

“I Desire Mercy, Not Sacrifice”

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Thank you for asking me to work on this passage. Your assignment encouraged me to spend time in the company of Hosea, Amos, Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, the Psalmists, Jesus and the Lutheran confessors. Our Savior quoted these words from Hosea 6:6 twice. The Lutheran Confessions do not cite the words, but they treat the subject often. I have added the second half of the verse to the topic: “and [I desire] acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.” Before we begin, permit me to thank Prof. em. Bruce Backer, New Ulm, MN, for what he taught me in his essay, “Foundations of Worship.” May the words of God Hosea wrote in the Eighth Century B.C. help men on the front lines of ministry as they lead the worship of God’s New Testament people today.

1. THE WORDS AND CONSTRUCTION

כִּי הִסָּד הַפָּצְתִי וְלֹא־זָבַח וְדַעַת אֱלֹהִים מַעֲלוֹת:

A. Immediate Context; כִּי *For*

The immediate context of Hosea 6:6 begins with v.4: “What can I do with you, Ephraim? What can I do with you, Judah? Your love (חֶסֶד—your חֶסֶד) is like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears.” The Almighty has run out of alternatives. His people’s inconstancy leaves him no choice. V.5: “Therefore I cut you in pieces with my prophets, I killed you with the words of my mouth; my judgments flashed like lightning upon you.” Israel’s unfaithfulness is the cause; וְלֹא־כֵן *therefore* introduces the consequence: God’s judgment announced by his spokesmen. The Assyrians will destroy Samaria (722 B.C.) and obliterate the Northern Kingdom from the map. Israel will go off to its doom in captivity. V.6, our topic, continues God’s words: “For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.” כִּי *for* introduces the reason why the Lord has now spoken his sentence of doom. But didn’t he say already in v.4 that Israel’s spiritual adultery brings on his judgment? Why the mention of sacrifice and burnt offerings? It’s evident that *something about sacrifice and burnt offerings must be supplied from the broader context* to explain the conjunction (see 2. below).

B. חֶסֶד *faithful love*

After the conjunction, we look for the most important Hebrew word at the beginning of the clause. Ordinary English word order begins with the subject, but most Biblical Hebrew sentences lead with the verb if they have one. This one opens with the direct object, חֶסֶד, so the object has the emphasis: “חֶסֶד I delight in, not sacrifice.” What is חֶסֶד, here translated *mercy* by the NIV? We look first at how the word appears in parallelism and then at the translations.

Hebrew with its penchant for parallelism tends to link similar terms into pairs, not only in poetry but also in prose. The meaning of a word is hinted at by the company it keeps. The most common companion of חֶסֶד is אֱמֻנָה. The words are found together 23x according to Even-Shoshan’s concordance (e.g., Hosea 4:1, which also has אֱמֻנָה וְדַעַת אֱלֹהִים). אֱמֻנָה, from the root [אָמַן] *confirm, support*, means *firmness, faithfulness, truth*. The heavy preponderance of אֱמֻנָה in parallelism with חֶסֶד seems to justify Glueck’s contention that the two words

make up a hendiadys (102), an expression of one idea through two nouns rather than by the noun and adjective combination that English would generally prefer. They might be translated “true love, faithful love, true and faithful love.” From the same root as תָּנָח comes הִצְמִיחַ, *firmness, steadfastness, stability*, found three times coupled with חֶסֶד. Supporting a covenantal significance of חֶסֶד is the pair חֶסֶד וְחֵן: Nehemiah 1:5; 9:32; Deuteronomy 7:12; 1 Kings 8:23; 2 Chronicles 6:14 and Daniel 9:4 with minor variations describe the Lord as *keeping covenant and faithful love* (NIV: *his covenant of love*). The pairing with רַחֲמִים *compassion* is found in Psalm 103:4 (of God), Zechariah 7:9 (of a man with his brother), Jeremiah 16:5 (God has withdrawn his blessing, his *love* and his *compassion* from this people!), Hosea 2:19, Heb.2:21 (God will betroth Israel to himself with these gifts) and Daniel 1:9 (God has an official show חֶסֶד and רַחֲמִים to Daniel). Otherwise there are two pairings with מִשְׁפָּט *justice* and one each with חַיִּים *life*, טוֹב *good*, חֵן *favor, grace*, and צְדָקָה *righteousness*.

In the translations of the Bible the NIV has *mercy* for חֶסֶד 6x, *love* 129x, *kindness* 41x, *unfailing love* 32x, *great love* 6x, *unfailing kindness* 3x, as well as an assortment of other translations. The Septuagint here and usually (172x) has ἔλεος, the Vulgate usually *misericordia*, both equivalent to *mercy*. The usual translation in the KJV is *mercy*, as in our common table prayer, Psalm 106:1: “His *mercy* endures forever” (but *kindness* 38x, *loving kindness* 30x). The lexicons through Brown-Driver-Briggs (1907) have *goodness, kindness*. Koehler (1952) introduced a new translation: *die Gemeinschaftspflicht, Verbundenheit, the mutual liability of those who are relatives, friends, master and servant, or belonging together in any other way, the solidarity, joint liability*. This general sense is retained in the most recent multivolume dictionaries: Baumgartner-Stamm (1993-) translates חֶסֶד *joint obligation*; Klines (1994-2000) has *loyalty*. These modern dictionaries are influenced especially by the dissertation of Nelson Glueck (1927), translated into English as *Hesed in the Bible* (1967). *Joint obligation* smells after the law, and even *loyalty* does not seem to have the required emotional content. In this paper I regularly translate חֶסֶד as faithful love, recognizing its connection with the LORD’s covenant, as shown by Glueck, and in keeping with the marriage picture in the book of Hosea. *Steadfast love*, the RSV translation, would be my second choice.

Glueck’s starting point is חֶסֶד as human conduct. He suggests that what can be called a *hesed*-relationship exists between “people who are in some close relationship to one another” (37). These include: A. Relatives by blood or marriage, related clans and related tribes (e.g. Genesis 47:29, where Jacob asks Joseph to swear to him that he will show him חֶסֶד וְחֵן); B. Host and guest (e.g., Genesis 19:19, where Lot’s guests show him חֶסֶד); C. Allies and their relatives (e.g., 1 Samuel 20:8,14,15; 2 Samuel 9:1,3,7, David and Jonathan and Jonathan’s son); D. Friends (e.g., 2 Samuel 16:17); E. Ruler and subject (e.g. 2 Samuel 3:8); F. Those who have gained merit by rendering aid, and the parties thereby put under obligation (e.g. Judges 1:24; 2 Samuel 2:5). Glueck’s definition of חֶסֶד: “conduct in accord with a mutual relationship of rights and duties or conduct corresponding to a mutually obligatory relationship.” According to Glueck, חֶסֶד “constitutes the essence of a covenant” (55).

Chapter II of Glueck’s dissertation takes up “Hesed as Human Conduct—Its Religious Meaning.” Of particular interest for this paper are the three pages on חֶסֶד in the book of Hosea. The underlining in this and the following paragraph is my emphasis, especially to show *the absence of grace in Glueck’s understanding of חֶסֶד*. In Hosea, חֶסֶד is “the proper conduct of all men toward one another” (57); it is “the realization of ‘the generally valid divine commandment of humaneness’” (Wellhausen).

