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Miscellanea

Concerning the Written Word *

MIKKEL LONO

I am impelled by an inner urge that gives me no peace to offer some comments on chapter three of Dr. T. A. Kantonen's recent book, *The Resurgence of the Gospel*. This urge received a boost when I came upon the letter by A. V. Neve entitled "Lutheranism or Pseudo-Lutheranism" in the March issue of the *Lutheran Outlook*, which clearly is inspired by Dr. Kantonen's book. We have also become aware of other evidences of the influence of this new attack upon the Written Word, and some defense should be made.

Before proceeding with a discussion of chapter three, I want to express my deep appreciation of the other chapters of "The Resurgence of the Gospel." I had the privilege to hear the original lectures, and at that time received a thrilling lift from the presentation, and the reading of the book was a no less rewarding experience. I have already read the final chapter several times, and I shall refer to the whole book again and again when struggling to put into words the fundamental truths of our faith.

The author's attack upon the Written Word in chapter three is therefore doubly disappointing. I remember how my heart sank as I listened to this presentation at Luther Seminary, and it was almost with fear that I read it now in the book—fear of the damage it may do to the message of our Lutheran Church, and fear for the consequences to the present efforts towards Lutheran unity.

According to Kantonen's concept of the Word, the Written Word is not God's Word at all. It is merely the words of men, liable to error as are all words of men, but which God uses to convey His Word directly to the heart, somewhat, I suppose, as when God uses the message of a fallible preacher as a vehicle for His life-saving Gospel. The Word of God is in the Bible, but the Written Word, or the Bible, is not the Word of God. By the Word of God Dr. Kantonen seems to mean some sort of spiritual intuition that God gives through the Bible.

At least in modern times, this concept seems first to have been presented in this form by Emil Brunner. I remember that Mr. Brunner was challenged by the faculty of Princeton Theological Seminary on this point when he was a guest there. Whether Dr. Kantonen is the first to impute this concept to Dr. Martin Luther I do not know. The new interest in Luther has entered the ranks of non-Lutherans, and I do not know what some of these may have attributed to Luther. We are all glad for the greater influence

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which this new interest promises, but I doubt the wisdom of running to non-Lutherans to learn what Luther teaches. We have not lacked competent Luther scholars in the Lutheran Church. (The authority of Dr. M. Reu in the field of Luther research cannot be dismissed as easily as Dr. Kantonen would have us believe.)

The dynamic concept of the Word of God is not new. That the Holy Spirit is in action in the Word, calling the sinner to repentance and creating the new life of Faith, is a concept that is fundamental to all our teaching and preaching. ("Ye were born again, not of corruptible seed, but incorruptible, through the Word of God." — 1 Pet. 1:2.) But that this concept is contrary to the doctrine of the inspiration of the Written Word is new to me. I have not heard anyone who thinks that the words of the Bible act like a magical formula. The Word of God, by which we have meant the Bible, is a Means of Grace, a vehicle of God's grace to man. Take away from us the authoritative Written Word and we have no Word of God. If the Written Word is not inspired and may be in error, then no man on earth can know the Truth. It is when the Written Word is discarded as authority that the sinful and deceitful heart of man perverts the Gospel to please himself. It was through a persistent and honest attention to the words of the Bible that the Gospel was recovered after it had been perverted through a neglect of that Word. If the words of the Bible, the Written Word, are not inspired, then we have no sure Word of God.

One does not have to be a Luther scholar to know that Luther did not do battle for verbal inspiration. That was not an issue at the time, and there was no reason why he should be concerned. But if what we have read of the history of the Reformation has any basis in fact at all, then Luther's conscience was bound by the written Word. I confess that I am not a Luther scholar. I have not read all his writings, and much of what I have read I have forgotten. But I have read enough to know that he clung tenaciously to the authority of the *words* of the Written Word. Otherwise the story of the conference at Marburg has no meaning. We have learned that he wrote the words, "This is my Body," on his desk before him, and that these words so bound his conscience that he could not join forces with those who would take liberties with them. This Written Word certainly was God's Word to him. Again it is recorded that at Worms he declared that unless he was convinced by clear words of Scriptures and sound reason he could not recant—his conscience was bound. And then they would have us believe that it did not concern him whether the words of the Bible might be in error or not!

