

THE 

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LUTHERAN AMBASSADOR

*Hear,
O Israel!*

THE
GREAT
SHEMA



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ENCOURAGING WORD

SMARTEST IN THE ROOM

BY PASTOR STEVE SNIPSTEAD

W

ho would you say is the smartest person who ever lived? Albert Einstein? King Solomon? A philosophy professor I had in college told me the smartest person he ever met was my mother. They were classmates in college. He made that confession right after he introduced me to her. He hadn't seen her since they left school. I guess he hadn't noticed the resemblance in our abilities. Someone who doesn't often get mentioned in the list of the smartest people who ever lived is Jesus.

Just how smart is Jesus? I've been having a friendly debate on that subject. My friend argues that Jesus was the smartest person who ever lived. I am skeptical. The human Jesus didn't have to be the best at everything to accomplish His work. Would Jesus have to be the strongest man that ever lived or have the best eye sight? Like any good debate it got me thinking. I'd never thought of how intelligent Jesus is, but I've come to the conclusion He is a lot smarter than I gave Him credit for.

Consider the story of Jesus in the temple from the Gospel of Luke. Jesus makes a powerful impression. The Jewish culture valued knowledge and understanding of the Scripture above anything else. Jesus was able to impress the best minds of His day when He was only 12.

I'm not sure how the two natures of Christ affected His human intelligence, but there is a phrase in Colossians 2:2-3 that suggests they do: "... to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mys-

tery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." Maybe my friend is right.

In college on my daily commutes I used to listen to a radio show called "Ask Dr. Science." It had the tag line, "He knows more than you do." One thing I am sure of, Jesus knows more than I do. More importantly, Jesus understands what He knows and how to use it. Maybe that does make Jesus the smartest person who ever lived. I find that tremendously encouraging.

One of my favorite sayings is, "If you're the smartest one in the room, you are in the wrong room." The cross settled the question of how much Jesus loves us. We know He wants what is best for us. The intelligence and wisdom of Jesus should give us confidence that He knows what is best for us and we can trust what He says. Turning control of your life over to someone is much easier if they love you and know more than you do.

In the words of Jesus, the Bible, we can find the wisdom we need. "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work" (II Timothy 3:16). You can trust Jesus. He knows more than you do.

Snipstead serves Faith Free Lutheran, Kalispell, Mont.

Christianity is not, and never has been, about finding the right combination of words! It is about encountering the living and loving God.

—Alister McGrath

To teach something you don't know is like coming back from somewhere you haven't been.

—Vance Havner

If we fail to hand to the next generation a vibrant, kingdom-focused faith, we could see the tragedy of churches that become a respected part of the landscape of American culture, a sort of historic relic of the past, but with little vitality or relevance for the modern-day America [sic].

—Ken Hemphill

We cannot maintain the status quo, relying on church programs alone to equip our children. Scripture makes it clear that evangelism begins with the souls that live under one's roof and that parents are to raise them in the training and instruction of the Lord.

—Chris Sherrod

Seek not to grow in knowledge chiefly for the sake of applause, and to enable you to dispute with others; but seek it for the benefit of your souls.

—Jonathan Edwards

Hear, O Israel!

THE LORD
OUR GOD,
THE LORD
IS ONE.

By Beverly Enderlein

H

as your heart ever been on fire? Can you identify with Jeremiah as he exclaimed, “Thy Word was a fire in my bones?” My “fire,” or favorite thing in all my world of experiences and pleasures, is teaching the Word of God to children and youth.


The call to teach is clearly given in the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy as part of the Great Sh'ma. Verses 4 and 5 contain the greatest prayer of the Jewish people, the grandest declaration of faith for God's children, and the strong directive of Christian education.

“Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”

This is so vital that Jesus Himself, in Mark 12, immediately answered with the Shema to the scribe who asked which commandment was greatest of all.

“And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children” (Deuteronomy 6:6-7a).





First, the call to teach must begin with knowing and loving God's Word. When Jesus commanded that His Word must be on our hearts, He emphasized personal love and obedience to His Word. It must be delicious. The Hebrews likened love for God's Word to eating honey from the honeycomb—the best of treats!

Next, the call to teach must be exercised in the home. Parents are the ideal teachers of God's truths to their children. Day by day, in the ebb and flow of life, children will raise questions, and parents need to be diligent lovers of the Scriptures so that they are equipped to answer these questions. Questions such as, "How can I know Jesus?" and, "What is Heaven like?" deserve full attention and accurate answers. It is good that others assist parents in this task: Sunday school teachers, pastors, teachers, coaches, and key Christian leaders in public life.

"... and you shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise" (vs. 7b).

Third, the call to teach must be displayed in the ordinary events of daily life, when we "walk by the way." Families should make good use of relaxed opportunities. When playing and working outdoors together, tell your children that you are in awe of His beautiful creation. Vacations can be times to focus on the Lord: camping in the great outdoors, seeing national parks, and visiting creation museums can be enhanced times of growing in God's family together.

"... when you lie down ..." Bedtime should be a cozy time as best as parents can regularly accomplish that routine. Instead of sending a child to bed, accompany that dear one to bed. Life is stressful and busy, but children are ready to talk as they lie down on their pillow to end the day. Prayers are essential. It is a beautiful practice in many homes that Dad or Mom place a hand on their child's head to pronounce a scriptural blessing from the Lord.

"... when you rise ..." Set the tone for the new day by prayer and a joyful greeting. Long ago, a dear friend—Carroll Satre—told me about her dad's regular habit of greeting the children every morning by singing, "Children, rise, shine, give God glory!" In our home, the secure routine began with prayer, "Let's give our day to Jesus."

Fourth, the call to teach must not be hurried. Children ask questions as you walk and talk, drive home from an activity, and enjoy one another's companionship. Teachable moments cannot be forced, they will occur surprisingly. Parents must have a prepared heart. Allow the Spirit of God to teach you through Bible study, sermons, and throughout the trials of family life as you pray for wisdom. Children will glean riches from these tender testimonies of God's loving care.

Next, the call to teach must be applied with diligence. God's Word applies to every event of life. Children do wrestle with sin and need to know how to confess it, forsake it and rejoice in God's forgiveness. First John 1:9 and Ephesians 4:32 can be taught as pillars of truth in daily mishaps and trials of family living. Even young children

can be troubled about their future and need reassurance of God their Father's loving care. They are assailed by fears in this troubled world. Each heart deserves the comfort of God's Word. "I will never leave you or forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5), and, "He who lives and believe in me shall never die" (John 11:26) are some promises that will sustain them.

"You shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates" (vs. 8-9).

Sixth, the call to teach is constant; I like to say, "ever-present." When God commanded the Israelites to bind the words of the law as frontlets before their eyes, He was implying that His Word should be in sharp focus before us in the constant walk through this world. Orthodox Jewish men do bind small parchments of Scripture in tiny leather boxes to their hairline and to their biceps—opposite their hearts—as an ever-present aid to remember. Many believers write verses on post-it notes or small cards and place them in strategic places to keep focused.

