

ON USING THE WORD OF GOD¹

Dr. Koren's Last Synodical Address, 1909

A good friend wrote me last winter and, referring to the fact that I had called my Synodical Address of last year “my testament to the Synod,” asked if I ought not add a codicil to my testament. As I understood him, he had in mind a supplement treating of the distortion of doctrine, which so often confuses people. I considered whether I should add anything to what I said last year, but found that if I should do so, then it ought to deal, not with the *doctrine* of the word of God, but rather with the *use* of that word. For I concluded the address which I delivered at the Synod, concerning Holy Scripture as the word of God, by saying: “If we are to be permitted to keep it, we must use it.” So this is what I intend to speak about at this time, presenting as well as I can a few simple and straightforward warnings against various common abuses of God’s word.

To have the word of God among us is the first requirement, if we are to be Christians. But that alone does not profit us. The word of God says of the people of the Old Covenant that “the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it” (Heb. 4:2).² This (to have a true faith), then, must be our aim, if the word is to profit us.

Why do we gather congregations? Why do we call and support ministers and professors? Is it just because we are accustomed to having the word of God among us, and because we think that it is seemly to have a proper churchly order, with the preaching of the word of God and the administration of the Sacraments? Is it because we know that Christians have always had such order among them, and because we, who also call ourselves Christians, must therefore see to it that we have such order too? If that is all we wish, it certainly would not be worth while.

No, if we really are Christians in the Scriptural sense, it is because we have actually come to Christ and to faith in Him; from this again, it follows that we will gladly help to draw others also to Him and to faith in Him, in order that both we, ourselves and others with us may be enabled to abide in Him. This demands all our effort and all our attention. If this is not the purpose, then all our institutions and our churches, with what belongs to them, are meaningless or even worse: – false pretenses; for we *say* that this is what we want.

However, nothing is easier and of more frequent occurrence than that we sink into a careless habit which forgets the aim and lets itself be satisfied with the mere form. If we do this, the reason is that we have not considered seriously, much less, realized, what the word of God is. If we try to explain what it really is, we shall find ourselves overwhelmed by the thought of its greatness. For the word of God must be the expression or revelation of the thoughts of God and of the will of God. Hence, God’s word must be infallible as God Himself. It must be as unchangeable as God Himself. Heaven and earth shall pass away, but God’s word abides forever. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so must the thoughts of God, and hence His word, be higher than our thoughts and words. The world was made by it and is preserved by it.

From the word of God there can be no appeal. “That every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God” (Rom. 3:19). Jesus says: “If I had not come and

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² [The Bible passages have been updated using the *New King James Version*.]

spoken to them, they would have no sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin" (John 15:22).

The word of God, then, is a real thing. All that belongs to Christianity is practical. Nothing is merely theory and speculation. This condemns all Pharisaism which lets itself be satisfied with external forms. There are many kinds of Pharisaism, and we must not think that we are not exposed to contagion or that we are not, perhaps, already infected by it. "Tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you," says Jesus to the Pharisees, that is, to those who let themselves be satisfied with mere outward forms. It is the cleansing of the heart that is the important thing. For "out of the heart of men proceed evil thoughts" (Mark 7:21). Our thoughts take place in the soul, and they are just as real as the works that are done in and by the body.

Now when the real value and content of the word of God is forgotten, only the sound of it or the shell remains. But Jesus says: "The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life" (John 6:63). Let us, then, consider some of the most familiar words of Scripture which we must use and hear used oftenest, and see how the value is taken out of them, so that only the sound or the shell is left.

Take, for example, the word "repentance." According to its concept, repentance is one of the most powerful emotions in the heart. Where it is really present, it will force a person either to seek reconciliation and forgiveness or it will drive him to despair. But when, as is often the case, the value, the true import is taken out of the word, while the word itself still is retained, then it becomes but an indifferent acknowledgement of the fact that we all are sinners, that we all are imperfect, etc.... One may make this confession without serious concern, without a troubled heart, and consequently without feeling the need of forgiveness and without seeking to gain forgiveness. There will, therefore, be no longing for the Savior, nor any faith in the Savior either.

