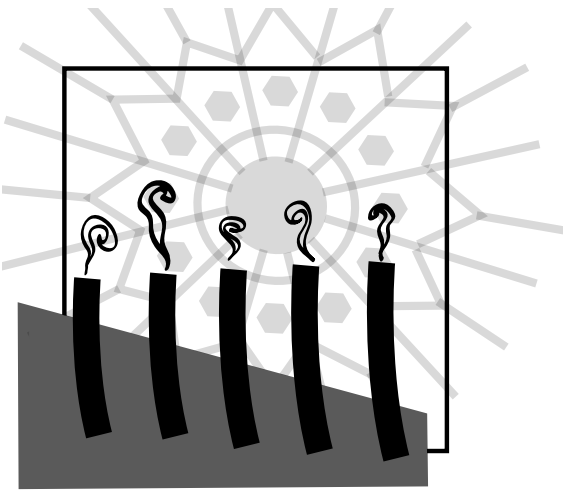


## WAR AND THE SACRAMENTS

*Kelly O'Lear*

*This part has to do with our poor, miserable life. Although we have God's Word and believe, although we do obey and submit to his will, and are supported by God's gifts and blessings, nevertheless we are not without sin. We still stumble daily and transgress because we live in the world among people who sorely vex us and give us occasion for impatience, wrath, vengeance, etc. Besides, Satan is at our backs, besieging us on every side and, as we have heard, directing his attacks against all the previous petitions, so that it is not possible always to stand firm in such a ceaseless conflict.*

—Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism*<sup>1</sup>

Christian soldiers have always had a special appreciation for sacramental ministry. I learned this the hard way. I had a nominally Christian upbringing. My parents brought my sister and me to Sunday school as children, but we never attended worship. As I recollect, it was a Disciples of Christ (Christian Church) congregation. I do remember asking, even yearning to attend worship as a family, but the customary reply was: “That’s not for us—it’s for rich people.” This was bemusing to me as a young boy. I remembered many Bible stories and lessons taught during those formative years. I am spiritually indebted to that congregation.

After that I became increasingly engaged in church life as an enlisted medic in the army, and specifically in a church movement that ascribes to the theology of glory. This theology left me clambering a ladder that elongated itself as I scaled up to what I thought was God-pleasing holiness. The instruction led me to believe that this climb would merit God’s blessing. I was told that the power was within me to put God into a situation where He had no choice but to respond to my dauntless plea as demanded. Needless to say, many of my requests went unanswered. For this I am thankful.

I attended a university that ascribed to this theology for my bachelor’s degree but afterward went to seminary at the

University of Dubuque and Wartburg. During this time, an unremitting and alleviating theological shift brought me to Lutheranism. I understood the law well in the theology of glory, but I had not really heard the munificent hope of the gospel. Previous sermons and teachings usually ran along these lines: “Jesus did it all for you. Now all *you* have to do is...” The “is” segued into a long list of the law that led to greater captivity, despite its euphonious delivery. It was the instructive and personalized attention of a Lutheran pastor that gave me clarity on law and gospel. The comforting words of the gospel through his mouth were liberating and brought me full circle into the faith as taught by the Reformation. Finally I came to terms with the reality of Christ “for me” in the sacraments, renewing me in the faith. A new theology began to take hold as I internalized the truth that I had already received Christ in baptism and contin-

ued to do so in holy communion. Christ was with me, notwithstanding my frame of mind and feelings.

I am now an army chaplain on active duty just back from Afghanistan. This was not my first deployment. I was deployed for a year to Iraq as well. The same travail of the growing ladder to reconciliation with God is well understood by the soldier on the battlefield. Young soldiers

experience the universal despair of doubt, guilt, and fear. Many come from a theological background where such thoughts are unallowable, associated with chagrin, shame, and rejection. The same theology that deluded me teaches them that once they have “asked Jesus into their hearts” they should no longer grapple with such temptations. The Christian life is sold as daily victory moving onward and upward to greater holiness. If a struggle with previous sin exists, then the usual diagnosis is a lack of effort. With more exertion, they are promised, the issue will most assuredly resolve itself. The ladder keeps growing. Soldiers quickly see the futility of it all. They pine for the relief of absolu-

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tion, surety of baptism, and the real presence offered in the sacrament.

Soldiers regularly feel distant from God during war. Those things in life that previously gave succor are gone. Family is far away. Hometown friends

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are enjoying the freedom these soldiers safeguard. Sometimes marriages and treasured relationships dissolve. Spiritually wounded soldiers construe their own sense of loneliness as separation from God. By default, they become miserable theologians of glory. They gaze at the world around them to form an opinion of whether or not they have the approval and acceptance of their creator. Their efforts to ameliorate their situation with the heavenly Father by works only leaves them in greater despair; for ours is a world fractured by hate, aggression, and death. The healing power of the gospel of Jesus Christ is the only true cure, available through God's chosen means—the sacraments.

Unfortunately, the theology of glory tells the soldier to pray harder, believe harder, and to have more faith. Good things in and of themselves, but they are bondage without the gospel. More law is the prescribed tonic. Greater burden is supposed to help an already afflicted conscience. Work harder and things will get better! Do good things and good things will happen! This message has more in common with Buddhism than the triune God. The life lessons of Jesus morph the risen

Lord and savior into a life coach or therapist. This position is not of a savior who vanquishes sin and communicates His righteousness to fallen humanity. The Bible is not God's message of deliverance for sinful humanity but a handbook for living a pleasant existence. The consequence of all this is the suspicion that God does not care, does not listen, and does not exist. The natural response is self-condemnation. The reality is that the troubled soldier never fulfills the prescribed law. Things don't always get better even when they behave themselves. The world around them carries on in war and baleful aggression. There is still yearning for loved ones half a world away. Sin still declares guilt.

