

## Looking Back...at a Century of God's Grace Moving Forward...with Prayer and Resolve

In 1917 the Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan and Nebraska Synods merged to become the Joint Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin and Other States, the church body we now know as the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS). At that time, the former Wisconsin Synod split into the three districts which still exist today: Northern Wisconsin, Southeastern Wisconsin and Western Wisconsin.

In 1918 the various districts held their first district conventions. Since 2018 marks the centennial of our Southeastern Wisconsin District, we gratefully convene this year under the theme: *"Looking Back... at a Century of God's Grace; Moving Forward... with Prayer and Resolve."*

The first convention of our district was held at St. John Lutheran Church in Burlington on July 10-16, 1918. 145 delegates attended that convention and heard Professor August Pieper deliver a paper entitled: *"Die Verachtung Der Gnade is der Tod der Kirche"* ("The Despising of Grace is the Death of the Church").

His essay was printed in the 1918 district proceedings, along with these minutes from the district secretary: "In the morning sessions on Thursday, Friday and Saturday, the assembly was busy with the doctrinal discussions. Professor August Pieper of the theological seminary in Wauwatosa delivered a paper on the theme, 'The Despising of Grace is the Death of the Church.' His presentation was followed by long discussions in which individual points of the paper were especially emphasized and further amplified or substantiated. All hearers were deeply moved by the serious preaching of repentance, and the district resolved to publish the paper verbatim."

One hundred years later, this essay will once again serve as our district presentation.

A few notes regarding the transmission of this paper are in order. Approximately six decades after it was published in German, this essay was translated by Pastor James Langebartels (then a student) and several others at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary as part of the Theological German class of Professor John Jeske. Pastor Langebartels later presented this paper to a conference of the Michigan District in 1991.

This essay is included in volume two of *The Wauwatosa Theology*, pages 283-312.

The specific "readers edition" of the paper we are using can be found on the WLS essay file website. It was prepared in 2013 by Pastor Thomas Jeske in connection with a Seminary anniversary project. Slight modifications made to help a modern reader involve formatting, pronouns, punctuation, and page numbers.

May God bless us as together we look back on a century of grace... and move forward with prayer and resolve.



*we have in large measure fallen into contempt and despising of grace  
and we do not know it*

## The Despising of Grace is the Death of the Church

*August Pieper*

With this present gathering, the Wisconsin Synod enters a new phase of external development. Change grew out of need due to circumstance. Will this change serve the church among us for the saving of souls, as we ask and hope? Luther once said concerning political upheavals: “To *change* government is easy; to *improve* government is very difficult.” Applying this to ourselves, his words would read: “To change the form of the church is easy; to improve the church is difficult.” Will the recent division, which means at least external separation, tie the bond of brotherly love tighter among us? Will the unity of doctrine and of faith among us be guarded and preserved better than before? Will the eagerness for the common work, the educational establishments and missions be furthered? Will the synodical authority in its different branches correspond more to the Gospel and the salvation of souls than the previous form?

However we may answer these questions for ourselves, one thing must not be forgotten: “*The kingdom of God does not come visibly*” (Lk 17:20). It is one of the most dangerous signs of our time that we let this truth be mere theory, and seek the salvation of the church in externals and work for its outward extension. Also here we must learn to apply the word of God, “It does not, therefore, depend on man’s desire or effort, but on God’s mercy” (Ro 9:16). If the kingdom of Christ is truly to be built among us, we must constantly despair of our work and be concerned that God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, comes to work among us and through us. The Holy Spirit alone founds, builds, increases and preserves the church. God’s kingship was at

work in Peter when he, with an overflowing heart, proclaimed to his Master the testimony, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!" (Mt 16:16). Where had Peter obtained this certain knowledge and this faithful zeal? "This was not revealed to you by man, but by *my Father in heaven*" (Mt 16:17). That is the Rock on which the church is built so that the gates of hell will not overcome it. The Father of our Lord Jesus Christ must reveal his Son in us and must continue to do that again and again, or the true church remains unbuilt. That God the Father does this faithfully is according to his promise that "I will pour out my Spirit on all people" (Jl 2:28).

If only we, we Christians, who have recognized his Son, his gospel, his grace, if particularly we teachers and preachers of the Word would *not hinder* his work in us and on others! If only we would yield ourselves to him as wide-open *vessels*, into which he could pour out his grace and his Spirit in full measure! If only we would yield ourselves to him as willing and ardent *tools* for his working, to testify to the gospel in the spirit and power of Paul! However at this point we fall so very far short. *We hinder the working of the Holy Spirit among us through lukewarmness toward grace in Christ Jesus*, through spiritual laziness in the testimony of the Word. Our senses have again been clouded by the glory of this life. The grace and the kingdom of Christ and of his Father is no longer of chief importance to us. We prefer again to serve two masters and we have begun to despise the grace which saves us. Therefore the LORD has ceased to do signs and wonders of his gracious Spirit among us and his kingdom cannot come to us. We have in large measure fallen into contempt and despising of grace and we do not know it. *We are approaching the conditions which Isaiah pictures in the fifth-ninth chapter of his book.*

Our conference this year is concerned with these thoughts. May the attention of our synod be directed with all earnestness to the spiritual conditions among us, so that their disastrous significance is pointed out, and those who are willing are called to return to their first love. Concern and attention will certainly not be without fruit. Our theme reads, "The despising of grace is the death of the church."

#### Thesis 1

**Grace means that God gives a condemned world eternal life.**

Luther once said, "Grace is God's favor toward the undeserving." That is correctly said, but it is still vague. Elsewhere he describes grace more exactly: "The word *grace* is the dearest and richest word in the whole gospel." It embraces the whole of God's rescue of sinners, and gives to all that Scripture teaches the correct meaning.

**a. Grace is full grace.**

Grace, God's grace, is God's favor toward the *undeserving*, toward such as deserve no favor. We humans are worthy of no favor, of no grace. That Scripture says everywhere; that is the basic confession of all Christians. We have deserved God's favor and grace with no work, with no good intention. God's grace, however, is more than mere favor toward the undeserving. It is favor toward those who *deserve punishment*. The people toward whom God has turned his grace are openly *worthy of damnation*; they deserve the wrath of God, death and the fire of hell. This must be grasped firmly above all else if one wants to understand what grace is.

The world toward which God turns his grace is a mass of sinners. That has now become a stale declaration for us with which we scarcely consider ourselves as anything bad. We confess this without terror or fear. But we are thereby expressing the worst thing there is. Often we understand no more by this than that we are certainly not entirely perfect, afflicted with many small failings, but in spite of all these still for the most part fairly passable people and, yes, in possession of many good qualities. However, that is to be blind to our disadvantage. To be a sinner according to the Scriptures is to be a complete reprobate before the eyes of the holy God, to be rejected and damned by God. No one, not even a Christian, knows the bottomless depth of his wicked heart, the unspeakable abomination of his sins. If sin should once step into our conscience in its full loathsomeness, we would seek to annihilate ourselves in despair. Luther: "This hereditary sin is so deep and horrible a corruption of nature that no reason can understand it, but it must be *believed* from the revelation of Scripture" (*Smalcald Articles*, III, 1).

Sin is an intolerable pride, an arrogance toward God in heaven, a stubborn and deadly enmity against the *good* and mostly against the *gracious* God (Ro 8:7). Sin is the most wicked self-deification; it is the deification of the perishable creature. Sin is fratricide, impurity and

unchastity, dishonesty, insincerity, unfaithfulness. And Scripture again and again says that with this abominable soup of sinfulness, *nothing good* any longer dwells in human hearts, that “every imagination of the thoughts of his heart is *only* evil all the time” (Gn 6:5). Scripture adds that therefore mankind can do nothing good, but can only sin, pile up sins and increase them. We are corrupted therefore through pleasures into error - - even with open eyes, “knowingly and willingly,” (*Formula of Concord, Thorough Declaration, II*). Men and women hurl themselves into corruption and damnation against all the offers of grace and all the saving activity of the Holy Spirit.

