

He That Hath an Ear, Let Him Hear

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He That Hath an Ear. Let Him Hear

I. Faith cometh by hearing

There was a certain home with a believing mother and believing children. The father was an unbeliever, however. The little children were distressed on behalf of their father and told him: "Dad, you should repent." The father would then ask rather scornfully, "How does one repent?" A little child replied, "Cry a little bit and we'll forgive your sins." That little boy had the right understanding of the steps to salvation or of repentance, which include, in order: a) distress and discomfort because of sin, b) the gospel, or believing in the release from sin and c) the amendment of life. This is what all we children of God have, after all, been able to experience. God aroused in us consciousness of sin and the longing for grace. God sent some believing person to us who preached unto us the forgiveness of sins in Jesus' name and blood for the first time. What happened then? A great love was kindled toward that person who was first to preach the forgiveness of our sins. We also began to feel a great love toward those who had come into faith before us. A child had been born unto God, and that child was joined with bonds of love to the congregation and the family of God.

God kindles living faith through hearing the gospel. For that God uses the reconciliation sermon of the Holy Ghost and the congregation of God. We are all familiar with the words of the Bible: "Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." (Rom. 10:17). There is no other way to be saved except by faith – not by praying, not by reading the Bible, not by going to communion etc. Jesus himself gave the office of reconciliation only to His disciples when, following His death and resurrection but prior to His ascendance into heaven, breathed upon His fearful disciples, saying, "Receive ye the Holy Ghost: whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained." (John 20:23). Only His own disciples did God send to do the work of the gospel. "... and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation, Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God." (II Cor. 5: 18-20) Thus our faith is built upon the solid teachings of the Bible, and God, by His Holy Spirit, testifies at this very moment in our hearts that we are children of God.

Writing about this forgiving of sins Luther put it rather fittingly: "Do not stare toward heaven. Those very keys that Christ and no one else has, those very ones He gives to Peter, as if to say: Why are you staring toward heaven looking there for my keys. Do you not hear that I have given them to Peter? They surely are the keys of heaven. That is true, but they are no longer in heaven. I have left them down here upon earth. You must not seek for them from heaven, nor from anywhere else, but you'll find them in Peter's mouth, which is where I left them. Peter's mouth is my mouth and his tongue is my key case, his office is my office, his binding my binding and his releasing my releasing. Hold fast to the words of Christ and be assured that Christ does not forgive sins in any other way except by the spoken word, which is the way He has ordered us humans to do it. Unless you seek forgiveness from this word, then you stare at heaven in vain awaiting grace from there. In this Luther puts it as plainly as can be that no one can bypass the living congregation and receive grace and forgiveness. The word of reconciliation, the office and the authority are passed on as an inheritance from one heart to another and from one believer's faith to another. This means that faith cometh by hearing!

2. Faith is Preserved by the Hearing of the Word of God

In the foregoing I tried to explain how a person becomes a believer by means of the gospel, that is the forgiveness of sins. How then does a person remain a believer? Again we respond: by the hearing of

the word of God. I will use one example. There were services in a believing home. The mother told her two little boys: "Go invite the neighbors to services." The boys went and invited the neighbors to the services. A neighbor asked: "Why do you have services so often?" One of the boys said: "So we would become believers." That's when the other brother corrected him and said: "No, so that we would remain believers." Thus faith is kindled by the hearing of the word of God, and faith is also preserved by the hearing of the word of God. We believers are familiar with the Christian saying: "What grace provides, sin consumes." Even as believers we are corrupted by inherited sin and that is why we must ever anew ask to have our sins forgiven. In His day Jesus taught this by saying: "Man does not live by bread alone but by every word that cometh from the mouth of God." Just as our body needs nourishment our soul also yearns for the comfort of God's word. As were the children of Israel, we are still on the wilderness journey. The gospel is the heavenly manna, which nourishes our souls. Each and every one personally receives exactly as much as he or she needs of this heavenly manna.

