only aware of, but diligent in putting into practice. Those of the church in Berea "received the word with all eagerness." But that wasn't the end of it, they also "examined the Scriptures *daily*, to see if [all in the preaching and teaching they were receiving] was true" (Acts 17:11).

Does it really make that much difference? Yes it does. One little thing that is off in one generation, if not attended to, will be off that much more in the next. And those little things can add up. The way is narrow that leads to life (Matt. 7:14), and the teaching of that way must also of necessity be narrow (Jn. 14:6). But that narrow way, based on Scripture, is what is true (Jn. 17:17). And it is the truth that sets free for time and for eternity (Jn. 8:32).

The Reformers

by Ralph Wm. Spears

Martin Luther stepped so suddenly from the shadows of near obscurity onto center stage of major world drama that it was quite surprising, if not disturbing in time, to him and his associates. The fact that we look back Five Hundred years with unfettered vision on the fruit of his initiative and tremendous effort is clear proof of how much was accomplished by the Protestant Reformation. In short it was enormous, world changing and earth shaking. The tectonic plates of opposing forces had been locked so long in static conflict that when they finally *let go*, the release of positive energy was nearly unprecedented. Rome, for one was caught in such successive tsunamic waves of change and delinquent renewal, that the effects could be felt for well over two centuries afterward. Rome's own Council of Trent which went on for some eighteen years, is of first exhibit.

Reformers are those who assume a role; a role of bringing about authentic order and the restoration of original purpose and grace to ideals, people and bodies, even institutions. They are *Called*, or take upon themselves, the task of change, sometimes unwillingly, sometimes with 'fear and trembling', sometimes with a zeal of purpose according to an urgency which acts as their motivation.

They have their way of becoming known - for good like Luther or not so good - like John Hus, at least for him. Reformers have taken the form of prophets, writers, translators, activists and preachers, but always with a vision and purpose which drives them. Luther was not only *all of the above*, but he was prodigious in his accomplishments if only in the areas of writing and translating are counted; such as commentaries on Scripture and the translation of the whole Bible itself into German, not counting his extensive preaching and teaching and travel (by ox cart) in doing so!

First there are the "Formers" such as Abram and Sarai, don't forget her. She was party to the leap of Faith as no other taken to become Sarah to her husband's Abraham. They were the believers - the founders - the beginning of offspring as numerous as the *stars of the heaven* - and *the grains of sand* - all mankind, with the help of God through one Mechizedek the first High Priest.

Another *Former* was Moses, as a part of God's answer to the cry of a nation in deep distress. And so the tests of survival and the Law - the Torah, were given to live by and so survive and then thrive at the dawning of Grace in the desert. Both Formers of Faith and of the Law acted on the flimsiest of operations, the promise of an offspring to a barren aged couple, and a baby floating down the Nile in a bullrush basket and the whim of the Pharaoh's daughter. Each child provided the promise of continuity and fulfillment of the Divine pattern unfolding.

Indeed God provides these opportunities but *Formers* and *Reformers* must take it from there acting bravely in Faith to pull it off in their mission of *near-impossibility*.

Jeremiah, admittedly *the reformer* among the major prophets, cajoled and complained to God regularly and bitterly about the danger he was enduring, while Amos insisted that he was neither a "prophet or son of a prophet" thank you, he was just doing the task assigned him. Good job Amos!

Before them were the Judges. There was Deborah a visionary who saw the way clear to deliver the whole opposition army into the hands of a woman armed with nothing more than a tent peg. In an era desperate for God's guidance, Samuel heard His voice clear as day as a youthful genius and Elohim/God, in his day - "Let none of his (Samuel's) words fall to the ground"!

We cannot minimize however, the drastic effects that this blessed job had

on these folks – the Reformers. Moses ran away to the wilderness insisting that the stuttering thing provided a legitimate reason to turn down that ominous *Call*. Elijah panicked and ran, making up the 'dangerous world' speech while hiding in a hole and fasting, after starring in the impressive one man show of defeat for several hundred prophets of Baal. What a change of heart and all over the covert threat of Jezebel. And John the Baptizer the last Old Testament Prophet over another *Jezebel* of a woman – lost his head.

