

CONVENTION BIBLE STUDIES

1. One Message—*Christ!*

A Message of Love for a Church in Mission—John 3:16

PRAYER before the study of God's Word:

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, without Your help our labor is useless, and without Your light our search is in vain. Invigorate our study of Your holy Word that, by due diligence and right discernment, we may establish ourselves and others in Your holy faith; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. (*Lutheran Service Book*, 312)

Introduction

The focus of this convention is “One Message—*Christ!*” During these next few days, we will make plans for the next few years and beyond. Those plans will center on making known Christ's love by word and deed within our churches, communities, and the world.

How do we do that? How do we make known the love of Christ? How do we nurture those who regularly sit in the pews of our LCMS parishes as we bring the kingdom of God to bear on their lives? How do we reach out to those we meet, for example, at the Little League game, the person who works next to us, and the neighbor who has no Christian church home? In the few moments we have together this morning, we are going to look to the Gospel of John for guidance as to how we can actually bring Christ's love to bear on the lives of the people we know and meet.

In chapter 3 of John's Gospel we read the story of Nicodemus, a Jewish leader who sought out Jesus under the cover of night. Verse 2 tells us that he probably came that night out of curiosity about who Jesus was. But as was usually the case—and we can reference here Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman in John 4—Jesus drew people into the conversation and then led them to discover His identity and the gifts He offers. Immediately following the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus, the inspired apostle records the one Bible passage that is probably known by more people than any other in the Scriptures—and I dare say by everyone in this room.

You may remember the guy who, a few years ago, was a fixture at almost every televised golf tournament, major league baseball game, and other televised sporting events. He was usually dressed in jeans and a tee shirt, had multi-colored frizzy hair, and positioned himself so that the TV camera was on him just when the golfer would hit the ball or the pitcher was about to throw his fast ball. His last name was Rollen, and his nickname was Rockin', Rockin' Rollen. And, every time the TV camera was on him, he held up a sign on which was printed: John 3:16. Now I don't know how many people actually knew that this was a Bible reference and reached for their Bibles to read these words: “For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever



believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” But for a few moments he had the attention of the world!

I memorized the words of John 3:16, as I'm sure many of you did, too, when I was a small child. They were probably the very first words of Scripture that I memorized, and I have carried them with me my whole life. Today, as we reflect on these words, I invite you to focus with me on one little word—often unnoticed—of enormous significance in this verse: the word *so*.

I. God *SO* Loved the World

In the Greek text, this is the first word in the sentence. It is pronounced “*houtōs*.” Actually, depending on the context, it can have a variety of meanings. In English, too, we use the word *so* in various ways. Consider, for example, the word *so* meaning “very,” as in, “This is *so* important.” Or, sometimes, it means “therefore,” as in, “So when he returns . . .” Or, it can even mean something like “to the degree or extent that,” as in, “So long as I have breath . . .” Or, “having a purpose,” as in, “So gathered here to study.” But here, in John 3:16, the Greek word actually means “In this manner; in this way.” With this meaning, the word is often used in discourse or narrative material to point directly to what follows. Take for example John 21:1: “After this Jesus revealed Himself again to His disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, and He revealed Himself in this way [*houtōs*]” (ESV, emphasis added). Then follows the account of the post-Easter morning breakfast appearance of Jesus to His disciples.

Houtōs. What a gem this little word is! A tiny word of enormous significance: “In this manner.” This is *how* God did it, how He accomplished your salvation. In a sense, you could say that the whole story of our salvation is packed into this simple word. It points to God’s plan to redeem the world.

On March 17, 2006, the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* ran a fascinating article on how some scientists think the world began. They think that the world expanded to astounding proportions in the trillionth of a second as the result of an explosion from matter about the size of a marble. We can think of John 3:16 something like this, and in particular John’s little word *houtōs*, *SO*. In this high-density, “marble-sized” word is packed the whole matter of the world’s salvation. “God *SO* loved that world *THAT*...” Coupled with the word *THAT* we see the result God intended. God’s love for the world was unique and unparalleled, and He would stop at nothing to have His world with Him eternally.

The story of HOW God loved the world begins with creation. God called everything into being by His word: the sun, moon, and stars; the fish of the sea, birds of the air; the beasts of the field; and every living creature, including us. And, when creation was complete God pronounced “it is *very good*” (Gen. 1:31). God loved the world He created. Even when God made known His will to Adam and Eve—His boundary in the garden—it surely was not because He wanted to make life difficult for them. Rather, it was because He loved them. God’s love has many dimensions. But as we have learned from Luther’s Small Catechism, God’s Law is summarized in a single word: *LOVE*. God loved His creatures and wanted them to live in harmony with Him, expressing in return their love for Him.

