

## Pericopes: May 1, 4, 11, 18, 25

### May 1, Ascension: Luke 24:44-53

Although Matthew does not describe an actual ascension event, he concludes his Gospel with ascension theology, "I am with you always to the end of the age." (Here note the "book-ending" with Matthew 1:23, "Emmanuel—God with us.")

In his longer ending, Mark writes (16:19), "So then the Lord Jesus, after He had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God."

In John's Gospel, we find statements such as, "I am going away, and I am coming to you," 14:28. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit will continue to share with the disciples what Jesus taught them during His ministry, 16:12-15.

Luke describes Jesus' ascension, first in his Gospel (24:50,51—apparently on Easter Sunday evening), and again in Acts 1:1-9, forty days after Jesus' resurrection.

### ASCENSION INSIGHTS

*(These thoughts might prove helpful also for the Pentecost pericopes that follow.)*

The disciples play a remarkable role in the Gospel narratives. Throughout each narrative, they remain slow learners. When eventually they wake up to the fact Jesus is the Messiah, they have no idea what that implies for Jesus or for them. Think, for example, of the way Mark tells the story. As Jesus carries out His ministry, although He says little about Who He is *with words*, He indicates who He is *through actions*. He gives sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, speech to the dumb, and healthy bodies to the crippled—things Isaiah said would take place when the Messianic Age broke in (see 35:5,6). In addition, Jesus demonstrates His power over nature (see Psalm 107:23-32). He does battle with the realm of the demonic, and overcomes it. He raises the dead (see Isaiah 26:19; Dan. 12:1-3).

Having done all these things, Jesus heads north toward Caesarea Philippi and asks the disciples who *the people* think He is, and then who *they* think He is. (See Mark 8:27-38.) They reply that although the people do not think He that is the Messiah, the disciples do. But when Jesus then, for the first time, predicts His coming death in Jerusalem, Peter explodes in protest.

When Jesus predicts His passion for the second time, the disciples ask Him which of them will be greatest (His "Prime Minister" or "Secretary of State") when He sets up His Kingdom in Jerusalem. (See Mark 9:30-37.) And after the third passion prediction, James and John ask if Jesus could arrange for them to sit, one at His right hand and one at His left hand, when He is crowned King! (Mark 10:32-45.)

Little wonder, then, that as the hour of the cross draws closer, the disciples fall asleep, deny, betray, and run. And little wonder that when Jesus is finally lifted on to the cross, they are not around. And little wonder that when word begins getting around on Easter Sunday morning that Jesus is alive again, they refuse to believe it—until they check out the empty tomb for themselves.

After the resurrection, some moving meetings take place in John's Gospel between Jesus and the disciples. In these, Jesus never rebukes the disciples for deserting Him in His hour of agony. Rather, He greets them with "Peace be with you!" He invites them to have breakfast with Him. He asks them if they love Him; see John 21. (Note that in Mark's "longer ending," we read in 16:14, "...Jesus upbraided them

for their lack of faith and stubbornness, because they had not believed.”)

And then finally (in Luke 24) Jesus takes them a mile or so out of Jerusalem to Bethany, on the southeast section of the Mount of Olives, where He had raised Lazarus from the dead, John 11. He raises His hands, blesses the disciples, and rises from the ground (apparently on the evening of His resurrection day). The disciples then return to Jerusalem and continue to bless God in the Temple there.

Luke presents us with a second ascension narrative in Acts 1:1-12—an event that takes place forty days after Jesus’ passion/resurrection, 1:3. Again, the conversation is an interesting one. The disciples ask if the time has finally come when Jesus will restore the kingdom to Israel. The question amounts to this: “Lord, Your crucifixion came as such a shock to us. We are so glad that You are alive again. We had such hopes prior to Your cross about what You would achieve. But has the time now come when You will rise up against Rome and restore the Kingdom to Israel?”

Apparently the disciples hope that the time had come when Jesus would drive out the Roman overlords, and establish His own political kingdom in Jerusalem and Palestine. No doubt they hope that He would restore the so-called good old days of David, with its extensive territories and international prestige. And no doubt some of them still had thoughts about being Jesus’ Prime Minister or Secretary of State, with all the perks that might go with such a position.