### **human nature and the wrath of God**

What an awful picture of the sinful corruption of human nature Paul unravels in Romans chapters 1 and 3! The first picture concludes with the horrible words, “Although they knew God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things, but also approve of those who practice them” (Ro 1:32). And now “the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness” (Ro 1:18). Yes, the wrath of God has gushed forth from heaven over this godless world. Cursed is the earth (Ge 5:29), cursed is all our toil and labor, thoughts, meditations, endeavors, sleeping and waking, coming and going, all our life. And not merely this temporal life, but also our eternal life! A life, perhaps valuable in itself, has only been toil and labor lived in vain. Afterward the eternal night grasps us, the second death, into which no ray of consolation and comfort any longer penetrates; the all-consuming fire of the wrath of God rages unmitigated, with the result that weeping and grinding of teeth is without end.

### **human nature and the grace of God**

Toward this so horribly godless, condemned world, which previously lay under his wrath and curse, God turns his grace. This is grace: *God has mercy on such horribly wicked, cursed and condemned people*. What an inconceivable thing! Martin Luther once asked, (*Saemmtliche Schriften, XI, 1099, 17*):

What is the world other than a great heap of such people who neither trust God, nor fear him, nor love him, nor praise him, nor thank him? They misuse all creatures, blaspheme his name, despise his Word. Moreover, they are disobedient murderers, adulterers, thieves and scoundrels, liars, traitors, full of unfaithfulness and all wicked malice. In short, they are transgressors of all commands and in all things refractory and rebellious; they depend on the enemy of God, the devil himself.

And on the same text, Jn 3:16-21, (SS, XIII (b), 2086):

If I were God, I would wish to and I would give the world hellish fire on their heads. That *I* would do. But what does *God* do? Instead of his wrath, which the world has full well deserved, he has loved the world, and in such a superabundant and inconceivable manner that he gave His only Son for the world, his worst enemies.

Here we have *the source of grace: the love of God*. The grace of God is not that which one in the world calls gracious condescension. That can be very refined and cold. God's grace is filled and driven by very strong feeling - - by love. Luther correctly says, "There can be no higher emotion through which God can wholly pour himself out than love," and, "There can be no higher Lover in heaven or on earth than God." The love of God is an inexpressible, ardently-compelling *yearning to give* to the worthless and condemned world both temporal and eternal happiness and *life*.

He *testifies* to us of this yearning not only *generally* in the Scriptures, that he does not want our death, our going to perdition, that he would freely save all, all lost sinners, that Christ calls to us with outstretched, loving arms, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will refresh you and give you rest for your souls." But he also, so to speak, sets heaven and earth in motion, turns the whole world upside down, and accordingly in all eternity has sought and investigated *in what way* he might procure our blessedness. Grace is thus no mere sentiment in God's heart, which takes place *within* him, but unending *energy, life, action toward the outside*,

*deed*. It works and works and does not rest until it has reached its goal, that is, procured the deliverance of the world of sinners.

*“By grace God’s Son, our only Savior, came down to earth to bear our sin” (The Lutheran Hymnal, 373).* That is God’s great act of grace, sprung from His unending love for sinners, that he gave his only-begotten Son for the reconciliation of the whole world, for the cancellation of their guilt, for the forgiveness of their sins. Dr. Luther, again on John 3:16, remarks that in and with Christ, God has given to us not merely *a part of his goodness, but all that he has*, his highest and best, wholly himself. He could not give more, better or higher, since he doesn’t have it. This is the same thing that Paul says, “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all - - how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us *all things?*” (Ro 8:32). With this “all,” however, is not meant all temporal and earthly goods, although all that, too, is given to us with Christ. Rather, the apostle refers first of all to those things which are necessary for our eternal happiness, so that we can be divinely certain of the basis of this great gift of our eternal forgiveness and life.

### **the sinful world is actually absolved**

It is in fact so, although our reason calculates it otherwise. With the giving of Christ to the world, the world has been given all the salvation there is, every part of it - - in so far as God’s activity is taken into consideration. Through Christ the whole world - - all who are sinners on earth - - has been completely *redeemed* from sin, from all sins without exception, and has been *reconciled to God*. The debt has been paid in full and “the righteousness which avails before God” has been obtained for all without any exception and has already been given to his own. The sins of all human beings actually have already been forgiven. Scripture says expressly that in Christ we have reconciliation through his blood, namely, *the forgiveness of sins* (Cl 1:14; Ep 1:7). Christ’s redemption is the *actual forgiveness* of the guilt of all sins.

Dr. Walther has left us a sermon on the gospel for Easter with the theme, “The Resurrection of Christ from the Dead is the Actual Absolution of the Whole Sinful World” (*Lutherische Brosamen*, p 138-147). This sermon is one of the most magnificent he delivered and proves that he was a



theologian of the highest rank. It shows that he correctly understood the doctrine of grace, namely, that grace alone has fully and completely accomplished our rescue without our own cooperation or conduct. *It is so.*

When God, the Judge of all humanity, awakened Jesus Christ our Substitute from the dead and thereby absolved *him* from all the guilt and punishment he had taken on himself, he also at the same time acquitted us, yes truly *us*, whose guilt he had taken on himself, from all the guilt and punishment of our sins.

### **the gospel proclaimed delivers grace**

And *the gospel*, the preaching of Christ and his deed, *is the literal forgiveness of sins*. God has sent the gospel into the entire world. It belongs among the weightiest errors of the papacy and of almost all sects, that they do not regard the Word, Baptism and the Lord's Supper as means of grace in the true sense of the word, but as mere talking and signs that there is a grace, that this is to be had under certain conditions, and instructions on how one can attain the grace earned and laid aside by Christ. However, the gospel is more than such an instruction, *it is itself the absolution*, the words spoken by God himself, "Your sins are forgiven!"

When our Lord Christ sent his disciples out into the world with the command, "Preach the gospel to every creature," he was actually saying, "Proclaim the forgiveness of sins, absolution, to all human beings!" He said to his disciples after the resurrection, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be *preached* in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (Lk 24:46-47). Peter expressly explains baptism as "baptism for the forgiveness of sins," i.e. that which has, brings and gives forgiveness in itself (Ac 2:38). Ananias said to Paul, "Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away" (Ac 22:16). The catechism says of baptism, "It works forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe, as the words and promises of God declare." On the Lord's Supper, the catechism teaches, in opposition to all the Reformed and to the Roman church, that "through these words *for you* we receive forgiveness of sins, life and salvation in this sacrament." The gospel is no mere word, but spirit

and life, the power and *working* of God. Just as with the word of the Lord to the paralyzed man, “Your sins are forgiven,” so every time. Every time, God Himself speaks and forgives in fact. “For it will not be *you* speaking, but *the Spirit of your Father* speaking through you” (Mt 10:20).

With Christ’s redemption, *also the Holy Spirit was acquired and given to the world*. In explanation of the miracle of Pentecost, Peter said, “This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel, ‘In the last days, God says, I will pour out My Spirit on *all* people’” (Ac 2:16-17). It does not merely say that he would *acquire* the Spirit for all flesh, but that He would *pour out* the Spirit on all people. It is indeed so, that after the exaltation of Christ, God actually poured out on all people the Spirit which had been acquired through the work of Christ. The gospel itself, which is preached to all the world, is first the creation and working of the Holy Spirit, whom the Lord acquired. Further, the Spirit is forever bound to this Word, as the Lord says, “The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life” (Jn 6:63). Wherever the gospel is preached, there also the Spirit is poured out on the hearers.

