

## Three Characteristics of True Theology<sup>1</sup>

Students of Concordia!

**Y**ou want to study theology at our St. Louis Concordia, and that is true theology. What true theology is, Holy Scripture places before us under several principles. At the beginning of a new student year I am making reference to three main principles. In the first place: True theology teaches only God's Word. Secondly: True theology teaches that we human beings obtain forgiveness of sins by grace, for Christ's sake, without the works of the law, alone by faith. Thirdly: True theology makes people certain of the grace of God.

### I.

Yes, **true theology teaches only God's Word**. That is its first characteristic. The word of men and the wisdom of men are completely excluded from theology. In order to know correctly this truth and to hold fast to it, we distinguish between Christ's kingdom and the kingdoms of this world.

Christ's kingdom is completely different from the kingdoms of this world, as Christ bore testimony to Pilate: **"My Kingdom is not of this world"** (John 18:36). That is also true in regard to the source by means of which knowledge is determined, the source from which both kingdoms are created (originate). In the kingdoms of this world the word of men and the wisdom of men have a territory in which they themselves should and can operate. The reason for this is that according to God's order the kingdoms of this world deal only with the things which serve human life in this world. After man's fall into sin people have desired for themselves that instead of loving each other, they love each other's goods, honour, body, life. Thus Scripture teaches and also world history bears testimony to this. That will also thus continue until the last day. In order to make it possible for people outwardly to live together in these circumstances and also to gain for His Church an outward homeland, God has also after man's fall into sin still allowed some understanding, namely, so much, that when they make use of their understanding or their natural reason, they are skilled in the things which are necessary for people outwardly to live together. We call these things with one expression "civil righteousness". Therefore we Christians thank God for a good, wise worldly government and also make intercession for kings and for everyone in authority in order that under their rule we may lead a peaceful and quiet life. In short, in the kingdoms of this world the wisdom of men and the word of men, according to God's will, have a legitimate area of activity.

It is completely different in Christ's kingdom, in the Christian Church. Concerning this area, as has been said, men's thoughts and men's word are completely excluded as a source by means of which knowledge is determined. There is a good reason for this. The reason for this is that the Christian Church is not possibly confined to that which one today calls the social gospel, but it deals with the life of people after this life on earth, with the things which save us sinful human beings from the guilt of sin, death and eternal damnation and after this earthly life lead us to an eternal, blessed (heavenly) life. For these things which the Scriptures include under the Gospel of the crucified Christ, even the **rulers of this world** (1 Cor. 2:8), possess no understanding, as St. Paul testifies of this in 1 Cor. 2 so clearly. Christ's Kingdom is, as far as teacher and ruler are concerned, an absolute monarchy, that is, a Kingdom in which Christ by means of His Word is the sole Teacher and Ruler, as He Himself says: **"One is your Master, Christ"** (Matt .23:8).

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<sup>1</sup> Address for the Opening of the Student-year of 1929-30. *Lehre und Wehre* vol 75, 1929, October; p. 289.

rule is in Christ's Kingdom. That house rule reads: **“If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God”** (1 Peter 4:11). That was the house rule in the Church of the Old Testament, as we read in the prophet Jeremiah: **“Behold, I am against the prophets, saith the Lord, that use their tongues and say, He saith.”** That is also the house rule in the Church of the New Testament. Christ establishes the general rule for His Kingdom: **“If ye continue in My Word, then are ye My disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth.”** (John 8:31,32). And St. Paul, Christ's Apostle, instructs us: **“If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing”** (1 Tim .6:3,4). In order correctly to instruct all preachers in the house rule in Christ's Kingdom, that **“if any man speak, let him speak as the oracles (Word) of God,”** Luther draws attention to this that a preacher when he comes down from the pulpit does not need to ask God for forgiveness of sins for his sermon, but rather could boast that in his sermon he has been an Apostle of Jesus Christ.

If now at the beginning of and in the continuation of your studies you keep directing your attention on this, “Never without the Scriptures”, then you are here studying the correct theology. Of yourselves understand that you accomplish such a constituted study only with holy earnestness and great diligence.

## II.

True theology teaches that **man obtains forgiveness of sins, or, what is the same, is justified before God by grace, for Christ's sake, without the works of the Law, alone through the faith.** That is the chief difference whereby true theology is itself distinguished from all false theologies. Among mankind there is no lack of theologies and religions. The Apostle Paul places before the Athenians the testimony that they are not only religious, but over religious, **“in all things I perceive that you are very religious”** (Acts 17:22). There is a reason for this over production of religions. The reason is that all people, also the heathen, have an evil conscience before God and they therefore believe, since they have angered God by their sins, they thus must and could reconcile God — or whatever they think him to be — also with their own works, worship of God and sacrifices. “This opinion of the Law,” says our Lutheran Confessions, “inheres by nature in men's minds; neither can it be expelled, unless when we are divinely taught” [*Triglotta*, page 197, section 145; see *Triglotta*, page 193, section 134]. In short, the doctrine of works, where a person wants to save himself completely or in part, where a person wants to reconcile himself completely or in part, that is the one meaning and content of all heathen theologies. And that is also the theme and content of all false Christian theology, as it confronts us not only in the papacy and in the sects, but also by those Lutherans that have departed from the right paths, who base their obtaining of the grace of God and their salvation on man's good conduct.

But that is false theology pure and simple, the perilous delusion with which the entire world has been flooded, as Luther so frequently reminds us. For God 's judgment reads that **by the deeds of the Law no flesh (person) is justified before God** (Rom. 3:20), and all those who are occupied with obtaining the grace of God and salvation by the works of the Law are **under the curse** (Gal .3:10). And the reason for this? It is this: just as there is only one God, so there is also only one Mediator between God and man, namely, the Man Christ Jesus, who has given Himself for all as the ransom payment (1 Tim .2:5,6), that such a message would be preached and believed in due time.

There is not the least room for man's works as the means of reconciliation alongside of the work of reconciliation by the Son of God who became man. That is the unanimous teaching of all the Prophets of the Old Testament, as Peter in the house of the Cornelius testifies: **“To Him (Jesus) give all the prophets witness, that through His name whosoever believeth in Him shall receive remission of sins”** (Acts 10:43). That is the unanimous teaching of Christ and His

Apostles in the New Testament. As St. Paul sums up this teaching: **“Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the Law”** (Rom. 3:28), and adds a warning: **“Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the Law; ye are fallen from grace”** (Gal. 5:4). That — and no other — is also the unanimous teaching that is being taught in our St. Louis Concordia.

Students of Concordia! You want to serve Christ, your Saviour, in the public Office of the Ministry which has been ordained by Him. In this service it is required that you, neither in your private care for souls, nor in your public preaching mix man's works and human worthiness (merits) into the Article of Justification. Otherwise you could not say: I am an Apostle of Jesus Christ in my teaching and preaching. Certainly, you should in the service of Christ diligently and constantly also teach good works, but not as the ransom either in whole or in part to purchase forgiveness of sins, but only as thank offerings for the fact that Christians have forgiveness of sins and an eternal homeland in heaven by grace, for Christ's sake, without one's own works, through faith.

If you at the beginning and in the continuation of your studies so direct your attention on this, **“Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the Law”** (Rom. 3:28), then you are here correctly studying the true theology. Of yourselves understand that you accomplish such constituted studies with holy earnestness and great diligence.

### III.

The third characteristic of true theology is: **it makes men certain of the grace of God**. We distinguish between the certainty of grace and “religious feeling”. Religious feeling is also found among the heathen and false Christian religions. Religious feeling comes upon them already in their prayers and sacrifices, about which you have read, for example, in Homer. Furthermore, strong religious feeling comes upon those in the kingdom of the papacy, especially in the Eucharist procession, as some years ago in Chicago. There is also religious feeling in the lodge religion, when therein as a religious ideal it is being praised that Christians kneel at the same altar with Moslems, Jews, Buddhists and others. Religious feeling has been and is being regarded as true religion and theology.

It is completely different with true theology. **It has nothing to do with a universal religious mood (feeling)**, but it makes us poor, sinful human beings who lie under the judgement of damnation of the divine Law and feels its judgement of condemnation in our conscience, certain of the grace of God. This certainty is indeed the purpose of the wonderful event, that God caused His Son to become man, cast on Him the debt of the sins of all mankind, caused Him to pay for them and therefore caused a way of salvation to be preached which reads: **by grace alone on account of Christ, without the works of the Law, by faith**. As St. Paul teaches in Rom. 4:16: **“Therefore it is of faith, that it might be by grace; to the end the promise might be sure to all the seed,”** without any national and other distinction; for Christ is the end of the Law; whoever believes on Him the same is justified. In short, to make someone certain of God's grace is a characteristic of true theology. Leaving people in doubt concerning God's grace is a characteristic of false theology. Therefore Luther speaks of a monster of uncertainty in the papacy, because as a result of their doctrine of works they teach them to doubt the grace of God. On the other hand he says of those who by God's grace are rescued out of the pope's kingdom: **“But from the former [promises of the Gospel] is certainty and the joy of the Holy Spirit... For God says: ‘Behold, I give My Son into death, so that by His blood He has redeemed you from sin and death.’ Here I cannot have any doubts”** (SL. IX:508).

Students of Concordia! You want to serve Christ, your Saviour, in the public Office of the Ministry which was ordained by Him. In this service it is required that you certainly preach also God's Law unadulterated in its exacting and condemning (convicting) contents. The Scriptures teach — and concerning this nothing is to be altered —, that everyone is cursed who does not

continue in everything which stands written in the Book of the Law, that he is to do. But then it belongs to your ministry that you proclaim God's Gospel unadulterated, namely, that God does not condemn any sinner, but wants everyone in heaven and that sin and grace having confronted each other, God's grace in Christ is greater than all sin. If you at the beginning of and in the continuation of your studies keep your eye on this, then you are here studying correctly true theology, and holy earnestness and great diligence cannot be absent.

May God grant us His grace for the new student year of 1929-30, that we as teachers so teach and you as students so study, so that you have been well instructed and taught in the spiritual art (skill) of making hearts crushed by God's Law certain of the grace of God by the Gospel. May God give us that by grace for Christ's sake through the operation of the Holy Spirit! Amen.