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Brief Studies

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BRIEF STUDIES

CHRIST'S DEATH THE END OF OUR DYING *

Death rules man with tyrannical power. Death obtained this tyrannical power because of sin (Rom. 5:12), and behind sin stands the demanding and condemning power of the Law (v. 13). As Luther pointed out in the theses against the antinomian Agricola, these three tyrants, Death—Sin—Law, always march hand in hand. The tyrannizing and terrorizing power of these tyrants becomes most evident in the power of death. To understand the dreadful power of death, it is necessary to understand the true nature of death. Man's death is not—and that is the dreadful fact—a death in the usual concept of this term, but an eternally ongoing process, an eternal *dying*. In the light of God's Law—God's condemning and convicting declaration—human existence is, as Luther states in his exposition of the 90th Psalm, a life constantly surrounded by death. In reality human existence is not a march from birth to an ever higher form of life; it is not a constant progress ever upward and onward. It is a journey from birth to death; it is a constant dying. Death is not a termination, an end; it is a *dying* death, a condition where "their worm dieth not, and their fire is not extinguished" (Mark 9:46). True, we speak of our physical existence as life. But viewed in the light of God's Law the term "life" is actually a misnomer and a lie. Life as the natural man experiences it is an eternal dying. Death is therefore infinitely more than the temporal end of a temporal existence, more than a mere transition or change from one form of existence to another. In its true nature and in its real meaning under the Law, death is the absolute and complete perversion of eternal life. Because of sin and because of the divine Law which stands behind sin, man's death is the eternal separation from God, the Source and Author of life, from Him who is Life. Death is the state in which man cannot live and cannot die. And the climax of the dreadfulness of this eternal dying lies in this, that man is solely and entirely responsible for this eternal dying, and at the same time is utterly incapable of freeing himself from the self-imposed guilt and power of an eternal dying.

In all human history only one death has occurred which was death

* This study was suggested in part by Heinrich Vogel, *Christologie*, I, Muenchen, 1949, pp. 272—295. A review of this volume is planned for an early issue of this journal.

in the true and full sense of the word. Christ's death was not a *dying*; it was *death*, a killing, a destroying, an annihilating death. In His death, Christ became a plague unto death and a pestilence unto hell (Hosea 13:14, which Luther rendered: "Tod, ich will dir ein Gift sein. Hoelle, ich will dir eine Pestilenz sein"). Our Savior's life was not like ours in one significant point. Our life is spent in the sign of that dreadful lie which pretends to be life when in reality it is nothing but dying. Christ was not, as we are, surrounded by death in the midst of life. He was at all times the Lord of life, of His life. But as the Lord of life He enters the realm of death. He is forsaken by God. As the eternal Son of God and as true man in one person, He, the God-Man, assumed our death. For He was made to be sin for us and thereby assumed the curse that was ours.

In His death, Christ not only revealed the true nature of death, but at the same time swallowed up death in victory (Is. 25:8; Heb. 2:14; 2 Tim. 1:10; 1 Cor. 15:55). His death is the antidote against our dying, and the only antidote. Christ not only died our death, but He killed our death. It is the glorious work of our Redeemer that He has completely, once and for all, without any reservations whatsoever, revealed in His death the true nature of death and at the same time has once and for all destroyed death. Being separated from God in the mystery of His person, an experience which no man can describe adequately and which, as Luther states, only the damned in hell realize, Christ has restored us to life. In the indissoluble union of Calvary and the Empty Tomb we find the complete annihilation of death. There Law and Gospel have met in such a paradox that the Law is completely destroyed. Death and life have been engaged in a mortal battle in which life and immortality have been brought to light.

The death of Christ as Gospel is unspeakably rich in its significance for us. Christ has destroyed the spiritual dying in which man is held captive by nature. In the midst of death the believer is now surrounded by life. He has arisen to a new spiritual life, the very antithesis of the eternal dying. Through faith the believer has now the conquering death of Christ as his very own possession. Commenting on Rom. 6:3, Luther in his Lectures on Romans in 1515/16 states:

That [our burial with Christ] is in the true sense of the word the meaning of death. In every other death there somehow remains mingled an element of living. This is not the case in Christ's death, where life has appeared in its perfect purity, since His life is life eternal. Only to the death of Christ can be ascribed all the characteristics of death in a true and complete sense, and only in His death.

