

3-1-1971

The Edifying Word: The Word of Hope

Paul G. Bretscher

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm>



Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bretscher, Paul G. (1971) "The Edifying Word: The Word of Hope," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 42, Article 15.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol42/iss1/15>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Print Publications at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Concordia Theological Monthly by an authorized editor of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact seitzw@csl.edu.

The Edifying Word: The Word of Hope

PAUL G. BRETSCHER

The author, formerly professor of theology at Valparaiso University, is now pastor of Immanuel Lutheran Church, Valparaiso, Ind. He is also a member of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. This essay is an abbreviated version of an address first delivered to the Southeastern District convention at Roanoke, Va., in April 1970. The full text of the original presentation is available to any who may be interested from the Office of the Southeastern District, 5121 Colorado Ave. N. W., Washington, D. C. 20011.

PSALM 130 SERVES AS THE BASIS FOR THIS EXHORTATION TO THE CHURCH TO edify one another in the hope of the Gospel, whose word of promise alone establishes our election, our eschatology, and our ethos. The author places liberal theology and form criticism into proper historical perspective and suggests ways for the church, especially his own synod, to turn contemporary turmoil into blessing.

INTRODUCTION

Out of the depths I cry to Thee, O Lord!
Lord, hear my voice!
Let Thy ears be attentive
to the voice of my supplications!
(Ps. 130:1-2)

The depths from which men cry can be very literal. A truck driver told me how he once stepped down from the cab of his truck on a Chicago street in driving rain and fell 20 feet into an open manhole. For 36 hours he shouted for help and bruised and lacerated his body in vain efforts to climb out. That's a long time to cry from the depths.

Usually, though, the depths stand for depression of spirit, as if death and the grave were closing in. We cry out of de-

feat and humiliation, out of futility or frustration or despair. In such despondency the lament of Psalm 22, as Jesus takes it on His own lips on the cross, becomes very real to us also, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" It is the severest of testings.

The depths may be more than an individual matter. A whole society may find itself in such a state of depression. In that sense I wonder whether the decade of the 1960s may not well be called "the Great Depression" of the American spirit. Assassinations, a war that sucked up untold resources of blood and wealth and allowed no escape, deep social conflict with hardening of polarities, economic inflation, fundamental challenges to the very structure of society, a rhetoric of violence and contempt

for all traditional values, the desperate dedication of militants who, like Samson of old, were ready to die if by their terrorism they could pull the whole temple of society down with them, and now add to all this the frightening specter of the subtle ecological by-products of technology which threaten the very survival of humanity on this earth—these are burdens almost too great to be borne! In the face of such massive problems the traditional American rhetoric of optimism sounds more and more hollow and unreal.

But our concern shall be primarily with the depression of the church, in particular The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. As one pastor has said, "We are dug in for the great Milwaukee offensive. Who is attacking us? Modernism? Fundamentalism? Existentialism? Neoorthodoxy? It's us! Brother against brother! We kick, bite, stab, wound, and now kill. LCMS . . . Lutheran Church—Miserably Sick. That's us. Father, forgive!"

"Out of the depths I cry to Thee, O LORD! Lord, hear my voice! Let Thy ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!"

Isn't that a lot of nerve? Our ears are so inattentive to the voice of God's Word. Our thoughts are turned so inward on ourselves, our minds are so forgetful, our hearts so calculating! We don't even know how to listen to our God, yet we expect Him to listen to our voice, pay attention to our supplications, concentrate His ears on us so that He doesn't miss a thing! That's nerve!

But God does listen—from the highest heaven down to our lowest depths He does listen, attentively! That is the beginning of our hope!

I. *The Forgiveness That Makes Fear of God Possible*

If Thou, O LORD, shouldst mark iniquities,

Lord, who could stand?

But there is forgiveness with Thee,
that Thou mayest be feared.

(Ps. 130:3-4)

To pray this psalm rightly, we must be so deeply in the depths as to give up on all our own hopes and devices.

Nobody wants to fall that deep, however, or confess it's as bad as all that. That is human nature. We may be depressed, but we resist despair; for we love life, and despair would make life impossible. If we cannot find the way out, we can at least pity ourselves, curse the forces that have conspired to sink us so deeply in the pit, and cry to God to approve our self-pity and join us in cursing our enemies. Obviously, then, we haven't hit bottom yet. We still have a dignity to hang on to, a high estimation of self that we don't want to let go.

The old "knowledge of good and evil" in us is busy working out its own kind of salvation. With our own eyesight we diagnose our situation. We decide for ourselves what the good is that we ought to achieve and what the evil is we must avoid. Without listening to God we invoke His blessing on this calculation of ours. By our wisdom we devise the strategy to gain the good and escape the evil.

We as a church are dismayed and fearful at many pressures and enemies, but not dismayed and fearful enough! For we still have our wisdom, our knowledge of good and evil, our diagnoses, our remedies—

and in these we place our hope. On these we want to invoke God's blessing.

Take a peek into the cluttered medicine cabinet of our Synod and see the host of prescriptions compounded by our many pharmacists. There is the bottle labeled **RELEVANCE**. Give people what really interests them, and do it in an exciting way. Generally this comes out to mean, don't bore them with the Book. Or here is another one, labeled **PROPHECY**. We need contemporary prophets, like Amos of old, to denounce the corruptions of society and to arouse consciences by invective and moral indignation. Another one, **SOCIAL ACTION**. We have spent our energies talking and feeding on our own piety and passed by the poor and oppressed. Fewer words, more action! Then there is a bottle called **CONTEMPORARY LITURGIES**. Traditional forms turn off the youth. We must give our generation the opportunity to express its own worship style. Or again, **NEW THEOLOGIES**. We must have a theology which speaks to man as he understands himself today. Or again, **ANTI-INSTITUTIONALISM**. The establishment is itself the problem, for it gets in the way of everything the church should be doing. Then there is a set of medicine bottles, the first of which is called **VERBAL INSPIRATION**. Get your theological prolegomena straightened out, purge critical methodology out of your system, and you will feel good again. Or **DISCIPLINE**. Get the "liberals" out of the colleges and seminaries, so that they cease contaminating the new generation of pastors and teachers. Or again, **ORGANIZATION**. Get the right people into key positions in the institution, so that we may have a little more theological firmness and courage in making rebels toe

the line or get out. Still another is labeled **DOCUMENTS**. Sign here, everybody. And next to it **DIVISION**. We are not ready for fellowship, even with ourselves. Put all the conservatives into one church and all the liberals into another. Then there is a label which reads **STUDY COMMISSION**. Turn our problems over to scholars in the church, and let them produce reports. (That bottle is about empty.) Still another bottle is called **PLURALISM**. We may be going off in a dozen directions, but it doesn't matter as long as each man is free to do his thing. And an explosive bottle waiting to blow its cork is labeled **SPIRIT**. Enliven the church with the dynamic of the Spirit and prayer and the variety of its manifestations.

