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DID GOD HAVE TO BE RECONCILED BY THE DEATH OF CHRIST?

Paul speaks of "the offense of the cross." (Gal. 5, 11.) He was conscious of the scandalizing effect which his preaching of Christ crucified was continually producing in the world of secular culture and in the world of mechanical religiousness. (1 Cor. 1, 22. 23.) There was a spiritual heroism connected with his ministry, of which many glimpses are afforded the reader of Paul's writings; but it is doubtful whether the quality and extent of this heroism is generally and fully appreciated. Paul had been a devout devotee of the most sanctimonious type of Pharisaism. He was not unacquainted with Greek learning and art. He embraced the cause of the condemned criminal on Calvary with the distinct feeling that he was making a sacrifice. His "knowledge of Jesus Christ" cost him "the loss of all things." (Phil. 3, 7. 8.) His sensitive heart felt the sneer and haughty scorn that greeted the bearer of the tidings of reconciliation which the death of the Nazarene prophet was supposed to have effected between the angry God and rebel man. (Rom. 1, 16.) He was aware that the miseries attending his apostolate reflected the sufferings of the Redeemer (Gal. 6, 17); yea, that no herald of the atoning sacrifice by which God was appeased once for all time could look for a more favorable reception of his evangelical message from the self-wise and self-righteous world than that which had been accorded him. (2 Tim. 1, 8.) The offense of the cross must be perpetual.

THE BLESSINGS OF MINISTERIAL CONFERENCES.

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Doctors have their conventions, teachers and farmers their institutes, mechanics and merchants their association-meetings, to discuss topics relating to their profession or vocation. They find it necessary to enter into consultation with one another, to have an opportunity for interchange of thoughts, ideas, and experiences. And they regard such gatherings a great benefit to them. Should ministers stand less in need of such meetings? If anything, they require them more than others. True, such pastoral conferences are not expressly commanded by God; but what is done at them is enjoined by the Lord. Nor do we have to search far for examples of such meetings. In the evening of that glorious Easter Day on which the risen Savior appeared to His disciples, they were assembled in conference at Jerusalem. And the same was true on the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was poured out on them in such a wonderful manner and in such an extraordinary measure. The blessings with which the apostles were favored on these occasions are beyond description. And conferences held by Christian ministers at the present day, if properly conducted, *i. e.*, to discuss, in a spirit of fraternal love, matters pertaining to the Christian religion and relating to their office, are also replete with blessings.

First of all, ministerial conferences yield personal blessings to the pastors concerned. They promote:—

1. *Growth in knowledge and strengthening of faith.* Pastoral conferences are held chiefly to discuss doctrinal matters. These are not at one's command in the measure that some may think. In a general way, indeed, ministers are familiar with the various doctrines presented in Scripture. But when it becomes necessary to go into a subject more deeply than to merely scratch its surface, and it becomes necessary to be very precise in expressing the truth, we all find room for progress in knowledge. No one is perfect. For that reason a faith-

ful pastor will continually make individual studies of the Bible. The Scripture is an inexhaustible storehouse of saving knowledge. However rich one may be in knowledge, he may draw out some more of the precious gold of truth and grow still richer. We are not like a sponge that freely absorbs the water of life, and then holds it; nor are we like a water-tower or reservoir which is filled to the top, and only needs to be turned on to serve for purposes of cleansing, slaking thirst, or to quench a fire that may have started. Our study of the Scriptures is rather like drinking at a bubbling-cup; while some of the water is taken in, more or less of it goes to waste. Though we study ever so diligently, and the stream of the living water constantly rushes into our minds and hearts, we are like a leaky garden-hose,—with some of us the leak may be small, while with others, like the speaker, for instance, the leaks are many and large,—and if the faucet were turned off, the study of the Bible discontinued, it would not be long before the hose would be completely dry and empty.

