

The Dangers of Subjectivism and Its Influence on Our Theology and Church Life

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Several years ago, Debbie Boone had a No. 1 hit entitled “You Light Up My Life.” For many, the song was a simple love song: “You light up my life, you give me hope to carry on, you fill my world with love,” and so on. Others, knowing that Pat Boone’s daughter was a born-again Christian, presumed that she was singing about and to Jesus Christ. And maybe you remember that this song, viewed on the one hand as describing human love and on the other as describing love for Jesus, had a closing line which ought to have caused more than a little discomfort. Boone crooned, “It can’t be wrong if it feels so right.” “Wait a minute!” we indignantly exclaim, “Just because something feels good doesn’t make it right in the sight of God! Only God’s Word can be a reliable guide for living in a God-pleasing manner!” But in a world of moral relativism, where ethical decisions are routinely made based on individual situations, most people have lost the objective measure of what sin really is. Instead of recognizing sin as an offense against God, a violation of his law, a missing the mark of the perfect standard required to be righteous, man now defines sin as whatever causes me or someone else to lose self-esteem. We have now entered the kingdom where everyone is king. It’s the period of the judges, revisited. Everyone does what is right *in his own eyes*.

This is the world of subjectivism. It is a realm where people base their ideas about God and his attitude toward them on their feelings and their experience, and not on the Bible alone. Unfortunately, the many people trapped in religious subjectivism have no true certainty for their salvation. That makes this kingdom one of hopelessness, despair, doubt, and manufactured emotionalism instead of the certainty, confidence, and genuine sorrow and joy produced by God with His objective message of sin and grace. In the kingdom of subjectivism, Satan is laughing as his lying signs and wonders deceive even the elect, if that were possible, causing them to doubt and distrust the Word and promise of God and therefore God himself, and look for a foundation of sand.

What is subjectivism? Subjectivism, simply stated, proclaims as “Holy Spirit” and “spiritual” what is neither; for subjectivism is any and every attempt to seek or to teach others to seek the Holy Spirit’s presence, activity, operation, and blessing apart from the divinely appointed means of grace, the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. Because without the work of the Holy Spirit, salvation is impossible, subjectivism in every form threatens to rob the soul of the certainty of forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. This is why Luther, in the Smalcald Articles, spoke so urgently in this way:

In a word, enthusiasm inheres in Adam and his children from the beginning to the end of the world, having been implanted and infused into them by the old dragon, and is the origin, power, and strength of all heresy, especially of that of the Papacy and Mahomet. Therefore we ought and must constantly maintain this point, that God does not wish to

deal with us otherwise than through the spoken word and the Sacraments. It is the devil himself whatsoever is extolled as Spirit without the Word and Sacraments.¹

That last comment is especially worth bearing in mind. This has been Satan's most subtle yet dangerous line of attack on God's people since Eden. Eve was led to trust her senses ("When she saw that the fruit was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it" [Gen. 3:61].) over the Word of God ("You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die" [Gen. 2:17]). So Luther's warning is fitting for Christians in every day and age, for we do battle against the same wily foe:

Luther explains that the practical result can only be despair if we do not learn, and daily learn anew, to cling to the external Word of the Gospel against all our feelings and perception. He says: "Over against all that reason suggests or would measure or fathom, yes, all that our senses feel and perceive, we must learn to cling to the Word and simply judge according to it."²

This is because the Holy Ghost is promised to us and carries out his sanctifying work only in and through the Gospel. It may occur to Lutherans familiar with Luther's explanation of the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed that only the call to faith is "by the Gospel." We say, "I believe that I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Christ, my Lord, nor come to him, but the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel enlightened me with his gifts, etc." But that was not Luther's intention at all. In the Latin version the explanation reads, "*Sed Spiritus Sanctus per evangelium me vocavit donis illuminavit, in recta fide sanctificavit et conservavit.*" The true sense of this is "The Holy Ghost through the Gospel called me; the Holy Ghost through the Gospel enlightened me with his gifts; the Holy Ghost through the Gospel sanctified me and kept me in the one true faith." Religious Subjectivism, also known as Enthusiasm, takes the Spirit out of the Gospel and asserts His immediate operation.

Enthusiasm, as a term, was formerly recognized only as a pejorative. Now it seems to carry a positive connotation of mere excitement. An "enthusiast" is, etymologically, someone who has or claims to have "God inside (en-theo)." To understand Luther and the confessions, we must realize that an enthusiast, to the Reformers, was someone who looked within himself for God's Spirit instead of looking to God's promised means of grace. The enthusiasts of the 16th century were as vicious in their opposition to Martin Luther as were the papists. Enthusiasm has been, alternately, a vicious maledictor and a subtle contradictor of orthodox Lutheranism. Luther was vilified by Carlstadt and Muentzer, nearly deceived by Zwingli's dissimulation at Marburg, undermined by Melancthon's humanistic indifferentism and compromising spirit. After Luther's death, the Lutheran church was graciously preserved via the Formula of Concord after more than thirty years of division and controversy caused by the Lutheran enthusiasts. These Lutheran enthusiasts, followers of Melancthon, often depicted themselves as brothers, fellow adherents of the Augustana, all the while actually holding to Reformed doctrine in the articles of conversion, justification, and the means of grace.

¹ *Smalcald Articles*, Part III, Article VIII, p. 497,9.

² Pieper, Francis. *Christian Dogmatics*, Volume III, p. 141.

Enthusiasm and subjectivism resurfaced in the 17th century as Pietism and in the 20th as the charismatic renewal. Only through the divinely assisted herculean efforts of God's servants Bading, Hoenecke, and Missouri's Walther was our own Wisconsin Synod graciously rescued from its pietistic, enthusiastic origins. A goodly portion of this essay will treat of the historical inroads of Reformed doctrine into the Lutheran church by way of the appearances, defeats, and resurgences of enthusiastic subjectivism. After all, those who do not know history are condemned to repeat its mistakes. And for us, the stakes are too high—the salvation of souls—for us to proffer the excuse that we don't like history or find it boring. Satan would like nothing better than to poison our Synod's rich doctrinal health with a renewed dose of enthusiasm, freely taken for its promised "high" by those who are ignorant of its addictive and destructive nature. That's why we'll also consider the insidious way enthusiasm has made headway and is seemingly on the increase in our Wisconsin Synod. It is assumed that this is what the conference is seeking, as the topic assigned is "*The Dangers of Subjectivism and its influence on OUR Theology and Church Life.*" Our conference is one of many which have recently considered this very topic worthy of urgent study, suggesting that others have the identical perception. All three Michigan District Conferences heard Prof. John Brenner's essay *Pietism: Past and Present* in 1989-91. Paul Prange delivered *The Effects of the Age of Pietism on the Lutheran Church* to the South Central District in 1991. The Western Wisconsin District, Central Conference heard Curt Holub's *The Pietism of the New Evangelicals: A Confusion of Justification and Sanctification* just last year. Two of Northwestern Publishing House's bestsellers (Harold Senkbeil's *Sanctification* and J. Kincaid Smith's *What's Going On Among the Lutherans?*) contain lengthy sections dealing with this very subject. The evidence is more than scant. The subjectivism of Pietism is alive-and-well and gaining ground in the WELS. But our attention to such incidences ought not to be condemned as "legalistic," "unloving," or "judgmental." On the contrary, were we to simply discuss the confusion between justification and sanctification among the Reformed, the liberal theology of Higher Criticism in ELCA, the charismatic renewal in Missouri, and so on, we in the WELS might imagine ourselves immune to subjectivism and its dangers because we are so unshakeably orthodox. But we dare not trust our WELS-ness to see us through. Nor ought we foolishly believe the logical fallacy that just because someone in the WELS said it, it must be orthodox. As Prof. Carl Lawrenz put it,

Do we not often hear our people say: This is what our pastor, our church, our synod teaches; our pastor, our teacher, our church approves this and is against that; our synod has spoken in this matter? Of course, there is nothing wrong involved if they really mean to say, as is often the case: our pastor teaches this because it is God's word; our church is against these things because they are against God's word. We also know, however, that many do not mean it in this way, that they show very little interest and concern to be personally convinced that what their pastor and their church teach, approve, and oppose rests firmly on God's Word.³

The admonition to "test the spirits, to see whether they are of God" is not limited to those outside the sphere of our church fellowship.

³ Lawrenz, Carl. "The Absolute Authority of the Word of God in Matters of Faith and Life," *Our Great Heritage, Volume I*, p. 30

Wherever enthusiasm occurs, we “watchmen for the house of Israel” must move to quench it. We are confessional Lutherans, as our solemn pledge and promise at our ordinations declared, and which our subscription to our congregational and synodical constitutions underscore. Therefore, we will, by God’s grace, do as our confessions strongly say we must:

The enthusiasts should be rebuked with great earnestness and zeal, and should in no way be tolerated in the Church of God, who imagine that God, without any means, without the hearing of the divine Word, and without the use of the holy Sacraments, draws men to Himself, and enlightens, justifies, and saves them.⁴

And further:

We have neither part nor fellowship with their errors, be they many or few, but reject and condemn them, one and all, as wrong and heretical, and contrary to the Scriptures of the prophets and apostles, and to our Christian Augsburg Confession, well grounded in God’s Word.

Namely, for instance, the erroneous, heretical doctrines of the Anabaptists, which are to be tolerated and allowed neither in the Church, nor in the commonwealth, nor in domestic life, when they teach:

1. That our righteousness before God consists not only in the sole obedience and merit of Christ, but in our renewal and our own piety in which we walk before God; which they, for the most part, base upon their own peculiar ordinances and self-chosen spirituality, as upon a new sort of monkery.⁵

Yes, the enemy is Satan. But if Satan only showed up in horns and red tights and a pitchfork, or only in obvious attacks such as devil-worship or Humanism, he’d be an easy mark. But he doesn’t. His covert masks of subjectivism and enthusiasm are more dangerous than his overt ones because of their subtlety and their ability to pretend to be orthodox. May God the Spirit, through His Holy Word, graciously give us the strength and the conviction to wage a pitched battle and contend for the faith once for all entrusted to the saints.

SCRIPTURE’S TRUTH IS OBJECTIVE

A. The Scriptures-the Holy Spirit’s Inspiring work

That the Holy Spirit comes to people through the Scriptures is self-evident from the fact of the Holy Scriptures’ inspiration. Peter wrote, “No prophecy had its origin in the will of men, but holy men of God spoke as they were carried along by the Holy Ghost (II Peter 1:21).” Inspiration is not to be thought of as a secretary taking dictation, but that God used the individual human writing styles as the Holy Spirit carried their writing along. The apostles recognized that the writers of Scripture spoke by the Holy Spirit. In Acts 1, Peter says, “Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the mouth of David concerning Judas... (v16).” Again in Acts 4:25, Peter and John lead the believers in prayer, “You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David...” Here is the objective

⁴ *Formula of Concord*, Thorough Declaration, Article II, p. 911, 80.

⁵ *Formula of Concord*, Thorough Declaration, Art. XII, 1097, 8.

truth: whoever would know God's Word must look in the inspired Scriptures. Because the inspired Scriptures are the very word of God, they are the only absolute authority for our doctrine and life. No one can create new articles of faith, not even an angel. Well did Prof. Lawrenz confess this attitude of the believing Christian toward God's inspired Scriptures:

In confessing that the word of God is the absolute authority in matters of faith and life we mean to say that only the word of God can finally tell us what may properly be an object of our Christian faith and what properly belongs to a God-pleasing life. Every other norm or guide that we may use for our Christian faith and life, even Luther's Small Catechism or any other confessional writing of our church, can properly serve as such a guide only because it agrees with God's word and presents the word of God. It has no authority of its own, but whatever true authority it has is derived from the word of God. There is no other independent authority, norm, or guide for our faith and life, supplementing the word of God⁶

We are correct in stating that the Holy Spirit works through the Scriptures because the Scriptures are the Holy Spirit's work. Because the Scriptures are inspired, they are inerrant. It is inconceivable that God, in whose Son "no deceit was found in his mouth," and about whose Scriptures it is said that they "are never broken," would prevaricate, deceive, or mislead us. The idea, therefore, of contradictions and errors in Scripture, be they historical, scientific, geographical, or moral, is a *non sequitur*. God is holy; God cannot lie; the Scriptures are God's Word; therefore the Scriptures are inerrant. It is clear that anyone who doubts the inerrancy of Scripture is operating in the kingdom of subjectivism, for he must use his reason to determine what of Scripture is or is not the Word of God and therefore authoritative for him in matters of faith and life.

Because the Scriptures are God's Word, they also are clear. The psalmist wrote, "Your Word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path (Psalm 119:105)." What kind of light for our life's path would an unclear Word be? Scripture is clear, even if our frail human understanding cannot fathom or comprehend what it is telling us. Jesus' words of institution clearly say "This is my body," for example. It is the Zwinglis, Calvins, and other sacramentarians who level the charge of ambiguity against Scripture when it is actually their unwillingness to believe what their reason cannot grasp. As Dr. Mueller points out, it is therefore our duty as faithful preachers and teachers of the Word to let the Scriptures speak for themselves and let Scripture be its own interpreter, rather than to call something "unclear" and force our own opinions on Scripture:

Whoever, therefore, rejects the perspicuity of the Bible (papists, enthusiasts, modern rationalistic theologians) must also reject the basic truth that Scripture is the only *principium cognoscendi*, thus compelling the Christian believer to base his faith upon the human expositions either of the Church or of individual Bible scholars.

Keeping in mind that Holy Scripture is a clear book, the Christian exegete must scrupulously refrain from foisting upon its sacred text his own subjective views (*eisegesis*) and regard it as his sole function to exhibit the true meaning of God's clear word (*exegesis*: the leading forth of the sense of Scripture); in other words, he must allow Scripture to interpret itself. Negatively the function of the Christian exegete may

⁶ Lawrenz, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

be described as the removal of all textual difficulties by proper grammatical instruction and of all misinterpretations by erring expositors, positively, as the exhibition of the true sense of the text in the light of its context and parallel passages.

Hence a true Christian exegete must possess the following qualifications: a) he must regard the whole Bible as the inerrant Word of God; b) he must treat Holy Scripture as a book which is clear in itself; c) he must conscientiously point out the real sense of the text; and d) he must be able to refute the erroneous human opinions which false teachers or misguided orthodox theologians have foisted upon the text.⁷

If a person suggests or asserts that Scripture is not clear in something or other, he is in the kingdom of subjectivism. The manner in which Scripture's principles are applied may allow for so-called "gray areas." But Scripture itself clearly reveals everything upon which to build our faith and with which to guide our lives.

A second consequence of the inerrancy and inspiration of the Holy Scriptures is the fact that they are efficacious. God's Word is not an ineffective tool; rather, it is called the "Sword of the Spirit (Eph. 6:17)," "The power of God for or the salvation of everyone who believes (Rom. 1:16)," and "Useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness." God promises that "As the rain and snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: it will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire, and achieve the purpose for which I sent it (Isaiah 55: 10-11)." "God's Word produces the results God desires. It is in the kingdom of subjectivism that pastors and teachers need to help the word along rather than simply proclaim it faithfully because they don't really believe the Word can work. Strategies, plans, goals, how-to books, programs, timetables, statistics, and especially gauging ministers of the Gospel by their "effectiveness" are man's business-world methodology, and anyone who forgets that the word produces fruit in God's measure, sometimes more but often less than what we set as our goal, is a likely candidate to deny the efficacy of God's Word. As Dr. Greg Jackson has written:

Lutherans stress faithfulness, and Enthusiasts emphasize effectiveness, because Lutherans trust God's activity through the Means of Grace, while Enthusiasts consider God's Word a dead letter unless it is made attractive and relevant.⁸

What a comforting thought that is to the public minister of Word and Sacrament! Instead of being either burdened with guilt for not being effective enough or puffed up with pride for imagining that our great skills have built our churches, we give all glory to God alone! It is through his word that souls are won and kept for Christ!