Here I am not arguing the purpose or need for any of these prescriptions. I recognize in this very diversity the possibility of a variety of gifts which may contribute through the Spirit, not to the division of the body of Christ but to its effective strength and unity. What I am concerned with is a perversion, namely, that we begin to take a particular prescription so seriously as to imagine that if we could only get everybody to swallow it we will have saved the church! That is demonic, the very curse of sin at work. For this is to regard ourselves as *wise* in terms of our own analysis and eyesight. We make ourselves then *like God*, assume we *know good and evil*, act out of our own strategies, and regard everyone who stands in our way and contradicts us as the enemy.

You can be in the depths that way, but not deep enough. The real enemy is our own wisdom, our calculation, our hope in our own devices, and therefore our inability to hear and believe what the Word of God

says to us. We do not know the enemy inside ourselves! The brother who offers his prescription and says, "Take this," does not know how sick to death he himself is, how much more profound the problem is than he imagines, and what a profound divine miracle, totally beyond the wisdom and strategies of men, is required for the cure of the church!

The psalmist had fallen all the way to the bottom. If we, in our personal lives as well as in the life of the church, are to know the hope of the Gospel again, we need to fall that low.

1. "If Thou, O LORD, shouldst mark iniquities, Lord, *who could stand?*"

We are so good at marking iniquities — in other people. Do we not hear or remember the warning of Jesus in Matt. 7:2, "With the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get"? (Cf. Rom. 2:1.)

Jesus' disciples bristled with righteous indignation when a Samaritan village declined to receive Him and suggested calling down fire to consume it (Luke 9:54). They did not know that that very fire would have to consume them too! The disciples thought they were loyal and righteous when they wanted to fight for Jesus on the Mount of Olives, expecting that angels would come to help them destroy those enemies. They didn't dream that the angels, if they came, would have to destroy them too!

"Lord, who could stand?" is also the theme of Revelation 5 with its cry, "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?" For the seals, when broken, unleash the wrath of God with so fearful a vengeance that the whole of humanity, from

king down to slave, has to hide in caves and call on the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us . . . for the great day of their wrath has come, and *who can stand before it?*" (Rev. 6:15-17). Who is worthy to open the seals, so that the wrath that breaks forth will not devour also *him?* And the answer is "No one!" — except only the Lamb who has already been slain by that same wrath and who ransomed men for God by His blood.

We look at our torn world with its injustices, its poverty, its bitternesses and hatreds, its griefs and pains and wars and conflicts, and we want it healed! The kingdom of God should come right here on this earth, we imagine, and we must work for and with it by resisting every oppression and healing every evil. And we wonder why God does not produce the great society, overthrow all the evil, consume the hypocrites, bring down the establishment, heal the world and turn it into paradise! It sounds like a noble prayer — until you hear Malachi again, "But who can endure the day of His coming, and *who can stand when He appears?*" (Mal. 3:2). You think you are praying for salvation, but what you are really asking for is utter, total destruction, beginning with yourself!

Are you willing to hit bottom? Then read Romans 2:17 ff., and paraphrase it so that it talks about us, about our church.

But if you call yourself a Jew (a true Lutheran, of the Missouri Synod) and rely upon the Law (the purity of our Gospel) and boast of your relation to God (as the true visible church) and know His will (that you mark heretics and avoid them) and approve what is excellent (loyalty to the Brief Statement), because you are instructed in the Law (the old dogmatics, especially prolegomena), and

if you are sure that you are guide to the blind (the liberals), a light to those who are in darkness (professors who use the critical method), a corrector of the foolish (the uncommitted middle), a teacher of children (young people who ask disturbing questions), having in the Law (formulations of pure doctrine) the embodiment of knowledge and truth—you then who teach others, will you not then teach yourself?

St. Paul then asks some embarrassing questions of his Jewish brothers. We can formulate some of our own to match his.

You who detect hypocrisies in others, are you a hypocrite yourself?

You who boast so much of the glorious Gospel, do you know how to preach that Gospel to comfort, heal, and unite people and to set them free?

You who boast of the power of the Word, is your Word so frail and empty that you have to shore it up with institutional powers of discipline to keep it from collapsing?

You who insist that every word is inspired, do you call it "faith" to skim over words that raise hard questions? And do you then stand in judgment over a brother who takes such words seriously and wrestles with them?

You who confess that the church is one and holy through the blood of Christ alone, do you propose to make it one and holy by dividing it—cutting yourself off from it, driving others out of it, or proposing to split the church by some kind of gentlemen's agreement?

You who confess that it is only by faith that we please God, do you then dare to imagine that it is by acting in accordance with what you call "conscience" that you please God?

You who regard yourself a defender of the Gospel, do you dishonor God by dis-

trusting and not using the Gospel? For, as it is written, the name of God is blasphemed among the outsiders because of you.

2. "But there is forgiveness with Thee, *that Thou mayest be feared.*"

We have not hit bottom until we understand that sentence too. The church cannot begin to hope until it learns first to fear what it ought to fear—the wrath of God and nothing else! But we can have the capacity to fear God's wrath rightly only when we live in the shelter of His forgiveness. Therefore if we are afraid of losing the pure doctrine, we have already lost it. For if we were living in and by that doctrine, we would fear nothing except God! But we would dare to fear God because between us and His wrath stands the cross, the revelation of the glory of His mercy!

