



LUTHERAN SENTINEL

A PUBLICATION OF THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN SYNOD

What is:
Christian Education?

pg. 6



Care for & Clarity on Israel

The state of Israel has dominated news headlines since October 7, 2023. We rightly call horrific the crimes committed by terrorists against her and we pray especially for those personally affected by the attack. At the same time, we do well to be aware of a false doctrine found in some Christian denominations regarding Israel as a nation-state. It is usually called “Christian Zionism.” It asserts that biblical prophecy indicates that Israel as a nation must be reestablished before the return of Christ and wholesale conversion to Christianity of those who follow Judaism should be expected. For Zionists, 1948 marked the beginning of such a fulfillment when the nation-state of Israel was founded.

However, God does not teach this. Rather He calls Christian believers like you “Israel” (cf. Romans 9-11). Christians are the people of God who struggle with Him in prayer while bearing the cross(es) He has given them in this life. Christians are found among ethnic Jews and Gentiles alike. Jesus’ Kingdom is spiritual, not physical, as Jesus told Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36). It is found within the hearts of all His believers, for God promised Abraham that all the nations of the earth would be blessed through him in the coming of his Descendent, the Christ, the Savior of all mankind.

A passage that Christian Zionists get wrong is Romans 11:26—“all Israel will be saved.” In Romans 9:6-8, St. Paul makes the distinction between Israel according to physical descent and Israel that consists of “children of the promise.” The Israel that will be saved includes you, me, and all believers, both ethnic Jews and ethnic Gentiles.

Christians surely have a love for the Jews because of our Lord’s command and our shared historical theology dating back into the Old Testament. So, for example, in *The Lutheran Hymnary* (1913), we pray: “Open the door of faith unto all the heathen and unto the people of Israel,” (p. 10)¹ that is, to all who do not believe in Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ, whatever their ethnicity.

In considering these sobering matters, Paul, himself a Jew, shows at the end of Romans 11 that we who are Gentiles should understand that we are like wild olive branches that have been graciously grafted into the tree which springs from Jesse’s root, Christ Jesus. We should never glory that the natural branches, ethnic Jews, were broken off through their rejection of Jesus as the Christ. Rather, we should be mindful that God has the power to graft the natural branches back in, and therefore we should actively seek by prayer and proclamation of the Gospel to bring that about.

If you support the State of Israel today as an ally of the United States, know that this can be a proper and noble position and attitude. But know also that there can be legitimate debate among Christians regarding the formation of the State of Israel and its governance of the lands it controls. Do not be deceived by false teachers in the outward Christian church who claim that the modern nation-state of Israel exists in fulfillment of God’s promise. Rather, blessed be the name of our God since there is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for we are all redeemed by the blood of His Son.

1. Using “heathen” makes a better contrast with “the people of Israel” than what is found in Rite One of the ELH (p. 48): “open the door of faith unto all unbelievers and unto the people of Israel.” This might be misleading as though the adherents to Judaism are not unbelievers.

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echoes

from **ELS PULPITS**
past

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OCCASION:

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AUTHOR:

Rev. U. V. Koren

Unto Us a Savior is Born

TEXT: Luke 2:1-14

The Holy Scriptures and the example of the prophets and the apostles show that the believer's life on earth is not just joy and happiness, but that there are often difficult and dark hours, days, and times for them, when sighing and sorrow are a daily experience. Every Christian will have experienced that if he lives long enough. The distress can dim the light which the Word gave him, but it cannot rob him of it. There are particular times in the church year when it seems even the appointed portions of God's Word have to put to shame every sorrow and bring God's joys right into our hearts, yes, make the joy so much greater by contrast. And this festival of ours is such a time. Nothing else is fitting for us than to be joyful. Otherwise, it would have to mean that we did not understand or did not believe the message.

So then, in spite of sin and Satan and sorrow, let us meet our Savior with joy, and with thanksgiving in our hearts, sing and confess His birth as we sing our Christmas hymn: "Rejoice, rejoice this happy morn."

What would our situation be like if there were no Christmas Gospel? Imagine that no Savior was born, that nothing that follows from the Christmas message took place. No offering for sin. No victory over death. No Christian church. What would be left? The sorrows and joys of the world. Sin with its consequences of sickness and distress. Enmity between people, conscience, death, and the grave. That's what would be left. What would our life be like then? Our striving for happiness and peace would be in vain. There would be no word of comfort for us in the Holy Scripture! What would you young people have to hope for? And what kind of comfort would you older people have who have learned to recognize the world's lies? Where would you look during temptation, in time of loss? Where would you go when dark and difficult days come? But now—what is proclaimed to us? Who can express the joy? Unto us a Savior is born!

The angel of the Lord stood before those who first heard this Word and spoke to them. So it is also now. The message— isn't it from God? Did human beings make it up? No, people couldn't even if they had wanted. Therefore, the Apostle Paul also says: "This is a trustworthy saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." This is precisely what you and I need to hear.

When the Word is spoken to the shepherds, what happens is that the Glory of the Lord shone around them. It became light in that dark night. Certainly the light from above is not the natural light of man's heart. For men love the darkness more than the light (John 3:19). There is so much in their lives which they prefer to be hidden. Think how many sins there are, not least at Christmas time! There is so much of which they are ashamed. They forget that someday the light will come upon them, if not before, then with lightning on Judgment Day when He comes. Many therefore run away from Christ so that His light will not reveal them in their true character.

