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Great Dangers Facing the Teacher and Preacher

Donald L. Deffner

A number of great dangers always confront the teacher and preacher. But chief among these are theological traps. In this article the focus is on several threats to sound biblical and confessional teaching and preaching. They are the following: (1.) synergism, or even making faith a work (preconditionalism); (2.) moralism, making morals an end in themselves; and (3.) confusing law and gospel.¹

A. Synergism

Synergism is the constant temptation which Satan offers each of us daily and is the classic heresy which Luther attacked in the Reformation. The term "syn-ergon" ("work together with") asserts that man does something in achieving his salvation. Whether it is fifty percent of the work or a "humbler" five percent, this false idea denies the truth—that we are totally dead in sin and our salvation is totally the gracious (which is to say, undeserved) work of God (in accord with Ephesians 2:8-9).

Of course, the teacher and preacher committed to the Lutheran Confessions avoids the false teaching of synergism. But the subtle trap is that many people hear what we say with "synergistic ears," or with a work-righteous mentality.² Merton Strommen's findings in *A Study of Generations* are shocking in this regard.³ Five thousand Lutherans were involved in the study. In a tabulation which the authors called "Salvation by Works," forty percent of the people interviewed agreed with the following statements:

Salvation depends on being sincere in whatever you believe.

The main emphasis of the gospel is on God's rules for right living.

God is satisfied if a person lives the best life he can.

If I say I believe in God and act right, I will get to heaven.

Although there are many religions in the world, most of them lead to the same God.

Clearly the one thread running through these fallacious statements

is a belief in salvation through our own good works, and not through faith in Christ alone. Evidently many Lutherans deny or, at least, do not understand that we are not made right with God by works of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ (in accord with Galatians 2:16-17). The danger, a subtle trap in teaching and preaching, is that we can inadvertently contribute to people responding "work-righteously."

For example, if we say that we are to "cooperate" with God in our Christian life, the inference may be drawn that *we* do as much work as Christ in us.⁴ Or if we say we should show our "gratitude" to God, a similar misunderstanding can occur. Etymologically "gratitude" is related to "grace." But in our common language today the word has a different meaning than originally. "Because he had us over to your house for dinner, we are going to have him over to ours—out of gratitude." In other words, we are going to pay him back. But we cannot pay God back anything. Our relationship with Him is unconditional. His forgiveness is a totally undeserved free gift. We cannot make anything up to Him.⁵

Even the word "renew" can be misunderstood. No one "renews" his baptism at confirmation. For it was the unilateral work of God which brought him to faith. No man can "renew" what was totally God's work. *God* does the "renewing."⁶

Nor does my profession of faith contribute synergistically to my becoming a member of Christ's church. Such an idea easily arises, however, from a misunderstanding of the pastoral welcome in the confirmation service of *Lutheran Worship*:

Upon this your profession and promise I invite and welcome you, as members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, . . . to share with us in all the gifts . . .⁷

The subtle danger here is preconditionalism, making faith a work. This was an insidious heresy at the time of the Reformation and persists today, especially among those in the Evangelical Movement. Following the lead of some television-evangelists, there is the tendency to understand faith as the decision of the believer. This tendency is nothing but a preoccupation with "my faith" rather than the *object* of faith, Christ and His atoning work in the gospel. The question of "How can I become a Christian?" erroneously stresses

the *active faith* in the Christian's life, rather than affirming the *pure receptivity* of faith.⁸ And hearers may try to find assurance of salvation, not on Christ's objective atonement, but on the quality or strength of their *own* faith—"as if justifying faith is something other than pure trust and receptivity."⁹

Robert D. Preus paints well the scenario of a botched evangelistic visit in which two people are trying to present the gospel to someone. One shares the good news in all its sweetness—the boundless grace of God for all sinners. To this the person being visited responds, "What a wonderful message for a poor old sinner!" But then the second visitor interrupts and says, "Wait—you have to *believe* this message! Everything my friend here has said is of no value to you unless you believe it." What has happened, then? Those statements intimate that justification depends on the man's faith, rather than his faith being a result of the gospel's work. It is as if one were making the appreciation of a beautiful sunset the basis of its beauty.¹⁰

Given the "synergistic ears" of many hearers, *any* kind of language that implies that "God has done His part . . . now we must do ours" must be eliminated from our teaching and preaching. Rather it is Christ who does all. "For *God* is always at work in you to make you willing and able to obey His own purpose" (Philippians 2:13, TEV).