Last, the call to teach can be expressed in creative and powerful ways. One of the most delightful aspects of teaching is storytelling. No matter what age we are, we love to hear a good story. Determine to establish the storytelling routine in your home. Storytelling transforms the listener as well as the teller. There are amazing instances of miracles occurring as a gifted teacher proclaimed God's story. I read about a beloved old Rabbi whose talent of storytelling was so inspiring that people loved to gather near and listen. He was animated as he spoke, and actually lost awareness of himself in the process of telling. It has been written that he became stiff and crippled in his old age, and young men were needed to carry him to a seat of honor as he prepared to tell his audience about God's powerful deeds of deliverance. Witnesses told of a time when his storytelling became so animated, colorful, and enthusiastic that he leapt to his feet, striding energetically across the room to boldly proclaim the wondrous acts of God. Only upon completion did he sink back into his chair as the people gasped in astonishment at the power of God displayed in him.

Obedience to the call to teach gains rewards. Each person who is dedicated to the teaching and proclamation of God's gospel of salvation is rewarded in countless ways by our Lord Himself. One of these rewards is the valuable, often lifelong companionship of those whom we teach. Recently, a faithful young woman who had been an AFLBS student of mine in Christian Education classes two decades ago kindly told me, "Anytime anyone mentions the Great Shema, we always think of you."

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Content

TO LOVE
THE LORD
YOUR GOD.

O

ne day in the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ, a lawyer, an expert in the Mosaic

Law, asked Jesus this question: “What is the great commandment of the Law?”

Jesus’ answer was a quote from Deuteronomy 6:4-5: “Hear, O Israel; the Lord our God, the Lord is One. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” And then Jesus added: “And a second is like it, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets” (Mark 12:29-31).

Thus, in these two sections of Scripture, the whole case for godly education is stated, as given by inspiration of God in the Deuteronomy text, and confirmed by the Lord Jesus in the Matthew text. The whole foundation of Christian education is set forth in authority.

But the Scripture does not

By Pastor Oliver Olson

stop with the simple command. Rather, it gives practical application as to how it can be lived out, in the individual, but more specifically in the family.

The first application is the command itself. We are to choose to love God. Hence, the law requires that we exercise our will to make the Lord God the focus of our lives and in the lives of our children, as well.

It is helpful to realize that our part to “love God with all your heart, mind, and soul” is offset by the knowledge that the Lord desires much more than we to have intimacy with us. The logical response on our part is to simply respond to this great love and to love Him in return. So it is not difficult to love God, because we are merely responding to this immeasurable love already shown to us.

Deuteronomy 6 goes farther and focuses on how the love of God can be centralized in our lives. Verse 6 says, “and these words that I command you shall be on your heart.” We see that it is not that we make a supreme effort to love God in our own strength, rather, that we place the authority and compassion of God’s Word constantly before us—as we note in Psalm 119, “How blessed are those who observe His testimonies, who seek with all their heart” (vs. 2), “How can a young man keep his way pure? By keeping it according to Thy Word” (vs. 9), “Thy Word have I hid in my heart, that I might not sin against Thee” (vs. 11), “O how I love Thy Law, it is my meditation all the day” (vs. 97), and last, “Thy Word is a lamp to my

feet, and a light to my path” (vs. 105).

As we place the authority of God’s Word before us, we begin to develop an appreciation for it until it becomes a joy and privilege to read it rather than a duty.

Deuteronomy 6:7-9 shows how Christian education can be accomplished: “You shall teach them diligently to your children” (vs. 7). Okay, but how? “You shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down and when you rise.” In other words, the family is encouraged to not just “have devotions” together—as important and needful as this is—but that the Word of God becomes part of their lives. For instance, when the family gathers together for breakfast in the morning, they talk



together of what God is doing and what the direction of their lives may be by God's grace in the ordinary tasks of the day, and how God's wondrous principles could be lived out in their lives.

Another application is noted in verses 8-9, "You shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes—you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates." In other words, the family was to saturate their lives with the expressions of God's goodness through His divine Word.

It is important to note that this does not happen automatically, for everyone in the family may choose for themselves what road they want to take, but the opportunity to follow the Lord must be made available.

In earlier days, most Christian education was accomplished in the family. We have departed far from this concept, and are paying the consequences. Every effort can and should be made to ensure a Christian education in every way possible through the many facilities available to Christian families: from the use of good Christian materials for all grades, to Bible school attendance whenever possible, and then if so directed, to a truly Christian college to prepare for life's work.

It is possible in a day of declining values in almost every area of our society to make a difference by applying the God-given principles, values, and instructions found in His Word. This has been God's desire from the beginning, and He is still and always will be King of kings and Lord of

lords, especially in the education of families.

Whatever the future, it is imperative that we—as individuals, families, and churches—be prepared for any difficult days ahead, until by God's grace we be ushered into the very presence of our Lord and hear these words from His lips: "Well done, thou good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Lord."

*Olson is a member of
Reformation Lutheran, El Cajon,
Calif.*

Consistency

TO WALK
IN GOD'S
WAY.



P

By Jennifer Thorson

ractice what you preach.

This is a common phrase that is shared even in the secular world. It might even be considered a proverb for life, a good rule to live by. “Do as I say, not as I do.”

That saying is likely more reflective of my reality as I parent my children. Maybe it is of yours, as well.

“So you shall observe to do just as the Lord your God has commanded you; you shall not turn aside to the right or to the left. You shall walk in all the way which the Lord your God has commanded you, that you may live and that it may be well with you, and that you may prolong your days in the land which you will possess” (Deuteronomy 5:32-33).

These exhortations in the fifth chapter of Deuteronomy are a tall order! They follow an earlier reminder in this chapter of the Ten Commandments, where God lays out His desire for the people who belong to Him to live in such a way that is honorable and obedient. We may be tempted to let out an exhausted sigh after reading such commands.

Oftentimes I find that in my life as a Christian mom, I am heavy on the “should do” and light on the “do.” I press on toward godliness but find myself falling short. How can I possibly teach my children to pursue a godly life when I fail to do so myself? How can I “walk all the way,” showing them a life of consistency so that what Mom says and what Mom does are compatible?

This command from Deuteronomy 5 was given to the Israelites as a reminder and was part

of a sermon, if you will, that was given as they readied themselves to enter the Promised Land. It was a truth that they were already familiar with and aware that they needed to pursue: to “do just as” they were already commanded and walk and live according to God’s Word.

Reflecting Christ to our children and living in a way that is consistent with what we say is an understandable challenge. Sometimes I find myself yelling, “Be quiet!” when it gets too noisy in the house. Talk about not setting a good example.

And yet, when we are in a place where we recognize our inconsistency in doing what we ask our children to do, this is a good thing. Part of the purpose of the law is to show us what we must do ... and then point us to Christ, who has already done it.

When we fully grasp that Christ has already fulfilled these commands and that we stand forgiven for our sins, this is when we begin, by the grace of God, to live a consistent life of faith. It becomes a life that is reflective of a heart change and not just lip service. And this is not a one-time recognition of our need for grace. Christ’s sufficiency in giving us the ability to live a humble life of consistency that is reflected in our parenting is a truth we must be reminded of time and time again.

