

**Walk Circumspectly  
in the World God So Loves**

**The Members of the Body of Christ Living in the Last Days**

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**James M. Braun**

## I. Walk Circumspectly

Psalm 2

5        *Why do the nations rage,  
And the people plot a vain thing?  
The kings of the earth set themselves,  
And the rulers take counsel together,  
Against the LORD and against His Anointed, saying,  
“Let us break Their bonds in pieces  
And cast away Their cords from us.”*

10       *He who sits in the heavens shall laugh;  
The Lord shall hold them in derision.  
Then He shall speak to them in His wrath,  
And distress them in His deep displeasure:  
“Yet I have set My King  
On My holy hill of Zion.”*

15       *“I will declare the decree:  
The LORD has said to Me,  
‘You are My Son,  
Today I have begotten You.  
Ask of Me, and I will give You  
The nations for Your inheritance,  
And the ends of the earth for Your possession.  
You shall break them with a rod of iron;  
You shall dash them to pieces like a potter’s vessel.’”*

25       *Now therefore, be wise, O kings;  
Be instructed, you judges of the earth.  
Serve the LORD with fear,  
And rejoice with trembling.  
Kiss the Son, lest He be angry,  
And you perish in the way,  
When His wrath is kindled but a little.  
Blessed are all those who put their trust in Him.*

35       **There is no existential threat to the Church.** I was going to stop there and maybe I should have. After all, our Lord Jesus is quite adamant in telling us that the one, holy Church will never cease to exist. No one person, no one army, not even the amassed legions of earth and hell combined would be able to build an embankment around her and level her and her children to the ground. It simply will not and *cannot* happen. Ever.

40       Yet the temptation is very real for you and me here in this convention hall, the doors and windows being locked, so to speak, to live in fear of the world. Not only are the streets mean, but so are many of the institutions that at one time were far more amenable to the Church and her mission in civic life. The antagonism in our nation for those who profess the Name of Jesus Christ and confess His truth has reached a fevered pitch so that at times it seems that only her annihilation will satisfy the demands of the maddening crowds.

45 But as Jesus said to those trembling on Easter evening: *Peace be with you* (St. John 20:19)<sup>1</sup>. Our Lord's solution to the turmoil that was so threatening to them in the streets and courtyards of Jerusalem was His powerful declaration of peace. No doubt brought to mind for them were the words He spoke just a few days earlier, right *before* His capture, trial, crucifixion and death: *Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid* (St. John 14:27). His peace bracketed the cross.

Unlike how these words are used by a current political pundit, this is not an admonition to calm down and know that everything will be alright. That the economy will improve. That your preferred candidate will win. That somehow God will come down and with the same finger that wrote the commandments on stone tablets inscribe in the American conscience a proper respect for Him and His rules that will lead us again to be a righteous nation upon which the Lord's blessings will be showered.

That's not true peace, though. Oh, sure, it's a desirable peace, and we pray for something very much like that when we ask in the General Prayer:

60 *Let Your protecting hand be over our country and over all who travel.  
Prosper what is good among us and bring to naught every evil counsel and purpose. Protect and bless Your servants, the President of the United States, the Governor of this state, our judges and magistrates and all in authority. Fit them for their high calling by the gift of Your Spirit of wisdom and fear, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence.*<sup>2</sup>

This is just as our Lord commands through St. Paul: *Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior* (1 Timothy 2:1-3).

We must always remember, though, that there will never be, nor has there ever been, a total ceasefire between the Church and this world. Even those days upon which we look so fondly when churches and schools were filled to capacity, when we had more than enough pastors to serve the expanding flocks across the country, there were insidious forces at work behind the façade of success.

When Jesus spoke those words of peace, though, it was before His capture in the garden...before His disciples would see Him brutalized...before they saw Him dead. Things, in an earthly sense, would not get better despite the resurrection three days later. They were told that they would be hounded and later even put to death for reasons similar to those that put Him on the cross.

Remember that we still live in this world, something which our Creator is intimately familiar with, having Himself entered it for our salvation. And so how are we to react to the challenges that face the Church and her members? With what weapons are we to fight? What, first, does it mean to "Walk Circumspectly in the World God So Loves"?

When we consider the words of St. Paul to the Ephesians, it might help to understand him better if you picture that the people in that city were members of a congregation that was very much like yours. We oftentimes look at the people in the Bible as felt figures in a folder who are pulled out only when we need to put them up on the board and use them as an example – good or

90 bad – for us. There’s something of a disconnect between us and them so that we think that what is being addressed doesn’t have all that much to do with our situation.

Picture those Christians in the church in Ephesus as though Sunday after Sunday they were sitting alongside you in your sanctuary back home. With you they bowed before the Lord to confess their sins and then heard the Word of God that forgave them. With you they sang *psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs* (Ephesians 5:19) to one another. With you they prayed and gave their gifts as a thank-offering to the Lord for His abundant mercy. With you they came to the altar of Jesus humbly to partake of His body and blood in the Sacrament of the Altar. With you they met privately with their pastors for confession and absolution, to hear his counsel. With you they assembled outside the Divine Service to bury the dead and spend time socially with one another for the mutual support they could give and receive in a city that was hostile to them.

The culture outside their church was not unlike ours either. They lived in a city in the center of which was a temple dedicated to the fertility goddess Diana. The Ephesians took part in all the rituals and experiences typical especially of the cults of the female gods. Thomas Winger in his commentary on the letter to the Ephesians states that it is *a fair assumption that the sort of fertility rituals associated with other ancient cults was practiced also here this probably included the services of sacred prostitutes in the temple precincts who offered union with its deity and the promise of fertility through sexual relations with her worshippers.*<sup>3</sup> Sound familiar? It should.

In other words, these people needed Jesus—which is just what St. Paul gave them.

110 *And [Paul] went into the synagogue and spoke boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading concerning the things of the kingdom of God. But when some were hardened and did not believe, but spoke evil of the Way before the multitude, he departed from them and withdrew the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus. And this continued for two years, so that all who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks”* (Acts 19:8-10).

As commanded by Jesus, Paul began in each city with the Jews. He spoke to them about how Jesus was, in fact, the Christ foretold by Moses and the Prophets, the Christ who appeared to Paul, instructed him, and sent him as His apostle. And so, Paul likely had no reason to speak to *them* of Diana and the things associated with her. But because some of them simply refused to believe his eyewitness testimony, Paul then went into the city proper to bring God’s Law and Gospel to the citizens there, reasoning with them as he did earlier on Mars Hill in Athens.

During his several years of preaching in Ephesus, Paul and the other shepherds baptized, forgave, distributed Jesus’ body and blood to those who saw their desperate need of God’s love. The congregation there lived on something of an island, closed off from the debauchery and unbelief that surrounded them. More and more people joined that group seeing in the Word of God their salvation; so much so that those who crafted silver figurines of Diana to be sold to the pilgrims to her shrine noticed a drop-off in sales. Because many were being converted to The Way, they were abandoning their former lifestyles and the rituals with them as they turned to the crucified and risen Christ and His Means of Grace for their hope’s foundation. As often happens when people’s wallets were being threatened, there was great unrest in the city. A large crowd gathered to protest and to rid themselves of the threat posed by Paul and the other disciples.

A mob mentality gripped many in that group. After they had seized several of the Christians, we are told: *Some therefore cried one thing and some another, for the assembly was*

confused, and most of them did not know why they had come together (Acts 19:32). Yet they still acted—ignorantly, yes, but dangerously so for those followers of Jesus. But then an interesting thing happened.