In confessing the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture objectively over against the subjectivism of the enthusiasts, we must also confess that Scripture is the all-sufficient Word of God. Everything that God intends for us to know for our salvation is contained therein. There may be mysteries in Scripture, incomprehensible to us now, for we now merely "know in part. But then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known (I Cor. 13:12)." In this way, the believer allows God to remain hidden where he wants to stay hidden. As Dr. Becker put it:

⁷ Mueller, John Theodore. *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 138.

⁸ Jackson, Gregory, *Contemporary Theological Issues in the Book of Concord: The Resurgence of Enthusiasm*, p. 10.

Because God is a God who hides himself, we are not to seek him out by our speculations. To seek him in this way is fraught with danger. “Nothing is more dangerous,” Luther says, “than to build one’s own road to God and to climb up by our own speculations.” What he calls the *sensum speculativum* must be held in check. Those who seek God in this way will always fall into error; their reason will always seek in vain. The questions that arise from that curiosity which pries into the inscrutable wisdom of God are full of danger and destruction. Adam sought God this way in the garden, and the devil did the same in heaven, and “they both found him, but not without great damage.” For this reason speculative theology belongs to the devil in hell.⁹

Speculative theology is familiar to anyone who has heard the very subjective assertions about God’s attitudes toward abortion, homosexuality, or even original sin. “I don’t think a loving God would deprive a troubled teenager the right to choose.” “Jesus never once condemned homosexuality in the gospels, and neither can I.” “If your God is a God who enjoys roasting babies in hell, I don’t want anything to do with such a monster.” Speculative man enjoys creating God in his own image, we might say.

God himself tells us that His word is sufficient also in the sense that it is complete. We are not to expect any further revelation. Certainly the dreams and visions by which God spoke in Biblical times were real ways God chose to speak to certain believers. But, as the writer to the Hebrews began his epistle, God has now spoken his final word: “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son ... (Hebrews 1:1-2).” God’s Word condemns those who add to it, subtract from it, or distort it for any reason. He alone reserved that right:

Ever since God has deigned to impart his written word to men, his church has been directed to it for its faith and life. No man was of himself to add to it or to subtract from it. It was for God himself alone to add to it until his revelation through the written word was complete.¹⁰

Therefore, whatever dream, ecstatic speech, vision, message, sign, gut feeling, and the like, which is touted as God’s communication, is part of the kingdom of subjectivism. It only takes the soul away from God’s Word. The reader of Luther will find that the reformer often complains about the devil torturing him with confusing little “signs” that he should do something or other; but He knows his God’s voice is not so deceptive. God speaks to him alone in Word and Sacrament. The Holy Scriptures, the Holy Spirit’s book, are the inspired, inerrant, clear, efficacious, and sufficient Word of God. This we confess as the objective authority for all matters of faith and life.

B. Justification—The Holy Spirit’s Saving Work

The doctrine of justification is the article by which the church stands or falls. It is the chief and fundamental article of faith. Any subjective deviation from what the Bible reveals about how

⁹ Becker, Siegbert, *The Foolishness of God*, p. 15.

¹⁰ Lawrenz, Carl. “The Absolute Authority of the Word of God in Matters of Faith and Life,” *Our Great Heritage Vol I*, p. 21.

we receive the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation, makes doubtful and questionable what God has intended for certainty and comfort.

In the narrowest sense, the Holy Spirit's work in justification is to bring us to faith in the message of the Gospel. Justification is a forensic act entirely on God's part. This is what gives it objectivity. To call justification a forensic act of God means that "To justify" means "To declare the verdict of not guilty." It is the opposite of "To condemn", which means "To declare 'guilty.'" In the divine courtroom, every sinner stands before God as condemned by nature and by deed. But Jesus Christ, the innocent substitute for sinners, kept God's law perfectly in our stead. Jesus Christ bore our sins in his body on the tree. God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that in him we might become the righteousness of God. Since man's substitute has kept the law and served the sentence, God imputes Christ's work to every sinner. God declares the world of sinners to be not guilty, since the punishment merited, the wages earned by every sin of every sinner has been paid by the innocent suffering and death of Jesus Christ. This is why justification is an objective truth. It isn't conditional on anything subjective in us. We do not meet certain requirements in order to achieve or acquire forgiveness. God forgives sins by his grace, freely for or the sake of Christ. Because God's Word tells us that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting men's sins against them," and that "God so loved the world that He gave His one and only son," this is the objective certainty of our own forgiveness of sins. The truth that the world's sins are forgiven is my assurance that my own are forgiven. This is what Dr. Pieper meant when he said:

Through Christ's substitutionary satisfaction forgiveness has been provided for all men without exception and without any regard to their subjective condition.¹¹

By subjective condition is meant such things as faith, contrition, joy, happiness, love, and the like. Without this objective aspect to justification, no person could be sure and certain that they were forgiven before God and have eternal life. God has declared us forgiven, whether you believe it or not, whether you feel it or not, whether you're sorry for your sins or not, whether you're repentant or not. God has forgiven your sins and mine not if we are anything or if we do anything, but because Jesus did it all.

But of course not all human beings possess this forgiveness of sins. By God's gift of faith, Christ's righteousness, imputed to the world, is made our personal treasure. The act of coming to faith, becoming a Christian, appropriating the universal declaration of forgiveness of sins personally, is known as conversion. Conversion is often portrayed as something subjective, as something "I do." Many people speak of the time "When I came to the Lord" or "When I made my decision to surrender to Christ." Such introduction of the subjective element of the human will to the objective act of the Holy Spirit known as conversion is also a dangerous and salvation threatening error. It is impossible for natural man, by an act of free will, to believe in Jesus Christ nor come to him. It is impossible because by nature man is spiritually blind, as Paul writes the Corinthians, "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned (I Cor. 2:14)." Natural man is called spiritually dead: "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins (Eph. 2:1)." And even worse than dead, man's natural will

¹¹ Pieper, Francis, *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 203.

is an active enemy of God: “The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God (Rom. 8:7).”

For all of these reasons, conversion is always described in Scripture as an act the Holy Ghost performs upon the heart of man. It is called a regeneration or rebirth, of which Jesus says, “Unless a man is born again of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of heaven (John 3:5).” As little as we cooperated in our physical birth, so little did we cooperate in our spiritual rebirth. It was an action that happened to us, not that we caused or decided to bring about. Scripture also calls conversion a resurrection. In the Ephesians reference cited above, in which we were described as dead in trespasses and sins, the apostle continues, “But God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. (Eph. 2:5).” Conversion is a miracle, as real a miracle as Jesus’ raising of Lazarus from physical death. And as little as Lazarus contributed to that miracle with his efforts, as totally as that miracle was brought about by the miraculous call of the Savior’s voice, so is the miracle of a sinner being made spiritually alive by being converted to faith from the natural deadness of unbelief. It is not brought about by the subjective act of the human will. It is brought about entirely by the objective power of the Holy Spirit. Thus, when today’s skeptics need proof, need demonstrable indications of God’s power in order to believe, we may boldly agree with Pastor Clement:

The work of preaching the gospel and converting sinners to Christ so that they are eternally saved is the greater work! It is one example of power (God’s omnipotence) to put a sick or physically impaired person back on his feet. but it is a much greater example of power (God’s grace) to change an enemy of God into a person who repents and believes the gospel.¹²

In the realm of subjectivism are all synergists, Arminians, and decision theologians who make something in man responsible for his own conversion. Invariably this takes away glory from God and exalts man at least partially as his own savior.

In this connection ought to be discussed also the matter of repentance. Repentance is often subjectively portrayed as the activity of man, when it is actually the objective work of God on the human heart. To “repent” is to have a change of mind. It is a 180-degree turn from looking lovingly at sin and despising God’s will to doing just the opposite. Repentance embraces two parts, namely, contrition and faith. Contrition is another word for sincere sorrow over sin. Godly sorrow over sin is brought about by the preaching of God’s law. It is not manufactured by a sinner trying to feel sorry for his sin. Nor can you or I force someone to be sorry by telling them “You should be sorry!” The Law of God as a mirror if properly used, is the only mechanism to produce the real contrition that is part of true repentance. This is what Dr. Becker meant by saying:

Contrition is often in popular language defined as “being sorry for sin.” This definition, however, is rather vague and subject to a great deal of misunderstanding. Contrition is defined by the dictionaries as the state of being bruised or crushed. This definition is helpful in reminding us that contrition is something done to us rather than something done by us. Often Christians try to be sorry for their sins, as though it were something

¹² Clement, Arthur, *Pentecost or Pretense*, p. 140.

they had to do, and do not clearly recognize that contrition is something that happens to us when the Holy Spirit through the law convicts us of sin. That is why Luther often warned against repentance that we “manufacture” by ourselves.¹³

Thus both contrition and faith are part of the objective work of God’s Holy Spirit through Law and Gospel, properly distinguished and applied. In the kingdom of subjectivism, however, all is a human activity which must be performed in order to obtain forgiveness from God.

Perhaps nothing is as “subjective” as the matter of personal faith itself. What exactly is faith, and why do the Scriptures speak of our justification as being “by faith alone, apart from works of the Law?” Since our coming to faith, or conversion, is wrought by the Holy Spirit alone, we recognize that faith itself is “the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast. (Eph. 2:9)” Faith is that gift of God which receives another gift of God—the forgiveness of sins obtained by Christ for us. To be justified by faith does not mean that we stand before God as innocent because of faith. We do not answer the question “If you died tonight and stood before God and he asked you, ‘Why should I let you into heaven?’” with the words “Because I have faith.” Faith is the hand that receives God’s gift of Christ’s righteousness, but God does not impute to us this gift because we have a hand that can receive it, but by his grace alone. Faith is the means by which we are justified, but it is a divinely-bestowed, graciously imparted means.

Faith justifies not because of its quality or strength, but because of its object. The object of faith, that upon which faith rests, is Jesus Christ and the promises of God which He has made about what Jesus has done. It is impossible to speak of what faith is without speaking about God’s promises. Hebrews 11:1 says that “Faith is being sure of what we hope for, and certain of what we do not see.” The catalog of “heroes of faith” in that chapter lists examples of people who didn’t possess what God promised, but acted with the conviction that God was going to keep his word of promise. By faith Noah built an ark, we are told, because God had given his word that the world would be destroyed in a flood. Abraham is often called the “Father of believers;” his faith is always closely connected to God’s promise: “Yet he did not waver in unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised (Rom. 4:20-21). “ And again, “By faith Abraham, even though he was past age—and Sarah herself was barren—was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise (Hebrews 11:11).” Abraham’s justifying faith took God’s Word of promise regarding a son and a Savior to be true, even believing that God would find a way to keep his promise if Isaac were sacrificed on Mt. Moriah!

Our faith also rests on the objective promises of God in the same way as Abraham’s did. Certainly we have a more vivid conception of the Gospel and of God’s plan of salvation, but it is no less a faith that rests on God’s promises. Our eyes see only a suffering and dying Jesus Christ. God promises that your sins and mine were punished there. Faith takes God at His Word and considers him faithful who has made the promise. Unbelief calls God a liar, as Dr. Becker wrote, “Refusing to believe that our sins are forgiven is the same as accusing God of being a liar.”¹⁴ Faith trusts God’s promise that baptism is not simple water only, but it is a washing of rebirth. Faith trusts Jesus’ promise that his true body and blood are present in the Lord’s Supper. Faith trusts God’s promise that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have

¹³ Becker, Siegbert, “Contrition and Conversion,” *Our great Heritage, Vol. III*, p. 5.

¹⁴ S. Becker, “Universal Justification,” *Our Great Heritage, Volume III*, p. 59.

been called according to his purpose. Faith trusts God's promise that he is an ever present help in trouble. Faith trusts God's promises. God's faithfulness in keeping his promises produces and strengthens faith. However, subjectivism replaces the objective promises of God with faith itself as the object of faith. Such is the source of such meaningless advice as "Have faith," and "Pray more fervently." Far more meaningful and comforting is it to review the gracious promises of God. Prayer is not a means of grace, it is a human work which is a fruit of faith, not the bestower of faith.

Conversion to faith is the work of the Holy Spirit alone. Faith rests on the objective promises of God. It is the Gospel promise of God itself that is the means by which the Holy Spirit works to produce, strengthen, and cultivate the fruits of faith. This is why we correctly call the Gospel, or good news of what God has done for us and promised us in Christ, the means of grace. Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ (Rom. 10:17), we read in Scripture. Paul wrote Timothy, "From infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus (II Tim. 3:16)." It is impossible to conceive of a "faith" that is created or strengthened apart from the means of grace. How could there be faith in God's promises without the proclamation of the promises? This element of the promise is what also makes the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper visible means of grace. When Jesus gave his disciples and gives us his true body and blood, he promises "Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." When a person is baptized, we have God's promise "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children (Acts 2:38-39)." Here once again are the promises of God which alone can provide certainty of salvation in a slough of subjective despond, as Luther humbly and gratefully recognized:

When Martin Luther experienced the wrath of God, when he could not believe that God could be gracious to a miserable sinner like Martin Luther, he would assure himself with the words, "I have been baptized." This was not a superstitious sacramentalism which saw Baptism as a magical rite which put a person right with God. Rather, it was Luther's way of reminding himself that his assurance never came from anything that he could find in himself, it came from what God had done for him in Christ. Baptism was the reminder that before Luther ever dreamed of looking for God, God had been looking for him. It reminded him that his place before God was not assured by any accomplishment of his, but by the gracious forgiving love which God had for him.¹⁵

The Gospel is the power of God for the salvation of all who believe, and the Gospel comes only in the external word and sacraments and absolution. The work of preaching the Gospel Word and administering the Gospel sacraments and pronouncing the Gospel absolution of forgiveness of sins is the ministry of the Gospel. This is what Paul speaks of in II Corinthians 5:18ff:

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting is men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of

¹⁵ Bruner, Frederick & Hordern, William, *The Holy Spirit: Shy Member of the Trinity*, p. 71.

reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.

There is but one ministry, properly speaking. It is the ministry of reconciliation, of proclaiming the message of the Gospel promises in Word and Sacrament. It is sometimes confusing to speak of "ministry" in the broad sense of "service," because when any service done as a fruit of faith is called "ministry," then everyone is considered a minister. But not everyone is qualified or called for the ministry. It is a dangerous and subjective trend which trivializes the call into the public ministry when a person is called by the church as "Minister of janitorial service," or some such nonsense. That may be the Reformed view of "ministry," but for Lutherans who hold in high regard the means of grace it is not. How fitting and timely to hear of the Augsburg Confession's objective description of the ministry:

Article V: Of the ministry

That we may obtain this faith, the Ministry of Teaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Ghost is given, who works faith, where and when it pleases God, in them that hear the Gospel, to wit, that God, not for our own merits, but for Christ's sake, justifies those who believe that they are received into grace for Christ's sake.

They condemn the Anabaptists and others who think that the Holy Ghost comes to men without the external Word, through their own preparations and works.¹⁶

The Augsburg Confession also reminds us that the very call into the public ministry is not something subjective, as though a person can have a "gut feeling" or "inner call" into the ministry. Such subjectivism is often heard in Missouri circles from women who claim they have a call into the pastoral ministry but are forbidden by the human rules of the synod from acting upon it. Therefore, they must go to ELCA where they can follow their "call." However, though a person may have an inner conviction or a desire to serve his Lord in the public ministry,

No one should publicly teach in the church or administer the Sacraments unless he be regularly called.¹⁷

The external election or call by a specific congregation or school to serve in a specific capacity is what makes someone a minister—not his faith, not his desire to serve, not his ordination, and certainly not an "inner call."