Tragically, however, mankind sinned and fell under God’s condemnation. Now God’s Law exposes sin for what it really is. It reveals how rebellious human beings turn in on themselves and make an agony out of a life that God intended in the beginning should be a blessing. In case there was any doubt about God’s real intent, Jesus sharpened what God meant. Jesus taught:

- “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment” (Matt. 5:21–22).
- “You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matt. 5:27–28).
- “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven” (Matt. 5:43–45).

Jesus makes it all the more clear how impossible it is for us sinful people to keep perfectly God’s righteous demands. Any infraction means that the creature that God loved so dearly must die eternally. But it is not God’s intent to leave the situation like this!

SO—in this way—God demonstrated His great love for the world He created: He sent His Son, Jesus, to buy back the world from sin and death and the power of the devil.

Do you remember how Martin Luther described this: “not with gold or silver, but with His holy precious blood and His innocent suffering and death”? So, in this manner, Jesus went to the cross to pay, with His own body and blood, the exacting price God demanded in order to deliver each person on earth from the penalty they deserved, eternal death. That’s the price Jesus paid. Think of it! We deserved eternal condemnation. But, out of His love for us God refused to condemn the world. As John puts it, “For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him” (3:17).

II. Where We Come In

God, therefore, wants all people to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth that in Jesus He was reconciling the world to Himself, making friends again (2 Cor. 5:19). This is where we come in, those of us who regularly sit in the pews of our LCMS parishes. We have thousands of professional church workers, many in this room right now, who are equipping millions of us to vigorously make known the love of Christ in our churches, communities, and the world. Every single soul is valuable to God. Not one person is more or less important to Him. In Luke 15, we read that “there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (Luke 15:10).

We are the link between the Word of God, His love for the world, and His desire that all people should be saved. Some people in our communities may not know that Jesus Christ died to forgive their sins. We are the church, and we have been instructed by Jesus to go, tell, teach, and baptize. The words of the hymn “Hark, the Voice of Jesus Crying” say it well:

Hark, the voice of Jesus crying, “Who will go and work today?
Fields are white and harvests waiting—Who will bear the sheaves away?”

Loud and long the Master calleth; Rich reward He offers thee.
Who will answer, gladly saying, “Here am I, send me, send me?”

If you cannot speak like angels, If you cannot preach like Paul,
You can tell the love of Jesus, You can say He died for all.

If you cannot be a watchman...Pointing out the path to heaven,
You can be like faithful Aaron, holding up the prophet’s hands.

And, finally, these words...

Let none hear you idly saying, “There is nothing I can do.”
While the multitudes are dying And the Master calls for you.
Take the task He gives you gladly, Let His work your pleasure be;

Answer quickly when He calleth, “Here am I, send me, send me!”

III. So, God’s *SO* becomes our *SO*!

Here is what we are going to do: When I tell you, please get into groups of four or less, no more than four, so each of you will have an opportunity to speak. Please take about ten minutes to discuss these questions:

1. What opportunities have you had recently to speak to someone that you know does not attend a Christian church about the hope that is in you for your eternal salvation? to invite someone to attend your church with

you? Can you identify by name one person right now that you know doesn't attend a Christian church?

- 2 What is your congregation doing intentionally and vigorously to make known the love of Christ, by word and deed in your congregation, your community, and the world?

God acted to save us while we were dead in our trespasses and sins. He set us apart to declare His praises to those inside and outside the church. Not everybody has discovered a comfortable way to talk about their own faith to others. But you can encourage someone in their quest to do this. You can teach them to say what you say. You can take someone with you to demonstrate how you share the Good News about how Jesus Christ came to give eternal life to all who believe in Him.

President Kieschnick told us in his inaugural speech on September 8, 2001: "We must begin to honestly view as simply unacceptable the fact that we are surrounded by people who do not know Jesus as their Lord and Savior from sin. It must be of utmost concern to our Synod and to each one of us that such individuals are on their way to eternal condemnation. We must, in winsome fashion, share the Good News of what God has done through Christ in order that those who accept by faith His undeserved love will spend eternity with Him, in heaven, forever."

