

By Pastor Merv Thompson

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"Grace and peace to you from the God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

I still remember the Saturday mornings during adolescence when I was sequestered in the church basement for what seemed at times to be endless confirmation instruction. While many of my buddies were outside playing ball or hockey or just frolicking in the great outdoors, I was one of the chosen few who was spending time indoors. I can still visualize the shape of the room, the arrangement of the tables, the faces of my classmates, and the kindly countenance of Pastor Lewis.

I don't remember a great deal about the content of the classes, except that I did manage to learn quite thoroughly the catechism which Martin Luther had created some four centuries earlier. So much of theology and doctrine seemed to go right over my head, but for some reason or another the catechism was more easily understood, more connected to my life and the life of the church. While the specific copies of the catechism that we used were not entirely in modern parlance (the word "dude" did not appear even once), still the structure and wording were helpful for the most part.

In retrospect, it still rather amazes me that something written so long ago could have any relevance at all in the early 1950's, or, I might add, in 2008 when my oldest granddaughter has started confirmation classes. Luther was very concerned with the level of Christian education of both youths and adults in his time (still a contemporary concern), and thus the small catechism was introduced to clarify and focus on some of the most important biblical teachings.

To make the catechism easier to follow Luther condensed it into basically five parts that for him were the most important teachings of the Bible. These five parts included the Apostles Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, the Sacrament of Baptism and the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Luther repeated the basic elements from the Bible, but then he always added one addition question, "What Does This Mean?"

It is in the meanings that we find the genius of Luther

coming through as he interprets the various biblical themes. It is one thing to know the Apostles Creed or the Ten Commandments, it is quite another to understand or even embrace Luther's eloquent explanations. For instance, I think that Luther's explanation of the Second Article of the Creed is probably the finest description of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ ever written outside of the Bible itself.

I continue to be surprised at how often some of the exact wording I learned more than fifty years ago comes back into my consciousness every so often. This is especially true of the Ten Commandments; whose relevance never seems to wane. Who can ever forget the powerful words about not killing, not stealing, not committing adultery. These still are normative for much of our society and certainly for the Christian community.

But for some reason this year I have been thinking more about the eighth commandment than any of the others. For those who grew up with Lutheran numbering, the eighth commandment is one that is commonly overlooked, for it says, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." At first blush it seems like this is much ado about very little; it certainly is not one of the sins that is foremost in our thinking.

In fact, it sounds almost like a courtroom scene "Law and Order" revisited. Virtually none of us would even consider bearing false witness under oath against anyone in a court of law. Even outside of the courtroom, most of us do not spend a lot of time trying to slander our neighbors, although gossip tends to become a favorite indoor sport.

Luther does not let us off the hook this easily. Rather he asks and then answers the question, "What does this mean? What does this mean?" The commandment, says Luther, is more than just an abstract doctrine relegated to the "hardly possible" category. It hits us right where we live and work and have our being.

He begins the meaning this way, "We are to fear and love God so that we do not tell lies against our neighbors, betray or slander them, or destroy their reputations." As we analyze these words, the commandment does not sound all that pertinent. Most of us have little reason to betray or slander our neighbors, especially the ones we like.

Then the language sharpens, and it says, "Instead," (always be aware when you see the word "instead" or "therefore," something new and perhaps game-changing is coming). "Instead, we are to come to the defense of our neighbors, speak well of them" and then, in some of the most poignant language used anywhere in the catechism Luther says, "We are to put the most charitable construction on all that they do." The most up-to-date translation says it this way, "We shall interpret everything our neighbor does in the best possible light."

Just ponder the power of these words from the meaning of the eighth commandment, "You should speak well of your neighbors and put the most charitable construction on all that they do." These words just cut through so much of the garbage that roils around in our culture, hitting us right where we live. "Whatever you do, put the most charitable construction on all that your neighbors do and say. And of course, who is our neighbor?" As Jesus says, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." When asked about who is our neighbor, he told the story of the Good Samaritan.

Talk about counter cultural. I always had difficulty with this commandment the way Luther interpreted it. For I found early on that one of the best ways to build myself up was the tear someone else down. If I could denigrate the neighbor kid, then I was on a higher plane. If I could question someone else's intelligence or athletic ability or even ethnicity, then I could somehow think better about myself.

When life didn't quite go the way I wanted it to, there was always one consistent answer—find a scapegoat to blame. I didn't do well in class - blame the teacher. I didn't do well on the athletic field - blame the coach. I didn't do well in the social pecking order - blame my parents, or blame my so-called friends. I rarely lived up to the eighth commandment where Luther said that we should speak well of others, and we should put the most charitable construction on all that they do. I preached a sermon one time that highlighted this

ambiguity that I lived, "I Look Down On People Who Look Down on People."

The media today seems to foster this sin against the eighth commandment as a matter of course, even a matter of pride and self-justification. The best way the television commentator can elevate himself or herself in their own eyes is to put down someone else. Thus "the other" is often labeled as inferior, demonic, a pathological liar and even worse. We can only feel superior when others are deemed inferior. We can only attain status when others are marginalized, and we can only rise when others are knocked down.

I hardly dare bring up politics, but since this month, it is politics every day, all the time. It cannot be ignored. I would ask a Luther question, "When is the last time you heard a candidate speaking well about an opponent, sincerely speaking well, not just setting up for the next attack?" When is the last time you heard a candidate "put the most charitable construction on what their opponent has said or done?"

In fact one of the favorite tricks of most candidates today is to take something the other has said or done, often with the most noble of purposes, and turn it into a source of vitriolic attack. It is truly putting the most uncharitable construction on all that the other does. Phillip Yancey's comments about politics being ungrace are certainly true, but that doesn't mean it is right. The most disturbing aspect of this is that it is often the "most religious" people, the ones who might even hang the Ten Commandments on their wall, who are the most fervent in speaking negatively about their opponent, about putting the most uncharitable construction out there.

I should not apply to be the campaign director for any future candidate. My kind of biblical optimism would be laughed out of the room. Maybe God, in giving the Ten Commandments and Luther, in explicating their meaning, just don't get it. The world would not turn unless we could put others down in order to lift ourselves up. It just seems if we are ever to unify our nation, people on both sides of the divide are going to have to go back to the eighth commandment where we speak well of those on the other side, and we put the most charitable construction on all that they do and say.

One can only hope.