In Hos. 6:4 God reproaches Israel because its *hesed* is inconstant. The people saw in the life of the cultus the truly religious life and did not know what really pleased God. The people had no notion of how they should act in order to gain God’s favor... In the same sense *hesed* also appears in Hos. 10:12 and 12:7 [Eng.12:6]. In 10:12 we discover the conditions which Israel has to fulfill in order to come to terms with God. “Sow in justice and you will harvest in *hesed*,”

admonishes the prophet. By practicing justice and charity among themselves, men find the way to God and to their salvation. (58)

Commenting on Hosea 12:7 (Eng. 12:6), Glueck says that the people's "conduct must be in accordance with דָּקָה and מִשְׁפָּט before Israel can return to God" (58,59).

Glueck begins Chapter III, "Hesed as Divine Conduct" (the point at which we would prefer to *begin* our word study) by considering the relationship of God with the patriarchs. When Abraham's servant, seeking a wife for Isaac, asks for *hesed*, this is

something which is due to Abraham and which Abraham's servant expects and asks for from Yahweh because of the special relationship between Yahweh and his master... Yahweh was the God of Abraham; Abraham was his servant. Theirs was a very distinct relationship which imposed upon them certain rights and duties—a relationship of mutual reciprocity expressed by $h\text{□}esed$. (71)

Although Glueck says, "The basis for the mutuality between Yahweh and Abraham was God's act of choosing Abraham and his promise to aid Abraham and his offspring" (71), he can also say a page later: "Yahweh's covenant-based loyalty (*gemeinschaftsgemaesse Treue*) naturally presupposed Abraham's loyalty to him" (72). Speaking later in connection with Numbers 14:18 and Exodus 34:6, Glueck grants that here God's דָּקָה "is viewed not as a right but as a gift" (88). Yet he can continue on the next page by adding: "Those who seek God must prove themselves worth in order to find Him and be received into His covenant. The fear of God makes the granting of His $h\text{□}esed$ possible" (89). At the end of his thesis Glueck suggests that "the significance of $h\text{□}esed$ can be rendered by 'loyalty,' 'mutual aid' or 'reciprocal love'" (107).

St. Paul's inspired understanding of God's covenant with Abraham and his seed is far removed from Glueck's. *The covenant with Abraham and his seed was a one-sided promise.* The promise created faith in Abraham, so that *God's righteousness was imputed to Abraham through faith (Genesis 15; Romans 4)*. This covenant of grace is completely lacking in Glueck's work. Glueck places both God's דָּקָה and the believer's response to God's דָּקָה entirely into the province of law: these are obligations imposed by the covenant, not grace on the part of the Lord and the loving answer of God's child to a gracious heavenly Father. But *the LORD builds his most fundamental relationship to Abraham and to Israel not on a legal but on a gospel footing—his free and faithful love, expressed in the gospel covenant with Abraham and his seed. The blessings of this covenant are received not through a proper attitude of loyalty in man, but only through faith.* When the LORD promised the patriarch seed as numerous as the stars, "Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness" (Genesis 15:6; cf. Romans 4:1-5). Later God introduced the Ten Commandments to Israel with the words, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt." Thereby he reasserted his covenantal relationship with the people of Israel, based on the promises made long before to Abraham. One of these promises he had now kept: "I will punish the nation [your descendants] serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions" (Genesis 15:14).

"Added" to the gospel covenant with Abraham and his descendants was the Sinai covenant. But "the law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise. For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on a promise; but *God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise.* What then was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come" (Galatians 3:17-19). Legalists might object: "But don't the prophets cite the Ten Commandments in speaking of Israel's covenant-breaking?" Yes, plainly and explicitly. But the prophets cite the Commandments to show that *Israel's disregard for the LORD's revealed will is the symptom of Israel's unbelief.* See, for example, Hosea 4:1,2, where the LORD begins a lawsuit against his people: $\text{אֵין־אֱמֶת וְאֵין־חֶסֶד וְאֵין־דַּעַת אֶל־הִים בְּאֶרֶץ}$ "*There is no faithfulness, no faithful love, no knowledge of God in the land.*" Israel has become apostate. Then God submits as evidence Israel's sins

against his commandments, almost like numbered exhibits: “There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed.”

The life-picture of God’s רַחֲמִים in the book of Hosea is the prophet’s marriage: Hosea, responding to the LORD’s call, takes adulterous Gomer to be his wife. “When the LORD began to speak through Hosea, the LORD said to him, “Go, take to yourself an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness, because the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the LORD” (1:2). The prophet, faithful to his marriage vow, represents the LORD, loving Israel with an everlasting, constant love. His love is pure grace, magnified by comparison with its shabby object. Adulterous Gomer pictures Israel, chasing after her lovers the Baals and attributing her wealth to their kindness. In spite of Israel’s unfaithfulness, the LORD woos his people back and promises them a magnificent bridal gift: “I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you in—better, *with* (Hebrew כִּי, here presenting the marriage gifts the groom gives to his beloved) righteousness and justice, with love (רַחֲמִים) and compassion (רַחֲמִים). I will betroth you with faithfulness (אֱמוּנָה), and you will acknowledge the LORD” ((אֶת־יְהוָה רַחֲמִים אֶת־יְהוָה 2:19,20 [Heb.2:21,22]).

When God faithfully loves human beings, the element of his mercy is always present, because we humans are so needy and God’s grace so abundant. Notice the coupling of רַחֲמִים and רַחֲמִים in the parallelism of Hosea 2:19 [Heb.2:21]. So David also prays at the beginning of Psalm 51 [Heb.51:3]: “Have mercy on me (רַחֲמִים), O God, according to your unfailing love (רַחֲמִים); according to your great compassion (רַחֲמִים) blot out my transgressions.” It is “the LORD who has mercy on you” (יְהוָה מְרַחֵם) whose רַחֲמִים will never be shaken or depart from his people, according to Isaiah 54:10. God’s mercy flows from the everlasting love he promised Abraham, David and his people Israel, expressed in his gospel-covenant. This grace belonged to Israel, as to Abraham and now to us—Abraham’s children—through faith alone. Thus the translation *mercy* will regularly fit for the Lord’s רַחֲמִים (though not for the רַחֲמִים Israel is to show the Lord!): his mercy flows from his faithful love. Yet for a consistent translation *faithful love* seems to reflect the Lord’s covenant more aptly, especially in the book of Hosea. It fits both dimensions, God’s love for us and the love for him he seeks in us, as well as the believer’s loving attitude toward his needy neighbor.

The busy pastor who might say, “Just give me the Bible passages” may not welcome the lengthy treatment I’ve given to Glueck’s work. An old Hebrew teacher is just reviewing a reminder to former students: dictionaries (and, of course, word studies and commentaries) must be used critically. Old and New Testament dictionaries are based on how words are actually used in the Biblical text. When we read a definition, we need to look at the passages it is supposed to fit. Furthermore, Jesus and Paul are better helpers in understanding the Old Testament than scholars who do not know the gospel. Most Hebrew dictionaries and many Old Testament commentaries would consider the exegesis of our Lord and his apostles irrelevant. It’s also worth noting that a Reformed scholar like R. Laird Harris, even while he accepts the authority of both Testaments, does not make a clear distinction between the law and gospel covenants. To defend the grace of God in *TWOT* he must argue against a consistent covenant significance for רַחֲמִים and suggest *lovingkindness* as an archaic but fitting definition (Hams 307). He asks, “Is not *hesed*...really the OT reflex of ‘God is love’?” (306) No: Glueck is right in connecting רַחֲמִים with the LORD’s covenant; but Glueck is wrong when he holds that “in the older sources, the common usage of *hesed* never means an arbitrary demonstration of grace, kindness, favor or love” (55).