B. Moralism

Moralism as another great danger is closely related to synergism. Here clear communication of the gospel is further complicated because of the similarity of five words:

morals
morality
moralism
moralize
moralistic

These words are, of course, closely related, but they diverge greatly in meaning. The first two words, properly contextualized, denote things which are compatible with biblical theology (unless as noted

below morals are taught as an end in themselves). The remaining terms, on the other hand, "moralism" and "moralize" and "moralistic," have referents which are incompatible with any biblical understanding of faith and life, are to be branded as such, and are to be avoided.¹¹

To recognize moralistic teaching, the beginning point must be a proper understanding of the biblical and confessional doctrine of sanctification.¹² The Christian life of good works, or sanctification, in the Augsburg Confession is not the work of mankind but the work of the Holy Spirit in Christians. Sanctification is, in fact, correctly seen as an extension of the work of Christ. As Luther always affirmed, the sinner has been transformed by Christ and is now in Christ. Thus, the life flowing from faith is a practicing christology in the world.

The "new creation" is not living under the law, but life in Christ Himself. Therefore, fear of God's wrath is never a motivation of works "which are pleasing to God as signs of faith and flowing from the Holy Spirit."¹³ The new synodical catechism (1991) makes a helpful addition to underscore this point when it speaks of the "third use of the law." The synodical catechism of 1943 had stated: "*Thirdly*, the Law teaches us Christians which works we must do to *lead a God-pleasing life*."¹⁴ The new catechism (under question 77) includes an additional sentence:

C. Third, the Law teaches us Christians what we should and should not do to lead a God-pleasing life (a guide). The power to live according to the Law comes from the gospel.¹⁵

The practical application of this addition is seen in Luther's treatment of the Ten Commandments. Many teachers do not go beyond negative prohibitions to positive descriptions of the Christian-empowered life by Christ and His work. The second commandment embraces an invitation to prayer. The third commandment evokes a loving response to God's word. The seventh commandment, not only fills us with fear when we steal, but also provides an opportunity to give.¹⁶ Happily the new exposition of the catechism uses the word "revere" to explain the word "fear" in relation to the

commandments.¹⁷

Christian life under the gospel is life in Christ Himself. Luther concludes the Ten Commandments with a statement which can only be addressed to those who already believe the gospel: "We should therefore love Him, trust Him, and cheerfully do what He has commanded."

In our teaching and preaching, at the same time, we do not proclaim the gospel's purpose as "the production of good works." The following lines summarize the case concisely:

Good works are preaching's *result*. Justification remains its only purpose. The gospel is a complete message in itself. Good works *result* from the preaching of the gospel, to be sure, but there can be no suggestion that the gospel is to be preached as if its ultimate and essential purpose were to bring them about. The gospel declares a completed atonement in Christ and shapes good works in the life of the Christian as a necessary reflection of God's love in Christ. The gospel is not an opportunity for reinstating the religion of the law.¹⁸

Moralism or moralistic teaching, by contrast, points to certain works, qualities, or virtues, which are to be achieved in and of themselves. It prescribes them as the *means* by which one lives the Christian life, rather than seeing them as the *result* of the gospel. Thereby even a call to faith can again become a work.

The language of moralism includes such incentives as "ought" and "should."¹⁹ Examples of moralism in the classroom would be the following: "When Jesus came to Mary and Martha's home, Mary wanted to hear God's word, and you should read your Bible to show your love for God's word, too." "The publican repented, and you should repent, too." Moralism has the same sound from the pulpit: "We ought to have more Sunday School teachers next year." "All of us need to come out and clean up the church on Saturday."

The fruits of faith in service are to be seen in the Christian life, to be sure. But they are motivated not by moralistic injunctions but by the gospel. We fail, but the power of the gospel does that in us

which we are unable to do.

