

**GOD GIVES YOU A MIGHTY WORD
TO PROCLAIM IN YOUR
PLACE OF LABOR**

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I. God Gives You a Mighty Word to Proclaim in Your Place of Labor

The mighty Word God has given you assures you that you are adequately equipped for your mission on the Savior's behalf. As has been already described so emphatically, that Word has the power to get the job done. That Word can awaken terror and remorse in the hardened sinner's heart. That Word can implant faith in that same heart and supply the cheer of the gospel of forgiveness. That mighty Word can promote and guide the life of faith that is pleasing to the Lord God and produces the fruit that ripens to eternal life.

That God-given mighty Word, however, does not assure you of 100 percent success every time you proclaim it in the mission field or in the local parish. Not every hardened sinner will be converted by the Word you bring him. Not every converted sinner will show forth the faith that produces the fruits of righteousness.

The Word is not mighty as is the might of the Almighty Father's work of creation and preservation. The Word can be hindered or thwarted by malice on the part of the hearer or by misapplication on the part of the proclaimer.

Put in the familiar terminology of dogmatics, there is no such thing as irresistible grace as Calvin erroneously taught and as some of his followers in these parts still believe. Until God's Word comes as the call to the final judgment, men can resist and reject it and have done so on so many tragic occasions. The sower of this good seed of the mighty Word should be aware of the dangers of choking tares, trampling feet, withering heat, and vicious uprooting. It is the purpose of this second treatment of your assigned theme to warn of such dangers and to provide assurance that they can be overcome by the mighty Word.

Some of these dangers come with the turf and the territory. It should be understood at the outset, however, that this writing has no intention of engaging in familiar and deplorable south bashing. There has been more than enough of that in the century and a third since the cause became the last cause. The caricature of a snake-handling, scripture-thumping sort of theology that predominates in a sort of Bible belt was not all that helpful and true to start with. By now the

caricature has grown wearisome and has -- what is more to the point -- become anachromatic. It should be given a long-overdue burial and left to moulder in its resting place.

There is, however, usually a bit of truth in the worst of caricatures. That is true also in this case. There are some specific religious differences in your region of the country that merit attention and suggest that your preaching of law and gospel will not suffer from a little bit of pinpointing and acclimatizing.

The specific religious differences can often have strengths as well as weaknesses, advantages as well as disadvantages. In either case, they should be noted and taken into account. Developments in the last decades have not necessarily made such concerns superfluous and outdated. There may well be a new south in politics, economics and race relations. Religious roots, however, run deepest. They can withstand decades of drives for change that may be eminently successful in so many other areas of human life and living. To look for a new south in the religious world is probably as futile as to search for a new democrat in the White House.

Regional religious studies, once so popular a generation ago, are currently out of favor. One supposes that there has been some gullibility about a new south at work here. The regional religious writings of previous decades, however, quite readily agree on the existence of unique characteristics in the religious tendencies of this part of the country. A little bit of such writings might be inserted here as a mini-bibliography:

Bailey, Kenneth K., *Southern White Protestantism in the Twentieth Century*, New York: Harper and Row, 1964.

Dorough, C. Dwight, *The Bible Belt Mystique*, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974.

Holifield, E. Brooks, *The Gentlemen Theologians*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1978.

Wilson, Charles Ryan, ed., *Religion in the South*, Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 1985.

The books just listed may have their differences regarding specific instances, but they are in strong agreement that a major characteristic of the religion of this part of the country is its strong conservatism. Compared to their northern counterparts, the denominations of this region would rank

as more resistant to the liberal inroads of the past hundred years. That was true of the Methodists and Presbyterians before the big mergers. It is still true of the Southern Baptists.

When an effort was made to combat liberal trends in theology in the early decades of this century, the development -- generally known as Fundamentalism -- gained a good following in these parts of the country. When the movement recovered from a depression setback and revived under its new name, Evangelicalism, it again found hearty acceptance in this area. Today, there are strongholds of Evangelicalism in this state and its neighbors.

It would seem that a region with a liking for conservative theology in general and Evangelicalism in particular, would provide good soil for mission plantings of our church body. There are major pluses. A better-than-average position on the authority of Scripture is something that warms our hearts. A hearty concern for doctrine is to be commended in this day when so many couldn't care less.

There is, however, also some bad news. There are pitfalls in the approach of Fundamentalists and Evangelicalists. We need the guidance of the mighty Word if we want to espouse God-pleasing Bible-based fundamentalism. We are to stand for fundamentals and more.

