

Consensus

Volume 13

Issue 2 *Canadian Lutheranism, Yesterday and Tomorrow*

Article 8

11-1-1987

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Recommended Citation

Lehmann, Helmut T. (1987) "The quality of God's mercy: cause for celebration," *Consensus*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 2 , Article 8.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol13/iss2/8>

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The Quality of God's Mercy: Cause for Celebration

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Text: I Corinthians 3:5-11

In his *Merchant of Venice* Shakespeare has Portia, the rich heiress, say these familiar lines at the trial of Shylock:

The quality of mercy is not strained;
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath: it is twice blessed,
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes....
It is an attribute to God himself.
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice.

And then Portia continues by saying to Shylock,

Though justice be thy plea, consider this,
That in the course of justice none of us
Should see salvation (Act IV, i).

Mercy, says Portia, is an attribute of God himself.

On the occasion of the 75th Anniversary of Waterloo Lutheran Seminary and in the light of our text in I Corinthians 3:5-11, I would like to suggest that the quality of God's mercy can be the cause for this celebration. This quality of mercy can be the cause for celebration because God alone is the source of growth in his church and its institutions.

Among the members of the house churches in Corinth party loyalties threatened to split the congregation. Some members were especially loyal to Apollos who had impressed them as a great public speaker and mighty defender of the faith. Others had an especially high regard for the Apostle Paul. After all, he was the founding father of the house congregations in Corinth. As preacher, teacher and pastor he had brought them to faith in Jesus Christ.

Such division in loyalties to one or another preacher, teacher, and pastor is not unheard of among us today. For all I know there may be among us today a few—a very few, I suspect—who think of Dr. Emil Hoffman as an outstanding teacher and administrator in the early years of the Seminary. There may be others who continue to have a high regard for Dr. A.A. Zinck as a forceful leader of the Seminary. Perhaps special plaudits should be given to Dr. Frederick Clausen who shepherded the Seminary in the 1930s during the hard times of the depression. Some of us may feel a greater loyalty to some of the professors who made great personal sacrifices in the early days and during the depression to keep the Seminary doors open: Dr. C.H. Little, Professor Preston Laury, Professor Aksim and others. All of these and others in more recent history have planted like Paul and watered like Apollos.

In reviewing what Paul himself had done in planting and Apollos in watering, Paul comes to a conclusion I find shocking. His conclusion is that he who plants is nothing and he who waters is nothing. Nothing? Nothing at all? Yes, nothing. That sounds like bad news. I find this conclusion so shocking because it flies in the face of virtually everything our current cultural wisdom keeps drumming and dinning into our ears. Current wisdom tells us that we need to convince ourselves that we are really something.

If I have heard it once I have heard it a hundred times from seminarians who have just experienced clinical pastoral education or have had a reasonably successful year of internship. The phrases I hear over and over again run something like this, "I feel good about myself", "I feel confident", "I like myself", "I feel comfortable with myself". These and similar self-estimates hardly jibe with the Apostle Paul's assertion that he who plants and he who waters is nothing.

But to understand Paul's shocking assertion we need to see it in its context. He who plants and he who waters is nothing because God is everything. It is God who gives the growth. A biblical scholar and historian by the name of Hans Lietzmann has what for me turned out to be a significant way of emphasizing the role of God in giving growth. He has translated the verse in question in our text thus, "So he who plants is nothing nor he who waters but (only) he who allows it to grow, God." The exclusive particle, only, is not in the original

text. For that reason Lietzmann was careful to put the word, only, in parentheses in this translation. In so doing Lietzmann indicated that the flow of the language implies the addition of the word, only. Only God gives growth. Paul doesn't; Apollos doesn't; the laborers in Waterloo Lutheran Seminary over seventy-five years don't. God alone gives growth.

While in Seminary in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, I had a professor who I think came from this part of Ontario. His name was Jürgen Goos. He was an excellent professor, though I should admit that I did not belong to his theological party for long. He did not have the gift of eloquence that Apollos did. He seldom raised his voice. He had the curious habit of using a short stub of a pencil as an instrument to drill little holes in the desk at which he was lecturing. When he wanted to stress a point or a thought, instead of raising his voice he would drill a little faster with his stub of a pencil. One day—and I do not remember in what class it was—he seemed to be looking straight at me as he drilled a little faster and quoted Psalm 115:1, "Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to thy name give glory." At the time I remember being confused by this quotation because I said to myself, "Who is worried about giving glory to anybody anyway?" Well, now many years later I am beginning to understand. I'm still learning.