Walking in that grace, this passage draws our attention to two practical applications for parents. First, when we read or hear the Word of God regarding a certain scriptural truth, we are called to teach these same words to our children and also walk in them ourselves. This walking in truth is a work of the Holy Spirit who instructs us and teaches us in the way we should go. I’ve found it incredibly helpful to pray that God would draw my attention to certain areas of my life that need to be changed so I can be more consistent in my example to my children. It is amazing how quickly we can be convicted when we pray for it.

Second, humility about our own shortcomings in obeying the Lord allows us as parents both to hear and to do in a way that shows our children that though we are not perfect, God is perfect. His commands and laws are there for our benefit

and His grace is abundant. As a “city on a hill” (Matthew 5:14) we are called to obedience and fruit bearing for the benefit of our neighbor and our families, so that the light of Christ will be reflected in us. It is good to know that as we grow and are transformed from day to day, we can point our children to the Lord and His Word to learn the powerful truths that will transform their hearts and lives.

Notice the three promises given to the Israelites from Deuteronomy 6:3 and 5:33 as it relates to walking in obedience:

“It will go well with you.”

“You will multiply greatly in the land of milk and honey.”

“Your days will be prolonged.”

God promised His people that when they lived in obedience there would be an abundance of blessing. There is great value, joy, and a multitude of blessings when we live according to God’s Word. Our life of faith is lived out of thankfulness for Christ’s deep love for us. This is a profound truth I want to communicate to my children, so that they knew Who it is that is working in each of us to live for His glory. “One generation shall praise Your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts” (Psalm 145:4).

Thorson is a member of Living Word Free Lutheran, Sioux Falls, S.D., and writes about parenting on her blog, The Purposeful Mom (thepurposefulmom.com).

Catalyst

OH THAT
THEY HAD
SUCH A
HEART.

O

ften the metaphor for passing on a Christian's faith to a younger

generation is referred to as "passing the baton." This metaphor pictures life as a human relay race in which Christian parents run with the baton of faith until their children are grown, then they pass the baton off to their children and expect them to carry on the relay race of faith. Some parents then say to themselves, "The children are grown, my job is done. I have successfully handed off the baton of faith. I can now retire and let the younger ones carry the load."

Passing on the faith to children is an honorable and essential responsibility for all Christian parents. But to compare Christian faith to a benign, lifeless baton that is once clutched tightly and then merely dropped into the hands of another is a weak comparison.

Instead of a baton-carrier, a more precise comparison for Christians young and old would be to that of a 17th century Victorian lamplighter. The lamplighter diligently and cheerfully performed his daily responsibility by carrying a fiery light to a prepared and willing wick. As the lamplighter

By Candice Johnson

faithfully shared his fire, the oil- or gas-soaked wick received the fire—sometimes reluctantly, but most often, willingly. However, once the wick was lit, the lamplighter's job was not done. He didn't extinguish his fire and return home to an evening of relaxation and rest. No, he continued to cheerfully share his fire, which brought light to a dark world.

God provided Jesus, the Light of the world, to set hearts on fire. Deuteronomy 5:29 clearly reveals God's desire for all people, young and old, when He says, "Oh that they had such a heart in them, that they would fear Me and keep all My commandments always, that it may be well with them ..." God desires hearts on fire. Teaching all ages the Word of God is essential to lighting and maintaining a heart on fire for Christ.

Just as fire is one of the foundational elements necessary to sustain the physical life of mankind, Deuteronomy 5 and 6 bring to light God's foundational element necessary to sustain spiritual life—His commandments, literally, the teaching of the Ten Commandments and their application to life (see Deuteronomy 5:6-21). A heart on fire for God knows and applies His Ten Commandments.

You can pass on the fire of faith by teaching about the multitude of people and events in the Bible. Stress that these people really lived, and the events in their lives really happened. Bible people are not showcased because they were better than everyone else, or more spiritual; God brings their lives to light in order to lead us and others to

Jesus, the Light (John 8:12).

Remember the two disciples who were conversing about Jesus while walking on the road to Emmaus. During their conversation, Jesus Himself appeared to them, though their eyes were prevented from recognizing Him. Jesus taught them the Scriptures, beginning with Moses and the Old Testament prophets. When He broke bread with them, their eyes were opened and they recognized Him. "And they said to one another, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking to us on the road, while He was explaining the Scriptures to us?'" (Luke 24:32).

Moses himself was encouraged by God





to look back at the lives of men like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and observe the mighty hand of God at work in their hearts and lives. During the dark days of wandering in the wilderness, God reminded the Israelites that they would soon step into the luxuries of the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 6:10-11).

But God was concerned that the ease of this new land and its false gods would cause the Israelites to “forget the Lord” who brought them out of Egypt (Deuteronomy 6:12-14). Before entering the Promised Land, God spoke some stern words to them when He said, “... then watch yourself” (Deuteronomy 6:12). He didn’t want

the Israelites to let their spiritual fire get snuffed out. He didn’t want their hearts to become proud (Deuteronomy 6:14). He didn’t want them to wallow in spiritual pride, retire, and relax. God wanted their hearts to burn for Him so they in turn would bring a light to the nations.

The most popular teachings from Deuteronomy 6 focus on verses 1 through 9 and are intended to ignite the fire of spiritual responsibility in the hearts of young parents. Indeed, teaching the Bible to children is a high and holy calling. However, the Bible does not allow the middle-age and elderly saints to extinguish their flame of faith, but says to them, “watch your-

self, lest you forget the Lord” (Deuteronomy 6:12).

Teach the Word in all its truth and purity. Be a lifetime lamplighter.

Johnson, currently a fourth grade public school teacher, lives in Stanley, N.D., with her husband who serves Our Savior’s and First English Free Lutheran Churches. She is a member of the Board of Publications and Parish Education.

Context

BIND THEM
AS A SIGN
ON YOUR
HAND.





T

By Leslie Winston

he greatest commandment we receive from God is to love Him with all of our being, to let Him dwell in our heart always, and to instill His commands into the next generation.

The greatest gift we can give to our children is the knowledge of how to live our lives intertwined with God's Word. God instructs us in Deuteronomy 6:7-9 to "teach these words diligently to your children ... when you sit in your house, when you are on the road, when you lie down, or when you rise ... bind them as a sign on your hand ... write them on your doorposts and on your gates." These instructions from God, of which Moses reminds us, are part of His set of guidelines for godly living. From beginning to end, the Bible gives us instructions on how to use God's principles to navigate this thing we call life.

Christian education shouldn't just be knowledge we gain from reading books and things we learn in a classroom. While those things are important and the start to our learning, they are not the end. Christian education must be put into practice. Having a head knowledge of God is great, but having a heart knowledge is so much greater. That 18 inches of space between your brain and your heart is sometimes the longest path to travel. But how do we get there? We get there by continually living out all we learn from God. We get there by taking the opportunities God presents to us and putting what we have learned into practice in order to witness and tell people what God has done in our lives, how we got from where we were to where we are now. Our lives are to shine the light of Christ to all the world so that people can see Christ living within us, and this teaching begins in our homes.

