

Christian Compassion and Civic Prayer

Rev. Joel A. Brondos

This study is an examination of the issues involved with Christian compassion, prayer and civic events in light of Scriptures, Luther, and other sources.

Robbing God of His Glory

Whenever people gather to participate in a common religious event — even in once-in-a-lifetime or civic events — it is crucial to keep in mind that the Lord God will not share the stage with other gods and false beliefs. *Isaiah 42:8*, “I am the LORD, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to graven images.” *Isaiah 45:22*, “Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth, for I am God and there is no other.” And again in *Isaiah 48:11* we are told, “How should my name be profaned? My glory I will not give to another.” *Psalms 96:5* relates, “All the gods of the nations are idols.”

What is true of His glory is all the more true of His Gospel. *Revelation 19:1* says, “Alleluia! Salvation and glory and honor and power belong to the Lord our God!”

There is no clear proclamation of the Gospel or fulfilling of the Great Commission when people are led to believe that we’re all praying to the same god. But that is precisely what happens when Jesus (who truly is the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End, the Author and Finisher of faith) is merely given small portions of time mixed into a program featuring many other prominent secular and even pagan religions. When the intent of prayer service leaders is to bring together all sorts of diverse religious beliefs so that all the bases are covered, then Jesus is being treated as if He is not the First, the Last, the One and Only.

We pray in the Lord’s Prayer that God’s name would be hallowed, that is, kept holy. Luther explains this in his Small Catechism: “When the Word of God is taught in its truth and purity, and we, as the children of God, also lead a holy life according to it. This grant us, dear Father in heaven. But he that teaches and lives otherwise than God’s Word teaches, profanes the name of God among us. From this preserve us, Heavenly Father.”

Furthermore, the Apology of the Augsburg Confession states, “Such prayer which relies on its own righteousness and not on the mercy of God, *insults Christ*, who intercedes for us as our high priest” (IV:332, emphasis added). The prayers of the non-Christian religions at Yankee Stadium did not rely on the righteousness of Christ. They relied on their own righteousness. It is truly an insult to Christ who suffered and died on the cross — who is the *one Mediator* between God and men (1 Tim. 2:5) when people imagine that they can offer prayers to the Almighty God apart from Jesus Christ. How could Christians stand by or participate in a service where Christ is insulted in this way for any length of time?

Sinning Against the Name of Jesus

Jesus certainly *does* want the Gospel preached to people and for everyone to call upon His name in the day of trouble. He wants everyone to know of His mercy, peace, grace and love.

The very name of Jesus *does* cause His dear people to rejoice knowing of His forgiveness and care, but if someone speaks well of Jesus without also stating that there is no other salvation apart from him, then there is a serious problem. For example, an undocumented statement often attributed to Martin Luther relates,

If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the Word of God except precisely that little point which the world and the Devil are at that point attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is tested. To be steady in all other battlefields is mere flight and disgrace, if the soldier flinches at that one point.

If the world hears the name of Jesus as just another name among many which people may choose to address some superior power or spirituality “up there,” then how can Christians rejoice? To mention the name of Jesus but not to direct unbelievers to the bestowing of it through Holy Baptism is like putting a carrot on a stick — holding it out but never giving it.

Besides this, not every naming of Jesus Christ is good. It is *not* sufficient merely to pray “in the precious name of Jesus.” Every mention of Jesus’ name in public is *not* Gospel when it merely gives the appearance of doing good or being compassionate apart from speaking the truth. For example, Jesus Christ Himself says in Matthew 7:21-23,

Not every one who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers.’

The Great Commission

Our Lord Jesus Christ was very specific about how he wants us to proclaim the Gospel and to make disciples of all nations. He calls for baptizing and teaching: baptizing in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching *everything* that He has commanded (Matthew 28:20). In the great evangelistic sermons of the book of Acts, neither Peter nor Paul shared the stage with other non-Christian leaders. They directed people *away from* Judaism to be baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Francis Pieper states that such people actually change Christ’s instruction:

“Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you” to read: “Teach them to observe those things for which you can obtain common consent.” This anti-Scriptural idea is responsible for the numerous attempts to bring about church union without unity in the Christian doctrine. (*Christian Dogmatics* vol I, p. 93)

Matthew 28:18-20 was not the focus of any part of *A Prayer for America*. Instead of being directed to the sure promises of Christ in Holy Baptism, the grief-stricken crowd was invited to hold hands. Instead of being taught the things which Christ mandated, they heard nice thoughts which blended well with the sentiments of all the other religions by common consent. Those who imagine that the prayer prayed at this event was some kind of public proclamation of the Gospel should see how it fails to meet the Scriptural criteria illustrated in the book of Acts by Peter, Stephen, Philip, Paul and others (see page 16ff.).

Some pundits complain, “Why are you so critical of praying in the midst of unbelievers and other religions? Do you mean we are only to proclaim the Gospel to Missouri Synod Lutherans?” Of course not. What we are saying is that the Gospel needs to be proclaimed as a clear testimony, not by mixing it in with all kinds of false witnesses. As 1 Corinthians 14:8 says, “And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle?”

Furthermore, this isn’t just about The LCMS in the USA. District presidents and pastors on the East and West coasts have complained, “We’re not living in the Midwest,” as if to say that the Gospel of Jesus must be handled differently in different geographical areas.

Even though this seems to be a foregone conclusion among many who claim to be mission-minded, it is a rather absurd position. It suggests that the Gospel of one century in one particular location can look utterly different and even contradictory to the Gospel of another time and place. Even though the Gospel has been challenged in many different ways, the Gospel and all its articles do not change any more than God Himself changes. This is true regarding prayer in mixed company.

