

# Concordia Theological Monthly



F E B R U A R Y • 1 9 5 3



ARCHIVES

# Concordia Theological Monthly

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VOL. XXIV

FEBRUARY 1953

No. 2

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## The Marks of the Theologian\*

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### I

#### THE THEOLOGIAN AS A FOOL

1 Cor. 1:17-25

A STEWARDESS on a plane once asked me what I was. I answered, not quite without malice I am afraid, that I was a theologian. She didn't commit herself too strongly on that, merely opining that I was probably the first theologian that she had ever "carried"; but she seemed impressed. I have since wondered whether she should have been; by the standards that govern the creation of airlines and all the other streamlined paraphernalia, physical and spiritual, of our civilization, she shouldn't have been. For the theologian is by Biblical definition a fool, a child, and a slave; and they are not impressive entities.

A theologian is a fool; it is imperative that he be one: "Let no man deceive himself," St. Paul says: "if any man among you seemeth to be wise *in this world*, let him become a fool that he may be wise" (1 Cor. 3:18). We like to deceive ourselves well enough and to think that we have a choice between being fools and something else, after all. We all respond to the flattery of book lists headed *Philosophy and Theology* or *Religion and Philosophy*. We like to dream of some sort of connection, mild but still connubial, with philosophy. Luther's "Harlot Reason" tempts us to prove our intellectual virility and to seek for an "intellectually respectable" theology. We like to think of theology as "queen of the sciences" and of ourselves as very respectable little intellectual princelets in

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\* A series of chapel addresses, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Mo.

her train, with a Christian philosophy to place alongside all the other philosophies. But it is not so; theology is not queen, not among the sciences, and we are not princes. We are more like the short-pants boy who hovers on the fringe of the long-pants set; tolerated, but not ever really accepted. We should not deceive ourselves.

St. Paul shows us why we dare not deceive ourselves. To do so would be to take the heart out of theology, to take the Cross of Christ, the kernel, out of our *kerygma*. "Fool" therefore goes all up and down the line of theologians, from the little children in Christ up to St. Paul himself; he is speaking here of what Christ sent him, the Apostle, to proclaim, and it is foolishness.

The Gospel of the Cross of Christ is foolishness, and its practitioners are fools. The Gospel is God's last word to mankind; but it is somehow less impressive than His first word was: "After that in the *wisdom* of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe." God's earlier attestation of Himself, the cosmic sketch of His power and His Godhead drawn in the works of His creation, outtops impressively this little fragment of a history of a few men clustered about a Man who taught in Galilee and died in Judaea. God's Law is more impressive than His Gospel, intellectually: "Do this, and thou shalt live" is a more demonstrable proposition than "Only believe, and thou shalt be saved." God once came with wisdom; He comes with folly, with the Cross. What kind of God, what kind of divine proclamation, is that?

The Gospel of the Cross does not fall into the same category with wisdom, with philosophy and science: over against "wisdom of words," the impressive truth clothed in impressive form, St. Paul can, for the first, only set something quite different and alien, "the power of God." The Cross of Christ will not satisfy the desire for intellectual mastery; it is an act of God, not deducible from premises, not reasonably explicable. It looms over mankind, not as an idea to be grasped, but as a life-or-death decision to be made. It cannot be demonstrated; it can only be proclaimed. The theologian does not fit among the searchers and the logical provers of this world.

The Gospel of the Cross is not only different; it is antithetical. It destroys the wisdom of the wise; it brings to nothing the under-

standing of the prudent; it makes foolish the wisdom of this world. The waves of this world's wisdom dash up against the Cross and break into a bitter spray that can only obscure it; the rainbow coruscations that appear, appear for a moment only and are gone. "Brilliant" theologies come, but they go also with monotonous regularity. For the antithesis will not down. Before the Cross vast sections of our libraries, huge areas of our civilization, recede into insignificance and irrelevance. And so the Cross acts also to exclude the wise. The scribe, the wise, the disputer of this world — where are they? Not under the Cross, not in the Church.

And so the poor Gospel of the Cross must wander helplessly up and down in the world, weak and foolish and indefensible: "The Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom"; and the Gospel of the Cross is neither. It is not a closed and symmetrical system, arguable and provable. A Greek mocker could call Jesus a "suspended sophist." Neither is it miraculously demonstrable. It is no obvious and inescapable act of divine power; it asks faith. A crucified Messiah is for the Jew a blasphemous thought, a conception unworthy of the Lord of Hosts. The Jew Trypho dismisses Jesus as honorless and gloryless, and to the Apostolic cry of "Jesus is Lord" there rises again and again the Jewish countercry, "Jesus is accursed!"