Beloved children of God! You are fortunate because you have even now managed to come over possibly long distances and possibly after long periods of time to hear the word of God, to receive of it for yourself and to enfold it into your hearts by faith. Hearing the word of God is an important matter because, first of all, it points out to us the way of salvation. At the same time it warns us believers about the perils of sin and the false teaching that this world is full of. The sacred word of God counsels us to preserve faith and a good conscience. This comforts all of us to believe even under all temptations and to trust in the omnipotent God and His promises of grace. The holy word of God testifies through the Holy Spirit even now that we are children of God.

Why do we believers want to hear God's word over and over? As children of God we feel, as did the disciples, that our faith is weak and thus we often plead in the midst of our daily temptations, "Lord, increase our faith." How does God increase our faith? God has given to His kingdom all of the means by which to apply grace toward our salvation. These instructions of grace include:

- 1) Believing the gospel personally. In the Book of Romans it reads that the gospel, that is release from sin, is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes it (Rom. 1: 16). Without this forgiveness we cannot remain believing. Forgiveness is the manna of heaven, which feeds our soul.
- 2) Confession: Confession is a precious grace gift to us for preserving our faith. In confession we may tell our confessor father of our sins, and believe that God Himself forgives us our sins. John writes: If we confess our sins He is faithful and righteous, Who forgives us our sins and purifies us from all iniquity. Let us boldly utilize this precious grace gift. May the using of confession never cease in our lives.
- 3) The Lord's Holy Communion: On His last night Jesus Himself instituted the sacred sacrament of the altar for His own. In the bread and in the wine He gave His body and His blood for the strengthening of the weak faith of the disciples. Partaking of the sacrament requires a totally believing heart. We teach as did Luther, that the sacrament is partaken of correctly when it is used to strengthen a weak faith. The sacrament does not kindle faith, nor are sins forgiven by the communion, but it does strengthen our faith.
- 4) Prayer: On our journey of endeavoring in faith we believers have many temptations, doubts and manifold sorrows, and that is why Jesus says to cast all your sorrows upon Him for He will take care of you. It is important to notice that sins are not forgiven by prayer, as many believe and teach outside the kingdom of God, but in prayer we may bring our concerns before the heavenly Father, as children of a temporal family bring to their own father. It is good to always add to our prayers what Jesus taught: "Thy will be done, Father."

- 5) Escorts: As a gift God has first given us faith and, along with it, hundreds of brothers, sisters, fathers, mothers and homes, and will yet give us eternal life in heaven one day. Even now we are able to be in the midst of the family of God and to feel that we are children of God. For the sake of our faith it would be a top priority matter for every believer to have at least a few close friends, an escort, to whom we could tell all the sorrows upon our heart and from whom we could hear that precious gospel word. This is how we get to know each other from the very heart.

3. The Holy Spirit Creates a Uniform Faith

The Bible very beautifully tells us that during Jesus' time those who had been granted repentance and were in the early congregation had but one kind of faith. What causes this? Simply this: that the Holy Spirit of God creates faith in the heart of an unbelieving person. In the Catechism Luther teaches us: "The Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me by His gifts, sanctified and preserved me in the true faith, even as He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies all of Christendom on earth and preserves it in union with Jesus Christ in the ONLY true faith." In this kingdom, or Christendom, He every day graciously forgives me and all believers all of our sins. Even now we may dwell in unanimity of spirit within the kingdom of God, of which Luther goes on to teach: "The Holy Spirit has a congregation upon this earth. It is the mother, which gives birth by the word of God to every Christian." This congregation is singular. That is to say, God has but one congregation upon this earth. Luther describes what this congregation is like: "I believe that upon this earth there is a small, holy congregation made up entirely of saints, which is subject to one and only one head, Christ, and which has been called together by the Holy Spirit. It is of one faith, mind and understanding, lacking groupings and divisions. I too am part and member of it, and a recipient of its riches. It is the Holy Spirit that has brought me into it and joined me to it by means of my having heard and still hearing the word of God. This is precisely the origin of coming into faith." (Luther's Large Catechism) This is exactly as we believe in the kingdom of God. Human reason cannot understand that there could be but one kingdom of God. The world considers such a notion foolishness.

