

# Spiritual Renewal Begins At Home

[Prepared for the Arizona-California District Convention, June 14, 1988, Phoenix, Arizona]

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It was in a church of another denomination in the deep south. A roving evangelist had come to town, pitched his revival tent, and held his evening services. Among those attracted to the tent one night was a townsman of dubious reputation. Sure enough, he hit the sawdust trail, in a rapid-fire conversion. Several weeks later he was received into membership of that small congregation, but not without some reservations. Everybody in the small town knew his past history and wondered whether he really had changed his stripes and would truly assume his share of the obligations in the congregation. The answer came the Sunday the new convert was asked to lead in prayer. Briefly and bravely he began, "Use me, O Lord, use me." Three times his prayer went this way, "Use me, O Lord, use me." And then as the seasonings of the past surged to the surface, the fourth time he added, "Use me, O Lord, use me—but in an advisory capacity."

Many, if not all of us, here at this district convention, know that the delegates at the 1987 synod convention passed a resolution about spiritual renewal. Among other things, that resolution stated with concern, "Resolved, a) that our synod in convention determine that spiritual renewal is a major continuing need of our synod, which needs to be addressed at this time... Resolved, g) that under God's hand of blessing we seek the following as fruits of faith: 1. A greater appreciation of the Means of Grace and the spiritual treasures in Christ which they bring to us. 2. Substantially increased participation in worship, in the Lord's Supper and in Bible classes. 3. Broader understanding of God's mission for his church and of the ministry of all believers. 4. Substantially increased ministry on the part of God's saints in the service to one another and in outreach to the community. 5. Substantially increased financial support for all aspects of kingdom work that are carried on among us. 6. Further development of our congregations and our synod as a body of Christians who care for and love one another in Christ."<sup>i</sup>

So the delegates resolved. But resolutions remain only paper until people put them into practice. And people put resolutions into practice only when they are concerned and convinced about them. And such conviction and concern begins with the individual, with me as a child of God. What is needed are not Christians who stand on the sidelines in an advisory capacity with their questions, comments, and even criticisms, but Christians who are acutely aware and actively concerned about their own spiritual renewal. Obviously your convention committee felt the same way. For the topic they have assigned to me bears the title, "Spiritual Renewal Begins At Home."

## Recognize the Need

Have you ever wondered about those early Christians? Just a few short years after the soon-to-be-ascending Lord had charged them to make disciples of all nations, we find the Gospel already carried to far off Rome. By the end of the first century the regions around the Mediterranean Sea had already been evangelized. How did those believers do it? They weren't super Christians. A cursory reading of the New Testament book of Acts and of the epistles reveals divisions and disputes among them, problems with doctrine and practice, immaturity and immorality, all of which needed to be addressed and corrected. Nor was their world radically different. The society in which they swam was as polluted and godless as the world has ever

seen. Remember also that they did not have the modern tools and means of transportation and communication which are at our beck and call today. How did they do it?

The answer is nothing mysterious. They were converted and confirmed, controlled and commissioned by the Spirit. Through Word and Sacrament the Holy Spirit enabled them to call Jesus Lord and then empowered them to live for Him. They were spiritually alive in the faith and spiritually renewed in the faith by the Spirit's working through the Gospel in Word and Sacrament.

Obviously comparisons limp, circumstances give different flavors, and cold statistics don't tell total stories. Yet a brief glance at what goes on in our synod might indicate something about the need for spiritual renewal. With thanksgiving to our God we read that 618 adults were baptized and 3,419 confirmed last year in our congregations scattered throughout our land. The harvest is going on under the guiding hand of the Master Sower. But our joy is dampened somewhat when we realize those figures represent only one half adult baptized and 2.86 adults confirmed per congregation or that it took 78.8 communicants last year to gain just one. With thanksgiving to our God we note that 194,400 people filled our church benches on a given Sunday last year to be fed with the life-giving and sustaining Word. But our joy is dampened somewhat when we realize that figure represents only 46.3% of our soul membership and that this percentage is a .3% decrease from 1986. With thanksgiving to our God we note that 33,835 confirmed youths and adults were in attendance at the Bible classes held in our churches. But again joy is dampened when we realize that figure represents only 10.6% of all our communicants. Though these figures may vary somewhat from district to district (for example in the Arizona-California District 54.5% were in attendance each Sunday and 21.5% in Bible Class), yet what they reveal can hardly be called high tide concern for feeding one's own soul or reaching out to the souls of others with the Word.