Everything pertaining to the sinner's justification by faith is the work of the Holy Spirit who works through the objective and external word and promise of God. We often call this work of the Holy Spirit "sanctification" in the widest sense. But sanctification in the narrow sense, namely, the Christian life, is also the work of the Holy Ghost which he carries out through the same means of grace. We now consider the necessity of maintaining this objectivity when it comes to

C. Sanctification (The Christian Life)

¹⁶ *Augsburg Confession*, Article V, p. 45.

¹⁷ *Augsburg Confession*, Article XIV, p. 49.

The Christian does good works. No one else can do anything that pleases God, for “Without faith it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:60),” and “Whatever does not come from faith is sin (Romans 14:23),” and Jesus said that “Apart from me you can do nothing (John 15:5).” Good works are fruits of faith and, as such, are a response to the Gospel promises of God. A Christian acts, believing and trusting that God will keep his word. A Christian does not do good works in order to obtain blessing from God, but recognizes that every blessing is a blessing of God’s grace. A good work in God’s sight is one that happens spontaneously out of thanks and love for God, for “We love because he first loved us (I John 4:19).” Works motivated by compulsion, fear, or hoped for reward are works of the law, not fruits of the Spirit. Such works of the law may be considered mere civic righteousness. Although this point may seem controversial, it is Scriptural—mere civic righteousness is sin! It is pure subjectivism to assume that outward piety is a good thing in God’s sight no matter what the motivation! Such subjectivism is known by other names—legalism and moralizing. To moralize means to send the law to do the gospel’s work. It is thinking you can make someone a Christian by making them act like one. It is the subjectivism that lies at the root of the Reformed confusion of church and state, in which they in vain imagine that they are Christianizing the community or nation by passing laws against things, or by boycotting advertisers of dirty TV shows, thereby cleaning up the country. God gave the sword to the state, not the church, and he gave the gospel to the church, not the state. God gave the state the mission of defending body, life, and goods, and he gave the church the mission of defending the soul. These offices are not to be mixed or confused in the slightest. As Dr. Pieper succinctly put it,

If we desire to retain the Christian doctrine, namely, the doctrine that we are justified and saved by God’s grace through faith without the deeds of the Law, we must, for one thing, hold to the divinely ordained means of grace. And, secondly, we must be content with these means and refrain from employing the powers of the State to build the Church.¹⁸

In this way we can ensure that we are speaking objectively of true sanctification, the work of the Spirit, when the Law exposes sin, the Gospel provides the motivation, and the law again guides the grateful response. The Law can only tell me what I have to, must, and should do. The Gospel alone can make me want to serve Christ.

But Christians realize that we have a big enemy to our grateful lives of sanctification. It is the old sinful nature. A Biblical and therefore objective view of the Christian life after conversion is that it is a constant struggle between the New Man who loves to please God, and the sinful nature who hates to please God. Romans 7:15-25 is perhaps the most well-known treatment of this aspect of the Christian life (“The good that I want to do, I do not do, the evil that I do not want to do, that I keep on doing, etc.”). In the kingdom of subjectivism are all claims that a Christian can and must be perfect also in this life, or that if you were really sincere in your surrender to the Lord, you wouldn’t be a slave to sin any more, and the like. The Christian’s holy living is not the proof of salvation. The Formula of Concord discusses this aspect of the Christian life extremely well and conclusively:

¹⁸ Pieper, Francis, *op. cit.*, p. 183.

For as long as a person is not reborn, lives according to the law, and does its works merely because they are commanded, from fear of punishment or in hope of reward, he is still under the law. St. Paul calls the works of such a man “works of the law” in the strict sense, because his good works are extorted by the law, just as in the case of bondservants. Such people are saints after the order of Cain.

But when a person is born anew by the Spirit of God and is liberated from the law (that is, when he is free from this driver and is driven by the Spirit of Christ), he lives according to the immutable will of God as it is comprehended in the law and, in so far as he is born anew, he does everything from a free and merry spirit. These works are, strictly speaking, not works of the law but works and fruits of the Spirit, or, as St. Paul calls them, the law of the mind and the law of Christ. According to St. Paul, such people are no longer under law but under grace (Rom. 6:14, 8:2). Since, however, believers are not fully renewed in this life but the Old Adam clings to them down to the grace, the conflict between spirit and flesh continues in them. According to the inmost self they delight in the law of God; but the law in their members is at war against the law of their mind. Thus though they are never without law, they are not under but in the law, they live and walk in the law of the Lord, and yet do nothing by the compulsion of the law. As far as the Old Adam who still adheres to them is concerned, he must be coerced not only with the law but also with miseries, for he does everything against his will and by coercion, just as the unconverted are driven and coerced into obedience by the threats of the law (I Cor. 9:27; Rom. 7:18-19).

Believers, furthermore, require the teaching of the law so that they will not be thrown back on their own holiness and piety and under the pretext of the Holy Spirit’s guidance set up a self-elected service of God without his Word and command, as it is written, “You shall not do every man whatever is right in his own eyes, but heed all these words which I command you. You shall not add to it nor take from it” (Deut. 12:8, 28, 32).

Believers, furthermore, require the teaching of the law in connection with their good works, because otherwise they can easily imagine that their works and life are perfectly pure and holy. But the law of God prescribes good works for faith in such a way that, as in a mirror, it shows and indicates to them that in this life our good works are imperfect and impure, so that we must say with St. Paul, “I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted” (I Cor. 4:4). Thus, when Paul admonishes those who have been born anew to do good works, he holds up before them precisely the Ten Commandments (Rom. 13:9), and he himself learns from the law that his works are still imperfect and impure (Rom. 7:18-19). David says “I will run in the way of thy commandments” (Ps. 119:32), but also, “Enter not into judgment with thy servant; for no man living is righteous before thee” (Ps. 143:2).

The law demands a perfect and pure obedience if it is to please God. It does not teach us how and why the good works of believers are pleasing to God, even though in this life they are still imperfect and impure because of the sin in our flesh. But the Gospel teaches us that our spiritual sacrifices are acceptable to God through faith for Christ’s sake (I Pet. 2:5; Heb. 11:4, 13:15). In this respect Christians are not under the law but under grace because their persons have been freed from the curse and condemnation of the law through faith in Christ. Though their good works are still imperfect and impure, they are acceptable to God through Christ because according to their inmost self they do

what is pleasing to God not by coercion of the law but willingly and spontaneously from the heart by the renewal of the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, they continue in a constant conflict against the Old Adam. For the Old Adam, like an unmanageable and recalcitrant donkey, is still a part of them and must be coerced into the obedience of Christ, not only with the instruction, admonition, urging, and threatening of the law, but frequently also with the club of punishments and miseries, until the flesh of sin is put off entirely and man is completely renewed in the resurrection. There he will no longer require either the preaching of the law or its threats and punishments, just as he will no longer require the Gospel. They belong to the imperfect life. But just as they will see God face to face, so through God's indwelling Spirit they will do his will spontaneously, without coercion, unhindered, perfectly, completely, and with sheer joy, and will rejoice therein forever.¹⁹

The Formula highlights the Christian's continued need for the Law even after conversion. Because we still have a sinful nature, we need to be guided in what really is God-pleasing behavior and what may be a piety of our own creation. This is what Prof. Toppe was speaking of when he wrote:

Much of what passes for Christianity in America today is not only shallow, it is false. Much public "Christianity" doesn't know how deadly serious sin really is. Many American "Christians" believe that sin is only what their "Christianity" feels is sinful. They are not minded to repent of sins they don't believe are sins. Their hearts don't join in with the prayer "Lord, have mercy upon us," of the church's liturgy, and they do not know the miracle of grace and the real assurance of the gospel in the absolution and in the Gloria in Excelsis. They know too little about their sins, and so they know too little about their Savior.

What the Christian church in America needs today is less church strategy, fewer church growth strategies, less social involvement in national affairs; it needs more of the fundamental messages of John the Baptist: Repent, and behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.²⁰

In other words, just because you don't think or feel something is sinful doesn't mean it isn't. Abortion is sin not because we feel it is but because God's Word tells us it is. If I feel homosexuality is OK, does that make it so? But, lest we get Pharisaical in our approach to such subjective attitudes toward what's right and wrong, let's be sure and pull the beam out of our own eyes. If I feel that joint prayer with the heterodox is loving, for example, does that make it so? If I feel that God's established roles for man and woman are outdated, does that make it so? Of course not. We must consistently be on guard for such a subjective view of sanctification, and out of love for our Savior and His Word, yield to its guidance regardless of how our sinful nature feels about it.

One final aspect of the Holy Spirit's work, as confessed in our Apostles' Creed, is to call, gather, enlighten, and sanctify the Whole Christian church on earth. Although the identity of the members of the Holy Christian church is known only to God, who knows the heart, believers gather together around Word and Sacrament into visible Christian Churches. It is the will of

¹⁹ *Formula of Concord*, Solid Declaration, Article VI, "The Third Use of the Law," Tappert ed., p. 566-567.

²⁰ Toppe, Carlton, "When 'Christians' Judge Sin," *Northwestern Lutheran* 8-91, p. 278.

God that all of His word be preached and taught in its truth and purity. Out of love for the souls of believers, He commands us to watch out for those who cause divisions and offenses which are contrary to the teaching we have learned, and to keep away from them. Out of love for God's Word, out of love for those who are holding to unscriptural error, and out of love for our own souls, we obey this command and do not join in worship or mission work with those who persist in false doctrine in spite of admonition. The objective basis for determining whether unity in Scriptural doctrine exists is the person's outward confession of faith, which includes the doctrinal stance of any church or organization to which he belongs. This is not a judgment on the status of a person's faith. Such a subjective judgment belongs only to God. God's word clearly teaches that it is His will that all Christians have unity-but it must be unity based on the objective standard of all of God's Word, not an artificial and subjective "unity" based on feelings, "love," or piety.

The church may be identified by its marks. The Augsburg Confession states that "The Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered."²¹ These are objective identifying features, clearly distinguishable from subjective marks such as "the reciprocal love of its members" or "when I'm there I can just feel the Spirit's presence," or the holy life of the congregation. When the congregation comes together, then, for corporate worship, it is primarily to hear the Gospel and partake of the Sacrament. Although no specific form of worship is prescribed in Scripture, certain forms are obviously anti-means of grace and are focused not on God and the message of the Gospel, but are focused on man and his activity. Joel Gerlach comments on this very point in the *Northwestern Lutheran*:

The virus of amusement dependency also poses a threat to the church. A growing number of churchgoers are opting for church services which promise to entertain rather than to glorify God and to edify his people. For them the medium is more important than the message. The number of churches willing to sacrifice their heritage to accommodate those who want to be entertained is growing steadily. They close their eyes to the fact that the proper focus of worship is God, not man. Their agenda for worship is determined by what the audience wants rather than by what pleases the Lord. They advertise their services as a time for fun and excitement. Admittedly, worship forms are not prescribed in the Scriptures. But anyone who truly knows God in Christ ought to know that he doesn't invite us to worship so that we can be entertained. The directive to "worship God in the beauty of holiness" hardly seems like a rubric for finding ways to make worship another opportunity for fun and games.²²

Harold Senkbeil also contrasts the weakness of anthropocentric worship with theocentric and objective worship:

The Lutheran church has a rich legacy to offer in its worship. Here is reality, not symbolism. Here we have real contact with God: not as we come to him, but as he comes to us. He meets us in the proclamation of the Word. Here the Son of God distributes his actual body and blood for the assurance of the forgiveness of sins. Here

²¹ *Augsburg Confession*, Article VII, p. 47.

²² Gerlach, Joel, "Fun and Games in the Church, *Northwestern Lutheran* 9-15-91, p. 321.

the people of God gather to offer him their thanks, their praise, and their prayer. This is the real thing!

It's time for a new initiative in worship. People are longing for God. Where are they going to find him? In the shifting sands of their inner life or on the solid rock of the word of his gospel? How are they to offer him their thanks and praise? With trivial methods borrowed from the entertainment industry or in worship forms which focus on the praise of God's gracious glory? This is the kind of worship which lifts the heart while it exalts Christ! And this is what Lutheran worship does.²³

Worship forms that purposefully exclude the confession and absolution, that do not celebrate the Lord's Supper, that feature testimonials of how "the power of Jesus turned my life around" but do not proclaim the specific Gospel, that sing about and play upon human emotion, that are focused on man's piety without providing the proper motivation for it, that tarry for the Lord's revelation and feature ecstatic outbursts and call them "Spirit"—all these are the worship forms of the kingdom of subjectivism. The corporate worship of the true church (true on the basis of the objective identifying marks), on the other hand, is truly Spirit-filled. It is Spirit-filled because it makes full use of the only means by which the Spirit comes. It is Spirit-filled not because it is "vibrant," "dynamic," or "powerful," but because it is the gathering of God's Spirit-made believers around the Spirit-conveying Word and Sacrament and is focused on God's promises in Christ.

II. The Subjective Approach Undermines Faith and Detracts Glory From God

Whenever a study of heterodox and unscriptural doctrine is undertaken, a word of caution is in order. We do try to view the words and actions in the best possible light, as Luther's explanation to the eighth commandment puts it. We do realize that no false teacher ever began with the intention of perpetrating something intentionally false (save Joseph Smith, Mormonism's founder, perhaps). We do understand that those who fall into subjectivism are sincere in their desire to experience religion with emotion. We may even acknowledge that, because of a happy inconsistency, there will be true believers found even in false churches because the Gospel can save even when hidden by false doctrine. But the "good intentions" or the "sincerity" of those who hold to a subjective religion ought not blind us to its accompanying dangers. Well ought we heed the advice of Dr. Pieper, who writes:

The "good intention" of the people who refuse to found faith on the external means of grace has been urged in their defense. They want to prevent "formalism," mere "head knowledge," "intellectualism," and foster a "Christianity of the heart," and inward "experience" of the saving truths... But even if we do not question the "good intention," Scripture obliges us to maintain that in the case of all who want to detach God's gracious revelation and operation from the means of grace we are dealing with ignoramuses and quacks, who do not realize what they say or set down, and with might and main work for exactly the opposite of what they purpose to do. "Communion with God," "inward experience" of Christ, "fervor in Christianity," can always be achieved in

²³ Senkbeil, Harold, *Sanctification*, p. 181.

only one way, namely, by faith in the Word of grace, in the forgiveness of sins provided through Christ's *satisfactio vicaria* and pledged to us by God in the means of grace.²⁴

In other words, it is a false claim and therefore dangerous to the soul to seek union with God other than where he has promised to come to man.

With that in mind, we must note that subjectivism in some way undermines the absolute authority of God's Holy Scriptures as a source for doctrine, faith, comfort, and living. As previously mentioned, mere human beings sit in judgment of Scripture and of God as He has revealed himself in Scripture when they accuse God's Word of being filled with contradictions, mistakes, and ambiguities. What is rationalistic theology except self-worship? What is higher criticism except the exaltation of man's reason above God's Word? We so easily identify the papacy as Antichrist for exalting human decrees and traditions to a place of equal or even superior position to the Word of God. So also do all the lesser antichrists who elevate what they feel or think above the clear word of Scripture. This is what our Smalcald Articles mean when they compare enthusiasts of every stripe with the papacy:

And in those things which concern the spoken, outward Word, we must firmly hold that God grants His Spirit or grace to no one, except through or with the preceding outward Word, in order that we may thus be protected against the enthusiasts, i.e., spirits who boast that they have the spirit without and before the word, and accordingly judge Scripture or the spoken word, and explain it and stretch it at their pleasure.