In the 4th century at the Synod of Laodicea, Christians confessed that “No one shall join in prayers with heretics or schismatics.” (Canon XXXIII of the Synod of Laodicea, from *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Second Series, Vol. XIV as found in *The Seven Ecumenical Councils*, Eerdmans, 1983, p. 149).

And again in the 17th century Colloquy of Thorn noted in the 1967 CTCR document entitled, *Theology of Fellowship*. At the colloquy, the Lutherans protested the fact that they were going to be compelled to pray with Roman Catholics saying, “It militates against our conscience, which forbids to harm the neighbor; our neighbor, who is related to our faith, would be harmed if we were to pray together with Roman Catholics.”

So to those who claim that they do not live in the Midwest, we say, “True. And you don’t live in Laodicea, Wittenberg, Carthage, or Poland either, but you *are* still charged with being faithful to the Word of Christ in all matters of doctrine and life.”

What About John 3:16?

Some will argue, what about the Bible passages which tell us to proclaim the Gospel to all nations? Isn't that more important than worrying about whether there happen to be unbelievers or anti-Christians joining together in a common event?

The Lord does not want "Gospel reductionism." He expects *all* of His words to be observed. Thus, John 3:16 must not be understood apart from 2 John 1:9-10. Romans 1:16-17 should not be understood apart from Romans 16:17-18. Matthew 10:32 cannot be divided from Matthew 10:34. Luke 19:10 must not be divorced from 1 Timothy 4:16. And Matthew 28:18-20 is not to be understood in isolation from Matthew 7:6.

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. (John 3:16)

If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds. (2 John 10-11)

For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes. (Romans 1:16)

Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them. For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple. (Romans 16:17-18)

Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 10:32)

Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. (Matthew 10:34)

For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost. (Luke 19:10)

Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you. (1 Timothy 4:16)

And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you . . . (Matthew 28:18-20)

Do not give what is holy to the dogs; nor cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you in pieces. (Matthew 7:6)

The Apostle Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 6:14-17,

Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will dwell in them And walk among them. I will be their God, And they shall be My people." Therefore "Come out from among them And be separate, says the Lord."

What does it mean to be "unequally yoked together"? In his commentary on 2 Corinthians, R. C. H. Lenski states that "the reference is to Deut. 22:10 which forbade harnessing an ox and an ass, a clean and an unclean beast, together to a plow." Much less, we should think, that a Christian would be harnessed together with Buddhists, Sikhs, Moslems, Jews and others to pray. How can all these pull together in a service to pray?

Or how could one church leader imagine something like "All those other religions were pulling their own way, but I was pulling in a completely different way and in an altogether different direction for Jesus! They may have been praying to false gods while holding false beliefs, but I am not like them! I joined together in a civic event with all of those false religions which met together for the intended purpose of comforting people – but I was doing something different than they were. I was praying to Jesus!" But we ask, what yoke could be more unequal than that?

The organizers of civic prayer services usually want to mingle many different religions together in a pantheistic setting. These events should be confronted as ungodly attempts at unity rather than inviting people to hold hands together and address them as brothers and sisters. In commenting upon 2 Corinthians 6, Luther says:

Therefore, one must always confront them with these words (1 Kings 18:21): "How long will you go along limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him." The Lord and Baal are not in agreement. Nevertheless, Ahab was eager to bring them together. He wanted to serve God in the pure Word and at the same time to mingle human traditions with it. But opposites cannot exist together; they cancel each other.

It is not godly nor is it Gospel to participate in an event which places false teachings and unchristian prayers alongside and on the same level as Christian prayer.

True Love

Imagine that on the morning of September 11, you had *known* what was going to happen. Wouldn't you have told the passengers on the planes to avoid that flight?

Wouldn't you have warned the people in the Pentagon to stay out of the building? But instead, you smiled at them, patted them on the back and said, "Have a nice day! Jesus loves you!" and you let them go to their terrifying death.

Christians believe the word of Christ when He says that there is something worse than dying at the hands of terrorists. Plane crashes which cause terrible heart-breaking anguish are nothing compared to the judgment of the Lord and eternal damnation. *We do not want anyone to go to hell!*

Jesus is the *only* way for us to call upon the Lord God Almighty as our heavenly Father and to avoid His eternal wrath and judgment. This idea is a stumbling block and an offense to the world. The world does not want to hear that Jesus is the *only* way to salvation. The world wants to allow everyone to follow their own self-chosen paths toward spirituality and religion.

The world squirms irritably when Christians insist upon Christ's words: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me," (John 14:6). The secular media becomes sharply critical at the sermon of Peter, Christ's apostle, who boldly confessed: "Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved," (Acts 4:12). The world bristles at any religion that claims to be the only way to salvation.

In the secular way of thinking, all religions are equal. That is one reason why participants are invited to lead prayer in civic prayer and memorial services. The organizers want to be all-inclusive. They want a representation of all the world's religions to come together to pray in order to give the appearance of being fair and equitable.

When an LCMS district president invited the multitude gathered in Yankee Stadium to hold hands and pray with him, referring to them all as brothers and sisters, it expressed compassion in the way that the *world* does such things. It seemed so nice at least to hear the name of Jesus in the midst of so many other religions, but when *nothing* was said about Jesus being the *only* Savior, it was like saying, "Have a nice day; Jesus loves you," while letting people hold false beliefs which lead them to the eternal, fiery judgment of God apart from Christ.