It was a dreadful moment, the day the kingdom arrived, the midnight hour for the world. The kingdom was coming by itself, suddenly, fully, at once—not a development of history, not a process evolving out of human strategies of love or war or merit. It was God acting to crown His people with the glory long promised them and to destroy and subjugate finally and forever all their enemies. It happened in what we know as Holy Week, especially Good Friday.

The atonement is indispensable. Christian theology cannot do without it! The world must know the judgment day that happened and how it was that the kingdom came and was fulfilled, both in wrath and in triumph, in that one Man! You can proclaim it as God's crucial change of plan in that desperate moment when the world should have perished. You can proclaim it also as God's eternal plan. Both are true.

But you must have that day and the atonement that happened there. It is nonsense to be ashamed of it, or to talk of Jesus in His glory without that cross, or of Jesus as the Word made flesh apart from that central moment from which the whole world has its great reprieve.

There was a little earthquake that day, but the cross of Jesus stopped it from being a big earthquake that would have leveled Jerusalem and every creation of man to the ground. There was a rending of the temple veil that day, but the cross stopped it from being the rending that would have torn the whole temple apart and left not one stone upon another. There was a splitting of rocks that day, but it was the cross of Jesus that kept the whole earth from opening its mouth as in the days of Korah and swallowing all humanity into hell. There was a little voice that day, confessing that Jesus was the Son of God; but the cross of Jesus kept it from being a gigantic voice from heaven, condemning and destroying the ungodly humanity which, in the arrogance of its knowledge of good and evil, had conspired as one, Jew and Gentile together, to crucify Him.

That is the pinhole of history through which it is given us to see and to know God. And God insists that we know Him there, and there alone. If you are not willing to look to Jesus Christ crucified, don't bother to look for God anywhere. He will hide from you. You will never find Him until the day you face His wrath head on in the Son whose name you despised. The cross! There it is that we may know God's wrath, fear Him as He demands to be feared, and yet return in confidence and peace, like little children, into the arms of His unfailing mercy.

We are not really in the depths until we know how to fear God, and in fearing Him, to fear nothing else! All other fear derives from our natural "knowledge of good and evil." We see disaster coming. We *want* to see it coming, we train ourselves to be alert, for the farther in advance we see the threatened evil, the more chance we have to evade it. We call that "common sense," and in much of life it is a good and necessary gift. We do not defy the flashing signals at railroad crossings. But when it comes to a choice between fearing what we see to be evil and fearing God, then we are to set aside our wisdom and eyesight and simply fear God. For that is the beginning of true wisdom! Jesus saw the crucifixion coming and feared it with bloody sweat. But He feared His Father and loved and trusted Him above anything else. That is why He tells us, "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear Him who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt. 10:28). Choose your fear wisely! For it is ungodly to set the fearful anticipations of man against and above the fear of the LORD.

When brethren among us lift up their voices of ominous warning against all the disasters they see looming up in church and world, and in fear and trembling or in righteous anger summon us to flee here and to attack there, then perhaps we need first to direct their attention to a much greater fear. For they fear what they call conspiracy, but they have not known what it means to fear God alone, and in fearing Him, to fear nothing else. (Is. 8:12-13)

"Fear makes strange bedfellows," the proverb says. If some overwhelming common disaster threatened the whole Near

East, it could put an end to the Arab-Israeli war by driving those bitterly opposed forces into one another's arms. A proper fear can do that even in the church. As a matter of fact, that is precisely where the unity of the church and its catholicity begins. When Jew and Gentile find that one wrath destroys them both, and yet that one forgiving mercy in Jesus Christ saves them both, the old walls of hostility and animosity have to come down. They can no longer be divided.

A proper and common fear could heal even the schisms in the Missouri Synod and help us to give up this business of prescribing medications for ourselves and for one another. Let's fear God together, and in that one total and overwhelming fear let's surrender our wisdom and eyesight and calculating strategies and confess from the very depths of our helplessness, "I cannot save the church. The only thing I'm good at is defiling it the more."

It is not easy to surrender and hit bottom. Indeed, it is contrary to all human nature. A man who has committed himself to a position, fought for it, gained a following, labeled the enemy, fired his deadly darts, and done it all in the name of God will inevitably resist repentance. He fears repentance above all things. It is degrading to be wrong, impossible to be wrong! There must be another argument, some new dart, some new accusation to be hurled at the new threat! That was Caiaphas' reaction when the news came that Jesus had risen from the dead. He had too much invested in crucifying Him. He could not repent, could not descend that low, all the way into the depths. He feared being in the depths more than he feared God.

Yet this marvelous verse makes the impossible possible. "There is forgiveness with Thee, that Thou mayest be feared." And that is where hope begins!

II. *The Word of God That Makes Waiting Possible*

I wait for the LORD, my soul waits
and in His Word I hope;
my soul waits for the LORD
more than watchmen for the morning,
more than watchmen for the morning.
(Ps. 130:5-6)

When the church exhausts itself in anxieties to define and defend what the Word of God is, it loses its capacity to hear and to search what God is actually saying. Thereby it loses sight of its true hope and becomes a wilderness.

The battle to define what the Word of God is has been for us a delusion and a snare, leading like a blind alley into every kind of distortion of the Word and of faith. Each one blames his favorite villain for all the troubles of the church. Is it historical-critical methodology? Are men like Strauss, Schweitzer, and Bultmann the arch-villains? I know how terribly disconcerting it is for anyone who all his life has revered the Bible as the very Word of God to hear the Old Testament referred to subjectively as "the faith of Israel" and the New Testament as "the faith of the church," and even a bold "Thus says the LORD" as simply Amos's religious perspective. I know how the history of religions tends to rob the Bible of its uniqueness and to exalt the religious sensitivity and creativity of man over any external Word of God. I know also how painful it can be when literary analysis and historical reconstruction casts a favorite text into a

totally different setting and perspective, and I know why anyone who lacks the "depth perception" which critics bring to Bible study will respond in anger that the words are there and must be read flat as they are!

