1751

The Relationship Of The Defense Of The Truth

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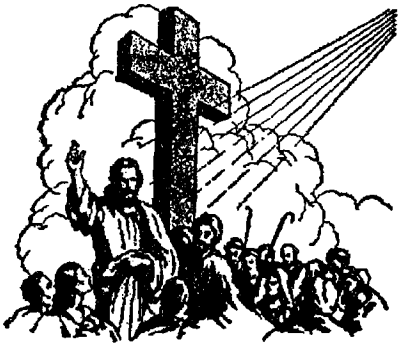

The Proclamation Of The Gospel

1751

Why do we need to discuss the relationship of the defense of the truth to the proclamation of the gospel? Why do we sometimes speak as if there must be a proper *tension* or *balance* between proclaiming the gospel and defending the truth? The early Church considered neither *balance* nor *tension* in this matter. It was *boldness* not balance that concerned the early Christians — boldness *in bearing witness concerning Jesus*. They prayed that in the face of growing persecution they might have "boldness" to speak of Jesus (Acts 4:31).

We recall the chief characteristics of the Apostolic Church:

1) Unity in doctrine — Acts 2:42 ff.; and

2) boldness to speak of Jesus — Acts 4:31.

And this boldness to witness concerning Jesus, no matter the cost, was given by the Holy Spirit to those who were

3) obeying His Word. — Acts 4:20

And wherever persecution drove them,

4) they went everywhere preaching the word. — Acts 8:4

We affirm that there is a "relationship" between "The defense of the truth" and "the proclamation of the Gospel." We would not prefer to say that they are in "tension with one another," however, or need to be "balanced" in our ministry. These are terms far too susceptible to subjective judgment on our part. We would rather say:

All Christians we are commissioned to be ***witnesses*** *of Christ. This necessarily means that we defend His truth so that we may proclaim His gospel in its truth and purity for the salvation of sinners and never lose it.*

If we are also called shepherds of Christ's flock, it is necessary that in our ***witnessing*** *of Christ we defend His truth so that we may protect the flock from "wolves in sheep's clothing," and all error that wars against the soul by slowly eroding or violently tearing down the sinners faith in his only Savior.*

"WE CANNOT HELP SPEAKING ABOUT WHAT WE HAVE SEEN AND HEARD."

(Acts 4:20 NIV)

THE WITNESS OF OUR PREACHING

I.

WE ARE TO BE WITNESSES WHO PROCLAIM THE TRUTH — GOD'S TRUTH.

A "witness" is not a dreamer or a public relations expert who makes up whatever message pleases him or the public. A witness is sworn to tell the truth. We are witnesses in our preaching *because we are testifying to the truth* we have "seen" in God's Word and experienced by Spirit-worked faith in Jesus Christ, no matter what it costs.

As it was in Jeremiah's day, so today there are many who proclaim "peace" in their gospels, but few witnesses who proclaim the peace of Christ in its truth and purity. How often we hear it said that a church's teaching or doctrine is not so important as its social impact for the betterment of community and nation. Then those same false prophets "use their tongues to say, God says!" God is "against" them. But the modern religious world is more than ever *for them*! Surely without God's grace it is impossible to be uncompromising witnesses of His truth as revealed in the Holy Scriptures. We are in constant danger of falling down this slippery slope, as others have before us. The majority of so-called Christian churches do not believe and teach God's Word faithfully. These are truly unprecedented times of rebellion in the churches, characterized by great hypocrisy and defiant rejection of the teachings of Holy Scripture.

Remaining faithful to the Word of our great Savior God is a burden that He continues to place on His under-shepherds, even as He did to Jeremiah in those difficult days before God's judgment upon Judah. The temptation is to get out from under God's yoke and take the easy way. "Don't all the churches preach Jesus?" we are often asked. "If doctrine is so important to God, why are you confessional Lutherans so few in number?" "If the Bible is so clear, why are there so many churches?" Why do we need to "defend the truth"? The answer to all such questions:

1) We sinners despise the hearing of God's Word;
2) We sinners neglect the hearing of God's Word,
and do not listen carefully to it.
3) We sinners know His Word, but we choose not to obey it.

Yet all Christian Churches claim the right from God to proclaim something, calling it their "gospel message," their "good news." Therefore we must be clear on just what the Church's mission is to the world. Jesus plainly tells us in **Matthew 28:18-20**: ***"You go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost; teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you."***

The great majority of the churches today seem to think *that their* calling is to "proclaim good news" to make people feel good about themselves. Their "gospels" are not THE Gospel which Christ commanded us to "preach to every creature" (Mark 16). Their false, feel-good-gospels so often avoid whatever may "cost" the preacher the loss of members or offerings. Jesus' commission to His Church, on the other hand, is to make disciples by baptizing and teaching them to observe all things whatsoever He commands. This will include not only the good news of the forgiveness of sins, but the "difficult sayings" of His Word and the impossible prescriptions of the law so that believers may be created, strengthened, continually reminded of their need for gospel grace in the blood of the Christ, and be preserved in the faith unto eternal life.

