

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL QUARTERLY



Volume 63: Number 1

January 1999

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A Case of Identity: Reflections on the Church's Preaching in the Modern World

Charles Hughes

"Who am I? They mock me,
these lonely questions of mine.
I am, thou knowest,
O God, I am thine."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Who am I? There is perhaps no question of more compelling interest to modern man than that of his own individual identity.

It is a question to which our secular culture offers many possible answers. Christianity, of course, has its own answer to the question of human identity, and it is the Christian answer, as expressed in Lutheran preaching, that I would like to consider here.

The purpose of Lutheran preaching is to assure its hearers that they are purchased children of God—that they have been ransomed from the captivity of sin by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and, through faith, will be the beneficiaries of God's promise of eternal salvation.¹ Martin Luther himself, in his work *Christian Liberty*, urged the preaching of "why Christ came, what he brought and bestowed, [and] what benefit it is to us to accept him."²

Certainly, the truth of this joyous message needs no confirmation from any human source; it is proclaimed by God in Holy Scripture and has always characterized the unique

¹See, for example, F. C. Rossow, "The New Obedience," *The Lutheran Witness* (July 1995): 12-14, especially 13: "Our salvation is 100 percent complete and certain the moment God declares us righteous on account of Christ. We're in."

²Martin Luther, *Christian Liberty*, translated by W. Lampert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 20.

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Lutheran witness within Christianity. It is, in Luther's words from another context, the "purest gospel."³ Nevertheless, it is my purpose to level a criticism—a criticism not (heaven forbid) of this gospel message of hope and salvation, but of the preaching of the church, insofar as it stops with the delivery of this message and goes no further. For there is, I think, a sober and essential corollary to the good news of salvation by grace through faith. When this corollary is omitted from the church's preaching, Christians may receive an incomplete (and, to that extent, false) idea of who they are, and the eternal peril to which we all are subject may be increased.

The essential corollary to the gospel message of Christ's saving work is an explicit recognition of the spiritual context in which the believer finds himself in this world. Although God, through Jesus Christ, has opened to us the very gates of heaven, the majority of Christians are not, at any given moment, standing at those gates. We have a life to live in this world, a road to travel here, a race to run. And we have the clear assurance of Scripture (John 16:33; Acts 14:22), not to mention the teaching of our own experience, that our journey through this world will not be an easy one, but will, as the hymn says, be filled with "dangers, toils and snares." As our Lord Himself, when He had assumed human form, was subject to the temptations of Satan, so are we too. We are, therefore, always subject to the possibility of succumbing to the particular temptations with which we are faced and turning away from the faith given to us by God. It is this that needs to be acknowledged by the preaching of the church, in order that believers may be prepared and strengthened against the time of testing. If Saint Peter, within hours after telling Jesus that he would rather die than desert Him, could then deny his Lord three times, how confident can any of us be that we too will not fall away?

³Martin Luther, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, translated by J. Mueller (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1976), xiii (referring to the whole of the Epistle).

The spiritual reality for all of us, while we live in this world, is that we are the subject of a struggle of eternal proportions between the powers of heaven and hell, with each human soul as the prize. "[W]e are not contending against flesh and blood," says Saint Paul, "but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12). This is the reality that occasioned Saint Peter's warning, "Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8). Commenting on Peter's words, Martin Luther writes that Satan "is not a thousand miles from you, but encircles you and stands by your side, so close to you that he cannot come closer . . ." ⁴ Satan "does not pass before your eyes when you are armed against him," warns Luther, "but looks out before and behind you, within and without, where he may attack you . . . that he may cause you to fall." ⁵

Jesus' own teaching sought to prepare His followers against the spiritual dangers they would face in the world. Repeatedly, He enjoined them to watch and be ready for His coming again, stressing the need for constant vigilance in their earthly lives no less than His promised return. "Watch . . . for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming" (Matthew 24:42). If the foolish maidens had known when the bridegroom was coming, they would have been prepared with their lamps and would not have been shut out of the marriage feast. But they did not know and were not ready (Matthew 25: 1-12). "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour" (Matthew 25:13). And again, "you . . . must be ready; for the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect." (Matthew 24:44). These injunctions to watchfulness and preparation would hardly have been necessary were our spiritual risk not great, and they are of supreme relevance to us all, whether the Second Coming occurs in our lifetimes or not. To paraphrase a remark of C. S. Lewis,

⁴Martin Luther, *Commentary on the Epistles of Peter & Jude*, translated by J. Lenker (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1982), 224.