The Gospel of One who hung upon the tree is foolishness; and the foolishness is not peripheral. No scholarship can cover the nakedness of its folly, and no alliance with philosophy can make the Cross acceptable, for in the end there can be no alliance: either the Cross or philosophy must go. The theologian must *choose* to be a fool.

But before we take to feeling sorry for ourselves and begin slinking apologetically about the world, muttering about the Cross out of the corner of our mouths instead of shouting it from the rooftops, there is a question we should ask. Peter's opinion of Paul tells us more about Peter than it does about Paul: Who deems the Gospel of the Cross foolishness? Who is calling whom what?

They are the Jew and the Greek, and it should have become clear before now that they are always with us; they are not merely first-century phenomena. They are religious pride and intellectual pride. These are the moralistic scramblers up into heaven, who ascend step

by laborious step up strenuous ramps of performance to the throne of the Almighty and say: "Here we are; you must receive us." These are the subtle climbers-up of speculative spiral stairs of thought to a pale and anemic attic sort of God and ask: "Aren't you flattered that we've found you?" These are, each in his own way, the asserters of themselves; these are the picture-frame makers who have a frame all ready into which God must fit, or the worse for God. Our Jew (there is a piece of him in every one of us) must have a Messiah to reward him and to destroy his enemies. Our Greek will have a Savior who will give him a perspicacious conception of cosmic reality; he wants to master the world in his thought, instead of glorifying and thanking the Creator of the world. Both of them want the Kingdom of God, to be sure, but in *their* way, without repentance, without reversal, without denying themselves.

Where are they, the Jew and the Greek? Outside God's people. Their wisdom has separated them from God and shut them out from the truth of truths. They are the men whose wisdom God Himself has destroyed.

They are "of this world," this dying world; these are they that perish. These are dead men who call the Gospel of the Cross foolishness. It is as if the young man of Nain in last Sunday's Gospel had sat up and said: "What are your premises and your postulates? Your wisdom of words does not satisfy me." Or, to put it in Jewish terms, it is as if he had said: "You have come down a dusty road in Galilee like any one of dozens of hedge preachers; you have no white horse, no trumpets, no sword proceeding from your mouth to blast our enemies; you are no Messiah for my needs." It is as if that wise and theologically trained young man had said: "I'll not rise. I'll stay dead on my own terms rather than live on yours." Who is calling whom what?

The question of questions is not, after all, "How does it look to me or to any man?" The question is, "*Whose* foolishness is it?" We do better to start from there. The Cross is God's act, His love, His giving — Jesus was "savoring the things of God" when He went to the Cross. That removes it from the realm of demonstration and proof. It is not below but above logic and sign. — The Cross is a deed and a fact without all analogy; but God in the Old Testament and the Son of God in the New Testament used a mother's

love to give us a grasp of it, and we may too: We never asked our mothers to prove or demonstrate their motherhood, either logically or dramatically. My mother was innocent of syllogism, and it never occurred to me to ask her to jump into a well to prove her love for me. She had "proved" it before I ever knew it; she had borne me, nursed me, yearned over me long before I was aware of it. Her love was in my life: she fed me, clothed me, washed my ears, blew my nose, spanked me, and forgave me. Her love was not an arguable quantity; it was *there*, and her face was the most beautiful in the world because it was hers. She lived in my life, and I lived in hers.

And so it is with the Cross. The love of God that sent His son to Golgotha was there, and fixed on me, before the foundations of the world were laid. All history was shaped and guided to the Cross, for me. The Son of Man came to minister and to give His life a ransom, for me. He won deliverance, and victory, and peace, and access to God in confidence, for me. Unto us, unto me, He was born and lived and wrought and died and was raised by the glory of the Father, for me. That love of God was brought to me, given to me without my willing and running; I *was* baptized; I did not baptize myself.

It is all God's good will; it pleased Him thus to save them that believe, *all* that believe, Jew and Greek; they need *only* believe, need only let the Cross be theirs. God calls us, and we believe; we see ourselves and abhor ourselves in dust and ashes. The miasmatic mist of logic and sign is lifted, and we *see*; we see power and wisdom. Instead of strong and brittle logic, we have a powerful, leaping, and triumphant music. Instead of the infallible sign for which an evil and adulterous generation asks, the sign that will obviate the need of faith, we have the sign which looms victoriously over the Church of Jews and Greeks, the sign of the Cross, which is marvelous in our eyes and spells victory.