**not all are converted, yet the word is always effective**

Of course it doesn’t always happen that all the hearers are converted through it, as with Peter’s sermon in Jerusalem or in Cornelius’ house. It does happen, however, that everyone who really hears the Word perceives in his heart the drawing of the Holy Spirit, his work toward conversion and sanctification. Both preacher and hearer must grasp this firmly in their hearts. The preached word - - or even the read word - - is never, never dead and ineffective. The Holy Spirit always, and in all circumstances, works through that Word on all who hear the Word for repentance, for knowledge of sins, for faith, for comfort, for sanctification, for perfection.

That is already the case with the law of God. The law is no empty talk, but as Jeremiah says, “Is not my Word like fire, declares the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?” (Je 23:29). Whoever wants to can explain this passage (and He 4:12) about the Word of God in general, or about the gospel in specific.

Both kinds of God's Word, even *all of God's Word, is the active God himself*; for God is no man of mere words, but a man of action. "Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?" (Nu 23:19). Wherever the law is preached, there the Spirit of God is present who thereby convicts the hearers of their sin so that they are convinced in their consciences. The law always and everywhere works knowledge of sin (Ro 3:20). The gospel always and everywhere works knowledge of salvation, faith, rebirth, conversion, sanctification. It is never without this working. That with many this working does not take effect, that with them it doesn't lead to a personal knowledge of sin and forgiveness, to faith, conversion, sanctification and perfection, that is because they smother and strangle the working of the Spirit in their hearts. With what joy ought that fill us preachers to preach and speak the Word of God, be it law or gospel, where it is necessary and needed! With what an aversion ought that Word fill us hearers, so that we do not set up a hindrance against the working of the Spirit through that Word! With what care and fear ought we to hear the Word so that we let it work in us all, everything that Word says to us! "Do not be deceived; God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows" (Ga 6:7-8; Ps 119). More about this later.

God has neglected nothing for our comfort and joy. He has given us in and with Christ everything (everything!) that is necessary and useful for our life under his kingship. The apostle Paul develops this especially in three passages (Ro 8:28f; Ep 1:3f; Cl 1:4-5) In all these passages, he speaks from the point of view of Christians upon whom grace has effectively prevailed for God's blessing, who now possess faith and love. In each passage, he emphasizes election in Christ as embracing the whole arc of God's saving work on our behalf:

### **fullness in christ: romans**

In Romans, he traces back to Christ our calling, our enlightening and conversion through the Word, our righteousness and our glorification, i.e., our perfecting in *this* world and our coronation in *that* world, when he says, "If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all - - how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us *all* things?" (Ro 8:31-32).

## **fullness in christ: ephesians**

And what a fullness of spiritual blessings *in the heavenly realms* it is, which he in Christ showers upon us in Ephesians! He has *chosen* us in him before the creation of the world, and *predestined* us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ; in him we have *redemption* through his blood, namely the *forgiveness of sins*; he *made known* to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ; through him we have also *obtained an inheritance*; in faith we partake of the heavenly inheritance; through him we also have *been marked* with the Holy Spirit as with the seal of our final redemption and glorification above.

## **fullness in christ: colossians**

Through him he has *qualified* us, made us *fully prepared* to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light (Cl 1:12), who has *rescued* us from the dominion of darkness and *brought us into the kingdom of the Son He loves*, after we have received through *him* redemption through his blood, namely the forgiveness of sins, who is the image of the invisible God, as God was pleased to have *all his saving fullness dwell* in his Son.

It was for this reason that John, as one enraptured, says of Jesus, "We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth ... from the fullness of His grace we have received *one blessing after another (Gnade um Gnade)*" (Jn 1:14, 16).

**b. Grace is not only *fullness of grace*,  
but also *entire grace, only grace, nothing but grace*,  
*free grace, saving grace*.**

### **1. God wants nothing in advance from you for his grace**

He places no condition on any step of his saving giving and working. He formed his plan of deliverance in Christ before the foundation of the world was laid, also for you and me, before we were, thus also before we could do anything for our blessedness. He chose us in Christ for blessedness without us. He redeemed us through Christ, without first asking for our

permission. He has blotted out the guilt of our sins, reconciled us with himself and struck out all sins and absolved us from them, before we could ask him about it. He has sent his Spirit into the world, created the gospel, and had it revealed and proclaimed in all the world, without first coming to an understanding with us as to whether that was proper in our eyes.

We cannot hinder his knocking with his Spirit and Word on our hearts, his shaking the foundations of our hearts with his thunder, his convicting us of sin, of righteousness and of judgment, of our redemption in Christ. We can indeed frustrate *the intended result* of the working of the Spirit, namely our conversion, sanctification and perfection, through our malice. No man, however, can hinder *the working itself* - - the teaching, converting, enlightening, demonstrating, the threatening and violent shaking, the alluring and exciting, persuading and urging of the Holy Spirit through the Word to faith, conversion, sanctification, preservation and perfecting in faith.

God certainly works repentance and faith in us, however, without us, that is, without our cooperation. We only resist, even knowingly and willingly (*FC, TD, II, Triglotta 889*) so that, after we are converted, we have to confess with Jeremiah, "You overpowered me and prevailed" (Je 20:7). When the Formula of Concord says that we can cooperate after the Holy Spirit has begun his work in us, it at the same time stresses that is not to be understood "that the converted man cooperates with the Holy Spirit in the manner as when two horses together draw a wagon, but that we can do this *not* out of natural powers, *but only* out of the new powers and gifts given by the Holy Spirit when he began our conversion. On no step in the acquisition of forgiveness does man work with God even the least from his own powers; it is all, from beginning to blessed end, a gift and working of God, *only* grace.

## **2. and it is free, saving grace**

God's grace has no motive outside himself. It is, were that not an unthinkable thought, as our dogmaticians are accustomed to speak of God, "*causa sui*," the cause of itself. By that we would say that there is nothing in the sinner which would move God to a demonstration of grace. God would remain perfect and irreproachable, even if he did not pardon one single sinner, if he had

left us all in our self-chosen guilt and damnation. Scripture attributes grace to the love and mercy of God (Jn 3:11; Mt 18:33; Ro 9:16).

On the one hand the love and mercy of God have no other basis than that God is so constituted. On the other hand, the love and mercy of God do not yet move him to blot out and forgive sins, and to convert.

Only one thing is given to us in the Scriptures now and then, especially in Isaiah, as the motive of grace: the self-glorification of God before his creatures (although it is to be said that even without the demonstration of grace, he was perfectly glorious and could glorify himself). Scripture says, "This people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise. Yet you have not called upon me, O Jacob, you have not wearied yourselves for me, O Israel. You have not brought me sheep for burnt offerings ... you have not brought any fragrant calamus for me, or lavished on me the fat of your sacrifices. But you have burdened me with your sins and wearied me with your offenses. I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, *for my own sake*, and remembers your sins no more" (Is 43:21-25). And, "For *my own name's sake* I delay my wrath; for *the sake of my praise* I hold it back from you, so as not to cut you off ... *for my own sake, for my own sake, I do this. How can I let myself be defamed? I will not yield my glory to another*" (Is 48:9, 11).

### **God's greatest honor: to be known as gracious**

God's greatest honor is not so much his might and his wisdom, as much more his grace. This is his true heart, his innermost being, which he wants his creatures to know. Moses, the man of God, asks, "Show me *your glory*" (Ex 33:18). And God said, "I will cause all *my goodness* to pass in front on you, and I will proclaim *my name* in your presence." And then when the LORD passed before Moses' face, he proclaimed in this way, "*The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished*" (Ex 34:6-7).

