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Testifying the Gospel of the Grace of God

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CONTENTS

JANUARY	PAGE
Testifying the Gospel of the Grace of God; Th. Engelder	1
Der Pietismus; Theo. Hoyer	6
Present-Day Problems of Lutheranism; F. Kreiss	14
Luther on the Study and Use of the Ancient Languages; F. V. N. Painter	23
Der Schriftgrund fuer die Lehre von der satisfactio vicaria; P. E. Kretzmann	27
Sermon Study on 2 Cor. 4, 3—8; Theo. Laetsch	30
Dispositionen ueber die erste von der Synodalkonferenz angenommene Evangelienreihe	39
Miscellanea	51
Theological Observer. — Kirchlich-Zeitgeschichtliches	55
Book Review. — Literatur	73
FEBRUARY	
The Principles and Teachings of the Dialectical Theology; Th. Engelder	81
Die Lehre vom Beruf unter gegenwaertigen Verhaeltnissen; H. Strasen	93
Some Contacts of the Book of Acts with the Every-Day Life of Its Age; H. O. A. Keinath	106
The First Three Bibles that Entered the Early Life of Martin Luther; E. A. Brueggemann	118
Der Schriftgrund fuer die Lehre von der satisfactio vicaria; P. E. Kretzmann	123
Sermon Study on Phil. 1, 12—21; Theo. Laetsch	126
Dispositionen ueber die erste von der Synodalkonferenz angenommene Evangelienreihe	136
Miscellanea	144
Theological Observer. — Kirchlich-Zeitgeschichtliches	148
Book Review. — Literatur	153
MARCH	
The Principles and Teachings of the Dialectical Theology; Th. Engelder	161
Non est vis magica; Walter Albrecht	175
Der Schriftgrund fuer die Lehre von der satisfactio vicaria; P. E. Kretzmann	190
Sermon Study on 2 Cor. 7, 4—10; Theo. Laetsch	194
Dispositionen ueber die erste von der Synodalkonferenz angenommene Evangelienreihe	203
Miscellanea	215
Theological Observer. — Kirchlich-Zeitgeschichtliches	221
Book Review. — Literatur	233
APRIL	
The Principles and Teachings of the Dialectical Theology; Th. Engelder	241
Der Pietismus; Theo. Hoyer	252
Biblical Methods of Poor-Relief; Virtus Gloe	262
Der Schriftgrund fuer die Lehre von der satisfactio vicaria; P. E. Kretzmann	278
Dispositionen ueber die erste von der Synodalkonferenz angenommene Evangelienreihe	291
Miscellanea	296
Theological Observer. — Kirchlich-Zeitgeschichtliches	300
Book Review. — Literatur	311

MAY		PAGE
Der Pietismus; Theo. Hoyer		321
The Principles and Teachings of the Dialectical Theology; Th. Engelder		329
Luther, Bucer, and the Wittenberg Concordia; P. E. Kretzmann.....		340
Der Schriftgrund fuer die Lehre von der satisfactio vicaria; P. E. Kretzmann		348
Beichtrede; O. Kaiser		350
Dispositionen ueber die erste von der Synodalkonferenz angenommene Evangelienreihe		354
Miscellanea		368
Theological Observer. — Kirchlich-Zeitgeschichtliches		374
Book Review. — Literatur		390

JUNE

The Principles and Teachings of the Dialectical Theology; Th. Engelder		401
Die Gewissheit des christlichen Theologen; P. E. Kretzmann		411
Political Contacts of the Hebrews with Assyria and Babylonia; Alex. Heidel		418
Eine Gnadenzeit nach dem Tode, die Vernichtung aller Gottlosen und andere Irrlehren; J. H. C. Fritz		436
Der Schriftgrund fuer die Lehre von der satisfactio vicaria; P. E. Kretzmann		445
Dispositionen ueber die erste von der Synodalkonferenz angenommene Evangelienreihe		447
Miscellanea		456
Theological Observer. — Kirchlich-Zeitgeschichtliches		460
Book Review. — Literatur		471

JULY

Political Contacts of the Hebrews with Assyria and Babylonia; Alex. Heidel		481
Der Begriff "Gerechtigkeit" im Alten Testament, besonders in den Psalmen; L. A. Heerboth		497
Der Schriftgrund fuer die Lehre von der satisfactio vicaria; P. E. Kretzmann		509
Sermon Study for the Third Sunday after Trinity; Theo. Laetsch....		512
Dispositionen ueber die erste von der Synodalkonferenz angenommene Evangelienreihe		521
Miscellanea		530
Theological Observer. — Kirchlich-Zeitgeschichtliches		537
Book Review. — Literatur		553