It is easy to infer, then, that the method is the enemy, its guilt being irreverence, subjectivity, skepticism, and conclusions destructive of the faith and of the history which the creeds confess. Therefore the church must be rescued from that enemy — not, however, by proclaiming the Gospel and rediscovering its centrality even within critical methodology but by erecting a dogmatic fence around the Bible to prohibit any conclusion which threatens the old understanding. Anyone who does not accept that fence or the necessity of it is a bad leaven, even if he explains that the interpretive process must be rational, that skepticism is a necessary tool when evidences don't mesh well into a coherent picture, that *all* the words and evidence must be taken into account without imposing on them the artificial prejudices of prior interpretations or preconceived systems of meaning, that we must trust God and not ourselves to save His Word and Bible. He is a bad leaven, the accusers insist, a threat to the church and the doctrine, and must be purged out. Let him join some other church, but not contaminate ours!

Or perhaps the enemy is seen as liberalism. We need to be clear as to what liberalism really is. To equate it with critical study of the Bible is a mistake. Critical study at its best is neither liberal nor conservative. It is simply a rational and dispassionate struggle to get at original meanings and relationships of ideas, and

thus at the content of words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, chapters, and whole books of the Bible. Liberalism, by contrast, is a philosophical posture. It arose in the early 19th century out of the frightening discovery that the scientific revolution had transformed the world of thought and that traditional forms of Christian dogma and proclamation had apparently become meaningless. Therefore liberalism was a declaration of independence from bondage to the old dogmatics in the interest of reaching the scientific skeptic from within his own view of reality. Liberalism became selective, using what seemed still to have religious value in the Bible but leaving behind everything that seemed rationally offensive (like miracles) or that belonged to an alien world of thought. It was a subjective process, infinitely more subjective than critical Bible study. Jesus became what every beholder thought He should be. Liberalism produced and is still producing new theologies in the continuing effort to make Christianity meaningful and challenging to modern man. Since man is the center of interest, however, liberalism has little sensitivity for an external Word of God addressing man from outside himself. So now, if liberalism is to blame for all the troubles of the church, then the way to save the church is simply to get rid of all the liberals!

Perhaps, though, you consider the villain to be "fundamentalism." We need to keep the term in quotes, for the Missouri Synod tendencies to which some apply that label have a history of their own and may be only partly analogous to the situation of American Protestantism generally. The term is also very confusing. For example, if "fundamentalism" stands for opposition

to historical-critical methodology in Bible study, I find myself ignoring its judgments and rejecting them because they draw a false battle line. But if "fundamentalism" is a name describing those who insist on the externality of the Word of God, both Law and Gospel, against the speculative subjectivity of liberalism, I find myself very much in sympathy with their concerns.

Whether the term "fundamentalism" is applicable or not, there does seem to be a distortion in our traditional concept of the Word of God, which bears closer examination. It began in the age of orthodoxy with the acceleration of interest in prolegomena.¹ Before one could get into Christian doctrine proper, it seemed necessary and reasonable to define certain preliminary questions such as the existence of God and the sources of Christian theology. The source of course was the Bible, and the inerrancy of the Bible itself as God's written Word became the authority for the truth of the Gospel, which was its central content. It was easy then to equate reverence for Christ with reverence for the Bible and faith in God with faith in the Bible. If the first premise was established, namely, that the Bible was true and reliable in every word, then all of Christian dogma would stand firm by a series of logical consequences. But if that first premise were to become doubtful, all else would become doubtful too by the same series of logical consequences. Thus it became possible, even fashionable, to devote enormous attention to that first premise,

¹ See Robert D. Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism: A Study of Theological Prolegomena* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1970).

to concentrate on what the Word of God *is*, and to give a kind of second place to what it *says*. Dogmatists still insisted that the center of all dogma was Christ, the cross, the forgiveness of sins. Yet in terms of their priority of interest and attention the Bible and the doctrine of inspiration had taken over as center.

In my own judgment this has been a trap for us, and we need every gift of the Spirit to break us out of it. As for myself, I am not interested any more, I do not want to be involved in defining the doctrine of inspiration or the authority of the Bible. I am interested only in plunging myself into that Holy Book, so that I can hear and know and proclaim the Gospel in all its unique and transforming comfort and power and hope. And though my arena of study is the Bible itself, my heart of sympathy goes out to those brethren also in the field of confessional and systematic theology who are struggling to recover the proper distinction between Law and Gospel as the central principle not only of the Bible itself but also of our Confessions and of our dogmatics at its best. It is a measure of the tragedy in our church, however, that some among us would view even this statement as nothing more than another insidious trick designed to open the floodgates of liberalism and to gain toleration and approval for the destructiveness of historical-critical study.

Let me press the matter a little further, for one distortion leads to another. Out of our obsession with defining and defending what the Word of God is, there has developed among us a distortion of the meaning of "faith" which has compromised our whole proclamation and left many of our

people terrified in their hearts rather than comforted, enslaved rather than free.

In the Bible faith is a very clear and simple thing. It is the trusting *yes* in the heart of man to a promise God has spoken. Faith and the Word of promise belong always together and must be defined in relation to each other. When God speaks a promise, He expects man to believe. When God told Abraham, "So (like the stars of heaven) shall your descendants be" (Gen. 15:5), Abraham's heart seized on and clung to that specific word of promise. That was his faith. Similarly, when Jesus said to the nobleman, "Go; your son will live," the man "believed the word that Jesus had spoken to him and went his way" (John 4:50). Faith is the response of the hungry and thirsty heart to something specific that God has said. We know and believe God by way of hearing and taking Him at His word. (Rom. 10:17; Luke 11:28)

We need to guard this unique meaning of faith as the response of the heart to a word of divine comfort or promise, and not allow it to be confused or interchanged with other meanings. For example, faith in God's Word of promise is qualitatively different from faith as rational persuasion. In my critical study I may attain an insight which is overwhelmingly persuasive to me on rational grounds as to what a particular passage really means. Yet to believe in the truth of this interpretation is not the same thing as believing in the truth of the Gospel, for the Gospel operates independently of rational persuasion. We do not weigh alternative possibilities and then decide to believe the Gospel. We only hear it, experience its comfort and power, and find ourselves believing it by the miraculous

activity of the Spirit. Again, when brethren among us talk of "believing" the Bible's creation story as opposed to "believing" in evolution, in neither case does "believing" have reference to the Word of promise that strikes through to the depths of a man's heart. "Faith" in evolution is nothing more than a degree of rational persuasion concerning the validity of the evolutionist's way of integrating phenomena conceptually into a meaningful coherence. But "faith" that the Bible's creation account is "true" is also a matter of rational persuasion, at least if it proceeds logically from the first premise of orthodox prolegomena and is sustained by the fear that if this premise falters, everything is lost! It is not "faith" in the sense of the response of the heart to a specific word of divine promise. "Believing" in a six-day creation is simply not the same kind of believing as believing the promise "Your sins are forgiven."