And yet it is actually a blessed thing that, when the Glory of the Lord shines, then everything is seen in its true character. This light certainly shows us sin, death, and judgment. But not only that. Salvation from sin is revealed, and the Way to heaven, namely through faith in Jesus. When by God's light we see our corruption and therefore are afraid, then like the

shepherds, we may hear the Angel's words: "Fear not!"

Certainly it is true that not everyone can rejoice in the words: "Fear not!" For what is someone supposed to do with comfort if he is not troubled and terrified? Those who have closed their eyes to the Glory of the Lord and will not acknowledge their distress, but are satisfied with worldly joys, for them the words "Fear not" are empty words. But for the frightened, troubled, anxious conscience, for the grieving souls, for them it is a glorious word with which the Angel of God greets us: "Fear not!" Yes, when he says it and it is believed, then fear must yield.

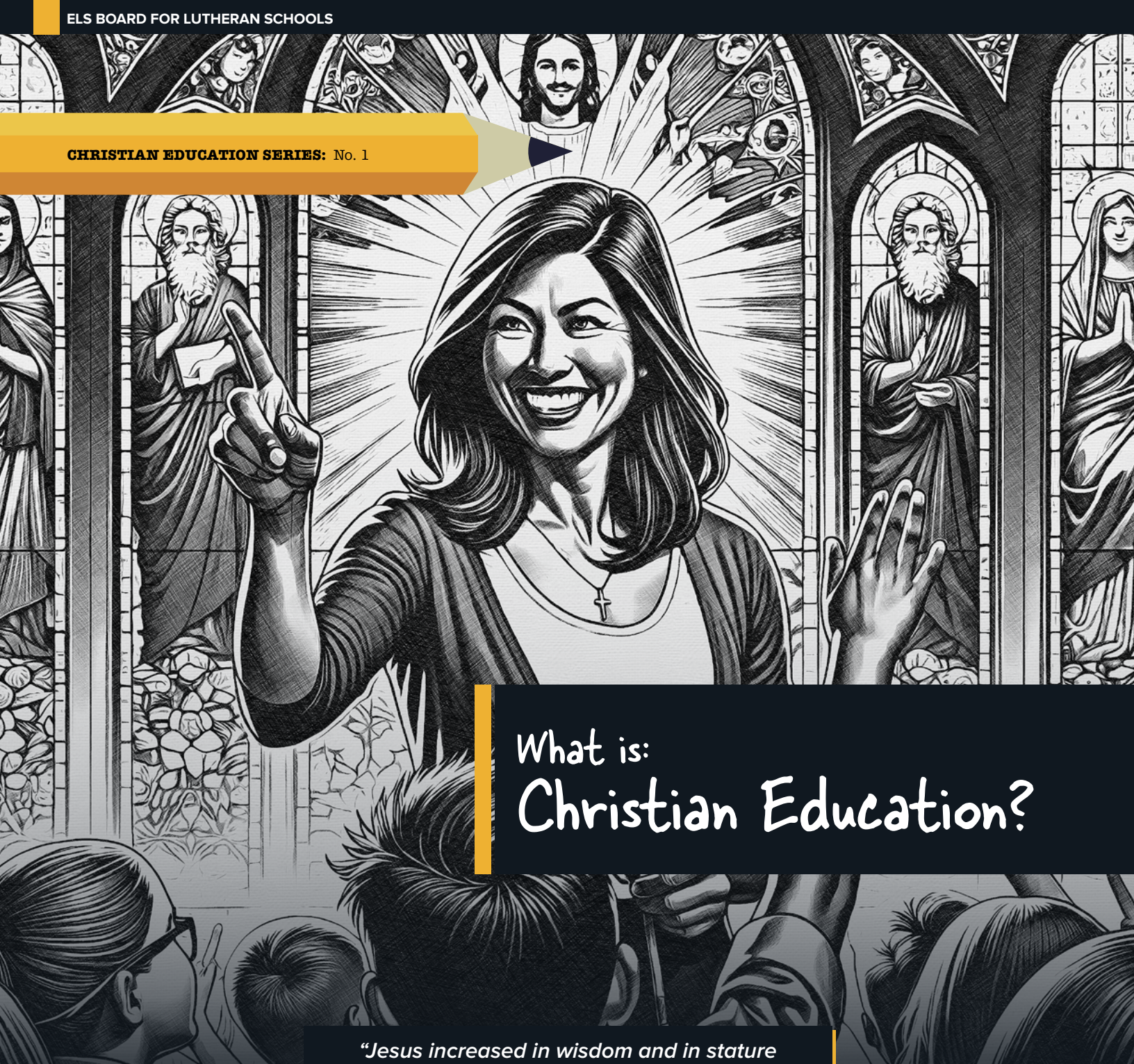
But don't we have reason to fear? Most definitely. There are many things that will make hearts fearful. Yet the angel says: "Fear not!" and he cites the reason in these words: "Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy.... For unto you is born this day a Savior." To whom is this spoken? To everyone! Thus, to each person who will gladly hear it because he needs it.