The Hebrew people were successful in teaching their children to live by these guiding principles because they modeled it in their everyday lives. It wasn't just head knowledge they passed on to their children but it was knowledge that was deeply rooted in their hearts. Out of their obedience and love for God, and love of their children, they instilled these fundamental truths into their daily living as the foundation to be built on, generation after generation.

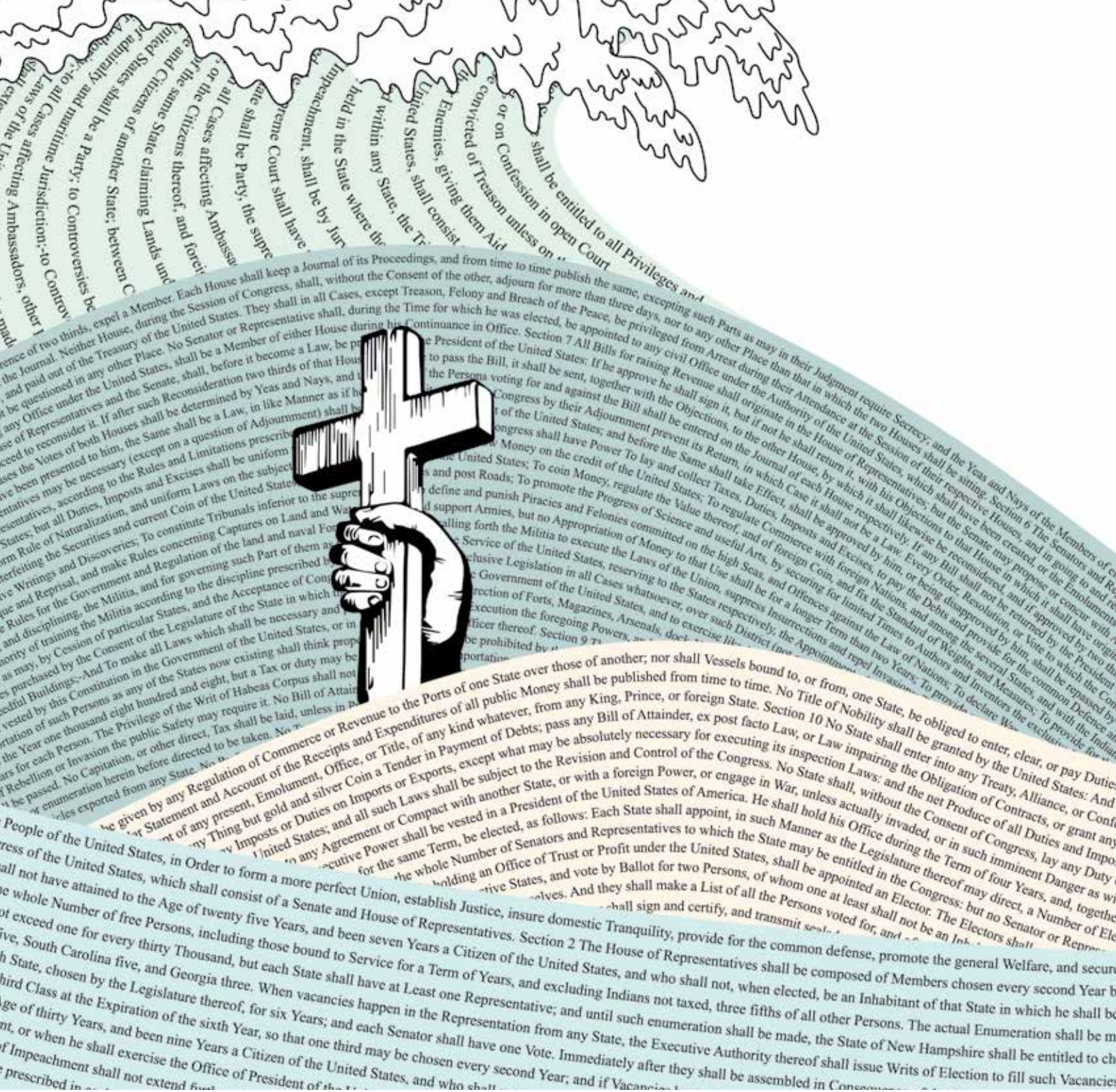
Christian teaching, modeled and carried out in every-

thing we do, is a gesture of apostolic action that springs up because of our love of God and our love of others. It is an apostolic action because we do it with the sole purpose of bringing others to Christ. We want those around us, especially our children, to have the same deep, personal relationship with God that we have. Teaching our children to care for the poor and needy, the elderly and the sick, are wonderful things for which we want our kids to have a heart. But how much greater are those lessons learned if we actually carry them out. Don't just tell them to care for those who can't care for themselves, let them see you do it. Don't just tell them to read their Bible, let them see you do it. Teaching godly living by example is the most powerful tool of all.

When my husband, George, received the call of God to enter into ministry, we prayed and fasted, and sought His will above all else. We asked Him, "Really, now? Is this what you want us to do?" Our daughters were in high school and we questioned God's timing, but He made it evident that this was what He wanted and it was His timing. Through prayer, God revealed that the best way for us to truly live out our faith was for us to obey and follow His leading. He also revealed that the greatest gift we could give our children was for them to see us put our love for God above all else and put into practice what we had been teaching them. Out of our love of God and our love for our daughters we knew it was more important for us to model how to follow God's leading in our lives rather than just telling them so.

Life grows through actions, both intellectually and spiritually. The people around us need to see us as the example of using our actions, motivated by our love of Christ, for God's Kingdom. These actions will revitalize the world for generations to come. Be the illustration and model of godly living in all that you do because the Bible says, "raise them up in the training and discipline and counsel and admonition of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4), and "train a child in the way he should go and when he is old he will never depart from it" (Proverbs 22:6).

Winston, the mother of two grown daughters, is a member of Grace Lutheran Church, Bruce, S.D., where her husband, George, serves as pastor.



GOD & CULTURE

BY MATTHEW QUANBECK

Last summer's decision by members of the Supreme Court regarding homosexual marriage has been on my mind. I am saddened by what this means for our country and concerned about my freedom of conscience as a future pastor. But most of all, it has made me rethink how Christians should engage our culture. Our reaction must not simply be one of anger and frustration. We must take a step back and evaluate how our nation got to this tipping point. We must ask, "Can Christian cultural engagement be practiced in a more fruitful and productive way than was done in this situation?" We should consider what we did well and what we did poorly. If we do not take this opportunity to re-evaluate what it means to be a "city on a hill" (Matthew 5:14) in our world, future generations will suffer consequences far beyond the mere establishment of homosexual marriage.

To learn from this situation, we should ask ourselves some questions:

First, what is the goal of Christian cultural engagement?

This is a crucial question for Christians. If we do not have a clear idea of what we are working toward, "cultural engagement" simply becomes a hip term in Christian vernacular used to spiritualize our hobby horses.