Jesus gently but clearly points out that their view of His kingdom is totally misguided. He did not come to set up some kind of political kingdom in Palestine. Rather, the Holy Spirit will come on the disciples and they will be sent to the ends of the earth to witness to Jesus the Messiah as forgiving Savior and Servant-Lord. And while Jesus talks, He rises from the ground. It would have been interesting to see the looks on the disciples’ faces while this was happening. Jesus rises higher and higher, and finally His presence is swallowed up in a cloud (a symbol of God’s presence). And while the disciples stand around confused and flabbergasted, two persons in white robes appear and tell the disciples that just as Jesus has departed from them, so He will eventually reappear. So much for the biblical narrative. What does it all mean for us?

Note again: Matthew presents us with what we might call “ascension theology.” Jesus’ last words in Matthew’s Gospel are: “I am with you always, even to the close of the age.”

Mark’s last words describe the women fleeing from the tomb on Easter morning, 16:8. His closing comment is: “They fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had come upon them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid!”

John telescopes Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, and the giving of the Spirit, into the events of Easter Sunday.

Only Luke reports Jesus’ ascension *event* (but again, note also Mark’s longer ending).

To try to harmonize all this is beside the point. The real issue is: *What does it all say to us?*

The German composer, Handel, wrote a work titled *Zadok the Priest*. It begins with a series of broken chords. Then, as it seems to be developing into something more consistent, it reverts back to broken chords—this way and that, some in a minor key. But then it really begins to go somewhere. It begins to swell and surge. And then the whole work explodes as the choir crashes in! King Solomon is being crowned! And Zadok is playing a key role in the coronation ceremony. The Gospels are like that. They lead you here—they lead you there. And suddenly they explode with their descriptions of Jesus’

coronation. The Gospels celebrate the coronation of Jesus, the Savior-King. The shock is that Jesus' throne is a cross!

Jesus' crucifixion has *royal significance*: Jesus is the restored son of David and the King of the Jews. Jesus' crucifixion is a *saving act*. Jesus saved humanity from the consequence of sin by dying for it. Jesus' crucifixion is also the *defeat of evil*. When the forces of evil did their worst to Jesus, He conquered those forces. Jesus' crucifixion was also an act with *eternal consequences*. Jesus achieved the saving purposes of His Father and opened the doors into eternity for those locked in time and held captive by the powers of sin and death!

The post-resurrection appearances of Jesus are sublime. (As we noted a little earlier, only in Mark 16:14 do we read of Jesus rebuking the disciples for letting Him down, for sleeping, denying, and running.) He shows the disciples the scars in His hands, side, and feet—and says, “Peace be with you.” (See John 20.) And when we look up into the sky, and think of the God who made the universe and fills every corner of it, we hear Him saying the same to us: “Peace be with you.”

Some questions: When Jesus ascended, where did He go to? And where is Jesus now? Let's think back to Jesus' post-resurrection appearances. Jesus appears—and He disappears. When He appeared, where did He come from? When He disappeared, where did He go to? The answer in both cases is: *He came from nowhere and went nowhere. Or: He came from everywhere and went everywhere.*

Think for a moment about those soldiers who were guarding Jesus' tomb. Matthew tells us about them in His Gospel. There is a divine humor about what transpired in relation to their response to Jesus' crucifixion. To begin with, they were guarding a sealed tomb that had a body in it. And we might *imagine* that there was a big sign up near the tomb, **Resurrection Illegal**. However, as the hours ticked by, and the soldiers and the sign stayed in place, there came that moment when the soldiers were guarding an *empty* tomb. Jesus had risen—the tomb was empty!

How did Jesus get out of that tomb? Did He pass through the walls in some miraculous way—Hollywood style, like a mist of some kind? Not at all! From the moment that Jesus came back to life in the tomb, He filled every corner of the universe not merely as God but also as man. Beyond the resurrection His human nature shares *fully* in His divine nature. That means that He did not have to pass through the rock walls to escape the tomb. Furthermore, when He appeared beyond the resurrection, He was merely letting the disciples know that He was still around. And when He finally “ascended,” He was *not departing*. He was merely saying, “No more little visits—but I am not going away. Even so, although I will remain with you until the close of the age, you will not see Me again until I reappear.” In short, when Jesus ascended, He did not *withdraw* His presence—He *transformed* it.

