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Thirty-two Theses Against Unevangelical Practice

Evangelical practice

1. Evangelical practice consists not in this, that we teach and treat nothing except the evangelical message (the Gospel), but in this, that we treat everything in an evangelical way.
2. This means that, since we expect justification before God, the renewal of the heart, and the fruits of the Spirit (to come) only through the Gospel, in everything we do we have this one thing in mind - to give free course and sway to the Gospel.
3. For this very reason, when we follow evangelical practice, we do not discard the Law or make its edge dull through bringing in the Gospel, but rather we preach it with all the more seriousness in its full severity, however in evangelical fashion.
4. (A) The Law is used in an evangelical way if it is employed solely for the purpose of preparing the soil for the Gospel and of submitting a divine norm for the manifestation of the new life which spontaneously arises through the evangelical message.

(B) The Gospel is used in an evangelical way when it is presented to everyone, without condition or limitations.
5. It is not evangelical practice to cast the pearls of the Gospel before swine, but much less is it evangelical practice to keep them in one's own pocket.
6. Evangelical practice drops not one iota of the things which God demands, but it demands nothing else and no more than faith and love.
7. Evangelical practice demands manifestation of faith and love if we desire to be saved, but it does not issue commands about their various manifestations as far as aim, amount, and mode are concerned.

8. Evangelical practice demands fulfillment of even the smallest letter of the Law, but it does not make the state of grace dependent on the keeping of the Law.

9. Evangelical practice endeavors indeed to prepare the way for the operations of the Gospel by the Law; but it does not endeavor beyond this to aid the Gospel by the Law. Since it expects the fruits of the Spirit to be produced solely by the Gospel, it is also willing to wait for them.

10. Evangelical practice considers nothing an essential gain that does not come through the Gospel, that is, through faith. It therefore bears with all manner of defects, imperfections, and sins, rather than to remove them merely in an external manner.

11. Evangelical practice limits pastoral care to specific applications of the Law and Gospel. It leaves scrutiny and judging of the heart to God, who searches the heart.

12. Evangelical practice insists on good human order, but still more does it insist on Christian freedom. For that reason it lets adiaphora remain real adiaphora, that is, it leaves the decision concerning them to the conscience of the individual.

13. Evangelical practice is faithful in little things; yet it considers matters in their larger aspects and totality more important than individual details.

14. To be wise as serpents, to redeem the time, to not let Satan gain an advantage over us, to become all things to all men in order that by all means some might be saved, are likewise elements of evangelical practice.

Antinomianism and Legalism

15. Evangelical practice is equally far removed from antinomian and legalistic practice.

16. Evangelical knowledge and disposition should lead to evangelical practice, but they do so rather seldom and slowly.

17. Usually we do not advance beyond legalism, or we fall into antinomian laxity; to such an extent the Gospel is foreign to our nature.

Legalism

18. There is danger in both directions. For us at the present the greater danger is still in the direction of legalism.

19 Apart from the natural tendency of the old Adam and our origin in pietistic circles, etc., our present situation and the necessary reaction against the prevailing moral laxity in principles and in life are responsible for this state of affairs.

20. How many [pastors] are there who secretly are more afraid of giving the blessing of the Gospel to an unworthy person than of denying them to a poor sinner or of curtailing them? [How many are there] whose conscience hinders them from following Paul's example of becoming all things to all men? Where this is the case [this secret fear], one will certainly find legalistic practice.

Legalistic practice

21. Legalistic practice does not consist in this, that one does not treat anything except the Law, but in this, that one treats everything in a legalistic manner. That is, one treats everything in such a way that one's main aim is to see to it that the Law gets its due and that one tries to accomplish through the Law (or even through laws) what only the Gospel can accomplish.

22. In addition, (as is often the case where the inner motive power is still the Law), the more that fiery zeal asserts itself - which does not even permit love to be the queen of all commandments, which spurns Christian wisdom as its counselor, and which even when it appears merely to teach, to reprove, or to admonish, in reality applies the worst kind of coercion, namely moral coercion - all the more unevangelical our practice gets to be.

23. Unevangelical, legalistic practice is found not only in churches and congregations, but likewise in schools and in the homes - and in our fraternal dealings as well.

24. The instances of unevangelical practice which are still most frequent with us in the realm of ministerial work, the cure of souls, and congregational government are perhaps the following:

a. In Sermons

Overabundant castigation of individual sins, unwholesome conditions, or perhaps even matters of personal dislike.

