

LECTURES ON THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH THE TRUE VISIBLE CHURCH OF GOD
ON EARTH by Dr. F. Pieper.³¹

FOURTH LECTURE: The Written Word of God is the Sole and Only Sufficient Source and Norm, Standard
and Rule of all Christian Doctrine and Practice, Faith and Life.

(Fourth Lecture concluded; continued from *Morsels From The Saviour* October 2013)

A Christian Must Base His Faith Alone on God's Word.



Our Lutheran congregations also follow this declaration of Luther's when in their congregational constitution they have the usual requirement that every congregational resolution³², right from the outset, is **not to be regarded as a valid resolution**³³ of the congregation if it were to be against God's Word. That is truly Lutheran.

Luther expresses this with great forcefulness in the following words: "This is a witness that they [the true Christians] **believe** not because of men, but **because of the very Word**. There are many who believe because of me, but those only are the upright who continue in it though they might hear (which God forbid!) that I would deny and forsake it. These are such who do not care what evil, abominable, and disgraceful things they might hear of me and our people; **for they do not believe in Luther, but in the very Christ. The Word keeps them, and they keep the Word**; they abandon Luther, no matter whether he be a rascal or holy. God can speak as well by Balaam as by Isaiah, by Caiaphas as well as by Peter, even by a donkey. **I myself indeed do not acknowledge Luther nor do I want to acknowledge him**; I do not preach him but I preach Christ. The devil get him if he can; but he should let Christ remain in peace. Thus we also fare well." ("Letters to Hartmuth von Cronberg" [1522], XV, 1988 f.; S.L. XV, 1675; translated in Walther T.V.C., p.53; bold emphasis is Pieper's).

At the end³⁴ Luther uses a very strong expression in order correctly to inculcate that one must not base his faith³⁵ on a human being, but **alone on God's Word**.

Testimonies From the Lutheran Confessions that Not Reason, Nor Man's Decisions, but the Word Alone is the Sole Source and Standard of Faith and Life.

Let us hear of some testimonies which show that the Lutheran Church has nothing to do with **human reason** as a source and norm of theology. Human reason gropes completely in the dark when it draws from its own wisdom in regard to the way to salvation; it proves to be a false way, the way of **works**. Therefore by nature all people want to go the way of works, not the way of faith. The former³⁶ hold to the natural man for its wisdom, the latter³⁷ regard it as foolishness. In opposing that³⁸, we Lutherans hold fast to the way of the Gospel, to the way of faith, because Holy Scripture bears testimony to this and because we do not grant to human reason any judgement whatsoever in spiritual matters.

It is stated in the **Apology** (Article 4 according to the Latin text): "**Human wisdom** gazes at the Law, and seeks in it justification. Accordingly, also the scholastic doctors, great and talented men, proclaim this as the highest work of the Law, and ascribe to this work justification. But deceived by human wisdom, they did not look upon the uncovered, but upon the veiled face of Moses, just as the Pharisees, philosophers, Mahometans. **But we preach the foolishness of the Gospel**, in which another righteousness is revealed, namely, that for the

³¹ **Dr. F. Pieper** (1852- 1931) delivered these lectures to the entire student body of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis in the so-called "Lutherstunden" or **Luther Hours**. He followed a tradition started by Dr. Walther. On September 4, 1885 **Dr. Walther** stated: "We call these Friday evening lectures, which form, as it were, the conclusion of the week's instruction, 'Luther Hours,' chiefly because in these lectures I let our beloved father Luther, the God-appointed Reformer and the common teacher of our church, speak to you." (Walther, "Law and Gospel," p. 344). In these lectures Dr. Pieper deals with significant points found in Walther's outstanding book, "The Evangelical Lutheran Church the True Visible Church of God on Earth," and further explains them to his audience. This particular series began on Nov. 31, 1889 and was completed on June 12, 1891.

³² or decision.

³³ or decision.

³⁴ of the last quote.

³⁵ I.it.: not denend with his faith.

sake of Christ, as Propitiator, we are accounted righteous, when we believe that for Christ's sake God has been reconciled to us. **Neither are we ignorant how far distant this doctrine is from the judgment of reason and of the Law.** Nor are we ignorant that the doctrine of the Law concerning love makes a much greater show; for it is wisdom. **But we are not ashamed of the foolishness of the Gospel.** For the sake of Christ's glory we defend this, and beseech Christ, by His Holy Ghost, to aid us that we may be able to make this clear and manifest." (Triglotta, p.183; bold emphasis is Pieper's).