AUGUST

Die Bedeutung der Predigt bei Luther; P. E. Kretzmann		561
King Henry VIII Courts Luther; W. Dallmann		568
The Greatness of Luther's Commentary on Galatians; R. T. Du Brau		577
Ueber Buecherbesprechungen; L. Fuerbringer		581
Der Schriftgrund fuer die Lehre von der satisfactio vicaria; P. E. Kretzmann		584
Dispositionen ueber die erste von der Synodalkonferenz angenommene Evangelienreihe		587
Miscellanea		599
Theological Observer. — Kirchlich-Zeitgeschichtliches		606
Book Review. — Literatur		629

SEPTEMBER	PAGE
Widmung	641
Skizze und Schriften Dr. Theodor Engelders	642
Pastorkonferenzen; L. Fuerbringer	644
New Revisions of Comparative Religion; Th. Graebner	653
Der "andere Martin" und seine hohe Bedeutung fuer uns lutherische Theologen in Amerika; J. T. Mueller	661
Doctrinal Preaching; J. H. C. Fritz	671
The Pastor and Secular Literature; M. S. Sommer	677
"Private Interpretation," 2 Pet. 1, 20; W. Arndt	685
Recent Archeological Light on Nahum; W. A. Maier	692
Die biblische Theologie im Studium des lutherischen Theologen; P. E. Kretzmann	699
Frederick August Craemer; W. G. Polack	704
The Blast that Wrecked the Pope's Power; Theo. Hoyer	710
How will Radio-Preaching Affect the Regular Pulpit of Our Church? E. J. Friedrich	713
OCTOBER	
Walther als Kirchenmann; L. Fuerbringer	721
Walther, a Christian Theologian; Th. Engelder	731
Walther the Preacher; J. H. C. Fritz	743
Suggested Thoughts on the Question: Can We Escape Both Tradition- alism and Liberalism? O. A. Geiseman	749
Der Schriftgrund fuer die Lehre von der satisfactio vicaria; P. E. Kretzmann	752
Dispositionen ueber die erste von der Synodalkonferenz angenommene Evangelienreihe	755
Miscellanea	770
Theological Observer. — Kirchlich-Zeitgeschichtliches	774
Book Review. — Literatur	789
NOVEMBER	
Walther, a Christian Theologian; Th. Engelder	801
Ein Gutachten des seligen Dr. F. Pieper ueber Polygamie	816
Der Schriftgrund fuer die Lehre von der satisfactio vicaria; P. E. Kretzmann	824
The Norm and Rule of Doctrine in the Christian Church before the Reformation; Theo. Dierks	826
Dispositionen ueber die erste von der Synodalkonferenz angenommene Evangelienreihe	847
Outlines on the Eisenach Epistle Selections	855
Miscellanea	858
Theological Observer. — Kirchlich-Zeitgeschichtliches	863
Book Review. — Literatur	873
DECEMBER	
The Training of Ministers; J. H. C. Fritz	881
Einige roemische Gesetze im ersten Drittel des vierten Jahrhunderts; R. W. Heintze	885
The Study of the Apocrypha by the Preacher; H. H. Kumnick	899
Are We Using Our Septuagint? P. E. Kretzmann	906
Der Schriftgrund fuer die Lehre von der satisfactio vicaria; P. E. Kretzmann	912
Outlines on the Eisenach Epistle Selections	916
Miscellanea	928
Theological Observer. — Kirchlich-Zeitgeschichtliches	933
Book Review. — Literatur	951

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No. 1

Testifying the Gospel of the Grace of God.*

Whenever St. Paul had occasion to speak of his work in the Christian ministry, his thoughts dwelt on one subject: "The Gospel of the grace of God." At a conference at Miletus he characterized his ministry thus: "None of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy and the ministry which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the Gospel of the grace of God," Acts 20, 24. On the present occasion we cannot, and we would not, speak on any other subject. Let us single out this particular point: The great need, the one great need, of the Church is "the Gospel of the grace of God."

