

**FIFTEENTH EVENING LECTURE.** (January 23, 1885.)

**We also learned that it is a false method to prescribe to an alarmed sinner all manner of rules for his conduct,** telling him what he has to do, how earnestly and how long he must pray, and wrestle and struggle until he hears **a mysterious voice whispering in his heart:** "Your sins are forgiven; you are a child of God; you are converted," or until he feels that the grace of God has been poured out in his heart. That is the method adopted for conversion **by all the Reformed sects and their adherents.**

Would that this method of conversion were not found in the Lutheran Church! But, alas! such is the case. At first **the Pietists** tried to convert people by this method. In some points they were quite right. **The Lutheran Church in those days had gone to sleep; it lay shrouded in spiritual death.** The Pietists desired to come to the rescue. However, instead of going back to the purity of teaching of the Church of the Reformation and learning from that age how to quicken the spiritually dead, they adopted **the method of the Reformed.**

Let me illustrate this by the example of **Dr. John Philip Fresenius (born in 1705, died in 1761).** Since 1748 he was Senior of the Ministerium at Frankfort on the Main. He was a most excellent man, unquestionably a sincere Christian, a godly, pious author of many beautiful devotional writings, in which there is little to criticize. With great earnestness he wrote against the papists, the Jesuits, and the Herrnhuters. His attacks upon the Herrnhuters put him under a cloud in circles of believers at that time.

Even in his boyhood, Fresenius was a zealous Christian. In gatherings of the boys in his place he did mission-work among them and tried to convert them. He kept up this spirit until he entered the university of Strassburg, where he studied with sturdy zeal and became a profound scholar. His father, who was in poor circumstances, did not like to see him enter the university, but John Philip went to Strassburg, relying on the help of God. Frequently he was in pitiful straits, living for quite a while on bread and water in a miserable lodging, until his professors heard of it and secured free lodging and board for him.

One of his most popular books is his *Book on Confession and Communion*, which was published in 1745. In a short time it went through eight editions. **There were no "believers" in those days who did not own this book.** In 1845 it was published in a new edition by Meyer, who not only failed to remove its errors, but even added some of his own.

My reason for illustrating by this very book how even Lutherans mingle the Law with the Gospel is because **I had some very sad personal experience with this book.** After graduating from college, I entered the university. I was no outspoken unbeliever, for my parents were believers. But I had left my parents' home already when I was eight years old, and all my associates were unbelievers; so were all my professors, with the exception of one, in whom there seemed to be a faint trace of faith. **When I entered the university I did not know the Ten Commandments by heart and could not recite the list of the books in the Bible. My knowledge of the Bible was pitiful, and I had not an inkling of faith.**

However, I had an older brother, who had entered the university before me. Not long before my arrival he had joined a society of converted people. Upon my arrival he introduced me to this circle of Christian students. I had no premonition of the fate I was approaching, but I had great respect for my brother, who invited me to come with 'him, At first I was attracted merely by **the friendly and kind manner** in which these students treated me. I was not used to such treatment, for at our college the intercourse of students had been a rather rough affair. I liked the manner of these students exceedingly well. At first, then, it was not the Word of God that

attracted me. But I began to like **the company** of these Christian students so much that I gladly attended even their prayer-meetings for they conducted such meetings.

Lo and behold! it was there that God began to work on my soul by means of His Word. **In a short time I had really become a child of God, a believer, who trusted in His grace. Of course, I was not deeply grounded in Christian knowledge.** {p.142}

This state of affairs was continued for nearly half a year. Then an old candidate of theology, **a genuine Pietist**, entered our circle. He could not expect ever to obtain a pastorate in the state church, as at that time **rationalism held sway everywhere**. The other students thought we were crazy and shunned us as one does people who are afflicted with a contagious disease. That was the sad state of affairs in Germany at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Now, this candidate who came to us said: "You imagine you are converted Christians, don't you? But you are not. **You have not yet passed through any real penitential agony.**" I fought this view day and night, thinking at first that he meant to take us from under the sway of the Gospel and put us back under the Law. But he kept repeating his assertion until I finally began to ask myself whether I was really a Christian. At first I had felt so happy, believing in my Lord Jesus Christ; now there began for me a period of the severest spiritual afflictions.