Absolutely nothing was said in what was prayed in Yankee Stadium that gave the impression that would turn people from their sins and false religions to Jesus Christ alone. If such words had been spoken, there would have been a great outcry of protest and hatred from the world which will not tolerate Jesus' exclusive claim as Savior.

There was not a single warning to the people that, apart from Christ, they were trapped in a plane hijacked by the devil, the world, and their own sinful flesh, flying speedily toward a more horrendous outcome than that terrible tragedy of September 11.

Participation in civic prayer services like the one at Yankee Stadium shows loving care in a *worldly* way, but shows careless neglect in God's sight working great harm.

Such worldly expressions of love from church leaders are a hypocritical and vain charity. When church leaders allow the world to have the impression that it doesn't matter what you believe, the leaders themselves incur the wrath of God, as the prophet Ezekiel warned:

But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet, and the people are not warned, and the sword comes and takes any person from among them, he is taken away in his iniquity; but his blood I will require at the watchman's hand. (Ezekiel 33:6)

When these leaders feel comfortable praying with all manners of various beliefs, they act as if there really aren't any differences which would keep Moslems, Hindus, Mormons, Sikhs, and Buddhists from praying together. (That is called syncretism.) Something similar happens when they act as if there really isn't any difference which would keep Roman Catholics, Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, United Church of Christ, and many others from praying and communing together. (That is called unionism.)

Together to Pray, But Not Praying Together

In defense of events which bring such disparate faiths together, one church leader cites the rather dubious rationale of Pope John Paul II in defense of his prayer in the presence of the heathen when he says: "We are coming together to pray, not to pray together."

Some of the textbooks which have been used for decades (and are still being used) to teach the faith at our synodical colleges, state unequivocally, that

We may not pray together with heathen, thinking that, while they pray to their idol, we may pray to the true God. At whose altar we worship, his religion we confess. Nor may we join in prayer-fellowship with those who "cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned," Rom. 16:17, (Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, p. 170).

And again,

He who loves Christ loves Christ's Word — and Christ commands us to avoid all who teach anything that is contrary to His Word. (Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. III, p. 425.)

In his book on church and ministry, the first president of The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod, Dr. C. F. W. Walther, commended these words of Martin Luther:

Whoever regards his doctrine, faith, and confession as true and certain cannot stand in one stall with others who teach false doctrine or are agreeable to it, nor can he continue to speak sweet words to the devil and his followers. A teacher who is silent over against error and nevertheless pretends to be a true teacher is worse than an outspoken enthusiast and by his hypocrisy does greater

harm than a heretic, so that no one should put confidence in him. He is a wolf and a fox, a hireling and a belly server; he despises and rejects the doctrine, the Word, the faith, the Sacrament, the church and school. He either secretly lies with the enemies [of the truth] under one cover, or he is a cynic and a windbag who wants to see how things will turn out, whether Christ will win the victory or the devil, or he is altogether uncertain in his mind and not worthy to be called a pupil, let alone a teacher. He does not desire to offend anyone; he wants neither to confess Christ, nor to hurt the feelings of the devil and the world. (*Church and Ministry*, trans. by J. T. Mueller, p. 118)

There are those who are zealous in their love for the poor, the terrorized, and the downcast in the world, but then they fail utterly to stand firm on the specific details of the truths of God's Word. Those who commend pluralism do great harm. Perhaps, as the apostle John writes, it is because, "they loved praise from men more than praise from God," (John 12:43). Luther described it this way:

Thus the false apostles pretended that they loved the Galatians deeply and that they were moved by a divine sort of zeal toward them. . . . Such was the zeal the false apostles pretended to have for the Galatians. Paul concedes that they do burn with an extreme love for the Galatians, that they make much of them and are concerned for them, but for no good purpose. Simple people are deceived by this show and pretense, when impostors affect a burning love and concern for others. Therefore Paul warns us here to make a distinction between good and evil zeal. The good zeal is, of course, praiseworthy, but not the evil. "I make much of you too," Paul says, "as much as they do. Now judge which zeal is better, mine or theirs; which is good and faithful, and which is evil and carnal. Therefore do not be so easily impressed by their zeal." (*Luther's Works*, vol. 26, p. 425)

The world will certainly speak well of Christians when they are zealous about giving away food, money, or other donations, but the world hates Christians when they stick to the details of Christ's Word, as John writes, "I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world," (John 17:14).

True compassion for the lost never separates itself from the faithfulness to the doctrine of Christ's words. Again, Luther puts it this way:

In addition, the art and skill of the servants of Satan is such that among their followers they not only know how to simulate love, concord, humility, and other fruits of the Spirit; but they also praise one another, give preference to others over themselves, and say that others are better than they. Thus they want to appear to be anything

but seekers of vainglory and they swear that they have no other aim than the glory of God and the salvation of souls. Nevertheless, they are actually extremely eager for vainglory, doing everything to gain more respect and praise among men than others have. In short, they “imagine that godliness is a means of gain” (1 Tim. 6:5) and that the ministry of the Word was committed to them to make them famous. Therefore it is inevitable that they be the originators of dissensions and sects. (*Luther’s Works*, vol. 27, p. 99)

Love More Important than Doctrine?