There were the lowly, poor shepherds— perhaps there are also such lowly men and women among us. Do you need the Savior? He has come. God tells you that. Are some here who have come to church today with worry and heavy thoughts? Do you want to be happy, to have peace with God? Do you need salvation? Your salvation has come! Is there someone here who knows that he has forsaken his baptismal covenant and is troubled by this? Do you need salvation? The Savior is here! Is there someone who feels cold and complacent and is worried about it, who sees that he needs to be woken up? Yes, who can list everything that is in every single heart? But whoever you are and however great a sinner you are, God sends the message to you— your Savior has come. If you want to have Him, then go in spirit to Bethlehem and see the miracle of God's love that happened there.

If you reply: Yes, but my sins, my laziness, my lukewarmness and foolishness! Then I say to you again: Do you want to be helped? That's exactly why He came; not for the righteous, but for the sinner, to seek and to save that which was lost. When we believe that and are comforted by it against all the accusation of sin, when we find our hearts' peace in that, then we also know how we should reply to this message. The angels put the thought in our hearts, the word on our tongues: "Glory to God in the highest!"

*"Behold, I bring you
good tidings of great
joy.... For unto you is
born this day a Savior."
To whom is this spoken?
To everyone! Thus, to
each person who will
gladly hear it because
he needs it.*

CHRISTIAN EDUCATION SERIES: No. 1



What is: Christian Education?

*“Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature
and in favor with God and man.”*

These words from the end of the second chapter of Luke’s Gospel sum up the first thirty years of Jesus’ life. The child Jesus was true God, being infinite, omniscient, eternal, etc. However, in His state of humiliation, He had to grow in knowledge and wisdom as a human child. He humbled Himself to an education.

Who could disagree that a newborn infant who knows little and is able to do little must grow and be formed into a mature adult? Education is the deliberate formative process that accomplishes this. It is more than just the impartation of knowledge, but it is the formation of a person intellectually, morally, and spiritually. It shapes a person’s thoughts, habits, morals, and values. It is also

important to note that this education is not limited to a formal classroom education, but it includes the entirety of training a person receives for his development. Education takes place when a child is disciplined or given chores to do around the house.

Everyone, believers and unbelievers alike, sees the importance of education. The world can provide an education that forms a person with upright character and with knowledge and skills for life on earth. Yet the world cannot provide a true education. All it can do is form a spiritually dead child into a spiritually dead adult—a fine old Adam he might be, and maybe rich, too.

The true education is a Christian education. Why?

If education is the formation of a human being, it must be God, the Creator of the human being, that tells us what we are to be. At the top of that list is not a high wage earner. The commonly held idea that education is primarily about getting a good paying job comes from a materialistic, evolutionary worldview. Rather, above all, God would have us be His holy people now and eternally. The Father created man for this purpose. The Son gave His life for man on the cross for this purpose. And the Holy Spirit sanctifies man with His means of grace for this purpose. All of Scripture testifies to this gracious will of God for us. Just to take one example, we have Ephesians 1:4-6, which says, Just as [the Father] chose us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He has made us accepted in the Beloved. Therefore, since it is God's intention for sinners to know Him, to believe in Him, to worship Him, and to finally enter the eternal inheritance Christ won for them, this becomes the highest purpose of education.

What, then, will an education that strives for these goals look like?

What will the characteristics of this Christian upbringing be?

Certainly, it can take many different shapes, but there are a few characteristics that must be part of it, some of which I will mention.

First, Christian education takes into account who the Christian child is. The child is born having original sin, completely fallen, and separate from God. But the child is also one who is loved by God, created by the Father, redeemed by the Son, and sanctified by the Holy Spirit. Since the child is a sinner, we teach that the correct response to their sin is not to dig their heels into their disobedience, but to repent of their sin. And since the child is loved by God, Christian education necessitates directing that child to the saving work of Jesus that paid the price for that disobedience so that they have the full forgiveness of sins.

Since a child is a sinner, we cannot expect the child to be the source and strength of his faith and Christian life. God is. Therefore, a Christian education constantly brings a child to the means of grace, the Word and Sacraments, so that the Gospel, which is the power of God to salvation, may work in them a steadfast faith in Christ their Savior and a life of holiness.

This brings us to another aspect of Christian education: the training of habits. These habits include regular church attendance, Bible reading, hymn singing, and prayer. It includes the habits of thought, such as remembering that we are God's baptized children. Paul encourages us to think on such things as are worthy: Whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are lovely,

whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things (Philippians 4:8).

Moral training is part of any education. The world teaches its own morality, or lack of it. Christian morality is very different. For one, we acknowledge a universal, objective morality that is written in our hearts and is most fully known through Holy Scripture. It is summed up by the Ten Commandments, which is further summed up by Jesus words, "You shall love the Lord, Your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37-39).

Moral training is guided by the law of God, but the strength for the moral life of a Christian comes from the forgiveness of Christ regularly pronounced to repentant hearts. Scripture says, *Put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness* (Ephesians 4:22-24). Repentance is the putting off of the old man. It is the gospel of Christ's salvation that makes us live as the new creations of Christ. It is the gospel that gives us and our children the kind of hearts that love God and do His will with courage and joy.

