

Balanced Teaching - A Necessary Requisite for Proper Christian Motivation

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During the year 1970 and '71 the church bodies holding membership in the LCUSA submitted to their congregations for study a novel and controversial program recommending a restructuring of the confirmation and first communion practices in Lutheran churches. The recommendations were made by 15 man study commission after five years of study and planning. You're no doubt familiar with their plan to admit young people to holy communion at the 6th grade level followed by instruction on the 10th grade level. That plan has been introduced in numerous Lutheran churches throughout the country. It was endorsed by the LCA, and the ALC, and rejected by the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod though some of its agencies endorsed it and many of its congregations are implementing it.

There was a reason for the study and the change. The LCUSA bodies were increasingly concerned and alarmed by the growing number of drop-outs in confirmation years. There was similar concern about the apathy and disinterest in church on the part of many young people who remained members of their churches nominally. The new practice recommended by the study commission was an attempt to do something about these problems.

In our own Synod, conferences, both pastoral and delegate, were encouraged to study the confirmation/first communion question also. The California delegate conference of which I was a member at the time, did so in 1970. The Seminary faculty was just completing its study of the question at the time I became member of it. For various reasons our people locked upon the commission's proposals with predictable disfavor. The new system was not for us, we said.

Whether or not we acknowledge that the LCUSA has come up with the right solution to the problem of turned off teenagers in the church, we will have to admit that there to a problem also in our circles. We cannot blind ourselves to the situation, nor can we sweep it under the rug. If we do not accept the proposed solution of other Lutheran bodies, then we ought to address ourselves to a different solution of our own devising. This paper is an attempt to do just that.

I think we would all agree that the problem is volitional. It centers in a failure to motivate the will. That failure may well be due in part to the manner in which we teach God's Word to God's people either in the classroom or by the living witness of our lives as teachers. Our teaching sometimes lacks a necessary balance. We want to explore that possibility as we discuss:

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We shall proceed by stating the problem and then by directing attention to:

- I. The symptoms
- II. The causes
- III. The remedy

After years of training in our system, many of our Christians apparently do not know how to express their faith in the Christian community and to the world at large. They tend to be inhibited, to often content to hide their candle under a bushel when it ought to be displayed on a candlestick. Instead of seeking opportunities to serve, they have to be urged to serve and sometimes do so only with great reluctance. They possess a more than adequate knowledge of Scripture but falter in the application of that knowledge to the tasks of Christian service. It is as though we equip them with all the necessary tools but fail to teach them how to utilize them

effectively for their Savior's sake. In brief that is the problem. It is a motivational problem. The diagnosis locates it in the will.

The symptoms of the problem are manifold. They are apparent both on the pre-confirmation and the post-confirmation levels. We have all felt our hearts warm at the uninhibited, simple, "God talk" of a preschooler. It comes directly from the heart. Who of us hasn't devoutly wished we could coax the same kind of talk out of their older brothers and sisters, or for that matter, from their parents too? Something seems to be at work diminishing rather than intensifying the candlepower with which they let their light shine. By the time they reach their teens an attitude of religious restraint has replaced the unabashed enthusiasm of earlier years. To some extent that is normal and natural. But then again it seems there is something selective about it. They aren't restrained in the gym when their heroes have just snatched victory from defeat or at the arena when their favorite rock group is performing. But in singing classes their inhibitions tie their tongues, and the fortissimo of the gym gives way to the pianissimo of the sanctuary. How does one account for their enthusiasm for things secular and their lack of it for things sacred?

Perhaps some examples would help to illustrate my concern. In my last parish I regularly taught the senior division of the vacation Bible school. The majority of the students in the class were outsiders, the minority from our day school. Frequently I concluded the day's sessions by asking for a volunteer to lead the group in a prayer incorporating thoughts learned from the day's lesson. It was perplexing to me to note the willingness with which the non-churched students volunteered to offer the prayer and the reluctance of our day school children to do so. I would say that was a symptom of our problem.

In that same congregation there were approximately fifty young people of high school age. In youth group meetings they were encouraged to be free in the expression of their faith, and to express it in a variety of ways. Their response was generally gratifying. About fifteen of the fifty enrolled at Synodical schools in the Midwest. As they progressed through the system a noticeable contrast became apparent between the Synodical school students and their peers who were year around participants in the junior Bible class and youth programs of the congregation. I would say that was another symptom of our problem.

For the past three years it has been my privilege to be involved in the evangelism seminars sponsored by the Lutheran Collegians and to serve as pastoral advisor to the Missions Committee of the Collegians. One of the chief concerns of the collegians with whom I have associated is the attitude of disinterest and indifference displayed by many of their fellow Wisconsin Synod students on campus toward the campus ministry of our church. This is all the more perplexing to them because of the seeming success of such organizations as Campus Crusade for Christ and Inter Varsity Christian Fellowship. Perhaps that is another one of the symptoms of our problem.

