

THE OPENING SERMON
for the
Fifty-fifth Annual Convention
of the
CONCORDIA LUTHERAN CONFERENCE

Delivered by the Rev. Robert J. Lietz, Conference President

Text: **Acts 2:42**

My dear friends, as we this morning take note of fifty-five years of God's rich grace toward our Conference, we have many reasons to cheerfully declare: "*O give thanks unto the Lord, for **He is good, because His mercy endureth forever***" (Psalm 118:1).

The sermon text for this Service of Worship to our Triune God is Acts 2, verse 42: "*And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and in fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.*"

We should not tire of **hearing** the Law of God and the Gospel of Christ. Furthermore, we should not tire of **properly using** the Law and the Gospel, first of all, with ourselves, and, secondly, with others.

The Law of God is so necessary because it shows us and others its real **demands** and, thereby, always shows us and reminds us of our many sins (Romans 3:20; James 2:10). Does God in His Law really demand that we and all other human beings be perfect, holy, and sinless as He Himself is perfect, holy, and sinless? Yes, most certainly! In Leviticus 19, God said: "*Ye shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy*" (v. 2). Isn't this an unreasonable demand? Of course not! God **never** makes any unreasonable demands!

The Law of God is so necessary because it also shows us and others its announcement of real **damnation and punishment** on all who do not perfectly carry out all of its demands. Does God in His Law really mean what He says in Galatians 3, verse 10: "***Cursed [damned]** is everyone that continueth not in **all things** which are written in the book of the Law to do them*"? Yes, God most certainly stands behind and means every word of His holy Law! But isn't He too harsh when He speaks this way in His Law? Of course not! God is **never** too harsh!

In sharp contrast to the Law, the Gospel is so necessary because it makes **no demands at all** of us or of anyone; it only announces and declares to us that Christ Jesus has, as our Substitute, perfectly done everything which God's Law demanded of us. Jesus Himself confirmed this in Matthew 5, where He said: "*Think not that I am come to destroy the Law or the Prophets; I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill*" (v. 17). Does Jesus really mean what He says in this verse? Yes, without any doubt! What He says is always the truth (John 14:6); He "*cannot lie*" (Titus 1:2).

Furthermore, the Gospel of Christ is so necessary because it declares to us and to all that "*Christ hath redeemed us from the curse [the damnation] of the Law, being made a curse for us, for it is written, Cursed is everyone that hangeth on a tree*" (Galatians 3:13). Is this really true? Did Christ Jesus, by His death, really make full payment to God for all sinners so that they are now

set free and released from the damnation and punishment of God's Law? Yes, most certainly!

When this wonderful Gospel resurrects souls from spiritual death to spiritual and everlasting life (Ephesians 2:1), giving them a second, spiritual birth (I Peter 1:23; John 3:3-6), that Gospel-produced, living faith in Jesus as their Substitute and Savior before God **will show** that it is spiritually alive, just as a baby, at its first birth, will show that it is physically alive by crying, kicking its feet, and moving its hands and head.

In our sermon text, we have

The Visible, Outward Evidences of Invisible, Inward Faith in Jesus

(I) persistently persevering in *teaching*, (II) persistently persevering in *fellowship*, (III) persistently persevering in *the Lord's Supper*, and (IV) persistently persevering in *prayers*.

I.

After Peter, in his Pentecost sermon, accused his audience of crucifying Jesus (2:36), we are informed that “*when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do*” (v. 37)? Peter replied: “*Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call*” (vv. 38-39). And with many other words did Peter “*testify and exhort, saying, Save yourselves from this untoward [wicked, perverse] generation*” (v. 40). Then “*they that gladly received his word were baptized, and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls*” (v. 41).

Right after this we have the words of our sermon text: “*And they continued steadfastly.*” The newly converted Christians, as well as those who were already Christians, kept on sticking with the four things mentioned in our text; they continued to be intently engaged in these things; they did not stop being persistent in their perseverance in the areas mentioned.

