

TWENTY-THIRD EVENING LECTURE.

(March 20, 1885.)

Among the various functions and official acts of a servant of the Church the most important of all, my friends, is preaching. Since there is no substitute for preaching, a minister who accomplishes little or nothing by preaching will accomplish little or nothing by anything else that he may do.

Here is where the papists differ with us. They call their ministers priests and assert that the most important of all functions of a priest is to baptize, hear confession and pronounce absolution, administer Communion, and, above all, to offer to God the sacrifice of the Mass. Setting aside the sacrifice of the Mass, which is the greatest abomination that has ever been practised in the Christian Church, we are forced to say that all baptizing, pronouncing absolution and administering of Communion is useless if these matters have not been previously made the subjects of preaching to the people; for they are not the works of men, but of God Himself, who has connected with them a promise to be apprehended by faith. Accordingly, all these acts do not profit, but are rather harmful, in the absence of faith. If these operations of God are to be of any use, it is absolutely necessary that a thorough instruction concerning them be first given from the Word of God by preaching.

When Christ was about to return to the glory which He had with the Father before the foundation of the world, He gave His disciples, together with their commission, this instruction: "Go ye into all the world and *preach* the Gospel to every creature," or as Matthew puts it: "Go ye and *teach* all nations." Then He adds: "baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost." Not satisfied with having said this, He concluded His instruction with these words: "Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you." Behold here the Alpha and Omega of the apostolic office, or the ministry of the Church: it is preaching and teaching.

This function, however, is not only the most important, but also the most difficult function assigned to a minister of the Church. There are ministers who imagine that preaching is easy to them, and the longer they are in the ministry, the easier preaching becomes to them; for they reason that, if they are only careful to preach nothing but the pure Word of God, without any admix ure of heresy, that must be sufficient. Such preachers are laboring under a great, an

awful, a very pernicious error. A mere pious talk without aim and logical order is not real preaching. Genuine preaching is inspired only by the Holy Ghost through His Word. Accordingly, a real sermon is produced only after all the spiritual and intellectual energy of a truly believing preacher has been exerted to the utmost, after fervent prayer, after all earthly cares have been chased from the mind, and after the preacher has been freed from all vain desires. That is a difficult task.

Administering Baptism properly is easy; anybody can do it. Likewise, pronouncing absolution correctly is quite easy; even a boy can do it. Administering Holy Communion is also very easy; any intelligent Christian can do it. But to preach properly is difficult. For this reason a student of theology ought to make proper preaching his highest aim. For if he is unable to preach, he does not belong in the ministry. In our orthodox Church a servant of God is a minister of Jesus Christ, and his worth does not lie in a certain undefined quality that has been imparted to him at his ordination or consecration, in something that other people have not and which, for that reason, makes him such a sacrosanct and precious person. By no means; the worth of a true minister of the Church lies exclusively in his ability to preach properly. If he has not this ability, the pulpit is not the place for him; for the pulpit is for preaching. Preaching is the central element of every divine service.

What is to be effected by preaching? Bear in mind that the preacher is to arouse secure souls from their sleep in sin; next, to lead those who have been aroused to faith; next, to give believers assurance of their state of grace and salvation; next, to lead those who have become assured of this to sanctification of their lives; and lastly, to confirm the sanctified and to keep them in their holy and blessed state unto the end. What a task!

A preeminent point that we must not forget is this: To achieve this task, it is especially necessary rightly to divide the truth, as the apostle says, or properly to divide the Law and the Gospel from each other. When a person does not understand how to do this and always mingles either doctrine into the other, his preaching is utterly futile, in vain. More than this, a preacher of this kind does harm and leads the souls of men astray; he leads them to a false faith, a false hope, a false contrition, makes them mere hypocrites, and frequently hurls them into despair. To divide Law and Gospel properly is a very, very difficult task. As Luther says, all preachers cannot but remain mere apprentices

in this art until death. Nevertheless, a young theologian must be able to recite at least the first lesson in this curriculum. He must know the goal that he is to reach, and he must have made a start in reaching the goal.

In our previous evening lectures we learned something about the difficulty of dividing Law and Gospel. Let us increase the conviction which we have already attained by considering another instance of the commingling of these two doctrines.

Thesis XII.

In the eighth place, the Word of God is not rightly divided when the preacher represents contrition alongside of faith as a cause of the forgiveness of sins.