But, however diligently a minister may make an individual study of his Bible, he is sure to profit by meeting with his brethren in conference. Here, too, the chief object of the ministers' meeting is the consideration of the Scripture-doctrines. The Bible is the fountain from which we must ever draw; the only judge, whose authority is supreme; the touchstone by which every utterance must be tested; the rule and standard by which everything must be decided; the crucible, in which the metal of a teacher must be assayed to ascertain whether it be pure gold or base alloy. The testimony of revered men, sainted or living, is highly prized by us when it is in accord with, and based upon, Scripture. But if it be not supported by clear passages from the Book of books, it is not worth more than that of any other fallible being. Men of learning, public opinion, hoary customs,—all count for naught if they contradict the Bible. Christ's own testimony is: "The Scripture cannot be broken." (John 10, 35.) And in Isaiah, the prophet, we read: "To the Law and to the testi-

mony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them." (Is. 8, 20.)

Though every faithful pastor will pursue the study of the Bible individually, and grow in knowledge thereby, conferences are special means of promoting such growth, since the study of the Bible-doctrines is there pursued jointly. One of the members being appointed to lead in the discussions, conferences stimulate intense study on the part of the one who acts in this capacity. And I dare say that none of us has ever been called upon to serve thus without deriving blessings and benefit from the work that it was necessary to perform.

Again, things that may not have been brought out clearly by one are rendered lucid by the utterances of another. According to Holy Writ "the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal." (1 Cor. 12, 7.) One, a scholar of Greek and Hebrew, is able to furnish an exact and literal translation, bringing out the fine shades of the meaning of an important word or sentence; another is particularly well versed in the Scriptures, so that he can bring a number of passages to bear on a subject which forcibly exhibit the truth; another is specially gifted to apply the Word for comfort or warning or admonition. Should not that result in blessings to all that attend such conferences and attentively follow the discussions? No doubt, among those taking an interest in the deliberations, one member of conference notes one thing, and another something else, that he had failed to notice previously, or that had slipped his memory. A Scripture-passage appears to him in a light in which he had never viewed it before, and a deep impression is made on him. He is strengthened in his convictions, or shown that he has been in error, and rejoices to have been led to a knowledge of the truth.

2. *Conferences furnish equipment to expose and refute heresies and fatal errors.* Never have there been so many antichristian spirits, sects, and schisms as at the present day. To mention but a few of the modern ones, there are Christian Science and Russellism, all wearing the mask of Scripture-

terms, parading as the embodiment of orthodoxy, and denouncing those who faithfully adhere to God's Word as impostors and counterfeiters of genuine Christianity. How to unmask such deceivers, antichristian demagogues, and self-constituted reformers, such despicable spiritual quacks and sleight-of-hand performers and magicians, requires careful study both of their falsehoods and of the revelation of Divine Truth, in order that sincere, but unsuspecting souls may be preserved from infection with the poison of heresy, or given the proper antidote to save them from death. In this respect conferences are assayers' offices, where the spurious coins are separated from the genuine; they are a spiritual food inspector's laboratory, where an examination and analysis is made of the foods and drugs that are dispensed to an unsuspecting public, and labeled according to their merits; they are a great information bureau, at which men are trained to combat errors. Either some one has already met the foe, and knows how to defeat him, or he is able to tell where valuable information may be gotten both for acquainting oneself with the errors and with the arguments by which one may scare away the contemptible faker and juggler, or by which a brother who has been duped may be delivered from the fatal snare in which he has been caught. The blessings to be derived at conference in this regard are too patent to require further amplification.

3. *Conferences are instrumental in promoting and preserving unity of spirit.* Unity is more than union. Ours is an age in which everything is unionized. In the sphere of religion union without unity is a delusion. Yet churches are united externally, though they are further apart internally than the "United Cigar Stores" are locally. "Let all churches be at peace with one another!" is the cry. "Let us beat the swords into plowshares and the spears into pruning-hooks!" say the advocates of union without unity. But their peace is like that of the graveyard,—a sure indication of spiritual death and decay. Elijah and the priests of Baal cannot unite, but Christian brethren are to foster the spirit of unity, not

merely unity of doctrine and confession, but unity of spirit, which finds expression in unity of doctrine and confession.

