Proclaim the Gospel—Purely!

Paper for the SID Theological Conference January 28-29, 2003 By Pr. Michael D. Henson

Sex is a good gift of God. However, there are appropriate times and places for the sexual union. Outside of the bond of marriage the use of that gift is adultery, a breaking of the sixth commandment. The fruit of the vine is a good gift of God. Its use in the Scriptures is often symbolic of the joys of God's people feasting in the kingdom. Once again, it must be made plain that alcohol can be misused. Drunkenness is sin. The proclamation of the Gospel is a good gift of God to His church. In its proper use, we have God's promise that it will not return void, but will accomplish the purpose for which it was sent. There are some among us who claim that there are no times or places in which the proclamation of the Gospel would be wrong. I ask: Is the proclamation of the Gospel the only gift of God that has no restrictions?

In St. Luke 5, Jesus told the healed leper not to tell anyone that he had healed him. Even though there were great crowds who witnessed the healing, many commentators emphasize that the leper's disobedience restricted Jesus' movement because of the unwanted publicity. Rather, the text says that Jesus desired that the leper make the required sacrifice "as a testimony to them(the priests)." Jesus restricted the leper's proclamation so that the priests in Jerusalem, who would pronounce him clean, would not know of this miraculous healing, until after they had given their pronouncement. By the leper's premature proclamation, Jesus' intention to create faith in the priests was undermined. Amazing! The leper would have done God's evangelistic will by keeping his mouth shut! Even the proclamation of the Gospel has appropriate times and places.

We must first begin with the church and her God-ordained Ministry. Christ has told His church, "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation." Nevertheless, this command to preach the Gospel does not give unfettered license to be licentious with it. We are not to toss the pearls to the swine. The proclamation of the Gospel² is to be the only message proclaimed within the mystical union of the bridegroom and his bride the church. "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed". This command, "let him be accursed," does not simply mean that the false teacher isn't saved, but in context, it is also a command not to allow this false gospel to stand alongside the true Gospel. The Apostle Paul knows that to allow the bewitching Jews to preach a false gospel in their midst, is to turn away from the gospel of Christ. The entire second chapter of 2 Peter warns about false teachers who will "exploit you with false words." The antithesis of the command to preach the Gospel⁴ is that the proclamation of the Gospel is not to be united with false teaching.

This command to Christ's church is also true for <u>individual members of the church</u>. Whenever the Apostle Paul writes, "Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness?" it sounds as if he is merely speaking of the church in Corinth. He uses the word "fellowship" and the plural "unbelievers." However, listen to the rest of Paul's words. "What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever?" Paul also applies this teaching to singular persons. Though individuals members of Christ are required to "encourage one another" with the Gospel message, the antithesis must also apply to individuals. St. John says, "Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work" (2 John 11). St. Paul addresses both sides of the command, when he says, "Therefore, having put away falsehood, let <u>each one of you</u> speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another."

Each catechumen knows that the Fifth Commandment is not entirely kept when he refrains from killing his neighbor. On the contrary, he is also to help and support his neighbor in every physical need." Luther's explanations teach us there are both sins of omission and commission. So likewise, the command to preach the Gospel includes the prohibition to both individuals and churches to flee from falsehood and not to support it.

The participation of District President David Benke in a "Prayer for America" was sinful. I am not referring to his motivation, whatever that may have been, but to his participation in a syncretistic and unionistic service. It was a breaking of the First Commandment because it united the false worship of false gods with the true worship of the Triune God. By his participation, he professed "that not all good is to be sought from the one true God, that the one true God is not the only refuge, and that He is not to be sought in every time of need." It is breaking of the Second Commandment to cover up this falsehood by using the precious name of Jesus.

In the 1970's there were those within our fellowship who believed, taught and confessed that God's Word contained errors. For example, they denied that Adam and Eve were real, historical people. The "Battle for the Bible" was supposedly won by declaring the Holy Scriptures to be inerrant. But was the battle won? **Though we now agree that the Scriptures are inerrant, we disagree on just what they mean, if anything.**

The traditional passages, which our spiritual fathers cited as reason to flee from falsehood and their teachers—Romans 16:17, 1 Timothy 6:3ff, 2 Timothy 3:5, 2 John 10-11—are now scornfully dismissed as not applicable. At least before, we knew what the Scriptures meant. If you didn't agree with St. Paul in prohibiting women's ordination, then you said Paul was a male chauvinist and denied the words had any authority. But now, we have God's inerrant Word and don't know what it means. We all agree that God said, "...for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." We just aren't quite sure what that means. Would it be ok to chew it, but not eat(inhale)? Could you make wine with the fruits and then drink it? In a similar way, we are also told that proof texts from the terms, definitions, and reasoning found in our symbolic books do not speak to the issue.