While cultural engagement has several goals, our main objective must be that God would be glorified within our nation. Hearing Jesus mocked should appall us. The ignoring of God's moral law should deeply sadden us. We want to see Jesus worshiped by all mankind.

There are several facets to seeing God glorified in our nation. The most important and most basic is the salvation of "precious eternal human souls for whom Jesus died."² This comes from a heart of love for mankind. It entails a sorrow for those still lost in their sin. If the salvation of souls is not our focus and love is not our motivation, we are not reflecting God's heart, though we may call it cultural engagement.

We also honor God as we stand up for His moral law. Our passion for what is right should be motivated by love for God *and* love for our fellow man. Instead, we often stand up for what is right in order to defend God's and our own honor. This perspective does not tend to lead to a winsome approach. We must remember that God doesn't need defending, and He is the one who will defend us. How tragic when our efforts to uphold God's law completely deter people from trusting in Christ.

I fear that in our present cultural battle, we have not accurately re-

flected God's heart, and we have deterred many people from trusting in Christ. By embracing our role as moral guides for our nation, we have come across as God's bouncers, ready to ostracize everyone who lives in particular sins. Our hotheaded vindictive attitude toward homosexuals has not only further distanced them

needed majority to elect godly leaders or establish laws against abortion, we still serve as moral guides for our nation. We take on a prophetic role, warning of consequences and standing up for what is right.

We should not have the perspective that says, "I personally believe homosexuality is wrong, but I don't think we

of the solution. I suggest that political efforts to stop abortion, gay marriage, and other such things are merely attempts to bandage a gaping wound with a Band-Aid. We have been pushing back against the natural results of spiritual bankruptcy without addressing the spiritual needs of those around us.

The Supreme Court's legalization of gay marriage is a timely example of this. Why are we stunned that this cultural battle has ended in favor of our opponents? We have been fighting for a moral absolute in a culture that no longer believes in moral absolutes. We have been appealing to the Christian Scriptures in a culture that believes that spiritual truth is determined by the individual. We have appealed to the Constitution in a culture that no longer cares what the intentions of its authors were. We should have seen our defeat coming. The truth is that the battle against homosexuality has been doomed for years as postmodern philosophy has hijacked the minds of American citizens. We have been busy advocating certain laws while our very basis for morality has been undermined. We have been fighting battles without realizing that we are losing the entire war.

To put it simply, our efforts have been backwards. We have made the caboose into the train engine, so to speak. Our cultural engagement, with the goal of God's glory, should be primarily driven by a desire to see souls won for Christ. Our nation is made up of individuals who are all in need of a Savior. We must minister to the parts before we can effectively direct the whole.

When we get this backwards, we tragically digress into the yelling match so common in the political arena. We become more concerned about being right than about caring for the souls of our opponents. Christians as a whole have not depicted an attitude of love and compassion toward homosexuals. Instead we have shown disgust and frustration. Our model, Christ, had compassion on the multitudes but had disdain for the self-righteous. Are we workers for the harvest (Matthew 9:36-38) or Pharisees with a superiority complex?

On the other hand, when we minister to the depths of people's hearts with the grace and love of Jesus Christ, we will see lives transformed to walk in step with His laws. Each life that is so changed is one step closer to a nation that will no longer embrace sins like homosexuality and abortion. If God chooses to bring revival in our nation, it will be from the inside out—not from the outside in.

I pray that this dark time in our nation's history will serve as a wakeup call for the Church. We cannot afford to keep engaging our culture in the same way. We must get our priorities (and our hearts) right.

Quanbeck, from Glyndon, Minn., is a second-year student at the Free Lutheran Seminary and dean of men at AFLBS.

Notes

1. I use the corporate "we," referring to evangelical Christianity as a whole. It does not include Christians who have adopted a higher-critical view of Scripture and do not view homosexuality as sin.
2. Pastor Wade Mobley, dean of AFLTS.
3. Part of what is so disturbing about the ruling is that a significant change was made to our nation's laws without the people being given a voice, but that discussion is not the focus of this article.

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
And renew a right Spirit within me.
Cast me not away from your presence,
And take not your Holy Spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
And uphold me with a willing spirit.
Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
And sinners will return to you.
Psalm 51:10-13 (ESV)

from Christ, but validated their accusations of intolerance and bigotry. This has expedited our nation's recognition of the gay community's "right" to marriage because society has come to see us as the oppressors. Granted, this perspective has been largely encouraged by liberal rhetoric, which has misrepresented the Christian view, but we have done a poor job of proving the rhetoric wrong.

Second, what is the Christian's role in the political realm?

Perhaps I come across as critical of Christian political involvement, but that is not my intention. Christians have a crucial part to play in our nation's political processes. If we give up on politics, our nation will further lose its moral compass.

We are blessed to live in a democratic republic where we are allowed to have a voice³ in our nation's governance. Even when we do not have the

should impose our beliefs on others." If we see our nation going in a harmful direction and stand by without making any effort to change its course, are we really loving our neighbor? Are we really loving our children?

Third, how should Christian fervor and political responsibility interact?

I have a friend who used to suggest that perhaps Christians should give up political involvement all together and simply dedicate our time to telling people about Jesus. This suggestion really irritated me because I am passionate about politics.

I just explained why it is important for Christians to be involved in the political realm, but I have come to realize that there is more wisdom in my friend's suggestion than I wanted to admit. In the past few decades, our nation has accelerated its moral decline, and Christians have viewed increased political involvement as a large part



Parish Education Resources

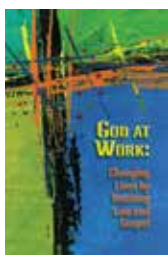
Give Them Grace: Dazzling Your Kids with the Love of Jesus

Many Christian parents and teachers strive to transform behavior with the Law. Armed with threats, manipulation, and guilt, they may try to create change that is only possible through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This book points to the grace of Christ and shows how to be instruments of that grace in the lives of children, helping them to know the dazzling love of Jesus and respond with heartfelt obedience. \$11.95



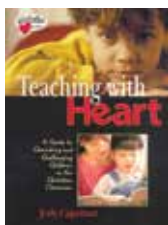
God at Work: Changing Lives by Teaching Law and Gospel

Recommended for equipping Bible teachers of all ages, these 34 short articles will help you understand God's Word of Law and Gospel and communicate it in your teaching, your relationships, and your life. \$9.95



Teaching with Heart

This valuable guide helps teachers understand the unique personalities and learning styles of each child while challenging them to grow in Christ. Includes reproducible handouts and charts suitable for teacher training. \$18.50



Family Vocation: God's Calling in Marriage, Parenting, and Childhood

What does it mean to be called as a spouse, parent, or child? How does the grace of the Gospel impact how we carry out our particular calling? With sensitivity and wisdom, this father-and-daughter author team offers a biblical paradigm for creating loving families in the midst of cultural pressures. \$12.75



Right from the Start

Discover how young children learn and the countless ways your interactions teach about God and His love. Includes a chapter on children and worship, an extensive resource list, plus discussion questions appropriate for a group setting. \$9.95



Shaping Hearts, Changing Lives

God changes our hearts and lives through the Gospel. Then He works through us to bring spiritual life and growth to others, especially those we serve in our church and community. Be encouraged through 30 days of devotions written especially for those who serve Jesus by serving others. \$2.95



TLC Teaching

God shows His tender loving care in many ways, especially through His gift of Christ Jesus the Savior. TLC teaching has a goal of reaching out to every child with the love and forgiveness of Christ. TLC teaching is Christ's love put into action. This resource offers practical ideas for Sunday school and VBS teachers, pastors, parents, and anyone involved in children's ministry. \$11.50



Concordia's Complete Bible Handbook

A valuable reference for parents, teachers, and students who want to take a brief look at books of the Bible and learn more about important people, places, customs, traditions, and life in biblical times. This Second Edition includes colorful illustrations, maps, charts, outlines, diagrams, and a 190-page Bible dictionary. \$21.95



(Colorful, updated editions of *Halley's Bible Handbook* and *Unger's Bible Handbook* are also available.)

