

TWENTY-FOURTH EVENING LECTURE.

(April 10, 1885.)

About one hundred twenty years ago Rationalism had become dominant in the so-called Protestant Church of Germany. It was at the time of the deepest ignominy and humiliation that the nation had ever passed through when defection from the Gospel had become complete. The shallowest minds, the most brainless men, without any considerable learning, were regarded as great lights and far ahead of their age. For theologians to achieve some renown, all that was necessary was sufficient boldness, or rather audacity, to declare the mysterious doctrines of Christianity errors of former dark ages, which had been without enlightenment, and to treat the doctrine of God, virtue, and immortality as the real kernel of the Christian religion. During this awful time

matters finally came to such a pass that rationalistic preachers, to counteract the idea that they were superfluous in this world and to prove their usefulness, would treat from their pulpits subjects like these: Intelligent Agriculture; Profitableness of Potato-raising; Treeplanting a Necessity; Importance of Genuine Sanitation; etc. Rationalistic books of sermons in which subjects of this description are treated with grand pathos will show you that I am not slandering the rationalists of that age.

Some rationalists were ashamed of these typical products of the school of Rationalism. In 1772 a book was published which bore the title *Of the Usefulness of the Ministry, Written for the Consolation of My Colleagues*. The author was Joachim Spalding, a writer of some renown in his day. In his book he states that subjects like those that I mentioned are indeed not proper subjects for pulpit efforts. He submits his own opinion, to this effect: If sermons are to be useful, the preacher must never speak of the doctrines of faith first because they only serve to confuse people's minds, but he must present exclusively practical ethical lessons. It is not surprising, then, that in those days many souls whose hearts were agitated by the question, What must I do to be saved? quit our devastated Church and either sought refuge with the sect of the Moravians or even turned to the spurious Church of Rome.

Praise and thanks be to God that those awful times are past, — let us hope forever! After the successful termination of the so-called Wars of Deliverance from that monster Napoleon I, something like the breath of a new spiritual spring passed over Germany. Multitudes experienced a truly marvelous quickening from the deadly sleep in rationalistic unbelief, and among them were not a few ministers. Since then many preachers began to discard the vapid, pagan morality of rationalism and to preach Christ and faith in Him as the only way to salvation hereafter and to true peace of heart in the present life. However, it is an undeniable fact that even well-intentioned preachers are mingling Law and Gospel and thus inflict horrible injury on their hearers. May God, by His grace, preserve you from this danger when you come into your future congregation, with which you are one day to appear before the throne of God to give an account whether you have been a faithful watchman over the souls entrusted to you and have broken to them the Bread of Life, or whether you have given them unwholesome, noxious food, which caused their souls to sicken or even to die. May the study of our thirteenth thesis help in equipping you for your future work!

Thesis XIII.

In the ninth place, the Word of God is not rightly divided when one makes an appeal to believe or at least help towards that end, instead of preaching faith into a person's heart by laying the Gospel promises before him.

This thesis does not score as an error the demand on the part of the pastor, be it ever so urgent, that his hearers believe the Gospel. That demand has been made by all the prophets, all the apostles, yea, by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. When demanding faith, we do not lay down a demand of the Law, but issue the sweetest invitation, practically saying to our hearers: "Come; for all things are now ready." Luke 14, 17. When I invite a halfstarved person to sit down to a well-furnished board and to help himself to anything he likes, I do not expect him to tell me that he will take no orders from me. Even so the demand to believe is to be understood not as an order of the Law, but as an invitation of the Gospel.

The error against which this thesis is directed is this, that man can produce faith in himself. Such a demand would be an order of the Law and turn faith into a work of man. That would be plainly mingling Law and Gospel. A preacher must be able to preach a sermon on faith without ever using the term *faith*. It is not important that he din the word *faith* into the ears of his audience, but it is necessary for him to frame his address so as to arouse in every poor sinner the desire to lay the burden of his sins at the feet of the Lord Jesus Christ and say to Him: "Thou art mine, and I am Thine."

Here is where Luther reveals his true greatness. He rarely appeals to his hearers to believe, but he preaches concerning the work of Christ, salvation by grace, and the riches of God's mercy in Jesus Christ in such a manner that the hearers get the impression that all they have to do is to take what is being offered them and find a resting-place in the lap of divine grace. That is the great act which you must seek to learn — to make your hearers reason that, if what you preach is true, they are blessed men; all their anguish and unrest has been useless; they have been redeemed perfectly, reconciled with God, and are numbered with the saved and those on whom God has made His gracious countenance to shine. The moment a person thinks these thoughts, he attains to faith.