Another essential aspect of Christian education is the truth. We acknowledge that truth is objective. First and foremost, God's Word is true, and we confess the truth about God, His righteousness and His grace, and that man's salvation is found in Jesus Christ alone. Beyond that, as people who are of the truth, we teach children to learn to appreciate all truth wherever it is found, such as in the order, complexity, and beauty of God's creation that displays His glory. We teach children to honor the heritage of truth passed down through history from generations past. Christian education forms the student to not only know the truth, but also to live in the truth, to have the ability and desire for a life of learning the truth, and to speak the truth well. This is greatly needed in a world that loves lies and denies the objectivity of truth.

Other essential aspects include the formation of values and affections. A person must learn to like and dislike what they ought. Another one is training in language. Mastery of language gives the child the ability to read and understand the Bible, to study theology, and to use their language to capably confess Christ and serve their neighbor.

Education is about forming a child into an adult. Christian education is about forming human beings into what God intends for them. Above all, it is about knowing the gracious forgiveness of God that they may see Him face to face in the life to come. It is also that they may live in that very hope and joy, exercising wisdom and goodness in their lives out of love for God and in service to their neighbors. There is nothing better and more important for us to keep growing in, and for us to hand down to the next generation of Christians.

by **REV. JOSHUA SKOGEN**, Contributing Writer,
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What in the world is going on?

ANTI-CHRISTIAN SECULAR FORCES

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What is going on? There are many movements in our current culture that are causing people to step back in shock. Maybe the most prominent example is transgenderism and the push for its acceptance, endorsement, and promotion. Perhaps you have other issues that you would give as examples.

People are often puzzled by the newest trends and the direction of a society, Christians potentially more than others.

They often struggle with the question,
“What in the world is going on?”

This is the first of a series of articles that will look at some of the trends of society and explain the goals and motives behind clearly identifiable anti-Christian philosophies perhaps buried within such movements. Cultural Marxism, Critical Theory, Social Justice, DEI (Diversity, Equality, Inclusion), SEL (Social Emotional Learning), Transgenderism, and Transhumanism will be considered with Christian discernment. You may be thinking that these are all political issues and therefore, the church and Christians should not comment on them. That actually leads to the topic of this piece.

The unalienable right of freedom of religion and the free exercise thereof protected by the First Amendment of our country's constitution has sheltered the Christian church in this land. Through most of its history, the government has respected this right and discouraged those that would impinge upon it. It is expected that religion will remain free in the United States. This expectation may cause Christians to be unsuspecting of secular movements and slow to respond to them.

God has given us warnings in His Word to protect us and to help us stand against them. These warnings are found in Jesus' preaching to His disciples generally about the opposition of the godless world (Matthew 10:16-39), in Jesus' teaching about the last days (Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 17:20-37 and 21:5-36), and also in the apocalyptic books of Daniel, Ezekiel, and Revelation. The predictions in these books can be applied to our situation in cautious ways.

For example, Jesus speaks of Christians being "hated by all nations" for His name's sake (Matthew 24:9, Luke 21:17), and he says that we will need to "be shrewd as snakes and innocent as doves" (Matthew 10:16). From Revelation 12 and 13, we see that Satan will wage war against Christ's church, even at times using the civil authorities to persecute the saints and conquer them. So we should not be surprised to learn that governments and secular forces may be working against Christ's church. When we identify anti-Christian secular forces, we cannot yield the field of battle to them because their goal is "to wage war against the saints and to overcome them" (Revelation 13:7). The stakes are high. They are eternal.

The anti-Christian movements in society are not just political issues. They are also spiritual. The church and Christians are to speak to the spiritual issues that culture is considering. In the United States, Christians are often told that they are not to speak about political issues because of the separation of church and state. This is a misunderstanding of the principle.

The church has the God-given responsibility to proclaim the truth of God's Word. As a consequence, Christians will speak on moral issues. They may be political issues as well, but that does not remove our obligation to clearly proclaim what God and natural law reveal.

There are two issues at stake. The first is the good of society and neighbor and the use of God's law as a curb. It is never beneficial to go against God's law. The second is the freedom to preach the Gospel, which is also for the good of society and neighbor. Silencing the preaching of the Gospel is Satan's ultimate goal.

Since Satan will use civil government, even the government of the United States, to wage war against Christ and His Church, what are we to do? Speak the truth boldly. St. Paul urged Timothy:

I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and Christ Jesus, who is going to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom: Preach the word. Be ready whether it is convenient or not. Correct, rebuke, and encourage, with all patience and teaching. For there will come a time when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, because they have itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in line with their own desires. They will also turn their ears away from the truth and will turn aside to myths. As for you, keep a clear head in every situation. Bear hardship. Do the work of an evangelist. Fulfill your ministry.

(2 Timothy 4:1-5 EHV)

Though this passage most specifically applies to public ministers, much of it also applies to the church and individual Christians. The followers of Christ are to proclaim the Word of God through called servants; collectively as the church; and individually in their daily lives. Clear preaching and teaching of the truth are how we fight the war against Satan.