It's midafternoon and as I walk through the community I look through a window as a woman is getting her hair done. She is chatting with another lady who is patiently waiting. Across the way, a man is talking to the teller at the bank and another man is grabbing his mail out of his mailbox. Just ahead of me there is a sign that says, "Museum," and encased behind glass are various artifacts from the past. As I keep walking, I can see a man looking at the day's newspaper. And then I get a whiff of freshly popped popcorn being made near a couple of pool tables. The pool tables are covered at the moment, but music is playing on the jukebox. Just a few steps further in the town hall a few men are playing cards and enjoying their cups of coffee. Shortly, I reach my destination, the chapel.

Believe it or not, all of these settings are found under one roof. They are all housed in the North Dakota Veteran's Home, where I have the privilege of serving as chaplain. As such, I have the opportunity to share God's Holy Word, the law and the gospel, with the home's residents. I carry this out through Bible studies, memorial services, and in various personal interactions with the residents.



TIME AND AGAIN

BY PASTOR DENNIS NORBY

Residents here are veterans or the spouses of veterans. Through their varied experiences they have seen the worst and the best that our world has to offer. They have had their friends taken away from them in battle and have seen the courage and bravery of many fellow soldiers. These individuals have been on the front lines, sacrificing their lives so that we might be free. Some in the veteran's home have the physical scars that prove that they have been to war.

On this day, a number of the residents gather for the purpose of a Bible study. We begin with a word of prayer and we look at what the Word of God says about Jesus Christ. With this group of people, some of whom have been believers since before my parents were born, we are taught by the Holy Spirit. As these believers hear the truth, many of them recall that they had been taught these things in the past by faithful pastors and teachers. They have prayed the words of Psalm 86:11 before, "Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth; unite my heart to fear your name." As I teach, I am able to see the lasting fruit of earlier study.

There are also those who gather with us who

are learning some of these wonderful truths for the first time. It is a precious time because those who have heard from God's Word want to hear again, and those who have never heard before are eager to take it all in. These are people who are still looking to learn. Their age has not stopped them from coming to God. Their aches and pains have not stopped them. For some, poor eyesight and failing hearing has not stopped them from coming. They look forward to being encouraged and given hope through God's gift to them of the crucified and risen Savior, Jesus Christ proclaimed in the Bible.

We end our Bible study by turning to the Lord in prayer. We pray for various concerns that have been mentioned, and we thank God for teaching us about Jesus Christ both today and all those times in the past. We thank God for His grace and mercy, and look forward to when He will teach us again.

Norby, who serves Hope Lutheran, Enderlin, N.D., is the chaplain at the North Dakota Veterans Home, Lisbon.



WMF

WOMEN'S
MISSIONARY
FEDERATION

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February is the month when people talk about love. Valentine's Day is on the 14th.

Some men are wondering what they should buy their wives or girlfriends. Others are going to have regrets that they didn't plan ahead. Girls and women are wondering how they are going to be remembered by the men who say they treasure them. All in all, as we watch the games people play, many wonder if this thing people call love is worth all the stress and effort.

Sometimes when people talk about God's love, it seems these romantic notions define what love means. But God's Word has something to say about what love is. The Apostle John says something amazing about love that might blow up any fickle notion we might have. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, he wrote, "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (I John 4:10, NIV).

"I object! I love God," you or I might cry out. "At least some of the time, maybe even a lot of the time I feel love for Him. But sometimes it's hard. I mean, life is sometimes hard and I have to

AND THIS IS LOVE

BY PASTOR JON AND LYNN WELLUMSON

go through things that I really don't like. Couldn't He do something about that? Doesn't He care? It isn't always easy to love Him."

And herein is the problem. Our definition of love is based on feelings and on what we receive from the object of our love. If love is as unstable as our feelings or our evaluation of whether we're receiving what we need (or want), it brings us no stability. Indeed, it complicates life more than ever.

But what John says about love, wow! We can't learn this by looking at ourselves. We have to look to God. He loved us. And His love is characterized by what He does for us, the ones He loves. He sent His Son as a gift to do something for us that we couldn't do for ourselves. He went to a cross and paid the debt we owe because of our sins. This isn't all He did for us in His love, but nothing shows the extent of His love or what love actually is and does more than this.

The phrase, "for our sins," tells us that we are completely undeserving of receiving anything from Him. What He gave is a gift of inestimable worth. This is love.

John tells us something else about love: "We love because He first loved us" (I John 4:19).

Coming to know and experience His love makes us able to begin expressing real love, His love. We begin loving without regard to feelings or what we might receive in return—whether the one we love is deserving or not, just like God loves us.

Ladies of the WMF, God has called missionaries through our AFLC. He has called teachers, administrators, pastors, and leaders. He desires to share His love with many through them and through you. You may not be the one being sent, but God may want to have you love through sending. Do you know God's love? Then I am certain you want to love. May your congregation and local WMF help you know God's love and provide opportunities to share God's love.

The Wellumsons live in Williston, N.D., where Jon serves Emmanuel and Beaver Creek Free Lutheran churches and Lynn is the president of the Women's Missionary Federation.

"He who is not for me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters" (Luke 11:23).

This is strong language, is it not? God says so very plainly that we are either with Him or against Him; we are either a help or a hindrance to Him. There is no room for indecisiveness here. We cannot divide our allegiance between God and someone else—even when that other one is *ourselves*. God cannot use half-hearted servants; a lukewarm servant is nauseating to God. Scripture makes that emphatic.

If we want a certain presidential candidate to win an election, we vote for that candidate, and do all in our power to convince others to do likewise. We feel that this [person] can do the best job for all concerned. Could Christ expect a lesser devotion from His followers? As a rule we speak out unabashedly of that which we believe to be good and true in our earthly life. Should we not do likewise for our Savior?

NEWS

Christian musician Steve Green and pianist Dick Tunney were in concert Sunday, Nov. 22, 2015, at Bethany Free Lutheran, Astoria, Ore. They performed two songs during the morning worship service and a concert in the evening. The concert was part of Bethany's year-long celebration of the 125th anniversary of the founding of the congregation.