140 It is sometimes said in the study of history that if your enemy says something positive about you, it's likely true. St. Luke went on to tell us:

145 *And when the city clerk had quieted the crowd, he said: "Men of Ephesus, what man is there who does not know that the city of the Ephesians is temple guardian of the great goddess Diana, and of the image which fell down from Zeus? Therefore, since these things cannot be denied, you ought to be quiet and do nothing rashly. For you have brought these men here who are neither robbers of temples nor blasphemers of your goddess" (Acts 19:35-37).*

150 It would appear as though St. Paul did not spend his time among the Ephesians bashing their goddess or the corrupt practices associated with her, at least as they understood his message. He reasoned with them and from the Apostles and Prophets<sup>4</sup> told them who they were and who Jesus was and what He had done for them. He stepped aside and let the Holy Spirit handle his discussions to the extent that nothing he or the others had said could be considered criminal or even blasphemous (which would be the same thing in Ephesus, really) regarding the goddess Diana, even though the livelihoods of some were threatened.

155 St. Paul and the others did as St. Peter exhorted in his first letter:

160 *Therefore submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, whether to the king as supreme, or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men—as free, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice, but as bondservants of God. Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king (3:13-17).*

165 From what we know of the contents of God's Word, Paul must have spoken to them about sin and grace perhaps without even mentioning the goddess Diana or the worship of her. He revealed to them the only true God in the way the only true God wants to be shown to the world: as the Judge and Savior of all. Paul labored in the Lord's vineyard using those things Jesus promised would make disciples of all the nations: the forgiveness of sins given through baptism and the teaching of *all things* Jesus had commanded His followers to declare.

170 There was no attempt to reform Ephesus, to change the town's leadership, to stand with a megaphone on a street-corner declaring "The end is near!" He and the others simply spoke the truth of the hope that was in them.

175 When this letter was sent to the church at Ephesus, Paul had been gone for some time. And, as happened elsewhere, some of the Christians there began to look with longing for their old life, to the old paths they once followed in obedience to the worship of the goddess Diana and all that entailed. This is why St. Paul seems overly preoccupied with sexual sin. He was concerned that they would go back to that place where they were before when they worshiped idols and practiced all manner of debauchery.

180

Understanding this it would appear that Paul was advocating that the people straighten up and fly right. To rededicate themselves to walk the walk of the Ten Commandments and keep themselves pure from such sins in which the society around them participated to excess. It seems reasonable, then, to take *walk circumspectly* as a moralistic command in the mode of those  
185 immortal words of Haven Gillespie in that well-known Christmas hymn that tells children: *You better watch out, you better not cry...*<sup>5</sup>

We often “run home to momma” with regards to the Law. Why? Because it works. It works at Christmas to modify our children’s behavior. It works in our culture when we outlaw certain behaviors from both left and right. It. Just. Works. With more emphasis on the rules in  
190 the Church, then, evidence tells us that the behavior of *some* people, at least, would improve.

As I’ve told my treasurers through the years, I can increase our offerings many times over if I say that the Lord demands – no, not ten, I’d give them a break – but eight percent of their adjusted gross income... not the gross! And people would give. Oh, sure, not the same people attending now. Knowing better, many, if not most, would also leave the congregation. But more  
195 would likely flock to it because, in general, people love being told that their holier living will lead to better living. (cf. Mormonism [3/4 of a trillion dollars in assets], Osteen, Copeland, Dollar, Jakes, et al.)

It’s more than just rules with Paul, though. His chief concern is not morality in the sense that he seeks to improve it by the Law.<sup>6</sup> With his imagery of light and dark and of walking, Paul  
200 is reaching beyond the moral failings of the society to tell the Christians in Ephesus that participating in such sinful things does not just bring judgment upon them because of their actions, but that they will lead them into the much greater sin of unbelief.

*Therefore be imitators of God as dear children. And walk in love, as Christ  
205 also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma.*

*But fornication and all uncleanness or covetousness, let it not even be named  
among you, as is fitting for saints; neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor  
210 coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks. For this you know, that no fornicator, unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not be partakers with them.*

*For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as  
215 children of light (for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth), finding out what is acceptable to the Lord. And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of those things which are done by them in secret. But all things that are exposed are made manifest by the light, for whatever makes  
220 manifest is light. Therefore He says:*

*“Awake, you who sleep,  
Arise from the dead,  
And Christ will give you light.”*

225           *See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the  
time, because the days are evil* (Ephesians 5:1-16).

          Here Paul warned the Ephesians: *do not be partakers with them*. Who are the “them”?  
They are the idolators there in that city from among whom *some* of the Christians had come. He  
230 wanted them *not* to become one with them either in practice or faith, because if they did, they  
then would end up back into the darkness from which they came.

          So also with us. No, we weren’t united with the idolatrous of this world as it currently  
stands, were we? Yes, we were and sometimes we *are*. We were once *dead in our trespasses and  
sins* (Ephesians 2:1). Our fleshly mind from the moment of conception was corrupt and we were  
235 enemies of God (Romans 8:7; 5:10), children of the devil.<sup>7</sup> We all were by nature idol  
worshipers, blasphemers, despisers of God’s Word, disobedient children, murderers, adulterers  
of all stripes (in other words, we were all hetero- and homosexual adulterers [and beyond]),  
thieves, liars, covetousness of all those things we think we deserve. Breaking just one  
commandment made us guilty of them all.

240           Yet by baptism we were raised from that death to a new life. Having been signed on the  
forehead and breast with the mark of the cross of Jesus, a target is put on us. Satan and his  
demons direct their energies at us with the result that the danger is very real for us to be tempted,  
to lapse back into what we once were. It is with this in mind that God’s Word continually  
reminds us of our former nature, but then, and chiefly, it tells us who we are right now in Christ  
245 Jesus.

          Right before this chapter St. Paul wrote *But you have not so learned Christ, if indeed you  
have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus: that you put off,  
concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful  
lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was  
250 created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness* (4:20-24).

          It is not just a reformation of currently sinful lives, then, of which Paul was speaking. He  
was telling the Ephesians to avoid unbelief, to avoid being joined once again in spirit and  
worship with the pagan and unregenerate forces, because they would be tempted to fall back into  
the faithless existence they had from conception until they were adopted by God and filled with  
255 His Spirit. See how he emphasized this point: *For this you know, that no fornicator, unclean  
person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and  
God*.

          Thus St. Paul exhorts us to be *wise*, but not just in the sense of knowing right and wrong,  
but by by the Lord immersing us in His Word in which true wisdom is to be found. Paul  
260 described this when he wrote to the messed-up church in Corinth in his first letter to them: *For  
Jews request a sign* [a visible proof], *and Greeks seek after wisdom* [a reasonable proof]; *but we  
preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those  
who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because  
the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.* (1:22-  
265 25).

          Going back to the beginning of this 5th chapter of the letter to the Ephesians helps us to  
understand this better. When Paul described Jesus as *an offering and a sacrifice to God for a  
sweet-smelling aroma*, he was not talking—as a friend of mine once said—of the smell of a  
backyard barbeque. Why?

270 Well, at the risk of disagreeing with my dear, sainted friend, it was because the sacrifices  
at the Tabernacle and Temple were anything but sweet to the nose or pleasant to the eyes.  
Burning hair and oily smoke with fat running off the altar by the gallon are not a feast for the  
senses. Yet those offerings were accepted by God. So also with Jesus' sacrifice. It was bloody,  
smelly, naked, shameful, hellfire-poured-out-on-Him agonizing. But to the nose of God, it made  
275 for a perfume of a far better quality than anything man could create. And being recognized as full  
payment for the world's sins, it resulted in your salvation.

Still, we want to quantify everything regarding the Christian faith. We want hard  
numbers on which to base our estimation of the success or failure of what we are doing as in a  
decidedly anti-christian world. We zero in, then, on behaviors and improving them as though that  
280 was the desired result in our estimation. We become pleased when we preach the Law and  
people respond to its demands and threats. We make numerical success be the determiner of  
whether we are doing the right thing, something, then, for which we must give the Mormonism  
and Islam credit because they are growing in both wealth, power, and membership.