The word "faith" also is often used without the content which Scripture puts into it. According to its essence, faith is a living conviction in the heart, a sincere, confident trust in what God has said and promised in His word, a power which brings peace and joy, and which impels men to action or to bearing fruit. Faith cannot be without fruit. It must manifest itself; for where it is present, it is a governing power, so that it changes a person's whole manner of life.

But when the essence of faith is changed and weakened, so that there remains merely an indifferent assent to the word, without personal appropriation of what God has said and promised, then the kernel of faith is gone, and only the shell remains. This kind of faith, dead faith, is never troubled by temptations and trials. Those who have it will not experience any spiritual conflicts and affliction because of their faith. But conflict always accompanies faith when it is genuine. Satan and the old Adam see to that.

Repentance and faith come together in that change of heart which the word of God calls "conversion," and which we find presented nowhere more clearly than in the Book of Acts, Chapter 2, — unless it be in the parable of the Prodigal Son. But then, as stated above, it must be genuine repentance and faith, and not an imitation which consists merely in empty phrases. There is something that is described as "half-conversion" and is called "awakening." Such a state has no basis in the word of God. The awakening voice of God speaks thus: "Awake, you who sleep, arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light" [Eph. 5:14]. Where Christ is not present, there is neither whole nor half conversion.

If one believes that his house is on fire, he does not sit quietly as if there were nothing wrong. If he cannot put out the fire himself, he will seek aid. If a person is in need and in danger, he will seek to be rescued. If he sees that he cannot save himself, he will seek refuge

where he thinks it can be found. If one is poor and helpless, it may, indeed happen that he will give up in despair. But if he really wants help, and he is told that somewhere there is abundant and willing help to be found, yes, that there is even a desire to help him, then he will surely go there. If he cannot go himself, he will send for help. If he seeks help from God, he will implore Him for it.

The same is true also in the case of hope. Hope is the expectation of a blessing which has been promised. A person says that he hopes he will be saved. If we consider the different persons who say that they have this hope, we will sometimes find those who do not even think of such a thing as salvation, much less hope to attain salvation, in the Biblical sense of the term. This shows itself by this that a man does not take care to walk the way which leads to salvation. Spiritually speaking, such a person is content to remain where he is, even if he is without God and without hope in the world. The kernel of the word is gone, and only the shell remains.

According to the word of God, one of the distinguishing marks of a Christian is love. There is no one, indeed, who wants to be called a Christian, who will not acknowledge and agree to this. But what do we ordinarily find among those who agree to it? That the content of the word is gone and only the shell remains. We are warned against letting ourselves be satisfied with such a mere shell, when the word of God says: "My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth." (I John 3:18). To love in word and tongue only is to keep the shell and not pay attention to the kernel. The kernel in love is described in I Cor. 13:4-7, which shows us that love is long-suffering and kind; that it does not envy, does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely and does not seek its own; it is not easily provoked, thinks no evil, but bears, believes, hopes and endures all things. For love learns more and more from our Lord Christ, who Himself is Love. If we want to learn to love our neighbor, we must consider how we love ourselves; for it is in that same way we are to love our neighbor,—just as sincerely, as willingly, as fervently, as assiduously, as indulgently, as constantly and perseveringly. That is how the Lord also loves us. How would it go with us otherwise?

The word of God constantly exhorts us, over and over again, to be humble. Why shall we strive to be humble? Because the truth demands it. What are we? Of ourselves we are as nothing before God, and moreover we are sinners who deserve no praise. "For if anyone thinks himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself" (Gal. 6:3). And, "if anyone thinks that he knows anything, he knows nothing yet as he ought to know" (I Cor. 8:2). If anyone believes himself to be something, it is pride. And when he still desires to be looked up to by men as being "somebody," it is vanity. True humility is very rare. What is it that too often is substituted for humility? Humble airs and phrases, such as the proud and vainglorious Pharisees used over against our Lord Christ.

Another of the most important admonitions which our Saviour directed to us is this: "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness" (Matt. 6:33). And one of the most glorious promises is: "he who seeks finds" (Matt. 7:8).

