

# CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

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Vol. XXXIX

June 1968

No. 6

## THE FAMILY SERVICE

Every clergyman knows that he speaks differently to children than he does to adults. He even speaks differently to different children. Children come in different ages, and the style of address varies with the age of the children. But more fundamental than those minor differences is the major contrast between the way he speaks to the ungrown and the way he speaks to the grown. Every clergyman knows that.

Every clergyman, probably, agrees with the principle of departmental teaching in the church school. There may be moments of stress during the perennial problem of securing adequate Sunday school teachers in which he is ready to scuttle all departmental division and take over the teaching task himself with the whole mob of children. Better, his frustration says, to have one person attempt to communicate to hundreds of children—one person who knows what he is doing—than to let 25 teachers who are somewhat confused or disinterested attempt to communicate to small groupings of children. But in normal moments the clergyman is committed to the advantages of dealing with small batches divided according to age levels.

Surely there is no clergyman who still believes that children are merely the "church of tomorrow." Surely every clergyman concedes that each child is a member of the body of Christ, of equal importance, if of smaller stature, with any and every adult. The "of such" which our Lord spoke in describing the Kingdom is enough to get him thinking this way; but if he has a baptismal theology and believes that this water of regeneration is an effective means of grace, he surely sees the children in his parish as members of the church.

All clergymen who continue to preach Sunday after Sunday must have at least a

residual respect for the task which the sermon undertakes to accomplish. Many will cheerfully agree to the "foolishness" label but firmly hold to "the power of God" dimension in preaching. They recognize that there will always be a didactic aspect to sermons. They see themselves as part of the whole picture of religious education, seeking by the exposition of the Sacred Scriptures to bring believing, reborn Christians into an ever greater conformity of their conduct with their confession. There are only a very few clergymen who actually think that God has decided to work with His Word even when the words in which it is expressed are unintelligible. Clergymen by and large subscribe to the fact that the taught Word must be understood to be meaningful and helpful.

Any clergyman who has any empathy with worship, and is in any state of rapport with the church's long-continued and Biblically approved practice of gathering together for corporate worship, will have faced up to the question of the presence of the younger members of the congregation in such an assembly. Every clergyman who is in favor of the church "doing its liturgy" recognizes that more is going on there than simply the appropriating of indoctrination and instruction. He sees his task as a leader of the worshiping action of the Christian people. They are giving to God the glory due His name. The leader of worship recognizes that in this explicit action of confessing the priority of God the worshiper is taking a firm step in commitment. He is, in the very saying, beginning his doing. It is highly significant that Christian people be helped to understand what they are doing as they worship and be able to appropriate the forms of worship offered for their use as viable vehicles for their adoring approach to God. Every clergyman appreciates all this.

No clergyman would be content to have

bodies in the pews that were neither thinking nor appropriating nor expressing nor adoring nor edifying. Obviously, if he agrees with all the above points, he must protest any situation that would condone noninvolvement in the church's service.

Then what is the hang-up? Why will clergy rest content with a division that puts children in a totally ungraded situation in which instruction is to take place? Why will he be content to allow children to sit in an adult situation which leaves them quite uninvolved in the worshiping action? Why will he continue content with having the children gather together in the corporate assembly of adults in the church, when the entire situation fights against their growing by the worshiping action into a life conformed to creed?

It is obviously true that this contentment with the status quo exists in most parishes. Children are urged, sometimes by a strong use of the third aspect of the Law, to be present in "the church service." But the only service that can possibly be rendered in that hour is to adults. Perhaps this is an extreme statement. It is possible for the aware child, conscious of the polysemous character of the liturgy, to go off on his own and to worship God according to this own understanding in spite of, rather than because of, the adult words of the people and the pastor. But by and large the situation is not designed for his receiving the action of the Word nor for his own action in response. He is neither helped to understand what the action of worship is, nor is he assisted in performing that act of worship in the various sequences which the liturgy offers. He is not helped to understand that the Word of God must be caught in order to be utilized, and the Word of God is given to him in a way that would require total translation before any possible appropriation could take place. The warning that there must be an interpreter of tongues present before preaching in tongues takes

place seems not to be taken seriously by most clergymen who, even though their vocabulary might not be ecstatic, do achieve by their style sermons in tongues unknown by the child.

Certainly there ought to be a solution in the structuring of a service in which the children, together with their interested parents, are brought together in a service designed to enable the children of the church to hear the Word and to give the response of adoration. For many years the children have been expected to adapt to the adult situation. Is it not time for the regular structuring of a service in which friendly adults—probably mostly the parents of the children—are asked to make the adaptation. Surely they will be able to adapt *up* more effectively than their children would ever be able to adapt *down*.