Accordingly, in dealing with our Lord's humility, devotion, and obedience (in Hebrews 5:7-9), one could make this observation:²⁰

Now we are not just speaking of "virtues to emulate." That would be the evil of moralism. Moralism holds up certain *values* as *ideals* to follow, rather than seeing them as *consequences* of the gospel. . . . For Christ is not just "our example." He is rather prototype. He is the first fruits of those who believe in Him. Therefore we focus not on His humility, as a *precept* to follow, but on His *humiliation*—His sacrifice for us. For we fail totally. But through His death and resurrection we are forgiven and then called to the *fruits* of faith, empowered totally by the Holy Spirit. It is "Christ in me." Paul uses the phrase repeatedly in the New Testament . . .²¹

Moralism is demonic because it tells me to act rightly—but as a sinner I know I cannot do so. Only the gospel heartens me, for it tells me I am forgiven for my failure and points to the cross of Christ. Christ does that in me which I cannot do.²² As was noted in discussing the positive prescription of the Ten Commandments, it is not so much the *Christian* doing God's will as it is Christ. As Paul says: I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).²³

C. Confusing Law and Gospel

One not-so-final word remains to be said in this brief treatment of great dangers facing the teacher and preacher. The point has already been masterfully made in C. F. W. Walther's *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*. But that message needs to be learned over and over again in every generation by the church's communicators.

We confuse law and gospel when we let the hearers' needs determine our message. We are to address the needs of people, to be sure; but we must also declare to them what they need to hear. The word interprets the world, not vice versa.

We err when we teach gospel without law. This approach is followed by a noted television evangelist whose sermons and hymns make no reference at all to our sin or guilt, our need for forgiveness, or God's judgment. Indeed, there is no gospel either, only self-help by means of "possibility thinking."

We fail as teachers and preachers when we frighten them with threats of hell, but do not proclaim to them the gracious forgiveness of sins. The Greek word *eis* in Luke 24:46-48 is not to be translated "and" but "to": "This is the message to be preached to all nations . . . repentance *to* the forgiveness of sins." The law is announced *in order that* there may be repentance and the good news may be announced. In addition, "about" preaching is a common ailment of students in preaching classes. There is discussion *about* Christ, hope, peace, or the cross. All the right words are used, but the gospel is not proclaimed. Christ is never involved in the lives of the people. All the great classical Lutheran exegetes affirmed that the purpose of exegesis in preaching and teaching goes beyond *interpretation* to the *application* of the text to the daily lives of people.²⁴

Another problem is that even the wrong inflection of the voice can turn the gospel into law in practical terms. When a primary Sunday School teacher dismisses her class with a fiery "Remember now, children, God is a jealous God!" they not only miss the meaning of "jealous," but also fail to take home the picture of a God "showing mercy unto thousands of them that love" Him (Small Catechism, Close of the Commandments).

A recurring tendency, too, which confuses law and gospel is conditional teaching or preaching. Frequently we hear preachers say, "If you will do something, *then* God will do something." Lutheran proclamation, on the other hand, says "because" and "therefore."

Our invitation to the sinner rests not on something that God *might* do but on what He *has* done! "By grace you have been saved." God has finished the task of pulling mankind and Himself back together. It has been done *for us*. Now we are called to be what we are—forgiven, *gospel*-empowered Christians. Where this message is heard, there is only Christ and no synergism, no moralism, and no confusion of law and gospel.²⁵