The Church owes its existence to the Gospel of the grace of God. And it could not exist for one moment without it. Offering the sinner the forgiveness of sins gained by Christ, the Gospel produces and preserves the saving faith, and by magnifying this wondrous love of God, it produces the Christian life. In the words of Dr. Pieper (*Chr. Dog.*, II, p. 13): "The *gratuitus favor Dei propter Christum*, brought to us in the Gospel, is the immovable heaven of grace spread out over the Church, under which the Christians live and work by faith. Gazing upon this heaven of grace, faith comes into being, is preserved, and becomes a 'living, energetic, active, mighty thing' (Luther, XIV, 99)." We Christians owe everything to the grace of God. It is the one source and the rich source of all comfort and joy. When the sinner, when the Christian, realizes his utter unworthiness and absolute helplessness, the Gospel speaketh in this wise: "By grace are ye saved, . . . not of yourselves, . . . not of works," Eph. 2, 8 f. — *sola gratia*. When we anxiously inquire by what right the just God receives the sinner into His favor, the Gospel speaketh in this wise:

* The following address, delivered October 25, 1935, in the chapel of Concordia Seminary on the occasion of Dr. L. Fuerbringer's jubilee, is offered here in place of the customary Foreword to the CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY. The sole business of our periodical is to testify the Gospel of the grace of God. — *Ed. Note.*

Ye are "justified freely by His grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus," Rom. 3, 24—*favor Dei propter Christum*. And to him who, happy in the joy of salvation, has but one more wish, the eager desire to have his fellow-men share in his bliss, the Gospel speaketh in this wise: "Preach the Gospel to every creature," Mark 16, 15. "The grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men," Titus 2, 11—*gratia universalis*. The grace of God in Christ is everything to the Church. And so much does she make of the truth that her righteousness is Christ that it has become her very name. "This is the name wherewith she shall be called: The Lord Our Righteousness," Jer. 33, 16. That means, as a theologian who is still among us, near and dear to us, points out: "The Church of God is set before us as a monument of joy, and the name that she bears, the mark by which she is known, is the name of her Savior, *Jehovah Zidkenu*, the Lord Our Righteousness." (*Lehre und Wehre*, 74, p. 145.) The Gospel of the grace of God is the Church's all. In it she lives and moves and has her being.

The Gospel supplies every want of the Church and can remedy every evil that afflicts her. For instance, the Church is groaning under the divisions which the errorists have caused in the visible Church. The heart of every Christian is set on the removal of this curse. And the only power that can heal the hurt is the Gospel of the grace of God. Says Luther (V, 1170), and after him the Formula of Concord (*Trigl.*, p. 917): "If this only article remains pure on the battle-field, the Christian Church also remains pure and in goodly harmony and without any sects; but if it does not remain pure, it is not possible that any error or fanatical spirit can be resisted." The reason is this: "*Es kann keine Ketzerei die Gnade Gottes leiden*." (Luther, III, 1692.) The errorist, at heart, hates the article that man is saved, converted, justified, by grace alone. (Cp. Walther, *Law and Gospel*, p. 163.) And, conversely, the heart that lives in the grace of God *kann keine Ketzerei leiden*. It cannot bear any false teaching. For, since the article of the grace of God is the heart and center of the entire Scriptures, any denial of any Scripture-teaching will in the end vitiate this article. And that the Christian cannot stand.—How shall the disrupted Church be reunited? Let the Gospel of grace rule in theology and rule in the hearts; then men will not only be able to detect the particular error, but will also be ready and determined to cast it out of their hearts, out of theology, out of the Church.

The Church's one great need is the Gospel of the grace of God, and so, in the second place, she needs a ministry which is able and willing to testify and teach it. And the Gospel itself supplies this need. No man becomes a minister of the Gospel of himself. It is not an easy matter to testify and teach the Gospel of grace. That arouses

the opposition and enmity of well-nigh the whole world. The whole Pelagian world is up in arms against it. The Pelagian world of Paul's days was determined to silence this testimony. Paul could testify the Gospel of grace only at the cost of bonds and affliction and at the daily risk of his life. Moreover, it went against his own Pelagian flesh and blood. It needed the power of God to turn the Pelagian Pharisee Paul into a minister of the Gospel of grace. It was the power of God which made the Semi-Pelagian, Catholic Luther a preacher of the righteousness which is of faith, by grace. And this compelling, gently compelling, force inheres in the Gospel itself. It was the Gospel which won the heart of Paul and thereby at once enlisted his mind and tongue and pen in its service. The joy of salvation which it brought to him must be brought to others. "Salvation unto us has come by God's free grace and favor" — we cannot keep that song locked up in our hearts. The earth must be filled with the psalm of *sola gratia, gratia universalis*. The Gospel of grace produces its own heralds. The pastors who had met there in Miletus were facing the same difficulties and struggles that Paul had encountered, and he tells them: "I commend you to God and to the Word of His grace, which is able to build you up," Acts 20, 32.