For the Papacy also is nothing but sheer enthusiasm, by which the Pope boasts that all rights exist in the shrine of his heart, and whatever he decides and commands with his church is spirit and right, even though it is above and contrary to Scripture and the spoken Word.

All this is the old devil and old serpent, who also converted Adam and Eve into enthusiasts, and led them from the outward Word of God to spiritualizing and self-conceit, and nevertheless he accomplished this through other outward words. Just as also our enthusiasts condemn the outward word, and nevertheless they themselves are not silent, but they fill the whole world with their pratings and writings, as though, indeed, the Spirit could not come through the writings and spoken word of the apostles, but through their writings and words he must come.²⁵

Incidentally, this is the whole source of disunity in visible Christianity. Luther was charged with causing disunity in Christendom for trying to restore the church to the foundation of the Word of God, when it really was caused by those who refused to yield to the clear words of Scripture. Even today, the ecumenical movements and all unionistic efforts attempt to say that Scripture itself is unclear and subject to different human interpretations, all of which are permissible when Christians agree to disagree. But the whole problem is the subjective human lordship over Holy Scripture, as Prof. Lawrenz writes:

In his work of reformation Luther firmly clung to the outward clarity of Scripture and never lost sight of it. Also we need ever anew to do so with him. That there are great

²⁴ Pieper, Francis, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. III, p. 135.

²⁵ *Smalcald Articles*, Part III, Article VIII, 495 3.

differences of doctrine in the outward Christian church. Doctrinal differences even in the outward Lutheran churches, is not due to any unclarity in the Holy Scriptures themselves. The unclarity always comes from man who is using the Scripture. Unclarity arises when man consciously or unconsciously refuses to cast all of his own prejudices and preconceptions aside and will not let the clear meaning of Scripture and. It arises when man omits something, changes something, adds something of his own.²⁶

Certain of the old ALC's antecedent synods, for example, claimed that certain scriptural doctrines were "open questions" and "non-fundamental doctrines," and therefore disagreement was possible and did not prohibit the practice of fellowship with those who held differently. Our Synod has, by God's grace, consistently held to the clarity of Scripture and the position that disagreement in a non-fundamental doctrine, though perhaps not per se damaging to saving faith, nevertheless displays a rationalistic bent, a different spirit over against God's inspired word that allows the person to elevate reason over revelation.

The subjective attitude toward Scripture is also seen in the many ways in which the sufficiency of Scripture is questioned. Ever since Thomas demanded the visible proof of Christ's resurrection, human beings declare "Unless I see, I will not believe!" We know our Savior's words, directing us to the sufficiency of Scripture: "Blessed are they who have not seen, and yet have believed," closely followed by the evangelist's rejoinder, "These things are written that you may believe that Jesus, is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing, you may have life in his name." But natural man, wanting proof before "faith," demands a miraculous sign. The recent events depicted in a recent article in *U.S. News and World Report* should show us that there is indeed nothing new under the sun:

In the past year, an enigmatic array of supernatural "sightings" has erupted across the United States: In Arizona, nine otherwise "normal" young adults say Mary, Jesus' mother, has visited and spoken to them; in Texas, an icon of Jesus reportedly wept; in a Denver suburb, a woman described visions of the Virgin wearing a "pink gown" in a mountainside shrine.

Whether these events indeed constitute divine intervention—much less what it means if they do—has created a kind of litmus-test controversy about the value of faith, instincts, and science. Millions of Americans are of two minds about miracles. On the one hand, they want to believe in them (and a 1989 Gallup Poll found that 83 percent of Americans do) because such events suggest that God exists and our daily lives have a purpose. At the same time, people have a conflicting urge to dismiss miracles as fakes. To land them credence seems to demonstrate naivete or ignorance. It is one thing to privately cheer on Kevin Costner when a disembodied voice tells him in "Field of Dreams," "If you build it, he will come." It is quite another to tell your boss that God spoke to you in the back yard about your real-estate plans.²⁷

The point of commonality in all of these "Mary sightings," healings, charismatic outpourings, signs and wonders, visions, and the like, is that the Word of God is seen as insufficient as a guide

²⁶ Lawrenz, Carl, "The Absolute Authority of the Word of God in Matters of Faith and Life," *Our Great Heritage*, Vol. 1, p. 23.

²⁷ *US News & World Report*, March 29, 1993; *The Case of the Weeping Madonna*, p. 48.

and as proof to God's existence. "God, give me a sign, show me what to do, show me you're real," is the dangerous prayer of subjectivism. It is dangerous because, invariably, the person praying will start to trust more in subjectively interpretable signs and an equally subjective inner voice than he will in the clear word of God. How many of us can cite experiences with people claiming, for example, "I prayed and prayed and God told me to get this divorce"? This subjective attitude is everywhere about us. Reggie White wanted a sign from God to know which NFL team he should sign with, so Mike Holmgren left a message on his recorder: "Reggie, this is God, sign with Green Bay. " Guess where Reggie ended up? Charismatics and Pentecostals are often the worst extremists at this very point, declaring "God told me..." about any number of subjects. Last year at a concert at Wisconsin Lutheran College, Annie Herring, a Christian Contemporary Music artist of Pentecostal background, interspersed her musical numbers with statements such as these:

"Once we find the Lord, we're searching for the truth; I won't do nothing until I hear from you!"

"When I was 23 I gave my life to the Lord; He started to give songs to me; he somehow spoke into my heart to remove the stony places."

"I said, 'God, you told me to take time off.' Then he told me I wanted to take time off with Me."

"When I came to the Lord, my dreams come true because I dream the dreams Jesus gives me."²⁸

How vigilant we must ever be that we do not in a similar way view every happening, every song on the radio, every occurrence in life as some sort of sign or message from God! How cautious we must be when we say how God has led us to some decision or other to not act as though God has spoken or given us a miraculous sign to help us! Consider Luther, who used the lightning storm as a sign from God that he should become a monk, but whose father correctly pointed out that he could not be sure that that "sign" did not come from the devil. The fact of the matter is that when signs and experience become more important and more reliable guides for us than God's clear word, the devil has us right where he wants us. Dr. Becker, in describing Luther's position on this truth, said:

Luther would have said that when such moments of experience become the ground upon which we build our assurance of God's love they serve to lead us away from the word, which, must be and remain the only foundation of our faith. He would have said that the devil thus hides himself under the mask of God in order to deceive men and to lead them into the imagination that they have found God without the preached Word. Repeatedly he warns against the sin of trusting in our feelings and experiences.²⁹

In this way does human subjectivism erode the foundation of faith, the objective word of God, and therefore, the objective means of grace.

This is where human subjectivism does indeed pose the greatest threat to saving faith of all—in the matter of justification by grace alone through faith alone as revealed and created by

²⁸ Annie Herring, *Live in Concert at WLC*, April 3, 1992.

²⁹ Becker, Siegbert, *The Foolishness of God*, p. 188.

the Holy Spirit by Scripture alone. Instead of giving all glory to God for salvation, man learns to trust God to a point, after which he must do the rest for his own salvation. As Dr. Pieper observes,

The rejection and every alteration of the divinely appointed means of grace impairs the core and center of the Christian faith, the article of justification by faith without the deeds of the Law. When the means of grace are rejected or impaired, human works regularly take the place of Christ's substitutionary satisfaction as the basis of salvation.³⁰

It is no secret that Reformed doctrine is aptly described in those words. The Reformed make no effort to hide their animosity to baptismal regeneration, for example. Their doctrine of conversion is synergistic to the core: God provided forgiveness, but now you must by your own free will reach out and grab it. The forgiveness of sins is never treated as unconditional and objective, but made to depend on some subjective condition which human beings must meet. The condition is usually repentance, as in "If you repent, God will forgive you;" but it is often described in terms of surrender: "If you turn control of your life over to Jesus, he'll never leave you." Has such subjectivism had an effect on our theology and church life?

Consider how easy it is to base the hope for forgiveness not on Christ alone, but on contrition. If you're sorry, really, sincerely sorry for your sins, God will forgive you, we say. Do we realize the possibility for despair such conditional forgiveness threatens? When a person is directed within, he will always wonder if he's sorry enough to be forgiven, leaving him no hope. How regularly we need to hear the advice of Dr. Becker in this regard:

Contrition might easily be viewed as a meritorious act on our part, or at least as something in us on account of which God is ready to forgive us. Such views lead to the statement that God will forgive us if we are sorry for our sins. Against this false view of contrition it must be stated emphatically that God does not forgive us because we are sorry. Our sorrow could never earn God's forgiveness nor act as an inducement to persuade God to forgive us ... God does not forgive us because we are sorry. He forgives us only for Jesus' sake, because of what Christ has done for us.³¹

Former executive secretary of Parish Education William Fischer repeats the identical advice for all who teach Law and Gospel:

Although God calls us to repentance through his law and wants us to feel sorry for our sins, our salvation does not depend on that sorrow. God's gifts of forgiveness and salvation have been secured for all men regardless of anything they do. That is why we should be careful not to tell the children, "If you are sorry for your sins, then God will forgive you." God's forgiveness through Christ is not conditioned on their sorrow over sins. If one would say "If you are really sorry for your sins, God will forgive you," a child might begin to wonder if he is really sorry enough for God to forgive him. He may even be tempted to feign a sorrow that is not a sorrow over sin at all. But if we teach him the full force of God's holy law, that alone will produce a God-pleasing sorrow.³²

³⁰ Pieper, Francis, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

³¹ Becker, Siegbert, "Contrition and Conversion," *Our Great Heritage, Volume III*, p. 5.

³² Fischer, William, "Teaching Law and Gospel," *Our Great Heritage, Volume III*, p. 228.

Subjectivism makes our repentance our own work, thereby making the conditional statement “If you repent, you can be forgiven,” practical work-righteousness. We must always be careful to preach and teach the unconditional, objective message of forgiveness of sins for Christ’s sake alone.

This is why, among the Reformed, it is common to not only emphasize the subjective human effort in conversion and repentance; faith itself is considered a work that we humans do. They will usually point to a verse such as Acts 16:30-31 in which the Philippian jailer asks in terror, “What must I do to be saved?” and hears Paul’s response, “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.” Ergo, believing must be something we must do to be saved. Of course, in that passage, the jailer was not as yet converted, and natural man’s *opinio legis* will always think in terms of the human action that must be taken. Paul’s answer is, essentially, it’s not anything you can do; Christ has won for you forgiveness; believe in him! But if the Reformed were to construct a definition of the word “faith,” it would be something like this: Faith is the willful commitment to submit to the Lordship of Christ. Because this is what they imagine faith to be, they cannot conceive of infant faith and speak abusively of infant baptism. Because this is their definition of faith, we must be ever cautious when reading material from Reformed sources, because so much of it sounds like orthodox Christianity (We’re not saved by works, but by faith alone) but is really only so much work-righteous confusion of justification and sanctification. Because of this definition of faith, they are ever subjectively drawn within to introspectively determining whether their commitment was sincere enough, their zeal for serving the Lord fervent enough, their emotion effusive enough.

What is the practical result of such a view? For one thing, it is from such a Reformed depiction of faith that Christianity becomes graded. Instead of seeing the world as God does, as believers and unbelievers, unscriptural distinctions are now made between, e.g., believers and disciples. Carter Lindberg, whose book *The Third Reformation?* compares the charismatic movement of today with the pietism of previous centuries, writes:

As a consequence, radical doubt is to be overcome in Pietism, not by hearing the Word of God as an address of promise (the authority of the Word) but by experientially verified faith. Thus it is Pietism which introduces the usage of modifiers for the term faith: weak faith, dead faith, living faith, powerful faith, etc. Luther’s straightforward position that faith simply takes God’s promise as true and honors it in that it does not take God to be a liar is displaced by discussions about the quality of faith and its accomplishments. The charismatic movement is also marked by the passion for “more” faith, “more” power, etc.³³

And certainly the damage to the person’s trust in the promises of God in Christ, if it exists, is immeasurable. The assurance that a person is “in the faith” must needs be the evidence of it in the person’s “Christian walk.” This manifests itself in the worship forms of the Reformed as well:

These then are the chief marks of conversion to him: to confess with the mouth, to pray; if he does both, and that devotedly, he may be reasonably assured that he is in the faith

³³ Lindberg, Carter, *The Third Reformation?*, p. 174.

and converted. For a certain sense of satisfaction with himself must appear, a contentment, a conscious joy; and this completes his conversion. Again we have a subjective turning in on oneself, the center of attention not being the word and promise of God, but that which goes forward within. Action, to be active, activity; to whip up enthusiasm, to prod, excite; to rouse to abandoned singing; to create the atmosphere of joy and a “good time”: these are not just froth, but rise from the desire to make their calling and election sure. They are the assurance of his conversion.³⁴

If I feel “on fire for the Lord,” I must have “faith,” says the Reformed. This is why so much emphasis is placed on their emotional state. Consider some of the songs I’ve heard on my children’s “Wee Sing” cassette: “I’ve got the joy, joy, joy, joy, down in my heart to stay, and I’m so happy, so very happy, I’ve got the love of Jesus in my heart.” My happiness is the evidence that the love of Jesus is in my heart. Or another, “I’m in right, outright, Upright, downright happy all the time, since Jesus Christ came in and cleansed my heart from sin.” A true Christian is happy *all* the time! How about “Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burning, burning, burning?” Readiness for the Brededgroom’s return is thereby portrayed not as simple trust and expectation but as enthusiastic, fervent fire. Dr. Pieper summarizes for us the danger of this emotional gauge:

All of us are by nature “enthusiasts.” Instead of listening to and believing God’s declarations of love in the Gospel, in the means of grace given by him, or, in other words, instead of fixing our gaze on God’s reconciled heart which—thanks be to God!--is a present reality through Christ and is revealed and offered to us by God in the Gospel and the Sacraments, we look into our own heart and seek to gauge God’s feelings toward us by the thoughts and moods we find in our heart. But that amounts to practical denial of the fact that God has reconciled us to Him through Jesus Christ, and hence to a practical denial of the means of grace, in which God acquaints us with this completed reconciliation.³⁵

And instead of assuring poor, despairing souls with the true comfort of the objective promises of God in the Gospel, uncertainty is the inevitable consequence. Am I happy enough? Fervent enough? Telling others the Gospel enough? Giving enough? Avoiding sin enough? Enough for what? To prove to myself that I really am a Christian, that my faith, my commitment to surrender to the Lordship of Christ is complete and sincere, of course! Correctly does Harold Senkbeil show us, from Luther’s own writings, that this is no minor flaw in doctrine, but soul-destroying opposition to the Gospel of Christ:

To search for confidence of a right relationship with God in one’s own life or in the feelings of the heart is to introduce a concept alien to the gospel and detrimental to the faith. Luther had an apt term for the horrible danger which comes from basing our faith on anything inside of us: *monstrum incertitudinis*, “the monster of uncertainty. It is a monster which continues to threaten Christians in every age, a monster which can be conquered only by the external promises of God in Jesus Christ.³⁶

³⁴ Sitz, E. Arnold, “Calvinism: Its Essence and its Menacing Impact upon American Lutheran Doctrine and Practice,” *Our Great Heritage, Vol. III*, p. 638-9.

³⁵ Pieper, Francis, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

³⁶ Senkbeil, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

God be praised that the objective promises of the Gospel hold for us the certainty of our standing before God even when we feel sorrowful or angry, even when we stumble and fall into sin, even when circumstances in our lives make us think that God must be angry with us and is punishing us. We still know that God loves us by the fact of Christ's atoning death and justifying resurrection. No horrible monster of uncertainty can take that away.