What effect does the LORD wish to produce by bestowing his רַחֲמִים on needy, undeserving Israel? In a children’s devotion last year one of our pastors asked the kids, “What does God want you to be like?” He was looking for an answer like “Loving” or “Good.” One pint-sized theologian answered, “Him.” The God who revealed himself to Moses as רַחֲמִים וְאֱמוּנָה (Exodus 34:6) wants us to be like him, *abounding in love and faithfulness*. Imperfect though the sin-spoiled likeness may be, it delights him to see his nature reflected in us. That happens when his faithful promises evoke faith, accompanied by all faith’s varied fruits. *The LORD in Hosea 6:6 speaks of רַחֲמִים as a fruit of faith. He desires to make his people both recipients and doers of his רַחֲמִים.* Dr. Paul Peters sums up this thought: “As He Himself delighted in *chesed* (Micah 7:18), thus He desired *chesed*

of his people, wanted them to love¹ (Micah 6:8), to show (Zechariah 7:9), and to keep *chesed* (Hosea 12:6).” This is “the *chesed* of the *chasidim*” (Peters 167). The God of steadfast, faithful, loyal love delights in those who love him and their neighbor with steadfastness, faithfulness, loyalty. When faithful love and knowledge of God are lacking in his people, they disregard his commandments (Hosea 4:1,2). On the other hand, faithful love and knowledge of God express themselves in that love which is “the fulfillment of the law” (Romans 13:10).

The Greek word *ἀγάπη* in the New Testament emphasizes a different aspect of divine love from the Hebrew *דָּוָה* but stresses the same relationship between God’s love for us and our love for him and for each other: “We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother, he is a liar... Whoever loves God must also love his brother” (1 John 4:19-21). John continues by describing mercy on brothers in need as the proof of love: “If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth” (1 John 3:17,18). Likewise, those who have received God’s *דָּוָה* may be expected to overflow with faithful love for the poor, the needy, the powerless, those in particular need of mercy. “Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow” (Isaiah 1:16,17: see under 3.C. below.).

C. *הִפְצִיתִי I desire*

הִפְצִיתִי is a stative, not an active verb. Therefore the perfect form is translated with an English present tense.

In the case of *הִפְצִיתִי*, the object solicits favor by its own intrinsic qualities. The subject is easily attracted to it because it is desirable... [*הִפְצִיתִי*] means “to experience emotional delight.” This is felt by men or by God. Men are said to experience it in respect to women... The word is used of God having delight in certain people... God is said to experience this delight toward good works of men. For instance, he “delights” in his sabbath being kept and his law observed (Isa 56:4), in “mercy” and “knowledge of God” (Hos 6:6), and in “truth” (Ps 51:8 [Eng.51:6]). (Wood 310-311)

Even though stative, *הִפְצִיתִי* may take as a direct object the things in which the subject delights. That is the case in Hosea 6:6. We could say that the LORD delights in what he himself has created in us, the good works he has prepared in advance for us to do (Ephesians 2:10). Repentant David uses the same verb *הִפְצִיתִי* when he addresses the Lord in Psalm 51:19 [Heb.51:21]: “*Then there will be righteous sacrifices...to delight you*”

(*וְבָחִי צִדְקָה אֲזַתְּהִפְצִיתִי*). We need to keep this passage in mind when we hear the Lord rejecting Israel’s sacrifices and burnt-offerings in Hosea 6:6.

D. *וְדַעַת אֱלֹהִים and knowledge of God*

Parallel in Hosea 6:6 with the LORD’s delight in faithful love is his delight in *וְדַעַת אֱלֹהִים knowledge of God*. *וְדַעַת* is a noun from the verb root *וָדַע*. When God says in the previous half-verse that he delights in *וְדָוָה*, it

¹ Regarding *וָאָהַב*: “The intensity of the meaning ranges from God’s infinite affection for his people to the carnal appetites of a lazy glutton... *וָאָהַב* frequently describes love between human beings... People may love things concrete or abstract... God has commanded man to “love” him... Conversely, God “loves” men, especially his people Israel... Jeremiah accused the people of loving to wander, while Isaiah charged them with loving to sleep... The participles often translate as “friend.” From II Chr 20:7 comes the notion that Abraham is the “friend” of God... The English word “lover,” translating the Piel participle, often carries a derogatory connotation implying prostitution (Hos 2:7, etc.)” (Alden 27). Of course “to love faithful love” is awkward in English. In Micah 6:8, I’d be inconsistent, leaning on Clines: “to love loyalty.”

might be tempting to think that he is referring to his own **הָקֵד**. But parallel to **הָקֵד** is **דַּעַת אֱלֹהִים** *knowledge of God*, which cannot mean God's knowledge of himself. Here the NIV has *acknowledgment* of God, but we tend to use the word "acknowledgment" in English for the way an old-fashioned gentleman tips his hat simply as a polite gesture recognizing that another person is present. A wife does not merely *acknowledge* her husband; she knows him. She wants to say the words that a Jewish sweetheart inscribes on her ring: **לִי וְאֲנִי לוֹ** *My lover is mine and I am his* (Song 2:16). In fact, **יָדַע** may also be used in a technical sense for the recognition of a covenant relationship: "Verbs meaning 'to know' in ordinary contexts were used for 'to recognize,' 'be loyal to,' in the vocabulary of international relations over a wide range of the ancient world" (Hillers 122). This sense, emphasizing the covenant, fits very well here, but we would not do justice to the rich meaning of **יָדַע** if we limited the semantic field covered by *knowledge of God* in this passage to covenant recognition alone. God wants his people to *know* him in the full range of his personality, as he revealed his name to Moses and as he is revealed through Moses in the Scriptures (Exodus 34:6,7): **יְהוָה**, "the compassionate and gracious God slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness (**רַב־חַסֵּד וְרַחֲמִים**), maintaining love (**בְּצַד־חַסֵּד**) to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generations."

God does not fully reveal his personality in nature, and knowledge of all his marvelous attributes does not dawn on us through reason. He makes himself known as he is only by revelation, and we know him only through Spirit-born faith in his revelation. For the patriarchs and for Israel before Moses the knowledge of God came through what the LORD did for his people, from what he told them directly and from what their fathers told them of what he had done. Then it came through the words of Moses and the prophets, the written Word in which the LORD's acts were both recounted and interpreted. For us full knowledge of God comes through all the Spirit-inspired Scriptures; it becomes our own through Spirit-wrought faith. Thus **דַּעַת אֱלֹהִים** is not mere information, or a bare recognition that God exists. It is the knowledge of which Jesus speaks when he says, "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep" (John 10:14,15).

