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The New Year and All Things

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The New Year and All Things

By MARTIN H. FRANZMANN

HE is before all things, and by Him all things consist." (Col. 1:17)

"It was the worst of times; it was the best of times." It always is. Any fairly clever theologian or fairly clever historian can always make out a pretty good case for both. It is rather difficult today, but for us in America at least most of our troubles are in the future. If we want to agonize ourselves by taking troubles out of God's lap and putting them into our own, God is good-natured about that sort of thing with a sort of judgmental good nature. But as of now you could call it good times or bad times, whichever way you please. But in the last analysis if you call them good times or bad times monomaniacally, you are always bound to end up making a fool of yourself, and an impious fool at that.

The great art that we must learn (and it is the obvious one which we always forget), the indispensable art, the queen of all arts, is to learn to sing, in bad times and in good times and in times that are both good and bad: *Tu solus, O Christe*. "Thou only, O Christ, art most high in the glory of God the Father." For it pleased the Father that in Him all fullness should dwell, that He should make peace by the blood of His cross, and that God should by Him reconcile all things to Himself.

The enthroned Son, the Outstreaming of God's glory, sustains all things by the word of His power. He Himself has said, "All power is given unto Me in heaven and in earth." There is no limit to this, and we who are redeemed ought to have eyes for

the full width and the whole scope of God's redemption. The covenant of the rainbow, which placed the long-suffering mercy of God upon all creation and upon all history, has never been annulled. It was not annulled by the covenant inaugurated by the blood of our Lord; it was taken up into that covenant and confirmed by it with a new potency. The groaning of creation does not go unheard; the travailing of creation does not go unmarked; the agonies of history do not go unnoticed by God the Father of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We are but the firstfruits of God's creation, of His whole creation. The life of Jesus was one great benediction spoken on the life and history of man. He spoke a benediction on little kids, on food and drink, upon the earth and upon the sea, and upon men's hands and legs and arms and feet and eyes and ears. And for our comfort we might notice that He spoke a benediction even on theologians, both amateur and professional. He was very patient with the amateur, the woman of Samaria, with her disquisition on the proper place for liturgical worship, and He was patient even with a Nicodemus, the more advanced type, the professional theologian.

"By Him all things consist." Let us take that literally. They hold together, they stand up, and they have their place and their function by Him. There is no good thing that does not consist by Him. Whatsoever is true, whatsoever is lovely, whatsoever is of good report, it holds together, it has its place, its function, and its value in

Him. There are no accidents in this world in which we live, no good accidents and no bad accidents. In Him are all the good things that we as theologians enjoy. The fact that we have better libraries than our fathers is no accident. The fact that we have better concordances is no accident. The fact that we belong to a church that gave us a better dictionary of New Testament Greek in English than any generation ever had before, this great ecumenical gesture of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, that is no accident. The fact that we have better grammars, that we know the language of the Bible better, that we know the world of the Bible better—thanks to the archaeologists and historians—that we have a spate of translations, good, bad, and indifferent, but each in its way adding to the flood of light in this generation, this “consists by Him.” All these things outside the church which we somehow never really consider theologically or too seriously, they consist in Him. Every good thing which the Gospel has wrung even from unwilling man: sanitation, the care for the halt, the maimed, and the blind; all the wonders of medicine; our care of the deaf, the crippled, the retarded, the handicapped; our care for the widows, the orphans, and the aged. And this wonderful thing in the Western world, our reverence for the child. These things consist by Him.

The arts consist by Him. Air-conditioning which enables us to write an ode on *Tu solus, O Christe* without having our arm stick to the paper, that consists by Him. These are all broken lights of the Light of the world, to say nothing of the more obvious things: of the increased opportunities of the church, the enlarged instrumentalities for the Gospel, the multiplication pos-

sible for our witnessing voices. All these things consist by Him. This is part of the fact of the Christ, and He looms ever larger before our eyes. This does not, of course, remove us from responsibility; it places responsibility squarely upon us, the obligation, namely, that all this muchness of the light that falls from Him be reflected by us. We are His body; He works through us.

And all the bad things are by Him. They consist by Him. They stand together; they have their place, their function, and their meaning and their value in Him. There are no accidents anymore. When the steeds of conquest ride across the skies, when the red steed of war goes galloping out, when the black steed of famine comes clumping down our roads, when the steed of death overtakes us—that is no accident. That is the Lamb that was slain opening the seals of God's book, *pro nobis*. When the Beast rises from the sea and makes its claim of power on all mankind, and when the Beast comes from the earth to use its subtle impious propaganda on the poor, deluded souls of all mankind—even that is no accident. “It was given him”; “it was given him”; “it was given him”—the Seer of Patmos cannot say it often enough. It is “given” them to strut and fret their little hour upon the stage of this world, their three and a half years, their allotted months and days. The earth and the sea are under God's control and the Lamb's; and we can be assured that no bestial blasts in air or space can escape that control. Here, too, the Lamb that was slain is opening up His seals.

To bring it down to our own life: my own diseases consist by Him. My growing older, feebler of eye, less quick of mind, and certainly less mobile of body—these

are in the hand of the Lamb that was slain, the hand of the Christ, who reconciled all things to Himself. My march toward death, my dying—they belong to Him and they consist in Him who said, "I am the Resurrection and the Life." And this, too, does not remove us from responsibility but places it squarely upon our shoulders. In spite of all these evil things, and through them, the Gospel of the kingdom must be proclaimed. Amid the sound of the footfalls of the God that marches toward judgment, this music never dare cease. All things, absolutely all things, consist by Him.

The First Article is illuminated by the Second. Only a faith like Martin Luther's, which circled continually about this *Tu solus*, that spoke with monomaniacal insistence "Is my Lord," only a faith like Martin Luther's could put "shoes" into the First Article and not get cute about it. He meant it. The common, necessary shoes he wore consist by Him. They are the gift of the God who has smiled upon us in the face of Christ Jesus.

Good times and good things will not save the church, and they will not save us. Bad things and bad times will not destroy us or the church. The Lamb that was slain alone can save, and the wrath of the Lamb alone can destroy us. There will be no rocks thick enough and no holes in the hills deep enough to shield us from that wrath of the Lamb and from Him that sitteth upon the throne.

We are not men filled with wine, we are filled with the Spirit. That is our intoxication, the intoxication of the Spirit, who

completes the presence of this Christ: "Thou only, O Christ, with the Holy Ghost, art most high." And so there is no intoxication in our life as there is in the lives of men who have no hope, and there is no terror either. If there is a delirium tremens, it is the trembling lest we receive the grace of God in vain, lest we misread the goodness of God in all life and all history in one way or the other.

Sweet rose whose hue, angry and brave,
Bids the rash gazer wipe his eye;
Thy root is ever in its grave,
And thou must die.

The intoxication of the Spirit means both that we see with delight and wonder that brings tears to our eye the angry and brave hue of God's good rose and that we see without surprise and without terror and without panic the fact that the root of this rose is ever in its grave. This is God's good rose from His hand, but it is not yet the rose that shall grow along the paths on the new earth under the new heaven. It is not the rose on the table where we shall drink the new good wine with our Lord in the kingdom of His Father. We cannot call the cacophony of history anything but cacophony. But at the same time we know that this is the tuning up for God's great Symphony No. 2, the Symphony of Creation, in one everlasting movement, that puts on us a responsibility—the responsibility that somewhere on this earth there be men who are neither drunk nor panicky, that this clear voice of the Christ continue to ring in the world's last days.

St. Louis, Mo.