Therefore Micah cries out, as an echo of this sermon of God, "Who is a God like you, who

pardons sin and forgives the transgressions of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy" (Mi 7:18). The grace of God is pure good-will, the free decision of God. He wanted to be gracious, therefore he is gracious. Isaiah says, "Yet it was the LORD's *will* to crush him and cause him to suffer" (Is 53:10). There in the Hebrew it reads, "It pleased the LORD"; in the New Testament this is translated *eudokein, eudokia* (1 Co 1:21, Lk 12:32), "Your Father has been pleased." It *pleased* him to do so.

### **God's greatest honor: to distribute grace**

Grace *by definition* is free and saving; it is also free and saving according to *its distribution*. The LORD promised that he himself would proclaim his goodness before Moses; he adds as the basis, "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion" (Ex 33:19). Paul (Ro 9) cites this as the basis for the election of Jacob in place of Esau, and for the rejection of the complaint against God that he deals arbitrarily and unjustly. Paul adds, "It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy" (Ro 9:16). After the LORD spoke about Pharaoh's hardness, he explained, "Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden" (Ro 9:18). If the old Adam rebels against that, Paul answers, "But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?' Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?" (Ro 9:20-21).

That God has from the beginning chosen us Christians, yes us, our persons, you and me, for blessedness, in the sanctification of the Spirit and in the belief of the truth, that has its foundation not in that God had seen something good, something better in us than in others. There was no difference. This pleased God, it was his will and purpose to do so. So very freely and sovereignly does God distribute his grace among sinners that we, according to our human reason, always think that God is indeed caprice and partiality. However, it is no human caprice, it is God's majesty, which does not want us self-righteous and pretentious Pharisees to justify ourselves, but rather wants to be worshiped in humility, in fear and trembling. "He does

as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: 'What have you done?'" (Dn 4:35).

This doctrine of the free, majestic election of God in the distribution of his grace does not abolish the perfection and universality of grace. Election stands next to grace and in it, with it, at the same time to be believed and worshipped - - whether our reason can fit it in or not. This seems like abasement, however, to our old Adam. He ought to learn from this that we have no claim on grace, that we ought to doubt ourselves. We ought to learn that it lies not with our willing and running, but with God's mercy, to whom we ought to flee in Christ. This is a rich comfort for all doubting and humbled Christians, so that they would learn to throw themselves wholly and certainly and alone on the grace and mercy of God. He has taken their blessedness entirely and certainly out of their hands and has laid it in the faithful hands of our Lord Christ, where it is well preserved, so that no one can snatch it from his hands (Jn 10:28-29). Scripture says, "It is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Pp 2:13). From this, however, the apostle does not conclude: "Therefore don't trouble yourselves about your status before God" - - the old Adam reaches that conclusion - - but, "Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling" (Pp 2:12). That is remarkable logic, peculiar logic; it is, however, God's logic.

## Thesis 2

### **To despise grace means to regard the world higher than grace.**

We take the word "despise" here not in the narrow sense of complete disregard and resolute rejection of grace, but in the wide sense of contempt. This is the sin and the danger of modern Christianity.

#### **a. how high does grace demand to be regarded?**

The gospel of grace is essentially God's message of peace and joy to the world, that message which alone truly preaches and creates true heartfelt happiness, true peace, the peace of God, and true joy, blessed joy, the joy of heaven. Therefore the Christmas angel cries, "I bring you good news of great joy" (Lk 2:10). Therefore we read that wherever sinners come to a



knowledge of grace, this heavenly joy, this peace of God seizes and fills their hearts. The crowd of the first Christians in Jerusalem praised God with glad and sincere hearts (Ac 2:46). That is according to Jesus' promise, given to the disciples (Jn 14-17), that he would send them the true Comforter, the Holy Spirit. The kingdom of heaven is like a man who finds a treasure hidden in a field, the one good pearl, and now for joy sells everything he owns to claim his find (Mt 13:44-46). The kingdom of God is peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Ro 14:17). Therefore the Lord praises as blessed the eyes which see him and the ears which hear him (Lk 10:23), and says to his disciples, "However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven" (Lk 10:20).

Paul, full of godly joy, rejoices over grace: "What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son ... who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? ... who is he that condemns? ... who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" (Ro 8:31-35). For he knows on whom he believes, and he is certain that nothing can separate him from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Therefore he writes to the Philippians, "Rejoice in the Lord always, I will say it again: Rejoice!" (Pp 4:4). That which will be our share in heaven, inexpressible fullness and completeness, is already our possession here if only in weakness: *to be filled with true, blessed joy over grace*. And so very great and strong is this joy that it makes all the joy of this earth, even the purely natural and un sinful joy, appear to us to be stale and empty. Asaph sings, "Whom have I in heaven but you? And being with you, I desire nothing on earth" (Ps 73:25). The church echoes him:

Earth has no pleasure I would share,  
yea, heaven itself were void and bare  
if *Thou*, Lord, were not near me (TLH 429).

Yes, the joy over grace sweetens for the Christian all the suffering of this time, so that we too are sorrowful according to the flesh, yet always rejoicing. We have nothing yet possess everything (2 Co 6:10); we mourn as if we did not (1 Co 7:29). With Paul, even in great trouble, we are satisfied with grace, because his power is made perfect in weakness (2 Co 12:9). If both our body

and soul faint, nevertheless the God of grace is always the comfort of our hearts and our portion (Ps 73:26).

## **b. joy, then peace**

May the peace of God which transcends all understanding, keep the hearts of Christians surrounded, so that they, freed from all fear of the mighty ones of this world, even in the worst rage of their enemies may look forward to the future peacefully. The Lord has promised this peace to his own (Jn 14:27). He protected his disciples, when he sent them as sheep among wolves, with peace, joy, courage and boldness. From this peace of God in the soul, David composed so many psalms of a) comfort and b) defiance (*unser Trost und Trotz*). Paul wrote his hymn in Romans 8 (v 28-39) and the Christian martyrs went peacefully into very painful deaths. *That is the Christians' portion if grace, God's gracious Word, is living and powerful in them.*

There was a time in American church history when the spirit of joy and peace was very evident. And each one who consciously comes to a knowledge of grace knows how to say something about this spirit of joy and of the peace of God. Where is this spirit today among us in a perceptible measure? Where is the *inner joy*, the *deep blessedness* in the certainty of grace? Where is the basic indifference, defiance, to the possessions, honors and joys of this world and toward the suffering of this time? Tears flow from the weariness of our flesh; where is the laughter among them? Where is the peace from which the twenty-third psalm was spoken? Where is the glory of Paul, "Who shall separate us from the love of God?" Where the defiance of Luther: "Though devils all the world should fill, all eager to devour us, we tremble not, we fear no ill, they shall not overpower us?"

We can repeat it mechanically with full, understanding agreement, but we no longer find deep in the heart what David found (Psalm 119):

"Oh, how I love your law (*Torah*, "teaching"). I meditate on it all day long" (v 97)

"The law from your mouth is more precious to me than thousands of pieces of silver and gold" (v 72).

“How sweet are your promises to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth” (v 103).

“Your statutes are my delight” (v 24).

“I rejoice in your promise like one who finds great spoil” (v 162).

### **boredom with joy and peace**

We confess only that grace and God’s gracious Word already taste very old and flat and stale to us, that often a boredom with grace, a satiety with grace overtakes us, so that we are not far from a loathing for “this miserable food” (Nu 21:5).

