

A Parting Peace

Colleagues,

Here's another one resurrected from ancient files [not my own, but from those of the Concordia Historical Institute, whither I directed Lee Precup when he asked me if I could find it. "Our man" at CHI, Marvin Huggins, found it there.] It is the "Parting Peace" of the faculty of Concordia Seminary (St. Louis) to the graduating class of 1972. [Lee was in that class.] Context: the gathering storm in the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, labeled by some as the "Battle for the Bible," but in this "parting peace" designated "the controversy about the priority of the Gospel." As some of you may divine—just from that shift to the word Gospel—the author was Robert W. Bertram, at that time Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology at the seminary.

A year and a half later, January 20, 1974, the Missouri Synod leaders moved to a "final solution" to the controversy by suspending the seminary president for tolerating teachers of "false doctrine" within the faculty. In the ensuing rumble Concordia Seminary in Exile (Sem-in-ex) was born. For Seminex's decade of existence, the theology of this Parting Peace was our common confession. And by virtue of Bob's becoming the founder of Crossings, it has become ours too.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

A PARTING PEACE

The Week of Pentecost, 1972

To the Graduates:

You are leaving us and yet you are joining us. We rejoice that you will now be sharing in the ministry of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ with us and more than 6,000 other pastors of our Synod. Our parting word is, therefore, a word of welcome. We welcome you as our partners in a common mission.

Our parting word, our word of welcome, is a word of peace. Not just any peace! It is what our Lord called "my own peace," the hard-won peace of the cross. That peace unites us with God and with one another. It is our common bond and must always have top priority in our teaching and in our life.

The following seven reminders – about repentance, about Sonship, about inspiration, about historical facts, about prophecy, about mission, about peace – are suggested by the Holy Gospel and Epistle for the Feast of Pentecost. With these reminders we bear witness to our faith and proclaim to you again the blessed Gospel which unites us in Christ's own peace.

His peace we leave with you,
The Faculty

I
May the Holy Spirit,
Whom the Father sends in Jesus' name,
Bring these words to your remembrance:

REPENT FOR THE FORGIVENESS OF YOUR SINS." (Acts 2:38)

To repent, men need to be more than merely sinners. They need also to be believers. They need the divine Law, yes, and the Law in the fullness of its criticism. How else could they be contrite? But to be truly contrite, to be free enough to take the criticism of the Law, sinners need more. They need the Gospel. "For human nature cannot bear [the divine wrath] unless it is sustained by the Word of God," that is, the Gospel.

(APOLOGY XII, 32). So the call to repentance is not only judgment. It is also the promise of help. "What are we to do?" cried the audience at Pentecost, pleading for help. Peter's answer, "Repent," was the help they could trust. Faced with our current synodical problems, you and we and the people of our Synod ask the same question: "What are we to do?" The answer at Pentecost is still our trustworthy help. "Repent and be baptized, everyone of you, in the name of Jesus the Messiah for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

We all resist repentance like the plague, preferring not to notice who it is who calls us to repent: the Lord Himself. Instead we play the judge ourselves and shift the blame to others. Some blame everything on our synodical or theological leadership, while others blame those who blame that leadership. Both attitudes are, at best, half right. Both evade their own obligation, and their own opportunity, to repent. So do those who consider our current problems trivial or call themselves neutral and loftily declare, "A plague on both your houses."

To say "Repent" is no evasion of the hard social and political realities. God uses precisely the realities of history to summon us to repent. And we make bold therefore to call you and all in the Synod – ourselves included – to hear God's call: "Repent." Let us repent, we ourselves first of all, and receive from God the power to walk together in His paths again.

If we find it difficult to repent, that difficulty has been mounting for a long time. It has long roots in our common synodical past. For what penitent sinners need most is faith, faith in God's promised mercy. Only by faith can they accept His judgment without being destroyed by it. "For faith makes the difference between the contrition of Peter and that of Judas." (APOLOGY XII, 8). Only by faith can sinners profit from God's

judgment, and even run with it. "Filial fear can be clearly defined as an anxiety joined with faith, . . . whereas in servile fear faith does not sustain the anxious heart." (APOLOGY XII, 38). But have we in our Synod, any of us, always remembered that that is what faith is for: "for the forgiveness of your sins," as Peter promised, so that "you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit"? Haven't we instead, far too often, prized our faith for its own correctness, rather than for its hold on that Father who forgives our incorrectness? Or perhaps out of scorn for just such a position, or out of a desire to accommodate our faith to a skeptical culture, have we minimized the reality of the miraculous, forgetting that all the miracles point to that one miracle, "the forgiveness of your sins"? In short, have we Missouri Synod Lutherans so discouraged faith that we lack the boldness and confidence, the sheer audacious courage to repent?