From the April 1988 WELS Connection comes the statistic that in 1987 "communicant membership increased by 715. This represents a 0.5% increase compared with 0.3% in 1986 and a plateau in 1985." Again such statistics record only numerals and leave out the knowledge that the Spirit, like the wind, blows wherever He pleases (John 3:8) and that God's Word accomplishes what He desires and achieves the purpose for which He sends it (Isaiah 55:11). Yet they do catch our attention and invite our concern. Back in 1960 when I entered the ministry, there were 829 congregations in the synod. Last year the total was 1,194, an increase of 365 congregations or 44%. In 1960 there were 235,073 communicants in WELS. Last year the number was 318,037, an increase of 82,964 or 35%. Those statistics reveal God's blessings and speak of His grace. But again some dampening occurs when you stop to realize the increase in communicants is barely over 1% per year when figured on an annual basis and that it does not keep pace as we might expect with the expanding congregational base. Mix into these statistics also the increase that came about through concerned Lutherans shifting to WELS as doctrinal sorting went on in other Lutheran church bodies and we begin to realize that we can scarcely be described as running full throttle in carrying out the great commission.

Let's use one more comparison. In 1960 the total all purpose offering per communicant in WELS was \$67.30 of which \$11.31 (16.8%) went to synod. Last year the total was \$378.05 with \$51.31 (13.5%) going for synod budgetary and special. Again these averages may vary from district to district; for example in the Arizona California District the all purpose average was \$579.17 with 10.1% going for synodical purposes. Again we thank our gracious God who alone can open the heart and wallets of people. But again our joy is dampened when we note that on a daily basis all purpose giving of our people stood at \$1.035/day, less than the price of a

newspaper and a coke; that synodical giving was 14 cents/day (what can you buy for that) and that of that figure, 18% (2½ cents/day) went for world missions. “Take my silver and my gold, not a mite would I withhold,” we like to sing, but!

Is there anything at all that we can glean from our quick glance at these statistics? Any need for spiritual renewal that they might indicate? Do they reveal that we may have swallowed some of the polluted water of the society in which we have to swim and that it is affecting us? The seasoned pastor under whom I vicared years ago right here in the Arizona-California District used to comment, “We reflect our society more than we care to admit. The only difference is that it takes us longer to begin doing what our society has been doing for some time already.”

Was he right? An article in a fairly recent issue of Christianity Today stated, “Little do we realize how pervasively our attitudes have been influenced by money. We have become victims of a disease called ‘affluenza’ with its companion self-interest.”<sup>ii</sup> There can be no doubt that modern America is still affluent America and though some might wonder, the statement still is true that earthly goods can be more of a test than a blessing from God. “Affluenza” is a stealthy, deadly disease. It can affect and infect us more quickly than we ever realize. When it does, little by little it shifts the believer’s attention from the Giver to gifts, changing that which was given to enable us to live and serve into that for which we sweat and slave. Little by little this disease cripples the heart and deadens the faith of the believer.

Self-interest is the companion of “affluenza.” Ours is truly the “me-generation” which jumps up and down to the tune, “I’m number one. I’m the one to please. I’m the one who achieves. I’m the one who decrees. And I’ll take the bows, too, please.” This “me first” philosophy leads to greedy hearts and grasping hands. Possessions, pleasure, power, popularity can never be had in large enough measure to slake the thirst of this monster. This “me-first” philosophy has a close relative, the kissing cousin known as immorality. Write songs about it and glorify it as love, coin new expressions for it like the “new morality,” label it as the liberty to decide for yourself what is right or wrong for you in a given situation, yet regardless what new or fancy wrapping you put around it, it’s still the same old garbage called “greed.” It’s still sinful man saying “me first” and showing it by the way he treats his fellow human beings like some orange out of which to squeeze what he can get and to discard when he pleases.

In an essay read to the fifteenth biennial convention of WELS Professor August Pieper wrote strongly and boldly, “How powerfully the worldly spirit has seized hold of our Christian people! The principal evidence of it is the greed, the desire to become wealthy, to make money... Our Christian people, our Lutheran people have been infected with this specifically American sin for many years and are being carried away by the wild flood of service to mammon today. Thus the curse of sin is fulfilled in them: ‘They that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil; which while some coveted after they have erred from the faith and pierced themselves through with many sorrows’ (1 Tim. 6:9-10). Yes, they have erred from the faith, they have fallen away! For no man can serve two masters... ye cannot serve God and mammon, Matthew 6:24. Outwardly they have kept the faith and remained in the Church; but they have lost the spirit of faith, the spiritual character, the joy in their heart in the grace, in Christ, in the Gospel, in their state of grace, and in their soul’s salvation. Thus they have also become indifferent and cold in their love to their Savior; the sincere fear of God is gone. Now they can do a hundred things with the world which would have been abhorrent to them as Christians; and so many a good work which they formerly did gladly now becomes burdensome to them. The flesh has gained the upper hand again. While they acquire two or even three autos

for their own enjoyment which cost them thousands of dollars, they have only a few miserable crumbs 'left over' for the kingdom of God, for the gospel, the church the school, missions, and synodical institutions. Because money and the world have occupied their heart again, the Word has little attraction for them any more. They have gotten out of the habit of reading the Bible, even sermons are distasteful to them and no longer grip them, church attendance becomes inconvenient and burdensome for them, even though they still cultivate the habit. The young and more vigorous people forsake preaching and the congregation and devote themselves entirely to the pursuit of making money and the life of the world and discard their Christian character entirely, while the older people still cling to the Christian traditions, but are losing the spirit, the heart, the essence and the kernel of Christianity without noticing it."<sup>iii</sup>