The Gospel produces the men the Church needs, and the Church needs men who live for the Gospel and are ready to die for it. Such men, dedicated to the Gospel, live in the Gospel. It is their daily meditation. They pray, says Luther, that "the Holy Ghost may so fill their hearts with it that they busy themselves with it all the day long, that they retire with these words at night and rise with them in the morning." (XI, 1103.) Further, "a preacher of the right sort studies and teaches this article *above all* and at all times; for on this article depends the true knowledge of God and our salvation." (VIII, 798.) A preacher of the right sort knows only one thing. Paul "determined not to know anything save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified," 1 Cor. 2, 2. Whether he preached in the market-place, or wrote epistles to the churches, or trained men for the ministry, or supervised their later work, his one interest lay in the Gospel of grace. Such a minister has no time to waste on anything that does not very positively serve the Gospel of grace. Other studies may gain him the plaudits of the learned, other activities arouse the admiration and enthusiastic support of the secularistic and legal-minded masses. But none of these things move him. Finally, he jealously guards the purity of the Gospel of grace as the one treasure of the Church, the only hope of the sinner. He would rather cut off his right hand than write down one word in support of the teaching that there is something in man, some activity, some disposition, that merits, or accounts for, the sinner's conversion. He would rather have his tongue paralyzed than have it say that God would not have all men to be saved. He will not

Testifying the Gospel of the Grace of God.

commit the crime of closing the door of heaven to any sinner and of robbing the troubled believer of his needed comfort. What does the Church need? Her prayer is: Lord, give us men who testify the Gospel, the full and pure Gospel.

The Church needs to have the Gospel of grace preached to her, preached, in the third place, in the Lutheran way. There are not different kinds of Gospel — the Catholic gospel, the Reformed gospel, the Modernist gospel, the Lutheran gospel. There is but one Gospel-salvation because of Christ, salvation by grace alone, salvation for all. And this Gospel is preached by the Lutheran Church in all its fulness and purity. She has maintained the article of grace in all its parts and aspects, in all its bearings and relations. Her enemies bear witness to that effect. For on that account they are her enemies. They blame her just for this. The liberal bodies hate the Lutheran Church for teaching the *gratia Dei propter Christum*. The Catholic and Arminian churches blame her for teaching the *sola gratia*. The Calvinistic churches call her to account for teaching the *gratia universalis*. This is the verdict of the adversaries. "This blessed doctrine [of the righteousness of faith in Christ], the precious holy Gospel, they call Lutheran." (Apology. *Trigl.*, p. 327.) Yes, whatever belongs to the Biblical doctrine of saving grace the Lutheran Church teaches. She will not relinquish one iota of it. "Of this article nothing can be yielded or surrendered, even though heaven and earth and whatever will not abide, should sink to ruin." (Smalc. Art. *Trigl.*, p. 461.) She cannot do otherwise. She will not go against God's eternal truth. She solemnly declares: "We have said in the Confession that the remission of sins is received freely for Christ's sake, through faith. If this is not the very voice of the Gospel, if it is not the judgment of the eternal Father, which Thou who art in the bosom of the Father hast revealed to the world, we are justly blamed. But Thy death is a witness, Thy resurrection is a witness, the Holy Ghost is a witness, Thy entire Church is a witness that it is truly the judgment of the Gospel that we obtain remission of sins, not on account of our merits, but on account of Thee, through faith." (Apology. *Trigl.*, p. 423.)

The one need of the Church is the Gospel of grace, and the more fully this Gospel is preached, the better her need is supplied. If the voice of the Lutheran Church were hushed, that is to say, if the Gospel of grace were no longer preached in its fulness and purity, the Church would suffer great spiritual loss. Amplifying this, Dr. Krauth declared: "As our Church has been needed in the past, so she is needed in the present. She is needed not only for her motherhood to her own children, but for the great wants of Christendom and of the world. She is needed as a witness to that doctrine which is conceded in terms by the whole Protestant world, but which is invaded primarily or by necessary inference by every system which is at war with ours —

the doctrine of justification by faith. Inadequate views of the person and work of Christ; false views of election and reprobation; of the means of grace; of the Word and Sacraments; of the mode and subject of Baptism; of the nature of the validity and efficacy of the ministry — all are in conflict, covertly it may be, but really, with the true doctrine of justification by faith. Romanism and Ritualism directly assail it; Rationalism destroys it; Fanaticism, sometimes with an affectation of zealotry for it, confounds justification by faith with justification by sensation and leads the patient to rest, not on the old, eternal promise, but on a new personal observation. No Church holds the doctrine of justification by faith in that consistent integrity and harmonious relation within itself and with all other doctrines in which it is held and confessed in the Lutheran Church." (*The Lutheran Diet*, 1877, p. 48.)