E. **וְלֹא־זָבַח** *and not sacrifice... מְעַלּוֹת* *rather than burnt offerings*

In Hosea 6:6 the LORD does not speak absolutely of his delight in his people's **דַּעַת אֱלֹהִים**. He speaks of delight "in steadfast love, **וְלֹא־זָבַח** *not in sacrifice*" and "in knowledge of God **מְעַלּוֹת** *rather than burnt offerings*." The syllable **מְ** before **עַלּוֹת** is the **מִן** of comparison (**מְ** before a guttural), and this helps us interpret the negative **לֹא** in the first half of the verse. *We should not understand "steadfast love, not sacrifice" as an absolute denial of God's delight in sacrifice.* The verb **שָׁעַר** *regard, look with favor* was used for God's pleasure in the sacrifice brought by believing Abel (Genesis 4:5). He "smelled the pleasing aroma" (**רִיחַ**... (Hiph. **רִיחַ**)) of the burnt offerings grateful Noah brought after his deliverance from the flood (Genesis 8:20). Burnt offering (**עֹלָה**, literally, *going up*, from the verb **עָלָה**, for the smoke ascending to heaven) and sacrifice (**זָבַח**, here in pause, **זָבַח** from the verb root **זָבַח** *slaughter for sacrifice*) were plainly commanded in the Law (Leviticus 1-7) as essential elements of the worship God required of his people. In burnt offerings and sacrifices the ceremonial law prefigured Christ's offering his perfect obedience and his own precious blood to his heavenly Father to atone for the sins of the world. There can be no thought that in Hosea 6:6 God is rejecting a "priestly religion" of ceremonies and sacrifices in favor of a purely ethical "prophetic religion."

But sacrifices and burnt offerings were acceptable to the LORD as proof of **הָקֵד** and **דַּעַת אֱלֹהִים** in his people, not as having value intrinsic to themselves. Yes, the LORD takes pleasure in them, but only when the heart of the worshiper belongs to him. Without the believing heart of the offerer, the offering is nothing, even worse than nothing. Your fiancée doesn't want your ring; she wants *you*. To put it more biblically, above all the LORD wanted to be Israel's God and wanted Israel to be his people. He willed to show his love to his people and

to see and hear them confess their love for him: “You are my God” (Hosea 2:23 [Heb.25]). Only *the “sacrifices of righteousness”* (זִבְחֵי יֶצְדִקָּה), *i.e., righteous sacrifices delight him* (Psalm 51:19 [Hebrew 21]). Wasn’t the sacrifice of Isaac pleasing to God only as an expression of Abraham’s fear of the LORD, which would not withhold even his only son from his God? (Genesis 22:12) And isn’t “fear of the LORD” here a way of naming the confession of a believing heart, “You are the LORD, *my God*”?

Why did the LORD mention *sacrifice* and *burnt offerings* in Hosea 6:6? The answer is in

2. THE BROADER CONTEXT

The last verses of Hosea 5 contain some of the strongest expressions of God’s condemnation in the whole Bible. He has declared Israel guilty in the lawsuit (רִיב) he instituted in 4:1. Now the LORD compares himself to a moth, eating away at the fabric of his people; he is like rot in their bones (5:12). Like a lion he roars: “I will tear them to pieces and go away; I will carry them off, with no one to rescue them” (5:14). But the lion simile does not carry over to the LORD’s purpose: “Then I will go back to my place *until they admit their guilt*” (5:15).

What follows in 6:1-3 is a quotation, though unmarked in Hebrew.² The prophet is evidently repeating the words Israel speaks in response to the LORD’s threatened judgment. The words are so beautiful that many preachers have taken them at face value and preached sermons about true repentance based on this text (ILCW Year A includes Hosea 5:15-6:3 for Lent 4). Laetsch lets Hosea himself say these words and so interprets them positively: “Hosea...at once falls in with God’s purpose stated 5:15b, and at once does all he can to effect the return of his people” (56). I’d consider the NIV heading, in keeping with the preceding and following context, to be more insightful: “Israel Unrepentant.” Hear the beautiful words: “Come, let us return to the LORD. He has torn us to pieces”—remember the lion!—“but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will restore us, that we may live in his presence. Let us acknowledge (הִגַּדְנוּ and *let us know*) the LORD; let us press on to acknowledge (לְדַעַת *to know*) him. As surely as the sun rises, he will appear; he will come to us like the winter rains, like the spring rains that water the earth.” That vv. 1-3 describe a superficial (German might say *gemachte*—manufactured—repentance) is evident 1) from what is lacking in Israel’s words; 2) from the LORD’s reaction in 6:4-6; and 3) from Israel’s persistent conduct described in 6:8-11.

1) What is lacking in this prayer? The LORD is waiting for the Israelites to “admit their guilt,” to earnestly seek him in their misery (5:15). *In 6:1-3 there is no admission of guilt*, not a hint that Israel’s own sins have called down the LORD’s just judgment. When they say, “Let us return to the LORD,” they use the right Old Testament word for repentance (שׁוּב *return*), but they possibly mean making a pilgrimage back to the LORD’s sanctuary from the Baal altars where they have been bringing their sacrifices. They say nothing of the repeated angling for foreign alliances that has replaced their trust in Israel’s Rock and Shield.

When they say that the LORD “has torn us to pieces” and “has injured us,” they refer to the military defeats they have suffered and the tribute they must pay, not to the painful knowledge of their own guilt that should have followed. The “healing” and “binding up” they look for would be victory in war and deliverance from oppression (*People’s Bible*),

not the restoration of a right relationship with their God. This prayer is not at all like the one that pleases God, described in the last chapter of Hosea. There Israel confesses its sins of relying on foreign alliances and trusting in the Baals; the people promise fruits of repentance to follow: “Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously, that we may offer the fruit of our lips. Assyria cannot save us; we will not mount war-horses. We will never again say ‘Our gods’ to what our own hands have made, for in you the fatherless find compassion” (14:2,3).

² The Septuagint marks the Israelites as the speakers, continuing the previous verse here with λέγοντες.

2) How does God receive Israel's prayer in Hosea 6:1-3? Just as Hosea had warned the Israelites (5:6): "When they go with their flocks and herds to seek the LORD, they will not find him; he has withdrawn himself from them." "Do they think they can satisfy the holy LORD God and escape the pain of saying 'I have sinned, Father' just by singing a lovely bit of liturgy and by piling sacrificial animals on his altar?" (*People's Bible*). The LORD reacts in 6:4,5: "What can I do with you, Ephraim? What can I do with you, Judah? Your love is like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears. Therefore I killed you with the words of my mouth; my judgments flashed like lightning upon you." Pray and sacrifice as they will, the LORD remains the lion descending on a defenseless flock. He receives penitent sinners with mercy, but *the impenitent come no nearer to him by going through the motions of worship*. David teaches this to us on the basis of his own hard experience: "You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise" (Psalm 51:17 [Heb.51:19]).

3) What does God see among his people in place of the faithful love and knowledge of him that he rightfully expects? Like the Pharisees and Sadducees who came to John the Baptist, the Israelites in Hosea's time were only "fleeing from the coming wrath"; *they produced no "fruit in keeping with repentance"* (Matthew 3:7,8). Hosea cites specific instances as evidence. At Adam (probably a place name; cf. NIV footnote) unfaithful Israelites break their covenant (6:7). Gilead is "a city of wicked men, stained with footprints of blood" (6:8). Bands of Israelite priests, like marauders, lie in ambush to commit murder and other shameful crimes on the road to Shechem (6:9). The eyes of the Almighty, which have seen everything, are horrified to see Ephraim, the Northern Kingdom, "given to prostitution" (6:10), yielding to the flesh and taking part in the fertility rituals of Baalism. Judah, spared so far, has been entangled in similar offences (5:5.10) and well deserves its own harvest of judgment to come (5:12,14; 6:4,11).