I pray that in our days together we will celebrate our past efforts of Gospel proclamation and empower the people of our LCMS congregations to make known boldly the love of Christ. "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life." Proclaiming this is our mission, our ONE mission: Christ. God bless our convention and the work each of us does every day to that end.

William R. Diekelman
First Vice-President
The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

PRAYER for the mission of the Church:

Almighty God, You have called Your Church to witness that in Christ You have reconciled us to Yourself. Grant that by Your Holy Spirit we may proclaim the good news of Your salvation so that all who hear it may receive the gift of salvation; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. (*Lutheran Service Book*, 305)





2. One Message—*Christ!* A Message of Unity to a Sectarian Culture—1 Cor. 1

Introduction: The Setting

The city of Corinth, perched on the isthmus dividing Greece, was the ultimate destination in St. Paul's Second Mission Journey. Why? Because when the Romans took over Greece in the mid-second-century BC, they transferred its capital from Athens to Corinth. And Paul, who, throughout the Book of Acts loved to speak truth to power, saw stunning opportunities for the Gospel in this political, economic, and social capital. In fact, he would base his ministry here for the next eighteen months.

Corinth, however, seemed to be the mission field "least likely to succeed," since it was a hotbed of competing cults, pagan idolatry, gross materialism, and sexual immorality. The Greek verb "to Corinthianize" meant to engage in every vice available. Looming over the city was the great Acrocorinthos, crowned with a temple to Aphrodite, goddess of love, sex, and reproduction. Paul certainly enjoyed his challenges, but it would seem that his mission here was doomed from the start.

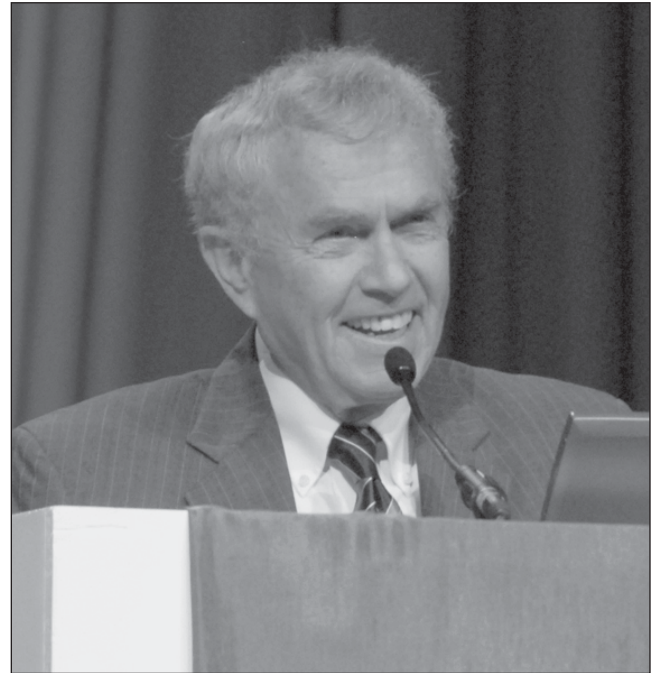
And yet it proved surprisingly effective after all. He won converts to the faith from the Jewish synagogue in Corinth, including Crispus, its president. When he was haled before no less than the Roman governor of Greece, Lucius Junius Gallio, the proconsul of Achaia (and Luke has that title exactly correct), the stage was set for the first test case for Christianity in the Mediterranean world. It was probably the most important trial in history since Jesus stood before Pontius Pilate. And Paul won! Gallio did exactly what Pontius Pilate wanted to do at the trial of Jesus: he threw the case against Paul out of court, thus legalizing Christianity at Corinth!

At this point, I just can't resist telling you how beautifully accurate is Luke's account in the Book of Acts. Paul's appearance before Gallio has become the chronological cornerstone in the chronology of his life. (The inscription at Delphi.) This also explains why Paul would later appeal for justice to Nero Caesar: Nero's tutor and advisor was none other than the great Stoic philosopher Seneca, who happened to be the full-blooded *brother of* Gallio, who ran Nero's courts. Basically, Paul was appealing to the very man whose brother had thrown the case against Paul out of court!

Now, it seemed, the church's problems at Corinth there were over. Or were they? Sadly, after Paul left, sectarian squabbles broke out, and the Christians there nicely quartered themselves into four "cult of personality" groups, favoring Paul, Apollos, Cephas (Peter), and—to finesse the others—Christ. Paul, now in Ephesus on his Third Mission Journey, had to intervene by letter. Today we call that letter 1 Corinthians.