This, all a part of the drama, the process with the long impressive name – *heils-geshichte* – Salvation History. It is mentioned several places in scripture such as Jude's Epistle and even in the talk of Jesus as the un-revealed stranger to the travelers on the road to Emmaus, "and beginning with Moses and all the prophets, He (Jesus) interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning Himself!" (Lk 24-27) Our Reformers in the long history of *heils-geschichte* were instrumental in the struggle while providing the "boots on the ground" in the victory.

Translators such as William Tyndale suffered arrest, imprisonment and martyrdom on the burning stake of execution after producing excellent English translations of Scripture.

Luther escaped this fate but the sudden pressure of a single handed battle and the protracted struggle with all of the forces of the Papacy took its toll. He suffered, we are told, digestive maladies – long periods of depression and melancholia so that his long suffering wife Katherine at times found herself unable to break the chains of gloom that surrounded her beleaguered husband - Martin. More than one modern day mental health analyst has suggested that Luther suffered from clinical depression. (Would they have fared better in that situation?) Luther once described the daunting task of this nearly single handed struggle with the Papacy using a very earthy example of his digestive problems. "If I break wind in Germany" he quipped, "they smell it in Rome!"

One seldom told tale however, shows how this otherwise erstwhile posting of Luther's 95 Theses on that crisp October day of 1517 must have had some kind of remarkable force of destiny behind it.

On the eve of the posting on the Castle Church door, on the 31st, the resident of that Castle, Frederick the Wise had quite a dream. As I have long studied dreams Biblical and otherwise for some time, this was a 'dream of dreams'. Frederick who earned his title – "the Wise", dreamed that, one of his monks with a long metal quill - so long that it eventually reached Rome - began to write words so powerful that it shook not only Rome but the world. This quill broke into several smaller pens which continued the polemic with great force. Frederick woke from sleep and recorded the experience - only to return to sleep and resume this powerful dream where he left off. Whereas he was at first apprehensive of this monk's efforts – he could see that as the dream played out, it brought about the forces of much needed change and reform. He breathlessly forwarded the events of his night time drama to his brother. Little doubt that the effects of this experience put Frederick on the task of rescuing and protecting his prized monk in the real world some few years later as Luther spoke before the crucial Diet gathering.

Martin Luther was classic type A personality, "Here I stand" he declared, "I can do no other" as he faced a kingdom of forces - both for and against him. One Philip Melancthon was just the opposite, mild mannered and tending to be too agreeable, he was once even accused of being willing to 'give away the store' to the Romans some years later in his life for a peaceful solution with them. Luther was square shouldered and five feet four inches tall. Philip, the little *Giant* of the Reformation, was willowy at best and barely five feet of vertical inclination.

It was Philip who lay dying in the thick of the Reformation battle in the early 1540s. Luther was soon as his bedside. "Philip, you must get up" he said.

"No Martin" he answered. "But Philip", Luther insisted, "I need you – the Church needs you !" "But I am so tired" he answered, "just leave me in peace, Brother Martin!" Luther soon returned with some soup – perhaps the medieval German version of chicken soup, insisting that Philip partake. Still Philip declined. Finally and forcefully Luther pulled himself up to full height and threatened his diminutive friend. "Philip" he insisted, "If you do not take this soup, I will, well... I will excommunicate you!" thundered Luther. Eventually Herr Melancthon drank the soup and outlived his benefactor and friend nearly fourteen years past Luther's last year of 1546. Needless to say, his efforts were fundamentally effective and necessary as Luther had recognized.

Where would we be – where would the Church be without such people? Today we recognize the faults of the Church militant. The problems are obvious, unavoidable! We ourselves feel the effects of the given situation, might even feel the results as symptoms in the body or the mind as did our predecessors. Why it is not even easy at times to be *the follower* of a reformer.

However, things could be so much worse. For "so it was also with the Prophets- and *the Reformers* - who were before us."

Interpretation

by Rev. Tylan Dalrymple

Introduction:

Focusing on the topic of interpretation means to realize we are really speaking about "communication." That is communication between the writer and the reader. Most modern ideas about interpretation usurp the author's role and make writing an exercise in futility. We accept a form of fatalism when we subconsciously root meaning in the reader rather than the writer. To discuss "meaning" along these lines means to boil everything down to a mere power struggle. If meaning is based on the subjective whim of the reader then "the meaning" of any text will be decided by the reader who has enough verbal, social, economic, or mental power to assert his/her interpretation over that of others. In this case communication is reduced to a medium or "middle man" who becomes the ultimate arbiter.

