

“The mutual conversation of the brethren”

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

A Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

Every week it's getting brighter. The light is increasing. The coming of the light is what this season of Epiphany is all about. As it says in John 1:5: "The light came into the world and the darkness does not overcome it."

In this season we ask: Where is the true light and how do we sort it out?

We find the true light, the light of Christ, in the church. There is some kind of authority in the church and the way it works. Some churches have bishops, popes, and councils. Those persons because they have been ordained, have a particular grace; they are said to the Holy Spirit in a special way so that what they decide what is this light.

The illusion we fall under is that the church settles things by voting, whether it's by 51% or by two-thirds of whatever assembly or council is meeting.

People have the idea that is what an ecumenical council is about. But it's not true.

All of the councils, until the Second Vatican Council in 1962, voted unanimously on whatever question they were voting on because they based this on that place in Acts 15:28, that so-called "first council," where it says: "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and us." It was understood that votes in the church had to be unanimous. At Vatican 1, before the vote on papal infallibility was taken, it was evident that the motion would pass, so bishops who disagreed with that motion left before the vote was taken. In this way the final vote for papal infallibility was unanimous.

Among us today, we fall into the trap of thinking that if 51% percent of us vote on a religious question, then that settles it. For example, if an assembly votes to change God's name from Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer, then that's it. But voting really doesn't settle anything.

A second way of deciding what is authoritative is to say the Bible is God's Word, plain, simple, and self-evident, so we follow that.

But when you stop to think about that, you realize that those groups and churches who say that don't agree on much of anything. Thus, saying the Bible is simple and plain doesn't settle anything.

Third, what is it that we Lutherans do, or should do?

For us the rediscovery of the apostle Paul at the time of the Reformation is basic.

You recall that Luther said his breakthrough (about 1514) was when he read in Romans 1:16-17: "[T]he gospel is the power of God unto salvation." The Gospel is salvation.

So what is the Gospel? Paul writes in 2 Cor 4:6: “For it is the God who said, ‘Let the light shine out of the darkness,’ who has shown in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

You recall in Genesis 1:1 God said: “Let there be light.” This light, which is the light of salvation in the Gospel, is Jesus Christ.

It’s striking to see what Luther wrote about this. In 1537 he was so sick that although he had written an important document, the Smalcald Articles, he wasn’t well enough to sign them. This document is in our Lutheran Confessions, and included in what pastors swear to uphold when they are ordained in the Lutheran tradition.

Luther writes in Smalcald 3:4 that the Gospel comes in five ways: First, the Gospel is the proclaiming of the Word in preaching; second, Baptism; and third, the Lord’s Supper; and fourth, the proclamation of forgiveness [the power of the keys]; and number five: the mutual conversation and consolation of the faithful.

[The Kolb/Wengert edition of the *Book of Concord* collapses four and five, thus losing sight of number five: The distinctive Lutheran way of using the plumbline of the Gospel (Smalcald 2.1.5) to keep the church on message. Tappert is to be preferred.]

You hear about the first four items all the time, but what about that fifth one? The mutual conversation and consolation of the faithful.

This is how Lutherans make decisions. We don’t have a pope. Rather, our way of sorting truth from error is to talk together and discuss together, to ask among ourselves: What is the Gospel?

When Luther said: “The cross alone is our theology,” he was simply echoing Paul in 1 Corinthians 2:2: “We resolve to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.”

Like 1 Corinthians 2:2, 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 is another creed or credo by Paul, reminding the Corinthians what is Gospel—God in Christ died and rose for you and me.

We are alert to the fact there are all kinds of people who say: “Of course we affirm this!! **But** more is required. It should be the gospel **plus** good works, or **plus** the special priesthood, or **plus** a conversion experience, or **plus** whatever someone says has to be required.

But this is to pull the rug from under the Gospel, and it’s what we have to keep clear among ourselves.

Who has the Gospel? We tend to think it’s the clergy for good reasons. Yet we then fall into the trap of thinking that whatever the Pastor says is somehow “the Truth.”

Setting other traditions aside for the moment and looking only at our own: What’s the difference between me and you? Do I glow in the dark? People kind of think there is something to that.

What does the preacher do? What is the preacher about? What makes the difference? The only difference is that the preacher is called upon to proclaim the Gospel. And that makes all the difference, because the Gospel itself is the power of God unto salvation (Romans 1:16).

That means several things that it is not. First, it is not the task of the preacher to convince and persuade the congregation. Of course, the preacher to dissuade you or lead you away from the Gospel, but Paul takes this up in 1 Corinthians 1. He says: "Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and **not with eloquent words**, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power" (1 Corinthians 1:17).

Second, the pastor is also not to amuse and entertain. That doesn't mean it's good to be boring, but it saying that sermons are not for entertainment. It's very questionable to tell too many stories or jokes. That gets in the way.

Third, the pastor is also not to be pastoral. The pastor is not there to be a therapist or to solve psychological questions or problems. The pulpit is not a place for family counseling.

Fourth, the pastor is not to be "the example." To be sure, if the pastor is drunk in the pulpit, that detracts from the preaching of the gospel. If the pastor is known to be a kleptomaniac, stealing things, that detracts from proclaiming the gospel. The pastor is not to behave or look in ways that detract from the Gospel.

We forget that sin is basically spiritual pride. Pastors probably have more of that than anybody. It's not that the pastor is supposed to be sinless. We are all caught in sin. The pastor's job is to proclaim the Gospel and not undermine or subvert it.

Again Paul, writing in I Corinthians 9:16, says: "Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel!" "Woe" meaning "judgment," not a general expression. Judgment is upon me.

Or when he is writing to the Galatians in 1:6-7: There is only one gospel, there is "not another gospel . . . and there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ."

People thinks that the pastor gets up and gives his opinion. Other pastors have other opinions. I can go down the street and get another opinion at a different church.

But as Paul writes in Galatians 1:8: "But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a Gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed [damned]."

Paul's not warning them only about other preachers. He says: "Even if I . . . or an angel from heaven" (!)

Again, the question, the only question, is: What is the Gospel? And the Gospel is that God saved us on the cross and resurrection through Jesus Christ.

Of course, finally it doesn't depend on the preacher.

If you recall the famous story in Numbers 22-24 about Balaam. He was a prophet. He was told to go preach condemnation to the neighboring king. He didn't want to go. He wanted to go the other way. He was riding this donkey, and the donkey could see the angel of the Lord was blocking the way. Balaam hit the donkey and the donkey turned on him and said: "I'm always doing the right thing. You know that. Why are you doing this to me?" Luther writes: "If the Lord could use Balaam's donkey, he can even use me." The Lord is doing it.

Then what is the task?

Finally, we get down to what it's about. Both for the congregation and for the preacher there is only one question: Is "this" (what is preached and taught) the Gospel?

There's a famous story about great preacher in Berlin named Claus Harms back in about 1830. He was pastor in a church in which the pulpit was elevated high above the congregation. He tells the story on himself of how one Sunday morning when he wasn't as prepared as he wished to be about his sermon, he was climbing the stairs to the elevated pulpit and said to himself: "The Lord will tell me what to say." And the voice of the Spirit came to him and said: "Claus, you've been lazy."

So what is it then?

The pastor is called upon to work on this question.

And the congregation is also called to work on this question.

The only question is: Is this the Gospel? That means, of course, salvation, that we are saved, you and I, forever through the cross and resurrection. Amen.