

# 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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## Peter's Helpful Reminder

by Rev. John Erickson

The setting: Since 2004, LMS Pastor Erickson has served a congregation of the LCMS. In September the LCMS congregation he now serves hosted the circuit pastor's gathering. The following was the challenge set before the pastors who had gathered at that occasion.

If you have seen the *Truth Project* you will remember the question with which the presenter began the series. He asked the seminar group, "Why was Jesus sent here to the earth?" The answer the presenter was looking for, was words of Jesus found in John, chapter 18 and verse 37. "For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth."

Is truth important? Or, "Why is truth so important?"

Well... as for truth... Jesus said of Himself, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me." And we recall also our Lord's words to the Jews who had believed in Him as we find it in John 8:31 and 32, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you

free."

There is a question that has, not so infrequently, come to mind for me. In connection with the truth, and the importance of knowing and adhering to the truth, "How far from the truth can one be with regard to God's revelation of Himself and of His will and way for us... and still be in the target area?" Thinking in terms of archery... "When it comes to truth... is there considerable leeway within the target area, or does one need to be 'dead center' bull's eye?" We remember in connection with sin... the term for sin... *HAM-ARTANO* ... means, "missing the mark."

I think of the plagues in Egypt - how Egypt was affected, but not the people living in Goshen. The plague of darkness back at that time intrigues me. Was there a wall of dark-

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ness right smack on the border of Goshen? We saw something like that with the eclipse of the sun last year. There was light here... and just over there it was dark. I've seen rain and snowstorms with very definite lines drawn between the area affected and that which remained unaffected. Well... is there at least a little leeway allowed when it comes to truth that God is accepting of... when it comes to that which sets one free as over against that which holds one's soul in bondage? Or... is it a well defined and clear line that separates truth from error... that separates saving faith from a false faith? And why do you suppose I even bring such thoughts to mind today?

As you well know... our Church Year begins with Advent - let's say in about three months. But for all practical purposes I would suggest that our church work year begins now, just after Labor Day. You know what I mean. Vacations are for the most part over... the school year has begun... people and families are back on schedule. Now we can more or less count on people being around and pretty much ready to go at things once again.

All this came to mind for me a couple of weeks ago in my reading in the first chapter of Second Peter. It was when I got to verse 12 that I was brought up a little short. Peter writes, "Therefore I intend always to remind you of these things, though you know them and are established in the truth that you have." A literal translation reads, "I will be ready always to remind you..." And what was he always going to be ready to remind them of? He was going to frequently/always remind them of the instructions and teachings he had just shared with them earlier in his letter. He was going to do this even though he acknowledged they al-

ready knew those very things he was thinking about. In fact he was going to do this even though he was convinced in his mind that they were already established in the truth... already established in the apostolic teachings.

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**As ministers of the gospel... we should never assume anything when it comes to peoples' connection to the apostolic faith.**

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The King James has Peter expressing himself this way, "I will not be negligent..." in seeing to it that you are reminded of the teachings I have shared earlier with you. It was important for Peter... it was a priority for him... even as it should be today for you and for me as ministers of the gospel... we should never assume anything when it comes to peoples' connection to the apostolic faith. We must be intent, again and again, on bringing known truths of Scripture to the minds of our people. People are liable to forget the truths they once knew... and if that is the case... those truths will not exert the influence they should in the lives of our people. It is something we, in the office of the ministry need reminding of... that it is integral to this office... not only to impart to our congregations truths they have not known before... but maybe even more so... that we work to keep fresh in the minds of our people well-known truths, in order that those truths might exert a proper influence on their daily living.

There is so much people are confronted with in their lives... business.. the day to day cares and concerns of life... temptations... what to do with one's free time... different ideas... new ideas... and in all of this and more... even Christians are apt to forget or set aside some of the truths

that are most basic and so important and necessary for their spiritual well-being. Ministers of the gospel provide a most essential service, even if they should do nothing more than to remind their people of truths which are well understood, and which they have known before. A pastor, if he is to be a useful and effective shepherd of his sheep... does not need to always aim at originality, or think it necessary always to present truths which his hearers have never heard of before. Rather... reminding them of what they already know... but are prone to forget... and who puts forth effort to impress plain and familiar truths on the heart and conscience of his hearers... it is such that gives evidence of a faithful ministry.