Bethany's adult choir sang backup for Green on three songs during the evening concert. Some of the children of the congregation sang with Green on three other songs. Green sang some of his older songs, some newer songs, and he also took requests during the concert. Tunney accompanied Green and also played some solo numbers on the piano and accordion.



Steve Green has been sharing the good news of Jesus in Christian music ministry for more than 30 years, performing around the world and making 33 albums.

By Pastor Craig Johnson

WATERS IN THE WILDERNESS

FEBRUARY 8

All during life decisions have to be made. It is important that we make the right decisions. Jesus Christ wants us to decide for Him, and to serve Him ever thereafter. He has made promises which no human being could make; He has promised present joy, and bliss forever. In the light of all this, is it not strange that there are still people who would rather shun Him?

Nancy Thingelstad was from Northwood, N.D.

Waters in the Wilderness is a daily devotional published by the AFLC Board of Parish Education in 1971 with Dr. Iver Olson, editor. All 365 meditations were contributed by AFLC members from many walks of life. "Here, they offer each a glass of cool and refreshing water each day to thirsting souls," wrote Olson in the preface. Reprinted by permission. The volume is out of print.

THE BATTLEFRONT

BY PASTOR KEVIN OLSON

Terrorism, Syrian refugees, border protection, persecuted Christians, religious liberty ... the battles never seem to end. These topics are all important because they involve freedom, faith, life, and death. To be disinterested or disconnected from them is to deny their importance. To fight every battle can be overwhelming, exhausting, and discouraging; leaving us weary and empty.

Man's natural temptation is to champion causes with human passions; but the sin in man's heart is the reason that there are battles in our world. All of these battles begin with man's inner desires and passions, even good causes. The necessary action is to allow the Lord to direct those desires. It is necessary to allow Jesus' victory over sin to become our victory. It is necessary to allow the Holy Spirit to change hearts.

The one battle that must be fought and won is the battle of the human heart. The struggle within our hearts is the key to any other battle that we are engaged in. It is a battle between the flesh and the spirit. On one side are the human desires and passions that give the motivation to confront causes that appear unjust.

On the other side is submission to the authority of God who is the final judge over what is just and unjust.

The struggle within the heart is missions. It is a battle that crosses borders and language barriers. It is a battle that is not always visible but always evident. The battle of the heart is fought across the sea and across the street. It is a part of our personal conflicts and our personal conversations.

Victories in this battle were seen after the Ambassador Institute graduation in Uganda. Students, families, and friends were interviewed about the training they had been taking. They repeatedly said that the training had changed their lives. When asked what they meant, the students said that they were not the same people they were before. They talked about attitude and relationship changes, understanding of the Bible, and joy in serving others.

Justine testified that her husband, Christopher, had been an angry, cruel man but he had become kind. He agreed. Eighteen-year-old Jesse said that his parents were able to manage their home and were showing love instead of anger. Carol was previously known as harsh and judgmental but she had changed to become loving and welcoming. Francis was a

Catholic catechist and had been leading a church but did not understand the Bible. He prayed to receive Jesus, dug deep into the study of God's Word, and started a church and an Ambassador Institute class.

The victory that these students experienced was won because they had spent two years studying God's Word. They were challenged with what the Lord had for them and Jesus changed their hearts. II Corinthians 4:5-6 says, "We preach ... not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ."

February is the beginning of the Lenten season. Lent is a time, when the inner battle of the heart can be fought. I pray that this Lenten season can be a time for all of us to contend with God's Word and allow it to change us, as well. That is missions!



Olson, Crystal, Minn., is the department head for the Ambassador Institute.

PEOPLE & PLACES

Members of **Hauge Lutheran**, Kenyon, Minn., hosted a sending service on Jan. 31 for Pastor Brent and Emily Raan, who have accepted a call to India with AFLC World Missions. The Raans plan to join the work in India in early March.

Pastor Joel Kangass was installed Jan. 10 at Resurrection Free Lutheran, Beltrami, Minn., with Pastor Lydon Korhonen, AFLC president, officiating.

AFLC Home Missions will host a retreat Feb. 1-4 at Calvary Free Lutheran, Mesa, Ariz., with the theme, "Creating a Culture of Discipleship." The emphasis of the retreat will be on equipping the saints from the theme verses in Ephesians 4:11-12.

DECEMBER MEMORIALS

AFLBS

Becky Valdez
Clifford Kelso
Pastor Erling
Huglen (3)
Pastor Chester
Heikkinen
Evelyn Stone
Victor Ness
Dick Askvig
Ernest Nash
Ruth Claus
Norman Edwards
Levi Schopp
Iris Jean Brustad

AFLTS

Evelyn Stone
Becky Valdez
Clifford Kelso
Andy Nelson
Evangelism
Pastor Erling Huglen
Enoch Thorsgard
Adeline McCarlson
Andy Nelson

FLAPS

Carl Reed
Robert Olson

General Fund

Sheldon Knutson
Andy Nelson
Ted Zipf

Home Missions

Knute & Gerda
Knutson
Dick Askvig
Kay Miller
Owen Myhre
Rita Rajdl

Parish Education

Dr. Mary Lindquist
Pastor Dale Mellgren
Pastor John
Mundfrom

World Missions

Enoch Thorsgard
Clarence Tostenson
Pastor Erling Huglen

WMF

Agnes Larson
Bertha Hegreberg
Iola Warford
Jennie Collins
Pastor Harvey
Jackson
Michael Burke
Helen Kari

Youth Ministries

Edwin & Mildred
Mathison
Enoch Thorsgard

Lenten series will focus on Icelandic hymn writer

Beginning on Ash Wednesday (February 10), *The Lutheran Ambassador*, together with worship leader Ryan Eagan, will publish a series of weekly devotionals during the Lenten season.

The seven devotionals will focus on the life work of seventeenth century Icelandic hymn writer Hallgrímer Pétursson, who is sometimes referred to as "the suffering psalmist." During his

lifetime, Pétursson wrote many hymns, including The Passion Hymns, 50 hymns meant to be sung during the working days of Lent.

Eagan, who is the worship leader at Living Word, Sioux Falls, S.D., has re-tuned one of the hymns, which he will be available to AFLC congregations during Lent. His devotionals will be published on the *Ambassador's* Facebook page.

Ambassador Institute budget changes
WM Committee sets new spending constraints

The Ambassador Institute is currently facing challenging budget concerns heading into 2016. The department, which is under the umbrella AFLC World Missions, focuses on providing accessible biblical education for students around the world hungry for God's Word.

"The Ambassador Institute is intrinsically focused on international biblical education," said Pastor Kevin Olson, department head. "Providing a biblical education on an international scale requires international travel and the financial support to do so."

In order to facilitate the future fiscal health of the Ambassador Institute, members of the World Missions Committee, which oversees the Ambassador Institute, have made several key decisions for the ministry. All debt prior to 2015 has been forgiven by the committee members through funds reserved for future ministry. However, all debt starting in January 2015 going forward must be met by the department and funds must be in place before any international trips can be planned.