The Israelites' impenitent worship added insult to injury. They treated their God-ordained public worship as if it were a means to hoodwink the Judge and shorten their sentence. They thought they could manipulate the all-knowing God with sacrifices. They were reconstructing the LORD in the image of Baal, thinking they would give him what he wanted—prayers, sacrifices, acknowledgement (that translation fits here!)—so that he would give them what they wanted—special status as his people, continued prosperity, deliverance from enemies—even while they remained in their unbelief and sin. The LORD will say about them, "Though Ephraim"—Israel, the Northern Kingdom—"built many altars for sin offerings, these have become altars for sinning. I wrote for them the many things of my law, but they regarded them as something alien. They offer sacrifices given to me and they eat the meat, but the LORD is not pleased with them. Now he will remember their wickedness and punish their sins... I will send fire upon their cities that will consume their fortresses" (8:11-14). "The time is ripe (lit. the end has come) for my people Israel; I will spare them no longer," the LORD says (Amos 8:2). His patience is infinite, but Israel has stretched it to infinity. The axe is laid at the root of the trees. After this, the fire (Matthew 3:10).

If we fill in the line of thought described in 1.A. above, it would run this way. Israel has been unfaithful to her true and loving husband, the LORD, running after her lovers, the Canaanite Baals. Therefore the judgment announced by his prophets is coming: like a great lion, the Lord will tear the Israelites to pieces and carry them off, with no one to rescue them (Chapters 4 and 5). Israel has responded with some of the right worship-words and seemingly appropriate sacrifices, but with a heart still far from the LORD (6:1-3). No fruits of repentance are about to appear (6:7-10). The LORD has come to the end of his long patience. He says, "What can I do with you, Israel? What you call דָּוָן (דָּוָן־דָּוָן , v.4) is transient as morning mist, disappearing like early dew, anything but faithful love (6:4). It was for this very reason that I cut you in pieces with my prophets; I killed you with the words of my mouth; my judgments flashed like lightning upon you (6:5). *For I desire faithful love, not sacrifice, and knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings*" (6:6).

3. PARALLELS IN EIGHTH CENTURY B.C. PROPHETS

It would be instructive to follow this thought through the whole Old Testament. We could begin by comparing the sacrifices of unbelieving Cain and believing Abel in Genesis 4. Our study might end with the picture of a post-exilic worshiper flooding the altar with tears: the LORD no longer accepted his offerings with pleasure because he had treacherously broken faith with the wife of his youth (Malachi 2:13,14). It is fundamental to the worship of the LORD that his people appear before him with penitent hearts, trusting in his loving promises, and that they confess their faith with their deeds. Passages from the prophecies of Hosea's fellow-prophet in Israel, Amos, and his contemporaries in Judah, Micah and Isaiah, will be adequate Old Testament parallels for the time we have. A passage from Jeremiah's Temple Sermon—Chapter 7—will also appear in 4. below, as it is cited by Melancthon in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession.

A. Amos 5:21-27

In earlier chapters of his book Amos has indicted Israel for bribery, trampling the poor, denying them justice, polluting his worship with a lack of love for the powerless, rejecting his prophets, making the Nazirites break their vows (2:6-12). Even the women crush the needy because their hearts are set on high living (4:1). The shrines patronized by the Israelites do not want for sacrifices, but Israel brings (polluted) offerings in order to brag (4:4,5). I called you back by my chastisements, the LORD says, “yet you have not returned to me” (4:6,8-11). “Seek me and live,” he implores (5:4); “seek good and not evil, that you may live” (5:14); “hate evil, love good” (5:15). The day of the LORD is coming, but it will not be a day of salvation for Israel. The day of the LORD will be a day of judgment, “pitch-dark, without a ray of brightness” (5:20).

Thus the context in Amos is very similar to the context of Hosea 6:6. Amos has pointed especially to the breakdown of דָּבָר as shown in the decay of Israelite society, as well as their idolatrous worship. Then follows a passage closely parallel to Hosea 6:6. To Hosea's *sacrifice* and *burnt offerings* Amos adds *pilgrimage festivals, assemblies* (21), *grain offerings, fellowship offerings* (22), and the *songs* and *harp music* with which David had adorned the public worship of the LORD (23). The LORD hates them, despises them, cannot stand them, does not accept them, has no regard for them. “Away with them!” he says: “But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream” (24). The prophet earlier pointed to the impenitence evidenced in oppression and injustice displayed in Israelite society; so he also expects the fruits of repentance to be shown in his people's common life. Israelite society (remember: Israel is the visible church of the Old Testament!) must mirror the constant justice and never-failing righteousness that characterize Israel's God.

B. Micah 6:6-8

Micah is an Eighth Century contemporary of Hosea and Amos, but in Judah, the Southern Kingdom. In Micah 6 the LORD initiates a law-suit similar to the one in Hosea 4:1. He himself brings the complaint. He calls the mountains and hills as witnesses. He sets the defendant in the dock (6:1-3). Didn't the LORD bring his people up out of Egypt? Didn't he give them Moses and Aaron and Miriam? Didn't he make Balaam speak a blessing on Israel when Balak asked for a curse? Can't the Israelites remember their journey out of the wilderness into the Promised Land? Don't they know the righteous acts of the LORD? (6:3-5)

Now in an unmarked quote similar to Hosea 6:6 the prophet shares with us the worship-thoughts of an Israelite. The worshiper considers *burnt offerings*. He might bring *yearling calves* (6:6), even *thousands of rams* for the LORD to wash down with *ten thousand rivers of oil* (6:7a). Not enough. Well, then: what about a sacrifice even more precious, the Canaanite alternative prescribed by the idol priests: “Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” (6:7b). No, no, no! “*He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy (דָּבָר אֱהָבָה) and to walk humbly with your God*” (6:6).

D. Isaiah 1:11-17; Summary

Hosea's greatest contemporary, working mainly in Jerusalem, is the prophet Isaiah. The promises he voices are so comforting that we easily forget his mission as a prophet of judgment (6:9-13). Remember the opening words of his book: "I reared children and brought them up," the LORD says, "but they have rebelled against me" (1:2). Isaiah calls Judah's leaders "you rulers of Sodom," the population of Jerusalem "you people of Gomorrah" (1:10). The prophet speaks so eloquently that anything we add only dampens the effect of God's words themselves: hear *Isaiah 1:11-17*.

I can sum up this message of these prophets with no better words than the following, from Backer's "Foundations of Worship" (4):

The four prophets Amos, Hosea, Isaiah and Micah pierce fake worship. Time and again they touch the very heart of the matter—the way in which men behave toward each other and the way in which they worship God; and all of these prophets can see that these two things are inseparable. The prophets will not permit religion to exist in a vacuum. Unless man's formal worship of God is matched by his just and fair treatment of his neighbor, then ceremonies, rituals, observances and sacrifices are nauseating to God. And they are highly dangerous to the worshiper because he is attempting to stifle his moral and social conscience by all the "business" of religion. [*These prophets*] *declare the usages and customs of religion to be null and void unless men are treating their fellow men with mercy and justice.*

4. HOSEA 6:6 QUOTED BY JESUS

A. Matthew 9:13

The Lord Jesus quoted Hosea 6:6 twice, both instances reported by Matthew, both passages directed to the Pharisees. Matthew had left his tax-collector's booth in response to Jesus' call, "Follow me" (Matthew 9:9). Matthew held a dinner. Among the friends he invited were not only Jesus and his disciples but also many tax collectors and "sinners." "When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, 'Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'? On hearing this, Jesus said, 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners'" (Matthew 9:11-13).