I. The Letter

As you read the all-important chapter one of 1 Corinthians, Paul's message seems to have five parts:



Verses 1 to 9: Introduction and compliments to the young congregation at Corinth. Diplomatically, Paul often begins his Epistles in this way, though not always.

Vv. 10 to 12: Paul exposes the problem of dissension in the Corinthian church.

Vv. 13 to 17: Sectarianism and quarreling in the church is *not* what Jesus had in mind.

Vv. 18 to 25: Wisdom and folly—by earthly standards—are reversed in God's divine plan for the world in Christ, leading to the climactic claims in verses 22 to 25.

Vv. 26 to 31: Here, Paul applies the message to the Corinthians themselves, a theme that he will pursue further in chapters 2 through 4—and, in fact, through much of his letter.

II. And This Convention?

Rarely has an application been so *easy!* Not that we have problems involving pagan idolatry, gross materialism, or sexual immorality as was the case in Corinth! But in one respect we do draw a clear parallel to those ancient Corinthians, and that is the existence of divisions, party spirit, sectarianism, politicization, and even talk of schism.

The *general* reason for this is that today we have probably the most sectarian culture in history. The options promoting divisions in society are virtually unlimited. Specialties, niches, are available for everyone, including the worst category of all: the option to ignore God entirely. Why else are our newsstands cluttered with magazines to cover every possible hobby, interest, or even lust? Why do people worry that even 500 channels on television might not be enough? The cohesion in the simpler existence of yesteryear seems to have disintegrated.

The *specific* promoter of division in the LCMS is not, of course, to ignore God in Christ, but rather to insist that *my* particular interpretation of Scripture, *our* understanding of doctrine, and especially *our* practice are the only ones that God favors. Those of others, God must utterly disdain. The examples are many:

Publications, Web sites, blogs, and e-mails that regularly transgress the Eighth Commandment, thriving on the process of sowing discord.

Putting the worst (not best) construction on words and actions of those “in another camp.” Even the remarkable synodical initiative—*Ablaze!*—has been faulted by ultra-critical “purists” in our church. How very sad!

Lawsuits against the Synod and its leadership—incredibly, the very same problem that Paul will condemn in chapter six of his first Letter to Corinth, where he concludes, “*To have lawsuits at all with one another is a defeat for you*” (v. 7). Bottom line: Paul tells the Corinthians (and us): “Don’t go to law: this is sin!” And that is quite apart from the other sin of draining Synod resources for having gone to law in the first place!

III. The Remedy

In Paul’s day, it was to focus on Christ and heed His message of unity in a sectarian world, as witness His prayer in the Upper Room that His followers “may all be brought to complete unity” (John 17:23).

The result? At first the Corinthian congregation was ticked off at Paul’s letter (as we know from 2 Corinthians), but it finally listened to Paul, and a *strong* church was established at Corinth. The Early Church historian, Eusebius of Caesarea, tells of a gifted second-century bishop of Corinth, Dionysius, who had enormous prestige in the area and wrote superb letters to bishops in Crete and the rest of Greece. In one of them, he tells that another Dionysius, one of two named converts after Paul’s Mars Hill address in Acts 17, became the first bishop of Athens.

In our day, the remedy really is exactly the same: to focus on Christ and heed His message of unity in our sectarian church and world. Like Martin Luther King, “I have a dream” for our beloved Synod: that we would leave this convention as if Jesus Himself had attended it, and told this convention, “I understand your concerns about Communion, church, ministry, worship, the roles women and men, and your outreach to the world, but in the name of the sovereign God who created the universe, get over your quarrels and be about your Father’s business!!”; and that we would leave Houston with a wondrous spirit of unity in which there were no victors, no losers, but Christian brothers and sisters gloriously one in Christ, ablaze with the desire to pass on the Good News to a world that needs it so badly.

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3. One Message—*Christ!*

A Message of Truth in a Postmodern World—Acts 17:16–34

Introduction

Almost ten years ago, a film titled *The Truman Show* gave us the tragic situation of a man whose whole life, unknown to him, was a television program. His family and friends were all actors, playing roles. His world was lived under a huge dome, a gigantic sound stage he thought was real.

At the end of the film, Truman finally figures it out as his sailboat runs up against a wall and he ascends a staircase that promises to take him from this fantasy world to what's real and true. It's then that the director of the show breaks in to try to get Truman to stay. "Was nothing real?" Truman asks the director. "You were real," says the director, "That's what made you so good to watch." And then the director says, "Listen to me, Truman. There's no more truth out there than there is in the world I created for you. Same lies. The same deceit."