We find that human sentiment continues to prevail over the authority of the Word in the minds of countless numbers of those who claim to be Christians. How is the proper and saving connection with Jesus made? Is a person saved by his/her "relationship" to Jesus through membership in a Christian Church? Does salvation belong to the one who feels especially close to the pastor, especially a "good" pastor? Is that person on his way to heaven who is always seeking "warm fuzzies" whenever he "walks and talks with Jesus" or does something "good" for his neighbor? Why does a person need the Word of God, if he can "feel" His presence walking through the woods or talking with a friend?

In all this we are speaking of that sense of being *connected* to God somehow. Indeed, Who could have been more Christ-connected than Mother Mary who nursed

our Lord in His infancy? *"But* ***Jesus said: Rather, blessed are those who hear the Word of God (that's faith!) and keep (PHULASSO= guard as a treasure) it (that's confession!)*** **(Luke 11:28).** The only way to real and eternal blessing before God is not by being the mother and nurse of our Lord, nor by any other connection that man may suggest. Eternal blessings come to sinners only by means of hearing (believing) "the Word of God." For Jesus is the Divine Logos, the very substance of God's Word from Genesis to Revelation. In order to receive the blessing of the Christ-connection we must not only believe the Word of God, but guard — hold on to it and defend it from those who would snatch it away!

Again, our Lord holds up His Word as the only source of salvation when He says to His disciples: ***"It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit and they are life."*** **(John 6:63)** The early disciples could not separate their future hope of life and blessing from the physical/material presence of Jesus. They shook with anxiety when He told them that to have eternal life they must "eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood" (John 6:53). *"This is a hard saying,"* they said. What then *is* the "spirit" and "life" of the Christian Church? It can't be the visible presence of Christ on earth, since He has ascended into heaven as He forecasted (6:62), and the Church has continued to receive spirit and life ever since.

The true "spirit" and "life" of the Christian Church cannot be something less than the visible Christ, as some seem to think — like the sincere religiosity of a congregation, the magnificence of its house of worship, or its contributions to the educational and social advancement of the community. If these were the true *"spirit and life"* of the Christian Church, then we would not need to defend the truth of Christian doctrine or strive to be a "confessional," true-teaching church. However, as long as spiritual and eternal life are only given by the *"Spirit,"* and the *"words"* of our Lord *"are spirit and life,"* an Evangelical Christian Church must also be a "confessional church," because the *words* that bring life continue to be under the constant attack of the devil and the world.

Three women were working side-by-side in a doctor's office. They were discussing the need for our nation to retaliate against the Moslem terrorists, who viciously attacked our country on September 11, 2001. One of the women expressed

her opinion that "Moslems believe in the same God as Christians do." Immediately the other two confessed the truth: Moslems deny that Jesus Christ is true God, and therefore they do *not* believe in the same God as Christians do. There followed the statement of another worker to the effect that she did not know how God could condemn all Moslems to hell for not believing in Jesus. Two Christian women were able to share the gospel, but first they had to defend the truth.

The defense of the truth and the proclamation of the gospel go together, like two sides of the same coin: The Gospel cannot be consistently *given* to others unless a defense of the truth is also given, even as one person cannot properly say, "I'll give you this side of the coin, but not the other." Neither can one *firmly hold* the gospel without also holding to the defense of the truth, any more than he can say, "I will hold this side of the coin, and let the other fall from my hand." If one gives or loses one side of a coin, he must also give or lose the other side. If we give or lose the defense of the truth, we must also give or lose the proclamation of the gospel. Again and again the history of churches demonstrates this very thing. On the other hand, we recall the promise of our Lord to the "faithful" church in Philadelphia: Because they had "kept" (held to, obeyed = TEEREO) His Word, He had opened a door to them for the proclamation of the gospel to their fellow man.

How can we expect a mission "door" to remain open to us, if we do not *keep* God's Word -- hold to and obey it as the truth? In going through the old E-mail messages after returned from vacation, I found that several of our brethren in the pastoral ministry had been discussing a discipline problem that is on the increase in our churches as in others: the unscriptural divorce. The word "excommunication" came up — a hard saying of God's word, hardly kept in the churches of our day.