That was 1919! One can't help wondering what the sainted professor would say today. When some congregational members view themselves more as volunteers free to come and go as they please, to work and give as they want or don't want to, rather than as God's people drafted by His Spirit into faith and dedicated wholly to His service; something is wrong. When some of those who call themselves God's people show more sympathy for a dog run over on the freeway than for souls mashed on hell's highway, or more excitement over a scratch put on their car door in the mall parking lot than over the dents inflicted by sin on the souls of men, we know something is amiss. When we lose members in our churches to immorality and indifference faster than we can replace them with new confirmands, when teachers in our Christian Day schools wrestle with the problems of children from broken homes and pastors give more and more time in already busy schedules to counseling in such situations, we know something isn't quite right. When the world simply cannot tell the difference between the lifestyles of those who claim to belong to our churches and those who do not, when the daily actions of the Christian are indistinguishable from those who are unbelievers, we cannot simply close our eyes. When we have to plead with parents to give and their gifted children to go into training for the preaching or teaching ministry and still not see them go, when we have to program evangelism so that our people will have a faint resemblance to what early Christians did so naturally, when we have to promote stewardship so that people of God, blessed more richly than ever before, are stimulated to appreciation, who will want to say that nothing is awry. When those who are called to preach and teach can view their work as daily routine and necessary employment, when the blessed Word they handle can be downgraded into a tool of the trade and the souls they touch into those who pay the salary, when the light fades from the eye, the awe from the heart, and the drive from the work, something is more than suspicious, something is wrong. Yes, who among us would want to dispute the need for spiritual renewal?

Our concern, however, is not with the nebulous, nameless, "them" in our midst who need spiritual renewal. It is with ourselves, each one of us. If we but take inventory of our hearts and homes, our attitudes and actions, our concerns and commitments, we'll realize we also need to hear those words which the Savior spoke to the faithful at Sardis, "Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent" (Rev. 3: 2, 3). Spiritual renewal needs to begin at home!

### **Remember the Power**

What's the answer? What's the secret to spiritual life and renewal? Is the remedy a hearty raking of the Old Adam over the coals of God's Law? That's always a temptation, to rain down thunder and lightning from the Law on the head of our old sinful nature. Scripture, however,

reveals and experience reinforces the truth that the Law can only arouse and antagonize the Old Adam and at best condemn him. It cannot change our sinful nature nor challenge it to works of service. The Old Adam needs to be drowned, not dressed up; removed, not improved. And that requires a power far greater than what the Law has.

Is the answer to shake up the outward structure such as business does when danger signals appear on computer print-outs and corporate graphs? That's a temptation too, of which the church needs to be constantly aware. The answer to spiritual renewal is not to be found merely in setting up committees and holding meetings, in preparing programs and packaging them for distribution, useful as all this can be. Relying on such outward structure is like building elaborate launching pads and installing sturdier heat shields for the rockets at Cape Kennedy, but forgetting about the fuel which only can power and propel that payload into orbit.

Do we want our people to have a spiritual character that consists in a deep, clear, and rich *knowledge* of God in the face of Jesus Christ? In a *faith* that defies devil, world and flesh? In a fervent *love* for the Savior that scrubs out its own human ego and strives only for His glory? In a *fear* of God that would rather die a thousand deaths and lose a thousand worlds than to grieve the Spirit of Christ who dwells in it? Is this what we are after for God's people and ourselves? Surely this is what all of us here today want with all our heart. For we know the stronger the spiritual character of God's people is the more glorious His church will be. Conversely, we also know that the weaker its spiritual character is the more deplorable its condition will be.

The power behind such spiritual character—where is that to be found? Didn't those early Christians show us? Of that first congregation in Jerusalem we read, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42). "They devoted themselves," it says, they kept adhering strongly to the Word. They also used the Holy Supper with its breaking of bread. As a result they were fueled by the Spirit as He worked in their hearts through Word and Sacrament. By His working through the Word they were renewed in the faith "that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them and He has committed to us the message of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:19). By His working through the Word they were convinced of the glorious truth "that one died for all and therefore all died" and then committed to the glorious task that "those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again" (2 Cor. 5:14, 15). Or as Paul put it even more personally in Galatians 2:20, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by the faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me."

As stated earlier, the answer was nothing mysterious. Those early believers were converted and confirmed, controlled and commissioned by the Spirit. Through Word and Sacrament the Holy Spirit enabled them to call Jesus Lord and then empowered them to live for Him. They were spiritually alive in the faith and spiritually renewed in the faith by the Spirit's working through the Gospel in Word and Sacrament.