Luther often had to deal with those who claimed that love was more important than doctrine. He himself was accused of being unloving and doing great harm to the churches because he insisted on the pure doctrine of Christ. In the following extended citation, he describes his position:

Hence this passage must also be considered carefully in opposition to the argument by which they accuse us of offending against love and thus doing great harm to the churches. We are surely prepared to observe peace and love with all men, provided that they leave the doctrine of faith perfect and sound for us. If we cannot obtain this, it is useless for them to demand love from us. A curse on a love that is observed at the expense of the doctrine of faith, to which everything must yield – love, an apostle, an angel from heaven, etc! Therefore when they minimize this issue in such a dishonest way, they give ample evidence of how highly they regard the majesty of the Word. If they believed that it is the Word of God, they would not play around with it this way. No, they would treat it with the utmost respect; they would put their faith in it without any disputing or doubting; and they would know that one Word of God is all and that all are one, that one doctrine is all doctrines and all are one, so that when one is lost all are eventually lost, because they belong together and are held together by a common bond.

Therefore let us leave the praise of harmony and of Christian love to them. We, on the other hand, praise faith and the majesty of the Word. Love can sometimes be neglected without danger, but the Word and faith cannot. It belongs to love to bear everything and to yield to everyone.

On the other hand, it belongs to faith to bear nothing whatever and to yield to no one. Love yields freely, believes, condones, and tolerates everything. Therefore it is often deceived. Yet when it is deceived, it does not suffer any hardship that can really be called a hardship; that is, it does not lose Christ, and therefore it is not offended but keeps its constancy in doing good even toward those who are unthankful and unworthy.

In the issue of salvation, on the other hand, when fanatics teach lies and errors under the guise of truth and make an impression on many, there love is certainly not to be exercised, and error is not to be approved. For what is lost here is not merely a good deed done for someone who is unthankful, but the Word, faith, Christ, and eternal life.

Therefore if you deny God in one article of faith, you have denied Him in all; for God is not divided into many articles of faith, but He is everything in each article and He is one in all the articles of faith. Therefore when the Sacramentarians accuse us of neglecting love, we continually reply to them with this proverb of Paul's: "A little yeast, etc." And another proverb says: "A man's reputation, his faith, and his eye do not stand being played with."

I have said this at some length to encourage our own people and to instruct others, who are perhaps offended by our firmness and who do not think that we have definite and serious reasons for this firmness. Therefore let us not be moved when they make such a boast of their zeal for love and harmony; for he who does not love God and His Word does not count for anything, regardless of what or how much else he may love.

Accordingly, Paul warns both preachers and hearers with this statement not to think that the doctrine of faith is little or nothing and that we can play around with it as we please. It is a sunbeam coming down from heaven to illumine, brighten, and direct us. Just as the world with all its wisdom and power cannot bend the rays of the sun which are aimed directly from heaven to earth, so nothing can be taken away from or added to the doctrine of faith without overthrowing it all. (*Luther's Works*, vol. 27, p. 38)

Sinning Against Worship

Luther maintained that faith and the Word of God are more essential than love and sympathy when he wrote:

For to sin against the worship of God is to sin against faith and the Word. Here one should give no heed to love or sympathy, since by it God is offended and lost, together with the Word, which is the leader, light, teaching, and rule of the whole life and of all works; when you have lost it, no work can be guided, no life established. When you sin against love, but the Word and doctrine remain intact meanwhile, only the work is lost, and it can be restored and repaired according to the rule of the Word.

So immeasurable is the distance that separates a sin against faith and the Word from a sin against love and works. For love bears all, endures all ([1 Cor. 13:7](#)). Faith bears nothing, and the Word endures nothing; the Word must be perfectly pure, and doctrine must

always be thoroughly sound, that it may be the goal of life and the guide for works. Love can be infirm and impure, and must be daily increased and made perfect. On this basis Moses, the meekest of all men on earth, mercilessly put to death three thousand men who had worshiped the calf (Ex. 32:28), because they had sinned against the Word, which is the light and leader of life. (*Luther's Works*, vol. 9, p. 166).

Luther furthermore shows how Christians rub salt into the wounds of the world when they insist on preaching and worshiping correctly — and this must be true even if the criticism of the world's self-chosen worship takes place in the context of great suffering and tragedy.

The world could tolerate it if we proclaimed Christ and all the articles of faith correctly. But if we want to seize [the world] and salt it by showing that its wisdom and sanctity are worthless, indeed, blind and damned.

This the world cannot and will not tolerate. It accuses the preachers of doing nothing but criticizing and biting, of causing revolutions and discord, and of maligning the clergy and good works. But what can we do? Salting has to bite. Although they criticize us as biters, we know that this is how it has to be and that Christ has commanded the salt to be sharp and continually caustic, as we shall hear.

St. Paul is always rebuking the whole world and criticizing everything it praises and does without faith in Christ. And Christ says (John 16:8): "When the Holy Spirit comes, He will convince the world." That is to say: "He will attack everything He finds in the world, without exception or discrimination. He will not rebuke some and praise others, or punish only the thieves and criminals. He will throw everything on one pile, one with another — great, small, pious, wise, holy, or whatever — in short, everything that is not Christ."

There is need for the Holy Spirit to come and to send preachers into the world, to uncover and to punish, not the outwardly gross sins like adultery and murder, which the world can know and punish by itself, but the things it regards as the most precious and its highest asset, the claim to piety, holiness, and the service of God.

So it is a mistake when some wiseacres maintain now that it is enough for a preacher to tell everyone what is right and simply to preach the Gospel, but not to touch the pope, the bishops, the princes, and other stations or persons, since this causes unrest and discord. But what He means is this: "If you want to preach the

Gospel and help people, you must be sharp and rub salt into their wounds, showing the reverse side and denouncing what is not right, like the Masses, monkery, indulgences, and all their works and ways, so that these scandals are eliminated and no longer deceive people."