In 1987, with all that was happening in the former ALC with regard to the talks that would lead to the formation of what would be called the ELCA... I met a pastor who has become a very good friend. It has been interesting to get to know this fellow and to understand why he was one of the many who had concerns with the direction things were going in the church at that time.

It was some thirty years previous to when I first knew him... it was in 1955... that as a new seminary graduate this fellow and his wife moved to a rural parish in south central North Dakota for his first call. He had been introduced to some things in seminary that had raised some questions for him. He was a little troubled with some of those things... things that did not mesh with his earlier upbringing and understanding of the Bible and of the faith. But, more or less 'going with the flow,' he at least to some degree, came to embrace some of those things he had been taught. So it was that as he began his ministry, he preached as best he could, as he had been trained.

Then, as his wife tells the story... a day came when, after one of his sermons, a little older woman - she was maybe in her later 50's or so - and she was described as a quite good looking woman... quite proper... rather tall... well respected... a teacher... and student of the Bible - - this woman approached this new pastor... stood eye to eye with him... and completely out of character language-wise... asked him... "Where do you get all this crap? Preach the Bible!"

To make a long story short... this lady woke this pastor up. He began to dig into Scripture. He began to do a serious study as to Scripture itself... its inspiration... its truthfulness... its reliability in so far as to all to which it speaks. In doing so, he came to understand and be convinced of, something of the importance - the necessity - of letting Scripture interpret Scripture. And, he found help and encouragement in all of this... by looking to biblical scholarship that had taken place before some of the more modern ideas of Scripture interpretation came in to vogue.

One of the highlights in my knowing this fellow came back in 1994, when, as a rather simple parish pastor (and I am using the descriptive word 'simple' in the best sense possible here)... but he was called upon to debate a candidate for a professorship at one of the AALC annual conventions. Much of the leadership of the AALC was seeking to bring a fellow in as a member of the newly formed AALC Seminary. The issue for many of us... was this potential seminary professor's questionable at best... understanding of Scripture. Well... this parish pastor, now grounded in the Word, put the professor of theology to shame. The result was that the professor never became a part of the AALC... but the AALC also had other serious prob-

lems at that time... so as it turned out, that 1994 convention was the last AALC convention for a number of us.

But I go back to that brave woman back there in North Dakota who called that young pastor on what he was about in his preaching. What if she had never said anything to him? What if she had not reminded him of what he once had known. Would he have continued in his ways and possibly led a number of souls into error with who knows what kind(s) of result? You see... it isn't just the lay people who need reminding... often times we pastors need reminding.

I remember a student by the name of Marcus Borg back in my college days. Students led chapel on Fridays... and I remember Marcus giving a sermon in one of those chapels. I remember clearly his promotion of evolution in that sermon... and this was back in the early 60's before evolution had any kind of foothold (at least as far as I knew) in the education at Concordia College, Moorhead, MN. I have often wondered if he was ever confronted by any of the religion teachers over what he did on that occasion.

As it turned out, Marcus continued in his religious studies... and as he would later put it... those studies lead him, "not toward atheism, but toward a deep belief in the 'spiritual life' and in Jesus as a teacher, healer, and prophet." In his writings he shares his belief that Jesus was likely the result of the rape of a young Jewish girl... and the birth of Jesus and His bodily resurrection are metaphors. He became a leading evangelist of what is called *progressive theology*. Some of you maybe know Dr. Borg as one of the founding members of the Jesus Seminar Group.

