

#762 Nervy Faith, or How to Appall a Pietist

Colleagues,

Something a bit lighter for once, and why not, it being the season of light and laughter as the Spirit makes epiphanies pop here and there.

I pass along a little thing that an old friend sent me the other day. The immediate source is the online version of [Lapham's Quarterly](#), a magazine that addresses matters of current interest with voices from the past. The topic of the latest issue is "Intoxication." It includes the excerpt from Luther that you'll get to below, culled from a letter he wrote to a favorite student named Jerome. My friend, who never calls me by nickname, thought I'd appreciate that. I did.

Then I caught myself appreciating the real gift in this piece. So will you. It's not the feature that seems to have caught and titillated the *Lapham* editors, namely Luther's attitude toward beer. The far greater surprise, especially in an American Protestant context, is his attitude toward superficial sinning in general. He doesn't fear it. It doesn't bug him. Far from tut-tutting and wagging his finger after the fashion of the long-faced elder, he finds a positive use for it as a weapon against the tempter who will use God's Law to gut God's Gospel and undermine the sinner's confidence in Christ. Sounds familiar, does it not? Who of us has not fallen for that over and over again? So enjoy this bit of genuine Lutheran refreshment.

Next question: why do we insist on hiding such gifts from our children?

By the way, the *Lapham* editors cut away the most important lines of the piece. I found them in a Google-books edition of Luther's *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, assembled and translated by Theodore Tappert. See the material in square brackets at the end. Of course you'll find [the whole letter](#) in the Tappert edition. Do check it out. It's well worth reading.

Peace and Joy,
Jerome (Jerry) Burce, for the editorial team.

Luther, writing in 1530 to Jerome Weller—

Whenever this temptation of melancholy comes to you, beware not to dispute with the devil nor allow yourself to dwell on these lethal thoughts, for so doing is nothing less than giving place to the devil and so falling. Try as hard as you can to despise these thoughts sent by Satan. In this sort of temptation and battle, contempt is the easiest road to victory; laugh your enemy to scorn and ask to whom you are talking. By all means flee solitude, for he lies in wait most for those alone. This devil is conquered by despising and mocking him, not by resisting and arguing. Therefore, Jerome, joke and play games with my wife and others, in which way you will drive out your diabolic thoughts and take courage.

Be strong and cheerful and cast out those monstrous thoughts. Whenever the devil harasses you thus, seek the company of men, or drink more, or joke and talk nonsense, or do some other merry thing. Sometimes we must drink more, sport, recreate ourselves, aye, and even sin a little to spite the devil, so that we leave him no place for troubling our consciences with trifles. We are conquered if we try too conscientiously not to sin at all. So when the devil says to you, "Do not drink," answer him, "I will drink, and right freely, just because you tell me not to." One

must always do what Satan forbids. What other cause do you think that I have for drinking so much strong drink, talking so freely and making merry so often, except that I wish to mock and harass the devil who is wont to mock and harass me. Would that I could contrive some great* sin to spite the devil, that he might understand that I would not even then acknowledge it and that I was conscious of no sin whatever. We, whom the devil thus seeks to annoy, should remove the whole Decalogue from our hearts and minds. [When the devil throws our sins up to us and declares that we deserve death and hell, we ought to speak thus: "I admit that I deserve death and hell. What of it? Does this mean that I shall be sentenced to eternal damnation? By no means. For I know One who suffered and made satisfaction in my behalf. His name is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Where he is, there I shall be also."]

** Tappert: "some token sin." Which is it, "great" or "token"? If one of you has access to the original Latin and can look it up, I'd love to hear from you. -JB*