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We shall not cease to be scholars; it would be sheer ingratitude to God, who gave us Greek and Hebrew and all other manifold skills wherewith we may seek Him where He may be found, if we did not use them to the uttermost. We shall not strike philosophy from our curriculum either; we shall study it diligently, for there

are Stoics and Epicureans in our market places, too, and we must become all things to all men that by all means we may win some. We must find men where they live and lead them thence to life eternal. But the theologian is not primarily a scholar, he does not set himself an ideal of scholarship; he becomes a scholar almost accidentally, by being a wholehearted theologian. And he is never in any sense a philosopher. He is a fool, and proud of it. Our prayer as theologians must always be:

Accept me, Lord, into Thy school,  
And graduate me as Thy fool.

Amen

## II

### THE THEOLOGIAN AS A CHILD

Matt. 18:1-4

We have become God's fools; the wisdom and the strength of this world are eschewed, rejected, and forgotten — we think; we know and are sure. The door is closed and locked upon them. But the devil climbs through keyholes, and the Jew and Greek scramble through the transom after and are with us still. Worse yet, we find them within us, transformed and dignifiedly disguised, but the same old gentry, proud and pestilential. They make the question: "Who, *then*, is greatest?" seem a natural and logical question even here in the Kingdom, under the grace of God in Christ Jesus. The old heroic words of Achilles' tutor: "Ever to excel and to surpass all others," have power to charm us yet. And the old Pharisaic love for the front seats in the synagog and the first places at table — is it entirely gone, after all? We have gotten away from crude brass trumpets to blow before us; but a little woodwind obbligato is so nice, so genteel; and little, felted words like "due recognition" can be made to do the job.

And so we theologians need another sermon on a text for theologians. Our text *is* a text for theologians, spoken by our Lord to an advanced group and a select lot. The theology these men had had, the things they knew! They had heard John the Baptist cry: "Repent ye!" and heard him proclaim the Kingdom of God nigh at hand, the wrath to come, the axe laid to the root of the tree, the

judgment of God upon all impenitence and unbelief, including Pharisaic and Sadducean unbelief and impenitence; they had heard him proclaim the Greater One who was to come with Spirit and with fire, with judgment and with creative grace, to burn the chaff in fire unquenchable and to bring home into His barns the winnowed grain; they had heard him proclaim and point to the Lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the world, God's complete and universal sacrifice for the sins of men; they had beheld the Baptist's joy made full: "He must increase; I must decrease." They had heard the call of the Greater One, Jesus of Nazareth; had heard His promise that He would make them fishers of men. They had heard the Sermon on the Mount—including the First Beatitude upon the poor in spirit; they had heard and sensed that unique authority in His words, words which proclaimed that the streams of mankind divide for eternal weal or woe around a rock that is none other than Himself. They had seen the leper cleansed, the storm stilled, the demons cast out by the Finger of God, the dead raised, the blind healed. They had been sent, commissioned, and empowered by Jesus to do great things in His name; they had heard the parables of the Kingdom, and to them it had been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of the heavens, to draw the line from the parable to the reality present in the word and work of Jesus of Nazareth. They had heard Jesus' answer to the Baptist when he sent to Him from prison; they had heard Jesus' claim to an unparalleled divine Sonship. They had confessed Him as the Christ, the Son of the living God; and to some of them it had been given to witness the Transfiguration.

They were crammed with good theology, and they knew it. They were in high spirits: Jesus had called them, the Kingdom was theirs. They felt confident and capable of occupying top places, of being great men before God. There was only one question still unsettled in their theology: "Who, *then*, is the greatest?" Jesus answers them: "Turn! Be converted!" Whoever asks the question of greatness is on the way out of the Kingdom, is throwing away God's gift. He must begin anew. The cry of the Old Testament Prophets to apostate Israel; the cry of John the Baptist to Sadducee and Pharisee, to all Israel; the cry of Jesus Christ to all men: "Repent! Turn! Turn away from yourselves and your sin, to God!" that cry is ad-

dressed to the theologians. Luther saw rightly: "When our Lord Jesus Christ says, 'Repent,' He wants our whole life to be repentance." Our new life, our life as theologians, is a reality only in our continued and ever-renewed turning from the old life. "The new man is always only one day old."

This is a radical word to be addressed to disciples, to theologians; and Jesus leaves us in no doubt as to its seriousness: "Except ye be converted and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." The Kingdom is God acting, is God interposing in the person of His Christ. It is solely and wholly His deed; it is the stone made without hands which destroys all human kingdoms and fills the whole earth and leaves no room for human greatness. His will is done; His name is hallowed where He reigns. The disciples had not chosen God's Anointed; He had chosen them. They had not done His deeds or spoken His words; they had witnessed them and heard them and received them. It was given them to confess Jesus as the Christ; they did not make Him the Christ. They had not transfigured Jesus; they had witnessed the Transfiguration. The Kingdom is God's giving and leaves room only for our receiving.