Therefore we must keep up this salting, be on our guard, and leave no room for such things to come back or to sneak in secretly. This is just what will happen if the ministry of salting is neglected, as it used to be in Christendom, when the rotten doctrine of men was in complete charge and ruined everything; this would not have happened if the salt had remained. There would have been no shortage of sound doctrine; for by the grace of God the Scriptures, the Gospel, the Sacrament, and the pulpit had remained in the church, if only the bishops and preachers had done what they should to use these means for salting whatever belonged to the old Adam. That is why Christ is exhorting and warning the disciples so diligently here, to be sure that this salting is never neglected. He says: "If the salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored?"

"Salt that has lost its taste" means salt that has lost its teeth and its sharpness, salt that no longer seasons or bites. This happens when the ministry is neglected in Christendom. Preachers no longer rebuke the people or show them their misery and incapacity or press for repentance and self-knowledge. They permit them to go along as if they were pious and all right. Thus they let their self-made sanctity and self-chosen worship take root so deeply that the true doctrine of faith is destroyed, Christ is lost, and everything is ruined, utterly and hopelessly. (*Luther's Works*, vol. 21, p.)

Unpleasant Admonitions

It is never a pleasant task to admonish someone who acted out of good intentions but did something which was contrary to the Gospel. So it was with Peter. When he heard Jesus saying that He would have to die, he took Jesus aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!" But Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men."

The words of our Lord sound rather harsh, don't they? Peter didn't want a gospel which had anything to do with suffering and death. Jesus excoriated him. That must not have been pleasant.

Many claim that when a church leader does so many compassionate things for the suffering and the poor that we must be more lenient with the proclamation of the Gospel. But it was precisely in the context of caring for the poor and needy that our Lord has said,

“Woe to you when all men speak well of you, For so did their fathers to the false prophets” (Luke 6:26).

If people are speaking well of those church leaders who gathered to hold hands and to pray with religions which deny Christ in order that they might hope to do some good for the poor and the suffering, will they not also share in the woe which our Lord Jesus Christ speaks against the false prophets?

There is no pleasure in having to admonish someone when we would rather be working together in service to the Gospel. But when an affront to our Lord’s words is covered over under the guise of being faithful to the gospel, we cannot remain silent. It’s like having to deal with that shrewd steward who discounted his master’s possessions (Luke 16:2-9). He makes himself a friend to everyone by minimizing what is required, but in the end he will have to give an accounting to the Master — not that he wasn’t kind to the Master’s people, but that he wasn’t faithful with the Master’s possessions.

We are to love our neighbor and our family members — but not more than Jesus and His Word as He Himself says, “He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me.” (Matthew 10:37)

Concessions Due to Suffering

What about the idea that the terrorist event of September 11 gives ample reason to lighten up on some practices in which The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod seems to be more strict than others? Do great tragedies grant a kind of license or freedom from an insistence upon pure doctrine as if it were unloving or burdensome to insist upon pure doctrine? Can we afford to be so particular about our beliefs and practices when people are hurting and need comfort?

The problem with the idea that we shouldn’t be so particular about doctrine in times of crisis is that it requires us to take Christ’s work out of His hands and into our own. It’s like telling Jesus, “Your holy words are a little too stringent for these hurting people. We will soften Your words in a way which we think will be more palatable for them. If we insisted that You are the only Savior and that the teachings and beliefs of other religions are false, then that wouldn’t look very loving at a time when we are trying to be loving. If we insisted on all of Your words, Jesus, then people would get upset with us. We wouldn’t be able to proclaim Your Gospel very well in a hostile setting, now, would we? So just let us lighten up on some of Your teachings which would be offensive to the world so that we can show them tender compassion.”

Horrific events make unionism and ecumenism seem all the more appealing and necessary in their minds, but this is the great guile of Satan: to attack in times of great heartbreak and weakness. Thus, on the occasion of terrible crises the devil takes the opportunity to heap an even more deadly deception upon the world. The world becomes like a little girl whose legs get mangled in a farming accident — and in the face of this horrific event, the devil gives poison which looks like medicine to the child while she needs and expects to find care and healing in the hospital.

On the other hand, if a small country boy broke his arm and the bone started to mend at a bad angle, the doctor might choose to go through the painful process of re-breaking that boy's arm so that it might be set straight. Sometimes, it can be painful to do what is right. It isn't pleasant to have to cause more pain even when one knows that it will lead to proper healing. It might seem more comforting just to leave things as they are — but that ultimately leads to greater pain and problems in the future (and especially for the future of eternal life).

Persecution in the Context of Tragedy?

When people are really suffering, do they need a clear-cut confession of truth — or would a watered-down version of the Gospel suit them better? Our Lutheran Confessions state that:

We believe, teach, and confess that in time of persecution, when a clear-cut confession of faith is demanded of us, we dare not yield to the enemies in such indifferent things, as the apostle Paul writes, "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Gal. 5:1). "Do not be mismated with unbelievers, for what fellowship has light with darkness?" (2 Cor. 6:14). "To them we did not yield submission even for a moment, that the truth of the Gospel might be preserved for you" (Gal. 2:5). In such a case it is no longer a question of indifferent things, but a matter which has to do with the truth of the Gospel, Christian liberty, and the sanctioning of public idolatry, as well as preventing offense to the weak in faith. In all these things we have no concessions to make, but we should witness an unequivocal confession and suffer in consequence what God sends us and what he lets the enemies inflict on us. (FC Ep X:6)

Accordingly, the Lutheran Confessions have also rejected and condemned the notion "that in a time of persecution and when a public confession is required, one may make concessions to or come to an understanding with the enemies of the holy Gospel (which serve to impair the truth) in such indifferent things and ceremonies."