But how are these words of God often used? In such a way as to imitate the language of God, repeat the words, say yes to them, but at the same time take the value out of them, so that only the sound and the shell are left. Just as some say: "Ah yes, we must hope," so some say also: "Ah yes, we must seek!" But does everyone who speaks that way really seek? No, not at all. What is it to seek? It is to want to find. Nobody seeks something except with the purpose of trying to find it. Everyone who actually seeks something knows what it is he wants to find. There is none who seeks something in just a general way without knowing what he wants to find. He may quit seeking, but that happens either because he has found it, or because he no

longer cares to find it, or because he has given up hope of finding it. But so long as he seeks—whatever it is—it is because he is eager to find it and hopes to find it. This is true also of the continued seeking; for he who has once found the kingdom of God and His righteousness will continue to seek it daily, because he needs it each day. But a great many of those who admit that we should seek first the kingdom of God do not seek it in reality. They do not seek the kingdom of God any more than they seek to become the emperor of China. The one is no more important to them than the other.

I have spoken here of this that the kernel of many leading Scripture passages is left unnoticed while men let themselves be satisfied with the shell. Is it not true also with our assembling for what we call “divine services,” that the *form* becomes the essential thing, while the contents remain unnoticed? What shall we pastors consider ourselves to be, according to the word of God? St. Paul gives us the answer in those well-known words in II Cor. 5[:20]: “Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ’s behalf, be reconciled to God.” We must recognize that this is our task. We must endeavor to fulfill it and keep it ever before our eyes. We are called to the ministry of reconciliation. If we do not try to fulfill it with all diligence and faithfulness, then we are not what we pretend to be. But if we are not what we represent ourselves as being: “Ambassadors of Christ,” then we become but actors, as the poet says:

“A pastor *sans* piety is but actor at heart.
 If men think he’s pious, he’s played well his part;
 If his true self’s revealed, he has played out of kind.
 But a truly good actor’s not easy to find.”

If the kernel of this word: “Ambassadors in Christ’s stead” is in our hearts, then we will think as Luther did when he wrote this prayer: “Lord God! Thou hast set me to be pastor and teacher in Thy church. Thou seest how unfit I am properly to carry out this great and burdensome office. If Thou hadst not counselled me, I would long ago have ruined it all. Therefore I call upon Thee. For I would gladly lend and bend my mouth, my tongue and my heart to the task. I wish to teach the people, I also myself wish ever to learn, to make use of Thy word and to consider it diligently. Use me as Thy instrument! But, dear Lord, do not leave me! For if I should be left alone, I would easily get to ruining it all.”

And our Christian congregations, as many of them as want to deserve that name, should be able, deliberately, to repeat the words with which Cornelius, of whom we read in Acts, Chapter 10, greeted Peter: “Now therefore, we are all present before God, to hear all the things commanded you by God” (v. 33).

If our church-goers will partake in the use of the word and sacraments with this mind, then the blessing will come on them as surely as it came on Cornelius and his friends by the speech of Peter. And like the word, the sacraments also will be to them a means of grace, through which God gives and hands to them the grace and the gifts which our Lord Jesus Christ has earned for us.

The rite of baptism will remind them of their own baptism. It is only human thoughtlessness when we look upon our own baptism as something that took place so long ago, that we seem to have no more use for it. We should learn to understand that before God it is as if we were baptized today. We have, indeed, learned to say that “the covenant stands on God’s side,” but few consider that this is just the same as if God had taken us into His covenant today so that He wants us now to appropriate His promises in baptism, as if they were given us today; and therefore we should regard ourselves as the children of God and confidently renew our baptismal covenant which is faith in the grace of the Triune God, which also gives us power to

renounce the devil and all his works. But how many there are for whom the value of baptism is gone, so that they have only the shell left!

Thus it goes only all too often with the sacrament of the altar. Our Lord Jesus has told us what the purpose with it should be: "Do this in remembrance of me!" [Luke 22:19; I Cor. 11:24, 25]. How abundantly have we not experienced our need of it! St. Paul says of himself: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me" (Gal. 2:20). There are not many who have come that far. Is it not strange that Paul finds it necessary to say even to his great co-worker Timothy: "Remember that Jesus Christ...was raised from the dead" (II Tim. 2:8). If the Holy Spirit found it necessary to speak these words by Paul to Timothy, what must it not be necessary to say to us! Our Lord Jesus knew our need, when He said: "Do this in remembrance of me."