What was the Pharisees' objection to Jesus' eating with Matthew and his friends? The Mishnah's list of things that shame the disciple of a learned man includes this: "He should not lie at table in fellowship with people who do not know the law" (Strack-Billerbeck, I, 498). The Pharisees' very name means "those who separate themselves." Edersheim describes the attitude of the Mishnah toward publicans, particularly toward customhouse officials like Matthew. They were classified with the worshipers of Molech, to whom Leviticus 20:5 applied: "I will set my face against that man and his family and will cut off from their people both him and all who follow him..." Remember how carefully the Pharisees observed the "traditions of the fathers," the oral law that built a fence around the law of Moses, to avoid a hint of a possibility of disobedience to the Lord. Just to cite the incidents in Matthew's account: the Pharisees point to the disciples' picking and eating heads of grain as profanation of the Sabbath (12:2—see below). They plot to kill Jesus after he restores a man's withered hand on the Sabbath day (12:9-14). "Why," they ask the Lord, "do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat" (15:2). From John we could add the irony that when they brought Jesus to Pontius Pilate with a false accusation, "to avoid ceremonial uncleanness the Jews did not enter the palace; they wanted to be able to eat the Passover" (18:28).

Jesus and his disciples were enjoying table fellowship and all that meant in the ancient East with tax-collectors and "sinners." "Why?" the Pharisees ask, and the Lord answers with a proverb, a text—Hosea 6:6—and an application, each in the form of "not-this-but-that." To clarify his answer for ourselves, and especially to understand his own application of Hosea 6:6, we could place the three "not-this-but-that's" in Matthew 8:12,13 parallel with each other.

| | | |
|--------------------|--------------|----------------------------|
| NOT the healthy, | BUT the sick | need a doctor. |
| NOT sacrifice, | BUT mercy | I [i.e., the Lord] desire. |
| NOT the righteous, | BUT sinners | I [Jesus] came to call. |

A doctor's mission is to heal the sick, so it is the sick who need him, not the healthy. (The healing of the paralytic, immediately before the call of Matthew, took place to show "the teachers of the law" "that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"!)

The Lord delights in mercy, in faithful love that reaches out to those in need, like the mercy shown by Jesus for tax-collectors and "sinners," rather than sacrifice, like the obedience of the Pharisees to their hoard of laws and traditions designed to earn points with God. Jesus came to call sinners, like the ex-publican Matthew and Matthew's friends at the table with him, not the righteous, like the Pharisees, loaded down with their own supposed righteousness.

Returning to Hosea's words, think back to the Israelites' refusal to reflect the steadfast love of their God in their own lives by loving their brothers, their failure to grasp their own spiritual disease and their optimism about making things right with God by their own sacrifices. All apply to the Pharisees. "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the *more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness*. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former" (Matthew 23:23). Of course, the same condemnation applies to every other religious observance intended to earn points with God by works of the law.

The Pharisees even twisted repentance into a legal requirement. Repentance for them was "ultimately return to the Law" (Edersheim, I, 511-512). In our preaching, teaching and counseling do we ever picture repentance that way? Do we remember the patient Father, his heart aching to welcome a straying child home? Further, as conservative Lutherans, might we justify ourselves and our church by making avoidance of unionism, keeping Lutheran altars for Lutheran communicants of our fellowship only, and careful observance of the Biblical roles of man and woman into sacrifices and burnt offerings to earn God's favor? Biblical practice shows reverence for the only Savior and for the Word he brought from heaven, the only message that can restore sinners to life with God forever. In our pastoral practice do we apply the gospel with mercy and love for lost souls, or do we ever show a spirit of uncaring judgment for "lesser breeds without the law"? Does our patient instruction in such matters reflect the love of a Savior who came to call not the righteous, but sinners to repentance?

B. Matthew 12:7

"Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them"—an action in itself allowed by the Law of Moses (Deuteronomy 23:25). "When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, 'Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath'" (Matthew 12:2). They saw the disciples harvesting and threshing grain—actions among the thirty-nine kinds of work forbidden on the Sabbath by Moses in the oral law, according to Jewish tradition. Under some circumstances the action of the disciples could have been punished with death by stoning (Strack-Billerbeck 616).

In response to the legalists, Jesus cited two passages from the Old Testament. 1) When David and his companions, fleeing Saul, were hungry, they "ate the consecrated bread—which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests" (Matthew 12:4; see 1 Samuel 21:1-6). 2) On the Sabbath "the priests in the temple desecrate the day and yet are innocent." On point 2) the Lord compares his disciples serving him with the priests serving the Lord in the temple. One greater than the temple (12:6) is here. If the priests under the Law could work in the temple on the Sabbath, surely the Messiah's followers could "work" to feed themselves as they followed him into the grain fields that Saturday, "for the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath" (12:8). In such a passage Jesus also begins to teach the New Testament abolition of the ceremonial law.

When he cites Hosea 6:6, Jesus seems to refer especially to point 1) above. God's purpose in having the priests alone eat the "bread of the Presence" was not to keep them from feeding the hungry with it. Ahimelech

the priest showed mercy by giving bread that was rightfully his to David and his men. The Pharisees, however, wanted to prevent the disciples from satisfying their physical need in the grainfields that Sabbath. The Twelve could hardly have kept their casseroles warm in the oven since Friday so as not to go hungry on the Sabbath. The Pharisees' narrow interpretation of the Sabbath command—their self-designed worship of the Lord—would have deprived the hungry of food. Jesus cared about his disciples in their need for daily bread. To show mercy on them in their need was the will of God. To that the Pharisees' interpretation and elaboration of the Sabbath law must yield: "If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent" (12:7).

The multiplication of ordinances is characteristic of any approach to God by way of law. Jesus quoted Isaiah 29:13: "They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men" (Matthew 15:9). The application of this principle to the multiplication of rules in today's cults is plain. And doesn't the legalistic old man also want to rise up in us when we are frustrated with a lack of sanctification in ourselves and others? May we not sometimes forget the guilt-cleansing waters of our baptism and set up our humanly devised new life-patterns, new methods, new rules to conquer sin?³ Don't we need to recognize our own sins—our envy of our brothers, our unchastity, our waste of God's golden hours—as the loathesome unholiness they are, lay them at the cross, and then begin our life and labor anew in the power of Christ's resurrection?

5. *OPUS OPERATUM* IN THE LUTHERAN CONFESSIONS

The Lutheran Confessions do not quote Hosea 6:6. They do, however, describe worship as an expression of the heart's fear, love and trust in God. They condemn worship practiced as a formal action to woo his favor, worship without faith. In the Apology Melancthon writes, "We condemn the whole crowd of scholastic doctors, who teach that the Sacraments confer grace *ex opere operato*, without a good disposition on the part of the one using them" (i.e., without faith) "provided he do not place a hindrance in the way" (313,18). It would appear that the Roman church since Vatican II wishes to avoid the appearance of fostering *opus operatum*. "To attribute the efficacy of prayers or of sacramental signs" (e.g., saying the Rosary) "to their mere external performance, apart from the interior disposition that they demand, is to fall into superstition," says the Roman *Catechism* (2111). Regarding the Lord's Prayer, "Jesus does not give us a formula to repeat mechanically" (2766). Yet the principle of *opus operatum* still applies to aspects of the sacramental system and especially to the very central ceremony of Roman Catholic worship, "the sacrifice of the mass." It is "offered for the faithful departed who 'have died in Christ but are not yet wholly purified' so that they may be able to enter into the light and peace of Christ" (*Catechism* 1371, citing the Council of Trent). Melancthon wrote: "In the Church the Lord's Supper was instituted that by remembrance of the promises of Christ, of which we are admonished in this sign, faith might be strengthened in us, and we might publicly confess our faith, and proclaim the benefits of Christ, as Paul says, 1 Cor. 11:26: As often as ye eat this bread and drink this cup, ye do show the Lord's death, etc. But our adversaries contend that the mass is a work that justifies us *ex opere operato*, and removes the guilt and liability to punishment in those for whom is celebrated" (*Apology* III, 177, 89).