Let me share with you a simple way of hearing and searching out the Gospel in all of Scripture, without distortion and without pursuit up blind alleys. The Word of promise to which the heart can cling in faith always sets man in the middle of time, with God behind him, speaking to him out of the *past*; God ahead of him, speaking to him out of the *future*; and God with him, speaking to him of his *present* moment.

By the Word that comes out of the past God tells us who we are in relation to Him and how we came to be that. For this kind of word, encompassing a vast variety of terminology and imagery, I use the general category term ELECTION. God took Israel as chosen people. We, the church, are His elect.

The Word of God that addresses us out

of the future is full of promise. In terms of our immediate tomorrow, God our Father promises to give us our daily bread and to deliver us from evil. In terms of our most ultimate tomorrow God promises to complete and fulfill our biography, to overcome even death for us, and to give us a share in the inheritance and kingdom Christ won for us and into which He has already entered. For this dimension of the Word of God I use the familiar, comprehensive term **ESCHATOLOGY**.

The Word of God that speaks to us of our present moment calls us to the unique life of those whose identity and destiny has already been given and sealed to them by the Word and act of God. They no longer have to live in pursuit of desire and in flight from fear. They are free to be God's kind of people, to imitate God, and to fulfill His purpose and character in relation to one another. For this aspect of the Word of God I use the term **ETHOS**.

In the Scripture these three dimensions of the Word of God are continually interwoven with one another. Though accents may shift, none ever stands alone. For example, in Ex. 4:22-23 the LORD says to Pharaoh, "Israel is my first-born son (**ELECTION**); let My son go (**ESCHATOLOGY**), that he may serve Me (**ETHOS**)."

Let us apply this approach to the psalmist's testimony of hope, "I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in His Word I hope." What has God said to him, which gives him such hope and comfort even in the depths?

The **ELECTION** aspect of the Word of God is found in the name Yahweh, "the Lord." That is the name God gave His people to call Him by when He delivered them from Egypt (Ex. 4:22; 6:6-7; 14:4).

In the New Testament era the name by which God gives us to know Him derives from the history of the crucifixion and resurrection. It is the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. In Baptism God has marked that name on each of us. It is as if His voice spoke from heaven also to you and to me, "This is My beloved Son!" That Word stands forever. We can stake our hope on it, clinging to the promise that we are His sons and heirs, even against our consciences, against all accusers who try to contradict it.

Look again at this testimony of the psalmist, "I wait for Yahweh, and in His Word I hope." What is the **ESCHATOLOGICAL** dimension of that Word to which his heart clings? It is this, that the depths are not forever, that his waiting is not in vain, for the Lord will come to deliver him! The word of promised deliverance also stands sure and forever. Was it not so in Egypt? God heard the groanings of the people of Israel and remembered His covenant with Abraham, and He saw them and came and saved them. (Ex. 2:24)

What then is the word of **ETHOS** to which the psalmist clings as he makes this grand confession, "I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in His Word I hope"? What is God saying to him about his life now, in the bottom of the pit? God is saying, "Stay where you are! Don't do anything. Don't try to climb out. I am coming, I will get you. Trust Me! Cry to Me, I am listening. But then just wait for Me to act in My own way." That is God's ethos word telling the psalmist what to do.

In sum, one should always be aware that the three dimensions of the Word of God belong together, and each presupposes the other. An ethos word, for example, if it is

not framed by the word of election and of eschatology, becomes simply moralism. Furthermore, the Word of God, in all its dimensions, is external to man. In whatever form it comes to him, whether by preaching or teaching, by sacraments or Bible, it always has the quality of the voice from heaven. That is the way we are to hear it. That is also the way we are to proclaim it.

Finally, there is no knowledge of God except by this Word of God, that is, by the election-ethos-eschatology proclamation, centering in the cross of Christ. We do not find God by seeking Him in speculation, or by projecting large our ideals and desires and fears, or by running through the Bible and listing His attributes, or by demanding signs and proofs, but only by hearing the Gospel that declares us to be His sons and heirs for Jesus' sake and invites us to trust and follow Him. When our hearts believe that Word, then we know God. There is no other way to know Him.

This is the Word of God that makes waiting possible. "I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in His Word I hope. My soul waits for the LORD more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning."

That is a remarkable confession. The watchman waits confidently for the morning because he knows by long experience the rhythm of day and night as God created it. He has seen it so often before. The psalmist in the depths, however, has seen nothing. There is no automatic rhythmic process for him to count on. He cannot even see what God has in mind, for example, *how* God would go about saving him. Will God supply an elevator or a

helicopter or a rocket to get him out of there? Will God perhaps lower all the ground that rises like a precipice all around him so that the floor of the depths turns out to be the top of a mountain? He has not the slightest idea what God will do, yet listen to Him! "My soul waits for the LORD more than watchmen for the morning!" His confidence that the LORD will deliver him is greater than the watchman's! For the watchman trusts only his past experience, but the psalmist lives by the Word and promise of God. The heaven and the earth on which the watchman depends will pass away, but the Word of the living God will never pass away.

It is the salvation of God that we wait to see, if only we can trust Him and quit saving ourselves! Do you realize what that would mean? No more documents, no more solicitation of signatures, no more trust in institutional disciplines, no more confidence in the validity of our diagnoses! Rather, trust the Word! Search it, hear it, devour it, share it with one another! For we are a church starving for the Bread of Life, dehydrated for the water of life and comfort. Our torments and strife and anxieties are starvation symptoms. We have trafficked so much in the hulls of the wheat that we have not known the wheat itself—the Word which is our life and our hope and which enables us to wait for God's morning.