For illustration's sake take the example of the ancient Christian Church, composed of Hebrew Christians and Gentile disciples of Jesus. Though differing in nationality, language, customs, and habits, they were all one in Christ. A special incident caused this unity to be confirmed and strengthened. Men from Judea taught that Gentile converts to Christianity could not be saved unless they submitted to circumcision and the laws of Moses. That was a fatal error. Paul and Barnabas opposed the errorists. And the church of Antioch sent these two men, together with several other brethren, to Jerusalem to confer with the apostles and elders "about this question." Here in Jerusalem the same difference cropped out. A hot debate ensued. After much disputing Peter called the attention of the conference to the fact that the gift of the Holy Ghost had been conferred on the Gentile Christians in the house of Cornelius without any preceding circumcision, and attested the doctrine of salvation by the grace of God in Christ Jesus. That convinced the assembly. The contradiction ceased. Then all listened with rapt attention to Paul's and Barnabas's report of what God had done by them among the heathen. Finally James confirmed the doctrine of Peter, proving from Scripture that God had resolved from the very beginning to accept also the Gentiles who turned to Him in true faith, and suggested that a letter be sent to Antioch, urging the Gentiles to refrain from things manifestly sinful and from things which, though in themselves indifferent, were offensive to the Hebrew Christians. Contending for purity of faith and doctrine, this conference charitably considered the scruples of their brethren as regards indifferent things that were offensive to them, and the unity of spirit was preserved. (Acts 15.)—Here we note another great blessing of conferences. None of us is infallible, absolutely proof against error. Doctrines may be proclaimed, statements made, claims advanced, practises indulged by some that discompose, discon-

cert, alarm, and trouble others. Words or expressions may be employed that are ambiguous, or appear to be inadequate and incorrect, too strong or too feeble, saying too much or not enough; the practise may appear to be inconsistent with the doctrines professed; customs, though indifferent in themselves, may prove offensive to some. Right here conferences are in order, where the truth may be championed, while charity yields in all matters that may, though they concern non-essentials, prove a stumbling-block to others. Thus unity of spirit is preserved by conference, and the blessings such conference is fraught with are inestimable.

4. *Again, conference aids in solving vexing casuistics.*

In the discharge of our ministerial functions numerous casuistical cases are met with. Or burning questions of the day arrest one's attention, which demand an application of God's Word to novel conditions and situations, *e. g.*, women's suffrage, the righteousness or unrighteousness of war, coupled with a question as to our duty, if in the present circumstances war were declared against the "Alliance" or the "Allies." It is not always easy to solve the knotty problems that present themselves to a conscientious pastor. Some cases demand much earnest deliberation, and even then one is not always quite certain that he has found the correct solution. The undoing of the Gordian knot was an easy task compared with those which a pastor has to deal with. If it were permissible to employ such drastic measures as in the case just mentioned, there would be fewer anxious moments and sleepless nights for the pastor and less anguish of heart, lest he make a serious blunder and be the cause, though unintentionally, of great injury to his flock. A discussion of such matters with brethren is certainly desirable, if not imperative. The advice given often results in clarifying the judgment and in restraining one from doing something rashly that might cause deep regrets, or it tends to strengthen one's position. What a relief that affords! How cheerfully one may leave such a meeting! If such conferences are no blessing, it would be difficult, indeed, to mention something that could be termed such.