Yet the Christian faith is not so quantifiable as that. In fact, St. Paul reminds us in his  
285 letter to the Colossians: *If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above,  
where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on  
the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life  
appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory (3:1-4).* Our lives as baptized children of  
God are hidden to the world. So often the world sees your days as full of pain and sorrow and  
290 continuing sin. It looks at those persecuted and killed for confessing Jesus as losers in grace's  
lottery. It's easy, isn't it, to buy into that sort of thinking.

*But you have not so learned Christ.*<sup>8</sup>

The essential nature of that group of Christians in Ephesus, like ours, was *not* found in  
them refraining from sin. I would guess—as with you and me—their neighbors could easily  
295 point out the evil they committed at least in word and deed many times between trips to the  
church nave/the Lord's Table as they lived their lives in their vocations. Oh, sure, it may not  
have been frequenting the temple prostitutes in worship of Diana, but the innate hypocrisy even  
of Christians would have been seen and acknowledged as being contrary to their profession of  
faith. Yes, saints, but also sinners.

300 What did mark them as something different was not their holiness, but the holiness of  
Jesus Christ given to them as a free gift. It was found in that the *all things* Jesus sent His apostles  
out to teach and the baptisms they were to perform were all done with the purpose of forgiving  
sins. These things revealed them to be different from the rest of the Ephesians and it was this that  
St. Paul preached and did in both synagogue and street and homes for two full years. And this is  
305 the very same thing that happens daily in your own congregations back home.

That this is Paul's intent here can be seen in how he continued after he told them to *walk  
circumspectly*:

310 *Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And  
do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit,  
speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and  
making melody in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things  
to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one  
another in the fear of God.*

315 *Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything.*

320 *Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself (Ephesians 5:17-28).*

325 Certainly, Paul goes on to discuss other relationships in the family and society, but it all starts with this continuing bond—physical and spiritual—of Jesus with His Church. It is because of that holy union that we are victorious in our wrestling against principalities and powers and the *rulers of the darkness of this age* (Ephesians 6:12).

330 And so Paul, having spoken of the spiritual and physical adultery of which the Ephesian Christians were in danger, moved here from the negative (don't) to the positive (be). He took them from the impurity of their relationships with idols and idol-worshippers to the purity of their relationship with Jesus Christ, the Church's holy Groom.

335 This is the *living hope* of which St. Peter wrote in his first letter.<sup>9</sup> "Living" because it is the living Christ who joins Himself to the Church, to you. "Living" because it can never die. It is an enduring hope that will be turned to joy when the Groom returns for His Bride. Though she can fail Him, He can never, nor will He ever fail her.

340 Satan, having done all he could to defeat the Son of God and having botched the job, turns His attention to you, the weaker vessel.<sup>10</sup> *Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour* (1 Peter 5:8). He knows his *time is short* (Revelation 12:12).<sup>11</sup> That sign of the holy cross marked on your forehead and your breast at your baptism is a target at which he aims his arrows to try to wound you so that you begin to think that this heavenly Groom isn't such a big deal after all.

345 Where was it that Satan first aimed his weapons? It was at the relationship between Adam and Eve. He tempted Eve hoping to influence Adam. He struck at the very core of their bond, causing Eve to place her desires above Adam's and making Adam forget his place as, not just the head, but also the protector of Eve. He stood there dumb, unmoving as she listened and ate. And thus the devil labors today to get you to obtain for yourself what joys can be found in this joyless world, hoping to prove to yourself and maybe to others that God really does love you because—see?—He's given you so much stuff.

350 This is why Paul sought to focus this little flock on those same *things above* the Colossians were to seek. They were to see that what they had in their congregation was the one and only thing that was needful for them. Their pastors served them by forgiving and retaining sins, by giving God's grace in the Gospel in Word and Sacraments, by shepherding them as they were confronted by the assaults of those living around them, and even when they doubted the words and promises of God. Those things—*all things*—were given them Sunday after Sunday in the Divine Service as they continued in the apostles' doctrine, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers that had been part and parcel of the Church's life since Pentecost. See how this plays out for us as we gather just as they did.

360 As Jesus said, *Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age*, so He is. When we  
*are gathered* together in His Name, it is not just so that we can know that He is with us, as vital  
to our life and salvation as that is. But there is still more to the Divine Service than that. Our God  
is never done giving us His love, and so He seeks to give it to us in more and as many ways as  
possible. Not only does Jesus Christ speak to His Church there through His ministers, but He  
365 also comes to her and—as a husband to his wife—speaks words of love to her and joins with her  
in a sacred communion so that two become one.

There you hear a joyous conversation taking place as the Husband and His Wife—Christ  
and His Church—enjoy their spiritual and physical union. You can almost picture them as  
though they started out on two opposite sides of a room at the wedding banquet and, through  
370 their words, you can see them moving closer and closer until they embrace for that first dance.  
*The Lord be with you... and with your spirit... lift up your hearts... we lift them up unto the  
Lord... let us give thanks to the Lord, our God... it is good and right so to do...take eat...take,  
drink...for the forgiveness of sins.*

The desire of Christ and His Bride is that they be united, body and soul, for eternity. This  
375 union finds its fulfillment—on earth—in this service that is truly divine when the Husband  
washes and dresses the bride in Holy Baptism, when He speaks words of love and forgiveness to  
her in Absolution, when He offers His very body and the blood to her to be in communion with  
her as He carries her through this time and over the thresh-hold into eternity.

This is a treasure inexpressible, but it has deep meaning to each one of us by faith as we  
380 struggle daily with the vagaries of a life that leads to death. *Walking circumspectly* means that  
you travel this life avoiding being joined once again in spirit and worship with the powers of  
darkness knowing that you were and are baptized; that you are forgiven your sins of looking  
back like Lot's-wife to where you once were, thinking that those were better times; that you are  
fed with your Lord's body and blood and, having your Savior dwell within you now, you are  
385 blessed, so that

*...in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, [you are] singing and making  
melody in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things to God  
the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another in  
the fear of God."* Jesus' holy Church cannot be destroyed. It will remain as  
390 long as Jesus remains with it, until the *end of the age*.

*And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep;  
for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. The night is far  
spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and  
let us put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in  
395 revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy. But  
put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its  
lusts (Romans 13:11-14).*

## 400 II. Walk Circumspectly in the World God So Loves

**There is an existential threat to you, your children, and your neighbor.** And it's even worse  
than an existential threat. That word means that your very existence is in the balance. But with  
regards to your faith and flesh, the attacks of the evil foe will not result in your dissolution, but  
405 your eternal damnation. It would be one thing to lapse into nothingness, nevermore feeling or

seeing. Simply not being anymore. But it's another to endure the agonies of hell forever, always dying but never dead.

To bring about your eternal destruction, the Deceiver, who desires neither men to be saved nor to come to the knowledge of the truth, uses the weapons he has at hand to push us ever slightly off course, to turn our attention to things that ultimately don't matter. He wants us to think we have the ability to change the world even though we have no real power to do this. He places in our hands what amount to nerf guns with which we think we can battle the dark forces and ultimately protect ourselves from a never-ending descent into hell.