Suppose you were picturing to a horde of Indians the Lord Jesus, telling them that He is the Son of God who came down from heaven to redeem men from their sins by taking the wrath of God upon Himself, overcoming death, devil, and hell in their stead and opening heaven to all men, and that every man can now be saved by merely accepting what our Lord Jesus Christ has brought to us. Suppose that you were suddenly struck down by the deadly bullet of a hostile Indian lying in ambush. It is possible that, dying, you would leave behind you a small congregation of Indians though you may not even once have pronounced the word *faith* to them. For every one in that audience who did not wantonly and wilfully resist divine grace would have to reason that he, too, has been redeemed.

On the other hand, you may spend a lot of time telling men that they must believe if they wish to be saved, and your hearers may get the impression that something is required of them which they must do. They will begin to worry whether they will be able to do it, and when they have tried to do it, whether it is exactly the thing that is required of them. Thus you may have preached a great deal about faith without delivering a real sermon on faith. Any one who has come to understand that it is up to him to accept what is offered him and actually accepts it, has faith. To be saved by faith means to acquiesce in God's plan of salvation by simply accepting it.

I do not mean to say that you must not preach about faith. Our time particularly lacks a proper understanding of this matter. The best preachers imagine they have accomplished a great deal when they have rammed into their hearers the axiom: "Faith alone saves." But by their preaching they have merely made their hearers sigh: "Oh, that I had faith! Faith must be something very difficult; for I have not obtained it." These unfortunate hearers will go home from church with a sad heart. The word *faith* is echoing in their ears, but gives them no comfort. Even Luther complained that many in his day were preaching about faith without showing their hearers what faith really signifies and how to attain it. A preacher of this sort may labor for years and preach to a dead congregation. That explains why people talk in uncertain strains about their salvation. You can tell that they are driven to and fro with doubts and become awfully frightened and distressed when they are told that they are at death's door. Whose fault is it? The preacher's, because he preached wrong about faith.

To say that faith is required for salvation is not saying that man can produce faith himself. Scripture requires of man everything; every commandment is a demand crying: "Do this, and thou shalt live." Scripture demands that we "purify our hearts." Jas. 4, 8. We are told: "Awake, thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light." Eph. 5, 14. The mere issuing of such demands does not prove that man can comply with them. An old and true maxim runs thus: *A debito ad posse non valet consequentia*. (No valid conclusion can be drawn from an obligation to the ability to meet it.) When a creditor demands payment, that does not prove that the debtor can pay. In ordinary daily life a creditor, knowing his debtor's insolvency, may demand payment of a debt merely because he has observed that the debtor is a shiftless person and, moreover, full of vanity and conceit. The creditor's object in making the demand is to get the debtor to quit his proud demeanor and to humble him. God deals with men the same way. By serving notice on me that I owe Him obedience to all His commandments, God leads me to realize that, even though I put forth my utmost endeavor, I cannot meet my obligations. Having humbled me, He then approaches me with His Gospel. This humbling of the natural heart is what is lacking in modern preaching. When a person says to a preacher: "Oh, but I cannot believe," he is told: "Oh yes, you can; you must only have the earnest desire to believe. You can get rid of your sins; all you need do is to strive against them." That is an abominable way to preach.

Alas; the synergists have put poison in the Gospel, denied the Lord Christ, and made His grace to be of none effect. Let me submit a few statements which reveal the synergism of Melancthon. Modern theologians ought to be interested in these statements. Some who know them declare these very statements the good part in Melancthon's teaching. Orthodox Lutherans, however, decline to accept them.

Leonhard Hutter, the well-known orthodox theologian, wrote a book entitled *Concordia Concors*. It is a history of the Formula of Concord, showing what occasioned the writing of each article of this Confession of our Church. From it we see, among other things, that Melancthon's teaching was the cause why Article II was inserted in the Formula of Concord. As evidence, Hutter cites false statements that are found in Melancthon's writings. I am presenting these statements in order to show that it is not only we Missourians who, with our rigorous minds, are scenting synergism everywhere.

Melanchthon taught: 1. There is, and must be, a reason in men why some are predestinated unto salvation while others are reprobated and damned.”