Lewis made two important statements that might cause us to reflect on our approach to interpreting the Bible. First, he reminds each of us where true power resides saying, "Aim at heaven and you will get earth thrown in. Aim at earth and you will get neither." We should therefore be wary of men who pay homage to the creation while at the same time deny its creator. Of these Lewis writes, "Keep clear of psychiatrists unless you know that they are also Christians. Otherwise they start with the assumption that your religion is an illusion and try to "cure" it: and this assumption they make not as professional psychologists but as amateur philosophers."

Remembering that interpretation is rooted communication is central. Paul writes, "How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?" The fact that the Bible is consistently the top selling book in a country full of people that don't actually read it is telling. Each person reading the Bible alone under their roof can mean multiplying a papal mindset by the number of people who own Bibles. The assertion that each person determines their own meaning actually makes everything meaningless. We must not put too much trust in ourselves when it comes to spiritual matters. Yet, faith must have a real personal component.

American individualism reacts against the concept of group thinking, and rightfully so. Our Lord calls individuals to bear the cross...not nameless faceless groups. Interpretation is not based on "the group." Rather interpretation happens within individuals who are operating in a group context. There are specific principles that underlie interpretation. Each individual's use of these principles is checked and balanced by the group of people who believe in Jesus Christ forming the church on earth.

Ignoring the importance of preaching and the exhortation to "not forsake the assembly" can have dire consequences. Luther sought to make the Biblical text and sermon the center of public worship. Modern worship tends toward musical performance as seen in the emergence of the praise bands on one end of the spectrum and legalistic traditionalism in liturgical forms on the other. Consequently, the proclamation of God's Word takes a back seat. Again the words of Lewis are proven true, "Every time you make a choice, you are turning the central part of you, the part that chooses, into something a little different from what it was before." We either say yes or no to communication with God when we choose to embrace or despise basic principles of communication. The question is, "What have we been saying yes to in the church?"

Methods of Interpretation:

The methods used, or not used, to interpret God's Word are wide and varied. There is no single perfect method. However, some methods get us closer to the authors' intent than others. Methods of interpretation that focus primarily on the writer while simultaneously diminishing the presuppositions of the reader are most trustworthy. Such a focus has never led any halfwit into a field awaiting an Armageddon that did not come. Devotional, theological, and doctrinal methods have reduced would be Christian fellowships to cultic/cultural gatherings all too often. Therefore, an overview of different interpretive methods is imperative to understanding how we approach the Word of God.

a. **No Method** – In practice this means, "Just go with whatever seems right." We have all been told to go with our gut or follow our heart. The problem is manifest. This is human reasoning and not divine logic. Scripture tells us, "There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end it leads to death." Sadly, this is the most popular way to interpret anything. We basically come to the text assuming that our thoughts and inclinations are pure. The motivation behind this method (no method) is sloth and/or arrogance. Most people would rather avoid thinking.

b. **Literary Method** – The literary method views the New Testament simply as a collection of literature from the 1st century. It approaches the Bible as any other text. It is certainly true that the OT and NT contain various forms of 1st century and other ancient literature.

The strength of this method is that it takes seriously the different forms of literature within the Bible. For example, reading a historic book like Genesis as if it were poetry obscures the meaning of the text. Likewise, an apocalyptic book such as Revelation must not be interpreted "literally" because the apocalyptic genre is full of figurative language and imagery. The danger of the literary method is that it is merely an academic approach. Such an approach is limited by presuppositions that may or may not deny divine inspiration and historic evidence for the supernatural...i.e. miracles.

c. **Historic Method** – This method sees biblical documents as recordings from a specific time period. All writings are devised in part as a response to historical circumstances of the time. The purpose of the historic method is to see various books as a witness to historical events. This method seeks to reconstruct these events. It insists books of the Old Testament and New Testament are part of a historical framework of their time. A relative weakness of this approach is that it often ignores life application.

d. **Theological/Doctrinal Method** – This is the most popular form of interpretation across all modern church bodies. This method does not focus on the authors intended meaning, historical context, or literary form. These ideas are considered secondary at best. The theological method uses the text to prove a point that is already worked out. This point may or may not have employed other methods of interpretation. Primarily the text is used to support a system of belief or doctrine. In most cases the doctrine is arranged around systemic applications like a set of belief statements handed out to employees of a business. One example of this method in action might be seen in those who go about finding a 50/50 law and gospel message within every scripture lesson on the church calendar. It is also seen in groups who read lone concepts such as sovereignty, power, charity, social justice, or multiculturalism into nearly every paragraph of sacred text.