First of all, they were persistently persevering in “*teaching.*” Teaching what? Whatever **they** felt like teaching? Whatever was **popular** at that time? What **they** liked? Whatever teaching was convenient for **them** and fit **their** lifestyle? No, they kept on teaching the doctrine of the apostles, the same teaching and doctrine which Jesus had taught the apostles. In short, they shared with others the same teaching, the same doctrine which the “*Master*” (Matthew 23:8), Christ Jesus, had shared with His apostles. And so, from generation to generation, we are to keep on teaching what our God and Savior have taught us in the Holy Scriptures: Parents are persistently to persevere in teaching their children the teachings of Scripture; our congregations are persistently to persevere in teaching and preaching the teachings of Scripture; our Conference, in its joint work, is persistently to persevere in teaching the teachings of God's Word in its periodical, *The Concordia Lutheran*, in its tracts, books, and other printed materials, in its seminary training, in its conventions, in its service to our distant brethren in Russia and Nigeria, and in all other opportunities which the Lord God graciously gives to us. After His resurrection, Jesus summarized what is to be taught when He said that “*repentance and remission of sins should be preached [proclaimed, taught] in His name among all nations*” (Luke 24:47). The Savior wants the Law and the Gospel to be proclaimed according to His Word, sorrow and shame over sin and the marvelous declaration that “*God was in Christ*

reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them, and hath committed unto us the Word of reconciliation” (II Corinthians 5:19). It is this marvelous declaration of what God has done for us and for the whole world of sinners through Christ Jesus which alone moves us, His dear, blood-bought believing sheep, willingly and persistently to persevere in teaching the doctrine of the apostles, the doctrine of our Savior, the doctrine of the Scriptures, even if that teaching produces little or no fruit in our eyes, and even if that teaching causes people to be offended and “turned off;” it is *“the love of Christ [which] constraineth us”* (II Corinthians 5:14) to confess that *“we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard”* (Acts 4:20) in the Holy Scriptures.

So, the first visible, outward evidence in our text of invisible, inward faith in Jesus is persistently persevering in teaching the doctrine of the apostles and of Christ Himself.

II.

The second visible, outward evidence in our text of invisible, inward faith in Jesus is persistently persevering in fellowship. Of the newly converted Christians and of those who had already been converted in the past, it is said that *“they continued steadfastly in fellowship.”* The fellowship spoken of here is that spiritual partnership, participation, association, communion, and sharing with their fellow believers as they persistently persevered in the right teaching of God’s Word. This fellowship with their fellow believers was an inevitable result and product of their fellowship, communion, participation, and association with the spiritual Vine, Christ Jesus. The Savior spells it out so clearly in John 15, where He says: *“I am the Vine; ye are the branches. He that abideth in Me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit, for without Me ye can do nothing”* (v. 5).

Again and again the Word of God reminds and urges us to persistently persevere in and not neglect this fellowship, partnership, and participation with our fellow, faithful believers: **II Timothy 1** (the apostle’s words to Timothy): *“Be not thou therefore ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me His prisoner”* (v.8); **Hebrews 10**: *“Let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is, but exhorting one another, and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching”* (vv. 24-25); **Ephesians 4**: *“I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace”* (vv. 1-3).

This fellowship is inseparably tied to the right teaching of God’s Word. Nowhere in Scripture are we ever taught to have fellowship with those who persistently teach contrary to God’s Word or with those who persistently support such wrong teaching and teachers. On the other hand, we are most certainly and repeatedly taught to stand with, support, encourage, and not stand aloof from those who love and follow God’s Word alone. Such Godly fellowship, partnership, participation, and association are built on Scriptural principles, such as we have in I Corinthians 1, verse 10: *“Now I beseech you, brethren, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.”* Our Savior did not stand aloof from us, but, instead, laid down His life for us, who were lost sheep (Isaiah 53:6; John 10:11), and *“for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross [for our sins], despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God”* (Hebrews 12:2), where He has graciously *“prepared a place for [us],”* and where He will someday receive us unto Himself, so that where He is, there we will be also (John 14:3). It is