We are told that since Luther likened the Written Word to the swaddling clothes containing the Christ, the Written Word must therefore be considered merely human. You can discard human swaddling clothes, lift the babe and clasp it to your bosom, but you cannot discard the Written Word without losing the Christ also. Luther was certainly right in insisting that Christ is the precious gift, but he did not say that the Means of Grace, through

and by means of which Christ is given to man, are not therefore also from God. Human words would tell us about Christ; only God's Word can give us Christ Himself. But how about Luther's seeming indifference to discrepancies in the Written Word, as indicated in quotations found in Kantonen and Neve? I do not claim to know the mind of Luther when and if he spoke as quoted. But in view of his insistence upon the absolute authority of the smallest word, I cannot accept the conclusion that he thought the Bible could be found in error. Luther's tasks in the Church was not that of a textual critic. He had more important work to do. I can well understand that he would refuse to be bothered by seeming discrepancies in passages that did not concern doctrines important to the Gospel. He did not say in the passages quoted that the Word might be in error, but that he would not be bothered. In our preaching of the Gospel we probably very seldom, or even never, find it necessary to try to harmonize seeming contradictions, yet that does not constitute an admission that the Bible is in error.

Now something concerning the alleged discrepancies in the Written Word. It has always been popular to seek to discredit the Written Word by pointing out contradictions in it. The method is to interpret each statement involved independently and then if these interpretations contradict each other it is claimed that the Word contradicts itself. But one of the fundamental rules of interpretation as taught in the Lutheran Church is that Scriptures should interpret Scriptures. It is easy to jump to conclusions as to the meaning of a passage, but we check our conclusions by other passages dealing with the same topic. Let me illustrate by comparing the passages in Acts 9 and 22 used by Dr. Kantonen, and after him by Rev. Neve, who finds here "glaring inaccuracies." They tell us that in Acts 9 it is recorded that Paul's companions heard the voice but saw nothing, and that in Acts 22 we read that they saw the light, but heard nothing. But the word *nothing* does not occur in either passage. That word is read into both passages. In Acts 9:7 we read: "Hearing the voice, but beholding no man" (Am. Stand.). In Acts 22 we read: "And they that were with me beheld indeed the light, but they heard not the voice of him that spake to me." It is not my purpose to try to give an interpretation that shall be accepted by everybody, only to call attention to the fact that the passages are different and do not contradict each other. There certainly is no contradiction between "seeing no one" and "beheld indeed the light." There is also no necessary contradiction between "hearing the voice" and "heard not the voice of him that spake to me." It is a reasonable explanation that in the first instance they simply heard the sound of the voice, and that in the second passage we are told that they did not hear the words of the speaker. According to my Greek dictionary, the word *phone* can mean merely a sound, or it can also mean an articulate sound. It is perfectly possible to hear a sound without hearing an articulate sound, to hear the voice of a speaker without hearing the words of the speaker. There is also a difference indicated in the fact that

in the first passage the word *voice* is in the genitive case, but in the second it is found in the accusative. It is only by trying to make the Written Word contradict itself that discrepancies are found in these passages.

This is one example of how contradictions are created, and I shall not take space to deal with the other alleged discrepancies. Even if we could not, because of our limited knowledge of the usages of language and of historical detail, harmonize all passages, we could not confidently claim errors. The late Dr. Robert Dick Wilson of Princeton Theological Seminary, one of the most learned Biblical scholars of modern times, who again and again confounded negative critics of the Bible by showing that their criticisms were based on ignorance of pertinent facts, declared that no one now is in possession of sufficient accurate information to prove a single error in the Bible.

Language seems to be a poor vehicle of thought, and I suspect that many of the arguments that have been raging concerning verbal inspiration have been due to a different understanding of what the words mean. To me they mean that the Bible, which is made up of words, is God's Word to man. I have no other Bible than this book made up of words, and if these words are not God's Words, then God has not spoken to me. I believe that spiritual intuition or any other concepts other than those clearly taught by the very words of the Bible are like shifting sand and are dangerous foundations for Christian hope.

The entering wedge for the great apostasy called modernism, which so weakened the message of Protestantism in America and all but wrecked it, was the successful attack upon the doctrine of the inspiration of the Written Word. Now that Protestantism is beginning slowly and painfully to recover from that defeat, should Lutheranism surrender its solid foundation and plunge into the sea of confusion which so nearly swallowed the rest of the Protestant Church? The truth of God's Word as taught by the Lutheran Church is not palatable to natural man, and when the authority of the Written Word is surrendered, that truth is quickly perverted so that it may be more agreeable to the natural human heart.

The Lutheran Church in America has passed through crises before, similar to the one which seems to be facing it now. In the days of *The Definite Platform* the distinctive doctrines of Our Church were threatened with extinction. But God raised up learned and zealous defenders of the truth, and the crisis was passed. It is my prayer that even now the truth may not suffer defeat by default, but that men of learning and wisdom and devotion may arise to defend our heritage.