And everything that dies in this death perishes totally and disappears into an eternal nothingness (*in nihil sempiternum perit*), and nothing whatsoever of it shall ever return, because Christ's death in truth kills and destroys even eternal death. Thus not only sin dies, but also the sinner when he is justified, for sin shall not return into all eternity, as the Apostle says: "Christ dieth henceforth no more." (John Ficker, *Die Scholien*, p. 153.)

The Christian shares the death of Christ, not merely as a dying, but as a destroying death. He is no longer separate from God, nor can God ever forsake him. The Christian's life is now the new life in Christ, completely free from the triad of tyrants: Sin — Law — Death. This is the ground of our hope and the source of our new life in Christ. In and through Christ's death, which we make our own fully and completely, we have died to the Law and its condemning voice; we have died to the old man and his evil lusts, and, having passed through death, we are alive in Christ and to Christ.

The death of Christ as mortifying and destroying death is the key to the Savior's mysterious words spoken to Martha: "Whosoever liveth and believeth in Me shall never die" (John 11:26). It is indeed difficult to believe that our mortal frame, bearing the germ of death constantly, has already conquered death. But the Savior's words are more than a figure of speech; they proclaim the solemn and glorious truth: In the midst of death we are surrounded by life. Only he can appreciate these words who, like Luther, sees the significance of the Savior's work as applying to the total person consisting of body and soul and who has completely freed himself from the dualistic view of man so prevalent in the Early Church and in certain sections of Christianity today.* Because of Christ's vicarious death — the only real death that ever occurred — we must look upon our bodies as grains of seed which experience such a process as will bring forth new fruit. Then our dying actually becomes a gain (Phil. 1:21), and the death of God's children is counted precious in God's sight (Ps. 116:15).

But this is not merely a future bliss. Through faith it is also a present reality. In a continuous "now" every believer shares the death and life of His Savior from the moment of his Baptism in infancy, through childhood, adolescence, manhood, until old age. On every level of his life the Christian will ask: Who shall deliver me from this dying? and shall always receive the answer: In Christ you have already the complete victory over your dying. For this reason eschatology is more than a

* See William H. Baar, "Luther's Sacramental Thought," *The Lutheran Quarterly*, November, 1950, pp. 414—425, especially 417 f.

mere appendix to Christian dogmatics; it permeates it at every point; it is the glorious "already — not yet" of the Christian faith.

Without the death of Christ the existence of the soul would be an eternal dying, an eternal separation from God, an eternal existence under the verdict of God's Law. This state is so dreadful that the natural man is ready to accept Satan's delusion that the soul will be completely annihilated. Man, however, cannot escape the eternal dying by denying it, but solely by finding in Christ's death the antidote to his dying. The new life begun at the moment of the believer's justification is an eternal living, an eternal victory through and with Christ over all our tyrants. This is indeed victorious living now and forever.

F. E. MAYER

NOTES ON THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH OF ITALY

"Whenever the Pope steps on the porch of his Vatican Palace on Monte Vaticano to bless the faithful, he is bound to see on Monte Pincio the stately tower and the impressive red-tiled roof of the Lutheran church in Rome." So our guide told us last summer. We could see the Lutheran church even from the Piazza di San Pietro, and we were proud of it. Monte Pincio lies east of Monte Vaticano.

At Christ's time Monte Pincio or Mons Pincius bore the special name of *collis hortorum*, the garden hill, for here were the famous *horti Luculli* and the equally celebrated *horti Salusti*. When about thirty years ago the builders dug down into Monte Pincio to erect, in Via Toscana, No. 7, the Lutheran church, parish house, and parsonage, they brought to light beautiful pieces of stone from the villa of the author Sallust, who here lived in "luxurious retirement," writing his famous *Catilinarian War* and his *Jugurthine War*. He died in 34 B. C.

As a farewell gift Dean Erich Dahlgruen presented to the writer two eminently interesting books: *Geschichte der deutschen evangelischen Gemeinde in Rom. 1819 bis 1928*, by Dr. Ernst Schubert, and *Resurrectis! Die Geschichte des protestantischen Friedhofs in Rom*, by Gottfried Niemeier.