To give glory to God alone can be cause for celebration. The growth of the church, the prospering of its institutions of learning like Waterloo Lutheran Seminary, are in God's hands alone. That's the way it has been during the past seventy-five years. And that's the way it will be in the future.

Some of us may be familiar with Mike Schmidt, the third baseman of the Philadelphia Phillies who has won several Golden Glove and Most Valuable Player awards. Now that Schmidt has turned thirty-six years old some reporters one day asked him about what he thought of his future. After all, at the age of thirty-six professional athletes and others wonder about what the future has in store for them. When a reporter asked Schmidt about his future, the third baseman replied, "The future is out of my hands. My future is in the hands of the Lord."

Our future, the future of Waterloo Lutheran Seminary is not in our hands; it is in the hands of God alone. That's good

news. That confidence is cause for thanksgiving and celebration.

To say that God alone gives the growth and that to him alone therefore belong the glory and honor and wisdom and power is not to say that such governance of his kingdom, his church and its institutions is simply an expression of God being almighty. His might expresses itself in his mercy. If the growth of his church depended on us there probably would not be a church. It is an expression of God's mercy that he alone gives the growth. It is this aloneness which is a quality of his mercy and which is therefore cause for rejoicing on the part of all of us.

Mercy as an "attribute of God himself", as Portia puts it in her address to Shylock, is the only foundation of our faith and life. In speaking to the Christians in the house congregations in Corinth Paul refers to this foundation in a twofold way. First of all he says he has laid the foundation for the faith and life of the Christian Church in Corinth. But then he goes on to say that the foundation has been laid. The foundation that has been laid for the faith and life of the Christians in Corinth is Jesus Christ. Acting in Jesus Christ God has laid the foundation. There seems to be a contradiction here. Either Paul has laid the foundation or God has laid the foundation. Actually, both statements hold true but always in such a way that it is God alone who lays the foundation. The faith resting on this foundation, as Luther puts it in his "Freedom of the Christian" in 1520, is "not our work: it is God's work in us".

This faith does not simply "rest", though sometimes it is misunderstood that way. This faith is a living, active, mighty thing, as Luther puts it in his Preface to the *Letter to the Romans*.

A comic strip in one of our Philadelphia newspapers appears daily under the title, "Sherman on the Mount". Sherman on the mount is usually an angel. Standing on a mound, the angel faces a transcendent voice in a cloud. Turning toward the cloud the angel asks, "Am I doing a very good job as an angel?" The transcendent voice replies, "You're doing fine." The angel asks a second question, "You want me to keep the faith, right?" To this question the transcendent voice replies, "Nope, spread it around."

Through the years we Lutherans have been rather successful in resting on the foundation of our faith. We have tended to keep the faith to ourselves. Through preaching the gospel in its purity and rightly administering the sacraments in accordance with our Confessions we have made sure we keep the foundation of our faith inviolate, strong and immovable. We need to spread the faith around.

Let me illustrate this by reference to something in the history of Waterloo Lutheran Seminary. There exists among the Seminary students an organization known as the "Cossman-Hayunga Society". Taking its name from one of Nova Scotia's pioneer pastors, Charles Cossman, and one of Ontario's pioneer pastors, Herman Hayunga, the Society is dedicated to consideration of evangelistic outreach among the unchurched and the raising of funds to support that outreach. I don't know of many organizations like that existing at most of our seminaries in North America. Yet keeping the faith and spreading it are central to our belief. Like love and marriage, the two belong together. Foundation and building on that foundation belong together. The mercy of God as an inward quality expresses itself in an outward thrust. The mercy of God expresses itself in what we believe and what we do, in who we are and what we are, in our past, our present and our future.

Looking to the future, Waterloo Lutheran Seminary has established an institute for the study of Christian ethics in relation to social issues. Robert Schuller, minister of the Crystal Cathedral, is supposed to have told a group of pastors that if they want to fill their churches they ought not consider social issues in the pulpit but leave their discussion to the classroom. The time has arrived to bring social issues out of the classroom into our streets. That action is mercy's outward thrust.

The quality of God's mercy as expressed in faith and life has served as the foundation of Waterloo Lutheran Seminary during the past seventy-five years. We are confident that the future of this Seminary is in the hands of God's mercy alone. That confidence is an occasion for thanksgiving, rejoicing and celebration. That's good news. That's the gospel.