This statement Hutter pronounces synergistic. Compare with this statement the publications of our opponents in the predestinarian controversy, and you will find that they are saying the same thing as *Melanchthon*, thereby proving that they are crass synergists, — for such *Melanchthon* was. The wrong part in *Melanchthon*’s statement is not the assertion that there must be a cause in man why he is reprobated and damned, but that there must be a cause in some men why they are predestinated unto salvation. There is no such cause in any person. All the saints in heaven will proclaim with heartfelt thanks that they have contributed nothing towards bringing themselves into heaven; that they have not been a cause of their own salvation; that there was sufficient cause in them why they should be in hell, but none why they should be in heaven.

Again, *Melanchthon* says: 2. “Since the promises of grace are universal and there cannot be contradictory wills in God, there must necessarily be some cause in us that accounts for the salvation of some and of the reprobation of others; in other words, there must be in each a different kind of action.”

The different kind of action is not the cause why any person finds himself in heaven. True, grace is universal. The reason why some are reprobated is that they wilfully resist grace. Here reason enters in with the claim that accordingly there must be a cause in the others why they are saved, and this must be because they did not resist grace. But we are at this point confronted with an inscrutable mystery, and any one who is unwilling to acknowledge this mystery is abandoning the Christian religion, the central teaching of which is that God has revealed to man a way of salvation which no man’s reason could have discovered nor is able to comprehend. When this plan of God for our salvation is presented to us, we are forced to exclaim with the Apostle Paul: “Oh the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord, or who hath been His counselor, or who hath first given to Him and it shall be recompensed unto Him again? For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things; to whom be glory forever.” Rom. 11, 33–36.

Again, Melanchthon says: 3. “The cause lies in men why some give their assent to the promises of grace while others do not.”

This is crass synergism; for Melanchthon refers to a real cause, to what is termed a causating or impelling cause (*causa causans*) . How can his assertion stand over against the truth that we are all by nature dead in sins and that we become new creatures in regeneration?

Lastly Melanchthon states: 4. “Three causes concur in a person’s conversion: the Word of God, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father and the Son send to quicken our hearts, and the will of man, which gives assent to the Word of God and does not resist.”

Man’s faith comes under the same ruling as his contrition. I may sit down in a corner and indulge in melancholy thoughts in order to coax contrition out of myself; but I fail. If I am sincere, I am forced to admit my inability. While I imagine that my heart has been softened and I am repenting of my sin, I suddenly feel in me a craving for the very sin of which I have repented. If genuine contrition is to be produced in me, the thunders of the Law must roll over my head, and the lightnings of Sinai must strike my heart. The same holds good with regard to faith — I cannot produce it myself.

Let me submit one more citation, which Hutter has not quoted, but which is cognate to our subject. It is taken from Melanchthon’s *Loci* (Chapters in Theology) of the year 1552. On page 101 Melanchthon writes: “You say you are unable to obey the voice of the Gospel, to listen to the Son of God, and to accept Him as your Mediator?” This question Melanchthon answers: “Of course you can!” An awful answer, this! When a parishioner comes to you complaining of his inability to believe, you must tell him that you are not surprised at his statement; for no man can; he would be a marvel if he could. And you must instruct him to do nothing but listen to the Word of God, and God will give him faith. Furthermore, you may admonish him not to resist divine grace and not to extinguish the sparks which are beginning to glow in his heart. But your telling him-these things does not give him the strength he needs. When the Gospel enters his heart like a blessed water of life from heaven, faith is kindled there. It is at first feeble like a new-born babe, which sees, hears, tastes, moves, has a certain amount of strength, and can eat and drink. Not until this has taken place, may you urge the person to cooperate with divine grace. We do not by any means reject cooperation on the part of

man *after* his regeneration; we rather urge it upon him lest he die again and incur the danger of being lost forever.

Melanchthon continues: “Raise yourself up by means of the Gospel, ask God to help you and to let the Holy Spirit make the consolations of the Gospel effective in you. You must understand that the grace of God proposes to convert us in this manner, viz., that, having been quickened by His promise, we wrestle with ourselves, call upon Him, and fight against our unbelief and other evil inclinations.”

Again, he says: “Free will in man is the ability to prepare oneself for grace” (*facultas se applicandi ad Gratian*). This is the notorious statement which is usually cited to prove that Melanchthon was a genuine synergist. The foregoing awful statements prove it indeed.

Lastly, Melanchthon says: “What I mean is this: man hears the promise, makes an attempt to give his assent to it, and puts sins against his conscience aside.” This is wrong; before a person is able to put aside sins against his conscience, he must be converted.