

At Home in the
**HOUSE OF
MY FATHERS**

Presidential Sermons, Essays,
Letters, and Addresses from
the Missouri Synod's Great Era
of Unity and Growth

By Matthew C. Harrison



LUTHERAN
LEGACY

Propositions on Unevangelical Practice

1862 Address to the Central District

By H. C. Schwan

Translated by Matthew C. Harrison

In the years 1852–1878, Schwan served as Vice President of the Central District, President of the Central District, and Synod Vice President. No doubt, under the burdens of the Civil War and social upheaval, many pastors were responding in legalistic ways. Schwan addressed his district with encouragement amidst the fear that the Zeitgeist draw the Church into the “Strudel” of the times. His theses on unevangelical practice are a courageous masterpiece of Gospel-centered teaching on how pastors might avoid legalism and let the Gospel predominate in all of Church life. Legalism has always been a danger in the Church, but the immediate answer of legalistic compulsion to solve problems in pastoral practice never results in God-pleasing Church life. Moreover, legalism finally produces the very circumstance it desires to avoid. “Let us courageously make an end of all unevangelical practice; but let us not forget that there is but one step from legalistic to antinomian practice.” This is Schwan’s introduction of the issues to the Central District convention at which he presented the matter in 1862.

Translated from Bericht ueber die Achte Jahresversammlung des Mittleren Districts der deutschen evang.-luth. Synode von Missouri, Ohio u.a. Staaten AD 1862; nebst Anhang, enthaltend einige Schriftstuecke von der Siebenten Jahresversammlung obiger Synode vom Jahre 1861 (St. Louis: Synodaldruckerei von Aug. Wiebusch u. Sohn, 1862). —M. H.

BROTHERS IN THE OFFICE AND THE FAITH, HONORED IN THE LORD! Once again we are gathered together for a district convention [*District-synode*]. Another portion of our synodical course is behind us, and now we move forward into a new year together as a synod.

It would seem appropriate that as thoughtful pilgrims in this life, having again left behind us a portion of our journey, we should cast a glance to the road that lies behind us. We can then fix our eyes on the path and goal before us, before we begin our journey into what lies ahead.

The year past has been a difficult time for us. The hand of the Lord lay heavy upon this country. His judgment has come upon this people. But far from recognizing the hand that strikes them, the multitude are hardened in the desires of their hearts. The longer and the more wild passions are unfettered, the foundations of human society are shaken, such that everything is in flux. The threatening storm has not been able to snuff out our flickering

candle. Our unity is untorn, and our hearts are not estranged from one another. But we pass through these times as through a terrible and stifling wind, and the influence of the spirit of the age is only too evident. For the most part, the convulsions of the world strike the righteous as they do the godless. And so faithful Christians can only remove themselves with great difficulty from the profound agitation, disquiet, and anxiety that besets the entire world. And who among us has not experienced how easily concern for the one thing needful is pushed aside, and the hand ceases to advance the Lord's work? Even when the foot is still on the right path, the weary knee steps only slowly and in uncertainty on the path to eternal life.

What would be left of us if the evil spirits, which rule the *Zeitgeist*, would be disposed to draw us completely into the *Strudel*, and if He were not truthful who promised not to tempt us beyond what we can bear and to keep us steadfast until the end? Truly, it is due to the goodness and mercy of the Lord that we are not completely at wits' end. For His mercy is everlasting. It is new every morning, and great is Thy faithfulness! And this, *this*, my esteemed brothers, is what we will confess with loud honor and praise of our merciful and gracious God, especially as we humbly look back upon the course of time. It is the kindness of the Lord that we are not exhausted. It is the goodness of the Lord that our lamps still stand and our torches still burn. It is the goodness of the Lord that we are still together on the way.

So then, with all the more confidence, let's look to the road ahead. Indeed, let's not be deceived. The clouds on the horizon have not dispersed. No. In fact, they rise up all the darker and more threatening. It is quite possible that the most difficult blows are still to come. For the arm of the Lord is not yet extended. It is absolutely possible that we should still expect completely different tribulations and dangers. But we will not lose courage! The mercy of the Lord has no end! It is new every morning; and His faithfulness is great. We are but spiritual foreigners and pilgrims, who have no abiding home here below but seek the one to come. Only let us raise again the weary hand and tired knee. Only let us hold tight the staff, which is written of in Psalm 23. Then, come what may, with the holy psalmist, we will be able to say: "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever" [Psalm 23:4–6 KJV]. Amen.

Now then, allow me to address the subjects that will especially occupy our dealings in this year's assembly.

It would be good if the right that our constitution grants to every member of the Synod, that is, the ability to propose the matters for discussion, be made use of more than has been the case. That would make it easier to recognize what might be most necessary and profitable for the allotted time. Since I had not received such proposals, I had to choose

the matters that appeared to be most valuable for our attention. I did this with the counsel of a number of brothers. In addition to those matters which our honored General [Synod] President [Wyneken was president from 1850–1864] has communicated to us, I place the following matters before this honorable synod:

First, several theses against unevangelical practice. We have at numerous synods treated the doctrine of justification, that high, chief article of our Christian faith. At times we have dealt with the doctrine in and of itself, and we have also treated its correspondence with the article of Christian freedom and the doctrine of sanctification. We have also had a detailed paper presented on how the doctrine of justification is to be handled appropriately in the sermon. Should we not then expect that the continued and earnest influence of this article, which makes the Gospel the Gospel, has filled us all with an evangelical spirit with respect to knowledge and disposition? Should not a real evangelical practice dominate generally among us in matters of the governance of the Church, congregation, school, and home?