this priceless fellowship which we believers have with our Savior on account of His substitutionary obedience and sacrifice for us which ought to move us to persistently persevere in our fellowship with those who hold to and follow the right teaching of God's Word, no matter what the cost might be for us in dollars and cents, no matter how far this takes us away from blood relatives who are not in Godly fellowship with us, no matter how uncertain this may make our future job status, at least in our own eyes. Our dear Savior's instruction and promise are never-changing and ever-comforting: "*Seek ye **first** the kingdom of God, and His righteousness [the righteousness of the Lord Jesus], and all these things [these earthly things] **shall be added unto you***" (Matthew 6:33).

III.

The third visible, outward evidence of invisible, inward faith in Jesus is persistently persevering in the "*breaking of bread,*" or the Lord's Supper. These newly converted Christians and those Christians who had earlier been converted also persistently persevered in the Lord's Supper, that is, they **did not neglect** or despise it, but they ate and drank the body and blood of Jesus, with the bread and wine, for the nourishment, feeding, and building up of their faith in Jesus, for their remembering of the death of Jesus for their sins, and for a testimony of their fellowship, partnership, communion, and association with their fellow believers who stood on and, by God's grace, were faithful to the teaching of God's Word. By coming regularly and frequently to the Lord's Supper, they were following the teaching of their Savior, who said of this sacrament: "*This do in remembrance of Me*" (I Corinthians 11:24c). Also, by coming to the Lord's Supper with their fellow, like-minded believers, they were giving evidence of their gratitude for the death of Christ. In I Corinthians 11, we are given this instruction: "*As often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do show the Lord's death till He come*" (v. 26). By persistently persevering in the Lord's Supper, we show that we are also persistently persevering in the right teaching of God's Word and in the fellowship, partnership, association, and sharing with other like-minded believers.

IV.

The final visible, outward evidence of the invisible, inward faith in Jesus is persistently persevering in "*prayers.*" True, Christian prayer is an act of worship by which we bring our petitions and requests to God, and also bring our thanks and praise to Him for all that He has done for us, especially through the perfect active and passive obedience of His only begotten Son, Christ Jesus. God-pleasing prayers are a response and an evidence of saving faith in Jesus. Jesus says: "*If ye abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you*" (John 15:7). Prayers by true Christians will follow the right teaching of God's Word, and because of that right teaching, will pray only **with** those who faithfully follow God's Word in what they believe, teach, and practice. God's Word teaches that we are to pray **for** all people, but not **with** all people. Listen to the apostle's words in I Timothy 2: "*I exhort, therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made **for all men**, for kings, and for all that are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who will have all men to be saved and to come unto the knowledge of the truth*" (I Timothy 2:1-4). On the other hand, we are taught in I Timothy 5: "*Neither be partaker of other men's sins*" (v. 22b). This is why we are not to pray **with** those who teach contrary to God's Word (I Timothy 6:3) or **with** those who support and go along with such wrong teaching (Romans 16:17-18).

So, as believers in the Savior, converted and born again by His rich grace and mercy, **I**) let us persistently persevere by this rich grace of Christ (II Corinthians 8:9) in the right teaching of

God's Word and nothing but that teaching; **II**) let us persistently persevere, by God's grace in Christ (I Corinthians 15:10), in our fellowship, partnership, and participation with each other in that right teaching of God's Word and not neglect or think lightly of such Godly fellowship; **III**) let us persistently persevere, by the rich mercies of our God in Christ (Romans 12:1), in our regular and frequent use of the Lord's Supper, with those who stand on God's Word in the unity of the Spirit (Ephesians 4:3; Psalm 133:1) for the preservation of our saving faith in Jesus; and **IV**) let us persistently persevere in our prayers to the throne of God's grace in Christ Jesus (Hebrews 4:14-16). It is this rich grace of our God which teaches us believers *"that denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and Godly in this present world, looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto Himself a peculiar [that is, special] people, zealous of good works"* (Titus 2:12-14).

Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!