No wonder Paul urged the Colossian Christians, "Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly" (3:16). The use of God's Word was to be no "hit or miss" affair, no "now you do it, now you don't" kind of activity for them. That Word was to "dwell" in them. It was to live in them, making its home in them. And this it was to do "richly." Their hearts and lives were to be wide open with room for that blessed Word and its power.

No wonder also that Paul scolded the Corinthian Christians, "Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly—mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready." (1 Cor. 3:1). Just as with

babies, so he had at first nourished them with the milk of the Word. As infants grow, more solid food is needed to promote strength and service. So those Corinthians should have graduated from milk to solids in the Word, but had not. And Paul worried about them! Of course, the solution was obvious—to the Word with its power!

No wonder Paul on the way to Jerusalem, speaking to the elders at Ephesus for what appeared to be the last time, prayed so fervently, “I commit you to God and to the *word of his grace* which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified” (Acts 20:32). They were to be built up through the Word. Then they were to teach it that through the Word others might grow in faith and service. Writing to the believers at Ephesus whom those shepherds served, Paul said the same thing. In Ephesians 4:12 He reminded them that the various forms of the public ministry were given by God “to prepare God’s people for works of service so that the body of Christ may be built up.” “To prepare” comes from a root which describes someone who fits into his proper place and performs his proper function. Shepherds are to prepare God’s people for their proper function which is “works of service.” God’s saints are to render services of various kinds in the church and in the world. When God’s people are so prepared and so carry out their ministry, then the ultimate purpose will also follow “that the body of Christ may be built up.” “Built up” involves both setting something upon a solid foundation and then erecting it to completion. Spiritual leaders through the Gospel are to equip believers for this vital service of building up the body of Christ. Read on in Ephesians 4 and note how Paul speaks of believers growing in unity of faith and in knowledge of the Son of God, of believers growing into maturity and remaining no longer infants whipped about by the winds of false doctrine, of believers growing together in loving concern for each other’s well-being and the good of the church as a whole. He’s describing spiritual growth and spiritual renewal better than ever I can. And he points out clearly that this comes only through the power of the Gospel. Only through the Gospel are sinners converted, believers strengthened, sanctification advanced and eternal salvation attained.

No wonder Paul also wrote so frequently about the same need to his young student and co-worker. In 1 Timothy 4:6 he stressed Timothy’s need to be “brought up,” constantly nourished in God’s word if he was going to serve well as a minister. And therein lies a message for modern day pastors and teachers. See what Paul was telling him and us. “To the word,” he stressed, “keep on being fed by it. Don’t ever stop. You need that Word for yourself and if you are going to serve others.” “Continue in what you have learned” he also urged Timothy (2 Tim. 3:14) obviously referring to the Word. “Preach the Word,” he urged him in 2 Timothy 4:2 because as he stated so clearly to Timothy, it only can “make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (3:15) and it only “is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (3:16). The only way for people to be brought to faith in the Savior and then readied, powered, and equipped for service to that Savior and His kingdom is through the Word.

Remember Vince Lombardi? People who do, remember what a fanatic he was on fundamentals. The players he coached at Green Bay often spoke of his intensity and drive. Even more so did they speak about his stress on the basic techniques of the game, on things like blocking and tackling, running and passing. One Sunday his team lost the game to an inferior team. To lose was bad enough, but to lose to that team was utterly inexcusable. So Coach Lombardi called a practice for the very next day. Monday morning the men filed into the team room strangely silent, sat there looking more like whipped puppies than champions, dreading what they knew was going to come from their fearsome coach. Staring holes through one athlete

after another and gritting his teeth, Lombardi said, “Okay, we’re going back to the basics this morning.” And holding a football up high enough for all to see, he stated loudly, “Gentlemen, this is a football.” Talk about basics! But it worked. Lombardi’s simple strategy was, “Know your position, learn how to do it right, then do it with all your might.” And that simple strategy put Green Bay, Wisconsin on the pro-football map.

We can talk all we want to about spiritual renewal, but it will do no good unless we go back to the basics. Remember the power, my friends. It’s this Book and this Book only. This, the Gospel, is the “power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16). This, the words Jesus has spoken, is “spirit and life” (John 6:63). This, His Word, is “fire” and “a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces” (Jeremiah 23:29). This, the Word of God, is “living and active, sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow” (Hebrews 4:12). This is His word, His living, effective power of which He promises, “It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it” (Isaiah 55:11).

Of this basic truth we need to be convinced. If there is to be any spiritual renewal in the church, if there is to be any growth in the Christian character of God’s people, it can only come through the power of the Word.

### **Roll Up the Sleeves**

So what are we going to do with this Word? The answer is deceptively simple, “Fill up with it.” We need to use it, fill ourselves with it. And that involves work, work that is ongoing and never ceases, work for which we need to roll up our sleeves.

Again there are examples for our instruction among those early believers. We have already heard how those in Jerusalem “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teachings” (Acts 2:42). From the believers in Berea comes another example. We read that they “received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true” (Acts 17:11). These believers filled up regularly with the Word.