Attorney Craig Parton wrote this in an article entitled "The White Wine Pietists" back in the 1990s:

*Thus the greatest threat to the church today is not from the ACLU, Martin Scorsese, The New Age Movement, Gangsta Rap, Planned Parenthood, Time-Warner, Madonna, Congresswoman Pat Schroeder, or Hugh Hefner. The greatest threat is a crossless pietism that has been given luxury-box seating within the walls of the church militant. It is a crossless pietism with confidence in the old Adam and in the life-giving power of the law. It is, though, the old, dank, putrid theology of glory now in the guise of dominion politics, or the seven promises of a promise keeper, or yielded or victorious living, or traditional family values, or any other appeal to life and salvation not centered in the daily inglorious and lowly forgiveness of sins found only in Christ's atoning death. The new white-wine pietists are lethal because they don't look, smell, dress, or socialize like the pietists of old. They are, however, enemies of the theologia crucis (the "theology of the cross").<sup>12</sup>*

White wine pietists, as he uses the term, are those who look to their successful lives as the only relevant sign of God's favor. Living the good life, they see in their cars, clothes, and an evening chardonnay proof that their faith is in the right place and on the right track. Their churches, too, display similar levels of success, solidifying in their minds that what is being done in them is surely the result of their good works and holy living.

In the 30 years or so since this was written the names have been changed, but the point still remains. In place of those listed, we could perhaps insert: Planned Parenthood (yes, they are still around), Cultural Marxism, Drag Queen Story Hours, Antifa, so-called "Christian Nationalism," or any number of other "usual suspects" whose ideologies we find at odds with God's Word.

Now, Parton is not at all saying that those things he lists are neutral and harmless. But they are not the real threat to the Church itself. The true enemy, he states, is a *crossless pietism*, a crossless Christianity, so to speak, that removes from its center the *Jesus Christ and Him crucified* (1 Corinthians 1:23) which is the power of God. Those who would pursue this kind of Christianity would look for those things that give evidence of the glory of God in ways that can be seen and measured according to human scales to determine their validity. What's missing from this is a "Theology of the Cross."

Perhaps one of the most perplexing *and* comforting parts of the Passion History of our Lord is this: Sitting at the table with His disciples, Jesus had been talking about His betrayal into the hands of sinners. He said that one of those twelve gathered that evening with Him would hand Him over to His enemies. John asked, "*Lord, who is it?*" *Jesus replied: "It is he to whom I*

455 shall give a piece of bread when I have dipped it.” And having dipped the bread, He gave it to Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon. Now after the piece of bread, Satan entered him (St. John 13:25-27). Only Judas understood what had just happened, and at Jesus’ urging he left the table to do what he had planned.

This is when Jesus said: *Now the Son of Man is glorified, and God is glorified in Him. If God is glorified in Him, God will also glorify Him in Himself, and glorify Him immediately* (St. John 13:31). Those words “now” and “immediately” are important. They keep us from understanding the glory as being found only in Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, rightly considered to be amazing, happy events. But the treachery of Judas hardly seems to be a thing of glory. Shame, yes, but not glory.

460 Which is why Jesus called Himself the *Son of Man*. This is a phrase used often to describe the Messiah. He is God who would become Man, conceived of the Virgin just as the Prophet Isaiah foretold hundreds of years earlier. Jesus was telling the disciples that the glory would not be only for a man who offered Himself as a sacrifice in place of others, as someone who stands in the path of a bullet to save a hapless victim. But as Man *and* God He would be glorified there on the cross. Why? Because His sacrifice would indeed be enough to pay for the sins of the whole world which He so loved.

470 St. Paul understood this and wrote to the churches of Galatia: *But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world* (6:14).

This was displayed not long after our Lord’s ascension. The apostles, flush with dramatic success as thousands were baptized, taught, and brought into the fellowship of the holy Supper,<sup>13</sup> had been put into jail by the temple authorities. What was their crime? They healed a bunch of people and preached the Gospel. That’s it.

475 In prison they were locked up, but then the Lord’s angel set them free. They were pursued again by the authorities and thrown back behind bars where they were beaten, commanded not to speak of this Jesus, and then set free. Then we hear: *So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name. And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ* (Acts 5:41-42). They not only put up with their suffering, they rejoiced in it.

485 This is not some sort of mental disorder. They weren’t masochists, though some might think so. They didn’t intentionally proclaim the Gospel hoping... hoping... hoping they could suffer still more as martyrs for the faith and get their version of Islam’s 72 virgins. There were even incidents when they purposely avoided persecution and violence, at times being secreted out from this city or that to escape the mobs that had formed to harm them. The Twelve understood what it was to live under the cross, the cross Jesus said they would bear as they followed and were sent by Him into all the world. This cross, then, patterned their lives and ministries.

490 By nature, though, we reject this sort of thing. Oh, sure, we’re willing to put up with minimal persecution, but we eschew anything greater. We are like the man who came to Jesus claiming to have kept the commandments. He said “*Teacher, all these things I have kept from my youth.*” Then Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, “*One thing you lack: Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me.*” But he was sad at this word, and went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions (St. Mark 10:20-22).

500 The Christian church in the United States of America has great possessions and privileges, perhaps more than most nations on the planet. We have land, buildings, money socked away in funds to use for the expansion of the faith. We also have the freedom to preach and teach as God commands. These are difficult things to have taken away from us. At times, we might even think that the right to these things is something with which we are “endowed by our Creator.”<sup>14</sup>

505 Our Lord Jesus though, tells us otherwise. The nature of the faith has its origins in the suffering of our Lord. As He was antagonized and brutalized, so will those who follow after Him. Those who propose Christianity as a solution to earthy problems have but to look to Jesus’ description of the Gospel’s effect.

510 Yes, of course it will convert unbelievers into believers, sinners into saints in God’s sight, bring comfort in the hour of death to those who are baptized into Christ. There would also be negative effects, too. Jesus’ claim to bring a sword to a nice fight<sup>15</sup> would impact our standing in society and even our closest relationships for the worse.

515 The Christian faith is not a religion of peace in the worldly sense. But the “war” which is waged is *not* instigated by the Church, but by her enemies. There is no call by God for us to conduct a political, military, or even moral *jihad* against those who would attack the proclamation of Christ crucified; but the reverse is often true by the foes of Jesus Christ. It’s as though those twelve legions of angels left unused in Gethsemane still remain in their barracks in our own hours of distress.

520 And rather than bemoan our place in our society, Jesus counsels us when He said that we are *blessed... when men hate you, and when they exclude you, and revile you, and cast out your name as evil, For the Son of Man’s sake* (St. Luke 6:22). Again, this is not something we actively seek but, as with our Lord, we passively endure it for His Name’s and for His Truth’s sake as we saw above with the apostles.

525 In a recent presentation entitled “Confessing Christ in a Hostile Culture,” Professor John Pless noted: “What we see and experience with our own senses seems more trustworthy than God Himself.” He then describes how St. Peter’s first letter informs us on the Cruciform Endurance in the World:

- *Addressed to “exiles” who are “chosen and destined by God” (1:1-2)*
  - *Baptized into a living hope (1:3-5)*
  - *Living as God’s priesthood in the world, receiving suffering in hope (Chapter 2)*
  - 530 • *Giving an answer for the hope within (3:15-16)*
  - *Life in light of the end, enduring suffering while entrusting our souls to a faithful Creator (4:7-19)*
  - *Living in humility, resisting the devil (Chapter 5)*
  - 535 • *“Therefore we would be Christians must surely expect to have the devil with all his angels and the world as our enemies and must expect that they will inflict every possible misfortune and grief upon us. For where Gods Word is preached, accepted, or believed, and bears fruit, there the holy and precious cross will also not be far behind” (LC III:65-66; K-W, 65-66)*
- 540 *“To confess the cross is to bear the cross”- Hermann Sasse<sup>16</sup>*

What this has to do with our lives in this fallen world is something that goes contrary to our reason and even our pride. We spend a great deal of time trying to find ways to “win.” We look

to defeat our enemies upon whom we place all sorts of labels. I am *not* saying that we *shouldn't*  
battle against the dark forces of this age. Those satanic ones who are trying so hard to bring  
545 down a culture that at least at one time valued the basic tenets of God's commandments as a  
pattern for a chaste and decent life lived in all godliness and reverence. The question is: with  
what weapons should we fight these dark forces?