Now someone might claim that the occasion of this prayer service was not a time of persecution but rather a time of national tragedy. That opinion, however, looks only at the surface of things. Can you imagine how great the persecution would be if a leader of the Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod had declared that Jesus is the only way, truth and life, and that no one comes to God the Father except through Him? Beginning with the national media and showering down upon the grass roots, our society would be primed to strike with its own self-righteousness against the righteousness of Christ.

Religious leaders were invited to *A Prayer for America* based on their willingness to commingle their prayers with the many religions of the world in a unified event. The idea behind this, no doubt, was that a show of unity acts as if it were a kind of gospel. In other words, it was intended that the people would be comforted by the fact that many

civic and religious leaders were taking a united stance. Thus, the consolation for the suffering lay more with this public display of unity than it did with the specific proclamation of forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ and His death on the cross. The name of Jesus was just one among many.

Church leaders would not have been invited (or they would have been hastily uninvited) if they had responded with the intention to proclaim Jesus as the one and only Savior of the world. If any participant in that public forum had boldly confessed that all of the other religions were invalid before God, then the national tragedy would have become a stirring catalyst to awaken a dormant persecution against Christ's dear people.

The devil is all too happy to suppress the clear teaching of God's Word not only when life seems to be going well, but also and especially when there is great heartbreak and turmoil. Satan does not only attack the details of the Gospel in times of peace; he undermines the words of Christ on any and every occasion when the flesh is weak and hurting. Therefore, it is not inappropriate to call to mind the words of our Lutheran Confessions at a time like this:

We believe, teach, and confess that at a time of confession, as when enemies of the Word of God desire to suppress the pure doctrine of the holy Gospel, the entire community of God, yes, every individual Christian, and especially the ministers of the Word as the leaders of the community of God, are obligated to confess openly, not only by words but also through their deeds and actions, the true doctrine and all that pertains to it, according to the Word of God. In such a case we should not yield to adversaries even in matters of indifference, nor should we tolerate the imposition of such ceremonies on us by adversaries in order to undermine the genuine worship of God and to introduce and confirm their idolatry by force or chicanery. (FC SD X:8)

In that same vein, Francis Pieper related,

Unionism avers that it aims at the removal of discord among Christians. But because the unity of the Christian Church consists in having one faith and one profession, unionism actually is a caricature, indeed a mockery of Christian unity. Instead of healing the hurt, it makes it permanent," (*Christian Dogmatics*, vol. III, p. 426.)

Public Honesty vs. Hidden Truth

Psalm 51:6 states, "Behold, You desire truth in the inward parts, And in the hidden part You will make me to know wisdom." Luther comments on these words:

Therefore the word "truth" simply cuts off and condemns whatever is presumed outside this doctrine, as well as whatever there may be

of works or righteousness among Turks, Jews, and papists outside the Word of God. All this righteousness and this holiness he simply calls a lie, which God not only does not love, but which He most thoroughly hates and curses. Nor should the word “truth” be applied only to words, but in general to the total life: that whatever we say, think, live, and are is sure and honest so that we deceive neither the world nor ourselves.

In the world there is also a civic honesty that manifests itself in word and deed, but this has many faults mingled with it. . . . God requires this civic honesty, and daily examples show that this civic honesty cannot be transgressed with impunity. Yet this honesty is not pure, if you consider the judgment of God. There are many filthy vices clinging to it, and God requires a much greater honesty. Therefore he adds, “You love that truth which is in the inward, hidden parts.”

It is as though he were to say: “The civic honesty that is in the world can be produced, and it is at least understood by men. . . . But the truth that God loves is not exposed to the eyes this way; it is in secret and hidden.”

Thus, though Mohammed may have been honest in public, in the sight of God he was a liar. Though I was an honest and guileless monk—I often use myself as an example, the way Paul writes that he was truly a Pharisee (Phil. 3:5)—still in the sight of God I was a liar because of the superstition and hypocrisy that I did not see. It lay hidden under the appearance of holiness, just as truth lies hidden, until it was denounced by the Word, and this hidden truth was revealed.

The prophet is thinking of such people when he says, “You desire truth in the inward parts.” It is as though he were saying: “Those other counterfeit saints, who are beyond reproach in their zeal for the Law, who hope to be loved, who are ready to die for their righteousness, and who suppose that with their strivings they are a delight to God—these are the ones whom You do hate with a divine and insuperable hatred. You love only truth in the inward parts. You do not love those hypocrites and proud saints who go about in fictitious religion” (*Luther’s Works*, vol. 12, p. 353).

Furthermore, we must not hide the fact that the Gospel is not an opiate for the world’s troubles. Jesus didn’t die on the cross merely to make people feel better when they face crises and tragedies. It is not a God-pleasing effort merely to comfort people with words like “love” and “strength” and “peace” if they are not willing to recognize the need of a Savior from *sin* and not just a savior from tragedies. Jesus died to free us from the guilt of our sins. He paid the wages of sin by His death.

Jesus didn't die on the cross in order to make the world a better place to live. In fact, He said that the world would be destroyed and He described the last days in a way that seems most discomfiting in a worldly way of thinking. Those who look to Christ alone are the only ones who may call upon the Almighty God as a gracious Father who will guard and protect them — and will ultimately deliver them into eternal life.

Is Public Prayer a Work of Evangelism?