Back there in the early 60's I worked to avoid some of the new

brand of teachers of our required religion classes. One of those "new" theology teachers, and I don't know exactly what it was at that time that made me want to avoid him... but I came into contact with him some 15 years later when I found him on the faculty as I began my seminary studies. Now his leanings were out in the open... a leading proponent of *Process Theology*. And, of course, it tracks back... I am almost certain that he was one of Marcus Borg's instructors in Marcus' undergraduate work. I later found out that this, now professor of religion, began his ministry as a pastor in town just ten miles from my home. Now... what if one of the members of that congregation had confronted him back then as he began to promote some of those 'new' ideas... and had reminded him of some of the most basic truths that he had hopefully been taught in Sunday School and Confirmation classes? Might it have made a difference?

It is so easy for people at any age... to... what should we say... neglect... or forget what is actually true... or to be drawn away from adherence to the truth by false teachers. In not so few cases... false teachers may be too strong a term. My great uncle was president of The Evangelical Lutheran Synod's Luther Theological Seminary, in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan from 1939 to 1953. He retired to the Twin Cities and did some part time teaching at Luther Seminary in the closing years of the old ELC.

Once I got to seminary I took some interest in finding out more about this relative. I found that he was friends with Rev. Fredrik Schiotz who became president of the ELC in 1954... and who, in 1960, became the first president of the new American Lutheran Church. I was also able to purchase several of the

books my great uncle authored.

My cousin (so the above mentioned was also her great uncle) along with her husband, were missionaries in Brazil. In 1976, my cousin gave birth to a daughter. As a result of complications, she died some months later. This was just before I began my seminary studies... and two years later when I began my studies, her husband wrote me a letter.

He shared how my cousin's death had absolutely devastated him. Even in his faith, he could find no comfort. Then he shared how when he was in seminary (that would have been in early 60's) the seminary students and faculty would make fun of men like my great uncle and of the theology they held to. In his time of distress over his wife's death, he reflected on what he had been taught and in turn he had been teaching and preaching hoping to find something to give him the comfort he needed. However, he found nothing to hold to... nothing to give him hope. He shared how he had dug out some of the books my great uncle and others like him had written... and how those authors pointed to the message of Scripture. And in his now taking the Word for what it truly is... he found his faith restored.

The reason he wrote me was to warn me - there it is, you see - he wanted me to keep foremost in my mind... the importance of being careful in my studies... careful to hold unashamedly and firmly to the Word as the Divinely inspired, inerrant and infallible Word of God, and not to be taken in by all the new ideas.

Well that was fine... but then... as I later looked at some of the books authored by my great uncle... and as I also read some of the materials that spoke of what was going on in all that led to the merger of 1960... I found that my uncle was not all that firm in his understanding of the

Word either. If you read somewhat carefully... you will see some of the ideas being presented... that the Bible is not so much the Word of God... as that it contains the Word. So I now believe there is little question but that my great uncle was quite comfortable with Dr. Schiotz's declaration made fairly soon after the 1960 merger to appease many of the seminary professors and pastors of the new ALC... that Biblical inerrancy is in reference to the message of salvation... and does not necessarily pertain to things such as history, or science, or geography. In other words, the Bible contains the Word of God, but also not so few other things.

Do you see what men like my great uncle did? And the danger is that we can very easily do the same. This is exactly what Peter is writing about. We need to be intent on reminding ourselves and our people concerning the Word of God... concerning the truth of that Word as God's Word and self-revelation to us... and that as such... that it is without error in all it touches, whenever and however it speaks... whether in matters of faith, doctrine, history, geography, or science. We ease up just a little... like my great uncle and others back in his day did... and like what was taking place just a few years later in all that in the LCMS led up to Seminex... and what is taking place even today that brings unrest and division into the church at large... as well as into individual congregations... and while... what we are teaching and preaching may for the most part be 'right on'.. it may at the same time... in some little area, be off just a little from the actual truth. The real danger is... that in the next generation... our parishioners... our students... will take that particular 'little thing' and make it more of an issue... until before too long... it

evolves into a false teaching.

I don't know that my great uncle's position on Scripture was of danger to his faith... but his position certainly has had a devastating effect as it has grown in the thinking of succeeding generations of theologians and pastors.