The temptation is very real to try and force the issue and to work toward a visible,  
tangible victory against those who promote evil in this world. We do this when we, as the  
550 Church, make an all-out effort to change things using the tools of the left hand of God. When we  
rely on these things, we can become overly satisfied with an electoral or legislative victory alone  
as though that will make a marked change in the righteousness of the nation.

But politics being what it is, there can be unintended consequences to this. For example,  
two years ago on this floor we had just received word that Roe v. Wade had finally been  
555 overturned. The prayers offered for nearly 50 years, we thought, had been answered in our favor.  
And, in a way, we were right. Fittingly, we sang the *Te Deum* in thanks to our merciful God.  
Was that the end of abortion in the land? No. It still goes on. Perhaps in a more limited way, but  
the division over this topic in our nation is as deep or even deeper than we might think.

The one side declares: "We will pass a bill in the U.S. Congress to make all abortions  
560 illegal!" Then the other side promises: "We will codify Roe v. Wade under federal statutes to  
make it illegal to outlaw abortion even of a full-term 'fetus'." It is a very real possibility that the  
latter might actually happen more so than the former, and more children will be murdered than in  
even the worst years under Roe.

The political system is, of itself, empty of any real power for true change. Yes, as stated  
565 before, behaviors can change as a result of legislation. After all, legislation—despite what many  
say—is morality. Someone's morality, at least. It's a politically derived moral code that because  
of the nature of democracies and representative republics can and does turn on a dime according  
to the capricious nature of the consent of the governed.

When the demon of abortion was cast out from federal interference, there was nothing,  
570 politically speaking, to take its place as those decisions now have been remanded to the states.  
Now, it looks as though seven more demons, more wicked than the first, might come back into  
that House (pun intended) and wreak even more havoc on the unborn because of the nature of  
public opinion these days. In other words, a victory in this realm is not always a victory. But, the  
outcome is God's will in the sense that He determines the course of history: who wins, who  
575 loses, who is in charge, etc. for His own and hidden purposes. This is why He commands us to  
obey even unrighteous rulers. They're His representatives set over us.

With regards to the "Great Commission," on the one hand we rightly focus on the  
spiritual nature of the command. That is, to make disciples by baptizing and *by* teaching. We  
often do not emphasize, though, what Jesus said immediately prior to those familiar words: "*All*  
580 *authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.*" Is this only authority within the  
Church? Certainly not. Jesus' authority extends throughout the whole universe which means that  
*all* mankind is under His right of absolute rule.

See how this is described in Luther's discussion of the 4<sup>th</sup> Commandment in his Large  
Catechism section concerning civil authorities:

585  
*The same (as obedience to parents) also is to be said of obedience to civil  
government, which (as we have said) is all embraced in the estate of  
fatherhood and extends farthest of all relations. For here the father is not one*

590 *of a single family, but of as many people as he has tenants, citizens, or  
subjects. For through them, as through our parents, God gives to us food,  
house and home, protection and security. Therefore, since they bear such  
name and title with all honor as their highest dignity, it is our duty to honor  
them and to esteem them great as the dearest treasure and the most precious  
jewel upon earth.<sup>17</sup>*

595  
It is difficult, isn't it, to "esteem" our rulers. One of our pastors took to task a member  
who had a bumper sticker that emphatically stated: "Obama is not my President." He was told he  
needed to remove it because it was a blatant breaking of the 4<sup>th</sup> Commandment. Then, to be  
consistent with God's Word, he later said the same thing to a member who had a "Trump is not  
600 my President" decal on his car. We do well to understand that the order for Christians, at least, is  
that our faith informs our daily lives and not the other way around, as Psalm 116 says (and notice  
the *because* in verse 1):

Psalm 116  
605 *I love the LORD, because He has heard  
My voice and my supplications.  
Because He has inclined His ear to me,  
Therefore I will call upon Him as long as I live.  
The pains of death surrounded me,  
610 And the pangs of Sheol laid hold of me;  
I found trouble and sorrow.  
Then I called upon the name of the LORD:  
"O LORD, I implore You, deliver my soul!"  
Gracious is the LORD, and righteous;  
615 Yes, our God is merciful.  
The LORD preserves the simple;  
I was brought low, and He saved me.  
Return to your rest, O my soul,  
For the LORD has dealt bountifully with you.  
620 For You have delivered my soul from death,  
My eyes from tears,  
And my feet from falling.  
I will walk before the LORD  
In the land of the living.  
625 I believed, therefore I spoke,  
"I am greatly afflicted."  
I said in my haste,  
"All men are liars."  
What shall I render to the LORD  
630 For all His benefits toward me?  
I will take up the cup of salvation,  
And call upon the name of the LORD.  
I will pay my vows to the LORD  
Now in the presence of all His people.*

635        *Precious in the sight of the LORD*  
             *Is the death of His saints.*  
             *O LORD, truly I am Your servant;*  
             *I am Your servant, the son of Your maidservant;*  
             *You have loosed my bonds.*

640        See the direction of things here. The Psalmist goes from God hearing his prayers, to his deliverance in the face of all men who are liars. He even sings of how his death is considered precious by the Lord. Of course, this Psalm is chiefly about Jesus the Christ. It points to Him and describes the work He did for your salvation, a work He accomplished while putting Himself  
645        fully under the authorities of the day. It is quite informative in that when He stood before Pontius Pilate, He did not declare His sovereignty over the Governor, but kept the 4<sup>th</sup> Commandment in its fullest sense for you who break it so often.

*“Then Pilate said to Him, ‘Are You not speaking to me? Do You not know that*  
             *I have power to crucify You, and power to release You?’ Jesus answered,*  
650        *‘You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from*  
             *above. Therefore the one who delivered Me to you has the greater sin’”* (St.  
             John 19:10-11).

             Jesus here was *not* referring to the Emperor in Rome as the source of Pilate’s authority to execute Him. He was referring to Himself as the Giver of that authority which came from above.  
655        This is an authority, St. James reminds us, which is one of those many good gifts given by God, even though our Lord was convicted and sentenced unjustly on that Good Friday. He rejoiced, if you will, in being worthy to suffer in His Father’s Name... something we need to realize to be true also for ourselves in these contentious days.

             So what should we do in the face of the wickedness that has taken over much of our  
660        culture? A question we must first ask is: “What is God’s will?” in the sense of determining for what we are to advocate in our nations. Do we *know* whom God wants in office? Can we be certain that it is His will that a particular bill pass or that the Supreme Court decides in a particular way? One wonders if the Christians in the countries that made up the former Soviet  
665        Union asked similar questions. Believers today in those places where they are being slaughtered while their officials turn a blind eye to their suffering might be wondering the same. Those Old Testament Christians who suffered under wicked kings in Israel and Judah may have cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken us?”

             An example of this was Jehu. He was the General of Ahab’s armies whom the prophet  
670        Elijah was commanded to anoint as King over the northern kingdom of Israel. Either Elijah didn’t do so, or did it in secret as, sometime later, Elisha instructed one of the “sons of the prophets” to anoint him. When Jehu became King, he brought the Lord’s vengeance upon the whole house of Ahab and Jezebel leaving absolutely no one to challenge him for the throne. *However Jehu did not turn away from the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who had made*  
675        *Israel sin, that is, from the golden calves that were at Bethel and Dan”* (2 Kings 10:29)

             Those sins of Jeroboam that started Israel along the path of false worship that would lead to its destruction, Jehu himself practiced. Oh, he wasn’t as bad as Ahab, but there’s no such thing as being just a little pregnant with idolatry. Either you are worshiping a false god or you’re not. But he was anointed by God!\_The God who knew how his reign and his sons’ reigns would turn out put him on the throne over His people. Why? For His own purposes.