AGAPE, *Caritas*, Charity

Communism has attacked Christianity on many fronts. One of the most dangerous points of attack is that of confusing Christian terminology or pinning responsibility on the Church where she

cannot be held responsible. Thus the Christian idea of "charity" has been attacked again and again. Maxim Gorky said some years ago: The Church "has never tried to alleviate the life of the workers by any other means than charity, which robs the worker of dignity." It is quite evident that Gorky and his fellow propagandists narrow down this term "charity" to mean merely "giving of alms," "throwing money to the poor." In attacking the weakest link in a strong chain the Communists hope to render it useless.

The Church will do well to re-examine the full scope of the word "charity," its Latin and Greek antecedents, and to put the emphasis on the primary meanings of the term. In other words, the Church must continuously teach and preach the whole meaning of "charity," all its implications, and must clearly set forth all dangers connected with a one-sided understanding. For while it is true that the idea of "charity" has been debased by non-Christians or even anti-Christians, we must at the same time readily admit that our own people, even within the Lutheran Church, who are giving so generously to alleviate the needs of their stricken fellow men, have adopted certain connotations, as, e. g., "reward," "good conscience," which are not Biblical at all if used as motivating forces, for their "charity."

What is Christian "charity"? Our English word is derived from the French *charité*, which in turn comes from Latin *caritas*, meaning "dearness, fondness, affection." This Latin word *caritas* is the most common translation in St. Jerome's Vulgate of Greek *agape*. (*Agape* is also translated *dilectio*, from which we derive English "delight.") The early versions of our English Bible translated *caritas* sometimes "love," sometimes "charity." In the King James Version *agape* was translated "charity." Luther translated it "Liebe," but since the German term was always wider than the English word "charity," this "Liebe" of Luther's Bible is usually qualified by preachers and teachers as "christliche Liebe," "Liebe Gottes," "Naechstenliebe," etc.

The primary meaning of "charity" is not "giving of alms," but — as we have seen — "dearness, fondness, affection." It is used to denote: 1. God's love to man; 2. Man's love to God; 3. Man's love to his neighbor; and 4. Christian love for our fellow men in general. In this latter sense it is also used without any specially Christian associations to indicate: natural affection. In the New Testament certain obligations were imposed upon those who accepted God's *agape* and wanted to practice *agape* on their fellow men. It was, however, not until the Middle Ages that the word *caritas* was identified — often exclusively — with the mere "giving of alms." While it is true that the popular preachers and the great mass of believers and above all, irresponsible church leaders placed an ever-greater emphasis on "almsgiving" and corrupted this beautiful Christian *agape* and abused it as a means to gain their own ends: money for the Church and a "reward in heaven" for the believer — it must also be emphasized that the best Christians from

St. Paul to Luther tried to keep *agape*, *caritas*, clean from all corruption.

Another important point is that since the early Middle Ages *caritas* was applied to works of mercy for the poor, which led to the deplorable confusion mentioned above. Chrysostom said, if there were no poor, there would be no opportunity to do good works. This was a misconception, which has narrowed down the meaning of "charity" to this day. Many unthinking people, even within our Church, apply this word only to the less fortunate and thus rob it of its deepest meaning: God's love for man, man's love for God, man's love for his neighbor regardless of his social position. We must see to it that this all-inclusive interpretation of *caritas* is preserved. There will be no real "charity" among Christians if we overemphasize one phase of it at the expense of the others. The humanist may feel a mere moral obligation towards the poor, the Christian, however, will feel a higher obligation.

What is this obligation? Negatively, the Christian will do nothing that may hurt or harm his neighbor in body or soul. Luther fought valiantly against the Roman misconception of almsgiving. He emphasized again and again that this practice was not charitable, but dangerous. Everyone who has visited Catholic countries will readily understand his anger. *Caritas* that does not rehabilitate the recipient is not "charity." In his "Vorrede" to *von der falschen Bettler Bueberei* (1528) Luther states:

Every city and village should know its poor and should register them, that they might be helped. But they shall not allow foreign or strange beggars (to beg within their walls).¹

He complains that he himself has been deceived quite often by impostors ("Ich bin selbst diese Jahr her also beschissen und versucht von falschen Landstreichern und Zungendreschern, mehr denn ich bekennen will"). If I give money to a beggar, I contribute to his delinquency. If I support a drunkard with no strings attached, I will have to answer for him. Begging thus becomes a vice. In his *Grosser Sermon vom Wucher* (1519) Luther warns:

Now there is so much begging going on that it has become an honorable profession; and not only worldlings are begging, but also priests do it on a remunerative basis (als ein koestlich Ding getrieben). . . . I think that the spiritual and secular powers would not overstep the limits of their office if they would forbid all begging (so sie alle Bettel-saecke abtaeten).²

Indiscriminate giving of alms debases the person who receives such gifts, it robs him of his feeling of responsibility, it contributes towards his indifference and causes his final downfall. Therefore in the "Ordnung eines gemeinen Kastens" (1523) Luther lays down the following ruling:

No beggars shall be allowed in our parish. . . . Everyone, excepting only the old and sick, shall either work or be expelled from our parish.³

¹ Munich Ed., V, 243.