5. *Conferences quicken Christian activity.* Christ's ministers are supposed to possess a living faith, and to be ever fervent in spirit. However, there are seasons when Jesus has good reason to reproach them with the words addressed to His disciples in the storm-tossed vessel on the Tiberian sea, "Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith?" There are seasons when their zeal flags and their courage is below par. Sensible of their natural unfitness and unworthiness to be engaged in a calling carrying such great responsibility with it, as well as in view of the successlessness of their labor, or because of some heavy family-cross with which they are burdened, or, which is even worse, terrible doubts of God's Word and grace with which they are assailed, they are apt to become so desperately despondent that they feel inclined to quit their charge. But if such a discouraged minister attends conferences, he will learn that his brethren labor under similar and sometimes even severer afflictions than his own, and that the almighty God who sustains them will do no less for him. Hearing how wonderfully the Lord has helped others, and being reminded of God's unfailing promises, the afflicted pastor waxes strong in faith; and hearing of the infinite love of his Redeemer, who has not only purchased him with His own divine blood, but has also honored him above kings and princes, the humbled and reassured minister realizes what an immense debt of gratitude he owes his Lord. No negro slave who has been purchased and given his liberty by a kind planter of the Southland has ever been the recipient of so much unmerited love and tender mercies as a Christian minister at the hands of his Savior. Therefore he fervently vows to trust the Lord implicitly, and to serve his gracious Master with renewed zeal and energy. Such are the blessings which the pastor takes home with him from the conferences which he attends.

6.* *Conferences, in many cases, afford pastors the only*

* Part 6th was not submitted to Joint Conference, because, in this particular case, there is no opportunity to receive Holy Communion; but this point is inserted here because of its importance.

opportunity to receive Holy Communion. Christian ministers need strengthening of faith as much as other Christians. They invite and exhort others to partake of the Lord's Supper frequently. They know better than many others how precious a repast this Sacrament is. At conferences frequently pastors, too, may receive, under the external signs of bread and wine, the true body and the priceless blood of their Redeemer as seals and pledges of their redemption, of the remission of all their sins, of the favor of God, and of their God-given title to the inheritance of the saints in light. The gold ring which a man places on the finger of his bride, pledging her his enduring love, the seal imprinted on the deed to a lot or house to confirm ownership to the holder of such a document, are small security as compared with the seals and pledges of Christ's unalterable love given a Christian communicant. The latter are as far superior to the former as divine and heavenly things transcend human and earthly things.

Again, Christian ministers are to walk circumspectly, be examples to their flock, and excel in Christian virtues. But they are the target of foes, who would rejoice greatly in their fall. In war sharpshooters level their guns chiefly at the officers of the hostile army, and try to pick off its leaders; likewise Satan and his host make special efforts to bring down the pastors by getting them to sully their life and tarnish their reputation. In view of this fact and the pastors' frailty and corrupt nature they need Holy Communion to give them stability in a Christlike life, to further them in godliness of conduct. That purpose is also served at a conference where the Lord's Supper is celebrated. And believing that it cost God's Son His life-blood to redeem human culprits from sin, and that, though in a supernatural manner, the body and blood of Him crucified is partaken of by every communicant,—will not a Christian minister abhor sin, and be careful not to grieve his Savior, and strive by the Holy Spirit's assistance to glorify his exalted Lord?

Furthermore, Holy Communion is a testimony of the

communion of faith. And it would be passing strange if ministers did not desire to thus express their fellowship. At conference they cheerfully embrace the opportunity of doing so. Now since all who receive the Lord's Supper testify to their communion of faith, each one has the satisfaction of knowing that he is not alone in the cause, but all the others who approach the Lord's Board with him are marching shoulder to shoulder with him under the banner of Christ. For these reasons the opportunity afforded ministers on such an occasion is certainly not the least among the blessings of a pastoral conference.

7. *Conferences serve to wear off any rough edges with which we may be afflicted and disfigured, and thus to increase our efficiency.* It is said that silence is golden; but at conferences not all silence is golden. It is contrary to Christian morals to conceal the truth and to stifle the voice of conscience. One must speak at times, even at the risk of receiving no flattering comments. But none of us knows it all. If one thought he did, the conference-room would be the place to be reminded of the words of Scripture: "Be not wise in your own conceits." There he would learn that very likely he is not the only pebble on the beach, but that there are others, perhaps many of them; that some are bigger than he and possess far more luster than he does. There he would learn that, unless he is sure of his ground and has incontrovertible arguments, there may be, nay, more than likely is, some one to detect the flaws, and to move the wheels of his intellect a few cogs downward or upward, as the case may require. Such experiences may not be overpleasant, but that they benefit one, and prove, or ought to prove, a blessing, cannot be gainsaid.