To a great extent, the world has entered into our hearts with its pleasures. The property and honor and good living of the world again make us happy, while affliction troubles our hearts and faces. We flee the cross, and no longer regard it as pure joy and honor and blessing to suffer for the sake of the gospel of grace. At the same time, our peace, our rest, comfort and defiance against the enemies of the church have given way to miserable fear and timid trepidation. What little accusation, for fear and care about our physical well-being, can drive us to disloyalty! We have now praised the genuine Lutheranism, the pure doctrine, the Lutheran orthodoxy, as the Pharisees did their righteousness. Where is something of Martin Luther’s joy and peace and defiance against the mob and the princes, against the world and the devil?

### **personal regret**

If we have a pure conscience toward God, why did we give up, for mere fear of the rabble, the German language in our schools, on which - - for us - - so much of grace depends? Why do dozens of formerly German congregations jump head over heels into English, to the unspeakable injury of the church, even though the government hasn’t commanded it? Why, if they have a good conscience, do whole Lutheran synods proclaim their loyalty to political conventions and direct addresses expressing fidelity to the president and to governors? Why do they resent taking part in the free-will war subsidy as a part of the obedience to government which God demands, while the government itself openly forbids all subscription from

compulsion, threatening or intimidation and instead turns to the free-will sacrificial joy of the citizens? Why all of this, if we have a good conscience before God? Such unsteadfastness can only bring either a bad conscience, which flees when no one pursues it, or weak faith, which has lost peace, comfort, courage and defiance, the anchor of certainty in God's protection and provision. We can no longer endure a cross or be free to confess the faith of our heart. We become like feeble, timid reeds which are blown here and there in the wind.

### **hunger and thirst for grace**

Our Lord says, "Blessed are those who *hunger and thirst* for righteousness, for they will be filled" (Mt 5:6). Thus he sets forth hunger and thirst for grace as the characteristic of a true and basic esteem for grace. A Christian heart ought to never have enough of grace. Satisfaction occurs *here on earth* only in part, only *in that life* completely. If Christian hearts have a correct, healthy knowledge of grace, then they can never get enough of grace; the more they have of it, the more they want to have of it. Each new piece of knowledge, each new comfort, each new strength which it drinks from the spring of grace awakes in them the thirst for still more. And Scripture admonishes, "Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation" (1 Pe 2:2). Paul says, "Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom" (Cl 3:16). The Lord himself urges, "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life" (Jn 5:39). "Seek first," that is, only and alone, "his kingdom and his righteousness" (Mt 6:33).

Therefore Paul says of himself, "Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me ... forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. All of us who are mature should take such a view of things" (Pp 3:12-15). That is the normal Christian condition: hunger and thirst for grace, for God's gracious Word, because it alone heals the wound which burns eternally, sin; because it alone fills the emptiness in our hearts, which originated after the fall when God withdrew from us; because here on earth there is no real good, for everything, everything earthly, is frivolous.

Because the satisfaction with grace in this life is not perfect (nevertheless we have tasted the strengths of the coming world and have received the first fruits of the Spirit, which are the pledge of our final redemption), there is in the upright Christian heart an *eternal longing after the condition of perfection*, when grace will be transformed into glory. All saints have at some time implored and sighed with Jacob, "I look for your deliverance O Lord" (Gn 49:18), with David, "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?" (Ps 42:1-2) and with Paul, "I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far" (Pp 1:23). What upright Christian, who knows grace and has experienced the deceit of this life, the suffering of this time even only for a certain extent, does not long for the redemption of his body, for redemption from the body of this death and of sin - - for that place, where, as Paul Gerhardt says, "In yonder home doth flourish my heritage, my lot" (TLH 528). The older we become, the more we ought inwardly to sigh,

My longing is for heaven

there I would like to be.

The world I have forsaken

in its entirety.

The longer I inhabit

the earth so full of woe,

the less joy I inherit

which makes my spirit grow (*Evangelische-Lutherische Gesangbuch* 646).

There still my thoughts are dwelling,

'tis there I long to be.

Come, Lord, and call thy servant

to blessedness with thee.

Come, bid my toils be ended,

let all my wanderings cease;

call from the wayside lodging

to thy sweet home of peace (TLH 586).

This hunger and thirst for grace, this longing for the homeland above, is the true nature of a Christian.

### **hunger and thirst for pleasure**

But how little of that is to be found at the present time in Christendom, even among us who are older! How we have again today become so well-liked by the world! We Christians too, in the course of time, have become well-to-do. And what is there any more that doesn't give the opportunity for earning money? Luther saw it in his day, "The puppy has learned to eat little pieces of leather" (no longer content with a breast or a bone, he goes after his master's shoes), and we join in his chase, as much as we can, or are annoyed if we can't. To a great extent, money and riches have captured the place of grace, of the kingdom of heaven, among us.

Today it is especially our young who run after the pleasures and lusts of the world, after excitement of the senses. The movie theater, urban or rural, has become the pleasure-palace for Christians, too. The lust for sex - - characteristic sin of the world - - gains ground like a flood also among Christians. This seeking after pleasure rages in a hundred forms among us; we are all infected by it, for we do not find anything in it other than natural joy for life. Yes, today everyone wants to *live* and make the best possible out of life. No longer does anyone want to *die*, no one desires to die before it is necessary, and even then doesn't want to leave the world and come to heaven. "First I will enjoy this world. If I become tired of it, then I will be converted; God will certainly have mercy on me."

How many love to take a drive in the country on a summer Sunday, but forget about church! With how little true desire for grace and for God's saving Word of grace in Christ, for the delight of the soul, do our people go to church? How few to the Sacrament? Where today is the searching the Scriptures, or even family devotions, not to mention the unceasing private prayer of our Christians?

### **public minister: special temptation, special guilt**

And we pastors and teachers of the Word? We are to a great extent ourselves guilty that our people don't come to church with pure desire and love - - *through the tediousness of our sermons*. It is not always a boredom with God's Word, but often an entirely natural boredom with our commonplace, tired and stale boomings from the pulpit. Sunday after Sunday, year in, year out, our hearers have to always hear the same trite phrases from us, which they've already heard a thousand times. They hear and learn nothing new. We keep them at the same level of knowledge as twenty years ago. Our sermon is an eternal reviewing of the theology we learned in school, yet Jesus the master teacher says, "Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old" (Mt 13:52).

Why, then, is the sermon so boring? Just because you lack *freshness*. It is day-old bread, *not thoroughly studied anew*. The teacher of the law expounds only the old, what he knew long ago and what his hearers also knew long ago. The preacher has not properly studied, he has not *found* anything new, therefore he can give nothing new. If he had studied with the greatest diligence, with prayer and supplication of the Holy Spirit, with the fear and trembling, then he would have found something new to preach. The new thing would have so interested the speaker that he would have expounded it with great interest. If the preacher's foremost interest is for new knowledge from God, then he also gains the attention of his spiritually hungry hearers. As a rule, *the pastor who complains about the lack of interest in his hearers condemns himself*; he is a tedious pastor - - one who doesn't study.

I don't believe that there are pastors among us who as a rule begin their sermon on Saturday night, or who as a rule chatter away *ex tempore*. The truth is, many are so overburdened with work that they cannot devote the necessary time to the sermon. To be pitied are pastors who are very industrious and burning in the Spirit, but must, so to speak, steal the time for studying. The whole week they supervise in the school, hold two or three confirmation classes and a Bible class, lead the choir, the young people's society and the dear ladies group (*den lieben Frauenverein*), take care of paying the bills and the new building that's under construction and in addition preach German and English, see to the private care of souls and ought to do still other

things. *They never become good preachers, because they can't study.* In time they become polished chatterers. No one can always give out money if he doesn't ever take in money.