Public prayer is being treated as though it were comparable to the proclamation of the Word of God or the administration of Holy Baptism in creating saving faith through those who hear it. The prayer offered in Yankee Stadium is considered by these people as if it were a means of grace.

Ex corde prayer comes from the heart of a *human*. The Lord God, however, has given gifts from *His* heart: the Word and Sacraments. To the pure preaching of Law and Gospel and the proper administration of the Sacraments, the Lord God has promised to do His gracious work. He makes no such promises to work through *ex corde* prayer. For this reason, the Lutheran Church has always opposed the idea that prayer is a means of grace whereby the Holy Spirit does His work.

To be sure, Christians pray for unbelievers and for the Lord to comfort the sorrowful and the needy and that the Lord would send workers out to the harvest, but nowhere in the Scriptures is prayer used in the same way as public preaching and proclamation of the Gospel. Our Lord Jesus Christ did not send the disciples out to pray publicly in His name but to *preach the Word* (2 Timothy 4:2).

There was *nothing* proclaimed at Yankee Stadium that even remotely resembled Peter's preaching in Solomon's Portico (Acts 3:12-26) or his testimony before the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:9-12). There was nothing like Stephen's address (Acts 7:2-53) or Philip's ministering to the Ethiopian (Acts 8:30-38). There was absolutely no resemblance to Paul's preaching at Antioch of Pisidia (Acts 13:15-41) or his testimony before King Agrippa (Acts 26:2-23). In none of those instances did the apostles pray in the company of the heathen or did they use prayer as a means for evangelism.

The issue is not *where* prayer goes on, but *how*. We know very well that Peter and Paul proclaimed the Gospel at the Temple of Diana, the Areopagus, Mars Hill and other places. But by no means did they participate in a common event such as was held at Yankee Stadium. Furthermore, they made it clear that the Gospel they were preaching required others to forsake the false gods and goddesses. The fact that the LCMS district president was welcomed by the leaders of false religions — the fact that anti-Christian sects didn't treat him the way that the idolaters treated Peter and Paul — was because he wasn't preaching Jesus Christ in the same way that the disciples did. His message was acceptable in the sight of the crowds unlike the Gospel as the apostles preached.

At *A Prayer for America*, there was no proclamation of Law and Gospel. There was no admonition to repent, to believe the Gospel or to be baptized according to the Lord's mandate. There was no proclamation that Jesus as the *only* Savior of the world. There was no warning for people to turn away from false hope. There was only an upbeat, allegorical, *ex corde* prayer which mentioned the name of Jesus in the context of many

false religions offering false comfort. How can it be that anyone would consider such a display to be God-pleasing evangelism or mission work?

Prayers are meant to be heard by the Lord God; God's Word is meant to be heard by people. It is not the prayer from devout Christian hearts which has the power to give peace and comfort, but rather the Word of God.

Conclusion: Let Charity Prevail

The horrific events of September 11 brought about great injury and deep grief. When confronted by such evil, God's people stand ready with the comfort of the Gospel.

For crowds who know nothing about their need for a Savior — who know nothing about the Gospel — it is vital that the Gospel not be thrown in with a mish-mosh of the world's religions. That sends unclear signals, especially in an age when the idea is so strong that people can worship a supreme being in any manner they please.

There is never any kind of event for which the Lord God expects Christians to mix the Gospel of Christ into an assembly of various religions and contrary confessions. It is *not* the love of Christ nor the mission and ministry of His Gospel which compels faithful pastors to join hands with unbelievers in prayer or to refer to them as "brothers and sisters."

The prayer service held at Yankee Stadium on September 23, 2001 was *not* to the glory of God. It was *not* a good example of proclaiming the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. It did *not* extend a God-pleasing compassion to people who were hurting in an extraordinary situation. This must not happen again. Instead, we must make every attempt to be pastoral in a personal way to those who realize the need for a Savior.

Christian charity only prevails where the words of our Lord Jesus Christ are maintained. As Luther wrote:

All depends on the doctrine. Where doctrine is right, then everything is right: faith, work, love, suffering, good and evil days, eating, drinking, hunger, thirst, sleeping and waking, walking and standing still, etc. Where the doctrine is not right, then it is in vain, all is lost, and everything is completely condemned. (*Luther's Works*, vol. 43, p. 281)

We cannot and will not turn our backs on the poor and suffering. At the same time, however, when we have the opportunity to extend compassion and care, we must not turn our backs on our Lord Jesus Christ who wants His name *alone* to be glorified in the compassion for the distressed. He does not want His Gospel watered-down so that it is more palatable to unbelievers and anti-Christians. Rather, He wants His Gospel kept pure without commingling it in any context with false teachers and enemies of the Gospel.

What does it mean to "let charity prevail?" Does it mean that church leaders and members should join in prayer events with false religions in order to care for people filled with grief? Luther suggests that faith takes precedence over charity.

If faith toward God demands it, charity is to be denied to one's neighbor, because God, who is worshiped by faith, must be held higher than man, who is served by charity. After faith comes charity, which sets limits to all laws, the ceremonial as well as the secular, faith alone excepted. (*Luther's Works*, vol 9, p. 241)

Or again,

For example, they make immense boasts and claims about their Christian charity, patience, and concord, just as they exaggerate the persecution they are undergoing. But what good is achieved in the end if you praise and stress Christian love and other virtues and meanwhile destroy the faith? (*Luther's Works*, vol. 22, p. 22)

A manifestation of love through relief efforts is not true charity if it obscures even a single one of Christ's teachings. We must not care for the needs of people in this life at the expense of giving a clear testimony in Christ about the life to come. It would be a terrible shame if our expressions of compassion for cares in this world overshadow that faith which Christ has given as we look for His kingdom to come here in time and hereafter in eternity. Thus Luther writes on the subject of 1 Corinthians 13:

This is so great a good that no human heart can grasp it (therefore it necessitates such a great and hard fight). It must not be treated lightly, as the world maintains and many people who do not understand, saying we should not fight so hard about an article and thus trample on Christian love; rather, although we err on one small point, we agree on everything else, we should give in and overlook the difference in order to preserve brotherly and Christian unity and fellowship.