8. *Conferences promote and foster fraternal relations.* That is not only desirable with brethren, but a duty enjoined by God. Christians, and especially Lutheran pastors, though they be strangers and meet for the first time, feel that they are bound together by the bond of faith, which attracts them to each other as surely as steel is attracted by the magnet.

But the confidence with which they meet one another is increased as they learn to know one another better and better, or their personal acquaintance becomes more intimate.

The blessings of ministerial conferences, however, are also such as are shared by the congregation.

The more familiar a pastor becomes with the doctrines of Holy Scripture, and the more firmly he becomes grounded in the truth, the better is he qualified to fill his pulpit and to serve his parishioners. Having been duly instructed himself, he is like unto the "householder which bringeth forth out of his treasure things new and old," and like the mother who has been to market and fetched a basket filled with nourishing food and toothsome viands. Having been warned himself, the pastor is the better able to hoist the danger-signal by which others are warned. He is like a buoy which marks dangerous cliffs, shoals, or other obstructions on which the mariner might be shipwrecked, and the vessel of faith be dashed to pieces. Having been comforted himself at conference, and having tasted the sweetness of the Gospel-promises of Christ, the pastor is able to comfort others also "which are in trouble by the comfort wherewith he himself was comforted of God," and is like the bee, which draws the honey from the blooming clover, and stores it up to feed its brood and provide sweetness for man. Having been encouraged himself, so that his "weak hands have been strengthened and his feeble knees confirmed," the pastor is the better able to encourage others also, whose spirits droop and whose hearts are faint. Like an officer who has had a badge of honor pinned on his breast, and being commissioned to perform some important task, returns to duty with renewed zeal and energy, the pastor, too, having been encouraged by God's grace and favors, knows how to inspire others with an abiding hope, so that they faint not, but take up their burdens anew, and bear them forth with buoyant step, until they have reached the goal appointed them by the Lord. Having been directed in the right path to eternal glory himself, the pastor is able to direct others as to the true

way to life also, and, like a lighthouse, guide them into the haven of everlasting rest.

Are not these blessings worth going after, my brethren? Doubtless, it would be superfluous to still enlarge upon the blessings of ministerial conferences. Let us, then, continue to be diligent in attending such gatherings. Non-attendance without good cause would be unbrotherly and fraught with serious dangers. Unless one attend conference, he may easily become rusty and crusty, get into a rut, lack material for his sermons, be dwarflike, perhaps, in knowledge, a back-number among faithful pastors in judging current questions, and pursue a wrong course in more respects than one. And how are we to learn of our shortcomings, frailties, and idiosyncrasies, unless we be told of them by our brethren? Our parishioners, perhaps, have too high a regard for our office and our feelings to do so. Conferences, however, may make up for any such neglect.

“He that separateth himself seeketh according to his desire,” says Solomon (Prov. 18, 1), according to a revised translation of his words. And the result can but be disastrous. The danger incurred by absenting oneself from conference, the loss and disadvantage of such conduct, is exemplified in Thomas. When the risen Savior appeared in the midst of His disciples on that memorable Easter evening, what assurance, what peace, what joy, what blessings, that brought to those who were present! All that Thomas missed. Let his experience serve as a deterrent to any one inclined to think lightly of pastoral conferences. If one have no need of receiving aught, then let him kindly impart something to others. Either way conference will prove a blessing to him, even though he be not keenly sensible of the fact. Christ’s gracious promise is: “Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them.” (Matt. 18, 20.) By these words of the Lord our ministerial conferences are assured, unquestionably assured, many precious blessings.