It almost goes without saying that the Reformed, subjective view of the Gospel is simply an offer of grace which is nothing unless you grab for it. It also is quite evident that there is no such thing as baptismal regeneration when coming to faith is treated as a free-will decision. The Reformed view the sacraments as ordinances to be kept, not means of grace. And they also view the confession and absolution as the greatest abomination and evidence of popery. As Walther reports:

The Protestant churches, so called, which are outside of the pale of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, know nothing of the true way to forgiveness of sin by means of the Word and, in general, through the means of grace. This is evident, in particular, from their rejection of absolution as pronounced by the minister from the pulpit, or in general and private confession ... They assert that the worst papistic leaven and the most abominable remnant of the Papacy in the Lutheran Church is absolution.³⁷

In this way they resemble the Pharisees who grumbled in their minds, "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" We must remember that their opposition to the words of absolution, whether we state it as "I forgive you all your sins," or "God has forgiven you all your sins," stems from their belief that no one can look into a person's heart and see if they have met the conditions to receive forgiveness (sorrow, repentance, burning love, etc.). Our proclamation of the words of absolution, however, is not only based on the promise of Christ given to the disciples (Whosoever sins ye remit, etc.), but on objective justification. When we hide or gloss over the words of absolution so as not to offend the Reformed, are we allowing their opposition to the doctrine of justification dictate what is proclaimed in our churches? On the other hand, what better opportunity could be afforded to discuss the key doctrine in all of Scripture, the one by which the church stands or falls?

Accompanying the denial of the means of grace (God's gracious activity in the Gospel and Sacraments) comes the elevation of prayer (man's activity) as something truly powerful. In fact, the assertion is made that "Prayer always precedes Pentecost. The Book of Acts describes many outpourings of the Holy Spirit, but never apart from prayer."³⁸ The Reformed view God as waiting and unable to act until his people fervently pray to him. Conversion is made possible by the "sinner's prayer (Lord Jesus, come into my heart, etc.)." The trouble sinner is not directed to the comforting promises of God but within, to fervent wrestling with God in prayer. As Walther describes it,

For the confounding of Law and Gospel that is common among the sects consists in nothing else than this, that they instruct alarmed sinners by prayer and inward wrestling to fight their way into a state of grace until they feel grace indwelling in them, instead of

³⁷ Walther, CFW, *Law and Gospel*, p. 167.

³⁸ Greenfield, John, *When the Spirit Came*, p. 19.

pointing them to the Word and Sacraments. Theirs looks like a very godly and Christian procedure, and an inexperienced person can easily be deceived by it. But God be praised! We have God's Word, which does not deceive us; a Word on which we can rely and by which we can abide in the present darkness, which it lights up for us.³⁹

I

It is easy to see how Satan has blinded and deceived so many people with such subjective Christianity. For if God is speaking to their heart in answer to prayer, if the assurance for salvation is emotion or piety, if faith itself is a person's own work which he achieved and maintained on his own, what need is there for the Word of God? It truly is the devil himself which is extolled as Spirit apart from Word and Sacrament. He has won the victory either by making souls despair or by confessing "I (and Jesus a little) am my savior."

It almost goes without saying that the Reformed view of sanctification is entirely subjective as well. It can be summed up in one sentence: "if I surrender to the Lordship of Christ, victory over sin is possible and to be expected, even to the point of perfection, also in this life." Senkbeil describes this approach, contrasting it with what Scripture teaches:

For all of its zeal and enthusiasm for Jesus, most of American Evangelicalism ends up pointing people to their hearts to find God. Jesus may have saved us, but now it's basically up to us to live for him. *If* we commit our lives to him, *if* we surrender control to him, *if* we have victory over sin—only then may we be sure that we are his.

But there is another place to look for God. The gospel is actually the only place God has promised to be found. This gospel comes to us in many ways: in preaching, sacraments, and absolution. In each case, however, the gospel has one content, and one content only: Jesus Christ and him crucified. For God hides under the cross to reveal himself more clearly to us. In his death he demonstrates that sin is destroyed and the grave has no power over us. The cross of Christ gives life to the world.⁴⁰

Some Lutheran writers have labeled the view that, if you surrender to Christ, all sorts of victorious and abundant living is possible, as "triumphalism." It is a natural appeal. You join a religion because of what it can offer you. If it offers you victory over your moral weakness (quit smoking, go on a diet, etc.), that's a desirable power to obtain. The triumphalist view towards sanctification appears in such formulas as "If you keep the commandments, God will bless you." People are led to a motivation-by-expected-blessing life of sanctification instead of one motivated by the Gospel and the desire to be faithful to God with time, talents, and treasure. That's why so many testimonials are gospel-free monologues contrasting the horrible life of sin with the new life now that one has surrendered to the lordship of Christ. And, unfortunately, triumphalism looks at certain blessings as the evidence of God's love. If finding a good job or getting good grades or having good health are the evidences of God's love, and I have them because I surrendered to the lordship of Christ, they are no longer blessings of grace for which I am grateful; then they are deserved and earned wages. But Luther spoke of God's providence in different terms. In explaining the first article of the Apostles' Creed he wrote "All this God does only because he is my good and merciful Father in heaven, and not because I have earned or deserved it." In explaining the fifth petition ("Forgive us our trespasses;" the one that

³⁹ Walther, CFW, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

⁴⁰ Senkbeil, *op. cit.*, p. 183.

immediately follows the long list of what is meant by “daily bread”) Luther said, “We are worthy of none of the things for which we ask, neither have we deserved them, but we ask that he would give them all to us by grace.” All the blessings we have are gracious blessings, of which we are mere stewards. If someone has a different measure of blessings than I have, it is not because he was more deserving or that I was less. God’s love for us is constant and certain in sickness or health, in employment or out of work, in good family situations and in stressed-out ones. This is how God demonstrated his love for us: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

In their excellent book entitled *The Holy Ghost: Shy Member of the Trinity*, Frederick Bruner (also author of *A Theology of the Holy Spirit*) and William Hordern have written an eye-opening comparison between the theology of glory, a.k.a. triumphalism, and the theology of the cross. They write:

Triumphalism describes what seems to be the normal human approach to religion. The natural person turns to religion to receive victories and triumphs from the divine beings. Health, wealth, and good fortune are hence seen as evidence that one has gained the favor of the gods and goddesses....

A theology of the cross does not assume that Christians abide in total ignorance, but it does know that even when and where God is revealed, God is also hidden.

Secondly, triumphalism appears in the area of sanctification. Extravagant claims are made as to the degree of moral purity that has been attained and the problems that have been overcome. Triumphalism promises that if a family prays together, it will stay together. It maintains that if one has faith, alcoholism will be overcome and psychological problems will be avoided ... Triumphalism forgets that the Christian is at one and the same time justified and sinful ...

Third, triumphalism appears in claims of victory over various forms of adversity. Triumphalism emphasizes a host of miracles and looks for miraculous cures of all ills. The triumphalistic church of Luther’s time was continually telling about the latest appearance of the Virgin Mary and the miracles that followed such appearances. Multitudes of people were always on pilgrimages to various holy shrines in expectation of having their illnesses healed....

In the fourth place, triumphalism leads people to find evidence in their lives which gives the assurance of salvation. The evidence may be in the form of ecstatic or mystical religious experience. It may be in the form of improvement in one’s ethical behavior and/or the overcoming of vicious habits and addictions. It may be in the form of answered prayer and/or success in business, good health, and general good fortune. When any or all of these are present, triumphalism promises that they can be seen as the assurance of God’s good favor towards the person in question and assurance that they are numbered among the saved ...

Over against triumphalism, a theology of the cross says that we can never find assurance of salvation by looking at ourselves. Religious experience is notoriously inconsistent.⁴¹

Such a subjective view of sanctification is dangerous to the soul because it feeds upon the legalistic nature of man. It makes the sinner think that he is working out his own salvation. It

⁴¹ Bruner, Frederick Dale & Hordern, William, *The Holy Spirit: Shy Member of the Trinity*, p. 66-67.

places the assurance for salvation on the “Christ in me” rather than the “Christ for me.” The Christian life and walk is seen as a decision and commitment done by the Christian himself, and not the work of the Holy Ghost through the Gospel . This leads to the identical spiritual pride of the Pharisees. Dr. Pieper describes its very real danger in this way:

Another very repulsive concomitant of the Reformed false teaching is spiritual pride. Because those who harbor the conception of an activity of the Holy Ghost apart from the means of grace are dealing in an illusory, man-made quantity, they regard themselves, as experience amply proves, as the truly spiritual people and first-class Christians, while they consider those who in simple faith abide by the divinely appointed means of grace “intellectualists, “ having a more Christianity of the head; at best, second-rate Christians This great self esteem lasts as long as there is no anguish of conscience. But when the *terrores conscientiae* set in, pride ends in despair, unless there is a conversion to true Lutheranism, that is, unless faith is founded on the external Word, which heretofore was despised.⁴²

In fact, it is impossible to speak of such a life as motivated by the Gospel when there really is no Gospel present at all; the forgiveness of sins is conditioned on something subjective in man.

This is why the Reformed have so little problem in using the tools of the State to promote the cause of the Church. If people start acting like Christians, pretty soon they will be Christians. Dr. Pieper warned against this confusion of the two kingdoms:

But this Reformed reformation of Church and State ... actually constitutes a continuance in the teaching and practice of Rome and tends to convert Christianity into work-righteousness trimmed with Christian frills. Both the assumption of an immediate operation of the Spirit and the mingling of Church and State crowd the Reformed Church into the doctrine of works. The assumption of an immediate operation of the Spirit has this effect because there is no such immediate operation and man is therefore left to his own efforts, which he then mistakenly regards as the product of the Holy Ghost. Seeking to build the Church by the use of the powers of the State leads to work-righteousness because the powers of the State, even with rigorous enforcement, never transmit the grace of God in Christ, faith, and the Holy Spirit, but at best achieve an outward piety that does not rise above the province of the Law and externalism.⁴³

Even when the issue is so compelling, as, for example, that of abortion, it is not in the place of the church to engage in political activism. Individual Christians are citizens of the state and as such may, if they choose to do so, work within legal avenues to promote good laws which protect the bodies and lives of all. But the mission of the church is the preaching of the Gospel for the salvation of the soul, and when a Christian acts as a citizen of the spiritual kingdom, in the name of and by the authority of the church, let his work be confined to spiritual activism.

An unwanted consequence of joining with Reformed Christians in political causes is the sin of unionism. Reformed Christians do not view their protest marches and rescues as something

⁴² 42 Pieper, Francis, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

⁴³ Pieper, Francis, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

distinct from the work of the church. When Christians of other denominations join them in a Life Chain or some other type of peaceful protest, they will talk about how a person could just feel the spirit of unity. Doctrinal differences don't matter any more, they say, we're all united for the common cause of life. For the Reformed, the mark of the true church will be the piety of its members. It doesn't matter if you hop from one church to the next; just go wherever you feel the Spirit. That's also why any church that's called "Community church" or "Non-denominational" or "Non-sectarian" is guaranteed to be Reformed in its doctrinal positions. Subjectivism will reign through and through. Who cares if Christians might hold differing views on the ministry, or the appropriate age for baptism, and the like? Piety is what really matters. Sermons have to tell me how to live, they have to tell me how to tap into the power of God for my life here and now, not regurgitate things that happened long ago or talk about dead things like doctrine. The power in Scripture comes from its ability to provide examples for me for which I can pray and emulate. The Reformed position on doctrine is indifference. As E. Arnold Sitz wrote,

For it remains true that unionism originates with the Reformed theology, which, because it does not lay the proper weight on doctrine and the principles that derive from it, leans toward an easy fellowship, not only with everyone who seems to profess Christ, but also with anyone who exhibits no more than a general religious spirit. Far more of the spirit of unionism than can be absorbed without grave deterioration, both within our own church as well as in our stand over against the world, has already entered into the Lutheran Church in America.⁴⁴

Unionism is part of the sin of subjectivism, because it makes the basis for fellowship not the objective confession of all of God's Word but the subjective determination that someone is a Christian because of their piety. It is part of the sin of enthusiasm because it ignores or treats as inconsequential some portion of God's inspired Word. It is unloving because it makes the false prophet or his adherents hardened in their belief that their false doctrine is really no big deal, after all.

Dr. Pieper, in concluding his analysis of the Reformed view of the means of grace and of the work of the Holy Spirit, gave this warning: I

We are confident that we have amply shown their unscripturalness and the complete revolution they cause in the relation God has ordained between Himself and men. because they do not place man on the Word of grace and thus on Christ and God Himself, but direct man to take his stand on himself and his own product. Hence indifferentism here is surely not in place. On the contrary, we must challenge the teaching of any operation of the Spirit independently of the Word within the Christian church and combat it as a foreign element that has penetrated into the Christian doctrine and as a deadly enemy of living personal faith.⁴⁵

Surely as called servants of the Word, we need to be alert to and fight against every deadly element to living, personal faith, not just the obvious ones.

⁴⁴ Sitz, E. Arnold, *op. cit.*, p. 643.

⁴⁵ Pieper, Francis, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

III. Historical Inroads of Subjectivism to the Lutheran Church

A person might get the impression that when we speak of subjectivism, we are not talking about Lutheranism at all, but Reformed doctrine. After all, Luther himself characterized the differences between the three religious traditions (Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed) in this way, as reported by Dr. Becker:

For Luther, *sensus* meant everything that is usually included under the term -“Christian experience.” Luther evaluated and characterized the dominant theological tendencies of his time in the following way:

The whole order of the papists consists in doing, of the Anabaptists in feeling, of the Christian in neither, but only always in believing.

“Believing,” for Luther, meant simply an acceptance of the bare Word of God and a trust-filled resting on its promises. In Lutheran circles since that time it has become customary to speak of Roman theology as resting on works, of Reformed theology as resting on Christian experience, and of Lutheran theology as resting on the words and promises of God. “Feeling and faith do not stand next to each other,” says Luther. We are not to judge according to our feelings, but only according to the Word of God.⁴⁶

But throughout the centuries since Luther, Reformed doctrine and all its reliance on subjective experience has made inroads into Lutheranism by way of the movements of Pietism and the charismatic renewal. A review of these movements is in order so that we do might recognize Pietism and its efforts to invade Lutheranism and that we might be better equipped to fight its enthusiasm and subjectivism with the objective means of grace.

During Luther’s lifetime, there were reformers who felt that Luther “began” the work of reformation but didn’t complete the work. The subjectivists who demanded a cleansing of all external religion included Luther’s one-time colleague Andreas Carlstadt. While Luther was held in protective custody at the Wartburg following the Diet of Worms in 1520, Carlstadt was instigating radical reform back in Wittenberg. The town was thrown into confusion and violence because of Carlstadt’s iconoclastic attitude toward any and every vestige of Romanism Statues, vestments for clergy, confession, and the like all must go, demanded Carlsstadt. Luther returned in 1521 , preaching his famous “Eight Sermons in Wittenberg” in which he stated the now-familiar words that reform would come in God’s time, for we must let God’s word, not legalistic compulsion, do the work of reformation. Carlstadt himself was told in no uncertain terms that there wasn’t room in Wittenberg for his brand of radicalism, and from that day on, became a virulent opponent of Luther and called Luther’s reliance on the Means of Grace simply warmed-over papism.