I recall right here in this group, some years ago, in spending considerable months in our meetings together, on a study on the plagues in Egypt... and how there were a couple of men who wanted to bring into the discussion the notion that while we generally consider these plagues miracles... they might also be explained in some other, more natural way. For example the bloody water was possibly the result of torrential rains that fell on the red clay... and then as some suggest... the muddy red flood choked out the fish that got infected with anthrax... and the frogs, trying to escape the muddy waters died because they too became infected with anthrax... and so it goes. But the Bible tells us that God inflicted Egypt as a demonstration of His power.

As a kid... I was somewhat embarrassed by father on a number of occasions. He was, to put it mildly, quite vocal concerning his faith. When there was something one of our pastors mentioned in a sermon that did not mesh with Scripture, my dad would confront them on it. I might mention that my dad figured he had about a 5th grade education. But he was very well read, especially in Scripture. And, among other books he had on hand were a couple of Luther's commentaries and I recall one or two volumes by Lenski.

From what I remember... he always did things in line with Matthew 18. He would confront in private before it would ever move beyond that.

When I was in the lower grades... my older siblings were to begin confirmation instruction. Our pastor was evidently lacking to the point where, for a couple of years, we attended another church where my sisters could get adequate instruction. Then when a new pastor was called to our home church... we returned. But this critiquing of pastors continued... and like I said... it rather embarrassed me at times. But I believe good came of it.

I left home a number of years before my dad died... but I recall at my dad's funeral... the pastor made reference to this - I'll call it 'habit' of my father - and he commented that he learned from ... and came to appreciate... those interactions.

But for me also... I wonder, if I had not seen this spirit of discernment in my father... would I have been selective of my religion teachers in college? ...or in giving serious consideration as to what church to join as we moved from place to place in my years of teaching? ...or later, in the selecting of my instructors when I got to Seminary? And then later... as a pastor... might I have simply gone along with the majority, and moved seemingly without question, into what became the ELCA... and later with the inroads of charismatic and pentecostal theology in the AALC... might I again, have just gone along... rather than stepping out with others in the establishing of another church body?

I have run into some very interesting persons... articulate individuals... with some very attractive ideas. Thinking of some of these men... I could easily have been drawn into *theistic evolution*... or maybe into *open theism*... or *process theology*... or *progressive theology*... or who knows what. Maybe I would just have gone along with the inroads into charismatic theology in



the first parish I served... and now more lately... it would be far easier not to take such a firm stand in the area of sexuality and the sanctity of marriage. And what has prevented me from doing so? I believe it is that I have had people around me that have followed the example we see here in Peter... and by God's grace... the Holy Spirit has had a hand in this also... that I have been directed back to the Word of God... reminded of the things I have been taught... thereby continuing the taking to heart of the Word of God *as I read it*, giving serious consideration to the plain meaning of words... its use of grammar... its context... in not adding to or taking away from the written word... and all else that should be involved in a careful reading and study of Scripture.

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**It cannot be a harmless thing to lean toward, to say nothing of actually holding to, erroneous opinions.**

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It is so important to have it brought to our attention now as we move into this school year... that the mere fact that at present we (as well as those to whom we minister) are firm in our understanding of truth... there is no guarantee that we, or they, will always continue in our *remembrance*. Or... because we as pastors... and that we are firm in the truth of our doctrine... that we should think it improper for our brothers in the ministry... or... for that matter... godly lay persons... to remind us what should be the basis and foundation of our faith... and warn of any one or anything that might subvert our faith. It cannot be a harmless thing to lean toward, to say nothing of actually holding to, erroneous opinions.

Are we careful that we do not get people thinking that once a Chris-

tian, always a Christian? That with neglect, or the ignoring of, or with a rejection of the Means of Grace... there can be true and saving faith? And there is always that which Bonhoeffer brought to the attention of the church back some years now... the danger of intentionally or unintentionally... promoting cheap grace, i.e., forgiveness without repentance.

And how many other things could be listed here? For example... how many in our congregations do you suppose are leaning in the direction of the acceptance of evolutionary thinking. And especially when it is a relative or family member involved, how many no longer see as sinful... the homosexual life-style, or same sex marriage, or living together outside the covenant of marriage.