Of course theology and/or doctrine are important for application. Well-developed doctrine is a useful guide when examining interpretive results. Doctrine provides historic checks and balances of the Christian assembly by allowing those who have come before us a voice. The history of the Christian church is a communion of saints who have, to greater or lesser extents, applied the same rules of interpretation to understand what each Biblical author meant to communicate. Sadly, two groups are prominent in the contemporary context. We have legalists who overemphasize the abilities of our forefathers to interpret and modernists who have little or no regard for those who came before us. Reality teaches us that men have always been heterogeneous in their ability to interpret a text as they have been in their ability to solve mathematical equations.

e. **Historical Critical Method** (Not to be confused with textual criticism!) – The word “criticism” rightfully sets off alarm bells in the mind of the modern interpreters. While this word has been used in reference to the now declining documentary hypothesis it should not be discarded completely. To discard every word that has been historically misused means limiting our lexicon to very few words and thus stifling communication.

It is also imperative to distinguish between textual criticism and the historical critical method of interpretation. “Textual criticism is a branch of textual scholarship, philology, and literary criticism that is concerned with the identification of textual variants in either manuscripts or printed books.” Scribes can make alterations when copying manuscripts by hand. A simple way of understanding textual criticism is through an exercise called “grandma’s favorite recipe.”

Let’s say grandma’s favorite recipe was copied by seven of her daughters. Sometime after grandma has passed away the original recipe is lost and only the seven copies remain. Each copy has a few discrepancies (textual variants) in it. How do we go about finding the original recipe? We would need to apply the method of textual criticism. In doing so we would compare the variants or (errors) in each recipe. The chance that all seven daughters made the same exact errors is numerically slim. In the case of each individual error you would have five or six copies that agree and one or two that contain a specific error. A translation of grandma’s recipe resulting from applied textual criticism would then include the information where the highest level of agreement is present.

When it comes to the Bible we have thousands of copies to compare making the textual variants of individual copies easier to rule out. If there is an agreement between 24,000 copies and a disagreement in only a few hundred the obvious conclusion is the correct rendition is contained in the large number of copies that are in agreement...especially when they agree across multiple geographic and cultural regions.

Sadly, the important field of textual criticism has been high-jacked by

pseudo intellectuals who hold prejudicial presuppositions against the central message of God's Word. There are many new translations of the Bible that are really not translations, but paraphrases of existent English texts. The idea that Jesus is the only way to salvation assaults the senses of fallen men who seek convoluted truth at every turn.

The true historical critical method of interpretation may broadly be referred to by what is called "hermeneutics." The goal of hermeneutics is to uncover the author's intended meaning in any writing sample. This method borrows partly from the general historical method (mentioned above) in that it takes seriously the historic circumstances in which the text was written. Sadly, the historical critical method has been boiled down to a wicked form of "Biblical criticism" in an attempt to discredit authors rather than communicate with them. One proponent of Biblical hermeneutics text explains, "For if the meaning of a text is not the author's, then no interpretation can possibly correspond to the meaning of the text, since the text can have no determinable meaning."

The word "critical" is an attempt to move meaning from the historical context into the contemporary one. In other words, we seek to draw parallels between past events and those of today. A straight forward example of this is the mob mentality we see against the apostles throughout the book of Acts. It is easy to draw parallels from these historic events to our own contemporary problems with protestors and riots.

We use the word "critical" because it is imperative that we do not "eisegete" or impose meaning on the text. While it is necessary to understand the author's intent for writing and apply this information to our own setting, it is also dangerous. We always run the risk of reading our current cultural trends back into the Bible or any text for that matter. It is necessary to examine any attempt at applying Biblical principles with a "critical" mind so as to avoid both contrived legalism and liberalism.

The strength of the historical critical method is that it considers historic and literary methodology and draws secondly on theological framework. In practice this means the Bible is guiding our doctrine (teaching) rather than our doctrine guiding the Bible. The pitfall of cults is the tendency to interpret every verse of the Bible through their doctrinal lenses. In many ways modern Christianity has become a form of cult by reading false doctrines into the Bible that simply are not to be found.

The weakness of the historical critical method is that no one person can do it alone. Hermeneutic principles are the tools of the historical critical method and these tools are only as good as the person using them. This leads us back to the importance of the assembly. That is God's people joining together around His Word.