Satan doesn't want things to be clear. He works to make everything muddy and confusing. He weaves lies into thoughts and ideas so that the truth becomes lost. Thank God that we have His Word. We have the truth. The truth sets us free (John 8:32). Therefore, we cannot be silent. Let us then speak clearly about moral issues for the good of society and neighbor. Let us speak boldly about Jesus the Savior of sinners so that God's name is hallowed, His kingdom comes and His will is done.

One final point. God does not promise that we will see all the victories over Satan in this life that we desire. At times, the church will suffer. That's why Jesus taught us to pray, "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." Our ultimate victory is when God graciously sees us safely through temptation and takes us from this valley of sorrow to Himself in heaven. God graciously grant us the wisdom to interpret the times and the strength to persevere to the end.



The First Lutheran Martyrs

Part I of IV



VANITY AND NOTHING:

Who Was the First Lutheran Martyr?

by **REV. JACOB KEMPFERT**, Contributing Writer,
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On July 1, 1523, two so-called heretics were tied to the stake in Brussels and burned alive. Hendrick Vos and Jan van Essen, who were members of the Augustinian monastery in Antwerp, had been arrested nine months before for their profession of the Lutheran heresy. To deserve this fate, they did nothing but condemn the sale of indulgences and teach justification by faith alone—and so Hendrick Vos and Jan van Essen burned as the first martyrs of the Lutheran Reformation.

In the previous issue of Lutheran Sentinel, Rev. Adam Brasich provided an excellent account of these events (“*Even Unto Death: The Story of the First Lutheran Martyrs*”). Therefore, the purpose of this current series will be to further explore Martin Luther’s connection to these faithful men, his personal response to their martyrdom, and the fruit Vos and van Essen bore for God’s kingdom on earth.

Years after those events, when lecturing on Genesis in 1536, Luther further reflected on the martyrs of his own day and age—martyrs for the scriptural truth of justification by faith

alone—as nothing new, but rather as following in the ancient footsteps of Abel. After all, wasn’t Abel the first to be killed for the sake of his faith in the promised Messiah? Wasn’t Abel justified by the faith alone that produced his pleasing offering, rather than the offering itself (Hebrews 11:4)? And wasn’t it for the sake of Abel’s faith alone that faithless Cain’s jealous rage overtook him, provoking him to murder? Doesn’t Abel’s blood crying out to God from the earth set the chorus that all martyrs of Christ shall sing?

In Luther’s 1536 lectures on Genesis, he compares firstborn Cain to the faithless, vainglorious, persecuting false church that possesses all the honor and glory of the world, and compares Abel to the humble, faithful remnant, the persecuted but true Church on earth, despised and called heretics for remaining steadfast in God’s truth:

“here the church begins to be divided into two churches: the one which is the church in name but in reality is nothing but a hypocritical and bloodthirsty church; and the other one, which is without influence, forsaken, and exposed to suffering and the cross, and which before the world and in the sight of that hypocritical church is truly Abel, that is, vanity and nothing” (LW 1:252).

Here Luther makes a pun on the meaning of Abel's name, which in Hebrew is connected to the word meaning "vanity" or "worthless." As the firstborn, Cain assumes he and he alone is given the promise of the Messiah, but yet in his heart he doesn't understand that promise or trust the God who gave it. When he sees that Abel, the "worthless" second-born, secures God's favor with his faithful offering, Cain's self-satisfied and selfish heart burns with indignance that his little brother should obtain God's grace and promise outside the rights of the firstborn. The firstborn can do nothing to earn his Father's favor; sin, and not blessing, crouches at his door (Genesis 4:7).

Luther instructs, "For Cain it is not enough that he is the lord of the house; he also wants to be the Son of God; he wants to be the pope and the father of the church. Therefore he appropriates to himself the right to pass judgment on the sacrifices, and he condemns and slays his brother as a heretic" (LW 1:253).

It's easy to see how the situation between two brothers—one the firstborn and the other viewed as a worthless latecomer, one relying on his works and the other trusting with faith alone, one persecuting and the other persecuted—would remind Luther of the ongoing conflicts between the Roman papists and the evangelical Reformers.

Indeed, by the time of Luther's lectures on Abel, many had been condemned and slain. Many had been branded heretics while professing God's Word. Many had suffered, lost their property and wellbeing, been imprisoned, been stripped of titles and offices and honors. Many had even given their lives for the sake of the gospel—and all as if the church of Cain was doing God a favor: "They have proceeded against us with utmost cruelty. Not in Germany only but also in other parts of Europe their rage has displayed itself against godly people. This sin, as if it were a pastime, the papacy regards as a trifling matter; nay, it even considers it a service rendered to God (John 16:2)" (LW 1:288).

When teaching Genesis 4:10 ("And the Lord said, 'What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to Me from the ground'"), Luther makes the connection between Abel and the Lutheran martyrs more explicit, listing by name several whose blood had been shed for the gospel, and so, like Abel's, refused to remain silent. These and "a thousand others"—including Vos and van Essen—shed their blood for the Gospel, and "the blood of all these will not keep silence" (LW 1:288).

In his comments on Abel, Luther makes it clear that the seeds of all the martyrs—and thus the seeds of the martyrs in Luther's own time—were planted long before. Cain broke the man, but he could not break the mold: Abel is the prototype of heroic martyrdom for all who follow, including the martyrs of the Reformation. They were required to say, "The Pope is Lord." When they refused and instead confessed "Jesus, and Jesus alone, is Lord," they were censured, censored, threatened, arrested, stripped of rights and property, defrocked, beaten, bloodied, beheaded, burned.