In this battle with liberal theology the Fundamentalists stressed certain basic, fundamental doctrines above all the others. Quite unofficially a list of five -- in the pattern of Dort's TULIP -- was developed: Scripture; Deity of Christ, Virgin Birth, Atonement, Miracles. No one here would be ready to call these doctrines unimportant or unnecessary. On the contrary! The danger is that concentrating on a few doctrines might lead to neglect of others. Those who, for example, promoted five fundamental articles showed a willingness to disregard doctrines dealing with sacraments.

A distinction between fundamental and nonfundamental doctrines is a very useful tool in systematic studies. The mistake is to use the distinction to declare some doctrines as unnecessary in proclaiming "*the whole will of God*" and unimportant in drawing denominational boundaries and determining fellowship relations. Every doctrine is important and useful, no matter what a ^{let's t} Purist or Fundamentalist may think and no matter what public opinion and political correctness may suggest.

Actually, for Lutherans all this could go without saying. From the time of its beginnings the Lutheran Church has been a confessional church. It has its body of doctrine, its Book of Concord. It is simply inconceivable, it is altogether inconsistent with the denominational name for Lutherans to plant so-called community churches that are supposed to be interdenominational. Lutherans confess their doctrines quia they are confessed by the Holy Scriptures.

God-pleasing, Bible-based fundamentalism is confessional and scriptural. It stands for the inerrancy, authority and clarity of the mighty Word. In the early part of the century the Fundamentalists fought hard for the beleaguered Bible. In their ninety articles in their major publication, *The Fundamentals*, no less than 27, almost one third deal directly with the Bible. That is commendable.

This concern for the Scriptures ought also imply that the whole Bible and all its truths should be believed and confessed. The Fundamentalists, however, clung to their doctrinal errors that clashed with Scriptures. While claiming allegiance to the Scriptures, they insisted on interpreting the Bible with that arrogant trust in reason that their spiritual fathers, Zwingli and Calvin, bequeathed them. The result was antibiblical teachings in such vital doctrinal areas as means of grace, conversion, and election.

It is also unfortunately true that some of the most conservative theologians in the ranks of Fundamentalists and Evangelicalists had or have a way of turning hermeneutics upside down. Trust in reason makes them interpret literal passages figuratively. Mistaken zeal for biblical authority leads them to take figurative passages literally.

Sola scriptura means all of Scripture doctrine and only Scripture doctrine. Only then is God's Word for us a mighty Word. Any subtraction has an enervating effect. Any addition acts as an encumbrance.

It is axiomatic in our midst that there is an intimate relationship between one's positions on Scripture and one's fellowship principles and practices. A God-pleasing, Bible-based fundamentalism also implies that church fellowship embraces those united in doctrine. We cannot in this matter follow the lead of the Fundamentalists of yesterday or the Evangelicalists of today. There is too much

of a tendency to reach across denominational lines in order to find more allies for the spiritual battle. Fundamentalists found a way of closing their eyes to sharp differences in eschatology. With but rare exceptions their descendants of today join in fellowship with those whose doctrine is different.

Again, all this should not have to be mentioned in a convention of this district. You've heard all this before more than once. One does, however, hear of doubts being expressed about the validity of our fellowship principles, especially when the goal is growth in the congregation and the mission field. The mighty Word rebukes all such doubting. It promoted God-pleasing, Bible-based fundamentalism and that fundamentalism treasures Scripture, Scripture doctrine, and also Scripture's fellowship teachings. Take heart for your work also because God supplies --

II. The Mighty Word That Truly Regenerates and Revives

Eighteen years ago when the *Life* editors put together for the Bicentennial market the issue titled *100 Events That Shaped America*, they included only one happening that was specifically religious. It was the revival efforts of Charles Finney in the 1830's. One might argue that more than one religious event should have been included in the hundred others. One could not, however, dispute the significance of the one event selected. For good or ill for country and for church, revivalism has dominated the country's religious scene for two and one half centuries.

What holds true for the country in general holds doubly true for this region. Dorrough (p. 28) states: *"Revivalism has been a contributing factor in shaping Southern religion. Its influence has perhaps been greater here than in other sections of the country."*

The Great Awakening is often thought of as primarily a New England venture. Its main promoter, however, George Whitefield, included Georgia in his revival journeys, visited the Lutheran planting at Ebenezer, and collected monies for an orphanage there. By the time of the Second Great Awakening at the turn of the century, Southerners were flocking by the thousands to the camp meetings. The revival tradition held sway in the region from then on. What does such a long-lived tradition mean for the proclamation of the gospel?

First of all, God's mighty Word is a safeguard against the built-in tendency of the revival method to stress the sinner's contribution to the conversion and revival process. The Word clearly and

forcefully teaches us that true conversion is wrought by the Holy Spirit working through his means without any contribution provided by those being converted.