680 In the realms of culture and politics, we certainly know that the Lord wants moral living and just rule. He has us pray for these things. What we don't know, though, is His particular will in a particular situation. As with the people of Israel and Judah He often sent His chastisements via foreign rulers (some of whom were even anointed by Him<sup>18</sup>) who were idolators so that His people would repent and return to Him.

685 This is not to say we shouldn't be involved nor discerning in whom we support and for whom we vote. These are important things. At the same time, we dare not put too much weight on our decisions as though they determine what the future of our nation and people will be. These are things we rightly leave in the hands of the Lord God who made the heavens and the earth. Yes, we are used by Him in our vocations to act, and even vote, chiefly guided by the concern we have for our neighbors. But we don't determine by our own reason or strength the nature of the left hand of God. It's His hand, not ours, and He wields that sword as He alone wills.

690 Now, that may not be to our earthly benefit, humanly speaking, but it will be so spiritually. We are promised that. The good that *all things* (those things Jesus commanded His apostles to teach) bring about is eternal in nature, not temporal. It may be worthwhile to note that the pagan Roman Empire continued on for almost 300 years after our Lord's ascension before it became ostensibly Christian. That's more years than the United States of America has existed. Was the Lord not in control over those years of the empire as the Word of the Lord grew? Was His will not done during the 70 years of Communism in eastern Europe when the Church was driven underground and into the gulags? Is He in control now over our nation which is in such moral and cultural turmoil?

#### THE ONLY JOB OF THE CHURCH IS NOT TO CHANGE THE WORLD BUT TO FORGIVE SINS

705 *Jesus said to them again, "Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you." And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (St. John 20:20-23).*

710 *Then He said to them, "Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And you are witnesses of these things. Behold, I send the Promise of My Father upon you; but tarry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high" (St. Luke 24:46-49).*

715 *Peter continued: "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ." Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call" (Acts 2:35-39).*

725 Jesus here issued no call to reform society or even to reform the priesthood there in Jerusalem. - the men who sentenced Him to death for blasphemy! He sent the Twelve to

proclaim Him and all that He had done by taking upon Himself the sins of the world. This is how much He loved them and the world. Not only by dying for every individual who has lived and ever will live, but by making a way for them to hear about it and have all their guilt taken away. He instituted the Office of the Holy Ministry effectively to bring His peace to the ears and hearts of His Church so that through her all nations might share in this peace through faith.. And though *all nations* is in the Commission, what that means is that His Word would work on individual hearts to bring them the Good News.

In this we can talk about objective and subjective love for your neighbor. Love is an easy concept to talk about in objective terms: “Jesus died for the world.” This is most certainly true. But in terms of the subjective, the individual, it’s much harder because we’d rather operate in categories. It keeps some distance between us and “them.”

The right calls the left “Marxist,” and the left calls the right “Nazis” and in this way any ability to communicate is shut down. “If only that group would think as we do, then we’d like them a whole lot more.” See how often it is that when some celebrity has a change of political or cultural outlook that they, who once were vilified by one side, become their new hero. But when you’re dealing with an individual, these terms are useless because they are not biblical. There is no commandment: “Thou shalt not be a Marxist or a Nazi” anywhere in Scripture. It rather condemns the specific actions and inactions of the individuals who hold to those evil world views. Therefore, we must deal with groups and individuals in terms that the commandments use, trusting the “good and wise”<sup>19</sup> Law of God to do its work even apart from our planning and coordinating.

To see this in action, the situation in much of Europe is dire. Refugees of all sorts are flooding into certain countries resulting in a great deal of tumult. It would be easy simply to categorize those people as “invaders” and treat all of them as such. Doing so, though, gives us a rationale to ignore and even vilify individuals along with the group.

Take a look at this, though. Gottfried Martins is a Lutheran Pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church, a member of the Selbständige Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche, a sister church body of the LCMS. This congregation describes itself: *Trinity Lutheran Church is an international Lutheran Church with members from many different countries. We do mission work especially among refugees from Iran and Afghanistan, offering them opportunities to get to know the Christian faith in Farsi and Dari. Meanwhile we have more than 1200 Farsi and Dari speaking members in our Church. We are the fastest growing congregation of our Lutheran church in Germany.*<sup>20</sup>

Hundreds of conversions have taken place through Baptism. Many former Muslims have been confirmed in the faith and partake of Jesus’ body and blood in the Sacrament of the Altar. These refugees, in other words, were treated first—not as a class of people as the culture might determine it, but—as individual blood-bought souls in need of salvation. That’s it. While some of the Germans and perhaps even clergy might disagree with the policies that brought them there, they saw that **baptizing and teaching** and giving them Jesus Christ to be with them always was of greater importance than whatever policy and political decisions were deemed necessary by their governmental officials.

Were they allowed to keep their former religion? Certainly not. Is it likely that some conversions were not on the up and up? Perhaps. Nevertheless, they were taught to mark and avoid Islam’s false teachings, its empty promises, its phony god. They were not baptized to become dual citizens with one foot in Wittenberg and the other in Mecca. No, they became full-fledged members of the Kingdom of God, His right hand, adopted by Him and given His Name

in those holy waters. The numbers, though, are immaterial, wonderful though they are. Rather, each individual was of more value than the sparrow whose falling God notices, and we rejoice over even the one sinner who repented.

775 Yet you and I so often fail in all of this. When challenged by those who can really do no harm to us or Jesus' Church, we sometimes deny knowing our Lord in the ways He has revealed Himself to us. As we stand around the glowing fire of screens full of social media diatribes against the holy Faith, we falter in our confidence in the promised power of the Means of Grace. In our attempts to demonstrate to the unbelieving masses just how powerful our God is, we cite  
780 His works in nature, we use reasoned counterpoints to the decaying world's rationalization of its evil, and we even reference His sovereignty as we seek and even predict a victory for our side (whatever it is) because we claim to know His will in the matter.

How does this apply to us in our situation today? St. Paul wrote in his second letter to Pastor Timothy: *I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables. But you be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry* (4:1-5).  
790

Both Law and Gospel must be our tools, even though this goes against our nature. We would rather participate in a modern version of the sin of Jeroboam when we exalt politicians, political parties, and even the Constitution as being not just God's visible representatives with regards to His left hand, but as being in their positions (or seeking their positions) because we  
795 know what the will of God is, having so wisely figured out how He wants to get certain result.<sup>21</sup>

And there is a difference between what God's Right Hand and God's Left Hand do. An example of this is what Martin Luther is reported to have said regarding a suicide. In his "Table Talks" he reportedly said:

800 *I don't share the opinion that suicides are certainly to be damned. My reason is that they do not wish to kill themselves but are overcome by the power of the devil. They are like a man who is murdered in the woods by a robber. However, this ought not be taught to the common people lest Satan be given an opportunity to cause a slaughter, and I recommend that the popular custom be strictly adhered to according to which the corpse is not carried over the*  
805 *threshold, etc. Such persons do not die by free choice or by law, but our Lord God will dispatch them as he executes a person through a robber. Magistrates should treat them quite strictly, although it is not plain that their souls are damned. However, they are examples by which our Lord God wishes to show that the devil is powerful and also that we should be diligent in prayer. But for these examples, we would not fear God. Hence he must teach us in this way.*<sup>22</sup>  
810

Notice how he distinguishes between the goals of the Church and State. The State has an interest in preserving life and order. It would not benefit the nation if suicide were promoted as  
815 an option (though some countries are doing this today, including our neighbor to the north), which is why suicide has been considered an unlawful act from which no benefit (e.g. insurance pay-outs) can be gotten. And so for a Christian to advocate politically against suicide would be

quite proper even apart from the Fifth Commandment (from which the State's view of suicide is derived, of course). It's simply a good thing to argue against.