There were other radical reformers, naturally. Our confessional writings will usually speak of them as “Anabaptists” or “enthusiasts.” What they all had in common, in germinal form, was the subjectivism which we have just studied. Against this background we can read with appreciation Luther’s *Against the Heavenly Prophets*, mainly directed to Carlstadt and his ilk. Here is a brief excerpt:

⁴⁶ Becker, Siegbert, *Foolishness of God*, p. 189.

Now when God sends forth his holy gospel he deals with us in a twofold manner, first outwardly, then inwardly. Outwardly he deals with us through the oral word of the gospel and through material signs, that is, baptism and the sacrament of the altar. Inwardly he deals with us through the Holy Spirit, faith, and other gifts. But whatever their measure or order the outward factors should and must precede. The inward experience follows and is effected by the outward. God has determined to give the inward to no one except through the outward. For he wants to give no one the Spirit or faith outside of the outward Word and sign instituted by him, as he says in Luke 16, "Let them hear Moses and the prophets." Accordingly Paul can call Baptism a "washing of regeneration" wherein God "richly pours out the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5) And the oral gospel "is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith."⁴⁷

Certainly other enthusiasts attacked Luther. Thomas Muentzer, leader of the Peasants' Rebellion, ridiculed Luther's reliance on Scripture with the words "Bible, babble, bubble." He believed that if God gave his people direct leadership through the prophets in Old-Testament times, he should be expected to do no less in the present. In this way, Muentzer actually would agree with the papacy's claim to be God's spokesman to provide continuing revelation for the church of all times, and even Mormonism's "living prophet" doctrine. Those examples should sufficiently illustrate the apostasy that results when a human claims to be God's revelatory mouthpiece and that his word is now equally authoritative to that of Holy Scripture.

On Luther's one flank was the papacy; on the other were the radicals. Although Carlstadt and Muentzer didn't hide their hatred of Luther and his doctrine, others were opposed to it and yet wanted to be Luther's friends. This made them agree outwardly to certain wordings of confessional articles of faith, all the while interpreting them in their own way to suit their human reason. Into this category we gather Zwingli, Calvin, and even Melanchthon himself. To them, outward union was more important than God-given unity on the basis of Scripture. At the Marburg Colloquy of 1529, Zwingli was agreeable to all of Luther's articles except the one pertaining to the Real Presence of Christ's body and blood in the sacrament. When it became obvious to Luther that Zwingli held a rationalistic view of the sacrament, they parted, with Luther saying to the Swiss reformer, "You are of a different spirit." The different spirit, of course, was the spirit of enthusiasm. In less than a year, Zwingli's enthusiastic spirit had caused him to give up Luther's wording on Baptism and conversion as well, as the Swiss were required to make their own confession at the 1530 Diet of Augsburg. We learn from this episode how readily enthusiasm wants to attach itself to pure Lutheran doctrine, yet also how it subjectively exalts human reason or experience above the inspired Word of God and its clear and plain sense. Luther's intolerance of such a spirit ought to serve as an example and guide for us who bear his name and confess his articles of faith.

Upon Luther's death, the Lutheran church was thrown into turmoil. Instead of a leader who refused to budge an inch unless he was shown his error on the basis of Scripture, the Lutherans had Philip Melanchthon. Melanchthon was prone to compromise away even the doctrine of justification by faith if it was politically expedient to do so. Melanchthon considered the Augsburg Confession his possession, not the church's, and continued to revise it until his death. Thus we have the Variata, or altered Augsburg Confession, to which any Reformed Christian can in good conscience subscribe, since it waffles on the doctrines of the sacraments.

⁴⁷ Luther, Martin, *Vol. 40, Church and Ministry, Against the HEavenly Prophets*, p. 146.

Melanchthon's humanistic spirit became evident as he began publicly holding the position that, besides the Holy Spirit and the means of grace, man's assenting will was also one of the *causae efficientes* of man's conversion. Those who agreed with him were known as Lutheran Synergists. Followers of Melanchthon were called Philippists, and the Philippists were later responsible for the Crypto-Calvinistic controversy. They taught that Jesus could not be really present in the Lord's Supper because he is sitting at God's right hand in heaven. Melanchthon's Reformed doctrinal positions and compromising spirit ought to stand as a warning example for us as well. Just because someone calls themselves a Lutheran doesn't mean that he holds to Luther's doctrine. And those who exposed and opposed Melanchthon were not legalists who divided Christ's church. They were men like Martin Chemnitz, Jakob Andreae, and Nikolaus Selnecker, the key formulators of the Formula of Concord, without whom there would likely have not been a Lutheran Church at all. Against the enthusiasm and unionism of Melanchthon, the Formula of Concord stands as a solid rock, firmly confessing the objective truth of the objective word of God. Its value for Lutherans for all ages is inestimable.

Following the 16th century in Lutheranism comes the 30-years war (1618-1648) and the Golden Age of Lutheran Orthodoxy. Names familiar to students of Lutheran dogmatics from this period are Gerhard, Calov, and Quenstedt. The next concerted effort of enthusiastic subjectivism to infiltrate the Lutheran church came in the form of Pietism. Pietism's founders are Philipp Jacob Spener and August Hermann Francke. Pietism as a movement also spread to the Church of England in the form of Methodism, and to America in the form of revivalism. Catholic Pietism was evident in movements like Jansenism and devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. What gave Pietism its impetus? A key factor must be considered the challenge of rationalism and deism. Some effort was made to prove to the free-thinkers and deists with complex arguments that there really was a God who was actively involved in His creation. The ontological argument, for example, stated that since I am imperfect, and yet can conceive of the idea of perfection, there must be a perfect being who gave me the idea of the standard of perfection, therefore God, this perfect being, exists. The Pietistic movements wanted none of that type of argumentation. They didn't need to prove to anyone God exists. They could feel him in their hearts. He burned within them and his power was evident in their lives.

Most of the papers I have read on the subject of Pietism begin with the assumption that the pietists' claim that the church of their day was a cold, lifeless corpse is a correct evaluation of the religious situation. It is assumed that the Lutheran churches of Germany had fallen into a "dead orthodoxy," a contentment to hold to correct doctrine without any concern for the Christian life or fruits of faith. Pietism ends up being praised for having worthy goals, but having simply gone a little bit too far. But is the charge of the Pietists a valid one? Consider what enthusiasts mean when they use the adjective "dead" in connection with our church. In his book *The Religion of the Heart*, a sympathetic study of Pietism and its associated movements, Ted Campbell writes,

The religion of the heart movements arose simultaneously, I am convinced, among Europeans of widely different confessional traditions, who, disgusted with what corporate Christian states had done to each other since the Reformation, and disillusioned with "objective" appeals to scripture and tradition, turned inwardly to a more individualistic and (in a certain sense) "subjective" appropriation of the Christian faith.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Campbell, Ted A., *The Religion of the Heart*, p. 177.

What is meant by “dead?” Any objective appeal to Scripture! Or consider this excerpt from a charismatic who tries to define what it means to “quench the Spirit:”

There was to be no restraint upon those who were guided by the Spirit in the midst of the worship. Here we are to avoid two extremes: one is the reaction against formalism which gives reign to extremes in the attempts of people to follow the Spirit. This repels sincere and cultured persons. On the other hand, there is the impetus to quench all such individual expressions and to resort to a set form of service. Even the Holy Spirit could not break through some of these set forms of service in our churches...

It was probable that some in the church at Thessalonica were trying to put out the fire of the Spirit, especially in the exercise of special gifts, hence the exhortation that follows, “Despise not prophesying. “ The manifestation on of the Spirit in the church or in the individual, whether it be in praise, prayer, or prophecy is not to be quenched. It is not difficult to put out the fire of spiritual fervor and zeal.

Frivolous conversation after a service in which the Spirit has been present in power may have the same effect.

Dr. James Denney contended that “a liturgy, however beautiful, is a melancholy witness to the quenching of the Spirit: it may be better or worse than the prayers of one man but it could never compare for fervor with the spontaneous prayers of a living church.”⁴⁹

Any liturgical worship is labeled as “dead,” into which it is impossible for the Spirit to break through! And liturgical worship which focuses on the use of the means of grace? Let Dr. Walther describe the way the Reformed attack it:

No doctrine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church is more offensive to the Reformed than the doctrine that the grace of God, the forgiveness of sins, righteousness in the sight of God, and eternal salvation, is obtained in no other way than by the believer’s putting his confidence in the written Word, in Baptism, in the Lord’s Supper, and in absolution. The Reformed, especially their theologians, declare that this way of getting into heaven is too mechanical, and on hearing the Lutheran teaching they denounce it as dead letter worship, citing the statement of the Apostle Paul, “The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.” (II Cor. 3:6). Again, they say: “What does baptizing with earthly water profit? The true baptism is baptizing with the Spirit and with fire.” Again: “What is the benefit of eating and drinking the natural body and blood of Christ? The true food and drink by which the hunger and thirst of the soul is really stilled is the truth that came down from heaven.” Finally, they say, “How can I be helped by a mortal, sinful man, who cannot look into my heart, saying to me: ‘Thy sins are forgiven thee’? No; my sins are not forgiven except when God himself speaks these words in my heart and makes me feel their force.” That is the Reformed view.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Sanders, J. Oswald., *The Holy Spirit and His Gifts*, p. 97.

⁵⁰ Walther, CFW, *Law and Gospel*, p. 151.

And Ernst Loescher, a contemporary of the Pietists, and an indefatigable champion of Lutheran orthodoxy over against Pietism, put it thusly:

They have accused the teachers of our church of both organolatry—idolatrously elevating the means of grace—and grammatolatry—idolatrously extolling the letters of Scripture. If one asks wherein such idolatry of the means and of Scripture consists, then they answer that we pay too much attention to the literal orthodox knowledge taken from Scripture, we regard this as true, as a gift and work of the Holy Spirit, as God’s Word, even among those who have no piety. Instead, they have spread and defended the doctrine that where there is no piety, there is no Word of God, and everything a man knows is natural, dead, impotent, and devilish. What is that except that the truth from the Word of God among us men is subjectively made to depend on piety?⁵¹

The point is this: before we overreact to accusations that our worship life or our congregations are “dead” by making radical changes, consider the source and the basis of the criticism! If an enthusiast will call dependence on the Word and Sacrament “dead,” and worship forms which serve primarily as vehicles for the means of grace “dead,” what do we care? It is his subjective worship that is, in fact, spiritless and dead, for without the means of grace there is no Spirit, and without the Spirit there is no life. “Dead orthodoxy” is an oxymoronic pejorative that is an impossible *non sequitur*. Orthodoxy, that is, straight teaching, preaching and, teaching the whole counsel of God for the salvation of souls, is not dead, never has been dead, and never will be dead.

Pietism arose, then, as a movement which would strive to make this “dead” church “alive” by breaking its dependence on the means of grace as administered by called public ministers of the Word. It would emphasize personal piety over doctrine and avoid doctrinal controversies at all costs. In a very timely and relevant manner, Pastor Paul Prange describes Pietism’s goals:

The age of Pietism began with a strength and weakness analysis of a group of Lutheran congregations. Church leaders identified opportunities and threats, and decided that spiritual renewal was necessary. They set specific, measurable goals for the renewal, and decided to work especially through the clergy. When the new reforms did not achieve the desired results, the leaders decided to appeal directly to the laity. With a love for the Savior and a desire to see more good works, men with strong personalities and good fundraising techniques built up a college that emphasized lay ministry. The activities at that college insitutionalized the worst practices of Pietism and diluted the message of the Gospel. The reader of this paper can sense that its topic still has application today.⁵²

The chief mechanism for incorporating the subjectivism of Reformed doctrine into Lutheranism was Pietism. The chief mechanism for incorporating Pietism into Lutheran congregations was the organization of the most pious members of the congregations into small groups for Bible study, prayer, and mutual encouragement and accountability in sanctified living. These small groups have been called, at various times and diverse places, “Cell groups,” “*Koinonia* groups,” “small group Bible study,” “conventicles,” and “ecclesiolae in ecclesia.”

⁵¹ Loescher, Ernst, *Timotheus Verinus*, p. 80.

⁵² Prange, Paul, *The effects of the Age of Pietism on the Lutheran Church*, p. 1.

As the cell groups continued to meet in this way, independent of the public worship life of the whole congregation, their growth in sanctification was supposed to act as a leaven on the rest of the church, a kindling that would set the whole church on fire for the Lord. In theory, who could oppose such a worthy practice? Who could possibly be against people getting together in their own homes for something as important as studying the Bible, and not just to have a bratwurst cookout or to (gasp!) play cards? In theory, no one could. But what happened in practice was a far cry from the theoretical goals and plans.

What did happen? Instead of acting as a positive leaven on the entire church, cell groups split the church. People in cell groups considered themselves as better Christians than those who weren't involved in small group Bible study, and people not involved in them resented the way these people flaunted their spirituality. People in the small groups tended to view their conventicles as the true church and stayed away from the public worship service, and partaking of Holy Communion was scoffed at as unnecessary externalism. Baptism was seen as a vow that was taken for you by your sponsors but which you needed to make for yourself at the time of your confirmation. Because those in conventicles were able to read and interpret their Bibles in the way they felt, the public ministry was denigrated at the expense of the universal priesthood of believers. Doctrinal differences with other Christians didn't matter, only piety. Pietism's attitude toward doctrine was, essentially, "I don't care about fine points of doctrine, I just want to live for the Lord! What difference does having all the right doctrine make? I just want to win souls for Jesus!" Clearly two sides of a non-existent dilemma are described. Living for the Lord and winning souls for Christ are not exclusive of holding to sound doctrine.

So what did happen as a result of the Pietistic inroads to Lutheranism? In a word, 'enthusiasm'. In another word, subjectivism. Let's let John Brenner, Professor of Church History at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, describe these problems:

But instead these little churches within the church caused all kinds of problems. Pharisaism developed. For the members of these groups began to consider themselves to be better than the other members of the congregation who weren't participating in the conventicles. Instead of working as a leaven to promote ethics and morality they became disruptive splitting churches as they separated themselves from those they considered to be unconverted or second class Christians. Later on, pietists actually attempted to classify people according to their growth in sanctification. Because of the emphasis on the universal priesthood the public ministry was disparaged.⁵³

Pietism shifted emphasis from the objective truths of God's Word to subjective experience, and from a theocentric (God-centered) system to an anthropocentric (man-centered) system. As mentioned previously, the pietists were more concerned about what God does in us than with what God has done for us. In reality, they denied objective or universal justification (the fact that God declared the whole world innocent when Jesus died on the cross), and conditioned God's forgiveness on man's behavior or reception of grace. Conversion or regeneration (rebirth) was more important for them than justification, and their doctrine of regeneration was synergistic.... In spite of the emphasis Pietism placed on Bible study, the objective truth of God's Word was not as

⁵³ Brenner, John M., *Pietism, Past and Present*, p. 5.

important to them as subjective feelings. For the pietist the important thing was not that God has announced his unconditional forgiveness to you, but that you feel forgiven.⁵⁴

Loescher's contemporaneous warning against the use of conventicles is also in place:

When the teacher gives himself up alone to those whom he regards as pious, when he wants to bind the members of this *ecclesiola* especially to one another, as Dr. Spener demands, that not only encourages assemblies which cause dangerous aversion, but also gives those who are gathered too great an inducement to spiritual pride and to despising the others. They and the teachers are pushed into partiality, and the rest of the hearers are partially neglected, partially made to slander. They are made more and more firm in their wicked mind, so that schism, even if they did not want it, unquestionably flows from it. Thus this advice has easily contributed the most to the pietistic division.⁵⁵

Let us not imagine that the idea of organizing congregations into small groups is a thing of the deep, dark, past. Not only do the Reformed love them, but also Lutheran charismatics. In fact, cell groups are the chief manner in which the charismatic renewal enters Lutheran congregations. Here is an excerpt from Larry Christenson's book *Welcome, Holy Spirit*. Christenson has been a leader of ELCA's charismatic movement for three decades. If we want charismatic renewal in our congregations, here's the way to go:

Spiritual renewal of congregations often begins in small prayer and Bible study groups that meet in private homes. Here people experience the presence of Jesus in an intense way, learn to live from the Word of God, and experience the Holy Spirit and his gifts.