I. We Live in a Non-Reality World

And with that, we're given a vivid statement of our culture, what it is like to be trapped in world where real truth is an illusion; the rabbit out there six inches ahead of the chasing dog.

Film after film—*The Matrix*, *Wag the Dog*, *Groundhog Day*, *The Sixth Sense*, *Bulworth* (the list goes on)—gives us this idea that the real and the true are absolutely an illusion and absolutely elusive.

And then there are the reality shows that end up being anything but real—singers on *American Idol* who can't sing, and we're supposed to believe that eating maggots or being overrun by rats is somehow "real." Language in such a culture can morph into a secret code to where someone walks up to a Starbucks counter and says, "Double Ristretto Venti Nonfat Organic Chocolate Brownie Frappuccino Extra Hot with Foam and Whipped Cream Upside Down Double Blended." And what scares me is that some of you know what that looks like.

It's in that culture we live, and it's to that culture we're sent—a culture seeking a staircase, a door, to some truth, some reality that sticks. It's a culture that turns those doors into a "Let's Make a Deal," as one truth, one reality, and then another vie for our attention and loyalty. So a woman has a cross, a crescent, a Buddah, and a star of David placed on her gravestone, accepting them all as true and calling herself a true believer. Truth becomes diluted and threatened by a self-driven relativism. Because people say something is true seems to make it true, at least for them. Abe Lincoln once asked the question, "How many legs does a dog have if you call the tail a leg?" His answer: "Four, because calling a tail a leg doesn't make it a leg."

II. How to Relate to a Pagan Society

So how does the church relate to a pagan society forever after elusive truth and reality? We can bash it, forgetting we're a part of it. We can dash from it, escaping to our own safe harbor. We can cash in and sell out, morphing truth



into opinion. Bash, dash, and cash. Or we can do what the church has always been sent to do: transform the world, testifying to the truth and reality of Jesus Christ.

For that task, that sending, there is no better model than Paul on Mars Hill in Athens. In Paul's day, Athens was no longer a great city, but it was still seen as a place of great ideas, where truth was considered and tried by some of the brightest people anywhere. As Luke tells it in verse 21, the Athenians were taken with just about any new idea. Newer was better.

There, in Athens, we get a lesson in Christians transforming the culture. Let me walk you through the text.

First, notice at the start of verse 16 that Paul was in Athens waiting for his traveling companions to catch up with him. Here is a rare occasion when Paul stands alone. *Sometimes Christians stand alone in witness.* So often, our witness to the truth is one-on-one. It's a "Here I Stand" enterprise. And yet, like Paul, when we speak, we are lifted by the prayers and encouragement of other Christians. When Paul spoke in Athens, he had partners in the church across the Mediterranean world in prayer for him. He also had the grace of Jesus Christ. Paul knew the laws of rhetoric alright, but it's likely he was not all that engaging a speaker in person. Early depictions show him short, bald-headed, with a hooked nose. Yet there in Athens, the overwhelming number of idols and the grace of God made him speak, alone but not alone.

Second, notice in the opening verses of the text how *Paul was a player in his culture.* In verses 17–19, we see Paul first in the synagogue, then in the marketplace, and then in the Areopagus. Paul was on the field, in the game. He didn't hurl

missiles from the safety of his house church. He earned the right to be heard. He got outside the walls of the church and into the culture's debate. In a real sense, that's one of the reasons we're here, not to turn in on ourselves but to say a word to the culture, a word of real truth. We're meant to be players in our culture. That means we have a prophetic voice that needs to be heard. We have books that need to be written in the popular vernacular of our culture. Our theologians at our seminaries need to break outside the walls of academic theology into the world of public witness, testimony, and apologetics. Our pastors and lay leaders need to go where the culture's idols stand and where its longings are heard. The Early Church didn't circle its wagons. It charged into its culture with the truth of Jesus Christ.

Third, *we can expect to be misunderstood*; Paul was. They call him a "babbler" in verse 18. The word actually means "seed-picker." Today, we might say, "bird brain." They were so taken up with idols, they thought he was introducing two new gods, Jesus and the Resurrection—taking the Greek word for resurrection, *Anastasis*, to be the name of another god. So Christians can expect to be called intolerant, exclusionary, duped, and out of touch. When Paul mentions the resurrection at the end of his speech, some sneer, others politely ask to hear more, and still others believe. We can expect different responses. Our task is to present, leaving the response to the Holy Spirit. One of the blessings of *Ablaze!* is its clear understanding that the results, the eternal yield of witness, are all a matter of God's grace.