Article XXIV in the *Apology*, "Of the Mass" addresses the spiritual issue treated in passages like Hosea 6:6. "The prophets also in the Old Testament condemn the opinion of the people concerning the *opus operatum*, and teach the righteousness and sacrifices of the Spirit. Jer. 7,22.23: *For I spake not unto your fathers, nor commanded them, in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, concerning burnt offerings or sacrifices; but this thing commanded I them, saying, Obey my voice, and I will be your God*, etc. How do we suppose that the Jews received this arraignment, which seems to conflict openly with Moses? For it was evident that God had given the fathers commands concerning burnt offerings and victims. But Jeremiah condemns the opinion concerning sacrifices which God had not delivered, namely, that these services should please Him *ex opere operato*. But he adds concerning faith that God had commanded this: *Hear Me, i.e., believe Me that I am your God; that I wish to become thus known when I pity and aid; neither have I need of your victims; believe*

³ I remember "cuss kitties" in dormitory rooms. A bad word or God's name used in vain and overheard would cost you a penny (before inflation).

that I wish to be God the Justifier and Savior, not on account of works, but on account of My word and promise; truly and from the heart seek and expect aid from Me” (393, 28). (A fuller treatment of *opus operatum* in the Roman church would have to take up the whole sacramental system.)

While we must condemn superstitious practices in any church, we need to be especially concerned about popular attitudes toward worship which the devil’s arrows carry into “Lutheran” hearts as well. A pastor may be shocked, as I was, by the deathbed words of a parishioner who expects to appear before the Lord unfearing “because I’ve gone to church all my life and communion every month since my confirmation day”! If you haven’t had the experience yet, you may some day hear something like that from a dear soul who sat under your pulpit every week. How careful we must be to preach and teach the harsh judgment of God’s law in such a way that the shoe fits Christian feet, so that we and our hearers put it on: “God, be merciful *to me, a sinner*”! With what love for souls we must labor over our sermons, devotions and Bible classes as we strive to present the unchanging comfort of the gospel in new and fresh ways so that our hearers say from their hearts, “Christ lived and died *for me*, in my place”!⁴ How patiently we must teach children and adults in confirmation classes, sermons and Bible classes the meaning of Christ’s holy Supper, according to his words, “My body, my blood, given and poured out *for you* for the forgiveness of sins”!

6. THE CHURCH’S WORSHIP—BROAD AND NARROW SENSES⁵

I was born into a world full of wonders, blessed with reason, senses and marvelous abilities by a kind Creator. But I was blind to his true nature, dead in sinfulness, struggling with all my strength to oppose him and his purpose for me. I was born under a sentence of eternal death. Yet God loved me from eternity and sent his own Son Jesus into my flesh but without any taint of sin. Jesus became sin for me. He took my place under God’s commandments and suffered the penalty for my rebellion. At the open tomb of Jesus the Father pronounced all sinners justified, including me. Though he knew the full measure of my enmity toward him, in his fathomless grace he chose me from eternity to be his own. He gave me Christian parents who brought me to baptism. By baptism the Spirit kindled faith in me, washed away my sins through the blood and merits of Christ, made me a member of God’s family, accepted me as my Savior’s own adopted brother. By water and the Word he made a covenant with me that he in his faithful love will never break.

His church through my parents, my teachers, my pastor taught me to know Jesus as my Lord. God’s Son became my sin; I became the righteousness of God in him. The Spirit used the instruments he gave the church to open my sin-blinded eyes. Now I know the God who knew me first. Through baptism my old self was crucified with Christ. Just as Christ was raised from the dead, so through baptism I live a new life in God’s family. I am set free from Satan for life with God, to serve him and my fellow human beings. Though my old self constantly struggles to get off the cross, it is nailed there for good. Now with all baptized believers I am united with Christ in his resurrection. We are still the Spirit’s work in progress today, as he helps us grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Savior. In freedom we serve God in our earthly callings, you and I in our ministry, some of us as husbands and fathers. We often fail and we need to repent every day; yet we also gain daily victories through Christ working in us. Further, he enables us freely to enjoy all this present creation as his gift. When he comes again he will glorify our bodies in his new creation. In the meantime my brothers and sisters and I in his church carry each other’s burdens, serving and encouraging each other. Our ears are tuned to his Word: “I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship” (τὴν λογικὴν λατρείαν ὑμῶν). *This “liturgy,” our entire new life in Christ—the same noun used in Romans 9:4 for the rites of the Old Covenant!—is New Testament Christian worship in its broad sense.*⁶ This is worship “in spirit and truth” (John 4:23). (See in this connection Brunner, 11-17.)

⁴ A German homiletics professor said it this way: “*Meine Herren, das ist ein Dienst der Liebe, dass Sie das alles so anschaulich wie moeglich machen!*”

⁵ My thanks again to Backer for making this distinction clearer to me.

⁶ Whole theologies of outreach, stewardship and Christian education would fit here, too.

But “if the conduct of the Christians as a whole is worship, this is closely linked to the fact that their temporal life has found a concrete focal point, a power station, so to say, which controls and directs their whole existence” (Brunner 18). Jesus instituted baptism and commanded his church to preach his good news. He sent his disciples into all the world to make disciples of all nations by baptizing and teaching them. He gave them authority to forgive sins in his name. He nourished the faith of the Twelve on the night he was betrayed with the gift of his own body and blood for the forgiveness of their sins. He told them, “Do this in remembrance of me.” *With his gift of Word and Sacraments Jesus instituted the church’s New Testament worship, our “formal worship,” worship in its narrow sense.* His church in faith treasures baptism and wants to share it with all nations, beginning with our children. His church in faith has open ears for the good news of Jesus, the forgiveness of sins as his called servants proclaim it. His church builds itself up with his means of grace, so that each member grows in grace and in the knowledge of Christ. His church listens and learns as everything he commanded is taught from his Scriptures. His church remembers and proclaims the death of Christ until he comes again in glory by receiving his body given for us and his blood poured out on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins. His church today also desires to join with the church of all ages in pouring out prayer, praise and thanksgiving for the salvation God gives through his chosen means. These are the two aspects of the church’s corporate worship, worship in the narrow sense: Christians gather in the name of Jesus to use the means of grace together and to respond with hearts upraised to him in prayer, praise and thanksgiving. (See Brunner 17-24.)

New Testament worship in this narrow sense needs forms. Even “psalms, hymns and spiritual songs” (Colossians 3:16) need forms if the congregation of believers is to sing them together. The church’s worship needs order. Otherwise it easily degenerates into the kind of church services Paul had to reprove in the Corinthian congregation. Old Testament forms and order were included in the law of the Lord, written in the books of Moses; the Psalms were and are inspired forms of praise. Hosea, Amos, Micah and Isaiah reminded God’s people that these God-ordained forms dared never become *opus operatum* for them, works done without faith with the intention of gaining God’s favor. The Lord’s faithful love promised salvation to his people, and he wants his nature to be reflected in a people full of faithful love. We love because he loved us first. *Our New Testament worship, for which we gather in the name of Jesus, is nothing but an orderly pattern of using the gospel in Word and Sacraments, the Spirit’s means of grace, and joyfully responding with our prayers, praise and thanksgiving.* Worship in the name of Jesus has developed historically, and so we receive forms of Christian worship from our Lutheran fathers in the faith, as they inherited forms from their fathers before them. Such well-worn worship paths dare never become laws, because God’s New Testament people are free. In freedom we value tradition—not a bad word—because we recognize believers of all ages as our brothers and sisters in the church. Our history is a gift. In freedom we also create new forms in our time, recognizing that the gifts the ascended Savior distributes to his church today are equally marks of his grace. Old forms and new forms will find their place as long as the church continues to come together in the name of Jesus to be nourished in faith by the good news proclaimed according to the Scriptures and by the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution.