Yet faith is still among us. That we know, for the Word is still among us, both Law and Promise, written and preached and sacramental. We are all of us baptized – "baptized," as Peter reminds us, "for the forgiveness of your sins." And isn't our Baptism itself a sign for our repentance, signifying "that the old Adam in us. . . . should be drowned by daily sorrow and repentance and be put to death, and that the new man should come forth daily and rise up" (SMALL CATECHISM, Baptism, 12) Isn't that sign enough of God's persistent mercy? And where God shows mercy, there is faith; and where faith, repentance; and where repentance, "the forgiveness of sins" and "the gift of the Holy Spirit." We heartily desire these gifts by which God will transform our very conflict into an opportunity for new beginnings. We acknowledge our own need for repentance and pray the Father for the strong faith that will enable us to repent.

II

May the Holy Spirit

Whom the Father sends in Jesus' name,

Bring these words to your remembrance:

‘HE WHO LOVES ME WILL BE LOVED BY MY FATHER.’ (John 14:21)

How like a father. No one pleases a father quite so much as someone who loves his boy. You fathers among the graduates know from experience how pleasant it is when people admire your offspring. For us faculty too it is gratifying how congregations, districts and the Synod welcome you, our “sons.” Now God our Father declares, “You are pleased with my Son, and so I am pleased with you.” Why is He pleased? “Why does the Father love you?” asks Luther, and answers, “Not because you . . . are beyond reproach in the righteousness of the Law.” (WA XL 1, 371) It is not because we do well or formulate teachings correctly, and not because of deeds performed or doctrines accepted. On that we are all agreed. We are furthermore agreed – all of us in the Synod – that we are the children of God because of His Son. Look what we have in common: nothing less than a gracious Father who loves us and all who love Jesus His Son.

But then could a Synod like ours, bravely confessing the Lutheran Symbols, still be infected with works righteousness? Sad to say, the lust to be right in and of ourselves is a temptation with which each of us must wrestle. Surely no one of us teaches that a man can be saved by his good works or the correct wording of his doctrine. But a form of this false teaching crouches, ready to spring upon the most devout among us. Take for example the sentence, “Believe the Bible simply because God spoke it, and you will be right.” What could possibly be wrong with such a formulation? It sounds so good. And yet, is there not a danger here? Might not this position reduce the whole of Scripture to a law to be obeyed, as though the Scriptures were only a set of orders issued by an Authority who outranks us supremely? Of course the Holy Scriptures are God’s authoritative Word. But say we would bow to them in

unthinking obedience, responding to all their statements in the same way, with the same unswerving submission. What could possibly be wrong with that? What would we have missed? The most distinctive thing of all: the biblical Gospel, the Good News of the Father who loves us supremely. that is the distinctive "authority," says Paul, "given by the Lord to build you up, not pull you down." (2 Cor. 10:8) It is "such authority to men" as we have from God in Christ Jesus who is distinguished by His "authority on earth to forgive sins" (Matt. 9:6,8) If we were to obscure that distinctive biblical Word, then we would not only have blunted the Law's terrible accusation, but we would also have blurred the unexpected and undeserved miracle of the Good News of our redemption. We would have failed to distinguish between the words God speaks to us, failed to give the varied response God seeks from His varied words to us. We would have failed to hear the Gospel as distinct from the Law.

Listen to the Gospel again. Why does the Father love us, wrong and wicked though we are? Luther answers: Because this Son, "sent from the Father into the world, is pleasing to you," therefore, "the Father loves you and you are pleasing to Him." (WA XL 1, 371) Rightness with God is the free gift of the Father bestowed on sinners because of the Son. It is the Son who reconciles us to the Father and the Father to us (AC III 3; APOLOGY IV 269).

III

May the Holy Spirit,
Whom the Father sends in Jesus' name,
Bring these words to your remembrance:

WHAT "THE HOLY SPIRIT . . . WILL TEACH YOU" IS WHAT "I [JESUS] HAVE TOLD YOU" FIRST OF ALL. (John 14:26)

To the apostles Jesus promised the Spirit, and inspired they

were. Let us all in Synod remember how blessed we are to have the inspired Word of inspired men, even as we disagree or fail to understand each other in our efforts to understand that inspiration. And we dare to appeal to all in Synod to bear with one another as together we pray the inspiring Spirit to enable us to grasp aright this inspired Word. We say it again, "the apostles and their word are inspired." About this inspiration we would emphasize one thing especially: the Spirit's link to the historical Jesus Christ. It was Jesus who sent Him and it is Jesus to whom He testifies. The Spirit who inspired the disciples is the same Spirit who had been promised by Jesus. It is that Spirit who led them to remember the things they had witnessed previously and the words the historical, visible and audible Jesus had told them beforehand (John 14:25-26, 29).