⁵Luther, *Peter & Jude*, 223.

what the Second Coming is to the whole human race, death is to each individual person.⁶

If, then, our spiritual lives are fraught with such danger, the unmistakable implication is that the church's preaching must be directed, in significant part, to warning believers against the danger and preparing them to face it. Every person, everyone in church on Sunday morning, is on the road either to heaven or to hell. John Henry Newman once concluded a sermon with this description of the inescapable reality that each of us faces: "Life is short; death is certain; and the world to come is everlasting."⁷ We are not to be anxious about our lives in this world (Matthew 6:25). Given the spiritual dangers we face, however, we are to "work out . . . [our] own salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12). Saint Paul's instruction to Timothy to "preach the word" and "be urgent in season and out of season" is, in this light, hardly surprising (2 Timothy 4:2).

Now what if all that has been said so far is true? What if believers are, in fact, in constant spiritual danger while they live in this world, and what if, this being so, the church has a responsibility to do all it can to safeguard them? What does this mean, in specific terms, for the church's preaching?

For one thing, it must mean the obvious, that the danger must be told. Through its preaching, the church must tell its people what it knows about the "wiles of the devil" that continually threaten their spiritual welfare (Ephesians 6:11). To judge from His teaching as recorded in the Gospels, this was not a subject that Jesus felt might be given too much emphasis. Similarly, the church should not shrink from reminding its members that "the days are evil" and warning them that they must "keep alert" to the end that they may "withstand in the evil day" (Ephesians 5:16; 6:18, 13).

There is also, I believe, another means by which the church can give practical help to believers in preserving their faith:

⁶C. S. Lewis, "The World's Last Night," in *The World's Last Night and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1960), 110.

⁷John Henry Newman, "Watching," in *John Henry Newman: Selected Sermons*, edited by I. Ker (New York: Paulist Press, 1995), 278.

namely, by the preaching of obedience to God's commands. Now such obedience, whether as a subject for the church's preaching or as an object of an individual believer's life, doubtless needs no other justification than that it is God's will for us all.⁸ Still, a preaching emphasis on obedience may strike some as "un-Lutheran," and some explanation of what I mean is, therefore, perhaps in order.⁹

If the church is to emphasize obedience to God in its preaching, what precisely is it to say? The question may be a deceptively simple one. Our inclination, when considering obedience, may be to think immediately of the Great Commandment to love "God with all your heart" and "your neighbor as yourself" and to stop there (Matthew 22:37, 39). After all, Jesus Himself said that all the law and the prophets depend on these two commandments (Matthew 22:40). In preaching obedience, however, it is important that the church go further, not only in the sense of extrapolating from the Great Commandment itself and trying to apply its lofty terms to our lives, but also by distilling those terms into more basic elements. Speaking personally, the Great Commandment at times seems too high and remote a standard, given my own spiritual condition, and, accordingly, sometimes does not seem to speak directly to me. Spiritually, as well as physically, we must walk before we can run. If the focus of the church's preaching on obedience is limited to the Great Commandment, many believers may be left where they were found, feeling that God's one commandment that really matters does not apply to them in any concrete way.

The preaching of obedience must begin at a more basic level, emphasizing aspects of the Christian life that are "closer to

⁸See the Augsburg Confession, Article XX: "It is also taught among us that good works should and must be done, not that we are to rely on them to earn grace but that we may do God's will and glorify him." *The Book of Concord*, translated and edited by T. G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 45.