The old evil foe will continue today to tempt the worshiping people of God to let the forms of worship in its narrow sense—our liturgies, our forms of hearing the words of absolution, baptizing our children, going to church, listening to a sermon, joining in hymns and prayers, attending Bible class, going to communion—take the place of worship in its broad sense, responding to God’s grace with lives of serving him, our brothers and sisters in his church and our neighbors in his world. If that happens, our God would speak to New Testament worshipers a message like the one Amos preached to Israel long ago:

I loathe and despise your communion services;
 Your Matins and Vespers give me no pleasure.
 You may bring me the paltry percentage of your income,
 And I will not so much as look at it.
 I don’t want to hear the songs of your liturgies;

My ears are closed to your organ music.
 Instead, let justice roll on like a mighty river,
 And integrity like a never-failing stream. (Backer 4)

Or, to paraphrase God's words in Hosea: "I desire faithful love, not the outward forms of 'worship'; I delight in Christians' knowing me as their Savior-God rather than just in people's being 'churched.'"

Come, worship the LORD! Worship him in spirit and truth! Christians, worship Father, Son and Holy Spirit, rejoicing in the use of his chosen means! Offer him your prayers, your praise and your thanksgiving! And worship him in his world by living with people in justice and righteousness! In mercy and compassion, give our Lord and Savior the worship that delights his heart: *faithful love and knowledge of God!*

7. APPLICATIONS: DISCUSSION

A. On אֱמוּנָה in a pastor's life.

The word אֱמוּנָה, referring first to the LORD's love and secondly to the love his people show for him and for each other, emphasizes steadfastness, faithfulness and loyalty. Perhaps his covenant with Israel can help us as we probe the אֱמוּנָה we want to show in keeping the vows we make. What is the meaning of אֱמוּנָה *faithful love* in regard to our baptismal vow? Our marriage vow? Our ordination vow?

B. On knowledge of God.

The LORD seeks "knowledge of God" in his loyal people. Our synod has been emphasizing adult discipleship, especially Bible study, as an area where our congregations need to grow. But can a Bible study can become a mere pious garnish for every possible church program and activity? How can Bible study help a congregation grow in "knowledge of God"? Are both textual and topical Bible studies of equal value in promoting "knowledge of God"?

C. On *opus operatum*.

Do WELS Lutherans place a proper emphasis on faith when they speak of the means of grace and justification? Note Luther's *Small Catechism* on Baptism: "It is not the water indeed that does them, but the word of God which is in and with the water, and faith, which trusts such Word of God in the water" (551). On the Lord's Supper: "He that believes these words has what they say and express, namely, the forgiveness of sins" (557). In the form of absolution suggested in "How the Unlearned Should Be Taught to Confess" (553,554), the pastor asks, "Do you believe that my forgiveness is God's forgiveness?" Upon the penitent's "Yes, dear sir," the pastor absolves him with words beginning, "As you believe, so be it done to you." Does a concern about a Reformed emphasis on faith as if it were a human accomplishment ("decision for Christ" theology) lead us to deemphasize faith? How do you differentiate between Lutheran and Evangelical emphases on faith?

D. On liturgies and worship forms.

In the above-quoted paper on worship, Bruce Backer, commenting on the passages from Hosea, Amos, Isaiah and Micah cited above, says,

The prophets will not permit religion to exist in a vacuum. Unless man's formal worship of God is matched by his just and fair treatment of his neighbor, then ceremonies, rituals, observances and sacrifices are nauseating to God. And they are highly dangerous to the worshiper because he

is attempting to stifle his moral and social conscience by all the “business” of religion. [The prophets] declare the usages and customs of religion to be null and void unless men are treating their fellow men with mercy and justice. (4)

Do we ever think of the possibility that our services could be “highly dangerous to the worshiper”? Do we see helping our people sharpen their “social conscience”—conscience as applied to our lives among people in the world—as part of our work as pastors when we preach the gospel?

E. On forms in public worship.

Backer paraphrases Amos for WELS worshipers in the second-last paragraph of the paper as quoted above. Would you include a passage like that in a sermon? Is it too easily misunderstood? Do you think it might even discourage church and communion attendance? Or don’t we ever face the worship situation that Hosea and Amos saw in the church of their time?

F. On enlivening our worship.

WELS congregations, pastors and church musicians have benefited from seminars and convocations on worship. Yet it is possible to overemphasize worship forms and techniques at the expense of a Biblical focus on the Gospel, faith, and the fruits of faith. Backer warns in the paper cited above:

Worship techniques in and of themselves do not constitute the foundations of worship. Variety will not solve lethargic worship, nor will modern English, nor will old English, neither will new liturgies or old liturgies; neither new hymns nor old hymns; faster hymn playing or slower hymn playing. The idea that there is any kind of lasting solution to problems in worship in these techniques is a grand delusion that we must fight with all our strength. (7)

Yet as worship leaders we must plan our congregations’ worship. What will enliven Lutheran worship?

G. On WELS practices (“church rules”).

Especially in the outlying areas of our synod, a pastor has a lot of difficulty explaining such practices as close communion, our attitude toward lodges and Scouts, Christian burial for Christians only and the Biblical roles of men and women. As he speaks to his conference about standing firm in such matters for the sake of the Gospel, a voice from the back quotes Hosea: “I delight in mercy, not sacrifice.” Is this quotation in this situation a correct application of Hosea 6:6? Are we ever guilty of building walls around the gospel, as the Pharisees built walls around the law of Moses? How can we help our congregations view evangelical Lutheran practice not as synod rules but as applications of gospel doctrine?

H. On how we can make it better.

In a 1988 Bible study class for adults, “Where We Stand,” Mark Braun described distinctive, often controversial practices of the WELS. His last chapter was entitled “Where We Can Make It Better” (67). He wrote:

There is a numbing sameness to our worship. Reading 1 Corinthians 14, it appears that the problem in the worship life of that church was that too many people wanted to speak up and take part in the worship assembly. That’s hardly a problem in the Wisconsin Synod. We have often become passively content to let one man do all the talking, week after week. Too many folks

treat worship as a spectator sport... We need greater variety, participation and enthusiasm in the worship life of many Wisconsin Synod congregations. We are quite good at doing things “in a fitting and orderly way.” Can we add ardor to our order?

Has *Christian Worship—a Lutheran Hymnal* helped? Would the 1988 criticism hold true in Cottonbelt Conference congregations in 2001?

I. On our ministry as worship.

Paul sees his apostleship as his worship of the Lord, speaking of “the grace God gave me to be a minister of Christ Jesus (εἰς τὸ εἶναι με λειτουργὸν Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ) to the Gentiles with the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God (ἱεουργοῦντα τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τοῦ θεοῦ), so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit” (Romans 15:15,16). Do we see our whole ministry in the same way? Would anything change if we did?

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