The Bible speaks of this unmistakably as it tells us, *"you were dead in transgressions and sins."* The Lutheran Confessions, as they sum up the Bible's truths, are just as clear on the point. *"I believe that I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him,"* is the way Luther sums up the matter in his explanation of the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed. The formula of Concord's second section on Free Will, in the shorter form, sums up the affirmative statement with the simple declaration: *"With this Word the Holy Ghost is present and opens hearts, so that they, as Lydia in Acts 16,14 are attentive to it, and are thus converted alone through the grace and power of the Holy Ghost, whose work alone the conversion of man is."*

While we cannot explain the mysteries of the conversion process, we can proclaim these truths clearly, forcefully, and repeatedly. Our hearers, so over exposed to revival practice and when-were-you-born-again thinking, need clear preaching and teaching about the Scripture's conversion doctrine.

It is true that the doctrine of justification by grace through faith is the doctrine by which the whole church and the individual believer stand or fall for time and eternity. But the doctrine of conversion by the Holy Spirit without man's work is the touchstone article. Error here threatens error elsewhere, also in the doctrine of justification. Fortunately the issue does not depend on our dogmatical acumen or apologetical skills. It depends on the mighty Word, whereby the Spirit converts human hearts, fortifies them against error, and keeps them grounded in objective truth instead of subjective emotionalism.

Revivalism has this tendency of pushing subjective emotionalism so far to the fore that the whole matter gets off center and out of balance. We have no quarrel with a healthy, balanced emotion in our religious life. We rejoice in every heartfelt and unforgettable subjective conversion experience. The Bible itself describes them.

When John was first led to his Savior, he had an unforgettable experience and made a lifelong commitment. He remembered so vividly that a half century later he could still identify the time of the happening as four o'clock in the afternoon. When Saul, on the way to Damascus to arrest

Christians, had to kneel in the highway's dust and bow to Jesus, he experienced an irrevocable change of heart and mission. He never forgot the experience. He wrote of it often and recalled it, we can be sure, when he bowed in the dust of a highway leading out of Rome to put his head on the executioner's block.

The mighty Word can and does work such dramatic conversions, but the drama and the subjective experience are not to be confused with the Word that produces the change of heart and provides the foundation for the heart's experience. Such confusion can easily result in the midst of revivalism's overstress on what goes on within the heart.

The early Lutherans in the neighboring state, the Salzburger at Ebenezer, were pleased to report that the fourth pastor sent to them, Rabenhorst, was a great success and could get the whole congregation to shed tears whenever he preached at the daily service. One would think and hope that our Georgia pastors do not produce such an effect with their Sunday sermons. A little adult crying at a church service goes a long way. The Ebenezer pastors were all Pietists and did not always think right about the proper relation between objective truth and human emotion.

The revival practitioners make the same mistake. All credit to the honest, heartfelt reaction of the heart to the Word of law and gospel. But what real good is there in our emotional experience, our religious high of the moment if it does not bequeath a durative legacy to the daily life? For that durative legacy we have to look beyond the feelings and emotions of our wayward hearts to the promise of forgiveness that nurtures faith, to the mighty Word that sustains it. This is also --

III. The Mighty Word That Rebukes False Security

One doesn't have to travel all the way from Wisconsin to Florida to find false security to combat. There's enough of it close to home. In this area, however, there are some extra pitfalls and dangers. Bailey tells (p. 2) of the Southerner who observed, already a century ago, that *"the leaders of the Southern churches, having considered the matter, have been convinced that the religion existing among the whites of the South was of a purer form than that existing in the north."*

"Give me that Old-Time Religion," a favorite in these parts, may make good sense when liberalism and modernism are on the prowl and when the old-time religion was orthodox to start with. But when one hears the song too often, one begins to overhear undertones of the boast that chants, "We are Abraham's descendants."

We all have reason to beware of misplaced security. The orthodoxy of our church body is something to cherish, but it is no replacement for saving faith in the heart. The faith of our parents and our grandparents is to be emulated, but it is their faith, not ours. An old Detroit neighbor -- with roots, one might add, in the South -- carried such false security to the absurd when he rested his hope for heaven in a tree that he had planted and that now shaded the church he refused to enter.

It takes the mighty Word to expunge the old Adam's self-righteous pride in our hearts, the notion that somehow we merit heaven on our own. We need that Word for our own salvation's sake. We need that Word to be of service to others, to our hearers.