Jesus promised his disciples that the Spirit "will teach you everything, and call to mind all that I have told you." The Holy Spirit did not inspire these apostles in a vacuum, without their first experiencing history the way everyone else does, nor without their prior knowledge of history, especially Biblical history. Indeed not! For as Peter and John explain, their inspiration enabled them to understand and announce what they had already witnessed: the common events of the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. These were the previous historical things they had seen and heard (Acts 2:32; 4:24). Their inspiration was inextricably tied to history with all its ambiguities. (Acts 1:21-22)

[The final page of III is missing from the manuscript.]

IV

May the Holy Spirit,
Whom the Father sends in Jesus' name,
Bring these words to your remembrance:

“ANYONE WHO LOVES ME WILL HEED WHAT I SAY. . . . HE WHO DOES NOT LOVE ME DOES NOT HEED WHAT I SAY.” (John 14:23-24)

A moment ago we said that the inspiring by the Holy Spirit dare not be separated from the facts of history. The converse is also true: the facts of biblical history cannot be understood without the Holy Spirit. Without Him to teach us, we might still retain all sorts of facts, but not as Gospel facts, hence not the facts of Scripture. We do run the danger of forgetting that. We tend to reduce the things which happened in biblical history – for example, Jesus’ virgin birth or His resurrection or the Exodus – reduce them to where we can no longer see what really was happening there “for us men and for our salvation.” All we have left then is the fact that this or that miracle took place. That much many a pagan believes. So do the devils. Once we have stripped these facts of their real Gospel secret, what good does it do to ask, “Do you believe that they happened or don’t you?” Of course they happened. But that does not require believing in any evangelical sense of faith. So the first question is not, “Did it happen or didn’t it?” No, the first question is, “Did WHAT happen?” For example, what really happened when Jesus was born of a virgin? Or when he suffered, died and was buried? What does it mean when the Large Catechism says, “All this in order to become my Lord”? (The Creed, 31) Only as we first answer that question, discerning the Lordship of Jesus in and through those events, do we thereby answer the other question (“Did it happen?”) in a way that really honors our Lord. That is possible only by faith in Christ, out of love for Him. For as Jesus says, in order to “heed what I say” it is necessary first to “love me.” And that is why He sends the Holy Spirit.

“He who does not love Me,” says our Lord, “does not heed what I say,” even though that man may SEEM to get the biblical facts straight. He really does not get the facts straight, not even the simplest facts, not even those facts which seem hardly

miraculous at all. For he does not understand what really happened.

It was that way with the disciples. For, as Jesus said, it was because they did not love Him that they could not grasp what in fact was happening. Even the elementary event of Jesus' death, His "going away," the disciples misunderstood. True, if someone had asked them whether His dying happened or not, they would of course have answered that it did. And in a sense they were right. He did die. But what they would have meant by His dying was all wrong. The dying which they thought was happening never really happened at all. They were too afraid, too unloving, too dispirited to see that WHERE Jesus was going was home and that the One to WHOM He was going was His own Father. So what point would there have been in asking the disciples before they received the Spirit, "Did Jesus' death happen or not?" No, the question which needed to be answered first is, "Did WHAT happen?" "Which death?" The death they originally had in mind did not really occur.

We all want to heed our Lord's Word. That too is something which we in our Synod all have in common. We all want to believe what His Word says to us, truly believe it. None of us wants to deny or even to abridge what all was happening in the biblical history. All of us yearn to perceive how those wondrous happenings, each and every one of them, are bound inextricably to what God was there doing for our judgment and salvation. We all know that without that "for us" no event in Scripture is yet a subject for faith, an acting out of Jesus' Lordship. What we are also finding out to our sorrow is that this constant connection between biblical history and biblical Gospel can be treacherously difficult to discern in each and every case. No wonder, such discerning is humanly impossible without our being taught by the Holy Spirit. This difficulty of ours, perhaps more than any other in our whole theological task, reflects how

remiss we have been in doing our biblical homework. All of us have. Now it comes home to us how utterly dependent we are, for our reading of the Scriptures, upon the love of Christ and the leading of His Spirit.