Adults in our congregations also display the symptoms. Church historians have correctly referred to the decade of the sixties as the decade of the emerging layman in the churches. For centuries churches were clergy oriented. Now that is changing apparently more so in some churches than in ours. In an age that is becoming more and more evangelism conscious, our Christians are not as free and easy in their talk about the Savior as are Christians of other denominations. God talk in many of our homes is rare, and in some instances even a cause of embarrassment. In a sermon consultation a year or so ago, one of my students mentioned that he could not recall his father, a life-long member of one of our churches, ever speaking the name of Jesus in ordinary conversation. He spoke only of "the good Lord" in connection with things providential. That surely is not the kind of picture that emerges from the pages of Acts where we read about the activity of the post-Pentecost Christians.

On the congregational level the symptoms are also apparent. Our congregations, particularly here in the Midwest, generally are not warm and friendly toward strangers. A visitor can come and go sometimes without a single word of welcome except for the blurb in the bulletin. Our congregational singing is often subdued rather than a joyous outpouring of praise, also in congregations with day schools where church members have become familiar with our rich heritage of hymns. That too is symptomatic.

The problem is highlighted today by the success of the charismatic movement. An ALC scholar who has studied and written extensively on the subject of the new Pentecostalism estimates that as many as 35 million people throughout the world have become involved in the movement in the last decade. Many of them are recruits from old line denominations. They are reacting against the cold, lifeless formalism of their churches. Neo-Pentecostalism offers something new and revitalizing. It turns people on. Some of our members too have come under the influence of the movement, and it threatens to siphon off more. Perhaps that is the Lord's way of compelling us to attempt to identify the causes which underlie the symptoms we have enumerated.

II. The Causes

How does one explain the fact that we can let ourselves go emotionally as spectators at an athletic contest, but not as witnesses to the mighty acts of God? What are the reasons for the inhibitions in our own people which are often lacking in other Christians? Why are our children less restrained religiously when they enter the first grade than when they graduate from the eighth grade?

There is of course no single, simple answer to that question except to say that our old Adam is the inhibitor. But if we succeed with the Spirit's help in daily drowning our old Adam in other areas, why does he turn out to be such a good swimmer in this one? Some might be inclined to attribute the problem to the martinet so characteristic of the German psyche (and most of us are still German in temperament). But then we think of uninhibited Luther, so we can't blame our ancestors.

If it is true that our children are for the most part what we train them to be, then the finger of suspicion points at us - parents, pastors, teachers and anyone else in the community of the sanctified who influences the lives of Christ's little ones. Isn't it probable that their inhibitions are reflections of ours?

Without question our children are products of the cultural milieu from which they come. In the Midwest we are still a predominantly German church. And it *is* true that it is not a tendency of German people to emote all over the place like some other nationalities which I shall not run the risk of specifying. Historically Germans have been a staid people, somber when they worship, jolly when they enjoy their pretzel s-and-beer *Gemütlichkeit*. They systematized more than their dogmatics, and our forbears brought the system with them to the new world and incorporated into their churches and schools their methods of teaching and worshiping. Surely that has to be considered in an attempt to identify causes.

The history of Lutheranism also helps us to understand our complexes. The struggles of the Reformation were followed after 1580 by the age of orthodoxy. The teachers of the church in that age sought to combine full orthodoxy with a devout spiritual life. However, in the years following the Thirty Years War, orthodoxy gradually gave way to orthodoxism and to a congregational life characterized in many places by dead formalism. A reaction was inevitable. It came in the form of Pietism, an emotionalism which tended to depreciate the importance of the means of grace and to overstress the importance of spiritual exercises. Subjective feelings supplanted objective faith in the church's teaching and life. The Pietists had made a travesty of true Lutheranism.

The people who transplanted our kind of Lutheranism to America had learned from bitter experience the dangers of excessive enthusiasm and emotionalism. It is understandable that they would look askance at anything resembling Pietism. It may be that in our present problem there are still some extant signs of their reaction to the Pietism of their day. It may be that their children have perpetuated an attitude without really understanding why.

Permit me at this point to share with you a part of a paragraph from a letter I received from a principal of one of our schools, a DMLC graduate with almost 30 years' experience in the classroom. The letter was written in response to an "Educator" editorial entitled, "Turn Up the Thermostat, Please." He wrote, "I agree with you that one of the causes underlying the problem is the inhibition manifested by so many (including myself) in our Lutheran Church." After locating the source of the problem in the old-Adam, he continued, "However, I believe that the question that should be pursued is: What in our history has aided and abetted this

inhibition in so successful a manner that it continues to permeate and spread through our Church like a creeping paralysis? There are many things from my youth which I have forgotten, but one thing stands out clearly - the strong feeling I had to stifle religious emotions. From whom I gained this feeling I do not know; but I know that it was inculcated. I have a sneaking suspicion that DMLC did not help too much to discourage it.”