Such a service, it would seem, should include some instruction in what worship is. It should point out the areas of the liturgy in which that worship action can be expressed. And it should finally couch all of the homiletical material and all of the lectionary material in words and in a style which it will be possible for the child to assimilate.

Such an approach is obviously broader than can be demonstrated in a homiletics section. But the approach to preaching can be illustrated at least, as is always the case with sermons, in one man's style and approach in one situation. At best it can illustrate. Preaching is too much of an individual's effort for any example to be a norm. But the following material attempts to illustrate how children can be addressed in a family service on the basis of an outline that also serves for a message to adults in the usual pattern of delivery.

GEORGE W. HOYER

*This sermon was delivered at a midweek Advent service which was also one in a series of dedication services of the new building of Atonement Lutheran Church, Florissant, Mo. In this*

*service it was the congregation's intention to recognize the schools and the youth organizations of the parish. The date was Dec. 6, Saint Nicholas' Day.*

*The announced nature of the service brought a large number of children to the service. Had the accents of the family service sketched above been developed in connection with the service itself, there would have been a brief presentation before the service to alert the worshipers to the direction of the sermon, the lessons, and the corresponding acts of prayer and praise. If it had been one of an every-Sunday family service sequence, there would also have been included some explanation of an aspect of worship and reference to a part of the liturgy in which such an effort of worship could be expressed. There would also have been brief coordinating interpolations before the lessons and, perhaps, before the prayers to assist the children's concentration in spanning the 60 minutes of the service.*

*It is possible to sketch the sermon in terms that readily indicate the form it might have taken were it addressed to the congregation as it is usually viewed in the traditional practice of sermonizing.*

#### SAINTS THAT SERVE

Ps. 80:2: Stir up Thy strength, and come and save us.

When the word "good" is applied to people and organizations and congregations, the meaning intended is often unclear. We usually call "good" that which performs well, that which efficiently achieves its purpose. Surely this is an important part of "goodness." But "out of the heart" deeds proceed, and *that* must first be good if the action is to be really good. Even as we speak of this we remember our Lord's words, "Only God is good." We are not. And only by God can we be made good. Before God acts to make us good, we are not good. And before God our acts do not enable us to "make good" until He moves us to the doing. But when He gives us the ability, then He makes us good, then we follow through by doing the good.

He makes us good. And His is the power which enables us to do the kinds of things by which we "make good."

His saving makes saints that serve.

All of this can be said in terms of this congregation. It is not our doing in the first place that makes Atonement good. No — *atonement* makes us good — His atonement through Jesus Christ. Yet that atonement enables us to do the good deeds that make our schools, our organizations, our congregation good, that make Atonement good.

- I. The good God makes saints through His atonement worked out in Jesus Christ.
  - A. We are not good in ourselves but must be made good by God.
    1. A man is often thought of as good because he does good things.
    2. But none of us is good in himself but must be made good by God.
  - B. Our schools, organizations, and congregation are not good because of their success but only because of the atonement.
- II. The good saints make Atonement a good congregation through the strength God gives.
  - A. Saints are not good without trying, even though they have been made saints without trying.
  - B. God's strength is the kind we need to do the kind of good God wants.
  - C. As we do good, we continually need God's saving help to keep from thinking that what we do makes us good.
  - D. His strength is ours now through Jesus Christ and in this Word, Scripture and Sacrament.

The text is part of the second verse of Psalm 80. These are the words from which the Collects in Advent and the Gradual of the Third Sunday take the famous words "Stir up!" In Advent we look for God's help to make us better. We ask God to "stir us up." We want God to make us "good." But to pray for that gift from God

we need to be very clear about what it means to be "good." Think about that as you hear this text: "Stir up Thy strength, and come and save us."

Today has been St. Nicholas Day — jolly old St. Nicholas. "He was a good man," we say. "He was a saint." "This is a good building," we say. "Mr. Becker is a good architect," we say. The proof of the fact that he is a good architect is a good building. And the proof of the fact that it is a good building is how well it does the work of a good building — whether it keeps out the weather, how it helps us remember that we are in the presence of God. The way it works, we say, decides whether or not it is a good building.

Tonight we are thinking about the Sunday school, the day school, and the young people's organizations of Atonement congregation. We say, "It's a good Sunday school." "It's a good parish school." "They are good leagues." They are good, we think, because they are getting done what good schools and good youth groups should get done. They do their job well.

Some of you are too old for school, and some of you do not belong to the societies for young people. But you are supporting these groups — and doing a good job of it. We look at you and say, "You are good people." Your neighbors may not even know about your support of Atonement Congregation, but they probably look at you and say, "They're good folks."