Perhaps the most practical lesson we can take from Paul in Athens is *how he breaks open the cultural icons of his day and fills them full of new meaning*, Christian meaning. In verses 22–23, Paul has spotted an altar with the inscription, "To an Unknown God" (Greek, *AGNOSTO THEO*), he says he will tell them about the god they do not know. And later, in verse 28, in making the point that since we are all created by God, God cannot be our creation, he chooses to quote well-known classic Greek poets, Epimenides, Aratus, and Cleanthus, loading their words with new Christian meaning. The church has always broken open the language of the culture and redefined it from a Christian perspective. The word *sacrament*, for instance, was a secular word for a pledge of loyalty, recast by Christians to apply to Baptism and the Lord's Supper, the Lord's pledges of loyalty to us.

This breaking open of the culture's icons means we need to know our culture—its poetry, its books, its novels, its magazines, its art, its cartoons, its coffee shops. Our culture's language and music and so much more are waiting to be broken open, interpreted, not giving them a spin, but filling them with truth from our Christian perspective. We have to know our culture. I spoke recently at a pastor's conference and said I had a list of 10 secular books published since 2000 that every pastor should read because they reveal our culture. Within a week, I had received over 100 requests for the list. Pastors get this.

A fifth lesson comes as we watch Paul present God as so much bigger, so much greater than the gods of the Athenians.

Look at verses 26–27. *The true God is bigger and more dangerous than the god and the truth of our culture*. Paul's God—and ours—establishes and moves nations according to His will and for the sake of His salvation plan. Then, at verses 29–31, we hear how Paul's God—and ours—raised Jesus from the dead and so made certain the urgent reality of a coming judgment. That looming judgment hovers over Paul's witness, giving it an authentically urgent character. Is that urgency here? Do we feel it? Do we see it on the horizon?

A sixth lesson comes with Paul's witness to the resurrection (v. 31). *The truth and reality of Jesus rides on His resurrection*. In the end, Paul's message was a message of eternal proportions, a truth, a historical reality corroborated by a risen Jesus Christ, whom Paul himself had seen and heard. In the end, the truth we speak, the truth we live and die for, is the truth of Jesus Christ: His perfect life, His suffering in our place, His atoning death, and His return from death. This is Jesus, who said, "I am the truth." This is Jesus, whose life was not some fantasy, not some divine show in the mind of a writer, but Jesus in history, the real Jesus, exploding from death to life, still present among us here, here now, at a church convention! (Imagine that!)

III. The Truth That Matters

In the end, the truth we long for most is the truth that looks death in the eye and says, "Death, you are defeated. Death, you cannot have me!" In the end, the truth about Jesus, the truth Jesus is, stands or falls on His resurrection. Even the spiritually shallow are taken by this basic tenet of our faith. As one wag put it, he wanted to be buried in Jerusalem because that city has the highest resurrection rate of any city in the world.

And finally, notice that at verse 34, *individuals matter in the record of the church's witness*. The flock increases one sheep at a time. Dionysius and Damaris are mentioned by name. The Kingdom grows one by one. We can dream of movements, pray for the multitudes to know Jesus, but one by one they come in. Why? Because the church, set ablaze by the Spirit of God, speaks the truth, and grace works faith, faith in the One who said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life."

Questions for Discussion

1. Where in our culture do you see self-focused, do-it-yourself truth at work?
2. When have you found yourself standing "alone" for the truths of your faith?
3. Where do you see opportunities for the church to "break open" cultural icons?
4. What keeps the LCMS from being a more visible player in our culture's debate of ideas and truths?
5. What aspect of Paul's witness in Athens is most significant for our church today?

Dean W. Nadasdy
Third Vice-President
The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

4. One Message—Christ! A Message of Love to a Desperate People—Acts 3 and 4

Introduction

This morning, our Bible Study is going to be driven by *two chapters of God's Word* and *two of my favorite hymns*. So much my favorites, that I've let it be known to my family that my wish would be to sing them at my funeral. *They are old hymns, but not that well known*. They cannot even be found in *Lutheran Worship* nor the new *Lutheran Service Book*. But they are in the 1941 Lutheran hymnal, and *before they get forgotten*, I want to have this great assembly sing them as part of this Bible Study.