In regard to the same point it is stated in the same **Article of the Apology**: "But works become conspicuous among men. **Human reason** naturally admires these, and because it sees only works, and does not understand or consider faith, it dreams accordingly that these works merit remission of sins and justify. This *opinion of the Law* inheres by nature in men's minds; neither can it be expelled, unless when we are divinely taught³⁹. **But the mind must be recalled from such carnal opinions to the Word of God.**"(Triglotta, p.196; bold emphasis is Pieper's).

Everyone not taught by God, that is, every unconverted person before God, relies on his good works if he at all still applies to himself the question: What must I do to be saved? This is also done by every unconverted person inside or outside the borders of the Lutheran Church. The former relies on this that he stands outwardly in the fellowship of the church, that he listens to the sermon, goes to the Lord's Supper, yes, that he perhaps is a teacher or pastor in the church who defends and confesses the right doctrine. For does not even human reason recognise the things which stand⁴⁰ in Holy Scripture?

Concerning this it is stated in the **Formula of Concord**: "Although man's **reason** or natural intellect indeed has still a **dim spark of the knowledge that there is a God, as also of the doctrine of the Law, Rom.1:19 ff.**, yet it is so ignorant, blind, and perverted that when even the most ingenious and learned men upon earth read or hear the Gospel of the Son of God and the promise of eternal salvation, they cannot from their own powers perceive, apprehend, understand, or believe and regard it as true, but the more diligence and earnestness they employ, wishing to comprehend these spiritual things with their reason, the less they understand or believe, and before they become enlightened and are taught by the Holy Ghost, they regard all this as foolishness or fictions." (Solid Declaration, Art.II, 9, Triglotta, p.883; Bold emphasis is Pieper's).

Though human reason knows something of the **Law**, how a person should conduct himself in regard to his works, yet that does not mean it knows anything correctly of **salvation**; for by the way of **works** no person will be saved. And how does it stand with human reason when it is now faced with the Gospel, with this completely, totally different way, namely, that we are righteous without the works of the Law, alone through faith, through faith in what Christ, the Son of God Who became man, has done for all mankind? Then human reason says as long as it judges according to its own understanding: "Foolishness!" And human reason **through culture and education** also comes to no other judgement, it continues to say: "It is foolishness!" The **scholars of this world** with their learning do not come close to the Gospel, but the more they strive to understand the Gospel with their reason, the more further they depart from the Gospel. Therefore also the Apostle already points to this fact: that not many wise according to the flesh, etc., are called, but what is foolish before the world, those God has elected, 1 Cor.1:26 ff.

Our church also will have nothing to do with the fathers, councils and laws of the church as a source and norm of Christian doctrine. The **Apology** says: "The consensus of the prophets is assuredly to be judged as the consensus of the Church universal. [I verily think that if all the holy prophets are unanimously agreed in a declaration (since God regards even a single prophet as an inestimable treasure), it would also be a decree, a declaration, and a unanimous strong conclusion of the universal, catholic, Christian, holy Church, and would be justly regarded as such.] **We concede neither to the Pope nor to the Church the power to make decrees against this consensus of the prophets.**" (Art. XII, 66, Triglotta, p.271; bold emphasis is Pieper's).

Here we answer the question: What have we exactly regarded as the decisions or decrees of the **church**? Concerning that our Confessions answer: **Whatever has been taken from the Word of the Prophets and Apostles, from the Scriptures**, that is a decree or decision of the church. **The church as a church speaks that which has been revealed in God's Word; what it does not speak from the Word of God that is not to be regarded as a decree of the church**, even if all the popes, all the scholars and doctors were to come together and draw up resolutions⁴¹ beyond God's Word.

How do we then regard⁴² the holy fathers? We honour them, we imitate their **life** when they have left behind for us a good example, but not now nor ever do we also allow even in the smallest⁴³ point our **faith** to be determined⁴⁴ by the holy fathers.

In the **Smalcald Articles** it is stated: “It will not do to frame **articles of faith** from the works or words of the holy **fathers.**” (Part II, Art. II, 15, Triglotta, p.467; bold emphasis is Pieper’s).

Luther also confessed the same at Worms. When he was required to recant, he finally replied: “Because your imperial majesty and gracious electors and princes desire a clear, simple, and correct reply, I will give you one which has neither horns nor teeth, namely this: Unless I am persuaded and convinced by the **testimonies from Holy Scripture** or by public, clear, and plain reasons and causes (for I believe **neither the pope nor the councils** alone, because it is clear and manifest that they have often erred and contradicted themselves); unless then I am persuaded and my conscience is bound by **God’s Word** through **passages** which I **myself** have quoted and given, I cannot and will not recant, since it is neither safe nor profitable to do anything contrary to one’s conscience. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise, So help me God! Amen.” (XV, 2307 f.; S.L. XV, 1926; translation from Walther T.V.C., p.55; bold emphasis is Pieper’s).