That this sacrifice may seem to us at times superhuman is not a testament to the resiliency of the human spirit, but instead is the sacred testimony of the unfailing Holy Spirit. For "God overpowers and converts the world, not by force but through the blood and death of His saints. He overcomes the living through the dying and the dead. This is an amazing victory" (LW 32:268).

By their God-given, Word-fueled steadfast faith, martyrs are made perfect or whole in their martyrdom, as by this saving faith they do not die in misery but live in everlasting bliss in heaven. Their sins have been forgiven in the blood of Jesus, whose death destroyed the devil's power, overcame the world, brought peace with God, and opened heaven itself to us. Man may hate them and kill them, but God loves them, gives them everlasting life and resurrection from death, and welcomes them into heaven for Christ's sake. Not only is the martyrs' victory eternal, but their martyrdom also proclaims to the whole world that Christ Jesus is Lord, and gives a powerful testimony to His Word.

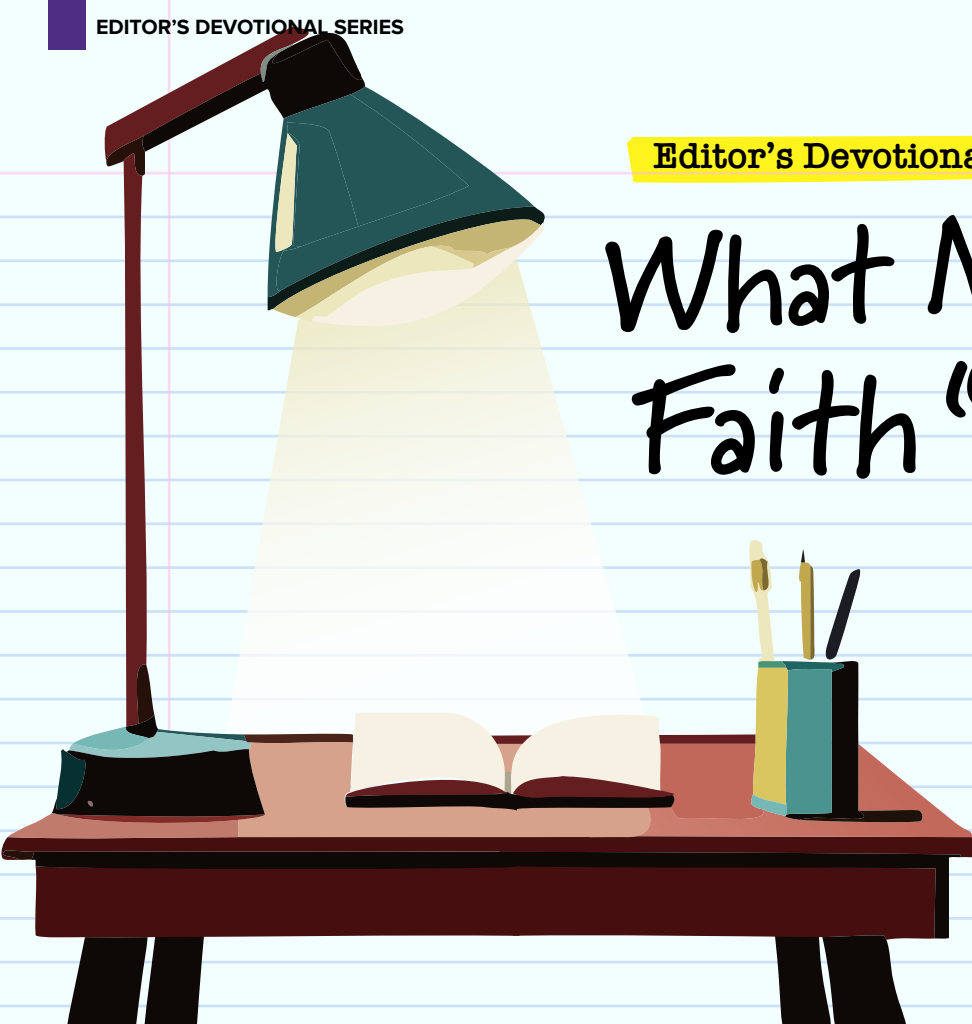
That Abel dies and the earth swallows his blood is no matter, for he does not die but truly lives by the blood of His promised Messiah. Likewise, that men like Vos and van Essen were burned alive, reduced to smoke carried off on the breath of the wind—this too is no matter, for in their deaths they are made whole in the body of Christ, and Christ will keep their dust and ashes until His Day of resurrection of all flesh.

Burning them to ash did not silence them, but, in fact, sent them out on the wind into all the world with their powerful testimony, so that even across an ocean and five centuries we today can look to them and see the saving love and strength of Christ. The martyrs are living proof that the kingdom of God does not consist of mere talk, but of power (1 Corinthians 4:20).



Editor's Devotional Series:

What Makes Faith "Great"?



(Jesus) said (to the begging woman), "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs." And she said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered and said to her, "O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire."