Retreats, conferences, and visits to renewal centers and communities serve a similar function: they help people respond to the reality of God in a new way.

In the Pietistic renewal, Spener and Francke urged people to come together to discuss the Scriptures, pray for each other, and sing. In these informal settings, ministry was dependent on lay people who led in the exposition of Scripture and in the prayer ministry.

Home fellowships, prayer meetings, and cell groups are commonplace in the charismatic renewal. This is the setting in which lay leadership is most often identified and developed. The leadership and ministry of the laity is the lifeblood of these meetings.

The experience in small groups becomes a foundation for the Holy Spirit to work in the entire congregation, so that the healing power of the gospel streams forth from a healing fellowship.

Small groups that meet under the leading of the Holy Spirit are often dynamic and unconventional. Their form will vary and change. One thing, however, remains constant: worship and adoration occupy the foreground.⁵⁶

And consider three results of Pietism and its key *modus operandi*, the cell group, as sympathetic Ted Campbell describes them:

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 13.

⁵⁵ Loescher, Ernst, *Timotheus Verinus*, p. 341.

⁵⁶ Christenson, Larry, ed. *Welcome Holy Spirit*, p. 325.

In the first place, then, among the consistent concomitant traits of these religious movements, we should note what Joseph P. Schultz has called the “religious excitement” that characterized them. Religious excitement does not necessarily follow from affective devotion, but did accompany the religion of the heart movements in many of their expressions.

In the second place, it is important to discern two distinct religious options that consistently threatened the religion of the heart movements internally: on the one hand, there was the threat that their members would be drawn into millenarian sects; on the other hand, there was the equally persistent threat that their emphasis on the experience of God would lead members into mystical aberrations, such as Quietism or metaphysical speculation. . .

A third rather consistent concomitant of the religion of the heart movements is the fact that (in Knox’s words), “the history of enthusiasm is largely a history of female emancipation...” The form of religious life centering on affective devotion and personal religious-experience was also conducive to the development of women’s leadership, precisely because of its distance from the sacramental system.⁵⁷

When women who, led by their sinful nature, resent the different roles God has given to men and women and, to their thinking, are deprived of serving in public pastoral ministry or of leadership in the corporate church assembly, such women will thrive in cell groups or in the charismatic movement. And it’s easy to see why. In cell groups, there is no preacher to tell you what the Bible means. Everyone’s a minister, and what really matters is what you feel God is telling you. If a certain woman doesn’t feel that I Timothy 2:11-15 applies, but is culturally conditioned and no longer binding on her, then it isn’t! That this is sheer enthusiasm and subjectivism should by now be obvious.

Pietism has had a long-standing effect on the history of the Wisconsin Synod. The father of the Wisconsin Synod, Rev. Muehlhaeuser, was sent by the Langenberg Mission Society to the United States. The Mission Societies were unionistic efforts of Lutheran and Reformed Christians. In fact, at the time Muehlhaeuser founded Grace Congregation in downtown Milwaukee, he wanted to make it a union church, not an Evangelical Lutheran one. His opposition to the Lutheran Confessions as being “paper walls of partition” is well documented. As president of the Wisconsin Synod, he never rejected financial support from any and every source, and the Wisconsin Synod in its early years advertised for pastors of any background to serve its fledgling flocks. Muehlhaeuser may have been the founder of the Wisconsin Synod, but our gracious Lord through President Bading made it a confessional Lutheran Synod. An eternal debt of gratitude to the Lord for Pres. C.F.W. Walther of the Missouri Synod is owed, as well. Missouri was the confessional Lutheran church body in those days, whose prodding brought Wisconsin into a strong doctrinal position as a member of the Lutheran Synodical Conference.

But Pietism has had a lasting effect on many areas of our church and worship life. Rare and infrequent communion celebrations, for example, are the result of Pietism’s denigration of the sacraments as a means of grace. The abandonment of private confession and absolution, something Luther himself would have suffered death rather than give up, is the result of Pietism’s hatred of anything “too Catholic.” Whenever the stress in Confirmation is on the vow

⁵⁷ Campbell, Ted A., *The Religion of the Heart*, p. 173—4.

the confirmand is making, rather than the Word through which the Holy Spirit has instructed him, the effects of Pietism are seen. Yes, Pietism's fingers reach deeply into our current theology and practice.

Unfortunately, these instances are not the limits of the efforts of Pietism, subjectivism, enthusiasm, and Reformed doctrine to infiltrate our Wisconsin Synod. Before we undertake a probing self-analysis of subjectivism's dangerous influence on our theology and church life some hard questions need to be asked. Do we think that we are so pure of doctrine that we can read and study hooks from Reformed sources and glean from them great ideas to use in our own ministry without any danger of contamination by their enthusiastic spirit? Do we think that we can use the methodology of Pietism and that, because we are orthodox, we will not suffer its subjectivism and manifold other problems? Let us not tempt the Lord our God. We have the history of enthusiasm before us. Why would we find any of it desirable and worth emulating?

IV. Subjectivism's Threat to the WELS

The reason we would find any of it desirable is that we perceive that our encounter with sin in our lives and in the lives of our students and congregational members is getting worse and feel helpless to do anything to stop it. We lose members by the back door as they grow increasingly inactive and eventually find a scapegoat to excuse their sin of despising the means of grace. We lose members by the front door as something or other in our synod's scriptural confession causes someone to take offense. Marriage and family counseling demands increasing amounts of our time. Troubled teenagers don't just wear leather jackets and smoke cigarettes, they commit suicide. We may perceive that we need to do more than what we're doing because what we're doing just isn't working any more! Professor Emeritus E. C. Fredrich described just this problem and then his proposed solution:

How can we care for the souls of our people in this society that demonstrates much more immorality and religious indifference than Spener's ever did? No matter how bad the times and the morals get, no matter what lags and failures in sanctification are encountered each day, no matter how much coldness our members show to Word and sacrament, the answer to the problems is not a resort and return to Pietism. There is a better answer. There is only one answer : we all know what it is.⁵⁸

This is where Prof. Fredrich's paper concludes. Do we all know what the one answer is?

We have so many blessings from God's gracious hand in our Wisconsin Synod. And whenever we speak of our blessings, we offer heartfelt prayers of gratitude, for they are surely better than we deserve! We have God's Holy Word, preached and taught in its truth and purity. The Bible is, without exception, believed and considered to be God's inspired and inerrant word by 100% of our public ministers. In this skeptical day and age, what a miracle of God's grace to be able to say that so confidently! Thank God for his blessing!

We have a worker training system that is second to none. No other church body demands its pastors to have such ready skills in exegesis as ours does by providing sound training in the Biblical languages. While other seminaries have rushed away from Biblical theology into "practical" things like administration and psychology, we have graciously been permitted to continue to hold that nothing is more truly practical than Law and Gospel, properly distinguished

⁵⁸ Fredrich, E. C., *After Three Centuries – The legacy of Pietism*, p. 21.

and correctly applied. What a miracle of God's grace that His love for us in Christ has prompted such a love for His Word that we demand that those who publicly preach it and teach it be able to work with it in its original languages! Thank God for His blessing!

We continue to hold to objective, word and sacrament-centered worship forms. Our new hymnal will continue this time-tested manner of enabling us to be consistently fed with the means of grace and praise our gracious God for the forgiveness of sins in Jesus. We have a true missionary zeal which seeks to win souls for eternity throughout the world, wherever new opportunities present themselves and previously closed doors open, and are not content to merely care for needs of the body without those of the soul. We have a wonderful blessing in our elementary and secondary school system so that the Word of God, not humanism, can permeate every subject, and where students are disciplined and counseled in true Christian love and concern. Thank God for his wondrous blessing!

It is indeed miraculous that God should give to such unworthy sinners so many blessings that we cannot count them. It is miraculous that so many people come to church on Sunday! It is miraculous that so many people are led by the love of their Savior to seek additional opportunities to study his Word together! It is miraculous that so many people are prompted by the love of their crucified and risen Savior to freely and willingly sacrifice of their time, talents, and treasure to provide Christian education and to support Christian missions! It is miraculous that we have so many young men and women who desire to serve their Lord full time in the public ministry, and that so many desire to glorify Jesus Christ with lives of praise! Thank God for the miracles that His Holy Spirit, through the Gospel, has been working and will, by His grace, continue to work among us!

As difficult as it is to say, we sinful human beings are often discontented with the many blessings God has seen fit to give us. Instead of joyfully looking at a full house of Christians we're disappointed at wondering where old Gus is. Instead of rejoicing at our faithful Bible Class attendance we get angry that so many don't bother with it. Our school is filled to the brim but we gripe about the "Christian" parents who don't see the need for it, since their property taxes support public schools already. We counsel one troubled marriage over and over but forget about the 50 that are as strong as steel. We agonize over the one that takes his own life, thinking about what we have to do differently, forgetting the 340 others who receive all the strength and motivation for living they need in God's Holy Gospel. As a church body, we are an insignificant blip on the radar screen of the world. Few people even know who the president of the Wisconsin Synod is outside of our own microcosm. And money! If we only had more money, just imagine what we could do! If only we could grow numerically, that would be an indication that we're on the right track! So instead of being content with the measure of blessings that God himself gives us, the measure of fruits of faith that He works through the Gospel, the temptation is to look to the legalism and subjectivism of the Reformed.

Have Pietism and subjectivism invaded our church body once again? In all honesty and fairness, the answer is "yes." For example, a person would have to be highly inattentive to synodical goings-on to not realize the trend at starting "small group Bible studies." Next month, the three Wisconsin Districts' Adult Discipleship Coordinators will be hosting a workshop for pastors on how to start cell groups in your congregation. Several congregations have already organized them. But considering the past history of problems with this methodology of Pietism, Wisdom suggests that to organize cell groups in a congregation is to invite trouble, especially if a naive person, ignorant of the history of Pietism, does it just because "A synodical official told me to." One such promoter of cell groups in the WELS recommends using the extremely

subjective Serendipity series. If this is the flippant attitude held by all cell group promoters, we're in trouble:

A WELS pastor, explaining his use of Serendipity materials, began his presentation to other WELS pastors: "Don't worry about me. I'm a Word and Sacrament kind of guy." He proceeded to teach from Serendipity that true *koinonia* can only come when there is gutlevel communication in a small group. When questioned as to where the Means of Grace play in, the pastor responded, "Oh, yes. and it's all based on the Word of God. There, are we orthodox now?"⁵⁹

Indications that some of the problems of Pietism are recurring in our midst include the continuing difficulty we seem to have in defining the word ministry." We simply cannot continue to equate or blur the distinction between the universal priesthood of believers and the public ministry without wholesale denigration of the public ministry and a subjective attitude toward Scripture resulting. Slogans as "Everyone's a minister" belong to Pietism, not orthodox Lutheranism. As Professor Fredrich put it, "A universal priesthood that sets itself in opposition to the public ministry is no answer at all and something else, a violation and mutilation of the very body of Christ."⁶⁰ And Prof. Brenner also sounds the warning bell:

Pietism fell into some problems when the distinction between the public ministry and the universal priesthood was blurred. Both have been established by God. Every Christian is a part of the universal priesthood with the privilege of going directly to the throne of God in prayer and the honor of telling others about their Savior and the duty of speaking to their brother who has fallen into sin. But not every Christian is qualified for or called into the public ministry.⁶¹

And the recent treatise *What's Going on Among the Lutherans?* warns orthodox Lutherans not to be taken in by this subterfuge of Pietism:

The lowered view of the means of grace and greater emphasis on lay involvement led to a blurring of the biblical distinction between the universal priesthood of believers and the public ministry. Every Christian is a part of the universal priesthood and is called to share the Gospel with others, but special requirements apply to the public ministry. Of special importance are the pastor's training and responsibility for the administering of the Sacraments and safe-guarding the teaching of correct doctrine. In their eagerness to serve in the church, the laity got into areas in which they did not belong, such as lay-led Bible studies without pastoral guidance. In emphasizing subjective experience over doctrine, the pastor's special training lost much of its significance and his role was modified. He was no longer primarily the "minister of the Word of God," but rather the personally accountable representative, witness, and example of spiritual life, of "godliness."⁶²

⁵⁹ Prange, Paul, *The Effects of the Age of Pietism on the Lutheran Church*, p. 3.

⁶⁰ Fredrich, E. C., *After Three Centuries – The Legacy of Pietism*, p. 14.

⁶¹ Brenner, John M., *Pietism, Past and Present*, p. 26.

⁶² Smith, J. Kincaid, *What's Going On Among the Lutherans?*, p. 259, 260.

Such subjectivism is entirely undesirable and will be introduced to a congregation only at great peril.. Other problems of Pietism seem to be resurfacing. More WELS churches and members, in the name of their church or church organization, are getting involved with political and social activism with hearty encouragements of “It’s about time!” Yes, all of the chief problems of Pietism seem to resurfacing, except for doctrinal indifference. We still find the Wisconsin Synod holding to its firm position not to practice any outward fellowship with the heterodox until doctrinal unity can be established. (Or do we??)

Beyond considering the reappearance of the traditional methodology of Pietism is its subjectivism in other forms. One of the manifestations of subjectivism is to rely on or look for extra-Biblical signs from God for guidance in decision-making. Consider the case of the WELS couple who related their agonizing adoption process by stating about the ordeal:

As we made preparations for the birth and placement of the baby, we felt God’s continued guidance.

There was a five-month wait until the baby would be born, which gave us time to get through the myriad of paperwork, home studies, interviews, and investigations completed. For the most part, everything went well, although there were times we needed to feel reassured that this was God’s plan for us. The waiting seemed endless.

We started to dislike weekends, when our minds were freed from work-related activities. We would stay at home, thinking and praying about the adoption. We spent a great deal of time sitting by the phone, and began to worry when it didn’t ring.

Each time there was a lull in communication, we would pray for a sign that things were still moving. We always received signs, little ones that almost went unnoticed, or larger, more miraculous ones. While waiting, we had the support of our families, our friends and coworkers, and our adoption support group.⁶³

It all seems innocent enough, until other people read the story and conclude that they should pray for and seek little and big miraculous signs as confirmation that what they’re doing is “God’s plan.” Such subjectivism, as has been demonstrated, can have grim consequences.

An even more serious subjectivism is seen when the Biblical doctrine of headship and authority, especially applied to the role of men and women, is questioned. The pertinent passages are cited, and the rejoinder comes back, “Oh, I don’t want to get into proof-texting.” Is this what Pastor Mike Albrecht of St. James, South St. Paul, Minnesota, associate of Rev. Richard Stadler, is also saying when he writes in *Logia* magazine:

If nothing else, it is becoming clearer that there are voices within Missouri advocating the ordination of women—perhaps not the conspiracy some fear, but voices that ought to be heard and answered ... Hopefully the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod will learn to articulate its position in ways which do not resort to the simplistic proof-texting which satisfied most people a generation or two ago. There is room on both sides of this issue for more careful speech and clearer vision.⁶⁴

⁶³ Campana, Craig W., “God’s Handiwork through Adoption,” *Northwestern Lutheran* 3-15-92, p. 105.

⁶⁴ Albrecht, Michael, “Where is the Mote,” *Logia*, Oct. 92, p. 81.