III. *The Hope in God That Makes Israel (the Church) Possible*

O Israel, hope in the LORD!

For with the LORD there is steadfast love,
and with Him is plenteous redemption.

And He will redeem Israel
from all his iniquities. (Ps. 130:7-8)

The Word of God makes hope possible, and hope in God makes the church possible. Only it has to be hope in the LORD, not in ourselves! The first of three grounds for such hope is the claim that "with the LORD there is steadfast love (*chesed*)."

Though rhythmically awkward in English, "steadfast love" does catch the meaning. It expresses the truth that God's love or mercy is not a momentary whim. It does not come and go but, as Ps. 118:1-4 says repeatedly and explicitly, "His mercy endures forever." It is as durable as God's Word is durable. God's *chesed* is a quality in God, not a response to our behavior. By *chesed* God took us to be His children and holds us as such. We do not become more His children when we serve Him, or less His children when we do not serve Him. God's steadfast love is steady and eternally sure, like a radar beam on which a plane can ride safely to a landing even in darkness. It was that *chesed* which brought God to tears even against the persistent sin and unbelief of Ephraim, as Hosea 11:8-9 describes it, "How can I give you up, O Ephraim! How can I hand you over, O Israel! . . . My heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender. . . . For I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come to destroy." That was the mercy of God for the lost world, which drove God to put Jesus, His only Son, into the breach and to bear into the death the wrath that should have doomed the whole of humanity on Good Friday! In the synoptic gospels it is usually rendered by the Greek *eleos*, translated "mercy." In John it comes through to us as *agape*, translated "love."

In St. Paul it is *charis*, "grace." Conceptually, however, the variety of terminology has the same root.

This was the love to which Jesus appealed as His authority to receive and forgive sinners. "I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice," He said, quoting Hosea 6:6 (Matt. 9:13; 12:7). Therefore He went out to gather "the lost sheep of the house of Israel." In terms of their sin and the judgment of wrath that threatened them, they were lost. Yet in terms of God's steadfast love and unfailing Word, they were still "sheep of the house of Israel." So He gathered them freely, laying no conditions of Law upon them. He forgave them, received them, promised them participation fully and without prejudice in the kingdom about to come. It was God's steadfast love that made them worthy, nothing else. God asked only that they hear the call and believe and follow and come, leaving the old behind without regret, for that was the meaning of repentance.

That is the kind of love by which God loves and sustains the church. God does not say to us, "I will love you and be your God and hold you as My people when you have purged yourselves and proved yourselves faithful and learned to live in peace as brethren." The beauty of His *chesed* is that it stands before all works and after all works and in all works—even when the works are sins! We are His people because He has said so, in the blood of Christ and in our baptism, and both His Word and the mercy out of which that Word speaks stand forever. That is why St. Paul can say even of his Jewish brothers in their stubborn rejection of the Gospel, "God has not rejected His people." (Rom. 11:2; cf. 11:28)

The psalmist's second ground of hope is that "with Him is plenteous redemption." There is plenty salvation to go around, enough power to overcome even the ultimate enemy!

There isn't much steadfast love in man, none at all, in fact, in man the sinner. Neither is there much redemption. We often imagine that we know the enemies from whom to save Jesus and the church — from liberalism and Bultmannism and rationalism and doctrinal indifference. When we should watch with Jesus and pray, we either sleep or mull over our own strategies. And then we take the pen, which is "mightier than the sword," and slash away with it, calling on God and the angels to come to the rescue and to approve that enterprise of ours. But it is no redemption. In our zeal we quench the smoking flax and break the bruised reed, and we do it in the name of the Gospel. But we don't really know or trust that Gospel. We cannot believe that it too is a leaven able to permeate the whole lump of dough if only it is proclaimed and released to do its work in the hearts even of enemies, even in ours! A grain of mustard seed was planted in the earth when Jesus was crucified, dead, and buried. But by His resurrection and the proclamation of His Gospel through the Spirit that grain grows to be the greatest of all trees and the nesting place of the nations. "In Him is plenteous redemption," not in us.

The psalmist adds the third and final ground of his confidence. "O Israel, hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with Him is plenteous redemption. And *He will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.*"

From *all* of them! Think what that

means! Then we are free. There is no need for recriminations, no need to analyze who was right and who was wrong, how right any of us may have been or how wrong. There is no need to justify ourselves to one another or even to ourselves, least of all to God. There is no need to measure ourselves, to psychoanalyze ourselves, to defend ourselves, to compare ourselves with one another. "He will redeem Israel from *all* his iniquities!" Let the past go, it doesn't matter any more, it has already been redeemed. And when tomorrow is past, it will have been redeemed, and the day after that too! "From *all* his iniquities." What a relief! It means, of course, that we are to expect no compliments from God. If we did everything perfectly right, if we were doctrinally perfect and morally perfect in every thought, word, and deed, we would get no compliments. "Does the master thank the servant because he did what was commanded?" (Luke 17:9). The joy of the servant is simply to be the servant. He needs no compliments! But if there are no compliments, neither are there any accusations out of the past. Let the sins be like scarlet, they become as white as snow! (Is. 1:18). God doesn't even remember them! (Jer. 31:34). What an incredibly merciful lapse of divine memory! "He will redeem Israel from *all* his iniquities." For the measure by which God measures us is not our works, but His mercy alone, His Word alone, spoken and sealed to us out of the cross and into our baptism. "You are My son!" That's what counts. That word erases and silences the contrary judgment, "You are a sinner." The past is dead! The only past that counts is the eternal Word of God.

But we must learn in the Spirit what

it means to rest in that Word of hope and promise. Go back to Num. 21:4-9, that remarkable episode of the plague of poisonous vipers in the wilderness, and the salvation God prescribed for Israel. "Forget about those vipers," God said. "Don't look at them! Don't think or worry about them! If you get bitten, just look at that brass serpent on the pole, and you will live." You know how St. John applies that theme to the cross of Jesus (John 3:15), and how other texts promise that the saints need not fear serpents (Ps. 91:13; Is. 11:8-9; Luke 10:19). The point is that the cure seems so very foolish. What logical relationship of cause and effect is there between experiencing snakebite and looking at the brass serpent on that pole? The wiser thing to do is wear heavy boots, or to watch the ground closely so as to see each viper in time to dance out of the way. Perhaps the wisest thing to do is to rally an army of people with clubs so as to attack the vipers systematically and kill them. But just to ignore them, and if bitten to look at that brass serpent, what nonsense is that?