That Word must sound out loud and clear with its crushing judgement of sin and sinners in a land and world that deludes itself with the notion that it has successfully repealed all of God's commandments, from the first on -- especially the first. Ours is a place and time that regards the abuser as abused, the murderer of his fellowman as the victim of his environment. According to this viewpoint about the only criminal and sinner left is the pastor who calls sin a sin and sinner a sinner.

This is a time to proclaim in truth and purity the mighty Word that annihilates the false security of the self-righteous human heart. This is the Word that says to the sinner convincingly and convictingly, "You are the man."

Such testimony of the mighty Word is needed also to counteract another form of false security, the impossible dream of perfection for the church and for the believer. In your area the dream abounds.

Exactly what kind of perfectionism, if any, John Wesley taught has always been a subject for dispute among his followers. Some of them called for out-and-out perfection on the part of the believer. Many Methodists became members of the holiness churches that had their beginnings a century ago and that spread rapidly in the Tennessee area.

Other church bodies, strong in this area, advocated the idea of the pure and perfect congregation and church body. The Restoration movement, promoted especially by Alexander Campbell, sought to purge the church of imperfections by recreating the original New Testament church as described in Acts. Eventually three large church bodies emerged: Christian Church Disciples of Christ, Christian Churches and Churches of Christ, and Churches of Christ. Some were so determined to have a pure church that they sought to avoid contamination by an anti-expansion, anti-mission policy. The name they gained for such efforts was "hard-shell."

The mighty Word God has given you for your labors speaks clearly on the issue of perfectionism. What is perfect, says the Scripture, is Christ's substitutionary work for us, both the sacrifice for sin and the fulfillment of the law. Believers are declared righteous for Christ's sake but they retain their inherited old Adam as long as they live. Their sanctification here on earth is always a matter of earnest striving, never a matter of complete achieving.

So it is also with the gathering of believers, the church. Holiness, the Bible teaches, is an attribute of the invisible church in the full sense of the term. Trying for the perfect church here on earth by the process of eradication or exclusion is an exercise in futility. Trying to uproot all tares does damage to the wheat. What the believer is urged to do and what you are urged to preach is the perfection of Christ and the need for the repentant believer to put his whole trust in the Savior's merits. That is the heart of the gospel message of the mighty Word. This is also --

IV. The Word That Teaches the Right Uses of the Law

Dorough (p. 4) quotes Reinhold Niebuhr's assertion that the emotionalism of Southern religion "*sought to do justice to the impulse toward moral perfection by a scrupulous legalism, expressed in extravagant rules of Sabbath observance.*" Dorough himself then comments. "*It directed its attention also toward such things as intemperance, the use of tobacco, dancing, card-playing, theater-going, horse racing, cockfighting, and the reading of romantic novels.*"

What is being described is the odd inclination of those with a shortened gospel to add more and more commandments to the original list of ten. Sometimes the extra commandments have their origin

in erroneous viewpoints. Here one can think of the process of taking an Old Testament ordinance and insisting on its validity for the New Testament church. An obvious example is tithing.

Another form of this creation of extra commandments occurs in connection with the church's worship. The so-called noninstrumental branch of restorationism, for example, will not permit the use of an organ in its churches because there is no mention of an organ in the Bible's description of the early Christian church. Others, make laws out of forms insisting on immersion and broken bread.

The mighty Word our Lord provides gives us clear direction amid this kind of confusion. It enables us to preach and teach clearly the liberty that Christ has won for his believers. He has freed us from all the old ordinances. He has fulfilled the whole law for us. Those who put their trust in him will not be minded to add commandments to the list. They will willingly use the commandments God has given as a guide for their lives.

This may well be the place to apply the theme to the third use of the law. God's Word instructs us that this guide use is limited to believers and has nothing to do with unbelievers. The motivation for a life of faith is the gospel in the heart. What results from other motivation is not a good work.

Much of the thinking and teaching around us misses this point. We need to take care that the error does not get inside us. The major denominations of this part of our land have a way of trying to motivate the Christian life by law. It is bad enough when such motivation is perpetuated in Christians. It is much worse when unbelievers are the ones involved. Utter confusion is engendered. Lasting harm is done to the cause of the gospel.

Here we are, of course, at the old and all-important matter of the proper use of law and gospel, the chief skill of the theologian, the lesson we need to study and apply over and over again. What is in place is diligent search of the Scriptures that reveal law and gospel and their proper distinction.

A related point is the issue of the relationship of church and state. The effort to effect sanctification by law motivation unfortunately often reaches beyond the group of believers and seeks to embrace the whole community, the whole state, the whole country. Such efforts are widespread, it is true, stretching far in time and place. It is likewise true that this region tries hard to outdo all others in this respect. Earlier generations labored for prohibition. Now the push is for school prayer.