Endnotes

1. A slightly differing form of this essay appeared in *Lutheran Education* (September-October 1991) and the publication here takes place by permission of the editors of *Lutheran Education*. It is this writer's conviction that the *greatest* danger facing the church today is universalism, but a consideration of that phenomenon would require a whole article in and of itself.
2. A distinction needs to be made between synergism and work-righteousness. In work-righteousness, man presents good works to God to earn his salvation. Synergism is more subtle. Man receives God's salvation through Christ, but now he seeks to "contribute something" with his good works. The quoted words are Francis Pieper's, whose critical discussion is particularly valuable; "The Synergists on the Means of Grace," *Christian Dogmatics*, III (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), pp. 122-125.
3. Merton Strommen, *A Study of Generations* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1972). There is a strong disparity between what Lutherans officially teach and what they actually believe. This disparity also appears in a representative sample of Lutherans completed in 1981, *Profiles of Lutherans* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1982). Sixty-seven percent of "mainline Christian" adults (including ELCA Lutherans) also affirm the statement: "I believe I must obey God's rules and commandments in order to be saved." Peter L. Benson and Carolyn H. Eklin, "Description and Implications of a National Study on Christian Education," *Issues in Christian Education* (Autumn 1990), p. 13.
4. See Colossians 1:27. The Lutheran Confessions, of course, speak of the regenerate man "cooperating" with the Holy Spirit, especially in Article II ("Free Will") of the Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord; Theodore S. Tappert, tr. and ed., *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), pp. 538-539 (see also Francis Pieper, III, p. 14). But if the word "cooperate" were ever used in a sermon, reference to the Holy Spirit would have to be added, so any unconverted visitor—or any Christian listening according to the Old Man—would not receive the impression that he could cooperate with God syner-

gistically. The danger would, even so, still remain that the word "cooperate" would be misunderstood. The Confessions note this danger: "But if this were to be understood as though the converted man cooperates alongside the Holy Spirit, the way two horses draw a wagon together, such a view could by no means be conceded without detriment to the divine truth" (Tappert, p. 534). The footnote on page 534 of Tappert also notes how the synergists employed 2 Corinthians 6:1 in the interests of their self-centered theology: "working together with Him."

5. See Georges Bernanos, *Diary of a Country Priest* (Doubleday Image Books, pp. 109-141). The dialogue between the priest and Mme. la Comtesse, who is trying to bargain with God to get back her dead child, is one of the most powerful pieces of theology in contemporary literature.
6. See Romans 6 and 1 Peter 3:21. Happily the word "renew" no longer appears in the rite of confirmation in *Lutheran Worship*, although there are still several misleading phrases in the service, (pp. 205-207). Much better is the "Affirmation of Baptism" in the *Lutheran Book of Worship* (p. 198). For an examination of this issue see Donald L. Deffner, "Youth Confirmation: A Lutheran Perspective," *Issues in Christian Education*, 24:2 (Summer 1990), p. 5.
7. *Lutheran Worship* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House), p. 207.
8. Robert D. Preus, "Perennial Problems in the Doctrine of Justification," *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, 45:3 (July 1981), p. 177. Luther likewise states: "Faith holds out the hand and the sack and just lets the good be done to it. For as God is the giver who bestows such things in His love, we are the receivers who receive the gift through faith which does nothing. For it is not our doing and cannot be merited by our work. It has already been granted and given. You need only open your mouth, or rather, your heart, and keep still and let yourself be filled" (WA, XI, 1104). Preus also notes: "How could the empty hand of the beggar, viewed as that which receives a priceless gift, move the benefactor to bestow the gift?" (p. 178).
9. *Ibid.* By way of illustration, we may imagine a man approaching a huge building on which are the words "The Holy Christian

Church." Over the entrance is a sign bearing a quotation from Scripture: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved." The man thinks, "Well, that makes sense to me. I read the Bible. I pray. I go to church. I will decide to become a Christian." And the man goes through the door. But once he is inside the building he sees another sign with a pivotal message: "It was only and totally by the grace of God that you entered here." And now the man sees, spiritually—with the eyes of faith, through the "spectacles of the Spirit"—that it was not he who came to God, but the *Holy Spirit* who called him "by the gospel" (Small Catechism, Explanation of the Third Article). "You have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you," says our Lord (John 15:16). See also 1 Corinthians 2:14 in the paraphrase of J. B. Phillips.

10. See Preus, p. 179. The danger of making faith a condition for justification is as old as the church itself. See C. F. W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, tr. W. H. T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1929), chapter 25. For a stark contrast to the evangelistic scenario described here see Dr. Hulda Hohenstein's approach to an agnostic on the Alpine train in "The Long Dark Tunnel" in Donald L. Deffner, *The Compassionate Mind: Theological Dialog with the Educated* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1990), p. 91.
11. Even after several hours of class discussion of these concepts, a homiletics student has told me: "But, professor, in the moralistic part of my sermon isn't it allowable to use these words?"
12. See especially David P. Scaer, "Sanctification in Lutheran Theology," *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, 49 (April-June 1985), pp. 181-185; "Sanctification in the Lutheran Confessions," *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, 53 (July 1989), pp. 165-181. Reprints are available in the Bookstore of Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne.
13. Scaer, 1985, p. 185.
14. *The Small Catechism* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1943), p. 86.
15. *An Explanation of the Small Catechism* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1991), question 77.