I went to the candidate and asked him, "What must I do to be saved?" He prescribed a number of things that I was to do and gave me several books to read, among them Fresenius's *Book on Confession and Communion*. The farther I got in reading the book, the more uncertain I became whether I was a Christian. An inner voice kept saying to me: "**The evidence that you have the requirements of a Christian is insufficient.**" To make matters worse, the aforementioned candidate was more pietistic than Fresenius himself. At that time, when opening any religious book treating of the order of grace and salvation, **I would read only the chapter on repentance. When I would come to the chapters on the Gospel and Faith, I would close the book, saying: "That is not for me."** An increasing darkness settled on my soul as I tasted less and less of the sweetness of the Gospel. God knows I did not mean to work a delusion on myself; I wanted to be saved, In those days I regarded those as the best books which spoke a stern language to sinners and left them nothing of the grace of God.

**Finally I heard of a man** who was reported to be a real spiritual physician. I wrote to him with the thought in my mind that, if he were to say something to me about the grace of God and the Gospel, I would throw his letter into the stove. However, his letter was so full of comfort that I could not resist its arguments. That is how I was brought out of my miserable condition into which I had been led chiefly by Fresenius. {p.143}

What happy students are those who are immediately given the blessed and comforting doctrine of the Gospel! However, experience teaches that the very abundance of the pure doctrine 'of' the divine Word is treated with growing contempt. This is deplorable indeed.

**In his book Fresenius divides all communicants into nine classes.** I did not fit into anyone of them. The sainted Pastor Keyl, who certainly was a sincere Christian, assured me that he had no better luck. That is the result of dissecting a person's spiritual condition as Fresenius has done, who enumerates the types, of communicants as follows:

1. Unworthy communicants;
2. such as are sincere seekers after grace, but have obtained no assurance;
3. such as are assured of their state of grace, especially spiritual infants, or puny beginners in Christianity;
4. young men, or such as have attained to some strength of faith;
5. fathers, or tried Christians;
6. such as are in great spiritual afflictions [though I was afflicted, I did not qualify for this class];
7. such as rejoice in God;
8. such as are fallen from grace;
9. such as are in a state of distress.

Speaking of the first class, Fresenius writes (chap. 3, § 11): "If sinners of this type are to be enabled to obtain the forgiveness of sins and to receive the body and blood of Christ worthily, **everything depends on their conversion.** Accordingly, I shall here offer a faithful instruction regarding the points that have to be observed on their part in order that **they may be, thoroughly converted in a short time.**" (The remark "in a short time" sounded like Gospel to me, and I wished that it might be so in my case.) I have tested the good quality of this instruction on many sinners in the past and found that it resulted in the certain salvation of everyone who faithfully followed it. With great, heartfelt joy I observed that even such sinners as had been bound by Satan with exceptionally strong fetters were in a short time by his method brought into a state where they could be regarded as new creatures in Christ. It is a straight and simple method, without any great subtle ties, and requiring no efforts on the part of the patient: all he has to do is to let God work in him; for it is He, after all, who must give us everything that we need.

**"All depends on three rules which the sinner must observe.** They are derived from the inmost nature of the divine order of salvation and are such that, if faithfully applied, the worst slaves of the devil are helped by them. If anyone is not helped, he must blame his own unfaithfulness for it, and not the rules." (I resolved gladly to obey all rules.)