Isn’t that what we do as pastors and teachers? Please, delegates, allow me to speak more directly and boldly to our pastors and teachers for a moment. Does a day go by in our life as a pastor or teacher when we don’t use the Word? Classroom devotions and memory passages, sermon studies and sickroom meditations, topics for societies and articles for newsletters, passages to be used in disciplining and witnessing, words to be applied to delinquents and the distraught...so the list could go on. Daily we have to use the Word. And before we know it we can shrink the Word in size to a mere tool. Like the saw in the tool chest of the carpenter, the law books on the shelf of the attorney, the drill in the hand of the dentist, so the Word can become only the professional tool of the teacher and pastor. Hurrying about our duties feverishly, caught up in the flurry of our activities, we may forget something as basic as what it is we hold in our hands and what we need to do with it for ourselves even before we turn to others.

Also don’t we know all about the Word? Count them up; how many years have we spent studying it? Let’s see, there were eight years in a Christian Day School (no kindergartens in my day), four years at a synod prep school, four years at a synod college, and for some of us four years beyond that in seminary training. Add to that “impressive” total the years we’ve been teaching and preaching (at my stage you don’t even like to add that far any more) and see how learned we may think we’ve become. So let’s spend the preparation time on that math lesson for tomorrow. After all, the new math books are harder and the Bible story for tomorrow I know. I don’t have to spend time on it, reviewing and even learning new what it offers me and my

children. Let's skip the study of the sermon text. After all, I've preached on it four times already. What thing, new can it say to me or to my people and besides the ballgame is on tonight. Let's skip the "Word for Today" column in the *Northwestern Lutheran* and turn to the "Letters to the Editor" section. That's where the sparks fly and the juice flows. Let's get through or not even schedule that Scripture study at our conference. There are so many more practical matters to spend our time on. Let's skip the Communion Service at conference. I haven't seen my co-workers for awhile and must get caught up on visiting or I can use that time for something else. Let's skip that daily Bible reading. How many times are we to read the Bible through when the *Time* magazine appears more current and the TV shows more appealing. We'd like to say that it isn't so, but the danger is very real that this Book in which God has so wondrously revealed Himself and into which He has packed His power can be viewed as something we know all about.

As teachers and pastors we need to be thoroughly at home in the Word for another reason. God has called us to bring that Word to His people. Paul's words to Timothy ought to ring in the ears of every servant of the Word, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and *who correctly handles the word of truth*" (2 Timothy 2:15). "To correctly handle" was an expression Paul the tentmaker could well understand. It meant to cut straight, not to zig and zag. How can we cut straight in the Word, present it clearly and correctly, unless we give ourselves to a personal study of the Word? How can we "proclaim the whole will of God" (Acts 20:27) to people unless we know well what that will is? How can we offer milk to the weak or meat to the mature, preach law to the stubborn or Gospel to the shattered, point out error convincingly or present truth clearly, if we are not truly at home in the Word? Our work is to lead people on toward eternity. Tell me, how can we do this unless it is a country in which we are at home ourselves—through the Word?

At my installation I heard words like, "You are to give yourself to the meditation and study of the Scriptures...Meditate upon these things, give yourself wholly to them that your profiting may appear to all. Take heed unto yourself and unto the doctrine, continue in them, for in doing this you shall both save yourself and them that hear you."<sup>iv</sup> I wonder why similar, suitable words were not included in the order for the installation of a teacher as we have it in the Lutheran Agenda? They fit anyone who would serve. The words are also there in that prayer framed on the sacristy wall at St. John's and perhaps also on yours, "How gladly do I desire to yield and consecrate my heart and mouth to this ministry. I desire to teach the congregation. *I, too, desire ever to learn and to keep thy word my constant companion and to meditate thereupon earnestly.*" We need words like these. Not only the people we serve, but we who serve need constant reminder of our very real need for the Word with its power.

But who has the time? All of us, whether layman, pastor or teacher are busy with something or other. So was Martin Luther, even more so. His production of sermons, Bible studies, books tracts and hymns has amazed everyone. "How did he ever do it?" we wonder as we struggle with our own little world and spin about in our own little circles each week. Luther once revealed that part of his secret was spending a sufficient time to feed his soul every day by reading and meditating on God's Word. When Peter the Barber asked the great Reformer for help in developing his devotional life, Luther responded by writing a booklet of some thirty pages for him. In that booklet Luther said in effect, "I take a verse or petition or commandment of Scripture and reflect on it. As I do, I soon find in it instruction for my personal faith and life. This in turn prompts me to thanksgiving. As I reflect further on the verse and find that I have come short of what God requires, I am led to penitent confession. This is followed by petition in



which I ask God for new strength to believe, to be and to do what the passage has taught me. As I read God's Word, I hear the Holy Spirit speaking to me and when He teaches me, I keep silent and become His student. In this manner, I find in each verse four 'intertwined wreaths.' One I name 'instruction,' another 'thanksgiving,' a third 'confession,' and a fourth 'petition.' You, too, will find this to be a simple formula for devotional Bible reading."