Recently I informed one of my seminary classes about the topic of this paper and asked if they cared to share any opinions with me from their experiences about the causes of the problem we are seeking to diagnose. One student suggested it was due in part to the “academic approach” we take to religion in our schools. “It’s too bookish,” he said. There was practically unanimous agreement with that observation. Though the term that he used is somewhat vague; nevertheless I tend to agree. The problem’s causes are certainly many and varied Yet I am convinced that the chief cause is to be found in the approach we take to teaching God’s Word. In seeking a remedy, therefore, we want to focus our attention upon this one specific matter. The phrasing of the theme suggests the remedy. It involves maintaining a certain necessary balance when we communicate God’s Word to God’s people. What do we mean by that?

III. The Remedy

We shall proceed by stating the remedy in the form of a thesis and then continue by expounding that thesis. The thesis is this:

The mode of operation of the Word of God is both psychological and supernatural.

The supernatural way in which the Word of God works is something with which we are all familiar and which we all teach. We believe the power of God is inherent and implicit in the Word of God. “The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit and they are life,” Jesus says, Jn. 6:63. His words have a unique, inherent capability to accomplish God’s purpose. They are “the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth,” Paul says, Rom. 1:16. The same God whose powerful word “commanded the light to shine out of darkness at the time of creation still uses that same powerful word to shine “in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ,” 2 Cor. 4:6. Because His Word works supernaturally it “is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path” Ps. 119:105. His word is capable of making wise the simple, Ps. 19:7. Think of what that word did for you when you were baptized. It worked supernaturally in and with the water. And think how effectively it has worked for you personally fulfilling the promise Jesus gives His sheep when He says, “No man shall pluck them out of my hand” Jn. 10:28. God’s Word is never without effect. To some it is a “savor of life unto life” while to others it is “a savor of death unto death” 2 Cor. 2:16. It is a word of grace or a word of judgment, always one or the other.

The psychological way in which the word of God works in the lives of His people is not as familiar to us as is the supernatural mode of operation. In fact there are some who even question the propriety of speaking of a psychological mode of operation. To them the term suggests something Baptist or Pentecostal, but not Lutheran. What do we mean by it?

The God who created the human mind (soul) understands perfectly the psychological make-up of the mind. When He inspired His holy writers to write the words of Scripture, He adapted His Word to the peculiar make up of the mind. He chose to reveal His truth through words. In common with ordinary speech, the word of God is adapted to the constitution of the human mind. The mind is comprised of intellect, emotion and will; and God’s Word speaks to all three. It addresses itself to the intellect, to the emotion, and to the will, not to one at the expense of the other.

Numerous passages attest to the fact that God’s Word addresses itself to the intellect. In His high priestly prayer Jesus says, “This is life eternal, that they might know thee, the only true God and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent” Jn. 17:3. To know God is a matter of the intellect. Luke says of Jesus and the Emmaus disciples, “Then opened he their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures” Lk. 24:25. Numerous

other passages of Scripture speak of knowledge and understanding. The Psalmist, speaking of the supernatural mode of operation of the word speaks also of the involvement of the intellect when he says, “The entrance of thy word gives light; it gives understanding unto the simple” Ps 119:130.

Other passages speak no less clearly to the emotions or to the heart of man. “Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice,” Paul urges the Philippians 4:4. Can you imagine a way to do that without becoming emotionally involved? The Psalmist is giving vent to his emotions when he says, “How sweet are thy words unto my taste? Yea, sweeter than honey to my mouth” Ps 119:103. Scripture addresses itself to the whole gamut of human emotions, and Psalm 119 touches base with almost all of them. “I am afflicted very much; quicken me, O Lord, according to thy word” 119:107. God’s Word meets my need when I feel afflicted. It also evokes a sense of fear. “My flesh trembles for fear of thee; and I am afraid of thy judgments” Ps 119:120.

Still other passages address themselves to the will. Scripture is filled with exhortations, and every exhortation is addressed to the will. “I beseech you, therefore, brethren, ... I pray you, ... I exhort you.” Every passage which rebukes and every passage which warns aims at the will. Indeed, every command which God issues in Scripture speaks to the will.

It is of the utmost importance that as teachers of God’s Word we recognize the truth concerning this twofold operation of the Word. If I emphasize the one at the expense of the other, I will not be doing justice to the task my Lord has given me, and the consequences can be most serious. This is why we speak of the necessity of maintaining a proper balance when addressing God’s Word to the mind. If I overemphasize the supernatural mode of operation of the Word, my appeal will be primarily to the intellect and the end result will be orthodoxism – cold, lifeless and even dead orthodoxism. That approach to teaching produces children and adults who know the right answers, but who remain for the most part unmoved by what they know.