The theme assigned to me is "A Message of Love to a Desperate People." Desperate people are people who have no hope. Wow, do desperate people (without any hope) ever need a message of *love*. I want to divide this Bible Study into two parts following the outline on pages 403–404 of Today's Business. The two parts address the fact that there are only two kinds of people in this world. Those who know they are desperate people and those who don't know they are desperate people. Because, of course, standing on our own before a *holy* God, we are all desperate people. Some of us know it; and some of us don't. And we are here this morning to celebrate that God's *love* is here, at least today, for both groups.

I. His Love Is Here for Those Who Know They Are Desperate.

In Acts 3, as Peter and John are going up to the temple they meet a man lame from birth being carried up to the temple to beg for alms. Here is a man without hope . . . desperate . . . lame since he was born. And the first verse of one of my favorite hymns, "Come Ye Disconsolate" describes his condition:

*Come, ye disconsolate, where'er ye languish;
Come to the Mercyseat, fervently kneel,
Here bring your wounded hearts, here tell your anguish;
Earth has no sorrow that Heav'n cannot heal.*

There are many who come Sunday after Sunday to our churches with wounded hearts . . . filled with anguish. Many of our family and friends are languishing in the trials and tribulations of this life's fallen world. I am certain this morning that there are some among you in this great delegation of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod who have sorrows *that heaven alone can heal*. Many times in our lives we need consoling because the circumstances of our life have left us disconsolate, desperate.

Peter says to the man asking for money in Acts 3: "*I have no silver and gold, but I give you what I have; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.*" And leaping up, he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God.

Folks, do you remember another day in Jesus' earthly ministry when another crippled man was lowered down from the roof by his friends? Remember how before Jesus healed him physically he told him his sins were forgiven. And in the dialogue that followed, Jesus asked that won-



derful question: "*Which is easier to say your sins are forgiven or take up your bed and walk?*" The greatest gift a desperate person needs to open is not the elimination of earthly struggles, but the forgiveness of sins in the name of Jesus. In verse 19 of Acts 3, Peter reminds those who were questioning this healing miracle, "*Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.*" Every one of us is desperate for the forgiveness of our sins. Every one of us on our own is dis-consolable. Every one of us in the darkness of our sin is straying like sheep without a shepherd. We need light. We need hope. We need love. The love of Christ that is here for desperate people who know their desperation and reach out in repentance and contrition for a healing that can only come from heaven, this is earth's greatest sorrow . . . that heaven alone can heal. Verse 2 says it:

*Joy of the desolate, Light of the straying,
Hope of the penitent, fadeless and pure;
Here speaks the Comforter, tenderly saying,
Earth has no sorrow that Heav'n cannot cure.*

And where is that forgiveness offered to the desperate who *know* their condition? And what is the source of such hope? Where indeed do we find the voice of the Comforter tenderly saying, "Earth has no sin sorrow that Heav'n cannot cure?" We know the answer. We are the "means of grace" church. Christ's love is here for desperate people in the Word and Sacraments. Christ's love is here [hold up the Bible] in His promises of hope. The Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the one true faith. Christ's love is here in His *church*, which Augsburg VII confesses is the "assembly

of saints in which the Gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly." It's the place where God's love is here dispensed on earth in the waters flowing from Holy Baptism and in the bread of life broken at His feast of love. It's all there in verse 3:

Here see the Bread of Life; see waters flowing
Forth from the throne of God, pure from above,
Come to the feast of love; come, ever knowing
Earth has no sorrow but Heav'n can remove.

There is not much time allotted to our Bible study, but there is enough for you to respond for a moment to a simple topic of conversation. Talk for a moment in table groups about how important it is to be a church for those who *know their desperate condition*, for the broken, the contrite, the sorrowful faithful, the searching lost, the prodigal coming home, the wandering seeking the way. Talk about this question:

In 2007, what are the great hurts we see *within the church*? In your congregation, how must the love of Christ be most generously shared?

[Short time of discussion]

We have talked thus far about the *broken desperate*.

Now let's turn our attention to the *ignorant desperate*. By that I mean they are living in *ignorant bliss*. They believe that they are in total and complete control of their lives, when, in fact, their lives are built on not one single thing that will last, that will endure. Their lives are built on the *shifting sands of unbelief*. We are here this morning to celebrate that on this side of eternity, God's love is here for them too.