As pastors but also in connection with those to whom we minister... as someone has said, "No one can be safe who denies the fundamental doctrines of Christianity. It is truth... not error. .. that saves the soul."

But there is this also, as the apostle John reminds us... that there is no greater joy than knowing that our brothers and sisters... and those under our ministry, are walking in truth (see 3 John 4).

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**(Lent Is About - cont. from page 11)**

Jesus Christ as we focus (or refocus) on His self-sacrificing passion, death and resurrection, which has brought us acceptance, forgiveness and redemption by God. Through that same discipline, we make a loving response to God who gives us the power to live anew.

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## The Seasons - - Lent

by Rev. Ralph Spears

Was it Solomon who coined the passage about that well-known reflection on "seasons and times" appointed for "every matter under the sun"? Since Ecclesiastes is placed solidly between Proverbs and The Song of Solomon it has often been assumed that Solomon was the author of that well-known third chapter since his finger prints are all over the other two books. (Some date Ecclesiastes to another wise one as late as the Third Century B.C.)

King Solomon, son of David, became the personification of *Wisdom* accompanied by some scriptural stories to prove the point. There was that dream encounter with **JHVH** – God Himself who asked the boy monarch what He could give him, and Solomon immediately chose WISDOM. Because of that choice – he was also granted all of the lesser good things that he might have chosen. Clearly he had gone to the top with his choice. There then came the realization that...

"To everything there is a Season and a time for every matter under the heaven." (Eccl. 3:1)

This is followed by some fifteen or so "matters" or categories that are made provision for – by God – under heaven. Remember ?

Some older folks remember these in a twentieth century folk song which listed them to the comfortable twang of guitars and mellow voices. **Rounders** it was aptly named by – who was it – the Mamas and the Papas or some such group? In fact several others took a swing at that song.

For those who would conclude that such is obvious and a matter of course, a modern truism, miss the profound point here. For a well rounded life and a balance of experience under heaven, time and occasion has been provided by The God of Wisdom that man might experi-

ence and learn from all of these *times, seasons and cycles*. When you think of it, how marvelous and purposeful all of this truly is!

*"I give thanks to Thee Almighty God for Thou hast put me in the bundle of life... and hast given me to know Thy deep, deep truth!"* (Psalm 3 of the D.S.S.)

Life in total is a series of cycles derived from the great Christ Alpha / Omega Cycle – encompassing all things and ages. They bring purpose, order and harmony to all things. Many festivals in Jesus' Bible – the Old Testament to us – began on New Moon

Especially in the Church Year is this made manifest, that there is a "time for everything" and a place for everything important, "everything in its place." Nothing truly is trivial.

Even the Church Year shows signs of evolving over the centuries of time to accommodate *everything*.

Everything pointed to and emanated from the miracle of the Lord's Resurrection, *Easter*. This indeed is based on a full moon following the sign for the major season, Spring, as it roughly was for that very first Easter. Back it up a couple cycles counting the Sundays as well, and the beginning of Lent starts with a Wednesday of ashes for repentance. Thankfully the sack cloth was eliminated which was a component of David's lament for his sin (see Psalm 51).

But preparation was necessary for this greatest of occasions, much preparation indeed! We walk the path with the followers of that which became known as "The Way," His way. So there is the Call the teaching and observing. At first there was a brief time allowed by the early Church Fathers, then more, and a Season-of its own, LENT, and finally for that six weeks, but then



borrowing from the Biblical time, forty days woven between Sundays, which were already reserved for observance of the Resurrection.

"If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me." (Matt. 16: 24; so also in Mk. and Lk.)

This is the path and the discipline following the "train" of the Apostles, as one hymn put it, following the Christ. But how can we prepare for what we already have? During Lent we prepare ourselves for what we also celebrate. Times and seasons intermingle. That is possible because all times are rolled into one. Like a spinning prayer wheel of the Buddhists, all three revolve together becoming as one – a witness through and including all times.