**"The first rule is: Pray for grace.** {p.144}

**The second: Be watchful lest *you* lose grace.**

**The third: Meditate upon the Word of God in a proper manner.**

**Since a sinner cannot convert himself, he must pray for the grace of conversion. Since the grace which he has obtained in answer to his prayer can easily be lost, he must be watchful. Since the Word of God is the means of grace by which we are enlightened and regeneration, or the change of heart, is accomplished in adults, he must meditate upon it in a proper manner. This shows that these three rules have been derived from the inmost nature of the divine order of salvation.**

"A brief explanation of these rules, one by one, will be of help towards learning how to observe them. **As regards the first rule, the person desiring the grace of conversion must pray for it.**" (As if an unconverted person could seriously pray for conversion! He should have said: He must hear the Word of God. But that he has put into his third rule. His whole scheme makes conversion dependent on man's own effort to obtain grace.) "This prayer must be of a different quality than formerly, when he was **still under the rule of sin.** It must not be a frigid, unfamiliar, lifeless operation of the lips, but must be offered up with great, heartfelt earnestness. You enter your closet, as the Savior advises in Matt. 6, 6, or wherever *you* can speak to God in private, bow your knees, and with all your might cry for grace; not only for the grace that God may forgive your sins, but also for the grace that your heart may be changed and the love of sin destroyed in *you*. Since Christ has acquired for us even the first, or converting, grace, *you* base even your first prayer on His merit and call upon God to grant *you* converting grace for the reason that the Lord Jesus has paid so precious a ransom for *you*. This prayer *you* should offer, not once or twice, but *you* must **continue offering it daily** with sighs and strong crying, until *you* obtain grace, which assures you from your own experience that your heart has been truly changed."

Fresenius actually speaks of a person in whom **sin is still dominant.** His primary error (*prwton pseudos*) is the false distinction between being converted and quickened. As a matter of fact, anyone who has been quickened, that is, raised from spiritual death, is converted. After his conversion he must, indeed, pray and wrestle. His faith at the beginning is like an infant that can easily die if it is not given nourishment. Praying and wrestling is not an exercise for

unconverted, however, but for converted persons. **Fresenius speaks as if forgiveness of sin and renewal of the heart** {p.145} **were two different things, occurring at different times. The fact is that, when I have the forgiveness of my sins, my heart is changed, and the love of sin has been destroyed.** As regards the remarks of Fresenius about continuously crying to God until He bestows grace, has he ever heard that **God is a hard-hearted being** that *must* be softened by a person's prayers and by wrestling with Him? He talks of a converted person as of one who is still to be converted. For basing one's prayer on the merits of Christ means believing in Christ. No matter how good the intention of Fresenius was, **what he writes is awful.** While speaking of the merits of Christ, he directs man to his own works, by which nothing will ever be achieved. His advice to cry to God "until *you* obtain grace" means, as the words that follow show, "**until you have a feeling of grace.**" That sweet sensation which satisfies their hearts is what these people call grace. But grace is not something for which I must look in *my* heart. It is in the heart of God. Grace cannot be found in me, but is outside of me. If good old Fresenius had said all these things of a believing Christian, they would be correct. A Christian *must* do all those things; but before he is a Christian, he is spiritually dead; he has no spiritual vision, no spiritual hearing, no spiritual sensorium.

Fresenius proceeds: "Some of my readers may say: Granted, that grace is obtained by praying, yet how can a sinner pray in the manner stated? Is not prayer itself an effect of divine grace, which we do not produce in ourselves while we are dead in sins? Answer:

**This kind of prayer is, indeed, an operation of grace which the sinner, dead in trespasses, cannot perform by his own power.** But we know that prevenient, or quickening, grace quite often and earnestly knocks for admission into our heart for the purpose of rousing us from our sleep in sin. Whenever this happens, grace offers to the sinner something that he has not, namely, the strength to utter sighs and cry for help from the abyss of sin, as he should. The sinner himself can observe this if he is attentive. Often he is thrown into unrest because of his condition by the Word of God, by sickness, by the death of other people, by terrible dreams, by the thought of his own death, of the future Judgment, of hell and heaven, and like things. In that moment a desire for salvation and a mysterious sighing for grace begins to stir in him. Now, this desire and sighing is not a natural action of his, but it is from an energy which quickening grace has already produced in him. **If he accepts this energy,** it is no longer impossible for him to call {p.146} upon God, pray and cry as his condition requires, and while he is so doing, his strength to pray is continually increased by grace."