Finally. One of the instrumentalities through which the Lutheran Church fulfils her God-given mission is our Concordia Seminary together with its sister seminaries throughout the world. In view of the nature of the present celebration a few remarks on this point will not be out of place. Concordia Seminary has one single aim — to fit men for the ministry of the Gospel of grace, to graduate men who are able and willing to preach it in its purity and fulness. Its first president, Dr. Walther, inculcated this from first to last. "The weakest graduate, if only he has grasped the doctrine that the grace of God in Christ Jesus has appeared for all men, to be received freely, by faith, can preach to men in such a way that they are assured of their salvation, and that is worth more than all the wisdom and all the possessions and treasures of the world. What is all erudition, as necessary as it is in its place, compared with the wisdom of God which is set forth when but the simple passage is explained 'God so loved the world,' etc.? Hearing this, all poor sinners rejoice, all the holy angels are filled with wonder, and the whole world should sink upon its knees and sing Gloria and Hallelujah. If our young preachers preach this, they are the men who can start a reformation in our country, as indeed in this way a small beginning has already been made." (*Proc. Syn. Conf.*, 1872, p. 28.) He told his students: "If you preach the Gospel abundantly, . . . your people will say: 'Our minister has given us what we could not get anywhere else. He is a true Lutheran minister and pours out a great treasure for us every Sunday.'" (*Law and Gospel*, p. 408.) And we know with what burning words he adjured the Seminary, at the dedication in 1883, to remain true to its charter. (Cf. *Lutheraner*, 79, p. 372.) The second president, Dr. Pieper, ever reminded the Seminary of its high calling. In an essay read before the General Body in 1926 he said: "The new Seminary buildings here in St. Louis are placed in the service of the Christian doctrine of grace. If they did not serve that purpose,

they would be nothing but a magnificent idol-temple." He closed his essay with the prayer: "Dear Savior Jesus Christ, graciously grant us that we may never betray the alone-saving Christian doctrine of grace, but remain faithful confessors of it for the honor of Thy holy name and the salvation of man! Amen." (*Lehre und Wehre*, 72, pp. 266. 329.) By the grace of God, Concordia Seminary to-day knows only one thing. The Biblical doctrine of the grace of God in Christ shapes all the courses in its curriculum. It forms the subject of the final examinations. Addressing the graduating class of 1933, the president said: "We feel sure that you have a clear perception of these two central truths of our Church, of the formal principle [the sole authority of Scripture] and of the material principle [justification by faith, salvation by grace], and that you confess both by mouth and heart as your faith; otherwise we could not with a good conscience permit you to enter the ministry." (*CONC. THEOL. MONTHLY*, IV, 562). A seminary of this character, in so far as it accomplishes its high aim, measures up fully to the needs of the Church.

And now for the matter at hand. Realizing the need of the Church and of the world, we commemorate with gratitude and joy the fifty years of Dr. Fuerbringer's work in the ministry of the Gospel of grace. In all these years, in the various positions into which God placed him, as pastor of a Christian congregation, as teacher at Concordia Seminary since 1893 and its president since 1931, as editor of the *Lutheraner*, and as President of the Synodical Conference, making full use of the manifold opportunities these positions offered, he has been testifying with a loud and sweet voice the Gospel of the grace of God; he has been giving all that is in him to supply the one great need of the Church. We thank God for the rich blessings this ministration has brought to us and countless others. And we pray God that the teaching and the example of the jubilarian may inspire many with the mind of the apostle: "None of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy and the ministry which I have received of the Lord Jesus to testify the Gospel of the grace of God." TH. ENGELDER.

Der Pietismus.

(Fortsetzung.)

In den „Magdeburger Benturien“, dem monumentalen Geschichtswerk der Reformationszeit, abgeschlossen im Jahre 1574, schrieb Flacius: „Anstatt eines Papstes springen ihrer unzählige hervor, welche Recht umwechseln und aus Gerichts- in Kirchensachen treten, in ihren Schranken nicht bleiben und den Gemeinden die Glaubensformeln mit Schwert, Bliß und Donner aufdringen. Dazu braucht man einen Haufen Vor-