Make no mistake about it. What Luther advocates is not easy. It may be simple, but not easy. This is no "How to Be Devotional in Six Easy Lessons" or "just add water and stir" instant study method. Time and discipline were two essentials in the method Luther used and suggested for devotional lives. Like Luther, whether we are layman, teacher, pastor, we need to put aside a specific time each day. For eating and other activities we do this. How about for devotions? Plan a definite time in that daily schedule and let nothing short of an earthquake disrupt the schedule. Devotion time needs to become part of our daily life style. So God urged Joshua. Though Joshua was head over heels with battle campaign plans and all the problems of leadership, though he was busier than he had ever been in his life, carrying heavier responsibilities than he had ever imagined even in his wildest dreams, yet he heard the Lord urge him, "Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth, *meditate on it day and night* so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful" (1:8).

Secondly, like Luther, we need to study the Bible itself. Read the Book, not just books about it. Yes, there are books your pastors can suggest which will give you background information and helps in Bible reading. There are introductory materials and outlines of Biblical books and verse by verse commentaries, like the *People's Bible*, all of which have their place and can be used by the serious Bible student. But these are only tools to help us get at the Word and dare not become substitutes for the Word. We need to roll up our sleeves and get into the Word. Perhaps we might want to follow the Bible readings suggested in the Meditations booklet which will take us through the Word in a year. Perhaps we might want to try playing recordings on our cassette player in our automobile as these Bible readings are readily available. But read, read the Word!

Thirdly, we need to meditate on what we read. Instead of looking the surface over lightly for nuggets lying here or there, we need intently to mine the depths for the gold contained there. We need to spend the time and discipline required to read and reread, to think and rethink, in order to grasp the sense of the sentence or section.

The fourth step is to apply. Instead of just loading up on Bible facts or looking only for applications for our pupils or people, we need to ask the important question, "What does it say to *me*? Is there a promise for *me* to claim? An example for *me* to follow? A job for *me* to do? A warning for *me* to heed? An attitude for *me* to change?"

Like some gardener working plant food down deep to the roots of his favorite rose bush so Luther's method will work God's truth down into the roots of the soul. Such a method requires perspiration and persistence, but pays off.

There are various stages to Bible study. Perhaps we could call stage one, the lowest stage, the "medicine stage." You do it because it's supposed to be good for you. And then you take it only as long as you think you need it and when there seems to be no other solution. Stage two is the "bran cereal" stage. You eat it regularly and it's good for you, but even with raisins added, it's still dry. The third stage is the "hot fudge sundae" stage, really enjoyable and a treat to which you look forward. At what stage do you think Jeremiah was when he told the Lord, "When Your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight" (15:16)? At what stage am I?

When we “fill up” regularly with the Word, we’ll be more ready to “dig in,” to get to work with that Word wherever God places us. My predecessor at St. John’s in Jefferson at his retirement told me he was glad his ministry was over because, among other things, of what was happening to the homes of our members. What would he say today twenty years later? For example there are 168 hours in a week. The average father spends about forty of them at work. Add another fifteen hours for commuting, lunch, overtime, community affairs, etc. Then throw in eight hours per night, a total of fifty-six a week, for sleep. All this adds up to one hundred eleven hours, with fifty-seven per week left for father to be a dad to his children. Now admittedly schedules vary and circumstances arise, but the question nags, I’ll have to admit also at me, the question, “What am *I* doing with even just a portion of those fifty-seven hours?”

Need we bring statistics to show that the office of father has seen better days in our land and perhaps also among our people? Yet the fact remains that God in Ephesians 6:4 points right at fathers with the command, “Bring up your children in the training and instruction of the Lord.” That serious, that awesome responsibility, God directed first and foremost to fathers. The church stands ready to reinforce and support, but not to replace fathers. Again admittedly life styles change, single parenting may become a necessity, economic pressures can be terrific, but it’s still the home where the training is to be centered. From Abraham of old of whom God said approvingly, “I have chosen him so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord” (Genesis 18:19) to the mother and the grandmother who raised Timothy in the faith (2 Tim. 1:5), we see how essential the home is.

Luther had his own inimitable way of putting things and getting his point across. Concerning the duty of parents to raise their children for the Lord he wrote, “There is indeed the commandment that parents are to bring up their children in the fear of God; but where are the parents who do it? To be sure, they love their children as the world loves, and they bring them to know how they must fit themselves into the pattern of the world; but there is no one really to instruct and teach them the care of their souls in the fear of God...No one teaches his children how to pray properly and the matters pertaining to salvation...Some animals devour their own young...People who do not teach and instruct their children are like that.”<sup>v</sup>

And in my home? Christians can sometimes be shortsighted when they dig in to do the Lord’s work. They can look at their own families and see only people, not souls. Mother is, among other things, a cook, cleaning lady and chauffeur. Father is a breadwinner and a bill payer. Children are report cards, dental appointments, and college costs. But behind them all are souls, souls which need someone to roll up his sleeves and lead them deeply and regularly into the Word; someone to show what it means to practice that Word; someone to show how valuable that heaven is to which that Word leads. Spiritual renewal begins literally at home, in my home, with those loved ones an arm’s length away.