So today we find ourselves in the wilderness, and God in His wise judgment has summoned against us a plague of poisonous snakes. Label them any way you wish — critical method, doctrinal indifference, liberalism, fundamentalism, unionism, separatism, formalism, secularism, materialism, institutionalism, anti-institutionalism, lovelessness. I suppose we could get into great disputes over which is the most poisonous. One man's pet is another man's poison, as the saying goes. But the question is, what shall we do? Shall we organize campaigns to expose the snakes, flush them out, club them to death? And if the snakes

reside in people, shall we club these devils out of each other? Shall we isolate ourselves from danger with thick boots, or by withdrawing into regions we think offer great safety? If that is our hope and salvation, is it not already evidence of the infection of deadly poison at work in us? Listen to the Word of God! Forget the snakes, they cannot hurt you! Look nowhere except to the cross! That is where God has already redeemed Israel "from *all* his iniquities," from the sins that work in him and from those that threaten him. The cross is our glory and our power, our only weapon — if only we knew how to look at it, to trust ourselves to it, to proclaim it! The cross is greater than all the snakes of evil. It has the power to drive out devils, and to set us free. That is the hope of Israel.

"Let Israel hope in the LORD!" For it is hope in the LORD that makes Israel, the church, possible. Let's be sure we understand what the church is. It is not the institution. There will always be an institution, for in this world we must have organizational structures as a tool by which we work together and within which we know and care for one another. But the institution as such is not the church. It has neither any sanctity of its own nor any power to make the church more holy. If anyone imagines he can reform and save the church by capturing the institution, he is fighting the vipers with clubs. The true holiness of the church is the holiness of the saints, and it derives from nothing else than the blood of Christ conferred on us through the Gospel and the sacraments. As the church finds freedom and hope in the Gospel, its institutional forms will develop in such a way as to enable the institu-

tion to exhibit more closely and freely what the church in essence actually is. Thus the institution will become an effective tool by which the saints accomplish their true work. It will also cease getting in the way of that true work, as it so readily does when it is trapped into pursuing false goals, defending itself against false fears, chasing down blind alleys, or seeking glory for its own sake.

The saints must understand, though, that the church as institution is inevitably a feeble, imperfect thing and accept its frailties with a forgiving humor. Constitutions and organizational structures are not revealed from heaven, but are the product of fallible human judgment of the sort we exercise in God's kingdom of the left hand, and are destined to pass away when heaven and earth pass away, if not a great deal sooner. Institutional decisions like elections and fellowship declarations have no inherent sanctity in themselves. They are sanctified not because they are "right" in themselves, and not because men have "pleased God" by acting in accordance with their consciences (for conscience in this sense belongs to man's sinnerhood and has no authority as the Word of God), but only when the saints in assembly submit the outcome to God with prayer for Him to make it good according to His promise in Rom. 8:28, "All things must work together for good to those who love God."

"Let *Israel* hope in the LORD," says the psalmist. *Israel* stands for that great family of God's elect in which the psalmist has his own identity, not by his own will or works but by right of birth, sealed to him by the mark of circumcision. *Israel* is not an organization but a family, and so is the

church of the New Testament "the *Israel* of God" (Gal. 6:16). That church takes its life from the one man Jesus Christ, the fulfillment of "*Israel*." We are born into it by baptism, by the living Word of God speaking to us in that water. The church is prior to any of us. It is not our church but Christ's. In it we are members of one another. That belongs to what is given us. It is not up to us to decide who is a brother to us, or to whom we are willing to be brothers, just as we do not choose brothers and sisters in our own families. Our call is to express the brotherhood of the communion of saints and to make it work, through and against all barriers. That means we are to hang on to one another with a holy stubbornness, to seek and bring back those who are wounded or who stray as Jesus did, without ceasing to call them "brother," so that "nothing may be lost." We are not authorized to overcome our discomforts with one another by separating ourselves from one another. We are not to live, as the Pharisees did, in the perpetual fear of being contaminated! We don't need to, for we have a cross to look to, and that alone is our purity and our glory. It is not our business to worry about weeds in the wheatfield. God has explicitly reserved that worry for Himself (Matt. 13:29-30). What looks suspiciously like a weed we are to treat as a bruised reed not to be broken, a smoldering wick not to be quenched. To *believe* in the one, holy, catholic, apostolic church is to see only wheat and to present the church as we know it, for all its imperfections, wounds, manifest sins, and starvation symptoms, to ourselves as Christ presents it to Himself—without spot or wrinkle, holy and without blemish!

The Word of hope creates and sustains

the church also in its unity. The New Testament resists division. It rejects the suggestion that Jesus (the church), Elijah (disciples of John the Baptist), and Moses (Judaism) dwell as sects in separate-but-equal tents on God's mountain, but summons them all to see Jesus alone in His glory and to "listen to Him" (Matt. 17:1-8). There can be only one division; that is the one which the Gospel itself creates as it draws men out of the old into the new, out of death into life in Jesus Christ. There is a line, then, that separates church from world, righteous from sinner, those who belong to God from those who do not belong. But the mission of the church as God's holy people, separate and different from the world, is to go right back into that world as a salt and a light until the whole of humanity is gathered into the life and freedom and unity of the sons of God through Christ.

The commission to bind and loose, to retain sins and forgive them, recognizes no division except the one that separates church from world. That line must not be blurred or compromised. To forgive sins or to loose is to declare by Word and sacrament that a particular person belongs to Christ as a son and heir of God, by mercy alone. His achievements do not compliment him or secure for him any advantage, neither do his sins any more accuse him or imperil his status before God. He belongs, and the Word and mercy by which he belongs stands secure and forever! On the other hand, to retain sins or to bind is to declare that someone who rejects that Word of mercy remains bound to the world, to the futility of human wisdom, and under the judgment and wrath of God. This is the division which the Gospel of

the cross creates, the Gospel which strikes the Greeks as foolishness and is a stumbling block to the Jews, but to those who hear it is filled with the power and wisdom and glory of God.