There are two important verses that come to mind when considering the application of hermeneutic principles. "*And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation.*" "*For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.*" [2 Pet. 19-20; Matt. 18:20] These words speak volumes. Conclusion: (Do not give up meeting together!)

All methods of interpretation are subject to human error. This does not invalidate the methods any more than a mistake in doing a sum would invalidate mathematics. It has been said, "If anyone makes himself his own master in the spiritual life, he makes himself scholar to a fool." The body of Christ is one, but made up of many parts. If parts are missing we have something less than the full truth. Therefore, interpretation belongs to the "Communion of Saints." These principles of interpretation put in action among believers will yield spiritual fruit.

The Church of Smyrna speaks to the Confessing Church of Christ in This Darkening Hour: On Tribulation, Remnant, and Martyrdom

Rev. Mark Dankof

Jesus Christ, the Logos, speaks to the Apostle John in exile on Patmos regarding the Church of Smyrna in Asia Minor: Revelation 2: 8-11.

And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: "The words of the First and the Last, who died and came to life. I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a Synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you in prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death."

Let me say at the outset that we will not be discussing the dreadful developments in the Lutheran Church specifically and the American Church generally which have been sufficiently covered in previous conferences. I will simply state again that in my lifetime, as American culture and life continues its precipitous downturn into the bottomless abyss, our own denominational tradition and affiliation has degenerated into an absurd dialectic between the apostate universalists, higher critical cynics, and Cultural Marxists on the left, and a compendium of isolationists and sectarians on the right for whom the use of the term evangelical is tragi-comic. In the left-right dialectic in American Lutheranism today, rampant institutional political power struggles and pathology on both ends of the spectrum are strikingly identical. The proclamation of the Gospel and Biblical teaching and instruction often seem but an afterthought, where everyday ministry to those starved for the Word, proclamation of forgiveness of sin in Jesus Christ and His love to all who believe, historic worship, and evangelical outreach and vision, are all too often lost in the shuffle of business-as-usual. Jeremiah described this very sort of scene in the 6th century B. C. context of disaster which had befallen Jerusalem and ancient Judah as the Babylonian Exile and Temple Destruction unfolded: "Her gates have sunk into the ground; He has ruined and broken her bars; her kings and princes are among the nations; the law is no more, and her prophets find no vision from the Lord." (Lamentations 2: 9)

If this looks increasingly like the unfolding and impending state of the American Empire and Church it should. The hour is increasingly late (Matthew 24).

Where does all of this leave the Believing Remnant of the Confessing Church of Christ? Put more directly, where does this leave you and me as a part of such a fellowship and movement? Where is God in all of this for you and me? Where are his promises? Where is hope for the present and the future? How does he provide for the Remnant when none of the present circumstances in history are favorable to our sustenance and survival?

It is these questions to which we shall now turn. The key prototypical Confessing Church for our purposes today is the Church of Smyrna in Asia Minor during John's exile on Patmos courtesy of the edict of Emperor Domitian of Rome (AD 81-96). As already read, our text is Revelation 2: 8-11.

It is noteworthy that the exile of the Apostle was due to his refusal to acquiesce to the demands of the Roman Emperor that Domitian be venerated and worshiped as the virtual incarnation of God on earth. Put slightly differently, John understood what was Caesar's, and what belongs to Christ alone.

For that faith and confessional witness, he found himself in the Roman penal colony on Patmos.

My counsel and admonition to all of us who are Remnant Believers today: It is not hyperbole to understand and acknowledge the evidence of increasing hostility to the Gospel in a post-Christian America and Western World in the 21st century, accompanied by lawlessness, decadence, perversion, blasphemy, violence, deception and societal disintegration on a breathtaking scale. The Satanic forces in play are reminiscent of those between 81-96 A. D. during the reign of Domitian. The challenge to us is the same challenge posited to the Church of Smyrna, but so are the reassuring provisions of God to His people that underscore His sovereign control of events in history, and His love of those who are faithful. The key point is this: God's people are entering what is eschatologically the most dangerous period in all of linear time and redemptive history (Heilsgeschichte). We must be prepared for any contingency thrust upon us by Satan and the world. But nothing can separate the believer from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8: 31-39).

Let me emphasize four (4) points from the Apocalypse in today's conversation about the assurances of God to the Israel of God, the Confessing Church of Christ, throughout time.