When we as teachers and pastors “fill up” regularly with the Word, we’ll be more ready to “dig in,” to get to work with that Word wherever God has placed us. An aged preacher once gave this advice to young ministers, “The way to prepare a sermon in just five minutes that would take two hours to preach is to study the Bible for at least four to five hours each day for the next thirty years.” We may question the wisdom of two hour sermons, but there can be no question about a bucket which is dipped into the well again and again coming out full to the brim for the people we serve. When servants “fill up” with the Word, religion classes will be more than “Word o’ God” time which is held each day like all the other classes and which like them receives a grade on the report card. Instead, that hour will become the highlight of the day and add the necessary flavoring to the rest of the day. When servants “fill up” with the Word, there

will be classroom devotions which live and everyday examples which shine. When servants “fill up” with the Word there’ll be Bible study in the faculty room and time found by the servants to attend. When servants “fill up” with the Word, there’ll be meat in the sermons and substance in the topics. When servants “fill up” with the Word, though methods may change and new materials come forward (and we always need to be open for such), the powering Word will still be at the center of all that is said and done. Then God’s people will be nourished and equipped to carry out more fully the work He has given us to do. But again we are reminded as teachers and pastors that spiritual renewal begins at home, with me.

When God’s people “fill up” regularly with the Word, they’ll be more ready to “dig in,” to get to work with that Word, in the congregation where God has placed them. For that Word clearly teaches that Christians are more than mere “customers” of the church, people who just come shopping once a week for what they need. That Word also clearly teaches that the church is more than a supermarket whose shelves are neatly stocked with the necessary commodities for shoppers to pick up and carry home only for their own consumption. “God loves me. God forgives me. God takes care of me. God will take me to heaven,” all these are meaningful truths which the Christian loves to hear and needs to treasure. And thank God for those truths! But one more truth needs to be added and then acted out—“God sends me!” God doesn’t just invite me, “Come,” and then just draw me to His lap where I sit and have all my tears of body and soul wiped away by His marvelous love. He with the same urgency pushes me from that lap with the word, “Go, go work for Me. I have so much for you to do!” The sentence “God sends me” may not be quite as popular, but it is just as true. And believers need to hear it repeatedly. Believers need to be reminded both of their beautiful blessings *and* their serious responsibilities. Our Lord Jesus never glossed over those responsibilities nor made glib promises in order to gain disciples. Instead, He warned, “If anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me” (Mt. 16:24). Though there have always been and will always be those in the church who want only to “hitch a ride,” true discipleship is much deeper than this. A disciple is also a minister, one who has heard his Master say, “As long as it is day, we must do the work of Him who sent Me. Night is coming when no one can work” (John 9:4).

Much has been said in our circles in recent years about every Christian being a minister so we need not repeat. Perhaps what we need do is ask whether in our congregations we are doing all we can to treat every believer as a worker, to help every believer identify and develop his working skills and then to give every believer the opportunity to work.

We need our congregations so that we might be led deeply and regularly into the green pastures and beside the still waters of the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. Our starving souls need to be fed with the rich food of His grace. We need our congregations so that our children can be made His lambs and then folded closer to His breast through ongoing nurture in the Word. We need our congregations so that we have pastors to comfort us with the Word when we are sick, to counsel us with the Word when we are perplexed, to cheer us with the Word when we weep, to commit us to eternity with the Word when we breathe our last. All these and many other rich benefits we receive through our congregations and our wider family of congregations which we call a synod.

But we also need our congregations and our synod to help us be about the Lord’s work before the night comes for us. Let’s summarize somewhat what that work is and let’s examine their role in training us for that work.

God’s people have the “word of reconciliation,” the glorious news that in Christ God has declared the whole world righteous, the wonderful news that in Christ God offers forgiveness

and life and hope now and forever. This message God has given to His people and charged them to preach it. Indeed they have to, for they cannot help speaking about what they have seen and heard (Acts 4:19). As a believer, each one of us is involved in this work of *proclamation*. Part of this work we carry out by training pastors and teachers, building pulpits and classrooms for them, sending them to the far-flung multitudes in the world, making it possible for them to proclaim this message of reconciliation. But another part is for us to catch that Word with our ears and heart and then to carry it personally to others. Part of my ministry is to proclaim that Word to my family in my home, fellow workers in the marketplace, friends on the block, strangers in my city. Another word, much used today, is “evangelism,” the work of every disciple!