At Neuendettelsau, Bavaria, Rev. Zoltan Antony, pastor of the Lutheran parish of Naples, gave to the writer a series of valuable notes on the Lutheran Church in Italy and on its important refugee work in southern Italy. Pastor Antony attended the Missouri Synod-VELKD Theological Conference in Loehe's town and was a most interested listener and enthusiastic student. It is his intention to come to America and attend our Seminary for a year, finishing his thesis for the doctor's title in theology.

From the three sources just mentioned the following notes on the

Evangelical Lutheran Church of Italy, which Pastor Antony usually represents by the letters ELKI, are taken. In the *News Bulletin of the Lutheran World Federation* (Vol. 9, No. 9; Sept. 1, 1950) the Lutheran Church in Italy is called "The Lutheran Church of Italy and Trieste," but we shall use the name given to it by Pastor Antony. In Italy also the name "The United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Italy" was used.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Italy grew out of the small and scattered groups of evangelical worshipers connected with the German embassies in that country. At first evangelical worship could be conducted only within the buildings of the German legation. It was only through ceaseless negotiation and downright hard fighting with the Roman *Curia* that property for evangelical church worship could be procured. Today the Lutheran congregation at Rome owns a beautiful and spacious church property, the gift of hundreds of loyal Lutherans. Fortunately the church, parish house, and parsonage could be completed before the devastating First World War broke out. In Rome the Lutherans own also a large and imposing Deaconess House in Via Alessandro Farnese (No. 18), not far removed from the heart of the Eternal City and the Roman *sanctum sanctorum*, *San Pietro in Vaticano*.

It was still more difficult for the Lutheran groups in Rome to secure a fitting cemetery for the burial of their dead. The story of the famous "Protestant Cemetery," as it is usually called, shows to what pains Rome will go to prevent evangelical Christians from obtaining recognition and protection even after death wherever it is in power. It was only due to the united diplomacy and strategy of Germany and England that at last the victory was won.

So finally, on the Monte Testaccio, the ancient Mons Testaceus, the "Mountain of Potsherds," near the now famous "Pyramid of Caius Cestius," who died before 12 B. C. and who for his tomb had adopted the Egyptian pyramidal form, a small plot of ground, originally a picnic place for poor people and a cow pasture, was yielded to the evangelical Christians as a burying ground for their dead. But there was to be no display of mourning, and the dead were to be buried at night; and there was to be no wall protecting the graves and the tombs against dogs, hoodlums, and the inciting wrath of inimical priests. Even Alexander von Humboldt pleaded in vain to have the graves of his two sons, buried there, protected against those who could see no reason whatever why the graves of evangelicals merit respect.

Today this retired spot, secured by a strong wall, is a place of beauty, quiet, and rest. Of the famous men here laid to rest, we mention only the English poets Keats and Shelley, and the son of

Goethe, who died in Rome after a relatively short and unfruitful life. We offer these details to give the reader a little of the background against which evangelical Christendom had to assert itself in the *urbs papas*. Many famous evangelicals living in Rome turned Catholic, while others, such as Goethe, never showed any interest in the evangelical movement in Italy.

Of the Lutheran congregations in Italy, those in Rome, Florence, and Naples are the oldest, for in a more or less organized form they existed for more than a century. The first Reformation Festival was held in Rome on October 31 and November 1, 1817. There was no evangelical pastor present, but Bunsen, the secretary of the German legation, in whose house the festivity took place, read a fitting address on the meaning of the Reformation, and suitable Scripture passages were read and prayers spoken. The Reformation Festival was attended by many famous persons, among them Alexander von Humboldt and his learned wife, the German ambassador Niebuhr, Professor Brandis of Bonn, and Kestner, the secretary of the Hanoverian legation, a son of Goethe's Lotte. In the conclusion of a letter to his sister, the devoutly loyal Bunsen writes: "At the close of the service, Niebuhr kissed me, and all the attendants were deeply impressed. Our Catholic fellow Germans, who are our best friends, were amazed. The Italians were enraged. I hope that in 1917 our grandchildren will be able to celebrate the Reformation Festival in Rome in a church." Preliminary arrangements for this Reformation Festival, by the way, were made by faithful Bunsen and his friends in the ancient German "Kaffeehaus," the Café Greco, in Via Condotti, which also Goethe attended and which is still in existence.