How many there are of those who bear the Christian name, to whom Jesus Christ is but an historical name of a far distant person or, if they have the so-called "historic faith," of the far-off Son of God, who sits at the right hand of the Father in heaven. What else does this become than the shell of God's word, while the kernel and the value are gone! He said: "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" [Matt. 28:20]. His presence is manifested most clearly, and in the manner expressed in the words of institution, in the Lord's Supper. He wants to be remembered by us as a living, real and present person, just as really present as the pastor who serves at the altar, and the guests who kneel by our side,—as the words in the address to the communicants express it. He is just as really present as these are, and He has the same fervent love for us that He had for His first disciples, when He instituted the Sacrament.

When the word of God is read from the pulpit, we say in the words of Jesus in his high-priestly prayer: "Holy Father, sanctify us by Your truth. Your word is truth!" [Jn. 17:17]. But how many there are who say, indeed, that they believe the word of God is truth, but who in their conduct show that they do not believe it! If they believed what God says about sin, about salvation, about the means of grace, about prayer, about the second coming of Christ and about Judgment,—if they believed that all this is the truth, then they would live accordingly. When, for example, the word of God says that every tree which brings not forth good fruit is hewn down and cast into the fire, would one who really believed this be easy-going and indifferent as to whether he brought forth good fruits, or even bore evil fruits? If he is indifferent, then this shows that he does not at all believe that this word is truth, even if he says that he believes it.

We confess that the word of God shall be "the only sure and perfect rule and guide for our faith and our life." Do we know this rule so well, and are we so practiced in it, that we do not need to be on our guard? Many a one will say: "I am not learned, and there are many things in Scripture which I do not understand." But if there is something that you do understand, do you guide your course by it? And do we not have a brief and easily understood summary of the truths of God's word in our little Catechism? What shining and happy Christians would we not be, if we used that book as the rule and guide for our faith and our life! It is, we know, the chief words in Holy Writ which are summarized in that little book! But if we are to use it right, we must let the words keep their value, their full meaning, and not let ourselves be satisfied with the shell or with merely repeating the words with our lips.

St. James compared the word to a mirror (James 1:23). We shall look into this mirror and look in such a way that we find out how we appear spiritually in the light of the truth. But then it is essential in the first place that we do not at once forget how we look, and in the next place that we do not merely look at the mirror and talk about it, and perhaps praise it, and spread ourselves in panegyrics over what a glorious mirror it is after all!

There are many, both pastors and hearers, who have misused the word in the ways I have here recounted and in many other ways. But there have been, and are also now, people who have used it both rightly and diligently, although not all of these either have used it as faithfully as they should. One of those who used it best was our dear Church-father Luther. But listen now to how even he must complain about himself in this matter, and that, toward the close of his life:

It is a shameful thing and something to be bewailed and lamented, that we are so perfectly lazy and so given to somnolence, that we value such great gifts (as God's revelation in the New Testament) so little, and are so sleepy with regard to them. The disgraceful, damnable sin which always clings to us and makes us sluggish produces the result that we do not put our trust in God, and do not praise and thank Him with such diligence, warmth and wonder as the greatness of the matter in itself requires. For it would not be strange if one, when he believed it, should die of joy.

Therefore I often complain about this, and it hurts me that I cannot believe, since I know full well that what is presented to us in the word is true. I have learned this not only from Holy Scripture, but experience also has in so many kinds of temptations taught me and made me sure of it. Therefore I often wish that I might escape from the uncleanness of my flesh and might be delivered from the many hindrances to faith, either by the Last Day, which I await with great desire, and for which I have a great longing, or else by some other way, however it may come to pass.

For I am ashamed of myself and regret my shameful unbelief in the presence of the great riches of the many promises with which we are overwhelmed and as it were intoxicated, when I consider and see that the holy patriarchs had such great faith in the promises, which still had not yet been fulfilled or realized. And other holy and God-fearing men also complain about this. With them, too, their nature wars against faith and they cannot keep the Old Man so tightly in check and compel it, so that it will not contend against the Spirit. (Luther on Gen. 49:27)

I call these words to mind, not to "sew pillows under our arms," but as a comfort to the honest souls among us who need it. Amen.