What Luther at that time confessed in Worms, everyone of us must also confess. Our conscience must only be bound by **God’s Word**; if our conscience is bound also by **the teaching of men or the commandments of men**, then in this point we have already fallen away from God, from our Saviour as our only Master. **Luther** says concerning the power of the Christian Church to establish articles of faith: “The Christian Church has no power to establish **articles of faith**; it has never done it nor will it ever do it.” (Article Concerning the Power of the Christian Church [1530], XIX, 1190; S.L. XIX,958; translated in Walther T.V.C.p.55; bold emphasis is Pieper’s).

Church Merely Confesses the Faith Found in Scripture.

These are classic words. What then does the church do in regard to the articles of faith? The church does nothing else than **confess** that which is already revealed in Holy Scripture, also the articles of faith which are already presented⁴⁵. The church is, as it were, a pillar on which are written the divine truths revealed in Holy Scripture. So when a church body is so bold as to want to decree for itself its own articles of faith, then this church body does not act as a **Church**, but as a sect, as an organisation which rebels against Christ; for Christ wants articles of faith decided alone by His Word. The church can and should do nothing else than **confess** those articles of faith revealed by Christ in the best way possible to the world. Finally the Lutheran Church also has nothing to do with all **new revelations** outside of and alongside of Holy Scripture.

Thus it is stated in the **Smalcald Articles**: “In these matters which concern the spoken, outward Word, **we must firmly hold that God grants His Spirit or grace to no one, except through or with the preceding outward Word**, in order that we may [thus] be protected against the enthusiasts, i.e., spirits who boast that **they have the spirit without and before the Word, and accordingly judge Scripture or the spoken Word, and explain and stretch it at their pleasure**, as Muenzer did, and many still do at the present day, who wish to be acute judges between the spirit and the letter, and yet know not what they say or declare. For [indeed] the papacy also is nothing but sheer enthusiasm, by which the Pope boasts that all rights exists in the shrine of his heart, and whatever he decides and commands with [in] his church is spirit and right, even though it is above and contrary to Scripture and the spoken Word. All this is the old devil and the old serpent, who also converted Adam and Eve into enthusiasts, and led them from the outward Word of God to spiritualizing and self-conceit, and nevertheless he accomplished this through **other** outward words.... **Therefore we ought and must constantly maintain this point, that God does not wish to deal with us otherwise than through the spoken Word and the Sacraments. It is the devil himself whatsoever is extolled as Spirit without the Word and Sacraments.**”(Part III, Art.VIII,3-5,10, Triglotta, pp. 495, 497; bold emphasis is Pieper’s).

For Luther the external Word is the Word of Holy Scripture. The enthusiasts⁴⁶ of course have said that the Holy Spirit needs no vehicle by which He comes to the hearts of men, also that He even does not need the external Word of Holy Scripture. However we confess with Luther that the Holy Spirit comes **only** by this “vehicle” of the Word of Scripture.

⁴² what is our attitude toward them.

⁴³ most insignificant.

Luther also refers to his opponents, among whom the enthusiasts influenced, when they say: "The Spirit does not come by the external Word," while they at the same time still speak the external words and try to instruct the world with this external Word. If now the Spirit does not come through the external Word, then their much preaching must be pointless.

Concerning the alleged appearances of the souls of men it is stated in the **Smalcald Articles**: "**Evil spirits** have perpetrated much knavery [exercised their malice] **by appearing as the souls of the departed**, and with unspeakable [horrible] lies and tricks demanded masses, vigils, pilgrimages, and other alms. All of which we had to receive as **articles of faith**, and **to live accordingly**; and the Pope confirmed these things, as also the Mass and all other abominations. Here, too, there is no [cannot and must not be any] yielding or surrendering." (Part II, Art.II, 16, 17, Triglotta, p.467; bold emphasis is Pieper's).

When the **spiritualists** of our time talk about the appearance of the spirits of the dead, then there is a twofold possibility: either this is gross deception and the spirits which they bring up before us have flesh and bone in themselves, and there is no doubt this deception is placed before us in most cases; or it occurs so, --- also the case is not excluded --- that the devil with God's permission appears and deceives the spiritualist and those in the audience; **God has expressly forbidden in Scripture to consult with the dead**. Whoever nevertheless does that, he can also expect the punishment that God will allow him to be deceived by the evil spirits.

(Next time we continue with Lecture 5.)
(Delivered on 29 NOVEMBER 1889. Headings added. Translated BLW. Proofed KKM.)

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