At present there are Lutheran congregations with pastors in the following cities: Rome, Genoa, Milan, Meran, Bozen, Trieste, and Naples. Churches without resident pastors are extant in Venice, Genoa Nervi, Rapallo, San Remo, Bordighera, Florence, Capri, Messina, Catania, and Palermo.

At the Synod of Florence, which took place from October 13 to 16, 1949, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Italy was reorganized. Since then it has become more and more conscious of its Lutheran heritage, especially as it has become more closely connected with the United Lutheran Church of Germany and the Lutheran World Federation. Both Pastor Antony and Dean Dahlgren assured the writer this past summer that in the future the work must be done more and more in Italian and that suitable textbooks must be prepared for the indoctrination of young and old, especially for winning for the Lutheran Church some of the many churchless in Italy.

The confessional basis of the ELKI is the Augsburg Confession, and all who subscribe to it may join the Church, no matter what race they are, Germans, English, Scandinavians, and so forth. The newly organized Church as yet has many problems of doctrine and practice, but the writer was assured that efforts are being made toward greater confessionalism and a more Scriptural and Lutheran church practice.

At the head of the ELKI is Dean Erich Dahlgruen, No. 7, Via Toscana, Roma, whose functions are very similar to those of the general president of our own Church. The writer was told that the president proper must be a layman to satisfy the peculiar church laws of Italy. The ELKI at present has about 5,000 members. Its chief tasks are the witnessing of the Gospel, the care of souls, the reorganization of the existing congregations, the refugee mission, and the newly begun youth work.

The pastor of the Naples parish must first of all take care of the local congregation, which consists of about 250 souls. In addition, he must supply with services the scattered groups in southern Italy and on the Island of Capri, a parish that numbers about 500 souls. To his charge is entrusted also the refugee mission in the vicinity of Naples, which means the care of 300 and more souls. To him finally has been assigned the youth work in the whole Church, which means caring for more than 400 young people.

In addition to this work, there are to be organized new congregations in such cities as Bari, Syracuse, and Taormina. Lutherans living on the Island of Tschia requested Lutheran services when Pastor Antony was in Neuendettelsau. There are many other opportunities, and the work is urgent, while the laborers are few. Youth work has only begun. In Cerro, on famous Lago Maggiore, a Lutheran youth camp last summer brought together 45 young Lutherans from all parts of Italy. These young Lutherans are eager to know more about their Church and to serve it in a more abundant way. So this work must be carried on more intensively.

Pastor Antony writes: "After June 30, 1951, I intend to come to America to finish my treatise on 'Das Katechumenat bei Gerhard von Zezschwitz.' I would be thankful if the American vicar could come to Naples as soon as possible, in order that he might be inducted into his work. All that which we do in Italy in the name of Jesus, we do to His glory." The address of Pastor Antony is Rev. Zoltan Antony, Portici, Napoli, Via E. Gianturco 43.

The American Lutheran Church, by the way, has lent to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Italy a student vicar for two years. The

undersigned met him at the theological conference at Bad Harzburg, and he proved himself a most interesting reporter on Italian church affairs.

In a special descriptive article on the refugee and diaspora work, Pastor Antony writes by way of conclusion: "On the second day of Christmas (1949) a Christmas service was held on Capri, that gloriously beautiful island in the Gulf of Naples. The blue sea, the rugged rocks, the enchanting summer homes, the green gardens, the blossoming flowers, and, above all, the azure-blue sky of Italy with its bright sun formed a gorgeous setting for our celebration. Also here the glad tidings of Christmas were proclaimed, and at the end of the service all joined in singing the Christmas anthem 'O du froehliche, o du selige, gnadenbringende Weihnachtszeit. . .'"

To Capri aging, cynical Tiberius withdrew to "enjoy seclusion" and "disgusting debauchery." Under Tiberius, as everyone knows, Christ died. Of Tiberius, and his life and work, witness only the splendidly ghastly ruins in Rome and on Capri, while to the everliving, triumphant Christ thousands of faithful believers are singing anthems of praise and glory—"O du froehliche, O du selige, gnadenbringende Weihnachtszeit. . ."

J. T. MUELLER