There is no question but that contrition is necessary if a person wishes to obtain forgiveness of his sins. At His first public exercise of the preaching function our Lord cried: "Repent and believe the Gospel." He names repentance first. Whenever this term is placed in opposition to faith, it signifies nothing else than contrition. When Christ gathered the holy apostles about Him for the last time, at the moment when He was about to ascend to heaven and to withdraw His visible presence from the Church, He said to them: "Thus it is written, and thus it behooved Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day; and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name." Luke 24, 46–47. Why is repentance required as well as faith? Our Lord gives the reason in these words: "They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick. ... I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance." Matt. 9, 12–13. With these words the Lord testifies that the reason why contrition is absolutely necessary is that without it no one is fit to be made a believer. He is surfeited and spurns the invitation to the heavenly marriage feast. As far back as Solomon we find this proverb: "The full soul loatheth an honeycomb." Prov. 27, 7. Where there is no spiritual hunger and thirst, the Lord Jesus is not received. As long as a person has not been reduced to the state of a poor, lost, and condemned sinner, he has no serious interest in the Savior of sinners.

However, while bearing this fact in mind, you must not forget that contrition is not a cause of the forgiveness of sins. Contrition is not necessary on account of the forgiveness of sin, but on account of faith, which apprehends the forgiveness of sin. Here are the reasons why we say that the doctrine that contrition is a cause of the forgiveness of sins is a mingling of Law and Gospel: —

1. Contrition is an effect solely of the Law. To regard contrition as a cause of the forgiveness of sins is equivalent to turning the Law into a message of grace and the Gospel into Law perversion which overthrows the entire Christian religion.

2. Contrition is not even a good work. For the contrition which precedes faith is nothing but suffering on the part of man. It consists of anguish, pain, torment, a feeling of being crushed; all of which God has wrought in man with the hammer of the Law. It is not an anguish which a person has produced in himself, for he would gladly be rid of it, but cannot, because God has come down on him with the Law, and he sees no way of escape from the ordeal. If a person sits down to meditate with a view to producing contrition in himself, he will never gain his object that way. He cannot produce contrition. Those who think they can are miserable hypocrites. They seek to persuade themselves that they have contrition, but it is not so. Genuine repentance is produced by God only when the Law is preached in all sternness and man does not wilfully resist its influence.

It is not likely that one who calls himself a Lutheran preacher will ever say outright that contrition is a cause of the forgiveness of sins. Only papists will say that, never a Protestant preacher who has some conception of the pure doctrine. Still it not infrequently happens that preachers who claim to be true Lutherans mingle Law and Gospel by the way in which they describe contrition. In two ways they may speak of contrition as if it were a cause of the forgiveness of sins: either by saying too little or by saying too much about contrition.

Owing to their lack of experience many preachers are afraid they might lead people to despair. They do preach, as they should, that contrition must precede faith, but they fear that, unless they add some saving clause to that statement, one or the other member of their congregation may become despondent. For that reason they qualify their statement by saying that the pain one feels in contrition need not be very great, and that a person will be received by God if he only desires to be contrite. A comforting qualification of this kind really presents contrition as the cause of the forgiveness of sins, which is a false comfort. What the preacher ought to say is this: "Listen! When you have come to the point where you are hungering and thirsting for the grace of God, you have the contrition which you need. God does not require contrition as a means by which you are to atone for your sins, but only to the

end that you may be roused from your security and ask, ‘What must I do to be saved?’ “

Accordingly, Luther says that, when he had for the first time grasped the meaning of the term *repentance* (*poenitentia*), no word seemed sweeter to him than that, because he perceived that its meaning was not that he must do penance for his sins, but simply that he must be alarmed on account of his sins and desire the mercy of God. The term *repentance* was to him the very Gospel, because he knew that the moment he had been brought by God to the point where he acknowledged himself to be a poor and lost sinner, he was a proper subject for the attention of Jesus and could go to Him with the assurance that He would receive him as he was, with all his sins and anguish and misery.

A person must not inquire whether his contrition is sufficient for admitting him to Jesus. His very question about his fitness shows that he may come to Jesus. If one has the desire to come to Jesus, he has true contrition even if he does not feel it. It is the same as when a person begins to believe. I know from my personal experience that a person can have contrition without being aware of it. For years I had been genuinely contrite and on the brink of despair. I did not have the sweet consciousness that my heart was dissolved in sorrow for having grievously offended my Father in heaven, but I had the lively feeling that I was a lost sinner. At that time I applied to a person who was more experienced in these matters than I was, and in a few minutes he made me see the light. The statement, then, that God is satisfied with a person’s mere desire to have contrition is evidence of a mingling of Law and Gospel; for such a statement represents contrition as a merit on account of which God is gracious to a sinner and forgives him his sins.