Therefore it is for the children. The child is small and knows he is small (that is all that Jesus singles out in the child; He says nothing of his innocence, loveliness, or charm); the child is always looking up to persons greater than he; he cannot ever forget how small he is, and he has not yet learned to deceive himself into the belief that he is as big as anybody. The child receives. Children are the world's best askers and beggars; they are the world's best accepters of gifts and receivers of presents.—The finest characterization of our Lutheran Confessions is Schlink's, who says that they breathe the air of child's delight at having received a gift.

"Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven." "Humble himself"—a child does not make himself smaller than he is; he knows how small he actually is. That is why turning, being converted, is a turning to childhood. That is why greatness comes to the childlike. The emptiest receives most; only he will be great for whom "greatness" has lost all meaning, for whom only God is great, as only God is good. God is Creator, and he works *ex nihilo*. He puts Himself

into selfless lives; He pours the wine of His gladness into empty cups; He fills empty hands; He justifies the ungodly and raises the dead.

When the brazen idol of *our* greatness has melted before the blaze of God's greatness and lies a little pool to reflect God's glory and the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ, then we shall have begun to be Christians, then we have become at least apprentice theologians.

This is not an interlude, a subject for a ten minutes' "meditation" on a Thursday morning. This is a practical and decisive consideration. On this turning, this becoming children, our theology depends, practically. Our response to this word of our Lord will determine, for instance, what sort of exegetes we are going to be; will determine whether we are going to judge the Word of God or let it judge us; whether we shall set out to master the New Testament or let it master us. On our response depends the character of our exegetical scholarship; if we take Jesus' word seriously and become children, we shall have the only genuinely theological scholarship there is. Genuine theological scholarship is always a by-product: Because he is a child, a beggar and a receiver; because he is a listener; because he would let the Word master him; because he cries out to that Word: "*Doce me! Doce me! Doce me!*" — therefore the theologian shrinks from no task however long, tedious, or irksome in itself. The tangled briars of the *apparatus criticus* become his pleasant pastures. He masters languages with gusto; he settles *boti's* business, and the aorist is his oyster. He takes an insane delight in grammatical niceties; he is like a baying hound on trail in his pursuit of etymologies; he listens laboriously but raptly to tones and overtones in words. He soars like an eagle scanning the whole and its parts; he ransacks history for all that makes clear and bright and plastic the brave Biblical world; he walks with seven-league boots through all Scriptures that he may know the whole land; hits every key on the Biblical keyboard that he may stay attuned to its vibrations only. Our child, somewhat to his own surprise, has become a scientific exegete — at least if we accept Schlatter's brave definition of *Wissenschaft*: "Ich heisse Wissenschaft die Beobachtung des Vorhandenen, nicht den Versuch, sich vorzustellen, was nicht sichtbar ist." He takes all pains to see, but he is content to

see, without attempting to divine the invisible; for what he sees is God's plenty.

Be converted! Turn! Become as a little child. Accept God's royal reign. And so we shall become great, really great. We shall have risen on wings of thanksgiving to realms where the yapping of applause can no longer be heard and the yardsticks of greatness are too small to measure anything.

Turn Thou us, and we shall be turned!

Amen

### III

#### THE THEOLOGIAN AS A SLAVE

Matt. 20:25-28

We can measure the total nature of sin by the total nature of the revolution wrought by the grace of God. The theological world is a topsy-turvy world: we turn fools in order to become wise; we turn children to become great; and today's text for theologians tells us that we must turn slaves to become princes. This text, too, is a text for theologians, for it is addressed to the Twelve, and particularly to the sons of Zebedee. James was so important a theologian that a king who sought the favor of the Pharisees by a pronouncedly pro-Jewish policy chose him as the first victim to be sacrificed to that policy and had him executed with the sword. He must have been a theologian of mark. And St. John the Theologian we all know, from his Gospel, his Letters, and the Apocalypse. This is a text for ambitious theologians, moreover, and for ready-to-die theologians, for men ready to be baptized with the baptism where-with their Lord will be baptized and to drink the cup that He must drink.