The first (1) is this: God provides for His people through select individuals who accomplish the Lord's purposes for those purchased with the Blood of the Lamb, Jesus Christ. Look at the way in which the Word of the Lord during the persecution of believers during Domitian's reign continues to be proclaimed through the selection of the Apostle John (Revelation 1: 1-3) on Patmos to reveal mysteries and reassure the People of God. Tellingly, John states in 1:9 that, "I John, your brother and partner in the tribulation, and the kingdom, and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus."

How much plainer can it be? Although we have no living Apostles or inspired writers of Scripture in our midst today, God continues to provide brothers and partners in the trials and tribulations of our lives as believers in this darkening age and world. These brothers and partners are also ours not simply in trials and tribulations, but in the Kingdom of God both present and future. Just look around this room. I recognize people here who joined me in the uphill fight to preserve the Biblical faith in our tradition over 30 years ago. Among those in that category, I'm unbelievably the youngest one of the 4 still left and who still perseveres alongside these men. Because of their faithfulness to the Gospel and their enduring friendships with me, I've been encouraged to continue when the temptation to give it up in these last 3 decades intensified. Because I continued by the grace and provision of God alone, I've come to know many of the rest of you who have attended these conferences for 22 years now. We are brothers and sisters in the trials and tribulations present and future. Can we be any more blessed than this?

Mysteriously, we possess the Kingdom of God now, and yet not completely until the return of the Lord. And how we presently possess the inspired, inerrant, inscripturated Word of God of the Prophets and Apostles, including John right now in our midst, assuring us of blessings present and future through Christ! This empowers God's humble people, such as all of us gathered here in Wisconsin today, to rejoice in the midst of sorrow, to be confident in the midst of unspeakable trials and discouragements, and to have the faith which comes only from the Holy Spirit of God. Forget the numbers game of the Church Growth Movement in America. Jettison the "Health, Wealth, and Prosperity" philosophies of the televangelists and the worship fads of an American Church that looks more like the world of sin, the flesh, and Satan with each passing week. Embrace the joy of the Biblical Gospel,

worship in continuity with the Confessing Church of Christ of the Ages, read and take to heart the Lutheran Confessions and what they affirm about sin and salvation only in Christ. And be confident that God has not forgotten his Remnant People wherever they may be, as He has numbered the very hairs on our heads and has our names written in the Book of Life.

The second truism (2) is this: God works through select groups of remnant believers throughout the trials and tribulations of His people in the midst of hostile societies, natural disasters, wars and rumors of war, and upswings in Satanic activity throughout human history. When we look for a select group of remnant believers in the past to serve as a prototype to be emulated by faithful Christians today in the midst of the perils of the 21st century, we need look no further than the Church of Smyrna. What characterized this Confessing Church in the all seeing eyes and all knowing mind of our Lord Jesus Christ? He states that, "I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a Synagogue of Satan." (Revelation 2:9)

The characteristics of the Confessing Church of Smyrna are thus clearly discernible, as are the characteristics of the Remnant in historical and eschatological times of political, cultural, moral, economic, and theological disturbances which seek to devour those who are Christ's and Christ's alone. There was and will be tribulation. There was and will be slander against God's people until the end of linear time and redemptive history. These slanders emanating from the Synagogue of Satan are to be understood as a phenomenon manifested in both the 1st century and the 21st (see Romans 2: 28-29 and Dr. E. Michael Jones' *The Jewish Revolutionary Spirit and its Impact in World History for the enumeration of the context of Revelation 2:9*).

And yet with all of these sobering facts and developments, the Lord reminds the Church of Smyrna, and our gathering here today, that we are yet rich! The world cannot know this richness, because it cannot know Jesus. The world cannot know this richness, which can only be revealed by the Holy Spirit of God to the believer (I Corinthians 12:3). Only the believer can possess all that is contained in this spiritual richness, juxtaposed in this case with worldly richness, and understand that tribulation, slander, and economic poverty cannot separate he or she from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8: 31-39). This is the faith that leads to eternal life. This is the faith that remains when Emperors and Empires fade away in the twilight of time and space, be it the Babylonian version, the Medo-Persian version, the Greek version, the Roman version, or the American version as the years pass in this 21st Century.

And make no mistake. There is no doctrine of American exceptionalism here to the Biblical principles that have governed Empires and Nations from Genesis to Revelation to the present.