We might well say that although Jesus' *crucifixion* was His *coronation* before human eyes, His *ascension* was His *enthronement* as *Lord of the universe*. When in The Apostles' Creed we speak of Jesus seated at the right hand of the Father, we should not think of Him as sitting on a literal chair next to a literal right hand. In the ancient world, the term “right hand” denoted the place of honor and authority. This means that God the Father endorsed Jesus' life, mission, and ministry, vindicated His Son's ministry by raising Him from the dead, accepted all that He had done for a fallen humanity, and declared Him to be King of the universe. It follows in turn that the only way the universe, history, and humanity can work is when it submits to Jesus the Messiah as forgiving Savior and Servant Lord. This in turns means that we have to think through the fact that the one declared to be Savior, King, and Lord walked the way of a humble servant-without-limit, *and calls those who believe and trust in Him to walk the same way in all that they think, say, and do.*

## May 4, Easter 7: John 17:1-11

Since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, John 17 has been called “the High Priestly Prayer” of Jesus. (In John, there is no reference to Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane.) In this chapter, Jesus speaks directly to His Father as an intercessor—although no doubt the disciples heard what Jesus was saying. Jesus prays for His *immediate* disciples (vv. 6-19) and *future* disciples, vv. 20,21. Jesus’ ministry on earth is now all but over. Although He had previously called the disciples to follow Him (13:33,36), He now prays that they will be with Him in union with the Father, vv. 12-14. Jesus’ prayer in ch. 17 highlights the unity of Father, Son, and believing community.

Note briefly what precedes this passage in John’s larger framework:

- \* Jesus reveals His Person and mission to His own people, chs. 1-11. No one seems to understand Jesus’ message, and after He raises Lazarus from the dead on the Mount of Olives, the religious and political leaders vote to kill Him, ch. 11.
- \* In 12:31, Jesus declares that He is about to conquer the kingdom of Satan. This verse has profound implications for the world still today. God’s people are to be aware of the continuing presence of the “satanic liar” and the demonic goals that he would have humanity pursue.
- \* In chs. 13-16, Jesus focuses on demonstrating the true nature of His Kingdom (He washes feet—something that only a Gentile slave would do!), emphasizing that He gives His brothers and sisters only one commandment (not 613!). He also assures His disciples that, after He withdraws His visible presence, the Holy Spirit will continue to make His message known (which stresses our continuing need to soak ourselves in God’s Word so that the Holy Spirit can communicate with us).

V. 1: When praying, Jesus looks up to into the heavens and uses the term “Father.” Jesus’ coming “glory” will consist in giving away His life on a cross. Here, note 19:30. The word “hour” has sounded like a muffled bell numerous times prior to ch. 17. It is now about to sound forth loudly and clearly—in Jesus’ coming enthronement on a cross. Jesus’ definition of “glory” is the reverse of that of the world. Jesus devoted life to giving Himself; humanity by nature devotes life to gaining for self. The events of Jesus’ coming “hour” will complete His revelation of His Father’s heart and will.

V. 2: “Eternal life” is not only a place that God’s people will eventually enter. It is also a servant lifestyle that they are to practice already in this life. Jesus’ invitation is, “Live *now* as you will *then*! My Father’s eternal kingdom has already broken in—in and through Me!”

V. 3: Jesus nowhere else refers to Himself as “Jesus *Christ*.”

Vv. 4,5: God’s (and Jesus’) glory is not merely of recent origin. It is eternal—beyond the limits of time.

V. 6: “Your name”: perhaps the name I AM (8:24, 28,58, 13:19). The mission of Jesus was to know and show His invisible Father.

Vv. 7,8: Positive words—but the disciples only began to catch on fully after Jesus’ resurrection and ascension.

V. 11: Jesus prays that the disciples will be bound in unity with a bond like that which binds the Father and Jesus together. A profound thought with profound implications! If only we could place above all

church altars (in addition to those beautifully made and polished crosses) an image of Jesus on His knees washing the disciples' feet! With perhaps the subtitle, "As I—so you."