Matthew 15:26-28

by **REV. KYLE MADSON**, Editor, *The Lutheran Sentinel*
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"O woman, great is your faith"... Wow! Wouldn't it be great to have "great faith"? In all of the Gospel accounts, Jesus only characterizes faith as "great" twice: A Roman centurion (Matthew 8) and this Canaanite woman (Matthew 15). On multiple occasions, Jesus critiques His disciples as having "little faith" (Matthew 8, 14 & 16). Which way would Jesus talk about me? we might wonder—and why? But there is a better, more essential question underlying all this: *What makes faith "great faith"?*

GREAT FAITH CRIES OUT

Before we can properly discern and dissect Jesus' words about "great faith", it's vital that God's Word inform us where any faith comes from and what it is. Jesus talks about it either as "great" or "little", but St. Paul speaks of its origin: "Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). Faith is a product of the Gospel—the Word from God about Jesus Christ. It must come as no surprise to us then when Paul boldly declares to the Ephesian Christians that faith is a gift of God—faith is NOT of ourselves.

We live in an environment and culture that is fascinated with “finding oneself”. But God’s gift of faith isn’t mined out of our “self” as is presumed of so many desirable things. The Canaanite woman, when confronted with the sharp pain and anguish of a daughter ravaged by demons, wasn’t left to go on a deep, probing journey to the center of herself for inner strength, inner courage, inner resolve—for anything in her. What Jesus calls “great faith” is faith that cried out for mercy—faith that cried out for help. So the first significant characteristic of great faith is that it seeks its greatness outside of self. Great faith cries out!

GREAT FAITH CONFESSES JESUS AS LORD

And that brings us to the second characteristic of what Jesus calls “great faith”: It confesses Jesus as Lord.

When faith confesses Jesus as Lord, it simply makes the essential Christian confession that the Son of Mary is God’s own Son. The word “Lord” has a few English synonyms. Maybe the most common is Master—one to whom I owe obedience. In this way, Jesus is indeed Lord (Master) over all people—not just believers. But our obedience and submission are not the essential way in which faith calls Jesus Lord. Faith calls Jesus Lord based squarely upon who Jesus is for us and what Jesus does for us. Consider Luther’s words on the matter:

“I believe that Jesus Christ, true Son of God, has become my Lord.” ... It means that he has redeemed me from sin, from the devil, from death, and from all evil. Before this I had no Lord and King but was captive under the power of the devil. I was condemned to death and entangled in sin and blindness.... (Large Catechism, 2nd Article)

Great faith knows “self”—that is, it calls outside of self for help, for mercy. Great faith, when it calls out, has a singular object: Jesus, the one who made Himself your Lord by redeeming you from sin, death, and the Devil.

This brings us to the 3rd characteristic of Jesus’ estimation of great faith.

GREAT FAITH KEEPS BEGGING

First, Jesus didn’t acknowledge the woman—not even a word uttered in return. Next, he calls her an outsider. Finally, He refers to her as a “little dog”. “This is great faith?” we might question incredulously. It probably seems to our instincts like she simply can’t take a hint! This Canaanite woman’s faith isn’t deemed great because it measures strong on some “Richter scale” of faith. She wasn’t moving mountains with her prayer while sweating drops of blood. This Canaanite woman’s faith isn’t deemed great by measure of volume—as if Jesus is suggesting she’s just got a

“never-say-die” spirit. No, Jesus deems this woman’s faith great because it is dog-like. Great faith keeps begging.

This is SO contrary to our proud flesh. Asking for help from our spouse or a friend once is hard enough. Begging over and over again—well that’s just weak and pitiful! Or so says the world. Besides, no one likes a nagging little dog... No one but Jesus!

Wouldn’t we have to admit that deep down, we’re offended for this poor woman—offended that Jesus would speak in such a demeaning way to her? There’s just one stubborn detail left for our offense to deal with: the Canaanite woman is NOT offended by Jesus. In fact, she welcomes the lowly title “little dog”. She concedes, I am a little dog—a little dog eager for crumbs from Jesus, the Son of David. Like a pesky little dog, she corners Jesus with His own words, and as Luther quips of Jesus, “He’s happy to be caught!”

Jesus, God’s own Son, is Lord of all. But He isn’t the Lord who pats us on the back for all of our dedication and devotion. He isn’t the Lord who helps us because we first helped ourselves. He is the Lord of little dogs. He is the Lord whose joy and delight it is to supply help to the helpless, hope to the hopeless, and mercy to those with no merit or worthiness in them. Jesus is the Lord who redeemed us with His blood and craves to be cornered by us and our incessant begging—our cares great and small. He longs to be caught again and again and again by our begging faith: “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy upon us!”

Does this begging nature of faith bother us? It may bother our proud old flesh, but the Gospel patiently pits us against this bother. The Gospel gives our Lord who wasn’t bothered by leaving His throne in heaven to live as The Beggar among beggars and for beggars. It gives us our Lord who, though He was rich, yet for our sakes bothered to become poor so that we, through His poverty, might become rich. It gives us our Lord who, when tormented and crucified, bothered Himself to remain silent as a Lamb led to slaughter. The Gospel gives us our Lord who bothered—while hanging crucified!—to beg His Father’s forgiveness even for those who nailed Him there. It gives us our Lord who now bothers to proclaim to us on the lips of other beggars the full and free forgiveness of our own sins. It gives us our Lord who now, exalted and sitting at His Father’s right hand, bothers to bring our little-dog lives and all our cares before His Father in prayer.