Can such opposition to citing pertinent passages of Scripture as “simplistic proof-texting” be a more subversive means of questioning the absolute authority of Scripture? What is the format of our catechism, if it is not citing appropriate passages to demonstrate God’s answers to our questions of doctrine and life? Imagine, if you will, comforting the sinner with “The blood of Jesus, God’s Son, cleanses you from sin,” only to hear him respond, “Oh, there you go proof-texting again.” If pertinent passages cannot be used to demonstrate what God’s promises and God’s will is, then the subjectivism of rationalism is all we have left, and not the inspired Word of God.

How widespread is such an attitude in the WELS? Some of those opposed to the Scriptural roles God has assigned to men and women in the church and family have attempted to memorialize the Synod convention to the effect that doctrinal statements ought not be adopted by the Synod in convention. Rev. Thomas Nass, a member of the Commission on Inter-Church Relations, has effectively countered that argument in a recent essay. Other opposition has been in the form of open letters, such as the one distributed by Grace Bartel of Thiensville, WI:

Fortunately for me I found answers to all my questions. Titus 2:5 explains that women were urged to be in submission in Paul’s day “so that no one will malign the word of God “since society in those days would have been turned off by a religion in which women were treated as equals (Gal. 3:28 and Matt. 20:25-27). Today we live in a society where many earnest Christian and non-Christian men and women are repulsed by a religion that advocates keeping any group of people in submission. And the Gospel will be hindered today if we do not treat “father and mother” as equals in the family, as the Bible does, and women as equal partners in the spreading of the Gospel, as the Bible teaches. Now there are no inconsistencies in the Bible for me, and it speaks the same message throughout.

Better yet, my conscience is not always wondering whether or not I am sinning against God by doing this or that. I am free to serve my Savior to the best of my ability with all of my talents without fear. And my fellow WELS women who vote, teach men, are in authority over men, and speak the Word of God to men need never again worry that they might be sinning against God or hurting their relationship with God by falling out of their role. There is no prescribed role.⁶⁵

Experience has taught us that when God’s moral law (in this case the fourth commandment, God’s will regarding order and authority) is considered culturally conditioned, the subjectivism of moral relativism follows. Identical arguments could be made in favor of homosexuality, premarital and extramarital sex, divorce, and the like. Society is tolerant of all, so in order not to offend society, we must consider the condemnation of such sin in Scripture to be only applicable to apostolic times? As free as God has made us in Christ, we are not free to subjectively question the absolute authority of God’s Word.

Could there also be a calling into question of the complete efficacy of the Word? When programs, strategies, numerical goals by target dates, and other such businesslike approach predominate, there is the danger of putting a timetable on the work of Holy Spirit. There is the risk of the attitude that, if the Spirit won’t give us the goals we want to achieve when we want them, then we’ll use any means possible (after all, we are to use all possible means to “save

⁶⁵ Bartel, Grace, *Dear Member of the WELS*, January 1993.

some,” aren’t we?). Do we run the risk of placing our mission congregations into a position where they must choose between faithful proclamation of the Law and Gospel and showing demonstrable numerical growth so as to keep the mission dollars coming? When human timetables and goals dictate our work and the manner in which we carry it out, the very real danger of self-reliance rather than Spirit-reliance may frequently occur. God help us to remember that the Spirit works His fruit when and where He wills, and grant us the humility to say with our Savior “Not my will, but yours be done.”

Since many of us here are in the teaching ministry, we must be cautious of another brand of subjectivism. It is the temptation to use other means to achieve sanctification than the Holy Spirit uses. Many teachers’ conferences have recognized the humanism prevalent in the DARE programs operated by the local police departments, for example. Pastors’ conferences, including our own Winnebago Conference, have made a study of “self-esteem” and its inappropriateness as a means for motivating God-pleasing behavior. And yet, it is reported, DMLC has its own “DARE” bulletin board to keep future teachers abreast of developments in the program. All secular professional magazines will stress the importance of developing strong self-esteem in students. The WELS even has a school that has received positive community publicity because it has adopted a curriculum tailor-made to increasing the self-esteem of African American students. Siloah Lutheran School’s principal, Tim McNeill, explained in an interview in the *Northwestern Lutheran*:

“We want our students to make strong association with Africa and their heritage. Just looking around the school, you can see we have a different approach to the educational process. And we’re going overboard with it, because it’s essential. When kids are looking for identity, that’s when they’re involved in drugs, in teenage pregnancy. They go through their lives searching. We’re trying to show these kids they have a rich heritage. We’re trying to give them a sense of self-esteem. I’ve got kids who scored in the top seven percent of the country in the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. But if you don’t have self-esteem, you can’t rise to the level of your ability.”

“It’s easy to make. kids feel good about themselves spiritually. But when we get to history and heritage, it’s tough. What they hear about African-Americans is about gangs, teenage pregnancy, and slavery. How is that going to give them a positive view of themselves? It’s important to know your heritage and to have a good feeling about it. In history, in science, in every subject, we try to make the link: they did it, you can do it. You can be successful.”⁶⁶

It’s wonderful that one of our schools can minister to minority children crossculturally. Certainly Siloah’s students have the right to have a loving faculty respect their heritage and help to teach it to them in a dignified fashion. But the caution against subjectivism might be offered here as well. If we are relying on the instruction of history and culture to build self-esteem, because without it the—students will become involved in gangs, drugs, and teenage pregnancy, then we are trying to do the Holy Spirit’s work of sanctification with means through which the Holy Spirit has not promised to work.

Among the Reformed (and we can include all Pietism in this grouping), it is common for prayer to be elevated to the status of “means of grace,” as though that terminology is not applied

⁶⁶ Sonntag, Dorothy J., “N is for Nefertiti,” *Northwestern Lutheran* 3-1-92, p. 86.

by them. The gospel itself is presented as merely an offer, and not as the true power of God for salvation. In such light, consider this article from Pastor Philip Merten, Wis. Luth. Institutional minister:

Serving as a missionary with Wisconsin Lutheran Institutional Ministry brings me into daily contact with chemically dependent people in jail, hospitals, and drug treatment units. I'm constantly finding out more about the hellish trap Satan has laid for human souls through chemical dependency.

But I'm also finding out what power Jesus has to dismantle this trap. For instance, let me tell you more about Tammy. During her time in jail I shared Jesus' free and unconditional love with her, and I could see the difference it was making.

Her smiles began to be more genuine. She started asking, "Jesus forgives me; so what's keeping me from forgiving myself?"

The day Tammy was released from jail was a day of mixed feelings for me. I was glad to see her free, but I knew she was on the edge, teetering between going on with her recovery and going back to the streets.

That day also happened to be the day of a WLIM delegate meeting. I asked the delegates to pray with me for her. Together we went to the Lord and pleaded with him to surround Tammy with his protection and bind Satan from speaking his lies to her. The next day I got a call Tammy had applied and been accepted at a long-term drug treatment center.

I've seen Tammy several times since then. She's still struggling. But now the Holy Spirit's power is helping her in her struggle.⁶⁷

This testimonial gives every indication that the good news of Jesus' love began to make a difference, but it was the pleas to bind Satan that had the most effect of all, including bringing the Holy Spirit's aid to help Tammy in her struggle. And in another article in that same series, we are told the case history of Jerry, an alcoholic who died while under the influence. Notice the counselor's subjectively-spoken advice:

After a while, though, Jerry seemed less convinced that his life was really changing for the better. I could sense Satan was putting doubt into his mind. I tried to talk to him about the need to trust Christ and experience the power of the Holy Spirit in his life, but Jerry was already headed in another direction. He stopped coming to visit and we heard he was drinking again. Jerry died one night. He fell off a bridge while walking home drunk.⁶⁸

It may seem innocent to those who are unacquainted with the language of charismatics, but the phrase "experience the power of the Holy Spirit" is a very loaded expression. It suggests that your sanctified living will be empowered by a special experiencing of the Holy Spirit's outpouring.

It appears as though the use of testimonials themselves are on the increase in our circles. The reason, I believe, we have traditionally avoided them is that they don't really offer any specific law and gospel. They are highly subjective. They lead those simple believers who hear

⁶⁷ Merten, Philip, "Chemical Dependency: Hellish but not Hopeless," *Northwestern Lutheran* 10-15-91, p. 349.

⁶⁸ Schmidt, Jody R. "Helping Addicts: My Job and Yours" *Northwestern Lutheran* 12-91, p. 416.

of the wonderful power God is showing in someone else's life to think there's something missing in their own. And, too often, testimonials are required to paint a horrendous picture of the person's sinful life before he submitted to the power of the Lord. A typical testimonial might have the basic outline of **I.** I was *such* a bad sinner (let me tell you just how bad I was) **II.** I found Christ and I came to the Lord **III.** Now I overcome those bad sins. Included for your consideration is such a testimonial from the "Fighting Addiction" series:

Did you try to cut back or quit using drugs on your own?

I tried two or three times for a week or two. At the time that seemed pretty good. I cleaned out my system—so I could start pouring the poison back in. I was trying to prove to myself that I didn't have a problem and could quit any time I wanted. I could hold off during the work week, or if I had something I had to concentrate on. But as soon as I could, I was back to drinking and getting stoned.

What got you on the path to recovery?

A lot of prayer. And I went to Alcoholics Anonymous. I had my last drink on a Sunday, and the next day I was in an AA meeting. That's what helped me stay sober.

How has knowing the Gospel affected your recovery?

A lot of people coming into AA say the "higher power" you rely on for recovery could be the AA group or anything you want it to be. Knowing that Jesus is the higher power is what helped me.⁶⁹

A person must wonder just what the Gospel means to this recovering addict. He still speaks of his prayer and his decision to go to AA as the motivating factor in his newly found sobriety. And stating that "Jesus" is "the higher power" is not a confession of faith in the Gospel, either.

Alcoholics' Anonymous' version of sanctification is to tell the person to surrender control of their life to the higher power, whatever they consider it to be. Thus the subjective view of sanctification as a person's own surrender to the Lordship of Christ finds ready support. This triumphalistic view of sanctification, namely, that if you surrender to Christ you will be victorious over sin, and that *simul iustus et peccator* and Romans 7 don't apply to the true Christian who is a slave to Christ, has also wormed its way into the WELS. Pastor Robert Rhyne delivered an essay to the Chicago Conference of the Southeastern Wisconsin District entitled "Sanctification by Grace Through Faith" in September of 1992. The conference did not accept the essay and pursued ways of having the seminary faculty respond to the issues raised. However, in spite of the paper not being accepted, it was distributed by the office of Adult Discipleship "in the interest of spiritual renewal" for pastors to be "consoled, comforted, and challenged." The doctrinal position of the essayist was entirely triumphalistic and subjective, as this excerpt reveals:

When I think of how much I've studied *Romans*, I can't believe that I missed the basic point of chapters 6-8. The only part I understood and identified with was 7:15-25 ... I was

⁶⁹ Merten, Philip, "A Recovering Addict Tells His Story" *Northwestern Lutheran* 11-1-91, p. 374.

under the common, but mistaken opinion that this was the inescapable experience of all Christians this side of heaven.

I now believe that Paul is describing seasons of his life, and of the life of any Christian, when we needlessly and unnecessarily live “under the law” instead of “under grace.” When I came to see this, verses in chapter 6 and 8 which had been inscrutable suddenly made perfect sense and gave intoxicating hope for change. When I was experiencing slavery to work, approval, and video-renting, I was under the law and putting myself further under the law in an attempt to control my sin... For ten years I gave no one any hope of living a new life, free from the slavery to sin. And good thing I didn't, because I was putting people under the law for sanctification, and they were trapped, with me, in Romans 7:15-25

In January of 1991 a shift began which has changed everything. I learned about surrender. I learned the truth expressed in Galatians 2:20, explained thoroughly in Romans 6-8, that I have been crucified with Christ and Christ wanted to live through me. It was so simple: If only I would give up striving in my own energy and surrender to Jesus as Lord of my life, he would do it all ... The elements of our Christian faith which I had just begun to enjoy were explained to me by two books: *The Normal Christian Life*, by Chinese pastor Watchman Nee, and *Handbook to Happiness*, by Charles Solomon.⁷⁰

Such a position on sanctification and the denial that the Christian's struggle with sin is described in Romans 7 explicitly contradict the Formula of Concord, Article VI, as cited previously in this essay. That a WELS pastor would fall for Reformed doctrine is surprising, but not unheard of. That the conference would not accept the essay is refreshingly good news. That it would be nonetheless distributed by Adult Discipleship ought to be a major concern. Lessons learned? Let no one think that they are so pure of doctrine that the poison of enthusiasm and subjectivism of the Reformed cannot contaminate his thinking and faith and teaching. If you feel you must read Watchman Nee or Chuck Swindoll or any of these other popular Reformed writers, be sure and spend 10 times as much time reading Scripture, the Lutheran Confessions, Luther (I mean really reading Luther, not just finding a neat quotation from What Luther Says), Walther, Pieper, and Our Great Heritage. If you do adopt a “Spoil the Egyptians” attitude toward Reformed writers, just remember that the Israelites took some of the Egyptian spoils and made of it a golden calf.

I have chosen these examples because they exceed what could be charitably called “innocent mistakes.” If something appears in the official publication of the Wisconsin Synod, it is assumed to be the doctrinal position of the Synod. If effort is taken to mail something out to win others to that position, propaganda is being sown. But what if these writers “didn't mean it?” I have a friend who told me a story of a grade school basketball game in which one of his players was driving for a lay-up and got absolutely hammered, but no foul was called. As the referee went by his bench, the coach asked, “Why didn't you call a foul?” The official responded, “He didn't mean it.” Part of our responsibility to each other, to our Synod, to our calls as ministers of the Word, is admonition and correction, whether our errors are intentional or unintentional. If you see a tendency toward subjectivism, call a foul!

The solution to the temptation to subjectivism is simple. We pastors saw it every day we entered chapel at the seminary. “Preach the Gospel!” Let us be preachers of repentance, using

⁷⁰ Rhyne, Robert, *Sanctification by Grace through Faith*, p. 5.

the Law in all its force to expose and condemn sin as violent attacks upon God and His righteousness for which we all deserve hell. Preach the law and let that law produce true sorrow and contrition, and not a phony, manufactured variety. And comfort with the clear, unconditional Gospel. "Preach the Gospel!" Don't talk about the Gospel or about Gospel motivation as though it were a museum artifact or a lab specimen. Preach its living and life-giving message of salvation as though people's lives depended on it! Preach the Gospel and let that good news of forgiveness of sins in Christ produce true joy and happiness, not a variety manufactured because we're supposed to feel happy if we're Christians'. And just be faithful to the Word and faithful as a servant of that Word to God's people. Thank God for and be content with the fruits His Spirit brings forth.

When our Synod celebrated its 100th anniversary in 1950, Prof. Lawrenz concluded his essay on the absolute authority of God's Word for faith and life with a strong encouragement. I can think of no better way to conclude than to join my voice with that of that member of the church triumphant who waged many a battle for the pure teaching of God's Word while a member of the church militant:

Let it be our centennial prayer that the Holy Spirit may also adorn our synod, every congregation, and every member anew in faith with this spiritual pearl of a faithful appreciation of God's word as the bread of life. The Holy Spirit bestows such appreciation through the word itself. As we richly live in it and draw from its treasures of grace for our faith and life, he ever deepens such appreciation. Therefore let us use the word of God richly in our family circles, let us eagerly come to hear the word of God as it is proclaimed to us in our public service, ever mindful that it is the word of God which we are hearing, through which the Holy Spirit is working in our hearts, extending and imparting the most precious gifts to us.⁷¹

SOLI DEO GLORIA

⁷¹ Lawrenz, Carl, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

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