Only he who industriously, continuously and earnestly studies further, can become full of knowledge and of the Holy Spirit, so certainly are grace and the Spirit bound to the Word, since preaching comes from the Word (Ro 10:17). Here even the greatest natural gifts don't help; *here only one thing helps: "Search the Scriptures!"* If the congregations want to have capable preachers, then they must not overburden them with other work. All schools, high as well as elementary, complain about their students' aversion to earnest, diligent study. It has also taken possession of those who no longer sit in school; with pastors and teachers, the cause is the same as with youth. *The lack of eagerness for the pure spiritual milk of grace, the excessive interest in the things of the temporal life; they want to have rest and ease, good days.* And it will become no better with us until we recognize this as a part of despising the grace of Christ and repent of it from the heart.

**sign of true esteem for grace: thankfulness**

Grace itself unfailingly works this in every heart which has known it: joy, peace, thankfulness. Whoever has known from what misery God has saved them, what deliverance God has given them, would have to be the very embodiment of all wickedness if they did not now want from their whole heart to repay God. The Lord cries out lamenting, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine?" (Lk 17:17) Moses accused his people, "They have acted corruptly toward Him; to their shame they are no longer his children, but a warped and crooked generation. Is this the way you repay the Lord, you foolish and unwise people? Is he not your Father, your Creator, who made you and formed you as His own people?" (Dt 32:5-6). Judas' betrayal is therefore a very despicable and abominable sin because it was such horrible unthankfulness.

Gratitude, only this one thing, gratitude, does God await from us for the inexpressible salvation which He has freely thrown into our lap. "Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good; His love endures forever" (Ps 106; 107). God wants to receive gratitude from us for His inexpressible gift. Where will we flee from him if we repay such blessedness with ingratitude? It would be



more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah on Judgment Day than for us. David proclaims, "How can I repay the Lord for all his goodness to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord. I will fulfill my vows to the Lord in the presence of all His people" (Ps 116:12-14). The whole psalter is only one large psalm of thanksgiving. And Paul admonishes, "Giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves" (Cl 1:12-13).

Now we do speak and sing of the grace of the Lord with our mouths, especially officially in the public worship service. But where is our deep feeling of thankfulness, which is the important thing for God, who looks at the heart? Where is the fresh zeal for thanksgiving at every new awareness of our rescue in Christ, about which speech overflows because the heart is so full?

It's for this reason that our synod lacks *thankfulness in deed*. If there is a church which ought to be rich in good works, in works of thankfulness for grace, it is the Lutheran, since in no other church is grace preached in such purity and fullness as among us. *Where are the works?* Not that there aren't any, but that they are so few - - this we have to confess to our shame.

### **thankfulness and my offering**

Every admonition to sanctification in the Scriptures bases itself on the mercy which is ours in the grace of Christ and calls our thankfulness and mutual love toward God into existence. Thankfulness is the most basic moral principle of all Christian morality. And *that* Scripture demands, that we "offer our *bodies* as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God" (Ro 12:1). Thus not merely a little money for the church, or here and there a crumb for our neighbor's need, but God wants to have our *bodies* as thanks for the grace which He has given to us; the bodies *together with the souls* totally. "I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are *Mine!*" (Is 43:1). "Who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death and from the power of the devil ... *that I should be his own*, and live under him in his kingdom and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness." You are *mine*, not only through creation and preservation, but above all through

your redemption, through grace, *mine* with body and soul, wife and child, possessions and goods, with your spiritual and physical goods, with business and farm, with wages and profit.

What then do we willingly give God as a thank offering? Ah, the unthankful and damned cash in the pockets of Christians who two or three times a week give out for a treat or a show! Ah, the miserable, unthankful annual church offering from people who annually spend five times as much or more for a car or luxury of another kind, while the kingdom of God in church, school and mission suffers bitter need! What unthankfulness for the gospel in circumstances where pastors and teachers are fed on hired-workers' wages, while the members of the congregation are well-to-do and even rich. Isn't it written, "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain" (Dt 25:4). "Is it about oxen that God is concerned? Surely he says this for us, doesn't he?" (1 Co 9:9-10). "If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you?" (1 Co 9:11). "The hard-working farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crops" (2 Ti 2:6).

We certainly can't give *God* in heaven any of our possessions and goods. "If I were hungry I would not tell you, for the world is mine, and all that is in it" (Ps 50:12). "Whatever you did for *one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me*" (Mt 25:40). "He who listens to you listens to me, and he who rejects you rejects me" (Lk 10:16). "He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me. Anyone who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward ... and if anyone gives a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward" (Mt 10:40-42). It is indeed true: we can never sufficiently thank God and those who teach his Word. Why then do church and school, congregational schools and high schools, colleges and seminaries, traveling preacher and missions, above all the funds for aged preachers and teachers and their widows and orphans suffer continual need, while the good God has showered us with riches, also in earthly things? It is the fault of the abominable unthankfulness for grace and for the gospel.

And if we do not possess enough spiritual power and passion to give something considerable of our overflowing money for God's kingdom, how will we be able with Hannah to offer our

Samuel for service in Christ's kingdom? Why did we this year have fourteen pastoral candidates for twenty-eight calls? That is unthankfulness toward grace, for which we don't want to bring any more offerings. Is this how you thank your God, you Lutheran fools? In that case God could very well take your possessions and sons for the war [World War I] and you won't know if you will get them back again! Ah, how far has modern Christianity advanced in the despising of grace! If we don't repent in time, and begin anew, then God's final wrath cannot hold off for long.

### **sinful security**

I mention one other place where our despising of grace clearly appears. That is the *carnal certainty* of modern Christianity.

*Paul* writes to the Philippians, "*Work out your salvation with fear and trembling*" (Pp 2:12).

*Peter* admonishes, "*Live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear*" (1 Pe 1:17).

*Jesus* himself reminds, "*Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation*" (Mk 14:38). "*What I say to you, I say to everyone: Watch!*" (Mk 13:37).

Yes, so it is with the souls of all who esteem grace above all else. For all depends on possessing grace. No grace, no treasure! However, we carry this treasure in earthly, breakable jars (2 Co 4:7). We cannot do anything of ourselves to keep it or to acquire it again. For Paul says, "It is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Pp 2:13). God may withdraw grace and gracious Word from you today or tomorrow if you deal with it in an unworthy manner. Peter says, "You call on a Father who judges each man's work impartially" (1 Pe 1:17).

Our Lord bases his admonition on this: "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Mk 14:38). The flesh always wants the wrong way, and before we know it, we have again become entangled in the way of the world, or we've fallen into this or that coarse sin. Especially today the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. "Small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it" (Mt 7:14). Therefore David says in

one place, "Though I constantly take my life in my hands, I will not forget your law," (Ps 119:109) and in another place, "My flesh trembles in fear of you; I stand in awe of your laws" (Ps 119:120). Paul says that his life was conflicts on the outside, fears within (2 Co 7:5). And as an apostle, he continually carried on his heart his concern for all the churches.

Christians are certain of their blessed status through faith in the faithfulness of God. The certainty of faith, however, is not carnal security and carelessness. Rather, no matter how paradoxical it may sound, it is incessantly concerned to possess and treasure grace, lest someone steal it. They anxiously hold on to what they have, so that no one may take their crown (Re 3:11). In war it's before our eyes: that side has lost which does not guard its gains with uninterrupted vigilance against the enemy. Do we Christians today so guard, watch and protect our great treasure, grace and peace?

Nothing is so hard to find today in Christendom as this anxious care for the protection of grace, the working out of salvation with fear and trembling. It appears to human eyes as if every congregational member were certain of his God's blessing and happy in his faith. Generally, where things outwardly are running smoothly, there is happiness, joking and laughing! If only it were *spiritual*! But it is joy according to human nature and laughter according to human nature. How much the happiness of modern Christianity is bound up with frivolity, with loose words and foolishness and light joking! One who can't swim doesn't go in deep water. Today Christianity is so bound up with the world in commerce and joins in their pleasures and their assemblies so unhesitatingly as if these offered no danger whatsoever for the faith. We plunge ourselves unnecessarily into the water of temptation to unbelief, false belief, sin and shame.