⁹One may see, for example, Rossow, "The New Obedience," 12: "We may feel uneasy when we hear a pastor or teacher encouraging good works; we may think it's 'un-Lutheran' for them to do so."

home" for most believers. God certainly has not left us without instruction of this more basic kind. Christians should read the Bible, for "[a]ll scripture is inspired by God and profitable" (2 Timothy 3:16). Christians should make prayer a regular part of their daily lives; we should "pray constantly" (1 Thessalonians 5:16). Christians should "not be conformed to this world" but should live differently, always striving to do "more and more," so as to "command the respect of outsiders," "in order that in everything God may be glorified" (Romans 12:2; 1 Thessalonians 4:10,12; 1 Peter 4:11). This we are to do by obedience to the Ten Commandments, not relaxing even "one of the least of these" (Matthew 5:19). Whatever our work happens to be, we are to do it "as serving the Lord," not primarily for material gain, since "if we have food and clothing, with these we shall be content" (Colossians 3:23; 1 Timothy 6:8). "[A]s we have opportunity," we are to "do good to all men," practicing "hospitality ungrudgingly to one another" (Galatians 6:10; 1 Peter 4:9). And all that we do is to be borne of "faith, hope, [and] love" and done "in humility," so that we "count others better than" ourselves (1 Corinthians 13:13; Philippians 2:3).

These are some of the precepts that God, in His Word, has made it incumbent upon Christians to obey. They, and others like them, are worthy subjects of the church's preaching, solely insofar as they are duties that a fallen humanity not only does not perform, but often does not even acknowledge. The point I am making in the present context, however, is that, by urging obedience to such precepts in its preaching, the church can help prepare believers for the testing of their faith that they will encounter in this world. How can this occur? In the space that remains, I will attempt to say how I believe the preaching of obedience can have this effect.

Before addressing this issue, however, let me pause to be clear as to certain things I am not saying. I am, of course, not saying that any person, other than Jesus Himself, has ever obeyed God perfectly or ever can. With Saint Paul, we must confess that, "None is righteous, no, not one" (Romans 3:10). Nor am I saying that any amount of good works can merit eternal salvation from

God. We are "unworthy servants" even if we have done "all that is commanded" (Luke 17:10). It may nevertheless appear that, by suggesting the preaching of obedience as a means of helping believers to prepare for the trials they must face, I am also suggesting that it is within the power of the individual believer to contribute to his own salvation, when all the glory belongs to God alone. But this also I am emphatically not saying. We are taught by Saint Paul that the Holy Spirit dwells in all believers (Romans 8:9,11; 1 Corinthians 6:19). Therefore, if by obedience the believer is enabled, in some degree, to protect his faith against temptation, are we not compelled to say that his obedience, to no less an extent than his faith, is the work of the Holy Spirit? Given our imperfect capacity of understanding, obedience may seem to us in the attempt as something we ourselves are doing, but that does not make it so. As Martin Luther has said, with respect to the power given by God to believers: "It is the power that serves us in securing eternal life and in godly living here. . . . And that power is with us and in us in a way that what we speak and work, we do not do, but God himself does it."¹⁰

How is it, then, that the preaching of obedience by the church can help preserve believers in their faith? That it can, in fact, do so should come as no surprise, in light of our Lord's parable of the house built on rock (Matthew 7:24-27; Luke 6:47-49) and Saint Paul's teaching that "godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come" (1 Timothy 4:8). But how is this effect achieved?

In considering this question, it is perhaps best to start with an examination of our own spiritual lives. In my own case, upon such examination, one thing I find is that my loyalties are divided. I love God, but I must confess that I love the world, too. If I am honest, I find that I have an abiding desire for the world's attractions: its comforts and ease, its honors and praise; and I find, also, that, because I love these worldly things, my tendency is to want to remove any obstacles in the way of their attainment and, accordingly, to limit my commitment to God.

¹⁰Luther, *Peter & Jude*, 240.