820 The Church, though, doesn't act in that way. It is not trying to preserve a social order, but to proclaim the Gospel of the crucified and risen Christ. And so, as Luther said, in the realm of the Church, we are to treat the suicide as a spiritual, not legal, issue—a breaking of that Fifth Commandment but not an unforgivable sin.

825 How similar today's culture is to that in first-century Ephesus! The influences of unbelief and paganism have entered not just society in general, but our homes, churches, schools, libraries, social media, etc. And, remember, this is also what we were before we were washed, sanctified, and justified *in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God* (1 Corinthians 6:11). These evil influences are capturing many with promises that everyone can determine who they are, based not on objective reality, but on subjective feelings. In the way of the false-  
830 teaching "new apostles" who are gaining popularity in Christian circles, the same message is being proclaimed: "You can create your own reality."

One of the problems with this, though, is that even though these are moral issues the Church is well-qualified to teach, they have become part and parcel of the political realm and so they *appear* to be off-limits to the Church's role in society. This sets a trap for the Church and  
835 therefore we often remain silent on those things of which God has spoken clearly. We see the danger of losing our own members or not attracting new because we seem to be getting into an area—the left hand—where the right hand shouldn't intrude.

As the Church we can and must speak on the morality/immorality of these issues. It is always proper for us to advocate and pray for good order under our rulers. But we must be  
840 careful not to couch our actions in political terms, but to speak clearly what God's Word has to say about them. At the same time, we must be careful not to think that advocating for moral norms will cause the fullness of God's morality to become the norm of this evil world.

By behaving like this, the way is still open for the Church to be able to deal with the individual caught up on these things. If we are treating those afflicted with these sins simply by  
845 lumping them in with the Marxists, the drag queens, and all those political opponents out there, then we may lose the opportunity to speak to those crushed by the Law that condemns their actions. If we restrict our proclamations to "thus says the Lord", we are using a tool God has given the Church, both to inform the society of His will chiefly so that repentance results, and then to inform the individual Christian as to how is to behave as a citizen of the earthly kingdom.

850 In an article about Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Hermann Sasse in pre-World War II Germany, Carl Trueman wrote:

*Now, this confession (The Bethel Confession) was drafted by Bonhoeffer and Sasse. Therefore, any response like "So they just wanted us all to live in a pious huddle and let the world go to the dogs" is clearly risible. Both were  
855 active anti-Nazis and suffered for it. Bonhoeffer was martyred. Sasse's anti-Nazi credentials were such that he was selected by the Allies to help with the de-Nazification of Erlangen University after the war. These were no passive pietists. Yet it was their grasp of the transcendent God and his gospel that  
860 immunized them to the blandishments of Hitler. They did not collapse the transcendence of God into the immanence of political exigency. And it was that very concern for the transcendent that made them wise actors in the world of the immanent.<sup>23</sup>*

865 Those men understood the nature of the Gospel and what it offered and thus they were  
able to deal with the rising tide of antisemitism and belligerence on the part of Hitler and their  
other rulers. They knew that this world and life was not all that there was, and so they were able  
to act, yes, according to their Christian consciences, while at the same time keeping the Gospel  
separate from their political activities.

870 Similarly, Bo Giertz wrote at around the same time in history, but here from the Swedish  
context of a nation set between two anti-Christian philosophies—Nazism and Stalinism:

*[We need] a living faith in the world to come, that which lies beyond and which the  
Church in all times has painted in bold images. All too often it has been said that this  
875 world-to-come can be permitted to fade away and lose its actuality, if only we with all  
our heart took the opportunity to serve God in that setting in which we find ourselves  
today. The church should be more realistic, [it is argued]. However, the more she  
engaged herself in the struggles of the day, the more she was seized by the impatience of  
the fervent advocates fighting for societal causes and the more she devoted herself to  
880 their sharp judgments and their clear opposition against certain of their fellow men. She  
lost the crown of glory upon which it is written: Patiens quia aeterna. [“She is patient, for  
she is of eternity.”] She shared in that sin which so often blemishes our human zeal for  
world improvement: she forgot love to a refractory humanity. She began to protest, scold,  
and condemn, where she was called to suffer, pray, and serve.<sup>24</sup>*

885 None of what these men were saying can be equated with capitulation, nor is theirs a call  
to passivity. It is in the context of her faith in the crucified and risen Christ that the Church views  
the world as her Lord Jesus did, who Himself said to Pontius Pilate: *My kingdom is not of this  
world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be  
890 delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here*” (St. John 18:36). As far as the  
Church’s confession to all creatures, serious damage is done if it puts its energy and time into  
changing this world, rearranging this dying world, instead of declaring that through Christ Jesus  
we look chiefly, as we confess in the Nicene Creed, for the *life of the world to come*.

895 Yet the individual Christian still operates with feet planted in both realms. Luther wrote  
in his “The Christian in Society: Temporal Authority”:

*In this way the two propositions are brought into harmony with one another:  
at one and the same time you satisfy God’s kingdom inwardly and the  
kingdom of the world outwardly. You suffer evil and injustice, and yet at the  
900 same time you punish evil and injustice; you do not resist evil, and yet at the  
same time, you do resist it. In the one case, you consider yourself and what is  
yours; in the other, you consider your neighbor and what is his. In what  
concerns you and yours, you govern yourself by the gospel and suffer injustice  
toward yourself as a true Christian; in what concerns the person or property  
905 of others, you govern yourself according to love and tolerate no injustice  
toward your neighbor. The Gospel does not forbid this; in fact, in other places  
it actually commands it.<sup>25</sup>*

910 Living in society the believer is, on the one hand, someone who confesses Christ as their Redeemer from sin, death, and the devil. Motivated by this love God has for the world, Christians then through their vocations serve their neighbors in that love. We might paraphrase St. John in his first letter: *We love because He first loved us* (1 John 4:9). Therefore Christians perform acts of mercy in their daily interactions with individuals whom the Lord has placed in their life.

915 This removes those labels spoken of earlier. It becomes much more difficult for one whom Jesus has personally washed, absolved, and fed, to act in an impersonal way with those he is created to love. We cannot refuse to love even those with whom we disagree, otherwise we would have to admit to not loving God the many times when, in our opinion, His ways do not fit with ours.<sup>26</sup>

920 Because definitions might differ as to what it means to *love your neighbor as you love yourself* (God does not mandate particular social, economic, or political structures apart from the Moral Law written on each heart), in like manner you live out your Christian vocations informed by the Gospel and Sacraments; by God's unmerited love given for you. And so, a Christian may advocate in the political realm for laws that they feel scripturally or conscience-bound to support while at the same time showing compassion for those whose activities they would want to be (or become) illegal.

930 Seminary President Wilhelm Peterson often told the story of a young woman who came into his office when he was serving in Madison, Wisconsin, near the University. They had never met, but she spoke of her sorrow because she had an abortion. She was struck down by the Fifth Commandment and saw no hope for mercy. But mercy is just what Pastor Peterson supplied.

935 He not only spoke of the Gospel, but He gave her the Gospel, forgiving her sins. As the story went, she enrolled in adult catechesis, was confirmed, and partook of Jesus' body and blood for the continuing remission of all her sins. It was then, she told him, when kneeling at the altar she encountered the risen Christ in the bread and the wine that she knew... she knew that she was forgiven and she wept for joy. Pastor Peterson's view that abortion was immoral and should be outlawed did not keep him from treating this woman as a broken sinner in need of salvation.