Imagine, giving this advice to a person "dead in sins"! As if such a person could do anything by an alien force! By these dangerous directions sincere hearts that have not passed through all these required experiences will be led to believe themselves quickened, but not yet converted. Thousands, yea, millions have been tormented with the thought that they are still unconverted. The sighing for grace of which Fresenius speaks **is nothing else than the first spark of faith. It is never a power that is given a person for the purpose that he may achieve grace by using it.** There is not a word of all these directions in Scripture. *After* we have become believers, we are told to wrestle with the devil, who wants to rob us of the grace we have received. It is indeed as I have stated: while a person is still unconverted, he is spiritually dead, hence without any strength. Even if strength were breathed into him, he could not use it as long as he is dead. Try and breathe strength into a statue and see whether it will move.

**..."The second rule,"** Fresenius continues, "is this: A person earnestly desiring to be converted **must be on his guard to keep the grace** which God has conferred on him. When God bestows the power to pray, He bestows at the same time the power to be watchful, and this power

must be exercised with great care and earnestness. Such a person **guards his own heart** lest it be ruled by sinful thoughts, which hinder the operations of divine grace. He guards his eyes and ears lest new filth be carried into the heart by these avenues of approach and the inner work of the Holy Spirit be disturbed. He **guards his tongue**, lest by insincere and sinful words it grieve the Spirit of God, Eph. 4, 29. 30, and the heart be deceived, Jas. 1, 26. He **guards his associations** when mingling with other people, so as to keep away from anything evil, to quit once and forever the sinful friendship of the world, which is enmity against God, Jas. 4, 4, and whenever his professional duties lead him into the company of evil men, to make his heart firm against their evil doings, lest he become a partaker of other men's sins. He guards his entire conversation, lest he be contaminated again with intentional sins. He **guards the operations of divine grace**, so as to give them more room and to heed particularly the seasons of gracious visitation, when God rouses him afresh unto prayer, the meditation of His Word, the wrestling with sin, and the exercise of neighborly love, in order that at such times he may enter more thoroughly into grace by his sighings and supplications....

"In this connection it is to be noted that watchfulness offers some difficulties in the beginning of a person's conversion; however, if he is but faithful, it becomes increasingly easy, until, by exercise, the person obtains such a happy aptness for this work that he thinks he cannot but constantly be on his guard. But in view of the aforementioned difficulties it occasionally happens, at the beginning of conversion, that a person, by imprudence, suffers damage from the enemy either in his inner life or in his outward conduct. Whenever this happens, we are not to despair, but take fresh courage, flee to Jesus, and heartily pray for forgiveness of the imprudent act and for the grace of greater circumspection. Accordingly, praying and watching take turns about in a Christian and cooperate harmoniously.

What Fresenius says is well enough when said in reference to a beginner in the Christian faith. He describes the complete work of sanctification and expects all these things of an unconverted person. It is almost inconceivable that so learned and experienced a minister should have failed to see this point. Even the love of a person's fellowman is assumed prior to his conversion. That is the dangerous feature of this "instruction." Any honest Christian reader will say to himself: "Since all these things are first to take place in me, I must pass for an unconverted person." **It is awful to hear Fresenius speak of entering more thoroughly into grace, since grace is something in the heart of God. Grace is obtained either entire or not at all; it is never given piecemeal, as Luther puts it.** A person is either a child of the devil or a child of God; either in the kingdom of darkness or in the kingdom of light; either in a state of grace with God or under His wrath. There is no middle ground....