"I am the Alpha, and the Omega, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty!" (Rev. 1:8)

"Who is" – meaning the present, "Who was" – for the past, and "Who is to come" – the future.

The God of all time as though there was no time, in the eternal nature of God's time.

Since at least the Fourth Century, Lent or Lenz (Gr.), possibly relating to the lengthening days of Spring meant to Christians a period of fasting, penance, and inward looking, relating to the forty days of Christ in the wilderness (and Moses' as well). Lately this has included for some a restricted diet and the replacing of meat with fish for a lighter body to properly contemplate Christ's suffering – the road less traveled. For this, the giving up of more worldly things and habits come to mind.

We tend to bypass or ignore the time without some liturgical or personal observation which takes us out of the everyday world into the mind of Christ. Again... "If any of us would come after Him, we must deny ourselves each day, and follow His most Holy life." And we are not after an outer regimen or routine so much as an inner obedience. Nor

should it be limited to just forty days for just one period of the year.

As people went into religious service and followed a life of contemplation and labor in the life of the monastery, they observed that the mind soon wandered away from the Holy, so they instituted The *Hours* of Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Matins, and Vespers etc. as reminders of their religious vocation in brief liturgies to help the spiritual resolve.

We confirm young people as a beginning of a spiritual life, when all too often it is the beginning of the end of their "growth in grace." Later in life they may experience a "call to remembrance" in the midst of the vicissitudes and difficulties of their lives.

There was a time when I was in grad school on a particular Ash Wednesday, when I had an attitude as though I was doing God a favor by showing up. We even took seats in the very back row. The Service began with appropriate solemnity and then the hymn, "O Sacred Head Now Wounded," with the harmonization of Bach. Next the Confession of Sins from the Liturgy. By this time my mood had changed dramatically as I hung on every phrase. My spirit now was in the front before the altar. From that night on, I never took a worship service lightly, especially a Lenten Service. Ash Wednesday has always been a special time as it begins the solemn Lenten Season for me. (Also Good Friday has always been more than special.)

Seriously, Lent is where we live as Christians with its discipline of inward looking and self preparation. Only then in due humility can we even appreciate the magnificent gift of Resurrection that life is eternal – that there is no death – the secret hidden for ages, now made manifest.

Should we then adopt new behaviors for Lent? Yes, that's the whole point. Should we give something up? Yes, as I learned years ago, the first

thing to give up is a bad or indifferent attitude. Does that mean that specific things should be eliminated? Well, yes, but be sure that it is done in sincerity and can become a regular part of your life and can be replaced by something positive. That is Biblical. It is also a part of Jesus' teachings that we do our praying, even the giving (of alms), in secret and not paraded about for show.

There are two kinds of Lenten discipline. First, is it just for the Lenten Season and will you sustain this activity for the whole season? Will it be followed for a short time and then forgotten?

A second type of discipline is more long term. It may be an initiative to begin the prayer life that you have always wanted to follow for instance. Again will we follow through and maintain the practice? Perhaps it is a resolve not to overly criticize or unfairly judge others. Each of these are Biblical and quite helpful in improving our spiritual life. Again we should keep these more to ourselves only sharing – at

least at first – with someone we trust, i.e., a pastor or helpful friend.

Finally as a part of each of these above – a more regular reading of Scripture. Let it guide you, however you do your reading. If you do this already, could you increase that exercise with your favorite Bible next to your bedside?

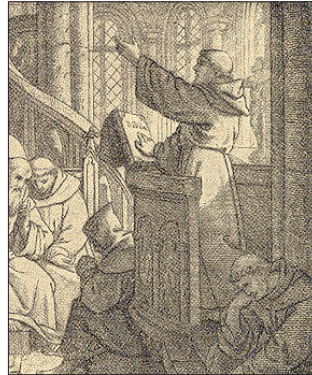
Remember the question of the Army Chaplain to General Patton? When he saw Patton's Bible on the stand beside his bed, He asked, "Why General, do you read your Bible regularly?" To which George Patton replied, "Every damn day!" (Not overly pious, but emphatic in his response.)