Last week I explained to our women's group that there comes a time when we must inform the clearly impenitent sinner that he has cut himself off from His Savior's saving grace and His Church, and that, without sincere repentance he cannot be saved. I further explained that when a Christian congregation, having followed the procedure outlined in Matthew 18 and I Corinthians 5, officially acknowledges that an impenitent sinner has demonstrated such an attitude toward the Christian Church and its Means of Grace, this is called "excommunication." I told the gathering that this is seldom done in the erring churches, where sentiment rules and outward numbers are more

important than the eternal salvation of souls. "But Pastor," a concerned lady interrupted, "Some won't like you if you bring up excommunication."

When has it ever been *safe* to preach the gospel or live it's life as individuals or as a Christian congregation? There are always costs involved, even as our Lord warned His disciples on more than one occasion (cf. Matthew 10:16-39, 16:24, John 15:18-21). God preserve us from compromising and surrendering any portion of the Gospel's message to save our own skin or face before men. To proclaim the Gospel can never be a safe thing to do, because the darkness hates the light and rages against its beams wherever they shine. The various shades of persecution push back our small faith so that we often hide its light. Small wonder that our Lord must encourage us to "let our lights *shine.*"

Of course, our *witnessing for the truth*, will meet with opposition from the Father of Lies and his comrades in the world. If we are merely proclaiming a message — like so many hucksters who proclaim financial prosperity for Christians, or have some other idol-pill or spiritual drug to sell — then we are no threat to the goals of the devil. But we are testifying that our faith in the merits of Christ *alone* has given us peace with God and the certain hope of eternal life. There is *witness* to our preaching not only of the inclusiveness of the gospel of Christ, but also of its exclusiveness. We are declaring to a fallen world, to Moslem, Mormon, Mason, or impenitent, not only that *God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that* ***whosoever*** *believes in Him should not perish have everlasting life,* but also that Christ is the *only truth, the only Way, and the only Life, and* ***no one comes unto the Father except through the Son*** (John 14:6). As witnesses in our preaching we are called to proclaim God's truth, not that which comes from us, but the truth that comes from Him — **"that which we have seen and heard."**

II.

WE ARE ALSO WITNESSES WHO KNOW THE NEED TO TELL THE TRUTH FOR THE SAKE OF OUR FELLOW SINNERS.

When someone is on trial for a crime he has committed, an honest witness takes the stand for the sake of helping others. He has something to tell that will benefit another person or persons. We are passionately involved as *witnesses in our preaching*, because we are convinced that above, over, and through all else, the truth *must be told and defended* in order to save life and property — *the lives of sinners who are the property of our Redeemer.*

"WE CANNOT HELP BUT SPEAK!"

Confessional*istic* or confessional*ism* are terms that many erring churches would apply to the CLC, perhaps characterizing our position as a type of spiritual disease, a narrowing of the blood vessels of both mind and heart that diminishes our ability to be evangelical. But ours is not "The Church of the Lutheran Confessional*istics,"* nor are we "The Church of Lutheran Confessional*ism.* We are a church which fully subscribes to the historic confessions (the *corpus doctrinae*) of the Lutheran Church, not so that we may confront people with the truth and win religious arguments with them, but so that we might invite people to the truth and win them to Jesus.

This is no disease, but the natural mind-set of those who believe in the power of the God's Word to convert poor sinners to Christ. *"For Luther and his followers, to be confessional meant not only to accept the content of documents which properly present the Biblical truth, but also to confess, to set that truth winsomely before the people who frequent the marketplace and who engage in the political discussion and decision-making of society. It was also natural for Luther to confess the faith publicly because of his understanding of the way in which the confessed Word creates faith in its hearers. Furthermore, it was natural for him to confess the faith by condemning false doctrine. He believed that sin and evil sprint ultimately from doubting God's Word. The doubt and deception in false teaching must be labeled and countered. Therefore, Luther's followers did what came naturally to them when they were invited*

to confess the Word of the Lord at Augsburg." [1]

The *anathemas* of the Augsburg Confession, for example, were to clarify what the confessors meant by their wording, *NOT* to express their desire for the eternal harm of errorists. The authors "chose their words carefully so that even their enemies might listen." [2] To illustrate: Three years ago our church in West Columbia changed its name from *Holy Trinity Independent Lutheran Church* to *Holy Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church -- CLC.* By so doing we purposely gave expression to the fact that we are an *evangelical (good news announcing) and confessional Lutheran Church.* We were concerned that the word "independent" in our church name suggested to others a defensive/paranoid posture, that is more ready to pounce than to proclaim the Gospel. As Christian witnesses to the truth of salvation, our goal is not to confront but to *invite* our neighbors to hear the Gospel. If I may suggest the distinction: a church that is "confessional*istic*" or that is afflicted with "Confessional*ism*" likes to confront, people and do battle *against* them, while an "evangelical and confessional" church likes to invite people to hear of Christ's battle *for* them.