Currently, any gifts intended for the Ambassador Institute must be designated as such since the ministry is considered self-supporting. All donations given generally to AFLC World Missions are not considered designated. As a valuable ministry of the AFLC World Missions, committee members encourage contributors to continue to give to the department as the Lord leads.

For more information on the need, contact Olson by email at kevino@afcl.org, or call (763) 545-5631.

AFLC BENEVOLENCES January 1-December 31, 2015

FUND	REC'D IN DECEMBER	TOTAL REC'D TO DATE	PRIOR YEAR-TO-DATE
General Fund	\$65,251	\$371,251	\$368,446
Evangelism	13,276	135,059	144,025
Youth Ministries	10,634	107,792	132,322
Parish Education	15,370	145,630	145,181
Seminary	50,245	290,489	288,143
Bible School	69,236	537,653	492,524
Home Missions	79,735	496,104	534,085
World Missions	78,124	484,051	490,621
Personal Support	89,634	609,844	475,106
TOTALS	\$471,505	\$3,177,873	\$3,070,454

Contact the individual departments for further information about specific financial needs.

PASSING IT ON

Passing on the Baton of Evangelism” was the title of a unique venture several years ago, sponsored by the AFLC Evangelism Commission, through which workshops were held in various districts for the purpose of renewing an evangelistic emphasis within our congregations. Perhaps today it is time to emphasize the passing on of the basics of our faith and life convictions.

In the late 1980s the Search Institute conducted an intensive study of six mainline denominations, revealing that too many congregations were populated by adults

and adolescents whose faith was not particularly well developed. Only about 30 percent of those interviewed seemed to have “a life-transforming relationship to a loving God” with a concern for serving others.



Pastor Robert Lee

Unless this issue is faced head-on, one writer warned, members will increasingly drop out or seek spiritual nurture elsewhere. Since the denominations studied would be classified in a more liberal category, however, it might have been easy to assume the results did not really apply to more conservative church bodies.

It was a recent article by Dr. Gene Veith that called attention to a new study last year by the Pew Research Center, including denominational breakdowns. Pointing to his own denomination, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, he noted that the members are not as conservative as the denomination, and it seems that the same could be said of other conservative church bodies. Although the study indicates that the number of evangelicals has remained remarkably stable, while mainline Protestantism continues to decline, there is cause for concern about exactly what they believe.

The LC-MS statistics reveal that a majority believe “right or wrong depends on the situation,” rather than “there are clear

standards for what is right and wrong.” The division on same-sex marriage is almost equal (45 percent in favor, 48 percent against), and a majority believes that homosexuality should be accepted. Results from the broader category “Lutherans in the Evangelical Tradition,” show a strong belief in God (81 percent) and the importance of religion in daily life (66 percent), but less than half attend services at least once a week. More confidence is placed on common sense (44 percent) than religion (42 percent) in seeking guidance on right and wrong, and the percentage of those who read the Bible at least once a week and those who read it seldom or never is equal (37 percent). Then, 87 percent believe in heaven; 74 percent believe in hell.

It seems to this writer that surveys like these would be more helpful if they had a stronger doctrinal content, perhaps more than the Search Institute study, with an emphasis on the basics of our faith. What do we believe about Jesus Christ? Is He both God and man? What do we believe about salvation? Is it by grace through faith, or some other way? What about the Bible? (Dr. Veith points out that 40 percent say that it should be taken literally, with 41 percent disagreeing, but this could indicate some confusion about parables, etc.) Is it true in all that it affirms? What do we believe about the Means of Grace?

Several years ago there was an emphasis during the annual pastors’ and wives’ retreat on ministry to senior adults. Our main resource person, Pastor Cliff Pederson, suggested that many were in serious need of being “re-catechized” in basic Christian teachings, especially due to the influence of the media. One might add that this is not only a need for seniors. An AFLC

pastor who has visited many of our congregations observed that it is not uncommon to find that many, even among the active church members, are struggling with a lack of assurance of salvation. A pastor friend in another conservative denomination confided that he has ministered to people at the end of life who are still looking to their own works for confidence rather than to the finished work of Christ.

The theme of this issue is Christian education, and the main focus is customarily on the important work of our Sunday schools and instruction in our homes. Perhaps it would be good for congregations to offer “new” member instruction to “old” members. Perhaps you and I need to blow the dust off our old catechisms from confirmation days and be “re-catechized.” How much do I remember? Do I still believe it? Do my faith convictions make a genuine difference in my life and my attitudes toward others?

*Do my faith convictions
make a genuine difference
in my life and my
attitudes toward others?*

“Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more, as you see the day drawing near” (Hebrews 10:23-25).

building the base

THE SOLID FOUNDATION

BY PASTOR JEREMY VANCE

M

y son, Christian, loves to play with blocks. He likes to pile on block after block to build a tower as high as he can.

Yet when Christian starts his tower, he doesn't begin at the top. He knows he must start at the bottom. He knows the importance of the base when building. It is the same way with us. Just as food, drink, and shelter are foundational to our physical lives, there are certain things that must be foundational for our spiritual lives.

Paul says in I Corinthians 3 that our foundation must be Jesus Christ. Any other foundation is not worthy to build on, neither our good works nor our feelings. We cannot start building our spiritual lives with good works, for outside of Christ our good works are unacceptable to God. Good works must come after starting with a foundation of having faith in Jesus Christ. Feelings, which are transitory, do not offer a real secure footing to build our spiritual lives upon. We can feel happy one moment and then something happens, leaving us discouraged. The only acceptable foundation is Jesus Christ, our faith being fixed

upon Him. Through Him, we have access to God as Jesus is the only way to salvation. Jesus is the way since He purchased our pardon from sin by His substitutionary death on the cross. His death satisfied God's wrath, so if we believe on Him we would have the forgiveness of our sins, thereby allowing our entrance into heaven. Jesus Christ is central to the building of our spiritual lives and faith connects us to Him and His atonement for our sin.

When we consider the building of our spiritual lives, just who is the one to do the building? Are we the ones hard at work? A number of people today try working on their spiritual lives by reading self-help books or watching popular doctors on television. They are seeking answers to issues such as forgiveness and spiritual strength. Yet these books and doctors cannot really answer questions that should be directed to God. We are, in fact, not the ones who should be building our spiritual lives. This must come from God working within us. Psalm 127:1 says, "Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labor in vain." Just as our homes must be built by the Lord, so

must our spiritual lives be built by Him. We can choose to toil away on our own with whatever means we see fit and come to accomplish nothing in regards to our spiritual lives. Or we can choose to let God access our lives and work His grace within us so that our spiritual lives may be fruitful.

God does not bring spiritual fruit about out of the thin air. He uses means to work within us. Just as a syringe is the means by which to deliver medicine to the body, so God uses the Word and the Sacraments to channel His grace to believers. These three instruments are called the Means of Grace and are the ways God chooses to work within us. In the coming year, we will be studying the Word and Sacraments as the means God uses to work within us. These, along with the foundation of Jesus Christ, are effective tools in building up our spiritual lives. May we all be centered on Christ, trusting in Him while making use of the means of grace God has provided for us.

*Vance serves Sunnyside Free Lutheran,
Stacy, Minn.*