V

May the Holy Spirit,
Whom the Father sends in Jesus' name,
Bring these words to your remembrance:

“THIS IS WHAT THE PROPHET SPOKE OF.” (Acts 2:16)

Peter's sermon at Pentecost heralds the dawning of the new day promised throughout the Old Testament. The new was promised in the old. What is it that is new? According to Peter the new is Jesus and His resurrection. And he quotes an old promise of new life from Psalm 16 to make his point (Acts 2:25-28). The raising of Christ the crucified is the fulfillment of that promise. Peter's preaching was initiated by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the gathered community with signs of fiery tongues and the sound as of a rushing wind. The spirited community began speaking with tongues. And that event too, as Peter reminded the crowd, had also been promised. For the prophet Joel had seen that day coming, a day of promises fulfilled for people far and near, even for those who were far from the Law and far from acceptable. That day the promise was fulfilled for “every one whom the Lord our God may call.” (Acts 2:39) We may not all agree precisely on how all of the old relates to the new or just how each of these ancient promises were understood by the Israelites. But this we have in common, that we affirm the old is fulfilled by the design of God in Jesus Christ, whom God has made both Lord and Christ.

The Old Testament is God's prophetic and promising Word. That Word is far more than predictive. If we treated the Old

Testament only as a book of predictions, a collection of accurate information regarding coming events, we would have discerned no difference between the efforts of Old Testament prophets and the attempts of pagan diviners to tell fortunes and predict distant fulfillments. What makes the prophets different? What makes them spokesmen of our God? The fact that their prophecies were true? More than that! What exactly did the prophets declare? In a word, "the promise!" A "promise to you and to your children and to all who are far away." (Acts 2:38)

The prophets spoke as "men of faith" who had experienced God's great acts of redemption in history: the exodus from Egypt, the crossing of the Red Sea, the gift of the covenant, the presence of the Lord with power and blessing in their midst. They believed in Him and they spoke, addressing Israel in the crises of her history. The words of promise they spoke from the Lord were, not negated by persistent unbelief, nor erased by repeated disappointments nor exhausted by timely fulfillments in the people and events of the Old Testament era. Far from it. These promises opened the way to a new and more glorious future. They were power surging through history, as the Holy Spirit led men of God to announce even greater comings of their Lord. They kept driving forward to Jesus Christ, the center of all history and all promise. The core, the climax and the seal of all Old Testament promises is Jesus Christ, crucified and resurrected, proclaimed among all nations. Thus it is that the New Testament fulfills and interprets the Old Testament. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, on the one hand, and the universal proclamation of His Name, on the other, together constitute the fulfillment of Old Testament promise (Luke 24:47). Without the newness of Jesus the Messiah and the proclamation of life in His name the Old Testament is both incomplete and obscure.

We appeal to you, and to all, to remember how much and what great things we have in common as God's new people brought into

being in these last times, redeemed in Jesus Christ, and sent with Good News. Let's avoid fretting about prophecy in such a way that the entire Christological question is in danger of being sidetracked. Let us not be so preoccupied with the predictive accuracy of the prophets or the historical methods we employ to analyze their writings that we lose sight of the promise they proclaim. But let us unite in praising God for His prophets, His providence, His promise for His beleaguered people of old and now again in these new times of His Son.

VI

May the Holy Spirit,
Whom the Father sends in Jesus' name,
Bring these words to your remembrance:

"THE WORLD MUST BE SHOWN." (John 14:31)

The Father sends the Spirit through the Son, and the Spirit inspires the church for its mission of confessing Him before the world. This mission is not optional. Jesus departed and the Spirit came because "the world must be shown" (John 14:31), shown the love Jesus has for the Father and the love the Father has for the world in Jesus. "The full extent of His love" (John 13:1) has been shown to us and to the world in the cross. That love, like every gift of God, is given to be shared. It is the joyous task of the church to move out into all the world with works and words that show the love of Jesus. Unfortunately the perennial tendency of God's people is to hoard the Gospel rather than share it, a tendency reinforced by the current controversy in our Synod. It is so easy, we confess, to become preoccupied with theological questions and theological conflict and to lose sight of the mission to which all of us are called. We appeal to you and to all to turn from conflict to confession. Let us together remember that the church has been entrusted with the Gospel – not merely to protect and preserve it, not only to

elaborate and polish it, not to boast of having it, nor to contemplate and fondle it nor to argue over it. The church has been inspired for a mission of confessing the Gospel.