II. His Love Is Here for Those Who Don't Know How Desperate They Are.

Acts chapter 4 begins with these words: "*The Priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon Peter and John, annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. And they arrested them.*"

Far more numerous than the *broken desperate* within the church or looking to the church are the *desperate ignorant*, who are trying in this present time to destroy the church. They have chosen another road, a road that leads the soul away from God. And in such a road, there is no happiness; no hope; only desperation. So begins my second old favorite hymn. It's a little more familiar than the first one, and I believe it's another great hymn to be sung at a Christian's funeral. At least at mine.

Let thoughtless thousands choose the road
That leads the soul away from God;
This happiness, dear Lord, be mine,
To live *and die* entirely Thine.

The closer I get to my funeral, that is to say the older I get, these desperate ignorant are the people I am more and more concerned about. In a Bible Study years ago, led by President Emeritus Ralph Bohlmann, I recall him taking us on a journey through Acts, chapter 4, and zeroing in on all the verses that spoke about the boldness and the power with which Peter and John spoke to the *desperately ignorant*. Come on that journey with me:

V. 12: *No one else can save us. We can be saved only by the power of the one named Jesus.*

V. 20: *We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.*

V. 29: *Lord, pay attention to their threats and allow us to speak Your word boldly.*

V. 31: *All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the Word of God boldly.*

V. 33: *With great power they continued to testify that the Lord Jesus had come back to life.*

And I love verse 13: "*Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they wondered; and they recognized that they had been with Jesus.*"

Speaking of funerals, that would be great on a tombstone, wouldn't it? He was an uneducated common preacher, but you could tell he had been with Jesus. Not bad, huh? Verse 2:

On Christ, by faith, I fain would live,
From Him my life, my all, receive,
To Him devote my fleeting hours,
Serve Him alone with all my pow'rs.

And what must be our message to the *desperate ignorant*? They have to hear about Jesus. *Take them to the cross and the open tomb*. That's where Peter took them: "*You want to know how this crippled was made well? This man stands in your presence healed by the power of Jesus Christ from Nazareth. You crucified Jesus Christ, but God has brought him back to life. He is the stone the builders rejected, the stone that has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.*" Verse 3:

Christ is my everlasting All;
To Him I look, on Him I call;
He will my ev'ry want supply
In time and thro' eternity.

And what, pray tell me, are we waiting for? The late Ed Wescott would spur this church on in mission by reminding us that Revelation chapter 12 tells us the devil is all over this planet working like crazy because he knows that his time is short. *Would that the church be as zealous as we set our priorities.* Would that I at the beginning of my pastoral ministry had been as concerned about the desperately ignorant as I am today. Would that our budgets would reflect a more passionate zeal for reaching the lost while it is yet day, before the night comes—and *that night is coming*. I don't know if this church has until 2017 to reach 100 million people. For my sake, I wish Christ would come today. For the redeemed, dying is gain. *But for the sake of the desperately ignorant*, I pray that the Lord be long-suffering with them for their unbelief and with us for our apathy. And until the Lord's patience with them and us runs out, we still need to live and love and work and serve and care and share—for to live is Christ! Verse 4:

Soon will the Lord, my Life, appear;
Soon shall I end my trials here,
Leave sin and sorrow, death and pain.
To live is Christ, to die is gain.

And the final verse of this great hymn reminds us of making sure Christ's love is *here* for the desperately ignorant. Remember that verse from 1 Corinthians 13 that you hear at almost every wedding you attend? That last verse that reads, "*Now there is faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is love.*" Have you ever wondered why love is greater than faith and hope. I mean, really, where would we be without faith and hope? *Well, we'd be in heaven, where faith and hope are no longer needed.* Sure, think about it: If faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the confidence of things not seen. In heaven, we are going to see it all; faith will have been completed. And hope? Eager expectation of the glorious things to come? In heaven there is no longer anything to hope for. Hope will have been consummated. All that we'll need for eternity is *love*. And that eternal *love* will be ours throughout timeless ages. Verse 5:

Soon will the saints in glory meet,
Soon walk through every golden street,
And sing on every blissful plain;
To live is Christ, to die is gain.

Just a few minutes left. So go back into your little groups and share just one excuse you hear about ignoring the *desperately ignorant* in your congregation. You know, like, "It's their own damn fault" or "We need to take care of our own first" or "That's the pastor's job"—you've heard them all. *Now reflect on the story of the Pentecost church in Acts and what would they say to us today?*

To close let's sing this second hymn #608 *TLH*

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