On the other hand, if I overemphasize the psychological mode of operation of the Word at the expense of the supernatural, my appeal will be primarily to the emotion, and the end result will be enthusiasm (in the ecclesiastical sense), – a view of the faith based on what people feel rather than what they know. That approach produces pietistic people who get turned on subjectively to Jesus without really understanding the objective basis of faith. Because they are more concerned about the Christ in them than they are about the Christ for them, they are in constant need of something to keep them emotionally high. Doctrine is relatively unimportant. “Deeds, not creeds” is their motto. Both emphases result in a caricature of the faith.

Recalling the problem and its symptoms which we discussed previously, it would appear from the foregoing that we tend to err in the direction of an overemphasis on the supernatural mode of operation of the Word. At least there is a measure of similarity between the results of such an overemphasis and the symptoms we isolated. That there is a cause and effect relationship seems to be a legitimate conclusion. If it is, then we need to ask ourselves what we are doing as teachers of religion to create and to perpetuate an imbalance in our teaching.

The student’s observation which we shared with you earlier suggests a beginning point for a critical self-analysis. If we display a greater concern for academics than we do for keeping our children free from the clutches of Satan, we are tipping the balance scale in the wrong direction. If Bible studies are treated more like subject matter than like faith-life lessons, or if we display more concern for scholastic achievement than for progress in sanctification and achievement in overcoming the flesh, then too we are overloading the scale on the wrong side.

At this point someone may be thinking that what I am really advocating is that Christian teachers assume to themselves the role of the Holy Spirit. Your God-assigned task, you say, is to *proclaim* God’s Word, not to make it more effective. To require more than that is to deny that God’s Word is inherently efficacious. St. Paul certainly believed in the power of the Word if anyone ever did. He also had some things to say about preaching the Word in season, out of season. But he didn’t stop with that. He told the elders at Ephesus that they were to be *examples* to the flock over which the Holy Ghost had made them overseers. He also told the Corinthians that they were manifestly declared to be the epistles of Christ, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God. We cannot be effective living letters in the classroom known and read by all our

students if we approach the teaching of God's Word in academic fashion. The best way to teach the Word is to live the Word in and out of the classroom. And because the Word has affected our emotions, we will reflect our emotional involvement with our Lord so that our pupils can sense it and learn from it. The light we are asked not to hide under a bushel is more than just our knowledge of the truth. That light is a beacon light to others only when intellect, emotions and will are involved. Our Lord does not allow us just to put our knowledge of the truth on display while we stifle emotions and curtail the will.

In this connection the question of goals is also an important one. What are we seeking to accomplish when we teach catechism and Bible history? I must admit to my shame that there were years in my ministry when my goals or objectives were not clearly defined. I viewed my role as teacher in confirmation classes something like that of a computer programmer. My task was to program student's minds with the facts of the faith so that on examination day they could demonstrate their proficiency in giving the correct answers to the examination questions and thus demonstrate their readiness for confirmation and for *communicant* membership in the congregation. I failed to understand and to apply to my ministry Paul's teaching that God gave pastors and teachers to the church to equip the saints for their work as ministers of Christ.

It is one thing for a teacher to have as his objective the implanting of Scripture's saving truths in the mind. It is quite another to have as one's goal the equipping of the saints for service to the Lord. The one can be accomplished by aiming instruction at the intellect. The other requires that we aim our instruction at the intellect and at the same time stir emotions and appeal to the will. And that in turn requires an understanding of both the supernatural and the psychological mode of operation of the Word. That understanding will enable us to maintain a proper balance in teaching God's Word to God's children.

Thus the remedy requires that we reexamine our methods in the classroom, and that we ask ourselves whether our objectives are clear to us. And if they are, are we employing the right means to attain our objectives? Are we excited about our love-affair with our Lord? Does it show? Can our children sense it? Or are our approaches too academic? Do we freely display our emotions, or stifle them? Are we sometimes guilty of overreacting against a false, misguided, neo-Pentecostal type of enthusiasm with the result that we seldom teach enthusiasm for our Lord and His work by our example?

If we are in any degree perpetuating a system which tends to produce spiritual dwarfs, then for God's sake and for the sake of the lambs He entrusts to our care, let's take a critical look with the Spirit's help at what we are doing and pray for His help to make us the kind of teachers He wants us to be. God wants to use us as agents of change to promote sanctification among His people. This is one area where there is room for improvement in our church. The place for me to begin is with myself. My hope is that this presentation will encourage us all to that end.