Portraying well-known sins of well-known people, instead of laying bare the "bitter root" out of which all evil fruits grow.

Mere so-called testifying without real instruction and admonition.

Unnecessary or premature or unedifying polemics.

Urging that repentance and faith be manifested, instead of preaching that which produces repentance and faith.

A pietistic classification of the hearers.

Attaching conditions to the Gospel promises.

Preaching faith preponderantly as to its sanctifying power.

Presentation of the grace of God only to build demands on such presentation.

b. With respect to Confession and the Lord's Supper

To demand more for admission than is absolutely required for its salutary use.

Schoolroom catechizing and inquisitorial searching of the heart of those announcing.

Postponing reproof till announcing for Communion or Confession.

To use refusal of Holy Communion as a coercive, terrifying, or disciplinary means.

To refuse [admission to the Lord's Supper] even when a state of unrepentance cannot be proved.

c. With Respect to Baptism

To be either entirely unwilling to baptize children of heretics or unbelieving people (who, however are in contact with the Word) even if there is no

intrusion in somebody else's domain or to be unwilling to baptize them only after various human guarantees have been given.

To put the acceptance of sponsors on a level with admission to Holy Communion.

d. At Marriages

To refuse to perform marriages of people who are outside the congregation even if they are not manifestly wicked.

A meticulous insistence on a certain form of parental consent and of engagement.

e. At Funerals

Absolute refusal of burial in the case of all who did not somehow belong to the congregation or at least request the visit of a pastor.

Adherence to the principle that at every funeral the salvation or damnation of the deceased must be asserted publicly, the sins of the deceased castigated, and the occasion used to take a fling at the sins and failings of the survivors.

f. In the Cure of Souls

Constant trimming and pressing on everybody until all wrinkles have been removed.

Acceptance of every kind of gossip.

Intruding into house, family, and matrimonial matters even if no public offense has been given.

Judging a person's attitude of the heart on the basis of a few words and works.

Applying moral coercion through exaggeration, etc.

g. In Congregational Government and Church Discipline

Exaggerated demands at the reception of new members.

To deny (or arbitrarily fix limits for) participation as a guest in the spiritual treasures of the Church, especially for attendance at the Lord's Table.

Mandatory imposition of dues on church members, requiring the same amount from all, or coercive taxing of individuals.

Use of church discipline against matters which are not evident mortal sins or even against self-provoked sins.

To consider a person as convicted in his own mind or as a malicious opponent because he is unable to reply to the arguments and charges uttered against him, or even assents to them.

To lay more weight on the correct form of the proceedings than on achieving the purpose of the discipline.

To demand the same form and the same degree of publicity for all confessions of sins which may have to be made.

The endeavor to make the chasm between those who are in and those who are outside the congregation really large, instead of building bridges for the opponents and for those who are on the outside.

25. Legalistic practice, in itself, makes the Gospel into a law, the Law into a taskmaster - but not one leading to Christ. It makes confession into torture, care of the souls into bungling, the sacrament into a testimony and seal of one's acceptability to the pastor; it makes Christian liberty into mere pretense, church discipline into an oppression of consciences; it makes the people petty, overly scrupulous, work-righteous pharisees, and the church a police state.

26. Legalistic practice has the appearance of greater conscientiousness, greater bravery, and quicker success only to those in darkness. Where there is light, legalistic practice can be seen to lack the true courage to let God reign and let His Word do its work. Legalistic conscientiousness is the work of an erring conscience and is itself one of the greatest hindrances to the work of both the Law and the Gospel.

27. No church ought to be more opposed to legalistic practice than the Evangelical Lutheran Church.

28. When the task at hand is to plant the church, it is not Lutheran to insist, straightaway, that the beautiful ordinances of churches planted long ago be normative.

29. Certainly there is a sufficient number of cases where we cannot prevent people from being offended at us. There is no reason for us to provide other obstacles through harshness in our practice.

Antinomianism

30. Let us fearlessly put an end to unevangelical practice. But let us never forget that legalistic practice is only a stone's throw away from antinomianism.

31. Antinomian practice tries to do away with legalism and effect everything with the naked Gospel. But it fails not only to give the full impact of the Law; it also removes the fire and intensity of the Gospel. Its followers therefore fall into a sleepy lack of discipline.

32. If anyone abandons legalistic practice to take up antinomian practice, he has gone from bad to worse.

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