To them our Lord says: "Be ministers! Be slaves!" This is in conscious, willed, and diametrical contrast to the standards of this world, where princes exercise dominion and the great exercise authority. Being prince, being great and strong, means being greater and stronger than somebody else, and the more somebody else, the better. Preferably everybody else. We recall Carlyle's dictum that it takes the whole universe, whole and undivided, to make one boot-black happy; if he has to share it with another bootblack, he deems

himself the most abused creature in the world. This is in direct opposition to the whole world of self-insistence, of honor, ambition, and nobility. "But it shall not be so among you." The great shall minister, and the chief shall serve. This is taking all the stitches out of the world's seams with a vengeance. If this stands, nothing else stands. What would happen if we began to take it with absolute seriousness, not in the world, but in the Church? And yet we must take it with absolute seriousness, for it is based and grounded on the fact that is the very center of the center of our theological existence, on the Son of Man, on the coming-in of the Kingdom of God, on the ultimate revelation of God: "Even as the Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many." This Son of Man of whom Daniel had seen the vision, the vision of One coming with the clouds of heaven, from the realm of God — "and there was given Him dominion and glory and a kingdom that all people, nations, and languages should serve Him; His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom that which shall not be destroyed" — this Prince, this Great One, came to serve, to minister. He "came" for that end; His ministry and servitude is no accident of His existence, but is the purpose and content of His existence; in it is its significance; in Him is God's ultimate revelation of Himself, God's last and consummate word to man.

It is God's last word, the completion and the climax of all His words to men, words which revealed Him as the God who ministers: He created a world which He himself called good, at whose splendor and goodness the morning stars sang together and the sons of God shouted for joy, and gave it as a birthday gift to man, gave it to him to replenish and subdue it. He offered Himself to man for communion, to man made in His image for that communion. And when man broke that communion, it was He who set about to restore it. The angel with the fiery sword is not His last word even here; it is the Promise. He chose out a man and blessed him and entered into a covenant with him and with the people sprung from him: "I will be thy God." The whole history of that nation is no heroic account of Israel's greatness, but of a ministering God's goodness to a wayward people. He sent them His servants, the prophets, to woo and win them back to Him; He gave

them the Law to be a schoolmaster unto Christ for them. The Old Testament is the book of God's ministry to His people, and through His people to mankind. It is the song: "My well-beloved hath a vineyard," a vineyard which He loves and tends.

Of that revelation the Son of Man is the climax: "Having yet therefore one son, his well-beloved, he sent him also last unto them." His name was called Jesus at His Father's behest: "For He shall save His people from their sins." His name already marked His servitude. At His birth the angels cried out to men: "Unto *you*." His acts were the enacted proclamation of the kingship of a King who ministers. His words were words of ministry: He is Life for the dead, Bread for the hungry, Light for those in darkness and the shadow of death, the Way and the Door by which men may come to God, the Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep, the Son of Man who gives His life a ransom for many. He says: "Come unto Me!" "Thy sins be forgiven thee!" Even in His preachment of repentance, particularly in that preachment, in His rebukes, in His disputes, in His crying of "Woe!" He serves. "I am among you as he that serveth."

In all this He was "savoring the things of God"; it is no accident that Jesus uses "Son of Man" *both* in His highest claims to divine glory, to divine Judgeship, to Godhead, and in His depiction of His humiliation — "The Son of Man hath not where to lay His head" — and the predictions of His Passion and death. In all this the Kingdom of God is drawing nigh, the Kingdom of a ministering and giving God. In all this God is revealing Himself. In all this the only-begotten Son was "declaring" God.

When the Son of Man revealed God, He also "revealed" man; for man was made in the image of God, and that image is restored to sons of men in the Son of Man who gave His life for us. Man's greatness lies where God's glory lies, where the glory of the Son of Man lies, in ministry. In ministry, in servitude, we are full sons of God again. There can therefore be no such thing as a contemplative theologian; how shall we commune with this God whom the restlessly ministering Son of Man has revealed to us and sit still? Isaiah saw the Lord high and lifted up; his lips were cleansed by God's own action, from God's own altar; and the Lord said: "Whom shall I send?" When God revealed His Son in Paul, He did so, St. Paul himself tells us, "that I might preach Him to the Gentiles."

St. John beheld a vision on Patmos, and the voice said: "Write to the seven churches." These theologians ministered.

If we think to take God's wisdom and let it rest within us, a treasure for ourselves alone; if we think to reduce His action to a conception, His mighty arm to a picture in a stained-glass window, His Word to a powerful and delightful rhetoric that we can have and hold and quietly enjoy, it will burn like fire in our bones and destroy us. All theologians are ministers, whatever their professional title may happen to be; they are servants and slaves.

Conversely, this makes theologians of all who serve for His name's sake, however "untheological" their servitude may be; for all such glorify their Father who is in heaven — and the glory of God is the end of all theology.

Amen

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