

Sermons
of the
Concordia Lutheran Conference

**The Only Source of
Sufficiency for an
Evangelical Ministry**

II Corinthians 2:16; 3:4-6

**I. There is no other source than
the grace of the Holy Spirit**

II. Our sufficiency is of God

**III. The sufficiency we seek of God
is for an evangelical ministry**

Sermon Delivered at the Opening Service Aug. 23

by President Wallace H. McLaughlin
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The Only Source of Sufficiency for an Evangelical Ministry

“Who is sufficient for these things? . . . Such trust have we through Christ to God-ward: not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think anything as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God; who also hath made us able ministers of the new testament; not of the letter, but of the spirit; for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life”. —2 Corinthians 2:16b; 3,4–6;

Dear Brethren of the Orthodox Lutheran Conference, “perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment”! Our fellowship has been widely accused of presumption in adopting the name “Orthodox Lutheran Conference”; whereas all that the name expresses, or may rightly be understood as expressing, is our thankfulness to our God and Savior for endowing us, of His pure grace and undeserved goodness, with a purely Scriptural and divine, hence correct, theology or doctrine.

The pure and correct doctrine which we believe and confess is not a product of our own minds, nor do we of our own power believe and confess it; therefore no credit for our orthodoxy is due to ourselves. Both the orthodox doctrine and our faith in it is a gift of God; therefore it would be base ingratitude and doubt of God’s Word of Truth not to acknowledge it to be correct. So far are we from claiming to be the only orthodox Lutherans, the only ones upon whom God has bestowed the gift of a pure faith and confession, that the first Essay accepted by our organizing Convention (page 21) expressly acknowledges our sister Synods, Norwegian and Wisconsin, as “unified in the acceptance of the orthodox doctrine and the rejection of the innovations introduced by the Missouri Synod”; and we also recognize the fact that even in heterodox and unionistic fellowships, such as the Missouri Synod has become, there are still many truly orthodox Lutherans, especially among the laity. And even over against those who are indeed heterodox, who have lost the full Truth of God’s Word, or who never had it, we have no reason to glory, as it is written, 1 Corinthians

4,7: “Who maketh thee to differ from another? and what hast thou that thou didst not receive? now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it?”

To impress this important truth the more firmly upon our minds, in the midst of all the rich blessings wherewith God has blessed us, we have selected for this opening sermon of our second annual Convention a word of God which admonishes us that “our sufficiency is of God”.

The words of our text, in the light of their context, clearly refer to the divinely ordained office of the holy ministry. The assembly to which I am now addressing them, however, is not a pastoral conference, but a Convention in which the laity preponderate over the clergy among the voting delegates in a proportion of two to one.

Our Orthodox Lutheran Conference will do well ever to remember the predominance of lay leadership in the preparatory steps which led up to our organization. When we consider that in St. Paul’s description of the “sufficiency” required for the pastoral office in 1 Timothy 3:2–7, and Titus 1:6–9, the bulk of the characteristics listed are those which are basic to the life of sanctification required of Christians in general, with, only the teaching ability and a certain maturity (“not a novice”) added as requisite for the holy office in particular, we shall realize that what our text refers specifically to the office of the ministry is equally applicable to that more general Christian service in the work of the church, for which, according to Ephesians 4:12. all the saints are to be “perfected” or equipped.

In speaking, on the basis of our text, of the only source of sufficiency for an evangelical ministry I am thinking not only of the specific functions of the pastoral office but of all which the spiritual priesthood of believers in the congregations of our fellowship does and endeavors for the building of Christ’s Kingdom of Grace upon earth, and of the absolute impossibility of accomplishing any of this work by our own reason or strength, by our own inherent powers or abilities. “Our sufficiency is of God”!

Our good confession, the Formula of Concord, uses these words in just this way as proof for the natural man's total inability in spiritual things (Triglotta, page 787, par. 3: page 885, par. 12; page 891, par. 26); and so also in the regenerate the sufficiency, ability, competence, for spiritual work is no natural endowment, but a gracious bestowal of God the Holy Spirit, without whose operation in and through us we can do nothing.

This central truth of our text should both keep us humble and encourage us with the assurance: "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me" (Philippians 4,13), as we meditate on the theme:

The Only Source of Sufficiency for an Evangelical Ministry

- I. There is no other source than the grace of the Holy Spirit, ch. 2:16.
- II. Our sufficiency is of God, ch. 3:4-5.
- III. The sufficiency we seek of God is for an evangelical ministry, ch. 3:6.

I.

"Who is sufficient for these things?" The theology which the Orthodox Lutheran Conference seeks to promote is intensely practical. It is not science, theory, mere dogmatically formulation, but the "sufficiency", aptitude, competence, skill to lead men by the use of God's powerful instrument, the sword of the Spirit, the saving Gospel, through faith unto salvation. Who is sufficient for these things?

A mere retentive intellect can enable one to propound a system of doctrines, but only the grace of the Holy Spirit can enable a poor sinner rightly to divide the Word of Truth, unto the salvation of other poor sinners, and thus to the building of Christ's Kingdom upon earth. Only the Holy Spirit can impart the skill to use in a salutary way the sword which He Himself has made and tempered.

Thus the theologian, the church-worker, whether he sit in the pew or stand in the pulpit, must first of all be a Christian, “taught of God”, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, before he can accomplish any spiritual work. The sharp sword of the Spirit in the unskillful hand of one upon whose own heart it has not done its work may serve only “to slay the souls that should not die, and to save the souls alive that should not live” (Ezekiel 13:19).