### **May 11, Pentecost: John 20:19-23**

Some preliminary thoughts:

- \* At Passover, the Jewish people celebrated the events of the Exodus from Egypt. In Luke's transfiguration narrative (9:28-36), Jesus and Elijah (both of whom had met with God on Mt. Sinai—Mt. Horeb) spoke with Jesus about His coming "exodus" (lifelong rescue event) that He would soon "complete" on a cross in Jerusalem.
- \* The Israelites spent forty years in the wilderness before entering the Promised Land. Jesus (according to Acts 1:3) spent 40 days with His disciples prior to ascending into the Eternal Promised Land.
- \* The Israelites/Jewish people celebrated the events of Sinai fifty days after Passover (hence, Pentecost, "fifty days"). In the Pentecost event recorded in Acts 2, the Risen Lord—through His Holy Spirit—takes up permanent residence among His people, and seeks to teach them to know and do His will throughout their "wilderness journey" in this world while on their way to the Eternal Promised Land.
- \* Those present at the Pentecost described in Acts 2 were *Jews* and *proselytes* (the latter, converts to Judaism). The Holy Spirit falls upon *Gentiles* for the first time in Acts 10; see 10:44-48; note also 11:2,3.

Vv. 19-21: Jesus meets with ten disciples in a room—with a locked door. He greets them with, "Peace be with you," and shows them His hands and side—and they rejoice. He says "Peace be with you" a second time (again, no rebukes!), and commissions them to undertake a mission to the world on His behalf.

V. 22: Jesus breathes on the disciples and gives them the Holy Spirit. In Genesis 2:7, we read of God breathing into Adam the breath of life, "and the man became a living being." The parallels are profound. Jesus' ministry brings about a new beginning to *creation* and *humanity*!

V. 23: Note well that we can say to anyone in the world, "God loves you—and has forgiven you all your sins." Some will believe and rejoice. Some will frown and perhaps dismiss us as a little crazy. Even so, the forgiveness that we proclaim in the name of Jesus is true. How people respond to our proclamation has profound implications for them—in this life and that to come. Faith never creates forgiveness; it merely lays hold of what has been there all along.

### **May 18, Trinity Sunday: Matthew 28:16-20**

In terms of what we call the "Church Year," last Sunday was Pentecost, and today is Pentecost 1. Those of you who have a few grey hairs will remember that, years ago, last Sunday would have been the Festival of Pentecost, today would have been Trinity Sunday, and the Sundays following would have been the Sundays after Trinity. Unfortunately our world is rather different from the world of Pentecost. After Peter preached his sermon recorded in Acts 2, the people asked, "What shall we do?" Today when the service is over, many ask merely, "Where shall we eat?"

If way back in the 7th century A.D. someone had succeeded in explaining the doctrine of the Trinity to

Mohammad, today there would be no world of Islam. Mohammad simply could not understand this business of the Trinity. The result: Today we have the Koran, and more than one billion Muslims—hundreds of millions of whom take their faith more seriously than do many Christians.

The early church struggled for hundreds of years to produce an adequate statement about the doctrine of the Trinity. It was not until A.D. 451 at Chalcedon that a statement was produced that finally expressed to everyone's satisfaction what the Bible has to say about the matter. The early Church was forced into formulating this and other creeds because most of the heresies that plagued the early church had to do just with this matter of defining the Trinity, and the Person of Jesus.

The New Testament itself does not sharply define the doctrine of the Trinity. Perhaps the most inspiring statement about the Trinity is in Ephesians 1:3-14. In the original Greek, this passage constitutes *one unbroken sentence*. The Revised Standard Version breaks it down into *six sentences*. But it is easy enough to understand the message of that long Greek sentence. It is a hymn to the Trinity. In English, verses 3-6 are a hymn to the Father. Verses 7-12 are a hymn to Jesus Christ. Verses 13,14 are a hymn to the Spirit. In this hymn, Paul does not set out to define the Trinity. He merely lists what each Person has done for us, and calls us to praise each person.

Several unfortunate things happened in the early church. First, it spent so much time discussing and debating the nature of each Person in the Trinity, and their relationship to each other, that it neglected Paul's approach to the matter. Second, it focused so much on salvation in the narrow sense that it lost sight of God as the One Who made and owns the universe, Who came among us as the Servant Son, and is still among us through His Spirit seeking to have us conform to the image of Servant-Jesus.