For Lent, take it seriously, let the Scriptures guide you within – follow **Jesus Christ as "The Way, The Truth and The Life," and so be ready for Resurrection – and remember, "If you don't bear the cross, then you can't wear the crown," as Revelation says. Without the Way of the Cross, you cannot comprehend the Crown.**

## *Luther and Holy Week*

Luther saw as improper some of the Holy Week practices of his day. In his *Deutsche Messe und Ordnung Gottesdiensts* (1526) he shares his vision of reformed observances.

"Lent, Palm Sunday, and Holy Week shall be retained, not to force anyone to fast but to preserve the Passion history and the Gospels appointed for that season. This, however, does not include the Lenten veil, throwing of palms, veiling of pictures, and whatever else there is of such tomfoolery – nor chanting the four Passions, nor preaching on the Passion for eight hours on Good Friday. Holy Week shall be like any other week save that the Passion history be explained every day for an hour throughout the week or on as many days as may be desirable, and that the sacrament be given to everyone who desires it."



## Lent Is About . . . by Scot Kinnam

**An editorial had been written to which the following response was received. "This is in no way Lutheran!" During the forty days of Lent, God's baptized people cleanse their hearts through the discipline of Lent: repentance, prayer, fasting, and almsgiving." We are saved by God's GRACE not WORKS of discipline. We cannot cleanse our own hearts." What follows is Rev. Scot Kinnam's answer -**

You are correct. Lent is not about our giving up something to somehow please God by our good work. Lent is about what Jesus Christ gave up to pay the penalty for the sins of the world – His holy and innocent life. This is the message of the Gospel.

If during Lent Christians choose to give up something or rededicate themselves to helping those in need as a way to proclaim the salvation Christ has won for all by His suffering and death, then such activities are sacrifices that glorify God. Yet as you say in your note, nothing we do through discipline, self-denial, or good works can ever earn the Lord's forgiveness or repay Him for what He accomplished for us. We are saved by grace.

Though the Scriptures do not mention Lent, it has a long-standing tradition in the Church. Though we are not certain how it developed, by A.D. 350 the forty-day fast that we now have was already part of the Church's practice in most places. Many identify the Second Festal letter of Athanasius in A.D. 330 as the earliest reference to a forty-day fast leading up to Easter.

For Christians living in the Fourth Century Lent had two major emphases: First, it was seen as a time of repentance and denial of self. All Christians were to examine their lives according to the Ten Commandments and other Christian ethical precepts and repent where necessary. They were to remember what it cost their Savior to save them. The second emphasis of Lent was as a time of instruction and preparation for those who wanted to become members of the Christian Church, i.e., the catechumens. During Lent they learned the Christian doctrine

by studying the Creed. They were led step by step through prayer and special rites toward baptism. The instruction of the catechumen led to baptism and receiving the Lord's Supper in the service on Easter.

At the time of the Reformation, some Christians wanted to eliminate Lent since Scripture didn't command it. Luther, however, urged that it be kept, for he saw Lent as an opportunity for the strengthening of faith. "Lent, Palm Sunday, and Holy Week shall be retained, not to force anyone to fast, but to preserve the Passion history and the Gospels appointed for that season" (Luther's Works AE, 53:90). Here Luther instructs that Lent should be preserved, in part, because it reminded Christians of the Passion (suffering and death) of Jesus and encouraged them to meditate upon it. However, no one should be forced to participate. It should be voluntary.

Lutherans retain Lent to this day, because we see it as a salutary outward discipline that gives Christians a wonderful opportunity for spiritual renewal. As Lent begins, we are invited to struggle against everything that leads us away from love of God and love of neighbor by exercising the discipline of Lent: repentance, fasting, prayer and works of love (almsgiving). These may become specific occasions and opportunities for spiritual renewal during this season of renewal as we come face to face with the sin that hinders our walk with Christ. Living out a discipline takes our Lord's words about self-denial seriously (Matthew 16:24). In the Lenten discipline, we come face to face with the Gospel of

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Table Talk  
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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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