Christian faith is God’s gift—that’s great! And this God-given faith is great because it cries out, because it confesses only Jesus, and because, like a little dog, it never graduates from begging. God grant us faith that aspires to the greatness of little dogs.



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Question ...

Did human beings exist with dinosaurs?

Answer:

Whether it comes from children's television programs, National Geographic documentaries, high school biology textbooks, or even our sources of entertainment, we hear the same drumbeat repeated: the dinosaurs died out roughly sixty million years ago. As a result, the idea of human beings coexisting with dinosaurs sounds to many like a fictional fantasy—something from a Michael Crichton novel or the subject of a big-budget Hollywood blockbuster. Though, if one takes the time to look, the evidence might lead to a far different conclusion.

The Bible does not mention “dinosaurs” by name. That's because the word “dinosaur” is a relatively new word. British taxonomist and lecturer Richard Owen coined the term “dinosauria” in 1841, which he based on the Greek words for “terrible lizard.” Yet in the Book of Job, God's Word describes two creatures that would probably be named as dinosaurs today: Behemoth and Leviathan. In Job 40, God introduces Job to Behemoth.

Take a look at Behemoth, which I made just as I made you. He eats grass like cattle. Would you look at the power of his hips and the strength of the muscles of his belly! He stiffens his tail like a cedar. The tendons of his thighs are tight. His bones are tubes of bronze. His skeleton is like bars of iron.

(Job 40:15-18)

Just listen to that description! Behemoth possesses a “tail like a cedar” and bones like “tubes of bronze” and “bars of iron.” It leaves one wondering just how large this animal was! The other creature God tells Job about is known as Leviathan:

Can you pull out Leviathan with a fishhook? Can you tie down his tongue with a rope?... I will tell about the parts of his body. I will describe his power and his beautiful design. Who can strip off his outer covering? Who can touch his double layer of armor? Who dares to open the doors to his mouth, which is surrounded with terrifying teeth? His back is like rows of shields, which are tightly joined together.

(Job 41:1, 12-15)

Only two animals come to mind that could possibly fit this description: the now-extinct “Supercroc,” an extremely large crocodile-like creature, and the plesiosaur, a large, carnivorous sea-dwelling dinosaur.

These descriptions, however, still leave us with the question: Did these creatures co-exist with human beings? To find the answer, we go back to the week of creation recorded in Genesis 1. The Bible tells us that God created all of birds of the air and the fish of the sea on the fifth day, and all the animals that live on land on the sixth day. This includes all wild animals, livestock, and every sort of “creepy-crawly” thing that moves on the ground, each created by God according to their own kind (Genesis 1:21-25). Included among the wild animals and “creepy-crawly” things would be all of the large reptiles, including what we know today as “dinosaurs.”

On the sixth day God also created the first human beings—in His image and likeness, male and female (Genesis 1:26-27). According to Genesis, the creation of animals and human beings took place in a fairly quick succession, one right after the other. We have no indication of any lengthy time gap between God creating animals and God creating human beings. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. There was evening and there was morning—the sixth day (Genesis 1:31, EHV). So based on the Genesis creation account, one can conclude that human beings dwelled on earth at the same time as the creatures we know today as dinosaurs.

There are roughly 50 pieces of ancient artwork from around the world—sculptures, paintings, carvings—depicting what only could be described as dinosaurs. Also, scientists have recently discovered fascinating evidence of preserved organic dinosaur tissue (bone marrow) that was not fossilized. Both discoveries support the biblical account of a six-day creation and challenge the predominant evolutionary assumptions of our time.

The drumbeat of our current culture goes on. Yet we walk to the beat of a different drum: the drum of truth. The Lord who redeems us in the person of Christ is the God of truth (Psalm 31:5). He will not lie to us. While human assumptions about the origin of this world and its creatures come and go, “the word of our God endures forever” (Isaiah 40:8).



Do you have a question for Pastor Van Kampen?

- > Send them via email:
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- > Send them via “snail mail”:
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LUTHERAN SENTINEL

6 BROWNS COURT
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2024 ANNIVERSARIES FOR GOSPEL PROCLAMATION:

A photograph of Zion Lutheran Church in Thompson, Iowa. The church is a small, white, single-story building with a tall, dark steeple. A cross is mounted on the front facade. The church is surrounded by green trees and a clear blue sky.

75 *years*

Zion Lutheran Church
Thompson, Iowa

A photograph of Faith Lutheran Church in San Antonio, Texas. The church is a large, light-colored building with a prominent arched entrance and a large window. The building is surrounded by green trees and a clear blue sky.

50 *years*

Faith Lutheran Church
San Antonio, Texas

A photograph of First Lutheran Church in Suttons Bay, Michigan. The church is a white, single-story building with a steeple and a cross on the front facade. The church is surrounded by green trees and a clear blue sky.

150 *years*

First Lutheran Church
Suttons Bay, Michigan

We give thanks to God for His abundant blessings through these Gospel outposts,
and we look forward to sharing more from these upcoming celebrations in the months to come.