Matt. 18:15-18 recognizes this one division. It is possible for a "brother" to become an apostate, like the tax collector who renounces his heritage and casts his lot with the Gentiles. But the church does not want to let him go. It renews the Gospel, pleads in Jesus' name the vast difference between life lived by the wisdom of man's "knowledge of good and evil" and the life lived in the freedom of God's redeeming mercy. But if that man is determined to live outside the household of God, the church must finally let him go—as the grieving father let his younger son go on his great adventure to the ruin and waste of his life.

But no other division than this is allowable. The New Testament knows no limbo between being bound and being loosed, between not belonging and belonging. That is St. Paul's real point in Rom. 16:17-18. Paul knows by long experience that the Gospel itself, here called "the doctrine you have learned," generates division (*dichostasia*) and offenses (*skandala*) as it divides church from world. But aside from or beyond (*para*) that Gospel's divisive effect, no other division, that is, no division *within* the church, is to be allowed. Anybody who capitalizes on natural barriers, suspicions, and rivalries to gain a following and polarize the church, no matter how fair and flattering and sincere his words seem to be, is operating from motives characteristic of the world and not of servants of our Lord Christ. The call of the Gospel is to overcome division and

to bring every barrier down, not erect barriers. It follows that the Creed is perverted, "I believe one holy, catholic, and apostolic church," when a gentleman's agreement is proposed which will get all the tares into one field and those who are confident they are the true wheat into another; or when baptized Christians are excluded from the church because they cannot overcome some intellectual block, even though the church has offered them no help except to say, "Believe this, or else!" The Creed is perverted when tense and unresolved questions like the church's ministry of service in the contemporary world, or the use and effect of critical methodology on our understanding of the Bible, or contrary judgments on the fellowship question, or differences on the role of the Spirit and His gifts in the church become grounds for division and schism between brethren.

"Let Israel hope in the LORD!" That is the great and simple alternative. What a power it has, however, to make the church and the world look and become different! You could argue, of course, that the death and resurrection of Christ produced no change. The crisis of threatened insurrection had been met, to be sure, and the hopes of those who had expected Jesus to "redeem Israel" had been dashed. Politically, socially, economically, and religiously, however, everything continued as before. Yet to those who heard God speaking in that event and in the person of the risen Christ everything was new!

What does God say in this visible, historical, fleshly "Word of life," as 1 John 1:1 calls it? He says, "It is over! The judgment is past! Your sins are forgiven! You are My son and heir forever, simply by confessing what I did for you in Jesus

Christ, My only Son, and being baptized into His name." That is the word of ELECTION, anchored in that unshakeable event of the past. The response of the heart to that Word we call "faith."

And then God says, "Now live without fear. The inheritance of the kingdom is surely yours, for in My Son you belong to Me, and you will share the triumph and resurrection into which He has already entered. Meanwhile I shall be your God and Father, leading you, giving you every good gift, delivering you from evil day by day. As your origin is in Me by creation and redemption, so also the fulfillment of your destiny is in Me." That is the word of ESCHATOLOGY, and the response of the heart to that Word we call "hope."

Finally God says, "Now be My servant, trust and obey Me. Let My will be done on earth, in you — not the old will of your wisdom and eyesight, of your desire and fear. You don't have to create an identity for yourself, or scratch out a future for yourself, or deliver yourself from evil. That is My business. Your business is to love and serve Me and your neighbor, as I have loved and served you. That is your high and noble purpose and calling!" There you have the word of ETHOS, and the response of the heart to that word is "love."

Faith, hope, and love! We need all three! Faith sets us free of the past, hope sets us free of anxieties for the future. That is what makes love possible in the present, so that we can look at one another and not at ourselves. Love does not set up barriers. Love does not rejoice in holding hard lines, creating animosities, feeling persecuted. Love becomes all things to all men, even when others might judge it to be indifference and compromise. Love bears

all things, even what looks like heresy. Love believes all things. It believes that the Word of God spoken in baptism to a brother stands firm even if the evidences of his life contradict it. Love hopes all things. It hopes that God's Spirit is still at work and that there must be a word that can get through even to the most hardened, fearful, defensive, recalcitrant, or indifferent heart. Love never fails, not even if it is called on to forgive seventy times seven. Love endures all things. It is stubborn. It will not quit!

That is where the Word of God through the Spirit gets its transforming power, first in ourselves and then in church and world. Look at the church again through the eyes of love, and you discover that the forces that seemed so divisive, the pluralism that threatened to fragment the church, are transformed by the Spirit into a variety of gifts given to each for the profit of all. If there are excesses and distortions in any, the Word of the Gospel has the power to sanctify and harness and heal, if only we will trust and use it in love and patience! The concern of the "liberal" to the world as it is is a gift to the church! So is the conservative's concern to magnify the external Word and the event of the cross and the resurrection against any tendency to subjectivize everything. The scholar who loves the Bible and without fear uses every critical tool to get the meaning of the words and history of Scripture; the activist who urges the church to see and

become involved in the battles of society for the poor and oppressed; the psychologist who searches out the relationship of personality sciences to the Gospel in counseling situations; the Spiritist who wants the church to enjoy more fully the awareness of the dynamic of the Spirit and of prayer; the institutionalist who wants the structure of the church to reflect more effectively what the church actually is; the anti-institutionalist who sees the church as people, living out their callings quite apart from institutional structures—all of them have gifts to offer in the body of which Jesus Christ is the one Lord and head. But if a leaven of potential perversion is at work in any of them, the leaven of the Gospel is greater in its power to forgive us, free us, hold us together in one hope, and turn even our arrogances and follies into good, to the glory of Christ, our Lord and King!

So we are in the depths and outwardly nothing has changed. And yet everything has changed. For when God by His own Word and promise sets the cross and resurrection before our eyes and invites us to see Jesus alone and to hear and know Him there—then at least we cease to be afraid. The vipers cannot poison us. Satan cannot accuse us. The church is beautiful again, not because of its work and successes but because Christ Himself sees it only in its wedding dress and loves it and calls it glorious!

Valparaiso, Ind.