The third truism (3) is this: The Remnant Confessing Church that is poor but rich, sets a foundation for many fruits to be made manifest in the future glorification of God and the proclamation of His kingdom in Christ. In the case of the Church of Smyrna of the 1st century, its foundation produced the 2nd century Bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp (A. D. 69-155). He is regarded as one of the 3 chief Apostolic Fathers in history, along with Clement of Rome and Ignatius of Antioch. It is no accident or coincidence of history that the name Polycarp literally means, "much fruit." A disciple of the Apostle John, and ordained by him as a Bishop, we must turn to 3 primary sources for information about this embodiment of witness to the Crucified and Risen Christ whose life and death continue to resonate now, even as I speak. These 3 sources are 1) The Martyrdom of Polycarp, a circular letter composed by the Church of Smyrna and distributed to the churches of Pontus; 2) Irenaeus' *Against Heresies*, which I first encountered in my first year of theological

study in California almost 40 years ago; and Polycarp's Letter to the Philippians.

Let's cut to the chase here. If the issues of Emperor Worship and oppression of the Christian in the 21st century Western World's Central States increasingly looks like the ideological matrix that exiled John to Patmos and executed Polycarp, can we envision ourselves having to make the ultimate choice of Christ or Caesar, Christ or Antichrist, under penalty of death for an evangelical confession and proclamation of faith?

The subject of martyrdom came up in a systematic theology course I was taking in suburban Chicago years ago under Dr. Paul D. Feinberg at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. The question of Martyrdom for the Faith was under intense scrutiny and examination one particular day and lecture. I can't say to anyone that I thought I was brave enough then - or now - to follow in the footsteps of Polycarp or any of the other martyrs for Christ. I will say to all of us here what Dr. Feinberg told me then in response to my questions and doubts about being able to cling to the Lord and witness to the truth under penalty of the ultimate sanction. He said that we should never ask for the dying grace of God before we actually need it (Matthew 24: 9-14). If or when we face contemporary versions of the Sanhedrin with its demands for recantation and capitulation, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit of God will give us the thoughts and the words to say when we are not capable of otherwise standing up to those who seek our very lives (Mark 13: 9-11; Luke 21: 12-15).

In the Martyrdom, Polycarp is recorded as saying on the day of his death, "Eighty and six years I have served Him, and He has done me no wrong", which could indicate that he was then eighty-six years old or that he may have lived eighty-six years after his conversion. Polycarp goes on to say "How then can I blaspheme my King and Savior? You threaten me with a fire that burns for a season, and after a little while is quenched; but you are ignorant of the fire of everlasting punishment that is prepared for the wicked."

These words have haunted me at night for almost 40 years since first reading them late one evening in a dormitory room. Would I really ever have what it took to confess the faith under their circumstances?

Finally, there is the fourth truism (4) bequeathed to the Church of Smyrna by the Lord. It is also your promise and mine: "Be faithful unto death and I will give thee the Crown of Life" (Revelation 2: 10).

It is this foundation alone which gives us peace, the peace which only the Lord gives and which the world and its Prince with his targeted tribulations and attacks can never know (John 16:33). We are guaranteed to experience these trials and tribulations, and an intensification of such in the context of the approaching eschatological signs of the end of the age. But Jesus assures us he has overcome the world, an assurance He gives to the disciples just before experiencing the most agonizing death in all of history, a death to be followed by the evidence of his overcoming of sin and the world in the reality of the Empty Tomb.

Take heart today my friends. Be encouraged. As deception, wars and rumors of wars, famines, earthquakes, persecutions and martyrdoms of believers, apostasy, evil, and lovelessness continue their present upswing (Matthew 24) leading to the appearance of the Antichrist in history, we will "overcome and will not be hurt at all by the second death" (Revelation 2:11).

We have gathered again in Conference/Convention to reaffirm the truths of God to His people in Christ, and to rejoice that as orthodox Lutheran Christians, we are but a small slice of the Confessing Church in history and presently, focusing only on the things of the Lord in Word and Sacrament and our love for one another, even in the midst of a nation and a world that increasingly does not know Him and which is coming to despise who and what we are. We must be discerning about the truth and the hour. We must be ready. And together, we shall be.

Table Talk
P. O. Box 31
Chetek, WI 54728

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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For information or to make
comment write:

President/Pastor, LMS-USA
2837 East New York St.
Indianapolis, IN 46201

Internet Contact:
revralphs@sbglobal.net

To: