Editor’s Note

There are times in the life of any denomination of the Christian Church when an understanding of history is needed. And when it comes to sinful human nature, “there is nothing new under the sun” (Ecc 1:9). Among confessional Lutherans there has always been a tendency to take the message of the Gospel and convert it into Law. This tendency was observed almost ninety years ago by Prof. J.P. Koehler who wrote this essay in reaction to the pietism of his day. Its words are relevant for anyone; however, when the emphasis in preaching and teaching shifts from the Gospel truth to pride over the formulations of the truth, from principles to applications, and from a disposition of sharing to an obsession with preserving. In the spirit of the Gospel, the editor presents this essay unencumbered by forced analogies or applications, and offers it to the reader to draw their own conclusion about its applicability to the Evangelical Lutheran Church today. The first part of this essay was printed in the Fall 2003 issue of CHARIS. Those wishing copies of the first part are invited to download it from the CHARIS website: www.charis.wlc.edu/publications.

The Essay: Part Two

Included in this address and approach is also the factor of respectful childlike fear as well as the humble consciousness of our own insufficiency. That is not something born of the law, although it revolves about the things with which the law is concerned. But a humble spirit and childlike fear are fruits of the Gospel.

And now, if anyone is of the opinion that this presentation, which accepts in all its validity the Apostle’s word that no law is given to the righteous, robs the Christian life of the feeling of responsibility, let him consider that the childlike fear and humility created by the Gospel is a sturdier plant than slavish fear and despair. Indeed, the acknowledgment of God’s majesty and sovereignty is alone given through this Gospel-born attitude of soul and not through anything that could possibly flow out of the law. Therefore this address, which we call gospel-encouragement (evangelische Ermahnung), has in addition to the stimulating joyousness of faith, and also the characteristic of soberness that is far removed from any frivolousness.

This address is not the gospel of the mighty deeds of God, but rather it speaks to us of God’s will concerning our actions. But neither is it law that demands, threatens, condemns, and presses us sorely; rather it proceeds out of the gospel. For that reason it hastens to point to the connection between God’s will and the gospel. Not only does it picture how the grace of God has redeemed us by the blood of Christ, but also how this grace proceeds to create all promised good in us and to free us from the filth of sin. So this address lets the impulse to creative doing flow from the Gospel.
That is not the preaching of the law, but the gospel of sanctification (evangelische Ermahnung), which is always a part of evangelical preaching, just as the Holy Ghost always creates love with the first stirring of faith, and as we see a fine example of such speech in the Sermon on the Mount.

The same is true of the effect of such address. The Holy Spirit does not first bring man to faith, and then, after the work of justification is done, begin His work on sanctification. What a wooden way of looking at it that is. This is life we are talking about, and the miracle of its growth. What the Holy Spirit creates is life, not just a single act divorced from the whole of life. Therefore not faith without love. Therefore also not afterward love alone as a work proceeding out of a faith, about which we need now no more be concerned. Rather the Holy Spirit is always active in the life which is now in the Christian, in all respects and to the full extent as at the beginning.

Justification is always complete and yet it goes on continually. And equally, faith is continually engaged in grasping salvation. That is a continuous act or an endless row of many acts, depending upon how we become conscious of it in different situations. That too is a part of sanctification, according as one views it, although this is certain that faith, in justification, does not come into consideration as a doing on our part. The term used to describe faith in justification is mere passiva, purely passive. Really no one can understand that either for there is no agreement between the subject and the predicate. But we speak thus in order to emphasize the all-exclusiveness of grace in justification.

Then we say also, faith comes first and love is its fruit. That is another pet phrase that we readily understand, though it does not cover everything. Faith without love; there is no such thing, even in the abstract. Faith itself is already love. Could man bring forth the two of Himself? Even then the following of the one after the other would be impossible. But now, as a creation of the Holy Spirit, it is still more unthinkable. So faith and love, enlightenment, the new birth, conversion, and sanctification always in one breath (the breath of life, Deut. 30:19-20) and in this way that, as a holy seed or bud, it is planted in the heart of man and as such must needs grow. That is why we must preach sanctification. And this then effects the whole man in his deepest likes and dislikes, molds his meditations, and inclines his heart in all he thinks and says and does.

Sanctification does not flit about in fancy work, or specialize in extra credit work, such as monastic vows or prohibition. These are manufactured articles. But sanctification is life. That is why it permeates the whole man and concerns itself with the simple daily duties of each one’s particular calling, as Luther so wonderfully pointed this out again. Therefore you always find it where the Gospel is at home. One cannot preach that at all without directly or indirectly also preaching sanctification. That is the preaching I call evangelical encouragement (evangelische Ermahnung); and I wish especially to emphasize that it is a fresh, joyous, glorious address.

In the Formula of Concord this matter is covered under the heading of “The third use of the law.” There, however, is included the law-preaching that addresses itself to the old Adam of the Christian. That is here excluded. For that reason I do not call this emphasis on sanctification law-preaching but encouragement, and in order to emphasize the main feature in this approach, I call it evangelical encouragement (or, the Gospel of sanctification. Tr.).

Ermahnung (admonition) has otherwise among us come to mean “to remind the other of his sins.” And since that of course is to be carried on with loving intent, it was called, evangelical admonition. My portrayal consequently has met with considerable opposition. But whoever approaches with the
will and readiness to understand what I am trying to say, will find, too, that such use of the word not only corresponds better to the idiom of the German language but also with the situation that is to be portrayed, than the customary terminology; and that something has been clarified that is not immediately clear in the term third use of the law.

Something entirely different is the boasting insistence on the form and letter (Pochen) of sanctification. Of this there are two kinds. The one appears in connection with the insistence (Pochen) on orthodoxy; the other is opposed to it. Whoever is at home in church history will know that the former flourished in the period of orthodoxy; whereas, the latter arose under pietism. This smug insistence in the form of sanctification, in both cases, is a natural outgrowth of the prevailing background of each. They appear at all times and in all phases of the external church body. They were there in the old Catholic church with her sects and schisms before the Reformation, and they repeat to the present day also in the Lutheran church. Indeed, through their opposition, they here show their real nature which both have in spite of their different characteristics, namely: legalistic arts and practices.

This legalism is revealed in three characteristics: (1) It has no time for the Gospel as motivating force, but seeks to create through demands and threats. (2) It mixes into the content of these demands foreign elements, which are not part of the will of God but are products of the individual's own "conscience." (3) The consciousness of one's own rectitude obtrudes itself in it.

With the insistence on orthodoxy the Gospel of sanctification is degraded into a sweatshop of the law. This occurs in a two-fold fashion. Either the preachment unto sanctification is held to a portrayal of the relationship between faith and works, or it seeks its force and power in the church's various regulatory measures, as, for example, excommunication. In the first instance the portrayal may be correct. Indeed, to avoid the appearance of legalism, one may give decorous homage to the doctrine of the adiaphora. But the strength has gone out of this preachment, because the full-throated ado about the form of right faith has enthroned the law and drawn to itself all inner participation, so that a certain indifference in regard to sanctification has developed.

Nor can it be otherwise. Where there is only an academic knowledge, an intellectual understanding, there is still not faith-life (Glaubensleben). But where the faith-life is missing, there legalism (gesetzlich Wesen) rules. And this legalism reveals itself in the above-described manner as being satisfied with the intellectual approval it has found. This preachment refers to works as the necessary fruits of faith, with the never-failing remark that of course such works are not meritorious.

And thus the wheel of the orthodox dogma comes full circle. Yes, if, on top of that, it is made clear in the doctrine of adiaphora that forces and conditions flowing out of the creative act of God are not subject to the moral law; that we are to allow no one to judge us in regard to these matters, and when one has this clear into the smallest detail— then the thought readily comes that we have solved the equation, our good deed is done.

Thus we have acquitted ourselves as a gospel representative, without any fear or trembling. And that’s the end of it, in the life of the individual Christian where he is concerned about his personal sanctification, and also in the life of the pastor in his watch over the flock. The hard work of trying to understand the thoughts has completely monopolized our inner participation. Beyond this it is not put into practice, not in the case of the individual Christian, nor does the work (Seelsorge) of the pastor point to that goal. The result in that case is a certain indifference regarding sanctification.
This in itself is already operating with the law. Purely intellectual understanding is built on the laws of unchanging logical relationships. It concerns itself with purely formal mental operations and thus, in so far, not with spirit and life, with the real nature of that which God desires. This understanding is purely mechanical addition and subtraction. There is something not genuine and somewhat of the lie in the mental preoccupation with the terminology of sanctification without faith’s travail in patient experience and hope. Therefore, it is not strange that self-discipline wanes in the simple affairs of daily life. And where this is missing, the effect of its loss will be felt in the preaching, and will also assert itself in the life of the hearers.

Language is akin to the life of the spirit that gave birth to it. The Gospel of sanctification is always a part of the Gospel message. Who ever is a herald, calling man to faithful acceptance of the forgiveness, also proclaims the Gospel of sanctification to call away from the servitude of sin to a godly life. The one interest can not be divorced from the other and the voice of both is heard in the sermon. Where the former interest is slighted in the clamorous ado about orthodoxy, or in so much as it is, the latter suffers equally. The sermon has these three elements: the word of God, the confession of the hearers, the experience of the pastor. The mantle of the preacher unto sanctification is specially heavy for the student and the young pastor because the ripe experience is still lacking. And now where the whole intellectualizing tendency is prejudicial to the interests of experience, because of its complete disregard, all the less can anything worth while be expected. Therefore, it has been observed at certain periods of doctrinal controversy that sanctification is neglected not only in the way the controversy is carried on but also in the congregational life. That is a result of legalism. What other could the fruitage be than a loveless attitude, when the preaching of sanctification consisted solely in the abuse of those on the other side of the doctrinal fence.

Closely related to this are the various measures taken in church government. At this stage the concern is not the fostering of sanctification in its little daily expressions, as is the case with true Gospel preaching; rather these measures involve notorious cases, where the good name of the church or the congregation is called into question; cases of church discipline, as they are often improperly called. The mere fact that these cases thus arise is a sign of legalism. All the more this becomes clear when we consider how these cases are handled. The ousting, the excommunication, is the aim to be attained. For that reason the procedure is also called ban-procedure (Bannverfahren) by people under the impression that the Lord Jesus, in Matthew 18, had prescribed a definite external form in which church discipline is to be carried out. In Matthew 18 the Lord quite evidently sets the salvation of the sinner as the aim to be attained. The looking upon him as a heathen and a publican is simply substantiation of the fact of the sinner’s unrepentance, the end that can no longer be avoided. The form through which this law preaching is effected varies, and is determined by time, place, and circumstance. Therefore, indeed, to assume at all that the Lord, in Matthew 18, has commanded an external form of church discipline, offends against the Gospel in general, and especially against the wording of the text as well. That by such lack of Gospel tact every single step of the procedure in question is steeped in the arts and practices of the law, goes without saying.

Now there is another carping insistence on sanctification, which is opposed to the harping on orthodoxy, and by its opposition, dumps the child with the bath water. That is pietism. Because lovelessness too often had the upper hand in the harping insistence on orthodoxy, the pietists turned away from the struggle for correct doctrine in so far as correct doctrine on the whole became
 somewhat indifferent to them. In as much as they deserted the dialectic work of doctrine, sentimentality grew up among them, accompanied by this legalistic attitude. The orthodoxists have arrayed a huge list of their shortcomings, with Latin names, which will be familiar to the reader. But these things aside, we wish to refer to the characteristics of legalism which fairly jump at you from the orthodox list of objections. Our objection may be summed up as already noted: The impulse is taken from the Law instead of the Gospel; the individual scruples of conscience are made the common censor; the awareness of one’s own rectitude is very keen. How this expresses itself and how it is inherent in the nature of the circumstances is what we have under consideration here.

To turn one’s back on the problems of a firm foundation in the word of truth already smacks of legalism. For the struggle to enter into the ownership of the faith of the fathers centers in our retaining the Gospel truth. Whoever thinks this a bagatelle thinks lightly of the Gospel, or else thinks highly of himself for staying away from the “offensive” doctrinal battles. Thus selfrighteousness and lack of deep Gospel sense are the mainsprings of this tendency. Naturally, only hollow, superficial, mechanical, opportunistic, and selfish riding of the law could proceed out of such legalistic attitude.

And that expressed itself in saddling all weight on doing, instead of on doctrine. Not so much faith, (this was mainly taken as credence, however) but rather love. But this love then consisted principally in “lovingly” overlooking the errors of the others. But otherwise there flourished an unbearably legalistic schoolmasterish prying and spying, in which their own peculiar scruples were made the standard of life for the associates. So and so should not go to dances, to the theatre, play Schafskopf, drink beer, and so on and so on. Naturally we are not advocating excesses. In themselves the reproaches of the pietists were often rightly made. But we are now concerned about the spirit that gave them birth. This spirit did not flow out of the joy of the gospel but rather consisted in the fallen countenance over the others’ joyfulness. This insistence on the right life shifted the emphasis from “life” to “right.” Not life with its spontaneity created by the message of promise, but rather through fault-finding, the external forms of life were pressed into set patterns. That was not truly real life, but rather the movements of waxen manikins, even where it was of honorable intent. Monotonous demand on demand is thus the first characteristic of this pietistic insistence on sanctification.

Now the standard according to which these demands are gauged is not the word of God nor yet His law, rather the scruples of conscience of him who makes the demands. Of course the pietists did not want this; they thought they were using the word of God as the standard. But because of the excess of their emotional enthusiasm they were unable objectively to sense the spirit of Scripture; they rather injected their own supposedly pious feelings into Scripture. Yet in their sour-apple disposition they were not content with the Holy will of God, which we poor sinners can’t measure up to in the first place, and really had to put teeth into it with their special demands. Now they are in the same trouble as the Romanists. They hit upon superficial, wooden trivialities. Thus these too in every respect show the legalistic traits described in the first paragraph of our article.

There is still the last trait, which accompanies all legalism: selfrighteousness. This is implied in the former trait. To set up one’s own conscience as the standard for others, takes more than a measure of conceit, even if excessive mouthings of humility occasionally flow in an unending stream. So it was with the Pharisees; so it was with all legalistic utterances in the Roman church; so it was with Calvinism and its friends; so it was with the Lutheran pietists of old. So it is with the sectarians. So it is developing within the Lutheran church in our midst even today.
Thus far in the elaboration of the second statement of our discussion, covering the clamorous insistence on orthodoxy and sanctification, we have considered legalism as it expresses itself in the feeling, thinking, and speaking of the individual Christian.

If we now ask, “How does legalism arise in an orthodox group, in the church?” it would be wrong to imagine that first, the doctrinal wranglings with their inclination toward intellectualism, and thereupon the reaction of Pietism with its insistence on sanctification created legalism, and that it does not come to pass in any other way. True it is that legalism in the doctrinal conceptions of the church appears and develops in the described historical sequence as already in the sixteenth century and the seventeenth, so also in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. But legalism already existed not only before these trends developed, but also in another field. With the orthodoxists as with the Pietists in the Lutheran church, the basic consideration was the attitude to the objective truths of Scripture, as indeed this is the striking distinction between Lutheranism and Calvinism.

However, legalism was at home in the Lutheran church before the intellectualism of the seventeenth century developed, and that in another field, that of organization. Indeed, aside from the personal attitude of the Christian to law and gospel, in the simple daily life of the individual congregation, that is the “fertile” spot where the arts and practices of legalism are nurtured and developed to their full vigor. But it was only after the church was transplanted from Europe to the new and entirely different external conditions of life in America that this part of church life began to demand the attention of the Lutheran church as a whole. In Europe the officials from the start did the work of the church that was public or representative of the individuals; and at that, partly due to Luther’s influence, in spite of the fact that Luther’s inner make-up and otherwise clearly detailed picture of the nature of church and office was really opposed thereto. Then, after Luther’s death officialdom gained supreme command and this is the mark it has ever increasingly stamped on German church life to this day. Here in America in this respect, the church was faced with entirely new tasks, not only because of the English-American conception of the nature of government, but because the civil government gave no thought whatsoever to the German Lutheran church, as was the case not only generally among the sectarians, but most especially with the Swedish Lutheran church. There was no way out; something new had to be created.

Already in the eighteenth century this took place as a practical development while Muehlenberg was about his task of organization. But the underlying principles of the pertinent factors were not explored thoroughly, because for that, the clarity of Luther’s position is necessary, which could not be expected from the predominantly Pietistic bent of Muehlenberg’s time. This first took place in the middle of the nineteenth century. There we meet up with such names as Grabau, Walther, Loehe, and Hoefling, actively engaged in getting at the root of the matter. The main point was the question of the church and its office of the ministry, how to get one’s bearings in and mastery of the new conditions of the nineteenth century and of the new western homeland, especially with reference to the conceptions of the fathers of the seventeenth century. Later, after the fathers of our new church here began to go to their rest, the period of business methods begins, which were primarily absorbed from the sectarians. We can learn from the sectarians too. The question is out of what spirit the forms developed that we wish to learn from others, and what the inner attitude is of the learners that accept the new things.

Thus we are led into the midst of the field of the practical endeavors of policy and regulation of church life and it is worth our while there too to uncover the individual expressions of legalistic arts
and practices. Our concern is Christian fellowshiping in congregations and synods, the way officials and congregation members comport themselves, the interrelationship of congregations and their synod, the intercourse with those of another faith and with the world without.

We do not have to spend much time proving it is the old Adam also here that causes this legalism to spring forth. That will automatically appear as we see how he takes occasion and invitation at the various external conditions of life, exactly as he took advantage of the Christian’s varying peculiarities to develop a legalistic way of thinking. As an aid to understanding we remark right here that also in this field the above-noted tendency of riding the goading, galling law passes current, making everything mechanical, external, superficial.

When Christians gather to do what spontaneously flows out of the gospel, namely, to speak of the mighty deeds of the Savior and of faith, then human conditions at once set certain limitations with regard to persons, time, place, and action, limitations of two different natures, official (amtlich) and business (geschäftlich). As far as the gospel is concerned no forms are needed beyond the word and sacrament. The word—language, as an expression of life, is a form through which the gospel flows. That there is such a form lies in the limitation of human life, for only thus are thoughts conveyed from one to the other. But which form is chosen is a matter of little moment to the gospel as long as truth is revealed. Thus too the sacraments are definite forms for conveying the gospel, and because of this fact, there are many who would fain have opposed the thought that in the New Testament the Lord has instituted no set forms for His Church as He has in the Old Testament. Yet do we not note with what gravely joyous accents the Lord set what are commonly called the sacraments as an everlasting memorial, thus raising them from the stolid row of man’s accomplishments; and besides they are pre-eminently fitted for the faith of the trustingly simple Christian to absorb the content itself in the gracious gift of his Savior without his flattening them out so that they fit the fixed adding machine of his mind. For any other forms and decrees there is no such institution of the Lord. To deduce God’s decree from historical happenings and examples out of the life of the apostolic church is ill-advised, and all such matters are covered by the word of the apostle that we should not allow ourselves to be satcheled and shackled to the external scruples of man.

Therefore the conclusion that, since Christ in a certain sense has given us forms in the sacraments, it is possible or probable that He has given us still other forms, is wrong in the theory behind it and in the history covering it, for then the other sacraments would have to be mentioned.

A further external form, which the gospel of itself does not need, but which develops as men live together, is organization, the sum total of external regulations. The need for external order lies in the organic nature of a group as a community, and the individual steps will develop naturally in the mutual association. They give expression to the spirit dominant in the community unity, and where they arise out of the work of the gospel and insomuch as that is the case, the Holy Spirit will acknowledge them for its employ, as the Acts of the Apostles give testimony in most every chapter. Thus, for example, not every one can speak at the same time or with the same effectiveness. Therefore, the group delegates to individuals the tasks of teaching and leading in the interest of all. For community action, definite place, time, and procedures are appointed to serve as channels for this action. In the formative period of community life individuals see that conditions are regulated. That, too, is a manner or form of human association, lying in its very nature because at that time it all develops more or less without set patterns, without one being able in such external endeavors to construe concepts of authority.
This faulty demonstration of proof or development of doctrine has appeared again and again when the present problems were under consideration. In the fourth commandment are included our superiors, and by correct interpretation, the teachers and ministers of the church. But that does not say that we must by all means enter into such relationship that superiors and their subordinates come into being, or still less, that a certain form of government is indicated. Indeed not even the parent-child relationship is commanded in that sense. Rather, all these conditions, the essence of the above forms as manifestations of life, are in embryo inherent in the organic character of human society and to these the Lord applies the eternal thoughts of His holy will, which finds expression in the one word “love,” when he speaks in the Ten Commandments, or when Paul, in the New Testament, speaks of the ministry of the bishops or of others. Missing the mark still further is the attempt to prove out of the Old Testament terms— pastor, teacher, etc. — and their use, that God has ordained a specific form, as such, of transmitting the gospel message, the essential feature of which is the official delegating to individuals the rights and duties of the group.

Further, the election by the congregation through the laying on of hands is actually not supported by Scripture; for wherever the corresponding Greek term occurs, it properly, as Luther translates, means “to order,” in a very general sense, which ordering more often and more precisely is mentioned of the Apostles than of the congregations. It does not follow, however, that this fact must lead us into Romanist conceptions of authority; rather, on the contrary, the idea that all this is the concern of the congregation is in itself part and parcel of the gospel around which the congregation forms. We find ample expression of this even in the informality which makes it appear as though the Apostles acted in an autocratic way. Thus Scriptures portray the founding of the apostolic church; and thus to this day in all pioneer conditions the same thing occurs without question, as a natural development. The concern here is to preach the gospel and no one thinks of authorities.

Such building of the congregation occurs at once in two fields of church life: the worship of the group as an integral unit, in a well-ordered use of the word of God, and, secondly, fellowshipping in love and self-discipline for our mutual temporal and spiritual growth. (Translating into words for today: Growth consists in calling one another “from a comfortable gospel, that acts as a soporific and permits unrighteousness to run riot in the church, to the Gospel that is in truth comforting to stricken sinners, and to seek with them an evermore increasing knowledge of our Lord, that we might win Christ and be found in Him, not having our own righteousness but that which is through the faith of Christ, to apprehend that for which, too, we are apprehended of Christ Jesus; forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forth unto those things which are before, pressing toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.”) Thus the congregational life takes form. Through external growth and expansion, a synod, as we call it, comes into being. To further the welfare of both congregation and synod, two kinds of external arrangements come into being: those relating to the service in the word (amtlich) and those purely operational. Those regulations covering the teaching and the guidance in the word of God carry the authority implicit in the word itself. Those dealing with the outward administration of the physical assets and with the provision of such external services as the care of the sick, have more the character of business-like administration. These are purely human, commonsense forms, as also their importance and the evaluation of their worth is subject to common-sense appraisal.

The Gospel does not make distinctions, rather it makes up for distinctions. Neither does it remove the external form of distinctions that are present. The Gospel is able to teach, to guide, to assist, to perform purely external menial services and therewith allow the external distinctions to stand, at the
same time keenly aware from the fingertips to the innermost emotions that there are no distinctions, because in all these matters the main issue is that sinful man may be saved by the blood of Christ our Savior. Such view of life and its corresponding exemplification alone impart deep and innermost intrinsic value and character to all human relationships, inasmuch as it concerns itself with the spirit that creates.

But the flesh, not being able to grasp the things of the spirit, and yet desirous of making a fair showing, injects its essential character and its approach, exemplifying man’s selfish reactions that are natural in all such situations. Being at home in forms, which is under emphasis in these regulations, the flesh, because of its legalistic nature, sees only the form, the external form, the fact of the existing order. The content, the Gospel, which is the point at issue in each case, is ignored.

Let us first consider this legalism as it applies to teaching. For the teacher, his being a teacher, which distinguishes him from those who have to listen to him, the mere form itself is more fascinating than the great content of his message would allow. A feeling of superiority attaches to the right to tell another what to do and how to do it. Our pastoral work often largely consists in dispensing doctrine and advice. Too readily the teacher allows himself to be placed on a pedestal, finds pleasure in this superior position, and finally condescendingly talks down, even then when he patronizingly becomes one of the crowd. Most people not only put up with such things, but also even look up to them with respect, which only makes matters worse. A man generally passes for as much as he makes of himself. It is no different in the visible church, nor in our own midst.

What a pitfall for the pastor and his work! In the first place, how silly! How flagrantly this offends against the inmost nature of the pastor’s true calling! The pastor is not called as a pedant to schoolmaster, but as a herald—the king’s messenger. To bring the message of glad tidings lends a lift and a lilt to the bearer; too, not as being selfishly puffed up over the personal part played, but humbly, with a song in the heart for the honor of bringing the message that can engender a song in another. Thus we can see how this false approach is related to the earlier-described intellectualism.

Furthermore, what utter lack of humility! What could tend to turn a Christian’s stomach more than the unctuous priestcraft put on as a cloak, be it overbearing, condescending, or patronizing. That, aside from sordid service of selfish interests, is what makes of the men-pleasing priestery, a blighting popery in miniature. How can anyone in connection with the death and glorification of our Savior stoop to push his person into the foreground, even if it is but in his external conduct!

Finally, how harmful! This forbidden fruit so enervates us that we cannot accomplish what we are here for, namely, by our preachment to unyoke our folk and unfetter the flock of Christ from the constricting frock of our priestcraft so that the children of the highest stand as kings and priests before their Father in their daily tasks. For our official mannerisms not only spawn and strengthen a scourge of evil growths among our members, such as fawning, selfish ambition, and politicking in petty personalities, but also, and that is graver still, we abridge their birthright to live in the Scriptures as their element, not to mention our neglect to encourage and guide their steps therein. What we have begun by our approach to Scriptures as so many dogmas where only the specialist knows his way about, we sharpen by our official mannerisms so that we train our people to say: “Bible study is the pastor’s business, that’s what we hired him for.” By the way, someone has noted that, among the sectarians the Bible is more at home among the people and, consequently, at least from their standpoint, the people are more at home in the Bible than is the case among Lutherans. That observation, as far as my knowledge goes, hits the mark, though it is a question in what
measure. There are many any reasons for this fact, which indicate an entirely different sort of legalism among the sectarians. Calvinism has actually fashioned a “paper Pope” out of the Bible, not Luther. This fits very well with their tendency to favor their reason over against the objective word of God in Bible interpretation. Thus this advantage of the sectarians is in part again lost. The lack of use of the Bible among Lutherans on the other hand, may in part be accounted for aside from these evil influences. We have the catechism and the hymnbook. These are more important and play a greater role than anything that can be arrayed alongside from any denomination. Here the church chorale plays in too. Because of the sectarian arts and practices grown out of legalism, for example, the dynamic church chorale, born out of the depths of Christian folk life and out of its best periods of youthful vigor, has, as it were, trickled out in the sand. For that reason the Bible as a form is held by them in higher esteem than among our folk. But what could have accrued to our advantage has turned to our loss because we took this gem for granted and cherished it not at all. Every thing centered about the sermon and the catechism so that the other simple and elemental aspects of worship were lost from the inner life of the people.

A penetration into our catechism and the chorales of our church, fine and appreciative and not stilted and stunted by partisan politics, but carefully, soberly, consistently, and understandingly presented, would also have brought our people into the realm and under the sway of Scriptures. Aye, there was the rub. But even if that were all in order, we should still be in the same old rut if the unfortunate priestcraft yet continued to flourish. Devotion and a lively application to Scripture, the catechism, and the chorales of the church, require an independent folk, freed, and with deep-diving roots made firm by the Gospel. But this does not harmonize with our exercising lordship over our people, even if it rests only in the external appearances.

A second field in which wrong views tend to make way for the law is (church) government.

For one who governs this becomes the main thing, namely that he does the governing, rather than the building of the kingdom of God. Everyone in the whole earth assesses governing higher than teaching, although the Apostle Paul turns it about. In 1 Tim. 5:17 we read “Let the elders that rule well be accounted worthy of double honor, especially they who labor in the word and doctrine, for . . . the laborer is worthy of his reward.” Three things are expressed here which will seem strange to our accustomed conceptions of office. In the first place, the chief leader in the affairs of a congregation or synod need not be a pastor unto whom has been committed, as his main duty, the public preaching of the Gospel. Rather, it may be a business man or a craftsman, for instance, as long as he meets the qualifications, as Paul, in the well known Scripture passages, otherwise expects of a bishop. And with the reference to the ability to teach, Paul again does not have in mind a formal theological training, but rather a practical gift, though naturally based on a deeply rooted understanding of the Gospel. Such people the Scriptures call rulers. Their task, in contrast to that of the laborer in the word and doctrine, is somewhat more external. It is the external leadership and the careful regulation of the common efforts of the congregation, wherein, for instance, in such primitive conditions, spiritual care was included. The Apostle otherwise in his directions clearly indicates that the Word of God is the true means with which one governs.

Secondly, Paul, in the passage quoted, places the work in the word and doctrine higher than the described activities of the rulers. To be entrusted with the particular special study of Scripture and with the task of spiritually penetrating into it, to uncover its teachings - and thus, to use a modern expression, to create intellectual and spiritual values with which the ruler then may operate so that they find orderly expression in life - that is the greater. Why? Because thus the Word of God, the
Gospel, is brought out in clear relief. The Gospel is the important thing, not the external distinction between a preacher and ruler. Paul does not put this into words in the quoted passage, but that becomes evident from what the Scriptures otherwise keep telling us about the Gospel.

Why Paul in this passage makes the distinction between ruler and preacher is the third point that engages our attention. The Apostle reveals that the conditions obtaining in the church and the world at that time were just as they are today, namely, the more spiritual abilities and activities were accounted worthy of less honor than the more external practical activities. This occurred to such an extent that the preachers often were not correspondingly supplied with the necessities of life. A ruler might well be a businessman as long as he did not engage in dishonorable transactions. For that the preacher had no time to spare from the pursuit of his studies. But as today, too, whoever stood out in administrative affairs and had the bigger income was also accounted the more worthy of honor.

These outgrowths in the ancient church did not arise out of God’s “So be it;” rather are they the natural development of existing forces. To these the Apostle applies the will of God as inscribed on stone tablets and in the fleshly hearts of men as a standard in his message of the Gospel of sanctification (evangelische Ermahnung).

The above-described unsound view of things halfway makes sense in worldly affairs where everything is settled by law (Gewalt). That makes no sense at all in the church, where everything is based on the Gospel, which enters the world by means of a message, a spiritual activity. And yet there is often very little difference between the visible church and the world. Congregations consider the pastor the one in highest authority. For that reason he is accorded the higher honor in the intercourse of the people, above the schoolteacher, for example. In larger circles too, such as in synod, if one has an office that has to do with administrative functions, and even if it is but handing out the ballot slips, that immediately raises him above his fellow men.

The fruitage of this false view among the officials shows up in a stirring, yet a sterile hustle and bustle, whose secret lies in their delight in presiding and being surrounded by yes men and obedient servants, that is, in promoting their own pet plans and programs and attaining their ends by using the base and sordid motives of others. Administrative orders, intimidation, and wire-pulling are the means that they employ. And externally this is effective no end, as it was with the Poles, and no less with the Pommeranians and all other German folk whose natural shell of reserve is not as readily open as others to the quiet wooing of the Gospel, or the like. Yes, among the English and Yankees too. Very few people, and Christians at that, are aware of how they are ruled by others. And I am talking herein about false ruling.

If, for example, one who is in office, be it pastor, deacon, president, or visitor, even if what the author had in mind or intended were a worthwhile object, if such a one, even in all sincerity, were to use the external superiority over the body in general that accrues by virtue of his office, to push through his opinion or his platform by force or other external means, he would be guilty of misrule, whether he turns the innate loyalty and submissiveness of his people to his account by loudly and forcefully casting the influence of his person in the balance, or capitalizes on their selfish aspirations with charming persuasiveness and a show of friendliness, or operates with Robert’s Rules of Order, with the hand-picking of committees, or with the rulings of the Chair, or what have you.

And now, it comes to adding to the flock or keeping the flock intact, those engaged therein, be it pastor or Sunday School superintendent, etc., allow their person to play a larger part than the Gospel
they are to represent would admit. This is evident not only in the actions and activities of those so engaged, but in the evaluation usually placed on such activities by both bystanders and participants. I must go back a bit in order to make clear what I have in mind. God has created in man a personality. As such, he is a separate, complete, and distinct being, and in the nature of a sanctuary that is not to be forcefully pried open and entered, not even for the purpose of converting him. Not even my own child do I wish to coerce or modify in the most delicate motivations of his soul, other than what the Gospel wins by impelling free and inner conviction. I am not to be the determining factor in my child, but the Gospel is to make out of him a free and independent man. Thus even in the relationship between parent and child there remains a facet of personality inviolable for prying penetration or belaboring by the parental personality otherwise. The forceful impress of one’s own personality has place only in the matter of external obedience and discipline. How much more incongruous in the relationship among men not bound together by blood ties. These thoughts are not expressed in Scriptures in so many words, but are inherent in the way the word of God as law and as Gospel is effectively operative. God forcibly impresses His personality on man, so to say, in the law, which is quick and powerful and annihilates the sinful doings of man. In the Gospel God wins us over through love, not by thrusting it upon us, but by sacrificing himself in His Son, and through the message creating a new personality in faith and love. That indicates the channels of our conduct in our relations with one another in matters such as these.

The motivating force that causes Paul to rap on the door of the heart of his hearers is his thankfulness toward God and his concern for the fellow-redeemed. There he himself is in the background completely. His person means absolutely nothing but, by the mercies of the Lord and offering them in his hand, he appears before his hearers. The only determining factor with which he seeks to influence them is the grace in Christ Jesus. A personal wooing appears with Paul, too, Gal. 4: 12-20. But there the personal interests are expressly excluded. The entire thought complex is to recreate in their soul the memory of their previous joyful spiritual experience and to remove the thought that Paul, in his previous sharpness, did not mean it well with them. The only means at his disposal is Christ and His grace; his only end and aim is that this same Christ take form within them. May I draw attention to the detailed presentation of these thoughts in my interpretation of the Epistle to the Galatians (Reprinted in Faith - Life, May, 1950)?

Directly opposed to this is for the pastor to boldly thrust his person upon the hearer, or affectedly to fawn upon him in order to win him. Herein we find many gradations, ranging from the trills and tremolos of the voice in the manner of the insipid affectation of some singers, the rolling of the eyes, the wise-cracking and catchy expressions and innuendoes, the use of snappy slang and other vulgarities, the distracting gestures, up to the contortions reported of Billy Sunday and his kind. Here too we might mention the overly close familiarity in the personal: association with individuals, for example with women. I well know that there is a difference in temperament. Partly that is a natural, inborn trait, partly it is a corruptible inheritance of the previous generation, or a cultivated mannerism. It is not my intention to set up any regulations, because it is fraught with danger to set up rules covering the boundary between genuineness and artificiality in another. It is too easy again to end up in legalism. These thoughts are merely set up as a guide for the reader as he casts a critical eye upon himself.

Now as regards results, the hankering for which lies at the bottom of most of these endeavors. How successful are they? In the olden days and more recently, too, I have known many men whose sails were not cut on these “successful” contours, for which reason, furthermore, they remained strictly in the background. But they were at home in the Gospel and loved the folk entrusted to their care.
And here they bore simple objective witness to the word of God. That’s about all they did in all their
days. What this accomplished for the hearer’s health was oft not credited to the pastor’s account, at
least not during his lifetime. Yet a wise-hearted observer would have taken note. Thus many a
capable man bears his fruit in the quiet background while the world, and also the church, as
Oxenstierna remarks, is governed with much stupidity, etc., for which they even take credit, because
they don’t see it. It would be a serious mistake on the other hand, however, to consistently assume
that the simple folk are unaware of such things.

Here belongs also what in this country is called “mixing” with the people. People mention it as
something praiseworthy in a pastor that “he is a good mixer.” That expression was coined among
sectarians, who wish to come to the help of the Gospel with social endeavors. I am well aware that
one can understand this expression in a good sense, and further that shyness and reserve not only
hinder a preacher’s effectiveness but also may give growing space to the old Adam. But in my
opinion mixing is guilty of this in a more positive sense than reserve. In any case we wish every
preacher a goodly amount of self-criticism in such matters. The deeper our understanding of the
Gospel, as life’s element, the more each one will herein find the proper steps to take.

Actual ruling in the church consists in this that the Holy Spirit through the Gospel creates spiritual
values, which then find living expression in the group life of the Christians, first of all in the little day
by day details and there, in careful faithfulness. The major issues, upon which predominantly the
church, too, sets the most value, are also under the direction of the Holy G host. But there, too, the
ruling in the church is served by the faithfulness in little things, not flashy nor set to capture the
attention of the crowd, but as doing its duty in quietness before God, the sum of which details make
a big thing. Generally those imposing things of whatsoever nature which should draw the attention
of the world to the Gospel, are mostly man’s improvisation and are finally futile, as, for example, the
obtrusive newspaper announcements and articles that wear Esau’s solid cloak and yet remind of
Jacob, or the mass meetings that lie outside the sphere of the life of the church, and do not spring
spontaneously from noble sources, but often are arranged for effort and to smooth the way for ill-
disguised ulterior designs.

But what we are concerned about in its broad outlines in this connection is: these things, censured
above, are outgrowths of our legalistic inner life. They are all aimed not to let the free grace of G od
which is witnessed through the Gospel message only create a new life and doing, but rather to have
man as Mr. Fix-it, according to the unsavory maxim: “I’ll do you a favor, so that you do me a
favor,” bring things to pass, which, as is but natural in such case, are external, mechanical, not
genuine, untrue, and superficial, which will not stand up against sin and the devil and under the
judgment in the day of the Lord.

And now as to business matters. The affairs of this earth in time naturally demand that preachers of
the Gospel are salaried; churches, schools, parsonages, teacherages are built; higher schools of
learning are founded; and periodicals and books are printed. In the first place all these things take
money. The latter also bring in money. In addition we have the mission activities which we divide
into foreign mission and home missions, from which latter we also in time expect money. For all of
these things administrative personnel are needed, as are regulations as a guide for their
administration.

Legalism puts in a different appearance here from what it does in the official arts and practices
dealing with teaching which we previously described. While there the self-centered feeling expresses
itself more in an authority complex, here the meritoriousness of works on the one hand and the observance of business procedures on the other are in the foreground. To be sure, the craving for authority is evident here too. That, however, is really the case only if officials happen to be pastors at the same time; and one may, in that case, relate this tendency to their accustomed practices as officials in their parishes. Thus we have to do here only with these two new appearances. They both run together, especially in the manner in which money is raised through collections; of course also in the manner in which money, as a freewill offering of love, is dispensed; and finally in the evaluation put on these business matters over against the church’s mission: to teach.

Here we do not have to cover the proper motive in giving. That belongs in the above treatment of what is comprehended under teaching. Here the point is more what consideration is given this motive in our dealings with the people. And there we must first of all state that a correct outline of the doctrine of it does not hold the answer. With the greatest of ease an improper practice can run right alongside, and it is even impossible to make clear to one who is carrying on in these two things simultaneously that you cannot do that. In other words one cannot set up rules for collecting money in the spirit of the Gospel, but we must have a gospel man whose attitude toward mammon distinguishes him before others. He who himself is stingy, who lays great store by money, who does not know from experience how happy (froehlich, Greek: hilarious) giving can make one, can never get another to give gladly; for, as was said, this work is not accomplished by easy talk. For that reason it is not a thoroughly dependable procedure for large groups to entrust their collections to a single individual instead of entrusting this to the pastors, or, which would be better still, to the congregations.

In the first place the pastors relinquish a goodly part of their high calling, namely, through the Gospel to strengthen this important part of Christian life in steady contact with their folk. Their calling should mean too much to them to let anyone cripple it for them. By saying they cannot do this work, they reveal a legalistic conception of it or else they are lazy. Indeed, to make people shell out their pockets with threats, or imposition, or by fast talking, is unpleasant. To inwardly rebel against doing that is eminently proper. But that is not collecting in the sense of the Scriptures. Rather herein the pastor should develop his greatest joy, for it is in immediate relationship to his preaching of the Gospel. And when synod operates with the above argument of the unfitness of many pastors, then it is evident that that determining factor is not the upbuilding of the spiritual strength of the congregation, but the size of the sums of money to be drummed up. On the other hand, a single collector can infect an entire synod, and that has its inception with the pastors, who act as carriers. Of course in all this we must keep in mind, if God provides a man with a peculiar gift, the church should feel free to make use of it.

A further question is that of the regulations under which this part of church life is carried on. When, how much, for which purpose shall we give? From all sides the gospel spontaneity is disturbed by the old Adam. In the first place, it is questioned whether all order is not legalistic. Giving should be left to every Christian’s choice, it should flow freely out of love. But there we place order and unimpeded love into opposite camps, we place them into an opposition in which they are not by nature. We do not have order because of the law; rather it becomes law through the spirit with which we take it in hand. Order serves as a handmaid to the group looked upon as an organic unit; here then as a handmaid to help those who give, so that what free love wishes to do is not dissipated like a gleaming white frost in the sun, and gone with the wind. The bigger the body, the greater the need for order; the greater the opportunities, it is true, for the old Adam; a reason, by the way, why we should not be so set on building big congregations or big synods. Thus where one loudly insists
there should be no forms, it betokens a clearly marked spirit of legalism, in that he not only stands in
the way of freedom to set up orders, but above all in that he boasts of the liberties that love may
take.

In the other extreme, of course, order, wherever it is in existence, serves the old man as an occasion
to consider it the essential thing. In the main he speaks of order in such a way that not only is the
impression created that it is the important thing, but this manner also shows that the spiritual life,
out of which such speech flows, has started off on the wrong key. Order then shall have validity
because it is the order. That cannot but turn the Gospel into law. Where force rules, this is a natural
procedure. But even there we find sensible people, who keep the legalistic character of order in the
background, because they wish to accomplish something higher than pure order. Then why can’t, in
the Christian congregation, a free man of the Gospel so go at his work that the brethren, out of
freedom of spirit, out of love, accommodate themselves to all good order as though there were no
such thing as order? Naturally, if I look upon the members of my congregation as an obstinate tribe,
or as a bunch of youngsters, over which the pastor lords it as a higher being, then nothing sensible
can come out of it. The pastor belongs in the congregation, in the midst of the flock, not as a man
of base motives in the midst of like-minded, who through mixing and fixing must make an external
show; but as a Christian, born of the Gospel, in the midst of Christians born of the same Gospel,
who with real ruling creates noble things of worth by means of the Gospel; not mere sums of
money, but spiritual gifts of the Holy Spirit. For that we need a joyous fortitude of soul, fragrantly
fresh as the morning dew in springtime, which can make the other free and happy too.

For what shall we give? This question seems completely superfluous. For even though in every
individual case we ask for individual concrete gifts, it is always taken for granted they are for the
kingdom of God. Even a little thought will reveal that the kingdom of God is not the particular
external crowd to which the giver happens to belong (rather the being king, the effectual ruling, of
the Lord in the hearts of His believers). We may as well offer a further word right here. As self-
evident as this disavowal is, so little is it generally kept in mind. Not only every Christian has a streak
of this right ordinary regard for self, but especially those who are supposed to be leaders and
teachers. And appearing among them, it, is all the more noticeable. When we allocate money for
church expansion, the justification is often quite naively put forward: We must get ahead of the
Council, or Ohio, or Iowa, or even Missouri. (I am now talking to Wisconsin. Well do I know the
others too.) I am well aware that such words are not to be understood exactly as they sound. At the
same time this way of speaking is evidence that in part the vicious understanding too lies behind the
words, all protestation to the contrary notwithstanding. Or when, in the founding and maintenance
of mission congregations, money, that for the most part has come together from those who have
but little of this world’s goods, is lightly spent to gratify the whims of a stubborn group, which has
left another congregation and is not at the moment able to maintain its own pastor, or of some rich
persons, who very well could take care of that on their own. Bullheadedness and greed no one
wishes to sponsor, of course, but either ulterior motives, as above, play in, or - and that is the point
here - it is difficult for those who are called upon to act to see that it is just the Gospel that refrains
from offering such assistance. Or if, in building up our institutions, we provide for external
greatness and the stir that it creates without concern for the real inner work which surely is properly
to receive our main attention. To be sure, the external affairs have to be taken care of too, and have
by far not progressed as far as becomes crack educational institutions. Yet our main mission, our
loyal liegeman service of the Gospel, must be our mastering mission. But in spite of assurances to
the contrary, both private and official, that still leaves much to be desired.
In all of these cases the point is that the Gospel does not form the center. Either other interests, opposed to the Gospel, more or less take over determinedly, such as envy and factiousness, or the quest for honor and the desire to cut a figure, or without thinking, one follows the leader like the stolid, ruminating herd. In each case the Gospel is not the exalting, deep-flowing motivation, which in itself is a treasure, noble and greatly to be desired, and bringing forth fruit in its time - not only insofar as the result swells the heart and is a joy to behold, but also with respect to the manner in which the result is gained. These other methods not only are in the nature of their origin offshoots of law, but they will drag along in their train the procedures already condemned above, in the entire life of the church and will finally engender results that are of no value: life that is mechanical, superficial, external, artificial, as these attributes apply in the individual situation.

Above we spoke of business methods that we have taken over from the sects. Order there was already in the apostolic church, as we know from Scripture, even in the matter of collecting money. So we did not just learn that from the Calvinists. But we have taken over from them some practical procedures. And that was but natural, for since with them the interests in the field of administrative organization and procedure are preponderate, they have thus developed some administrative methods which in themselves are fine, worthwhile, external forms which we formerly often opposed because of a wrong understanding of what is in harmony with the Gospel. Whoever can still recall those motives, will realize that either these, his motives, were rooted in the law, or the nature and operation of the new methods were not understood.

However, there were methods that really were objectionable. For instance, where amusements, business interests and such were used to make money. The main thing was to make money, and that with no sense of shame. The world was called in and then plucked and plagued by beggars. Ranks were joined with them according to the usual methods of business and politics. That's the beer picnics, fairs, bazaars, socials, and entertainments.

The names alone do not reveal what was objectionable about them - one must have seen these methods in action - and yet there, too, with a difference. To list the individual items judged objectionable by the opponents again does not make for a thorough judgment. For instance raffles, wheels of chance, and grab bags were the things made much of in the speeches held opposing them. Even the laws of the state were brought into the fray, since, in the opinion of the opponents, they had been broken. On this side there was, indeed, a seriousness that condemned the, in part, disorderly conduct, but there was also a decided spirit of legalism, which could not immediately separate between the external form and the interpretation and spirit out of which these things were carried on. Which is the reason why many of these things are today continued without embarrassment and at that by individuals who do not have still to establish a reputation with respect to Christian discipline. But this, nevertheless, does not prove that all things are justified, as they have now found their place among us. Wherever they really are innocent amusements and, especially in the cities, serve our people and, above all, our youth, purely as recreation. Where the attendant raising of funds is merely the most convenient way of defraying the cost involved without the odor of the usual unsavory money-making schemes— indeed the combining of amusements and the gathering of funds is not in itself to be condemned— where one does not beg from those without and, above all, where, in the effort to serve the church, the Gospel is not switched to a side track for the duration, one should at least be careful in forming judgment on these matters. Yet this remains true to this day: these things, in themselves and because of the multiplicity of arrangements and the ever-present alternative of our people to be just a ditto-machine, do not lend themselves as a particularly happy aid in furthering the understanding of the Gospel. And in so much, they belong in
our discussion on legalism. In our critical analysis of the life of the church as a whole they are symptoms showing that the fresh and spontaneous life in the Gospel is ailing, that we do not have full confidence that the Gospel is a power of God unto salvation, not only at some future time to release us from this planet that is to be destroyed through the glory of his coming to transport us to the mansions in the Father’s house, but more, to free us from this present evil world, from sin’s thraldom in the mean and niggardly way we view and do the deeds of our daily life. In other words, we do not trust the Gospel, in spite of protestations to the contrary, dogmatically correct as they are, that it alone is sufficient to create for the furtherance of the church not only what is needed but also what is at all of value.

We still have a few words to say with respect to the association with those of another persuasion and those of the world without. With respect to the former, Rome and the sectarians are naturally so far removed from us that our shortcomings are generally sins of omission. However, we are guilty of much legalism over against Lutherans who still can not find the same path with us in harmony of life and teaching in spite of the decisive and evident confession of the Synodical Conference. Just a short reference to what has already been said thereon in the Quartalschrift and also is touched upon in the second half of this article. It goes without saying that, because of the truth of the Gospel, we cannot externally cooperate with those who reject vital elements of the doctrine as we are constrained to hold it. But that our cardinal characteristic is the rebuff shows a spirit of legalism, just as in recent times an external importunate pressure for union reveals the same trait. There is an approach which takes not, as it were, the middle road, but operates on a level completely different. That is, to take appreciative note of every manifestation of the Gospel’s ability of spirit, to acknowledge it, to stand behind it with word and deed openly, to strengthen and encourage its fuller growth, without automatically turning on the icy water of our superior criticism from operation Isolation. It is necessary to add: We are not born with these qualifications, they must be acquired; and our failings often are not so much the result of evil intent but of force of habit. Nevertheless it behooves us to examine ourselves whether we are not enmeshed in our own legalistic arts, in parochialism, our craving to be always in the right, and self-righteousness. That is a point also in our occasional association with the sectarians and Romanists. It is not remarkable that we too readily step over the line on the one side or the other, since we are unaccustomed to association with strangers because of the naturally predominant particularism in this free country. However, as soon as the Gospel becomes the central point in all respects and in all our doings, the individual proper approach will quite readily be forthcoming. At the same time that leads to a readier understanding as to where and how a legalistic spirit tends to lead us astray.

In more recent times our struggle against Rome plays a special role. It would lead too far astray here to consider the question exhaustively. This will have to be done in a special article. A brief remark will suffice here. Where this opposition is carried into political agitation I expect, out of my knowledge of history and out of personal experience, that a legalistic attitude, a lack of Gospel understanding, will lie at the root of it. The outcome will be accordingly external, mechanical, superficial. Hidden motives and mental reservations, that is, the cheap motives and methods of worldly politicians soon flourish. It is no service to the church, it is of no service to the state, it serves only to strengthen the antichrist, who is our superior in fanatic conviction and organization, and will put him on top of the heap. Since I have learned more and more to apply the criterion of the Gospel to these things it is clear to me that it can not be otherwise.

It is the same in our association with the world. Formerly our pastors were considerably more, for external reasons, looked upon as outsiders. In the last twenty-five years we have become more
involved in the activities of the world especially in politics. Two trends make themselves felt here over against the former clear separation between the world and the church, the attempt is now often made to have them grow together. The other side, then, widens the separation between church and state to such an extent that a separation or division takes place in the individual, who now can swim in both streams. There we arrive at the first-mentioned syncretism. The realization, however, that these realms are clearly divided only in their innermost essence, that the Christian, in accord with the will of God, can’t jump this world, yea, rather not only is in this world and, at that, on the same footing with Christian, Jew, Roman, and heathen, but at the same time also stands as the Gospel Christian that he always is, and thus only will he neither flag nor flinch but be a man in time of need—this realization will point to the proper path and will point up too that the other tendencies root in a legalistic spirit. There too then the resultant accomplishment of such fixing is external, superficial, mechanical, hollow, and influenced by selfish mental calculations.

The Third statement: When in the development of the church’s life this condition assumes control in one new field after the other like a weed pest and becomes the natural state in each field, then the decline sets in, the decline which also shows itself outwardly in this, that we take over many virus-infected and beggarly elements from the sectarian churches.

This statement is simple; and the issue is simple too; that we see and acknowledge that it applies to the conditions prevailing in our midst. The complaint concerning the decline is general among us. Yet that does not make it a purposeful, penitent acknowledgment, rather the plaint itself may be a fruit of the spirit of legalism. It is necessary that we repentantly recognize that the decline is born out of the spirit of legalism, indeed, the legalistic arts and practices are the decline. Voices are heard in our midst claiming the complaint concerning a decline is pure pessimism. That too is a legalistic technique. Over against that it is submitted that the above presentation reflects one aspect of conditions prevailing in our midst. Naturally that is to be understood as though we did not have the Gospel nor just cause to magnify the grace of God. Nor as though every period did not have its peculiar weaknesses. Yet there is need to note that our times lack the freshness characteristic of the work of our fathers; and that the weaknesses painted above have these distinctive features: the outbreaks have occurred in ever-increasing fields, and they have become habitual. In many ways we have lost the consciousness of and the critical sense for legalistic arts and practices. For that reason we can’t stomach being reproached therewith. There is a vogue among us so open and remarkably current that we actually take it for granted: the lack of interest in doctrine (Lehrinteresse) and, at the same time, an imperturbable conviction of one’s own rectitude. Paralleling this appears the inconsistency—closer attention, however, reveals it as a consequence of the described conditions—that we have lost the power to bring the simplest matters to a decisive close. In addition, the assimilation of the frills and froth of the sectarians, the spread and exclusive flourishing of officialdom, of officious manipulation and fixing, and the corresponding methods of nurturing the redeemed of the Lord, the Bride of Christ!

This we must recognize (in sackcloth and ashes) if we wish to escape therefrom, if we are not to resist to the end the wooing work of the Gospel. If we do not repentantly acknowledge these things, we are sunk. In this sense this study is a sharp but necessary preachment of the law. (But how we stand in need of it!)

Now how to help? Let us retreat and recoup our strength in the Gospel, study it more diligently, again and again, and from the beginning, and thus preach it to our people. Let us study the Gospel to answer the new questions, which, in the prevailing conditions, break in on us like the sea. The
result of which can and will be that many cardinal truths of the Gospel will again be cultivated; truths lying open not only in Scriptures, but especially in Luther’s writings, that our occasional doctrinal discussions, through their one-sided emphasis, crowded from the center of our vision. Thus the spirit of our Christians will be introduced into challenging fields where its elasticity may be exercised, having become tired out and weakened by the old battles, which by themselves are incapable of furthering new thoughts. The Gospel brings new vigor, it also brings deeper knowledge of sin, it brings greater joy of faith, it will then too give the power to overcome the decay of spirituality of our time.

You Are Invited….

… to submit comments, articles, or references to other works related to Prof. Koehler’s essay. Of special interest to the editors of CHARIS are works which examine the relevance and applicability of his thinking to conditions found in the Evangelical Lutheran church today.

Inquiries and letters of interest can be sent to:

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