Another form the believer’s ministry takes is that of *teaching*. Not only are God’s people to be students, but also teacher of the Word. Through teaching of the Word, whether formally or informally, whether to children, youth, or adults, they are to nourish people in the faith and help equip them for their mission in life. As believers each one of us is involved in this work of teaching. Our congregations are teacher training schools for us. That’s one of the reasons why they have worship services, Bible classes, youth groups and other organizations. The class we teach may be someone else’s children in Sunday School or my own in my home. It may be people down at the job on the coffee break or neighbors in the backyard as they ask and I seek to answer their questions. It may be teaching without even realizing that I’m doing it as neighbors see me going to church every Sunday of my life, practicing my faith in life’s everyday affairs, training my children in life’s greatest needs, showing my faith in the weal and woes of life.

A third form for the believer’s service is that of *fellowship*. Industry can function with mechanical robotry, but not the church. We are all one in a warm, personal, caring relationship in Christ and we want others to share this with us. Those who are already with us in this fellowship we cherish and those who are not, we want to reach. As believers each one of us is involved in this work of providing fellowship. We need to view each member of our congregation as someone to love in Jesus’ name. We need to be concerned for each member of our congregation when he suffers hurt, shows need for strengthening, strays into sin, slacks off in service. Visiting, disciplining, comforting, strengthening are the concerns of the pastor and every member. Moreover, we want others to enjoy this fellowship. Consequently, we view our congregation not as something only for our benefit, but also for others. Our congregations exist to nurture us in the fellowship and to help us bring others into that blessed fellowship.

Another form for the believer’s ministry is that called *worship*. In response to God’s love His people do everything to His glory and for Him, but very directly is this true in public worship. Jointly with fellow believers they meet for worship. Together they are forgiven and fed by Him. But also strengthened by His love, they in worship respond to His love with hearts and hands and voices, with their throats and their treasures. “Liturgy” we call it, a word which means the “people’s work.” We also call it the “worship service.” Both terms remind us that here is work for us to do. Not only does my absence from worship give no glory to God; it also deprives my fellow believers of my service. For in the worship service I speak both to my God and to my fellow man. Our congregations exist to give us both opportunity for such worship and incentive to continue that worship with our deeds in our daily lives.

What might the results be if we were to conduct a poll of our members and carry out an extensive evaluation of our congregations? Is there more “customer” and less “worker” philosophy among our members? More “spiritual supermarket” and less “training center” view of our congregations? Perhaps even more so than we might imagine. What is my congregation

doing to identify my life with Christ's mission? To show the relationship between my intake of spiritual food and my witness in life? To teach that all I do and how I do it is part of my mission as a believer? What is my congregation doing to help me identify my spiritual gifts? To help me develop them and to train me in using them for the kingdom? How concerned is my congregation not only in sustaining its members, but in using them? How free and open in using its members, new and old? When is the last time my congregation examined its purpose and structure and defined its goals and detailed its procedures? What percentage of time does my congregation spend on "church work" as contrasted to the "work of the church"? Does it offer opportunity not only for working on budgets and buildings, mowing and fixing, but also for reaching in and reaching out with the life-giving Word? What is it doing to train its members for that all important "work of the church"?

These are questions we might do well to ask in our congregations because that's where spiritual renewal needs to begin, at home in those congregations. The desire and determination to make our congregations do even better what God has given them to do is what spiritual renewal is also all about.

After the end of World War One the famous desert fighter, Lawrence of Arabia, brought several Arab leaders to Paris to represent their interests at the Versailles Peace Conference. Those sons of the desert were filled with astonishment at the sights of Paris, but nothing intrigued them quite as much as the running water in their hotel rooms. In the desert water was such a luxury and here in their rooms it seemed to be free and never ending, at the turning of a tap. When it was time to leave Paris, Lawrence found those Arabs removing the faucets, believing that those magic instruments would give them water at will in their native Arabia. Only with great difficulty did he finally convince them that the faucets were no good if detached from the water supply.

"No good if detached!" That's true, too, if we view, only from the sidelines in an advisory capacity, those resolutions about spiritual renewal passed at the 1987 synodical convention. And it's true, also, if we fail to connect God's Word solidly with any of our spiritual renewal efforts. God give us all a holy and insatiable hunger for His powerful Word. God make us all Bible Christians who eat and drink, live and absorb the Holy Scriptures. Then we'll be doing more than talking about spiritual renewal.

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<sup>i</sup> *Proceedings of the Forty-Ninth Biennial Convention*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1987. p. 101, 102.

<sup>ii</sup> David McKenna, "Financing the Great Commission." *Christianity Today*. p. 28, May 15, 1987.

<sup>iii</sup> August Pieper, "The True Reconstruction of the Church." *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*. Vol. 62:92, 93. April 1965.

<sup>iv</sup> *Lutheran Agenda*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, no date. p. 111, 112.

<sup>v</sup> Ewald Plass, *What Luther Says*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959. p. 1022, 1023.