At this point let us be warned: The concern that a Christian congregation should not be "against too much," lest it offend against the proclamation of the gospel, is misleading. The word "too" is too subjective. What is "too" much? At what point should Christian churches say: "We dare not oppose another of the world's godless opinions, actions, or organizations, or no one will listen to the gospel of salvation? Where is there even a hint of such a concern in the inspired Gospels, Acts, or the Epistles?

Church history, particularly during the Reformation era, was fraught with controversy, much that would be seen as "negative" and "offensive" to many of today's churches. And yet, in defending the truth Luther witnessed to Christ, proclaiming His gospel most clearly. It's not how much or how many are spoken against by the Christian congregation that is important in our witnessing of Christ, but simply *HOW and WHY* the much and the many are opposed.

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[1] Confessing the Faith --- Reformers Define the Church, 1530-1580, Robert Kolb, p. 24, Concordia Publishing House, 1991.

[2] Ibid., p. 36

Whether or not Christ's witnesses ought to be "against" yet another teaching, practice, or organization of man, should never be decided on the basis of whether we think we have reached the saturation level of opposition to the things of this world. There is great danger in this sort of subjective reasoning. Rather, may we be led always to oppose *everything* that contradicts the objective truth of God's Word because of the potential damage to the property of our Lord Jesus — precious, blood-bought souls! In this way the saving truth of the Gospel of Christ will be upheld and held up before fallen mankind as a clear and precious jewel from heaven without fracture or flaw, a pearl of great price for which the sinner would gladly sell everything he has.

At the same time, as we teach and preach we must be careful not give the impression that we are "standing up for Jesus *against* the world." We are not! Rather, we are "standing up *with* Jesus (i.e., in defense of Him and His saving truth) *for* the world." [3] We need to teach and remind our people that the New Testament does not emphasize the disciples of Christ as "soldiers" over against the world, but as WITNESSES. True, Ephesians 6:10 ff. does picture us as "soldiers," but only in a *defensive* posture — not as soldiers on the offensive *against* the world, but as soldiers who must "stand against the wiles of the *devil,*" and who do not "wrestle *against flesh and blood,*" "but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places."

As *witnesses* of the saving gospel of Christ in our preaching and teaching we are anxious to get our message out to all people, including Christians who are in error. But if we are witnessing and confessing what we believe to be *truth,* then by implication, all opinion and teaching to the contrary must be rejected as *false.* Martin Luther and the Lutheran Church of the Reformation in his day gave witness concerning the Gospel by also condemning all that opposed it. As the Gospel is proclaimed, its *truth* must be defended, so that it does not become distorted and perverted (Galatians 1:7), losing its God-given definition and power to save.

"The faith of Luther and the confessors at Augsburg was Christocentric without

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[3] For this reason, I have seldom used the well-known hymn, "Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus, You soldiers of the Cross!" On those rare occasions that I have used this hymn in the worship service, I have explained how it is that we should see ourselves as "soldiers" *for* Jesus.

being Christomonistic." The Augsburg Confession does not reduce the Bible to "simple pieties regarding Jesus." "'Christ alone' does not *complete,* but rather *permeates* the teaching of the church, as the church has always confessed." [4] The relationship of the proclamation of the gospel to the defense of the truth is similar to the relationship between the gospel itself (*the norma normans)* and the confession of the church (*the norma normata).* Just as the Gospel is the standard that establishes the norm of what is to be believed, and that normative confession is governed by the norming Gospel, so also the proclamation of the gospel ought to govern every defense of the truth.

Cast into propositional form, our thinking should be:
Every defense of the Truth ***is*** a proclamation of the Gospel.

Our thinking should NOT be:
In defending the truth there ***may be*** a proclamation of the Gospel.

This means, that neither we, nor those who hear us witness in our preaching/teaching/confessing, should need to "dig deeply" to find the proclamation of Jesus as the Savior of sinners. This applies to every "hard saying" that we must defend in our witnessing.

This means that is Jesus Christ - Savior is not an "afterthought" to be plugged into our sermons in order that we may sound positive to our hearers and give them something that will make them feel good before they leave church. We are called to be *witnesses not psychologists;* we are commissioned by our Lord to proclaim the objective truth because it *is their only salvation,* not because it *feels good.*

This means that we do not need to determine the "confessional stance" of every one we meet before we make use of an opportunity to proclaim the Gospel of forgiveness and salvation in the world's Redeemer.