The issue before us, the renunciation of syncretism and unionism, is not that difficult. The passages from God's Word are quite clear. The witnesses to those teachings in our Synodical constitution and bylaws are consistent. But more importantly, this action, and the copy-cat crimes that have arisen while the cat is away, directly contradicts the exclusive and offensive character of the Gospel of Christ. Acts 4:12, "There is no other name given among men by which we must be saved."

Allow me to disarm the various voices which are asking, "Did God really say?"

- 1. "Let Charity Prevail." --Even if this act of syncretism was simply a breaking of David Benke's voluntary oath to maintain (and as a District President to hold others to) the conditions of Synodical membership found in Article VI of the Synod's Constitution, it would still be sin falling under the fourth commandment. 1 Corinthians 13:6 states, "It(Charity) does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth."
- 2. "Once in a Lifetime." --This phrase was never intended to give a one-time exemption to syncretistic or unionistic acts. Would your wife allow you this kind of marital option? Would she receive you back if you did not repent of adultery, called your affair a good thing, and said that you would do it all over again?
- 3. "People don't see it that way, anymore." --David Benke's participation alongside other religions confessed either (1) we all believe the same things or (2) that we may not believe the same things and it doesn't matter what you believe. One prominent speaker in Phoenix denied that supposition to be true stating that you would need to poll the opinion of everyone who attended to find out if it was syncretism. On the contrary, syncretism and unionism are not determined by people's perceptions. People need to be taught what God's Word says about fellowship with false teachers and false religions.
- 4. "It's ok to pray." --The issue is not about prayer, per se. The issue is about the joining together of prayer(worship) to the one true God and prayer(worship) to other gods. "Call upon me in the day of trouble" (Psalm 50:15) "Blessed is the man...who does not stand in the way of sinners" (Psalm 1:1).
- 5. "Paul preached in the Areopagus."—The Apostle Paul did not participate in a syncretistic or unionistic service of any kind. The philosophers asked him to come saying, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?" Paul presented to them the teachings of the Christian faith and told those who worshipped idols that God demanded repentance. "Thus Paul went out from their midst. But some men joined him and believed..." (Acts 17:18-34).
- 6. "Show me in the Bible where it says that." -- Exodus 20:3, "You shall have no other gods before me." 2 Timothy 3:5, "...(people) having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people."
- 7. "Show me in the Lutheran Confessions where it says that." -- The Apology says, "We should forsake wicked teachers because they no longer function in the place of Christ, but are antichrists. Christ says (Matt. 7:15), "Beware of false prophets"; Paul says (Gal 1:9), "If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed."
- 8. "What about Matthew 18?" For those who are asking for charity, thinking that David Benke's action was not sin, it seems kind of out of place to require the order of Matthew 18:15-20, which addresses, "when a brother sins against you...." Moreover, the Large Catechism explains concerning Matthew 18 saying, "All this refers to secret sins. But where the sin is so public that the judge and the whole world are aware of it, you can without sin shun and avoid the person as one who has brought disgrace upon himself, and you may testify publicly concerning him. For when an affair is manifest to everybody there can be no question of slander or injustice or false witness. For example, we now censure the pope and his teaching, which is publicly set forth in books and shouted throughout the world. Where the sin is public, the punishment ought to be public so that everyone may know how to guard against it."

I close with a quote from Pieper's *Christian Dogmatics*. This text book is/was used in our seminaries as the systematic textbook to train pastors first German and then later in English. Every Missouri Synod pastor was taught this Scriptural position. Those who now do not now hold it, I call to return to it.

"To say that love demands such a practice is a misuse of that word. Love of God and love of the brethren rather requires the opposite practice. He who loves Christ loves Christ's Word, and Christ commands us to avoid all who teach anything that is contrary to His Word. And whoever really loves the brethren refuses to participate in their erring and sinning, seeking rather to deliver them from error and sin.

Moreover, the Scriptures of both the Old and the New Testament state explicitly that God permits false teachers to arise in order that Christians may show their obedience by avoiding them, not in order that Christians may fraternize with them (Deut 13:3; 8:2; 1 Cor 11:19). If Christians, against the divine prohibition, fellowship false teachers and tolerate false doctrines, they commit the sin which the Church calls 'unionism,' 'syncretism'" (footnote: Baier-Walther, III, 665fff.; Apol., Trig. 243, VII, VIII, 48.)¹⁰

¹ Mark 16:15

² In the wide sense

³ Galatians 1:8

⁴ Mark 16:15

⁵ 2 Cor 6:14-15

⁶ Ths 4:18, 5:11; Eph 5:19, Col 3:16, Heb 3:13, 10:24

⁷ Eph 4:25

⁸ Tappert, T. G. (2000, c1959). The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran church (Apology: 1, IV, 48). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

⁹ Tappert, T. G. (2000, c1959). The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran church (Large Cat.: 1, 284). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

¹⁰ Christian Dogmatics, Volume 3, page 425, F. Pieper.