The same mistake is made when a pastor is readily satisfied with a slight sign of contrition in his parishioners. In wicked men, who have lived a long time in sin and shame, the conscience may suddenly become aroused and charge them, for instance, with having perjured themselves. They are seized with palpitating fear because of the consequences. Or their conscience may reprove them with having soiled their hands with the blood of murder. However, these people are not alarmed because they regard themselves as poor sinners, but it is one particular sin that frightens them. Outside of that they imagine they are good at heart. I witnessed an instance of this kind in Germany. A wicked person had committed perjury. He would not admit it, but began to be agitated every time some one spoke to him about it. During a call

which I made on him he had to take hold of the table to keep down his trembling, but he could not be induced to confess his sin. The result was that I could not preach the Gospel to him. There are many abandoned villains of this kind, who have already had their sentence of doom served on them. They may tell the pastor that they admit being at fault in this, that, or the other thing in which they slipped unavoidably, but they appeal to the fact that they are good at heart. If a pastor is satisfied with a partial contrition of this sort, he treats contrition as a merit, while it is nothing else than the bursting open of an ulcer. When a healing salve is spread on an open wound that still contains pus, the pus will eat deeper into the person, and the wound will not heal. The healing balm in spiritual therapy is the Gospel.

Others, again, probably say to their hearers that contrition is necessary, as Scripture testifies on every page, and that their own reason must tell them that God cannot forgive their sins which they treat so lightly. Then they proceed to describe to them what must be the quality of their contrition from texts like Ps. 38, 6–8: “I am troubled; I am bowed down greatly; I go mourning all the day long. For my loins are filled with a loathsome disease, and there is no soundness in my flesh. I am feeble and sore broken; I have roared by reason of the disquietness of my heart”; or Ps. 6, 7–8: “I am weary with groaning; all the night make I my bed to swim; I water my couch with my tears. Mine eye is consumed with grief; it waxeth old because of all mine enemies.” Legalistic pastors will ask their client whether he can say all these things concerning himself; whether he has ever gone bowed down and mourning for a whole day; whether there has been a time when his loins were dried up; whether he can say that there was no sound part in his whole body; whether he has wailed because of the unrest in his heart; whether he has watered his couch with his tears all night long; whether his friends have noticed that he looked as if he had grown fourteen years older in two weeks; etc. Unless he can point to these criteria of what they regard as genuine contrition, they tell him not to imagine that he has been truly contrite.

This method is utterly wrong. True, the texts cited describe David’s repentance. But where is there a text that prescribes the same *degree* of contrition for every one? There is no such text; on the contrary, we find that when the hearts of Peter’s hearers on the first Pentecost were pricked and they were moved to cry, “What shall we do?” the mercy of God was preached to them immediately. David’s own case serves as an illustration. He had lived in

impenitence for an entire year when Nathan came to hold his awful sin up to him. With a contrite heart David cried: "I have sinned against the Lord." That was all. The prophet Nathan noticed at once that David had been struck down and was crushed. Accordingly, he said to him: "The Lord also hath put away thy sin." 2 Sam. 12, 13. The same thing we read about the jailer at Philippi. Only a few minutes before he had been so terribly agitated that he was about to take his own life. When he fell down before the apostles and cried, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved" he was not told that he must produce contrition in himself, and that, a profound, a serious one; he was not reminded of the penitential acts of David, but he was promptly told: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved and thy house." The apostles saw plainly that the man was crushed and craved mercy, and they regarded that as sufficient. When a person has been made to hunger and thirst for mercy, contrition has done its full work in him.

The Pietists claim that faith must be preceded by a long time of penitence; yea, they have warned people not to believe too soon, telling them that they must allow the Holy Spirit to work them over thoroughly. A person, they said, cannot be converted in two weeks; sometimes it takes many months and years during which God prepares him for conversion. That is an awful doctrine. These preachers do not consider what a tremendous responsibility they assume when they warn a person against believing prematurely. What will become of such a one if he dies before he is ready to believe? I know the awful effect of this teaching from experience. A Pietistic candidate of theology had instructed me in the manner which I have described. I did everything to become truly penitent and finally fell into despair. When I came to him to tell him my condition, he said: "Now it is time for you to believe." But I did not credit his advice; I thought that he was deceiving me because his last direction was out of keeping with the marks of penitence which he had described to me previously. Accordingly, I said to him: "If you knew my condition, you would not comfort me. What I want is rules for my further conduct." He gave me them too; but it was useless.