Now we take up **Fresenius's third rule, viz., that the Word of God must be meditated in the proper manner.** We shall see that he is speaking exclusively of the power of the divine Word to change the heart of man. He is not speaking and it seems he is entirely ignorant of the collative power of the Word of God, by which gifts **like justification are not only described, but at the same time conferred and communicated.** The statement: "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved" produces faith in the statement and therewith communicates the blessing described. When listening to a preacher, we must imagine that God stands behind him. When he speaks words of comfort to me, I must say to myself that it is God who is speaking to me; when he pronounces forgiveness of sin to me, **I must not merely think that, because these words are in the Bible, I am to derive some benefit from them, but I must say' to myself: 'By these words God Himself imparts forgiveness of sin to me.'** But this doctrine, alas! had vanished' from the Lutheran Church for a long time.

Fresenius writes: "A person desiring to be converted must meditate upon the Word of God in a proper manner. This is done by reading as well as by hearing the Word. The Word is read in , " a proper manner by a person **when he reads it for the purpose of being enlightened by it and being transformed into a new man by its power.** Before, during, and after reading there must be a prayer for grace; not a great quantity, but **little must be read;** at every powerful passage there must be a halt, the heart must be lifted up to God, and the passage must be recited with a brief sigh and prayer that it may become effective in the reader. Beginners, in particular, are to be advised to read in this manner, first the four gospels, because they set before us the Lord Jesus with His grace and example. After that the same method may be followed for the reading of the remainder of the New Testament, the Psalms of David, and the other books of Holy Writ. Anything that the reader fails to understand he should reverently pass by, not stopping for doubtful musings, but holding on to what is clear and plain, in the certain hope that of the remainder God will gradually' open up to him as much as he needs. The Word of God is heard in the proper manner when it is heard from preachers who present it in its purity; when it is heard with **the same purpose as {p.150} when it is read; when God is invoked for His gracious power and work before, during, and after hearing the Word;** when it is gladly received and those passages, in particular, are noted which apply to that person's conditionally, when it is kept and revolved and permitted to enter ever more deeply into the heart."

Fresenius **does not say** a word about this, that whoever believes the Scriptures **receives what they say;** for they do not merely tell about gifts of grace, but also offer and confer them. The Word is a distributing and appropriating instrument of grace. In Fresenius's scheme everything is made to depend on the person's conduct. It is a questionable piece of advice to read little of Scripture. Halting occasionally at particular passages is proper, but a true Christian must also read the entire Bible rapidly in order to have a general knowledge of its contents. A quiet reflection upon these contents should go hand in hand with the reading Fresenius's advice would be excellent if he had not offered it to 'a person who is still to be converted. That is what makes his scheme wrong.

Fresenius concludes his explanation of **the three rules for "such as are not yet converted, but would like to be"** with these remarks: "**Anyone putting these three rules to practice with all possible fidelity will in a short time become a different person, and the grace of God will work in him so effectively that he will discover in himself with growing distinctness the marks of a new creature in Christ.**"

I ask you now: Where do we find an advice of this kind in the Bible? Whenever the apostles preached and their hearers asked them "What must we do to be saved?" they returned no other answer than this: "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ." That is the only correct method to be adopted by a preacher who wants to lead men to faith and to an assurance of the forgiveness of their sins and of eternal life. When following this method, **he must not omit urgently to recommend prayer, wrestling, and struggling, and the proper use of the Word of God at all times to those who have been led by this right way to the assurance of the forgiveness of their sins and of their state of grace.** For from the opposition of orthodox Lutherans to this wrong method you must not infer that they are no friends of genuine, earnest Christianity, of earnest and incessant prayer, of earnest wrestling with sin and constant watchfulness. On the contrary, sincere Lutherans show as great zeal in these matters as in their refusal to lead men to Christ by a round-about way.