I want to have it both ways, so to speak—to be a Christian, but at the same time not to let my Christianity interfere with my worldly ambitions. My inclination is to be a “taxpayer Christian”: in matters of faith, as with filing my tax returns, I want to pay the minimum that is required, and not a penny more.¹¹

This spiritual condition of divided loyalties, which I have been describing as my own, is, I suspect, a common one among Christians. And the essential point, for present purposes, is that it is not a safe one. Our divided loyalties are dangerous, precisely because they impair our ability to heed Jesus’ repeated warnings that we must be watchful in our earthly lives, always looking out for His coming again, “lest . . . [our] hearts be weighed down with . . . cares of this life, and that day come upon . . . [us] suddenly like a snare” (Luke 21:34). A soldier at his post can hardly keep alert, if he is fraternizing with civilians, much less if he is fraternizing with the enemy. Jesus’ own words could not be more clear: “You cannot serve God and mammon” (Matthew 6:24).

Now it is with the problem of our spiritually divided loyalties that I believe obedience can help—even obedience that will surely be far less than perfect. It can probably go without saying among Lutherans that, by attempting obedience, we learn to what extent we are sinners. What does need to be said, I think, is that, by attempting obedience, we can also learn to want to be saints; and the desire for holiness, once kindled within us, will itself produce that watchfulness so urgently enjoined by Jesus Christ, for the sake of all believers, and afford to us the spiritual protection that He graciously intended us to have by this means.

It is true that we are children of a fallen race and that a love of holiness does not seem to come naturally to us. But our sinful nature is not “original” with us at all: sin was originally no part of our first ancestors; we were created in God’s image, and He “has put eternity into man’s mind” (Ecclesiastes 3:11). Although

¹¹See C. S. Lewis, “A Slip of the Tongue,” in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, edited by W. Hooper (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1980): 129, from which the analogy of the taxpayer is derived.

we have since fallen, we have, through Christ's death and resurrection, been made "dead to sin and alive to God . . ." to "walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:11, 4). We should not, therefore, be content to pursue the world's attractions. We should instead set our sights much higher—on the things of heaven for which we were made, remembering that we are only "strangers and exiles on the earth" and that "our commonwealth is in heaven" (Hebrews 11:13; Philipians 3:20).

Love of holiness, then, is natural to us in a way that our love for the world can never be. But, just as we must first study the grammar of a language before we can love its poetry, so in spiritual things we must begin by earnestly trying to obey God at the most basic level. When we do so, we will begin, by His help, to realize, with the Psalmist, that "the ordinances of the Lord" are "[m]ore to be desired . . . than gold" (Psalm 19:9-10). We will begin to love the riches for which God has made us and to find that His treasure is our heart's desire.

In this way, obedience can give us the singleness of mind and purpose that is essential if we are to watch and be ready in our earthly lives, as Jesus has instructed us to be. In this way we also will be prepared, by God's grace, to face what we must in this world and to persevere in our faith to the end. The question of ultimate importance turns out to be, not who we are, but whose. By the mercy of God, we are His, and this obedience can help us to know.

Who am I? Amidst the confusion of the many answers offered by the world, it is Christianity that holds the one true answer, and it is the church that has been called to proclaim this truth. In an age of "mega-churches," when marketing techniques are confused by some with theology and the cross is removed from nominally Christian sanctuaries to avoid giving offense, the church at large may perhaps experience an identity crisis of its own. In such an age, it must be the prayer of all believers that the church will remain true to its calling to feed the flock of the Good Shepherd and bring His sheep home in the end to Him. This solemn responsibility, it has been my purpose to suggest, can most effectively be carried out only if the church gives a prominent place in its preaching to telling believers not just who

they are in God's sight at a given moment in time, but also where they find themselves—to a description of the real and constant dangers confronting believers in the world and to the most practical help possible for protecting their faith against these dangers. Stressing the importance of obedience to God in our individual lives is one way in which I believe the church can provide this kind of help.

Needless to say, this message will not always find a receptive audience. Yet, though the church may sometimes feel itself to be weak, by worldly standards, as compared to the strong secularizing tendencies of this present time, it can confidently proclaim the truth entrusted to it, resting (like Saint Paul) on our Lord's blessed assurance: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9).