If we may assume, in all reasonableness, that a person has been pried loose from his self-righteousness and wants to be saved by grace alone, we should for God's sake confidently preach the Gospel to him. It will not be too soon. A person cannot possibly come to Jesus too soon. The trouble is that people

frequently do not really go to Jesus; they call themselves poor sinners, but are not; they want to bring before God some merit of their own. It is sheer hypocrisy when they say they are going to Jesus; for as a matter of fact they do not come to Him as poor beggars with all their sins. A person whom God has granted grace to see himself crushed and broken, without any comfort anywhere, and looking about him anxiously for consolation, such a one is truly contrite. He must not be warned against going to Jesus, but to him the Gospel must be preached. He must be told not only that he may, but that he should boldly come to Jesus and not imagine that he is coming too soon. If such a person were to die after I had told him that he cannot yet come to Jesus, God would demand the soul of that sinner from me.

One of the principal reasons why many at this point mingle Law and Gospel is that they fail to distinguish the daily repentance of Christians from the repentance which precedes faith. Daily repentance is described in Ps. 51. David calls it a sacrifice which he brings before God and with which God is pleased. He does not speak of repentance which precedes faith, but of that which follows it. The great majority of sincere Christians who have the pure doctrine have a keener experience of repentance after faith than of repentance prior to faith. For, having good preachers, they have been led to Christ in no roundabout way. While they are with Christ, their former self-righteousness may make its appearance again, spite of the fact that it has been shattered for them many a time. God must smite these poor Christians again and again to keep them humble. David's example may serve to illustrate this point. He had come to faith in a moment, but what misery did he have to pass through later! A prophet had spoken to him the word of the Lord, but to his dying day his heart was burdened with anguish, distress, and misery. God had ceased to prosper his undertakings; he met with one misfortune after the other, until God released him by death. But all that time David had contrition together with faith. That is, indeed, a sacrifice with which God is pleased. Contrition of this kind is not a mere effect of the Law, produced by the Law alone, but it is at the same time an operation of the Gospel. By the Gospel the love of God enters a person's heart, and when contrition proceeds from love of God, it is indeed a truly sweet sorrow, acceptable to God. God is pleased with it; for we cannot accord Him greater honor than by casting ourselves in the dust before Him and

confessing: “Thou art righteous, Oh Lord, but I am a poor sinner. Have mercy upon me for the sake of Jesus Christ.”

Let me submit a testimony from the *Smalcald Articles*, Part III, Art. III (Mueller, pp. 312–314; *Trigl. Conc.*, pp. 479–488). It is a precious passage, one of the gems in our Confessions. For the true doctrine of contrition is not found in any of the sects, but only in our Lutheran Church, and it is laid down in this passage. Luther, you know, wrote the Smalcald Articles himself; we bless him even in his grave for having bequeathed to us this heritage. He says:

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“This office [of the Law] the New Testament retains and urges, as St. Paul, Rom. 1, 18, does, saying: ‘The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men’; again, 3, 19: ‘All the world is guilty before God. No man is righteous before Him.’ And Christ says, John 16, 8: ‘The Holy Ghost will reprove the world of sin.’

“This, then, is the thunderbolt of God by which He hurls to the ground both manifest sinners and false saints and suffers no one to be in the right, but drives them all together to terror and despair. This is the hammer, as Jeremiah says, 23, 29: ‘Is not My Word like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces?’ This is not *activa contritio* or manufactured repentance, but *passiva contritio*, true sorrow of heart, suffering and sensation of death” [Manufactured repentance is nothing else than acting as though you were penitent.]

“This, then, is what it means to begin true repentance; and here man must hear such a sentence as this: You are all of no account, whether you be manifest sinners or saints (in your own opinion); you all must become different and do otherwise than you are now doing, no matter whether you are as great, wise, powerful, and holy as you may. Here no one is godly, etc.”

“But to this office the New Testament immediately adds the consolatory promise of grace through the Gospel, which must be believed, as Christ declares, Mark 1, 15: ‘Repent ye and believe the Gospel’; *i.e.*, become different and do otherwise and believe My promise. And John, preceding Him, is called a preacher of repentance, however, for the remission of sins; *i.e.*, John was to accuse and convict them of being sinners that they might know what they were before God and might acknowledge that they were lost men and might thus be prepared for the Lord to receive grace and to expect and accept

from Him the remission of sins. Thus also Christ Himself says, Luke 24, 47: 'Repentance and remission of sins must be preached in My name among all nations.'

"But whenever the Law alone, without the Gospel's being added, exercises this its office, there is nothing else than death and hell, and man must despair, like Saul and Judas; as St. Paul, Rom. 7, 10, says: 'Through sin the Law killeth.' On the other hand, the Gospel brings consolation and remission, not only in one way, but through the Word and Sacraments, and the like, as we shall hear afterward, in order that there is thus with the Lord plenteous redemption, as Ps. 130, 7 says, against the dreadful captivity of sin.