Those who study at a seminary memorize some Latin terms such as: *opera ad intra* and *opera ad extra*. These terms are not references to the discovery of some hitherto unknown opera by Verdi or Mozart. They refer to the relationship of the Persons within the Godhead (*opera ad intra*), and to the involvement of all three Persons in the external works (*opera ad extra*) of creation, redemption, and sanctification.

These days people say things like this: "God has been so good to us in this country. He has given us a wonderful land to enjoy. There are so many opportunities to achieve success here!" Yes, God has indeed been good to us in this country. However, He has not given it to us. No nation owns the land it occupies. It all belongs to God. Nor has God placed us within this land that we might enjoy ourselves. He has placed us here to life usefully—for the good of all on a global scale. Success is never measured by what we achieve for ourselves. It is measured by what we do to the glory of God in the service of others.

Radical—but biblical! Perhaps the time has come to call another church council to change the First Article of the Creed so that it reads, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker *and Owner* of Heaven and Earth." The implications? There is no such thing as Christian giving. There is only Christian management, and Christian distribution. The problem in the church at large is not Christian giving. It is unchristian keeping. The cure? It is not to encourage people to give more, but to inspire them to rob less. After all, the problem is not the high cost of living. It is the cost of high living.

More: We are beginning to learn that we have not treated creation with the respect that it deserves as God's property. Among many other things, we have regarded the oceans as the ideal dumping ground for a variety of deadly wastes. I wonder what God the Father Almighty, Maker and Owner of Heaven and Earth, thinks of all this. It would seem that we are beginning to find out!

Let's try a question about God the Son. Some years ago, an important church leader writing an important article in an important paper of a major denomination wrote: "Christmas is a wonderful season. It is that

time of the year when we reflect on the fact that God is reconciled to sinners." However, the Bible nowhere speaks of God being reconciled to sinners. It only speaks of sinners being reconciled to God. In this matter of salvation, God is already for us. The Bible never gives us advice about how to get God to love us. God already does. God is like that waiting father in the parable of the two lost sons longing to welcome back the first of those two wayward sons. And when He persuades us to come back to Him, His desire is to move us to love Him by loving those around us. Sad but true, the Apostles' Creed jumps from Jesus' crib to Jesus' cross. It makes no reference to Jesus' life and ministry, walking the way of a Servant-without-limit, and calling His disciples/followers to do the same.

Finally, some comments about the Holy Spirit. Many Christians do not understand clearly the Person and work of the Holy Spirit. After all, you can understand God the Father as the One who made and sustains the universe. You can understand the reality of God the Son as the One who once lived, died, and rose again on Planet Earth. But what ideas concerning the Holy Spirit reside in our mind?

First, the Holy Spirit has been referred to as the "shy member" of the Holy Trinity. That's appropriate—the Spirit has no desire to be noticed. The Spirit desires only that we know Jesus the Messiah as forgiving Savior and Servant Lord. The Spirit is like someone standing in the wings to the side of a stage urging the audience to look at the One in center stage, Jesus the Messiah, and believe in and follow Him.

Furthermore, the work of the Risen Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit are one and inseparable. The Holy Spirit simply continues to do what the Risen Jesus would do if the risen Jesus were still among us visibly.

But note carefully. It is quite wrong to think of Jesus as having taken off to some distant corner of the universe. The Risen Jesus is still here, and the Spirit merely wants to empower us to understand what that means, to believe what it implies—and to respond! The Spirit wants us not merely to believe in the invisible Jesus, but to make that invisible Jesus visible in our own lives.

The Holy Spirit is never going to call us by phone, or send us a fax, or talk to us out of the blue sky. The Holy Spirit is going to speak to us through the Means of Grace: the Bible, Holy Baptism, and the Lord's Supper. And in particular through the Bible. That means that if we do not regularly open up our Bible and grapple with its meaning and message, we are simply giving the Spirit no opportunity to speak to us. Listening to the occasional sermon and sitting in on the occasional Bible class just won't do it. We are called to get beyond sitting, standing, and singing to studying, sharing, and serving—on a global basis.

Some years ago while conducting a seminar in Columbia, South Carolina, I heard about an Episcopal priest who conducts workshops around the United States and tells churches that we Christians need to rethink a few things. One thing he points out is that we have put a lot of time into studying stages of learning and moral development in relation to children. However, we have neglected to do the same thing in relation to adults, and we really only begin to take Jesus really seriously when we become 70 or 80 years of age, and finally become aware of the imminence of death and the uncertainty of eternity! Many testimonies from people who use our materials indicate that he is right!