Sacramental ministry has an answer for the soldier during a crisis of conscience and soul. We can absolve soldiers who repent of their sins. They can have the hands of God's servant placed upon their head as they prepare to hear the gospel of forgiveness of sin. They can hear the words of Christ through the mouth of the chaplain. "According to the command of our Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you your sins, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Go in peace."<sup>2</sup> Few people can imagine the crying faces and comforted consciousnesses that hear and believe these words after killing another human in combat or any struggle with guilt. This is why Christ has so blessed His church with the office of the keys. It is the salve of pronouncing the gospel to wounded souls. Instead of more law, soldiers receive Christ's forgiveness.

The Smalcald Articles put it this way.

Since absolution or the power of the keys, which was instituted by Christ in the gospel, is consolation and help against sin and a bad conscience, confession and absolution should by no means be allowed to fall into disuse in the church, especially for the sake of timid consciences and

for the sake of untrained young people who need to be examined and instructed in the Christian doctrine.<sup>3</sup>

Many soldiers dodge the chapel because their theory is that they will receive a catalog of laws and hear what appalling sinners they are. That is only half-true for those who come to a confessional Lutheran service. Unquestionably, God's law read and preached will declare sinners guilty. But what soldiers usually don't know is that sinners will also be declared "not guilty" by faith in Christ. Tender and timid consciences will be examined and instructed in the *mercy* of God in Christ. They will learn that worship is not about what we bring to God but what God generously bestows upon us in Christ: mercy! Christ's words of forgiveness and hope proceed from the mouth of the chaplain. The law has met its match and suffered defeat to the power of the cross.

Throughout a deployment, soldiers are inexorably stricken with the feeling that God is missing. They see fellow

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soldiers die. They live in harsh conditions. Friends and families back home are out of touch. Furthermore, those back home do not have the shared experience of what the soldier is enduring. Here is where holy communion encourages the soul of the down-trodden. In the holy supper, Christ is present! Certainly, Christ is also present in the reading and preaching of the word. Nevertheless, especially here

in the holy supper, soldiers receive the very body and blood of the Lord. The beneficiary internally assumes Christ and so all sins are forgiven. Luther teaches us “the forgiveness of sins, life,

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and salvation are given us in the sacrament, for where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.”<sup>4</sup> Here is where troubled consciences find rest. Christ is present. Christ is with them. They are not forsaken. He has held true to his promise: I will not leave you or forsake you. It is not that they have found Christ but that Christ has made himself a gift to them in their time of need. A soul-saving gift in faraway, bleak, and seemingly forlorn locations.

Lastly, soldiers often question their salvation in experiencing what they think is a separation from God. Here is where baptism is a grand fountain of relief. I assume most of the readers understand the great comfort Luther drew from his baptism when facing doubt and the devil. It is no different for the soldier. Baptism “effects forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and grants eternal salvation to all who believe, as the Word

and promise of God declare.”<sup>5</sup> These are words of true comfort and hope that substantiate Christ’s grip upon us. This is why baptism is so offensive to the devil.<sup>6</sup> God places His name upon the baptized. In the water, the baptized is declared as His own. He will neither leave nor forsake them. Through their baptism, God has closed the fissure of separation.

War and the vocation of the soldier do not enhance the need for the sacraments; rather, they expose it. I am exceedingly joyful that I can offer words of true hope in the work of Christ against doubt and despair. Those who are Christ’s receive great comfort from them. God has mercy upon sinners!

Precisely in order to make hope sure and to distinguish between those who are saved and those who are not, we must hold that we are saved through mercy. Unless it is qualified, this statement seems absurd. In courts of human judgment a right or debt is certain, while mercy is uncertain. The judgment of God is another thing altogether. Here mercy has God’s clear and certain promise and His command. Properly speaking, the gospel is the command to believe that we have a gracious God because of Christ.<sup>7</sup> *LF*

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*Notes*

1. Martin Luther, “The Large Catechism,” §86, in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore J. Tappert (Philadelphia: Augsburg Fortress, 1959), 432.
2. Martin Luther, “The Small Catechism,” §8, in Tappert, 351.
3. Martin Luther, “The Smalcald Articles,” §1, in Tappert, 312.
4. “Small Catechism,” §7, in Tappert, 352.
5. *Ibid.*, 348–349.
6. “Therefore it is sheer wickedness and devilish blasphemy when our new spirits, in order to slander baptism, ignore God’s Word and ordinance, consider nothing but the water drawn from the well, and then babble, ‘How can a handful of water help the soul?’ Of course, my friend! Who does not know that water is water, if such a separation is proper? But how dare you tamper thus with God’s ordinance, and tear it from the jeweled clasp with which God has fastened and closed it and from which He does not wish His ordinance to be separated? For the nucleus in the water is God’s Word or commandment and God’s name, and this is a treasure greater and nobler than heaven and earth.” “Large Catechism,” §15, in Tappert, 438.
7. Philip Melancthon, “Apology of the Augsburg Confession,” §345, in Tappert, 160.

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