To be sure, these dealings have brought manifold blessings. This is certainly not merely a matter of faith. Indeed, I see its fruit here and there. But even so, I would be deluded if, in spite of all this, I did not see that there still remains among us practice which, while not directly contradicting the acknowledged and confessed doctrine [of justification], yet in no way fully corresponds to it. Either I have a completely false notion of evangelical practice or there is still here and there among us a more or less unevangelical, legalistic manner [of] dealing. There is nothing here to be surprised at. For it is generally so that life and its dealings lag behind faith and Confession. But it still is doubtless a great shame and evil. For such practice not only produces a great deal of useless effort and anxiety, it also hinders like few other things the course and effectiveness of the Gospel, and has perhaps driven away from us more hearts than we may know. Is it not then worth the effort also to examine our practice according to the Gospel? I hope to God that a significant investigation of the same would not merely serve to heal all sorts of individual problems and failings, but would also bring another great blessing. It would, if God grants, not only reveal whether and to what extent we actually grasp the Gospel, and walk in it to the very marrow of our being (practice is indeed the proof of the theory). It would also help us achieve a still further and all-encompassing grasp of the same. Indeed, the example of something is indeed the first and best way to make the rule quite clear. This hope has moved me to present to the honorable synod the theses that were composed to this end.

A second matter to deal with: the relation of a Christian-minded schoolteacher with his students and also with the congregation and its pastor. We certainly have every cause for joy and thanksgiving for our schools when we think of them. It was only a few years ago that scarcely a teacher was to be had for our many children. So almost all of our preachers, of necessity, had to take over the office of schoolteacher. But now, year after year, our [teachers'] seminary is placing a number of young workers into the field. New schools are being established; the old are being expanded and greatly enlarged. This is so particularly

where larger congregations already have ordered instruction of classes with a number of teachers. The schools of our congregations are gradually growing larger than all other German schools. What a fortuitous outlook for instruction in our schools, if it also continues in the right spirit. What a glorious vocation it is to work in the field that is truly the school of planting the Church! If this task is mandated to the Office [of the Ministry] to which the entire herd is commended, then certainly those to whom the rearing of the Lord's lambs is entrusted are the noblest and most important. Indeed, who may deny that under certain circumstances, the office of schoolteacher can accomplish as much or more for the kingdom of God than the very preaching office itself! It is, however, a real problem that the great importance and glorious nature of this office is unfortunately not yet generally and sufficiently acknowledged and valued. On the other hand, there are examples where, on occasion, it is overvalued out of misunderstanding. There is not much surprise when particularly the young brothers, fresh out of the [teachers'] seminary, go into schools and do not always in all matters properly understand their office and vocation. They have not always succeeded in heading down the right path. Therefore I recommend the honorable synod pay particular attention to the paper that deals with this issue.

The third and last matter to which I wish to direct your attention is an answer to the question "Why is *Christenlehre*¹ not better attended?" Is it perhaps not appealing because it appears to be unnecessary? I fear this is the case. It is true, this topic has been addressed often. But what other means would we have then but the teaching, chastening, encouraging Word? What else can we do than progressively make use of this Word until things change and become better? And it has to get somewhat better. There are certainly congregations, and their number is increasing, God be praised, in which the dear catechism is held in due honor. In such congregations, the great blessing of *Christenlehre* is plainly experienced, and they bear witness to the foundation and advancement of saving knowledge. Overall, however, the old complaint continues that for a long time now, *Christenlehre* is not properly valued and attended. What is the reason? General laziness alone cannot be the cause; otherwise, the same complaint would be true with respect to the minor Sunday services with sermon, which still enjoy broad popularity. Without doubt, much depends upon the manner in which catechism instruction is held. And furthermore, that points to the view one has of the purpose and goal of the same.

But no one can fail to notice the uncertainty and lack of consensus among us on this question. This is indicated already by what we call it: "*Christenlehre*." This has in view the young children. To others it is the "Catechism examination," and their object is especially to drill the confirmation youth. To the third, it is "*Kinder-lehre*," and they have in mind only the schoolchildren.

¹ *Christenlehre* was a time for catechetical instruction of children that was held just before or between services, sometimes Sunday afternoons.

Accordingly, the first is mostly teaching in the form of dialogues. The second gives a more summary examination. The third limits itself completely to the brief explanation of the words of the text. And there are other approaches as well! I would like to weigh in on this matter, but that might be somewhat improper. The matter will be taken up in this gathering at the appointed time. I will thus limit myself and commend the referred-to lecture to the honorable Synod for thorough discussion. Thereby, God willing, we will be able to acknowledge the true cause of the unfortunate state of affairs [and] take the right means for correction, all so that teacher and hearer may give themselves with renewed zeal to catechism instruction.

That would be, then, my honored and beloved brothers, the matters that I wanted to set before you. Now, let's get to work. And [may] the Lord our God be gracious to us and prosper the work of our hands. Yes, may He prosper the work of our hands! Amen!