When we remember that Jesus Christ once asked a man, "Why do you call me good? There is none good but God," we begin to wonder what is meant by "good." You can tell what your father means when he says to you, "You're a good boy." Does God think about us as "good" for the same reason — because we swept the basement? because we helped with the housework? We ask ourselves, "How does a person get to be good in God's sight?" If we think about this congregation, we might ask the question

this way, "How can we make good at Atonement?" As soon as we ask it, we begin to think like Lutherans and change the question to, "How can atonement make us good?" and then we are thinking, not about the congregation but about what God does for us through the work of Jesus Christ.

This text helps us give the right answer. "Stir up *Thy* strength, and come and *save* us." *His saving makes saints.* God makes real goodness. But even as we say that, we don't forget that saints do good things. We'd better work that into the sentence, too. "*His saving makes saints that serve.*" And He does all this through the atonement. And He does this also at Atonement.

## I

Let's try it with St. Nicholas — see if it works out. The good God makes saints through His atonement worked out in Jesus Christ. That's the first thing. Because we are not good in ourselves, we must be made good by God if we are to be good.

Not everyone thinks about goodness that way. A man is often thought of as good because he does good things. See what you think about St. Nicholas.

Nicholas was a bishop in Asia Minor some 300 years after Christ. There are many stories told about the good things he did, but the most interesting one is about what he did for three girls who wanted to be married but didn't have a dowry. Some of you girls don't realize what a problem that could be. In those days if a girl didn't have an amount of money or some valuable possessions which she would bring to her new husband and new home, she had a difficult time persuading some boy or some boy's parents that she was the girl for him. These three girls didn't have anything for a dowry because their father was very poor. And nobody was interested in marrying them. When the good Bishop Nicholas heard about that, he crept out one night with a bag of gold in his

hand. The window of the room where the three girls slept was open, and, quick as a flash, he threw the bag of gold into the window and hurried away. (Some people say he didn't throw the gold through the window at all, but threw it so high that it fell down the chimney and landed in one of the girl's stockings which she had hung by the chimney to dry. And if you begin to guess that it is from good old St. Nicholas that we get our ideas about Santa Claus, you are right.)

Anyway, when this girl — the oldest one, of course — had a bag of gold for her dowry, a lot of young men were interested in her, and before long she was married. But then there were two girls left who had no dowry. Good Bishop Nicholas crept out by night a second time, and when he came to their house, quick as a flash he threw another bag of gold right through the window — or right down the chimney, we're not sure. In any case, sure enough, before long the second girl was married. Then there was only one girl left. A third time St. Nicholas crept out in the night, and when he got to the house, quick as a flash he threw in another bag of gold through the window or down the chimney, we're not sure. But this time the father was watching because he wondered if there really was a Santa Claus! And he caught him right in the middle of a "quick as a flash" and recognized the good Bishop Nicholas. He fell down on his knees and thanked him and asked him to pronounce forgiveness for his sins, and the Bishop did, and everybody was happy, and the third girl was soon married, too, and I guess she lived happily ever after.

Now — what do you think? Was Nicholas a good man? Was he a saint? Are you sure? Is it what a person does that makes him good? Was Nicholas a good man because he did good things, or did he do good things because he was a good man?

It's not so important that you be think-

ing about a man named Nicholas. I'll keep using his name, but whenever I say that word — Nicholas — you change it so that it is your name. What makes you a good boy or a good girl? Answer me that, good Frank, good Timothy, good Betty, good Esther! How did it happen? Or doesn't it always happen? Are you really good all through, all the time? I think I can answer that about you, because I can answer it about me. I'm not good all through, all the time. But does that mean we are not good, not good the way God looks at us? Think about yourself while I tell about Nicholas.

God knew about Nicholas. (Say Bob, say Bill, say Carol, say Marge.) God knew when he was born and all the neighbors cooed, "What a good baby!" that really here another bad boy had been born into the world. He was a good child as children go — and they are pretty wonderful — God should know! He's involved in making them! But as all children go since the first father and the first mother went the wrong way, Nicholas went bad. (Say Ernest, say Charles, say Dorothy, say Barbara.) Some people's children were worse, but there was no doubt of it that Nicholas wasn't all good. He was part of the meanness that shows up in every school, the fighting, the bad language, and the many things that don't come out in the open — the angry thoughts, the envy, the jealousy, even the hatred. (Say Henry, say Rudy, say Christopher, say Peter.) It wasn't just his problem, nor just yours; it is the problem with people, all people, this problem of not being able to be all good. And the way God looks at it, only *all* good is good. Actually, that's the way we look at it too — who wants a half-good bite of an apple? God knew the problem. God knew about Nicholas. (Say Andy, say Chris, say Ruth, say Thelma.) And God said, "If they are going to be good, I will have to make them good." And He did. What He did — well, you know what He did!

It was at the first Christmas that the big thing happened. God Himself said, "I'm going to come into the world, and I'll be born just like the boy Nicholas. I'll take on the human nature and be a baby—so real that my mother can hear God cry, so that everyone will know how much I care; so that everyone will know that I love them, that I will forgive the wrong they do; so that everyone who loves me will realize that with all the wrong taken away they will look good to Me." That's exactly what God did for Nicholas to make him good. (Say you, say me!)