That's where we stand today in these hard times. St. Peter said in his first letter):

940 *And who is he who will harm you if you become followers of what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you are blessed. 'And do not be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled.' But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear; having a good conscience, that when they defame you as evildoers, those who revile your good conduct in Christ may be ashamed. For it is better, if it is the will of God, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil (3:13-17).*

950 Be ready to do this with *meekness and fear*. Kind of sounds like the opposite of how conversation and debate are done today. But this is where we come back to the beginning: *Walk circumspectly*. We saw how St. Paul meant this to direct us back to the *all things* of Jesus—for us to partake of the richness of God's mercy. Why? So that we can bring that same mercy, not to "share," but to "give," as the supply will never run out.

Love does not mean tolerance. Both Law and Gospel must be preached, each in its time.  
955 We preach the Law in all its fierceness... not in all our fierceness. We proclaim the Gospel with  
all its kindness... not with all our kindness. These words are God's Words, after all. The job of  
*convicting the world of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment* (St. John 16:8) is His to do, not  
ours. We are but tools (in several senses of that word), *created in Christ Jesus for good works,*  
*which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them* (Ephesians 2:10).

960 Pastor Todd Wilken, host of the internet radio program *Issues, etc.* put it this way:

*Jesus is not the observer of whether we are making disciples, He is the only  
one making disciples through baptism and teaching. The work is not ours, it is  
His. We are speaking His words, we are baptizing with His baptism, we are  
965 giving His forgiveness, His undershepherds distribute the bread and wine He  
calls His body and blood. Only because these are Jesus' works in the world  
do they get accomplished. In other words only Jesus displays His love for the  
whole world by forgiving sins in these ways because, as He has promised,  
He—personally, physically, spiritually—is with His Church even to the end of  
970 the age.<sup>27</sup>*

This takes us back to the *all authority* and *all things* Jesus spoke of just before He  
ascended. This world is wearing out like an old garment. It will have a definite, fiery end.

975 Isaiah 51:6  
*Lift up your eyes to the heavens,  
And look on the earth beneath.  
For the heavens will vanish away like smoke,  
The earth will grow old like a garment,  
980 And those who dwell in it will die in like manner.*

That won't be all there is, though. Isaiah continued:

985 *But My salvation will be forever,  
And My righteousness will not be abolished.*

Realize this: there will not be one person who is not in heaven who should be there. The  
end is delayed until all whom the Lord has predestined have come to trust in Christ Jesus for  
their salvation. Believing this, by the power of God the Holy Spirit, we walk in the light of Christ  
990 always looking to Him for the gifts that bring our salvation so that we, in turn, give those good  
and perfect gifts to the world God so loves.

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<sup>1</sup> All citations from scripture are taken from the New King James Version unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup> The Evangelical Lutheran Synod Worship Committee. *Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary*. MorningStar Music Publications Inc., 1996, p. 48.

<sup>3</sup> Winger, Thomas. *Ephesians - Concordia Commentary*, 2015. 573

<sup>4</sup> *Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone.* (Ephesians 2:19-20 )

5 *Santa Claus is comin' to town.* Melody: J. Fred Coots; Lyrics: Haven Gillespie .(1934)

6 Wright: “Thus, Paul’s concern is not with moral codes as such, but with the danger to faith inherent in falling back into the pagan lifestyle. Certainly this warning should not be restricted obnly to the ancient practices of paganism. The present day addiction to sexual gratification illustrates its perpetual tendency to become an idol.” 556

7 In the rite of Holy Baptism a “minor exorcism” is often practiced. The Officiant says, “The Word of God also teaches that we are conceived and born sinful and are under the power of the devil until Christ claims us as His own. Therefore depart you unclean spirit and make room for the Holy Spirit.” *Then he shall sign him with a cross on his forehead and breast and shall say:* “Receive the sign of the holy cross on both thy forehead and thy breast.”

8 Winger. “It is more than just learning “about Christ” (as if referring to mere information; Paul states, ‘You did not *learn Christ* this way!’ Christ Himself, not simply a message about Christ, is the object of apostolic preaching.” (511)

9 *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.* (1 Peter 1:3-5 )

10 *Husbands, likewise, dwell with them with understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered.* (1 Peter 3:7)

11 *Therefore rejoice, O heavens, and you who dwell in them! Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and the sea! For the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, because he knows that he has a short time.*

12 <http://www.intrepidlutherans.com/2010/09/new-white-wine-pietists-by-craig-parton.html>

13 *And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers (Acts 2:42). And believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women (Acts 5:14).*

14 Preamble to the *Declaration of Independence*.

15 *Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven. Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to ‘set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law’; and ‘a man’s enemies will be those of his own household (St. Matthew 10:32-36).*

16 Confessing Christ in a Hostile Culture. Presentation from "Evangelism the Lutheran Way" Conference at Emmanuel Lutheran Church in Dearborn (May 11, 2024)

17 <https://bookofconcord.org/large-catechism/ten-commandments/#lc-i-0150>

18 e.g. Hazeal, King of Syria (1 Kings 19:15) and Cyrus, King of Persia (Isaiah 44:28-45:1).

19 “The Law of God is Good and Wise,” Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary #492.

20 <https://steglitz-lutherisch.de/english.html>

21 Two examples from both sides of the aisle:

- The UK Daily Mail reported on April 25, 2024: “President Joe Biden sparked backlash from pro-life Catholics after he made the Sign of the Cross on Tuesday while listening to a speech about limits on abortion. Biden made the gesture during a campaign organizing event in Florida with Nikki Fried, the Democratic candidate for governor running against Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis. During her opening remarks, Fried expressed outrage at DeSantis for signing a ban on abortions over six weeks. 'Then we come back here to the state of Florida where Ron DeSantis felt like he needed to run for president and so 15 weeks was not good enough,' Fried said. 'And then we had to go to six weeks.' Biden reacted to her statement by making the Sign of the Cross.” <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-13346467/biden-abortion-blessing-florida-catholic-church-fury.html>

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- The Daily Mail also reported this on March 27, 2024: Donald Trump is selling \$60 Bibles in partnership with singer Lee Greenwood, whose 'God Bless the U.S.A.' is the former president's walk-on music for his political rallies. 'Happy Holy Week! Let's Make America Pray Again. As we lead into Good Friday and Easter, I encourage you to get a copy of the God Bless the USA Bible,' Trump said in a video on Truth Social announcing his new venture, which comes the week before Catholics celebrate Easter. 'All Americans need a Bible in their home, and I have many. It's my favorite book. It's a lot of people's favorite book,' he adds. The 'God Bless the U.S.A. Bible' costs \$59.99. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-13241825/trump-endorsed-bible-sale-lee-greenwood-concertt.html>

22 Table Talk #222, April 7, 1522:

23 The Gateway Drug to Post Christian Paganism, Carl R. Trueman. <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2024/04/the-gateway-drug-to-post-christian-paganism>

24 Preventing the Poisonous Pitfalls of Politicization and Polarization *Eric R. Andrae Concordia Journal, Winter 2024 63-64*

25 LW 45: 96

26 *How we love our neighbor becomes a matter of Christian conscience. I like to call it the “Reichwald Option.”* The Sainted Bethany Lutheran College Professor Glenn Reichwald was well known for his political positions. He labored for and campaigned on behalf of politicians and positions that might be contrary to many here as a member of the Democrat Farm Labor party. He actively promoted the DFL because he felt that party better represented a way by which people could show love for their neighbors. At the same time, though, when he went to DFL caucuses he advocated *strongly* for the pro-life position. He made every attempt he could to get that view into the DFL platform...something which was far less difficult than now. Vocationally, as a citizen, this is how he decided to serve his neighbor and no one could really fault him for that or accuse him of sin in the matter.

27 “The Not So Great Commission” Parts 1 and 2:

<https://issuesetc.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/JOURNAL-SUMMER-11a.pdf>

<https://issuesetc.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/05/JOURNAL-FALL-11.pdf>