"However, we must now contrast the false repentance of the Sophists with true repentance in order that both may be the better understood.

"It was impossible that they should teach correctly concerning repentance, since they did not know the real sins. For, as has been shown above, they do not believe aright concerning original sin, but say that the natural powers of man have remained unimpaired and incorrupt; that reason can teach aright and the will can in accordance therewith do aright; that God certainly bestows His grace when a man does as much as is in him, according to his free will.

"It had to follow thence that they did penance only for actual sins, such as wicked thoughts to which a person yields (for according to them wicked emotions, lust, and improper dispositions are not sins), and for wicked words and wicked deeds, which free will could readily have omitted.

"And of such repentance they fix three parts: contrition, confession, and satisfaction, with this magnificent consolation and promise added: If man truly repent, confess, render satisfaction, he thereby would have merited forgiveness and paid for his sins before God. Thus in repentance they instructed men to repose confidence in their own works. Hence the expression originated, which was employed in the pulpit when public absolution was announced to the people: 'Prolong, O God, my life, until I shall make satisfaction for my sins and amend my life.'

"There was here no mention of Christ nor faith; but men hoped by their own works to overcome and blot out sins before God. And with this intention we became priests and monks, that we might array ourselves against sin.

"As to contrition, this is the way it was done: Since no one could remember all his sins (especially as committed through an entire year), they inserted this

provision, namely, that if an sin should be remembered late, this also must be repented of and confessed, etc.”

Some went to Communion only once a year. They found out that they could not enumerate every sin which they had committed every day of the year. The priest would tell them that they must confess their unconfessed sins whenever they remembered them, if his absolution was to be of benefit to them.

“Meanwhile they were commended to the grace of God.”

This meant that their absolution actually was not yet in force; it would be in force whenever they made up what they were still in arrears regarding their confession. “To be commended to the grace of God” meant, for instance, that , if the person were to die the next day it would not be probable that he had gone to hell, but it could ‘not be stated definitely whether he had gone to bell or into purgatory.

“Moreover, since no one could know how great the contrition ought to be in order to be sufficient before God, they gave this consolation: He who could not have contrition, at least ought to have attrition, which I might call half a contrition or the beginning Of contrition; for they have themselves understood neither of these terms, nor do they understand them now, as little as I. Such attrition was reckoned as contrition when a person came to confession.”

Luther means to say: What they meant by attrition I do not know; but with them it was a sufficient contrition.

“And when it happened that any one said that he could not have contrition nor lament his sins (as might have occurred in illicit love or the desire for revenge, etc.), they asked whether he did not wish or desire to have contrition. When one would reply, Yes (for who, save the devil himself, would say no to such a question?) , they accepted this as contrition and forgave him his sins on account of this good work of his. Here they cited the example of St. Bernard, etc.”

Ask a Roman Catholic priest or any true Catholic, and if he is sincere, he will admit that this practise still prevails in the Roman Church, that persons admit in the confessional they would like to have contrition, but when they think of their fornication, they feel they would like to continue that; likewise, they would Id like to inflict harm on their enemy. The papistic religion surely is a religion to make one shudder when its true inwardness is understood.

“Here we see how blind reason, in matters pertaining to God, gropes about and, according to its own imagination, seeks consolation in its own works and cannot think of Christ and faith. But if it be viewed in the light, this contrition is a manufactured and fictitious thought, derived from man’s own powers, without faith and without knowledge of Christ. And in it the poor sinner, when he reflected upon his own lust and desire for revenge, would sometimes have laughed rather than wept, except such as either had been truly struck by the Law or had been vainly vexed by the devil with a sorrowful spirit. Otherwise such contrition was certainly mere hypocrisy and did not mortify the lust for sins; for they had to grieve, while they would rather have continued to sin, if it had been free to them.”

The decrees of the Council of Trent prove that Luther has correctly depicted the Papacy. When he wrote these words, he undoubtedly remembered his own life among the papists. When engaged in his penitential exercises, he certainly did not feel like laughing. He took it so seriously, and he was filled with dread to such an extent that he sometimes swooned away in sheer terror during these penances. You know that at one time he locked himself into his cell for several days in order to do penance. When his convent brethren forced the door open, they found him unconscious, so great had been the anguish of his soul. They roused him with music. That is one reason why Luther esteemed music so highly: he had felt the powerful effect which music has on the minds of men.