"Do not be yoked together with unbelievers ... come out from them and be separate, says the Lord" (2 Co 6:14, 17). That today is a sermon preached in vain for most of our congregational members. Our Christians believe they are all-powerful and everything is profitable for them; they can so fittingly join in everything without damage, while they daily are compromised without noticing it. The Lord Jesus had to admonish, "Watch and pray!" But where today is even family prayer still properly in fashion, to say nothing of the prayer in your room or the praying continually? What spiritual carelessness and carnal certainty do so many of our

parents show concerning the precious souls of their children, concerning their children's association with the world: their work, their use of their free time, especially the evening hours! Is that the correct care with an eye on the eternal life of one's child? God will someday demand an accounting from their hands if they do not insist that these children be brought up only Christian. What if instead a parent's first concern is that a child become somebody in the world and "amount to something?" That is evidence that a parent didn't work out theirs and their children's salvation with fear and trembling. That is despising grace - - high esteem for *this* world and its goods and honors and joys. The thorns of care for this life have almost choked the hard struggle for God's approval; meanwhile such parents regard their sinful, carnal peace of mind as faith-born peace.

The despising of grace - - the desire for worldly well-being - - that is to a great extent the signature of modern Christianity. The church is in the greatest danger of losing everything - - all that God has willed and Christ has earned - - and of falling into eternal death.

### Thesis 3

#### **The despising of grace is a sin against the ministry of the Holy Spirit.**

##### **a. to despise grace ruins faith and a good conscience**

The church of God does not perish. It is founded on the Rock, that is, the Father's revelation of Christ. He has redeemed them, firmly chosen them and given them to Christ, and that great Shepherd of the sheep leads them through His Spirit and Word securely through all the storms of the world into eternal glory without losing a single lamb from the whole flock (Mt 16, Jn 6:37, Jn 10). That is said of the church as a whole. But locally, the church can perish. In Burlington or Milwaukee or in Wisconsin or America it can partially or entirely die and disappear. Luther's saying is well known in which he compares the gospel and grace to a traveling cloudburst which does not return where it once has been.

It has been with the Jews, but when it's gone it's gone, and now they have nothing. Paul brought it to the Greeks; but again when it's gone it's gone, and now they have the Turk. Rome and the Latins also had it, but when

it's gone it's gone, and now they have the pope. And you Germans need not think that you will have it forever, for ingratitude and contempt will not make it stay (*SS X, 464; Luther's Works AE 45 p 352*).

Also in Germany, as in almost all the countries of Europe, this Reformation prophecy has come into fulfillment. When it's gone it's gone. Now they have Rationalism.

We here in America, especially through the work of Walther, have had the gospel among us in great clearness, fullness and power throughout two generations. But we will not have it forever. Unthankfulness and despising will not allow it to remain. These are already present to a frightening extent. The death of the church has already set in with us. *Naturally that can't be said of the externals of the church.* According to the external appearance - - the number of members, the quality of church buildings, schools, parsonages and maintenance plants, the order in the local congregations and in our synod, here and there even the salaries, probably even the liturgical forms and similar things - - our church is in many ways better situated today than twenty-five or fifty years ago.

### **a lukewarm church**

But the well-being of the church does not consist in this or other externals, but in its inner life: in faith and in love and in fear, in the presence of joy and peace in the Holy Spirit, in esteeming the Word and grace above all earthly things, in passion, zeal, endeavoring, striving, pursuing the perfection of the kingdom of God. That has so strongly decreased among us that we have become to a great extent lukewarm and sluggish, cold and indifferent toward grace, toward all that is the kingdom of God. We have again to a great extent sunk down into the world's way of thinking, the spiritual life in us has become weaker, the unspiritual, stronger - - and *that* is the beginning of the death of the church. Our church, professors, pastors, teachers, administrators, congregational members have begun to become spiritually *weak with old age*. Our spiritual, youthful strength is gone, we have begun to decline spiritually, to wither away and thereby to go to meet our spiritual death.

And now let me especially say the following, not as my own private opinion, not as the word of men in general, but as it truly is, as God's Word. If God does not give us grace and the Spirit, now, now, and I mean that in the Scriptural sense: *today* - - to repent, to turn around and to regenerate us again spiritually (to turn back to new faith, new passion and love and fear and trembling and zeal and work toward God and his Word, toward his gospel and his grace, toward his kingdom and his righteousness), then we have fallen to complete, spiritual death, beyond hope to eternal destruction. Our church will have a speedy downfall.

I want to say this: we are in *danger of hardening* without suspecting it. We pastors and teachers and also most of our congregational members all know what Scripture teaches concerning the "*sin against the Holy Spirit.*" There are however many false notions concerning it. First, one ought never to call it "*sin against the Holy Spirit,*" but exclusively "*blasphemy*" of the Holy Spirit, in order to label it accurately and to distinguish it from other sins against the Holy Spirit. For it is certainly also called a sin in the Scriptures (Mt 12:31); its proper, specific essence shown by the Lord himself who first spoke about it, as *the speaking* against, and certainly the *blasphemy*, consequently the slandering of the Holy Spirit (Mt 12:31f; Mk 3:28-30; Lk 12:10). This distinction is so important, because the Scriptures label this sin as *unforgivable*. Not every sin against the Holy Spirit, but only the "*blasphemy*" of the Holy Spirit is unforgivable.

### **the unforgiveable sin**

The other important point in this doctrine is the question *why* the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is unforgivable. And even concerning this the Scriptures do not leave us in the dark. It is not unforgivable because it is too great a sin, but because it makes the renewal of repentance, the repeated knowledge of sin and faith, impossible. He who has once blasphemed the Holy Spirit has become incapable of faith, he can no longer believe, or even be terrified over sin. The writer to the Hebrews says, "*It is impossible* for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the Word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, *to be brought back to repentance*, because to their loss they are *crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him*

to public disgrace" (He 6:4-6). John calls just this sin "a sin that leads to death," for which one need not pray (1 Jn 5:16).

Whoever has committed this sin is absolutely lost. For that man or woman there is no more help. That person has not only once and for all pushed away from themselves the only means to blessedness, grace, the gospel, but has also thereby destroyed and *exterminated his spiritual, moral personality and their conscience to the last spark*. With regard to religion, the relation of a human creature to its God, this person has become just as empty as an irrational animal, in whom God cannot produce repentance and faith; they have no *moral intellect*. Yes, this former Christian can advance so far in godlessness that he can only laugh, mock and blaspheme the gospel and grace in Christ.

However, Paul speaks of men with completely depraved minds, unfit (*adok'imoi*) for faith, who continually learn, but can never come to the knowledge of the truth, yet have not blasphemed the Holy Spirit (1 Ti 6:5, 2 Ti 3:8). The Lord speaks of people in whom his Word did not "take," without accusing them of blaspheming the Holy Spirit. Thus, one may not consider everyone in whom God's Word does not "take" to already be a *blasphemer* of the Holy Spirit.

We may also not presume that *only* the blaspheming of the Holy Spirit can make the heart unfit for faith.