The Lord Jesus, who cried in Mary's arms because of all the wrong in the world, loved us so much that He lived His whole life for us, perfectly obeying God in everything, never doing anything wrong. Finally, after He had done everything God wanted Him to do, He was ready to obey God by offering His life for us. That is what the Father's will was, that by the dying of Jesus, His only Son, and by the good of Jesus, His good Son, we could live forever and be good in God's sight. He lived a good life all His life for us whose lives were not good. He offered His life and His death as a substitute for the lives we were never really willing to give up to God. Jesus Christ is good. Jesus Christ offered His goodness to Nicholas. (Say you, say me.) And Nicholas believed in Him and accepted His goodness. And Nicholas was a saint, a good man. (Will you say *you*?)

What makes a man good? It is atonement that makes a man good, because what Jesus Christ did, we say, was that He "atoned for our sins." It made us at one with God. What Jesus Christ did for us is the atonement. What makes a man good, a boy good, a girl good? What makes St. George, St. Justus, St. Betty, St. Alice, St. Nicholas? Atonement does. Atonement, God working out His love in Christ Jesus does, not things that we do. Atonement makes saints.

If that is clear, then it is also clear that our schools, our youth groups, our whole congregation are good because of the good God, and not because of anything we call success. Everything good at Atonement congregation is made good by God's atonement in Jesus Christ.

## II

But there is another side to all this "being good." And that is—what? "Doing good." Right. Things are being *done* all the time in the Sunday school and the day school and the youth groups—in the whole congregation. That's a part of life. If things were not being done, everybody would be dead. It's true that by God's forgiving the things that are done wrong, we are good in His sight. But in another sense it's only when we are doing good that we are good in God's sight. But here, too, we get it straight when we get it from this little text: "Stir up Thy strength, O Lord, and come and save us." It is through the strength God gives that the good saints make Atonement a good congregation, make ours good schools, good leagues.

Saints are not good without trying, even though they have been made saints without trying—without *their* trying, since God did it through Jesus. It is true that atonement makes saints; but when we are talking about this congregation, we must also say, "Good saints make Atonement." Good saints in good schools, in good Sunday school classes, in good youth societies—good saints make a good congregation.

That's why we pray the "Stir up's" all through Advent, because we want God to come and save us, to come with the kind of strength we need to do the good things. We want to be made good by God's atonement, and then we would like to be strong to do good. We start off that way with the new church building, too, thanking God for giving us a good building, and then praying God to give us His strength to do good and to

make Atonement a good church, a good congregation.

We need God's saving help for something else, too. As we do good, we need help to keep from thinking that what we do good makes us good. Everybody has mixed that up so easily, even people who told the story about St. Nicholas Christmas after Christmas. They used to say to their children (and this sounds just like Santa Claus talk): "If you're a good child, St. Nicholas will come and give you good things, chocolate, gold coins, and wonderful presents; but if you are not a good child, if you are bad, then he will just leave a switch at your fireplace, just a switch with which you can be beaten." See how easy it is to mix up the two kinds of goodness? Unless we are very careful, before long we may begin to think that God looks at us and says, "If you do good things, then I will love you and call you good. But if you do bad things, I will not love you because you are bad." That's not the way God looks at us at all. God looks at us, and He knows what we are like. He knows we are not good, all good, the way we should be. Even we know that. But God makes us good. He comes with His strength, and He saves us. And then He comes with His strength and helps us *do* good.

St. Nicholas gives us a good example of how to go about doing good in such a way that you don't get the wrong idea of how you *are* good. He didn't do good just to people

who knew him and knew he was doing good things for them. If he had done that, he knew people would say to him, "Oh, Nicholas, you're a good man, you're a saint!" and before very long he would begin to believe them. Instead Nicholas looked for ways to do good to people who wouldn't even know he was doing good. He tried to do good to everybody. He went out in the dark when no one could recognize him, and he did things quick as a flash so that no one would stand around and admire him. That's a good way for us to do good — just for everybody, without waiting for applause, without expecting people to do good back to us — we should be good for God's sake. That way we will always be remembering how it is that we get to be good in the first place. We will be doing good because God has made us good. His saving makes saints, and His strength makes serving saints. His atonement makes a good school and a good church, and by His strength we can make Atonement be one of His good churches.

When the Lord gives us His body and His blood, gives us Himself in the Holy Sacrament, isn't that exactly what He is saying to us: "Here comes My strength, the very strength that saved you, forgave you, made you a saint. Take it. It's the atoning body and blood that made you good. Now use that strength to make a good Atonement."

GEORGE W. HOYER