Always the effort involves mixing church and state, overriding constitutional provisions, promoting a social gospel.

What we do with our voice and vote as individual citizens is one thing. What we do as a church or as its representatives is another. We use the law to curb sin, to convict consciences, and to guide the repentant believers. We use the gospel to create and sustain faith and to motivate the life of faith. That is task enough. To create other tasks for ourselves is folly and futility. The better way is to let the mighty Word have its way, its say, its sway. This is also --

V. The Word That Calls For The Right Administration of the Sacraments

Without gainsaying the significance of any or all of the previous points, one could insist that this last section has overriding importance for your ministry in this place. What sets you off from the vast majority of the others is sacramental doctrine and practice. The gap is wide, and short of a new miracle of the mighty Word, unbridgeable.

The rift is of long standing, reaching back across more than four and one half centuries. Attempts at reconciling differences failed at Warburg in 1529, at Thorn in 1645, in Prussia in 1817, and at numerous places in more recent times. Sham agreements could be reached only by compromise and concession, usually in the part of Lutherans. It makes no sense to hold one's breath while waiting for the magic end to the differences.

We confess that the sacraments are means of grace, that baptism regenerates, that there is real presence in the Lord's Supper and that the right administration of the sacraments is a mark of the church. These are truths of the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. We cannot yield them, no matter how many denominations or how many of their members stand in opposition.

This opposition is directed at two important aspects of baptism that we cherish deeply: baptismal regeneration and infant baptism. The erroneous argumentation is well known and need not be repeated here.

The result is that the miracle of grace worked by the Holy Spirit is denied and baptism is turned into some kind of sign of some other happening, certainly much less than a mark of the church. We

will continue to treasure our baptism as the means of grace that brought us into Christ's kingdom. We will preach and teach this truth to those who hear us.

Then there is the matter of infant baptism. Some simply prevent it, choosing to baptize only when they see proof that faith already exists. Others baptize infants with the reservation that the bigger and more important turn to faith is hopefully going to take place in the future.

In this century it was Karl Barth who led the attack on the baptism the Scriptures teach and we Lutherans confess. In his Church Dogmatics (IV,4) he likes to refer to the sacrament of baptism as a "bad habit" and even denies the "sacramental or sacramentalistic" character of any baptism. Insisting that it is the baptism with the Holy Spirit that brings repentance and renewal, he identifies any baptism with water as a mere liturgical response to a change already wrought by the Spirit. He questions whether the church can be a mature missionary force in our come-of-age world if it continues to *"dispense the baptismal water with the same disrespectful prodigality"* it has demonstrated in the past.

All too many regard Barth as the theological oracle of the age and regard his pronouncements as the last word. It is to be feared that his influence in this matter could do damage in our own church body. In any event the growing exposure to the more spectacular conversion experience, baptism -- whether infant or adult -- is being pushed into the background. A repeated resort to the mighty Word's many passages of baptismal comfort and encouragement is a necessity in our teaching and preaching, now more than ever before.

In the other sacrament, the sacrament of the altar, we find ourselves in the same position of disagreement with so many around us who are still upholding Zwingli's gross sacramentarianism of representation or Calvin's more subtle, figurative variety. Whenever one hears these days of a Lord's Supper agreement being achieved by some dialog, the agreement, one can be sure, involves Christ's presence in the sacrament but never real presence, with the Lutheran party denying Scripture truth and contradicting their confession. Even one word of the mighty Word is mighty and compelling, as it was for Luther and should be for us.

Often others ridicule and blame us for a close communion practice. Sometimes one or the other of us is tempted to emulate the open communion celebration of others. What should be realized is that an open communion is quite consistent and compatible with the denial of real presence. For the Lutheran, however, the confession of real presence implies and compels close communion. It is simply a matter of hearing and heeding the mighty Word and teaching and preaching diligently.

Much that might have been added will have to remain unsaid because of the drastic time restraints imposed by your leader. This is not mentioned to fault him. He is wise beyond his years in calculating the risks involved when requesting an essay from a seminary professor, especially one of the emeritus variety.

It is to be hoped that the selection of material has been sensibly made and will be of some help to you in your labors in the South Atlantic District. The essayist is grateful to the whole district for this kind invitation to join you in your 1994 convention. There are a few of us still around who some forty years ago urged their Michigan congregations to gather some special dollars to help get the first Florida planting here in St. Petersburg off to a good start. What has resulted is a joy to behold. And the future holds the promise of good things to come. The mighty Word God has given you for planting in these parts assures you of a good harvest in the early season and in the late season.