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16. These facts do not eliminate the law for the Christian, for he needs its threats to curb the Old Adam. But "the Christian in Christ is now free from the law" (Scaer, 1989, pp. 17). "Good works flow from the gospel and not the law" (Scaer, 1989, p. 173). "The Christian or sanctified life is christological, first of all because Christ lives in us by faith; secondly it is Christ who is doing these works in us; and thirdly these works are clearly recognizable as those which Christ alone can do and which He in fact does in us" (Scaer, 1989, p. 177). See also Article VI ("Third Use of the Law") of the Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord, pp. 565 (paragraphs 10-12) and 567 (paragraphs 22-23).
 17. *Small Catechism*, 1991, question 22A.
 18. Scaer, 1985, p. 194. In the later article (1989) Scaer notes the error that arises when less attention is paid to justification than to sanctification, which then deteriorates into moralism (p. 165). Once sanctification is the *goal*, it can be *measured* and work-righteousness again intrudes (p. 166). But good works naturally flow from the teaching and preaching of justification, rather than forming a distinct compartment of the Christian life. "The sinner is not first justified by the preaching of Christ and then sanctified subsequently by some sort of admonitions to do good works. No, not at all! The preaching of the gospel in the moment that it is preached justifies the sinners and makes him abound in good works (p. 169).
 19. In discussing the obligation of the regenerated man to do good works, the Lutheran Confessions state: "In this sense the words "necessary," "ought," and "must" are correctly and in a Christian way applied to the regenerated and are in no way contrary to the pattern of sound words and terminology" (Tappert, p. 476, paragraph 9). But in preaching or teaching these words can easily sound like the language of the law. And the next paragraph (Tappert, p. 476, paragraph 10) clearly states that a word like "necessary" does not involve "coercion or compulsion of the law" but a "spontaneous spirit." The question is whether we should use words which can so easily be misunderstood?
 20. See John T. Pless, "Martin Luther: Preacher of the Cross," *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, 51:2-3 (April-July 1987) p. 96, where he observes that in the maturing Luther Christ "is no

longer seen as the pattern one must imitate to gain salvation. Rather, Christ is pure gift; all that He has achieved by His vicarious suffering and death belong to the Christian through faith alone." He quotes these words of Luther: "The devil has the victory if we take Christ's doctrine for law and His life for example . . . The gospel is not the preaching of Christ as example, but proclaiming Him as a gift."

21. Donald L. Deffner, "How Do People Know You Are a Christian?" unpublished manuscript. My kudos go to Richard Lischer for some insights in this paragraph gleaned from his *A Theology of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), p. 63. That book is out of print, but there is a reissue of the volume by the Labyrinth Press, Fall, 1991.
22. When a young man came to our Lord and asked what he should "do" to inherit eternal life, He summarized the two tables of the law and said "this do and thou shalt live." The Lord could have added: "if you can!"
23. See note 10 above.
24. For some of the insights in this latter section plaudits are again due to Richard Lischer, *A Theology of Preaching*, pp. 49-65.
25. For an outstanding monograph treating the above issues and much more see Earl Gaulke, "Effective Christian Education: Biblical Perspectives," *Issues in Christian Education*, 24:3 (Autumn 1990), p. 6. The Board for Parish Services of the LCMS also provides some excellent resources dealing with the issues noted above. See "Principles of Christian Education for the Local Parish as Expressed in Christian Education Materials of the Board for Parish Services" (\$4.50, S08398); "Instrument for Evaluating Religious Curricular Materials and Resources" (\$3.50, S08477); and "The Heart of It all: Proper Distinction of Law and Gospel in Teaching" (\$3.00, S08560). All are available from Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, Missouri.