How very little, then, the number of our adherents, our financial strength, our importance in the public eye, has to do with the success of our church body! Indeed none of these things count at all in the primary spiritual work which we have to do. No man, and no aggregation of men, has the inherent sufficiency for these things.

If the adherents of the large and powerful church body which we have been forced to leave in order to be loyal to the Word of our God inquire how such a little flock can hope to survive, to grow, to do effective mission work, to operate a respectable theological seminary, we shall not be dismayed, but know that our numbers and our strength have nothing to do with the accomplishment of any of these things.

But while the question: “Who is sufficient for these things?” stimulates our confidence in the promises of our God and the power of His Spirit, it must also keep us humble. The moment we would begin to trace our sufficiency to ourselves we should lose the power of the Spirit with which we have been blessed hitherto. “Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto thy name give glory, for Thy mercy, and for Thy truth’s sake”. Psalm 115:1.

II.

“Such confidence have we through Christ toward God: not that of ourselves we are sufficient, so that we might make account of anything (for this translation, rather than “think anything”, see I Corinthians 4:1) as coming from ourselves; but our sufficiency is from God.” In verses 1 to 3 of this third chapter of Second Corinthians St. Paul had referred to the product of his God-given

“sufficiency” as this was evident in the Corinthian congregation.

Now he points to its source as further proof of its genuineness. He has this “sufficiency” and competence for the work to which he has been called, and this gives him confidence in facing God. “This boasting every preacher should have”, says Luther, “that he is certain, and that his heart also stand in that confidence and be able to say: This confidence and courage I have toward God in Christ that my doctrine and preaching is truly God’s Word.” With him we have and must have the same confidence and trust through Christ our Savior.

There is no presumption in declaring that what we say and do in accordance with God’s Word, from faith in Christ, is true and right. Failure to have, and on occasion to express, such confidence would be denying credit to God and doubting His Word. Our work is not to be done in a half-hearted, apologetic way, as though we were in doubt, of the Word we proclaim and of the Scriptural principles which govern our activities. With all boldness and confidence we storm the citadels of Satan in this holy war, knowing full well the source of our sufficiency.

“Not that of our own selves we are sufficient”. Perish the thought of claiming any sufficiency, any aptitude and ability for this work, as emanating from ourselves! On the contrary, “our sufficiency is of God”. If we are thus sure of the source of our qualifications for Gospel work, that it is of God’s grace alone that we have been equipped for doing that which we are so utterly unable to do of ourselves, then we will not worry about the results, but leave them to Him to whom the cause and the glory belongs. Then we will not be standing on the sidelines, waiting to see whether Christ or the devil will win. Rather shall we, with the full affiance of Nikolaus Selnecker’s great hymn, pray:

“And since the cause and glory, Lord,
Are Thine, not ours, to us afford
Thy help and strength and constancy.
With all our heart we trust in Thee.”
(The Lutheran Hymnal, 292,7.)

Counting the cost, indeed, of the work the Lord has put into our hands to do, we shall yet never reckon that it is too great for Him to pay. And we know that we are not cast upon our own resources. He is the source of all our supplies. It is really presumption to say: "It all depends on me; and I'm not so sure that I'll be able to do it". It is humble trust to say: "Our sufficiency is of God."

III.

To what end, and for what sort of a ministry do we seek sufficiency of God? Our text says: "He hath enabled us as New Testament ministers, a testament not of letter, but of spirit; for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life". Our labors and conflicts are those of an evangelical ministry, of the service of the Gospel. For this God has enabled us, or made us sufficient; and for this we seek of Him ever greater sufficiency.

In our contentions against error as in our proclamation of the truth in our controversies as in our missionary endeavors, our one grand end and aim is that the Gospel of Jesus Christ our only Savior may be maintained *in its truth* and purity, and hence also in its power and effectiveness. Controversies seldom if ever, arise in the Church concerning the Law, the truth and force of which is admitted even by the natural man; but the great Christological and soteriological controversies of the past, as well as those in which we are engaged today, revolve about the blessed, but mysterious and to human reason incomprehensible, truths of the Gospel

Is the inspired Scripture, which brings us the Gospel, fully God-breathed, and hence thoroughly reliable? Is the Gospel fully unconditional, objectively true, and hence a sufficient ground of faith, or does it carry with it an "if" which we must fulfill in order to validate it? Does God's election bring full assurance and comfort to the troubled conscience, or must I be uncertain of the source of my faith and of God's power to preserve it unto the end? Is membership in the Church established only" by faith in the Gospel or does it depend upon outward criteria? Can we know of whom God warns us in His prophecy of the anti-Christ, or can

there arise a greater enemy of Christ than that son of perdition who curses the heart of the Gospel?

The last part of our text concerns itself directly with the distinction between Law and Gospel as the whole of it is concerned with the God-given ability rightly to divide the Word of Truth. In every sermon, in every ministration, of the Christian whose sufficiency is of God, the way of salvation must be made plain. This is indeed the New Testament ministry, as Luther puts it, “which does not teach what you should do (for that you have heard before); but it indicates to you what God wants to do and give to you, yea, has done already, in this way, that He gave His Son, Christ, for us, because, on account of our disobedience to the Law, which no man fulfils, we were under God’s wrath and condemnation, that He paid for our sins, reconciled God, and gave *us* His *righteousness*”.

It is for the proclamation of this glorious news of the free grace of God in Christ Jesus that we as individual Christians live, move, and have our being upon earth; it is to this end that God has brought us together in an *orthodox* church body; and since no man is sufficient unto these things, but our sufficiency is of God, it is to this end that we, lacking wisdom, ask an ever new measure of divine sufficiency, in Jesus’ name, through the illumination of the Holy Spirit, of Him “that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not” (James 1:5).

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Why Orthodox?

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