Some translations of "The Great Commission" (Matthew 28:19,20) are misleading. The opening words in English translations are usually, "**Go** and make disciples of all nations, teaching them, etc." However, in Greek the first word is not an imperative. It is a participle. The passage should be translated, "As you walk through life in this world..." The message does not have to do with "sending" missionaries to distant places because we ourselves cannot go. Jesus' message is, "As you are going through life in this world, *teach* all those around you, *teach* people of all nations..." All of life is to be a teaching-about-Jesus, showing-Jesus experience—non stop! It follows that those who wish to teach about Jesus need to

be *taught* (not just preached at) about the REAL JESUS and inspired to *show* His servant lifestyle.

C.S. Lewis wrote, “There is no neutral ground in the universe. Every square inch is claimed by God and counterclaimed by Satan.” How deadly true—and a profound reason second to none for thinking through what we believe about the Person and work of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit!

## **May 25, Pentecost 2: Matthew 6:24-34**

Throughout this section, Jesus does not deny the reality of human needs. He merely forbids making them the object of anxious care and becoming their slave.

V. 24: The NRSV uses the word “wealth” rather than “mammon” (RSV, NAB). “Mammon” helps people better understand wealth as an evil master.

Worth pondering are the words of the first century Roman satirist, Juvenal, who wrote, "Luxury is more ruthless than war." Also John Calvin's comment, "The human mind is an idol factory." We are neither deserving nor special. God has not *blessed* us (as the world understands that term) but *endowed* us. We are not here to live *comfortably*, but *usefully*—to use whatever God provides by serving others without limit in their every need, whoever or wherever they may be. Needs abound. We live in a world in which a small percentage of people receive half the income, and the vast majority are constantly hungry, live in shanty-towns, have little or no access to health-care, and have had little or no education.

The practice of tithing is based on Old Testament principles; see Malachi 3:8-10. It can lead to confusion in the Christian mind regarding what constitutes discipleship. For example, let's say Mr. A earns \$20,000 per year and gives \$2,000. He has \$18,000 left. Mr. B earns \$100,000, gives \$10,000, and has \$90,000 left over. Does Mr. A need \$90,000 per year? If the response is that as we earn more, we have every right to increase our standard of living, then we should note the example of John Wesley, the father of Methodism.

Wesley became a Christian while teaching at Oxford University in England. His salary was 30 pounds per year. He lived on 28 and gave two. When his salary was increased to 50 pounds per year, he lived on 28 and gave 22. When his salary was increased to 100 pounds per year, he lived on 28 and gave 72. It is said that when Wesley died, his estate consisted of one silver spoon! Wesley taught his followers that they should make as much as possible, save as much as possible, and give as much as possible. The "Wesley Way" is worthy of much thought. After all, money is merely stored service, "stored self," that facilitates service to others by proxy.

V 25: Jesus assures us that His Father knows our needs and will provide them. If God has provided us with such amazing things as a body and life, He will provide us also with what *He* sees as needs—but note, not what *the world* defines as needs. The world says, “Make what you can—can what you make—and sit on the lid. If you do that, you will be in a position to buy what you do not need to impress people who do not care.” *Or*: “You will be in a position to give people what they already have too much of—and do not know where to store!”

Vv. 26-30: In these verses, Jesus points out, beautifully and clearly, that if His Father sees fit to provide for the needs of such seemingly lesser things as birds and flowers, will He not also provide for the needs of His sons and daughters? Unfortunately, there are those who profess faith in Jesus, but whose trust is not as deep as it should be.

Vv. 31-33: Here, Jesus points out that the Gentiles worry about what they to eat, drink, and wear simply because they do not know His Father. God's son and daughters, and Jesus' brothers and sisters, are to focus on learning to know and do the will of their Father, the things of the Kingdom of God—and leave it to God to provide their needs. Serve passionately! Trust totally! Seek the smile of God, not the applause of those around you!

V. 34: Today, focus on the doing the “rights” of today. Doing that will relieve you of the burden of worrying about the “mights” of tomorrow!

---

---

Worth pondering....