This means that we ought to train our people to be better witnesses by helping them to recognize that Jesus Christ - *Savior* is the heart and center of our confession of God's Truth revealed in Holy Scripture. We need to improve the Bible study skills

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[4] Ibid., p. 32

and knowledge our people, rebuild their understanding of Christian doctrine, and help them see that our witness is about the evangel -- the good news concerning Christ, and nothing less.

Who is sufficient for such things?
"But our sufficiency is from God" (2 Cor. 3:5) that He may receive the glory.
So help us, Lord!

Pastor Vance Fossum
Southeastern Pastoral Conference of the CLC
Zion Lutheran Church,
Lawrenceville, Georgia
September 2001

ADDENDUM

We of the CLC, beginning with our clergy, must be continually watchful for those "pitfalls of orthodoxy" of which we have often reminded ourselves through our 40 years of grace. However, let us be thankful and praise our God for every evidence that the *witness* of our preaching is both a proclamation of the gospel and a defense of the truth. We mention just two examples that recently came to our attention.

■ In a chapel talk at ILC, Professor John Pfeiffer, president of our synodical school, addressed the issue of why a female should not be elected to serve as student council president at Immanuel. His words demonstrate that central concern that we are witnessing to Christ when we defend the truth.

"Is ILC engaged in the work of the Church? I am sure that we all agree that the primary work of ILC is church work. *Proclaiming the good news of forgiveness is the foremost function of this school.* We exist for the purpose of training young men and women to carry out this function as laymen, pastors, and teachers.

"This does not mean that everything we do is spiritual in nature. On the other hand, everything that we do is intended, in some way, to support the primary, spiritual function of the school. Here at ILC, co-curricular activities may not seem to have much to do with the primary function of the school. However, it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to operate this school without such things as sports, plays, musicals, band, strings, publications, etc. Young people need an outlet for their energies and a way to exercise their talents.

"Co-curricular activities do not exist for their own sake, but for the sake of the Gospel . . . that is to help make it possible for us to have a school where we can teach, and train others to teach, the Word of God.

"Student Council is a co-curricular activity. It involves students from every class level . . . from high school freshmen to seminary seniors. Insofar as it involves the seminary, it involves men. There are also men and women on the college level. — This answers the third question: yes, there are men and women in our student body.

"So the question arises, should a girl be in authority over the men at ILC? *Since the primary role of the school is to proclaim the Gospel* and since every aspect of our work here is intended to serve the primary role, this is a valid question. It seems to

me that the answer should be, "No." A girl should not be student body president.

"Even if I was unsure about the right and the wrong of this, I would still make the same decision. Why? Because, I would rather do that which is sure **not** to be a violation of the will of God, than to do something that might **possibly** be a violation of His will." (Chapel address by ILC President, John Pfeiffer)

■ Our CLC Missions web site begins with this statement of purpose: "It is our single purpose to be a Christian church which strives to proclaim the saving gospel of Jesus Christ as revealed in the Bible, by which alone man can know the true God and the way to eternal life." Compare with the following "E-News" report from David Koenig our Foreign Missionary on August 9, 2001:

"While at the Gurukul Lutheran Theological College in search of Hindi catechisms for our work in the Andaman Islands, I had a chance to witness.

"Gurukul is the seminary for the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of India, which unites ten Lutheran churches here and also has other denominational teachers. The largest Luheran church in India is in Andhra Pradesh, where the CLCI is located. The Andhra Evangelical Lutheran Church, part of the UELCI, has perhaps 700,000 members.

"I got into quite a discussion with a few of the students from Andhra on the differences between us. At first one fellow said they agree with what I had said so far. But the more we got into it the more it was obvious they had a different view of the Bible. The one fellow I talked with the most didn't even want to say there was a hell where unbelieving Hindus and Moslems went.

"The issue of women's ordination, which has caused us to have contacts in Tanzania, was accepted among these Lutherans in India. "Because I had talked of us being conservative, I was asked to explain it.

"The ten United Lutheran churches were not only unionistic among themselves, but with other denominations. We got to visiting briefly about the Lutheran World Federation and the compromising statement on unity with the Catholic church on justification.

"These and other issues are prompting us to have a friendly lunch when I am back in Chennai for the Uthukottai pastors' catechism examinations around Sept. 4th. We are sending two good hermeneutics books (principles of interpreting Scripture) to a couple men). They were interested to an extent. Pray that the Word has its effect

on these men and that the lunch is a time for feeding not only the belly, but faith with the Word. One man said that these things I had been saying were what he had held to until he came to Gurukul. But now . . . !

"Be thankful for what we have, the Word, the Word, the Word."