Scripture has a clear and amply developed doctrine of obduracy, *the hardening of the heart*, through which, as believer or as unbeliever, one becomes unfit for faith and blessedness. Just as with Pharaoh, so with Israel in part (Ro 11:7, 25). *Obduracy, however, always follows the despising of the good Word of God that wants to save and in itself does save*, whether it begins with the law or happens directly at the gospel. And every despising, every disdain of the gospel of grace is a sin *against* the Holy Spirit namely *against the ministry and labor, against the saving work of the Holy Spirit* on the hearts of human beings. It is a hindering, damage, restraint, frustration and - - as much as it can - - an abolition and destruction (partially) of the fruit of the work of the Holy Spirit. If this continues, it leads inevitably to complete ruin of the conscience, the moral personality, and thereby to final, total obduracy and even to blaspheming the Holy Spirit.



## **to sin against my conscience**

Right there, right there lies the fearful significance of the despising of grace as it has set in among us. Scripture knows of various sins against the Holy Spirit. One can “grieve,” that is, offend him, so that he loses the desire to work in us. The seal of blessedness, which he has imprinted on us, is undermined (Eph 4:30). According to Scripture, this happens already when we do not resist the old Adam, through lies, anger, slander, idle gossip and other similar sins. One can “lie to him,” that is, cheat, deceive, disillusion, falsify his words through impurity, so that instead of the intended good fruit an evil one grows out of his work (Ac 5:3). One can oppose and struggle against him, suppress and stifle his saving work as Israel did (Ac 7:51). Every disdain of grace and God’s gracious word is a part of dulling the cleansed and sanctified Christian conscience, a numbing blow against faith, which inevitably destroys faith and a good conscience and ends in obduracy, *if God does not do something special to the heart*. If the despising of grace has once begun, if it is not restrained early, daily! - - every day anew, through repentance and fear and trembling, then it daily increases and grows like a rolling snowball, which becomes an avalanche and, thundering, vanishes over the edge of the abyss.

A man who begins to despise grace is like a sick person to whom the doctor gives saving medicine and restrains him from harmful food and drink. He does not take the medicine carefully and does not carefully avoid the harmful things. The medicine cannot have its full effect, its effect is completely hindered; the sickness increases, and the body becomes unresponsive to the medicine until it doesn’t work at all and the sickness brings the patient to complete deterioration. It is just so with every sin against conscience; it is much more so with every disdain of saving grace. He who deals frivolously with grace has his heart and conscience cauterized. And the most dreadful thing with this condition is this that one doesn’t realize it himself. Here the judgment concerning Laodicea fits in: “You say, ‘I am rich, I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing!’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked” (Re 3:17). So one goes steadily towards obduracy, from which there is no return.

### **b. to despise grace calls down God’s wrath**

The other side of the working of this sin is that it unfailingly calls down God's wrath and punishment on us. One can embitter and enrage the Holy Spirit (Is 63:10; Ps 78:18,21). One can provoke him to punishment as Ananias (Ac 5) and Simon the sorcerer did (Ac 8:19-24). There is a passage in Scripture which ought to paralyze the heart of every despiser of grace: "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows" (Ga 6:7). God is infinitely gracious and patient. He has allowed the heathen to go their own way and overlooks their time of ignorance. When however he reveals his grace to a man or to a people and gives his gracious Word to them with the testimony of the Spirit and of power, then he thereby commands all people everywhere to repent, since he has already established the nature, the manner and the day of the judgment in Christ Jesus (Ac 17:30).

Now it is important not only for all who hear the gospel for the first time to repent, but also for every *Christian* to daily live in continual repentance and to work out his salvation with fear and trembling and to make use of God's gracious Word with the highest diligence. He who now *deals in a slovenly way* with grace - - which ought to save him and sanctify him and daily prepare him more for eternal glory - - tempts God; he provokes God to wrath and stands in danger every moment of being cut off from all grace. No, no, no - - *God will not allow His grace to be mocked.*

Ah, it is truly sinful and immoral enough that we as unconverted, ignorant heathen "have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do - - living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry" (1 Pe 4:3). Or as Paul expresses it that "at one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice envy, being hated and hating one another" (Tt 3:3).

### **to trifle with the holy**

But if we, after we have received the knowledge of the truth, *sin against grace itself*, against the saving, sin-forgiving, cleansing, sanctifying working of the Holy Spirit, then we are playing with dynamite which can explode at any moment. We play with the holiness of God, which

hangs by a hair like the sword of Damocles over our head. At any moment the hair of patience, from which the sword hangs, can break, and the sword can drive down to kill us eternally.

In the second half of the prophet Isaiah, a wonderful concept is developed, the concept of "the Holy One of Israel." That is God not merely in so far as he hates sin, but in so far as he has given himself to Israel as the God of grace and does not want the enemies of his covenant of grace outside Israel and the despisers of this covenant in Israel to go unpunished. Yes, God is a jealous God, who himself punishes the children for the sins of their fathers. He is a jealous God above all else to punish the despisers of his grace. Isaiah himself saw this holy God of grace in a vision and he heard the seraphs around his throne calling, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory" (Is 6:3). The whole heaven and he himself shook before this holiness which washes away sin. This triple "HOLY!" preaches: Gracious, gracious, gracious is God; therefore woe to those who despise grace! There is no other sacrifice for sin. Do not be deceived, God does not allow his grace to be mocked! Whoever believes on the Son is not condemned; whoever does not believe, stands condemned already (Jn 3), since God has only one gracious Savior. Whoever does not believe on him is damned.

It was the anger of the God of grace under which the chosen people again and again with great patience were punished, chastised, but finally *rejected*. They *constantly* sinned against grace; often the LORD, the God of grace, was ready to "destroy" them (Ex 32:10; 33:3). How much and how terribly did he strike this people with plagues, famine, sicknesses, snakes, war, imprisonment - - why? For no other reason than because Israel again and again and again sinned against his grace.

What is the present World War other than the God of grace - - who does not allow himself to be mocked - - punishing and chastising the world, but particularly modern Christianity which deals in such a slovenly way with His grace? If Christianity today turned from its despising of grace and united in prayer for the ending of the war, tomorrow there would be peace. But we must not forget that this war is only a physical and temporal judgment of God which ought to produce spiritual improvement in us. If we will not reform ourselves, if the physical chastisement does not attain its goal, then there may very well be peace without our prayer.

The God of grace, however, in his wrath will allow his spiritual judgment to come on us. He will take the pure gospel away from us, as he has also taken it away from the Jews, the Greeks, the Romans, the Germans, the French, the Russians, the English. He will give us over to obduracy and he will come upon us with the last wrathful judgment, from which only the few faithful believers will escape, who have returned to their first love in faith. May God grant us grace so that we recognize that he is among us today in order to rescue!

*Dear Father, do not take from our mouth the Word of truth.*

*Forgive our unfaithfulness for Christ's sake.*

*Work in us today to will and to act according to your good purpose.*

*Carry this out through your good Spirit,*

*that each of us may once more work out our salvation with fear and trembling.*

*Amen.*

. . .



*August Pieper 1857-1946*

*Note to the Reader*

Seminary professor August Pieper presented this message at the first gathering of the Southeast Wisconsin District of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin and Other States, assembled at St. John's Lutheran Church, Burlington, Wisconsin, 10-16 July 1918.

Six decades later the paper was translated by James Langebartels and several others at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. They were students in the Theological German class of Prof. John Jeske.

The paper was presented to the Pastor-Teacher-Delegate Conference of the Southwestern Conference of the Michigan District, assembled at Grace Lutheran Church, St. Joseph, Michigan, 21 January 1991, by Pastor James Langebartels.

It was later included in *The Wauwatosa Theology* 2:283-312.

This specific edition of the paper appears in connection with a Seminary anniversary project. Changes made to help a modern reader involve formatting, pronouns, punctuation and page numbers.

Christ for us!

*Omaha, Nebraska*

*Pastor Tom Jeske*

*August, 2013*