The "Great American (or Australian or Western World) Dream" is proving to be a "great nightmare" in many frightening ways. Simply put, we are not here to accumulate *riches* (and then be forced to create a prison state to protect it all), but to seek after *righteousness*.

God commands us to put Him *only*, not *first*, Matthew 4:10. Compare Matthew 6:33 with Luke 12:31 where the word *first* is omitted. To put God *first* is to operate with *priorities*. To put God *only* is to operate with *options*. Luther reminds us that each person is like a horse with a saddle, in which either Jesus or Satan holds the reins. Christianity is not the most important part of life; Jesus calls us to *full-time*, not *part-time*, discipleship.

There is no secular realm. There is one world which God made and owns. We use life and creation either according to God's will, or according to the will of “the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh” (Martin Luther). We might edit the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed so that it reads, "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints— *and I believe in the existence of the unholy satanic spirit, and the unholy demonic realm....*" The demonic realm is every person, power, pressure, institution, or influence that seeks to sidetrack us from living to serve God and others into living merely to serve ourselves.

The "good news" of the New Testament is that *the Messianic Age has broken in*—with all that implies; see Isaiah 60; 61:1-7; Mark 1:1; John 20:30,31. We must beware of merely telling people why they should not do "good works" for the *wrong reason*, while failing to tell them what good works they should be doing for the *right reason*. Preaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments is merely a means to an end—an end that the Anglican Catechism sums up pointedly: "The mission of the church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ." Above the entrance doors of our churches we need a sign saying, "Servants' Entrance." Above the exit doors we need another sign saying, "Mission Field Ahead."

True, local congregations need to remain financially viable. However, some tend to become slaves to their own facility. They provide amenities and programs that everyone will enjoy, but do not weep for a heartbreaking world about which they know so little.

Every Christian is called to be a priest of God. Whatever we touch has a sacred quality to it, for God made and owns all things. Hence, as priests of God, we constantly touch and handle sacred things. As a priest is one who goes to God for others and to others for God, so we, in our daily work, devote life to glorifying God by serving others. Those who preach sermons from pulpits are not doing something more sacred than those who paints houses or grow corn. Although there are differences in *function*, there are no degrees of *holiness* in the things God's people do. Luther wrote that, in God's sight, the works of

monks and priests are in no way superior to the works of a farmer laboring in the fields, or a woman scrubbing floors in her home. The view that scrubbing floors held as much dignity as occupying a pulpit radically changed the work ethic of Luther's day, and has made an impact on the world ever since. Furthermore, clergy are not so much *professionals* as those called by God to make a *profession* and to make it with a *passion*—in all that they think, say, and do. If anything, their task is to equip God's priests for their work throughout creation, and to be protesters against the prevailing sin and corruption within society-at-large. Churches that have installed a number of professional workers can give the impression that those workers can assume full responsibility for the work of the church, especially for the Christian nurture of the congregation's children and youth. This is a disastrous attitude to adopt. Parents are God's faith-nurturers and youth-workers!

For Christians, life itself is to be a servant event! We need to insert into the Second Article of the Creed, "...born of the Virgin Mary, *walked the way of a Servant without limit*, suffered....the third day He rose again from the dead, *He has not withdrawn but transformed His presence, makes Himself available in many distressing disguises that people might serve Him, and will at the Last Day finally reappear*, to judge the living and the dead *with reference to whether or not they have responded to His forgiving mercy by serving Him in those distressing disguises.*"

There is no such thing as private Christianity. We are called to *personal* faith, but never to *private* faith. It might be argued that the emphasis on individualism in many western nations is destroying the fabric of its society. Christians are not free to do their *own thing*, but free (from the guilt, power, and punishment of sin) to do *God's thing* by serving others. *Free grace* calls us to *costly discipleship*. In determining whether or not a certain action or lifestyle is God-pleasing, a person must ask: "If everyone were to do what I want to do, or pursue the life-style that I plan to pursue, what would happen to the human race?" If the answer is that it would destroy the human race, then no person has a right before God to do that deed or pursue that lifestyle.

Food for thought! May your people enjoy the "meals"! And may they shape their spiritual life!

*Harry Wendt*

*President, Crossways International*

*7930 Computer Ave*

*Minneapolis, MN 55438*

1.800.257.7308

[www.crossways.org](http://www.crossways.org)