² Munich Ed., V, 162.

³ Munich Ed., V, 61.

In a positive way, *caritas* will try to rehabilitate both spiritually and physically. Luther advocates the establishment of homes for the aged, the sick, the poor, and the orphans, and he stresses that everyone should be taught the Christian fundamentals and also to work. The great Inner Mission institutions of our Church are trying to work along these lines. But it is important that our congregations and individual Lutherans, too, see to it that their charity is channeled in the right direction.

We dare not make a distinction between friends and enemies, provided, of course, that the need for charity is real. Luther in *An die Pfarrherren, wider den Wucher zu predigen* (1540) gives an exegesis of Matt. 5:42 in which he states:

Thou shalt give to everybody; this does not mean that I must give to all people or to all those in need. He [Christ] knows that this is impossible. But He is arguing against the Jewish idea that . . . thou shalt love thy neighbor, but hate thy enemy. . . . Over against this idea Christ says: thou shalt give to everybody, not only to thy friend, but also to thy enemy. Thou shalt not exclude anybody.⁴

We must give in the right spirit. The left hand must not know what the right hand does (Matt. 6:3). Luther says (a few pages later):

Give from a simple heart, not for vainglory; and try as hard as you can to forget about it; act as if you had done nothing; or else the smell of the devil will stay with it (sonst haenget sich gar gern dran der Teufelstank, dass man sich solcher Wohltat kitzelt, und gesehen sein will).⁵

Do not give to be seen by others. God will see into your heart. God will reward you, but you must not expect His reward. In his *Tischreden* Luther rebuked Dr. Jonas. One day Luther and his table companions had gone downtown, and Luther had given alms to the poor. Dr. Jonas had followed his example, saying: "Who knows where God will give it back to me." Luther said: "You act as if God had not given it to you in the first place; you must give freely, for pure charity's sake, willingly!"⁶

Thus we return to our point of departure: God has given us, we give to our fellow men and show that we love Him. Charity divorced from the love of God is not charity. According to Luther, *caritas* is one great important work. It is only good in so far as God has commanded it. In *Von den guten Werken* (1520) he writes:

We ought to know first that there are not good works except those which God has commanded. . . . Accordingly we must learn how to distinguish among good works from the Commandments of God and not from appearance.⁷

Caritas must be done in faith (Rom. 14:23). Luther writes in the same treatise:

⁴ *Volksbibliothek, Concordia Publ. House, XIII—XIV.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Munich Ed., VII, 314.*

⁷ *Munich Ed., II, Introduction.*

If things are done with such faith that we believe that they please God, then they are praiseworthy not because of their virtue, but because of such faith, for which all works are of equal value.⁸

The world may judge us by the outward impact that our charity makes upon society, but God judges us by our faith. There may be greater blessings in little things done in faith than in big projects done for selfish and worldly considerations. This difference in motivation is felt today by many sincere Christians abroad, who have come to realize that even the most splendid efforts at charity given without faith will not relieve them and who turn towards their fellow Christians in America in the hope that Christian charity, however limited, carries with it the blessings from on High. Like everything that a Christian does for God's sake, *caritas* must fill his whole being. It is not just another department of our life, but our whole life.

God does not only *command* us to do good works, he *allows* us to do them. This permission enables us to exercise and strengthen our faith. Chemnitz mentions in his *Enchiridion* that Luther, Melanchthon, Regius, and the Augustana and the Apology considered this an important function of good works.⁹

Thus we arrive at the all-inclusive interpretation which Luther took directly from the New Testament. Our whole life is *caritas*, either passive or active. We are surrounded by it, we must radiate it.

As long as there are sinners, this interpretation of *agape*, *caritas*, charity, will be watered down or challenged, sometimes for selfish reasons, sometimes simply because "the flesh is weak" and cannot adhere to the things that are acceptable in the sight of God. But the Church dare not give in. The Church can do much in these dark days, which in many ways resemble the days just before the Reformation, to help preserve the true meaning of Christian "charity." Only if we are faithful in our teaching and preaching shall we be able to meet the challenge of our adversaries. Only then shall we prevail against them.

WALTER G. TILLMANNS

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Ed. by A. L. Graebner, 1886, p. 123 f.