No, my dear man, do not recommend to me peace and unity when thereby God's Word is lost, for then eternal life and everything else would be lost. In this matter there can be no yielding nor giving way, no, not for love of you or any other person, but everything must yield to the Word, whether it be friend or foe. The Word was given unto us for eternal life and not to further outward peace and unity. The Word and doctrine will create Christian unity or fellowship. Where they reign all else will follow. Where they are not, no concord will ever abide. Therefore do not talk to me about love and friendship, if that means breaking with the Word, or the faith, for the Gospel does not say love brings eternal life, God's grace, and all heavenly treasures, but the Word. (*Sermons from the year 1531, W.A- 34-11- 387. Day By Day We Magnify Thee, p. 384*)

APPENDIX

Controversies in the Church

From This is My Body by Hermann Sasse, p. 107f. (Adelaide: Lutheran Publishing House, 1977).

There is nothing more depressing for the student of church history or for the Christian layman than to read about the great controversies on doctrinal matters that time and again have divided Christendom. At the same time, nothing has provoked more mockery from the world than those occasions when the old saying about the Early Church, "Behold how they love one another" could be changed into an ironical "Behold how they bite and devour one another" (see Galatians 5:15).

How often such controversy has destroyed the missionary opportunities of the church! Was there a greater missionary possibility than at the moment when Constantine recognized Christianity as the religion of the Roman Empire? But, to his amazement, the Donatist controversy in Africa, the Arian controversy in the East (which soon spread throughout Christendom), absorbed the strength of the church for generations to such a degree that it could not live up to the task of preaching the Gospel to the millions of Roman citizens as it should have done.

Is not the same true of our centuries, and even of our own age, when Christianity, in a state of obviously-incurable divisions, meets the great world-religions on the mission fields? Politicians inside and outside the church have always regarded these divisions as incomprehensible foolishness and a lack of Christian charity on the part of theologians. Just as Constantine wrote to Athanasius and Arius, expressing his astonishment that they regarded their disagreement on the meaning of a certain Bible passage (Prov. 8:22-31) as church-divisive, and admonishing them to follow the example of the philosophers, who in similar cases always found it possible to agree on a compromise, so Philip of Hesse, the far-sighted politician of the Reformation, did his utmost, in the interest of the common Protestant cause in those fateful years of the Reformation, to bring about an agreement between Luther and Zwingli on the basis of a formula acceptable to both parties. In both cases the well-meant attempt of the secular ruler to restore the unity of the church was unsuccessful.

As Christians we are not allowed to excuse even the slightest of the many sins that have been committed time and again in connection with such controversies. Pride and self-glorification, lack of love and humility, failure to understand the other side's point of view, and acrimonious speech are some of the sins that threaten the souls of those who have to fight doctrinal controversies. There are sins and dangers in orthodoxy that the world sees with greater clarity than we theologians do, and in many cases the judgment of God on the orthodox defender of the faith may be far more severe than his verdict on the erring soul of a heretic.

In saying this, we do not want to exonerate Luther and Zwingli from the harsh words they spoke against each other. Although the 16th century was used to very rough language, this language is nothing if compared with the cruelty with which other churches and even some non-Roman nations tried to suppress what they regarded as heresy. Neither the night of St. Bartholomew nor the bloody persecution of Catholics in

England can justify the way in which Lutherans and Reformed wrote and spoke against each other.

In order to understand the doctrinal controversies that accompany the history of the Reformation, we must keep in mind that according to the New Testament such controversies belong to the history of the church from the days of the apostles to the end of the world: "There must also be heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you" (1 Cor. 11:19). The heretics that Paul wanted rejected after the first and second admonition probably felt themselves to be genuine followers of Christ. The Christian gnostics that John, the apostle of love, criticized so harshly as antichrists, and to whom he refused the courtesy of a greeting, may have been, in their way, lovers of Christ who complained bitterly of narrow-minded dogmatists that made the doctrine of the Incarnation a church-divisive dogma. Much of the criticism that has been launched against the church of all ages on account of controversies that have divided Christendom could be, and has been, directed against the church of the New Testament.

However, in order to understand that the condemnation of soul-destroying error is more than the rejection of opinions that we do not like, we need only ask what would have become of the Gospel in the world if the apostles and the church after them had been less orthodox and more tolerant, if they had shown more of what the world calls "love" and "toleration." Just as the distinction between true and false prophets or true and false apostles belongs of necessity to the history of God's revelation, so the fight against heresy and serious doctrinal controversy belongs to the very nature of the Church of him who called himself the truth.

If this is true of the entire history of the church, how could one expect the church of the Reformation to be an exception to this rule? On the contrary, if in an age of religious decay in the Christian world the question should be raised again as to what the Gospel really is, how could this question find an answer without incurring the most earnest controversies? And how could it be avoided that these controversies centered in the Lord's Supper, which always has been a center of discussion, because doctrine and liturgy, as well as the life and faith of the church, meet in this Sacrament as nowhere else?