The “holy inspiration” for which we prayed in the collect on Rogate Sunday has been a fact of life since the miracle of Pentecost. For the Spirit has called us by the Gospel, enlightened us with His gifts, inspired us to believe in Jesus as our Lord, kept us in the true faith and motivated us to share the Gospel of the crucified Christ. He is the true treasure of the church that God’s Word imparts to us (LARGE CATECHISM, Baptism 37).

We are called as His people to testify to “the great things God has done” (Acts 2:11). We are summoned to our mission by our Lord who calls us His witnesses (Acts 1:8). All our testimony and all our teaching must ultimately point to Him. Thus we are commissioned to bear witness, not to a specific set of carefully formulated doctrines nor to the Bible for its own sake, but to the Gospel, to Jesus Christ as the real and living way to the Father. God’s people are summoned to address the Gospel to the whole human being and to the whole society throughout the world. You are sent as commissioned men on that mission.

The Spirit in the church is the Spirit of bold, prophetic testimony to Jesus Christ. And so in the power of that Spirit the church goes “to the ends of the earth” (1:8) speaking the Gospel message and translating it into action so that the Word becomes flesh and so that deeds are not mute. For the Good Word is “to you and to your children and to all that are far away” (Acts 2:39), as far away as the gentile world or the valley of the shadow of death. As the church proclaims that Gospel and lives by its power the world will be shown what it needs to know.

VII

May the Holy Spirit,
Whom the Father sends in Jesus' name,
Bring these words to your remembrance:

"PEACE IS MY PARTING GIFT TO YOU." (John 14:27)

As we your teachers and now your colleagues bid you farewell, we wish you the Lord's peace. What kind of peace? "My own peace," Jesus calls it, "such as the world cannot give." This peace is His because He gives it, but more than that, he achieved it. "Peace" is that great prize for which he did battle with the world and which He now bestows upon His people. We welcome you as fellow theologians to the lifelong task of interpreting His peace and of distinguishing it from the world's peace. We your colleagues in the ministry of the Gospel of peace appeal to you and to all our brothers in our Synod to remember that we are called of God to struggle not against each other but against the world for the sake of the world. Does any one of us really need to be reminded that the world is present also even in our own hearts and lives? We have the world in common, and better than that. We – you and we and all God's people – have the Lord's own peace established and strong in our hearts.

His peace has the shape of the cross. the Father did not bestow it as a direct celestial infusion straight out of heaven into all believers. He gave it in and through the Word made flesh, in Jesus born of a Jewish mother, in Jesus crucified on Golgotha, in Jesus opposed by the powers of darkness who could not overcome Him, in Jesus whom God raised on the third day. Through these great acts the peace of God was won, the unworldly peace the world needed. Note that this peace is "unworldly" not "otherworldly." It is not an escape from the world any more than His gaining of that peace was a flight from the world and its evil power. And now he gives us that peace as we struggle where

the world is most worldly, and where the Gospel is under attack. He gives it to us who, as He Himself was, are burdened with specific historical and worldly burdens. There will be days when you are tempted to complain, "Why can't we be your people and enjoy your peace without all these extras, all these historical burdens? It is heavy enough, Lord, being a Christian, but why Missouri Synod Lutheran? Why must I be caught in this controversy about the priority of the Gospel?" It may even seem like mockery to hear someone greet you and say, "The peace of the Lord be with you."

Yet that is precisely the word that we who are besieged by the world need to hear. He has won the peace and bestows it freely on His own. While His Gospel is under attack we need to speak that message of peace to the attackers and to ourselves. With the enemy at the gates he says, "Set your troubled hearts at rest and banish your fears." Easier said than done? But it has been done! How? By His "going away." For His going away was not only to death but to a victorious reunion with the Father. And more than that, He promises "I am going away and coming back to you." Peace is His "coming back" to you! And this time He brings the Father along. Both of them have come to dwell with us in peace.

Being His people, being the place of His dwelling and being identified with His Gospel will inevitably mean conflict with the world. But it will also mean a rich measure of His peace. That is His promise. Being Lutherans in the current debate over the nature and function of the Gospel makes that conflict even sharper. But as theologians in that struggle we wish you His peace and more. We pray that a double measure of His Spirit may be yours so that you discern ever more clearly how all questions of life and faith in our church and our ministry must be posed anew and reconsidered in the light of the priority of the Gospel. In that work we are one, for the Gospel has made us one.

The Gospel is our agenda!

As we undertake this mission we bear our burdens and we bear with our brothers, remembering that our brothers also bear with us, and that Christ bears us all. Thus it is that as we bid you farewell we offer you this parting peace, which is His peace. And we speak that word with you as we have spoken it with each other at every campus communion, "Peace, Brothers!"