When a person gains the grace of repentance, he or she at the same time gains the Holy Spirit as a tutor to his or her heart, and this instructs us to reject all ungodly ways and worldly lusts, and to journey piously and chastely in this world. Because the Holy Spirit is what creates faith we have a shared faith and doctrine in America, Europe, Finland, Russia, Ecuador, Togo, Africa etc. This faith and doctrine is not our own invention, as Jesus Himself teaches: "My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me. If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself." (John 7: 17) The correct doctrine is essential unto salvation, but we need to also endeavor as believers according to the correct doctrine, thus showing obedience in faith to the word of God.

What did the Holy Spirit of God effect among the Gentiles in the early congregation? We may read about the original congregation in the early parts of the book of Acts and learn that 3000 persons repented. They were of different nations, languages and cultures. But the apostle, nevertheless, gives a wonderful description: "They remained all the while in the doctrine, the fellowship and the breaking of bread with the apostles." And the Believers "were of one heart and one soul." (Acts 4: 32) The Holy Spirit joined the believers into one family of God, and in their hearts was a united faith and doctrine and they remained in the doctrine and fellowship of the apostles. This is the way it is yet today. May God continue to preserve us in our shared faith and love. If we had not the correct understanding of faith, we would not become saved, but we would serve God in vain, teaching the commandments of men. The correct understanding of faith is such an important matter that Paul writes to the Galatians: "But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach the gospel to you differently from how we have preached, let him be accursed." (Gal. 1: 8) We cannot be believing in such a way that we would have different understandings about matters of salvation.

4. Caring for the Life of Faith and Obedience of Faith

As believers we are of two portions during our life in this world. The spirit and flesh wage war against each other. The congregation of God is an embattled congregation here in man's time, but one day in heaven it will be a celebrating congregation. I just read to you the description of the early congregation from the Acts of the Apostles. Amongst the believers there was one heart and one soul. That picture was, however, soon shattered for the enemy of souls was able to deceive some of the believers. What kinds of falls occurred amongst these believers? The Book of Acts relates that Ananias and Sapphira tried to deceive the disciples, that a dispute about the gifts of speakers arose in the congregation and the congregation then broke up into contentious factions, that some lived in adultery, that some came to the Lord's Holy Supper while drunk, and, on top of these, that doctrinal contradictions were originated. These persons had been victimized by the deception of the enemy of souls. Their flesh had gained dominion and with their deeds they had denied their faith. Even so, that congregation was still living, despite the fact that some of its members had fallen into sins. Every one of us is ever faced with the danger of falling. How did God care for and how does He continue to care for His fallen children in His congregation? Christ Himself gives the caretaking instructions to His congregation. Chapter 18 of Matthew teaches us:

- 1) If your brother transgresses against you, go and rebuke him one on one. This continues to be good advice, and a means to repel the enticements of the enemy of souls.
- 2) If he does not heed you, then take one or two witnesses with you.
- 3) If he does not wish to heed them, then tell the congregation.

If the fallen and strayed child of God humbles himself to repentance, then these instructions need not be followed past the first point. Sometimes it is necessary to call the entire congregation together to deal with some difficult situation. Generally this involves a long-standing and difficult issue, which threatens to split the entire congregation.

Not one of us is forced to be a believer, but if we say that we are believers, then we must believe, teach and endeavor according to the counsel of the Holy Spirit. In the Acts of the Apostles we have one good example of this kind of caretaking situation, how a solution was found in dealing with doctrinal differences of opinion. Although some Pharisees had received the grace of repentance, they still brought with them a law minded spirit into the congregation of God, and they wanted to lead the believers and especially the converted Gentiles to be under the law. How was this issue resolved? The children of God were all called together to Jerusalem in the year 48 A.D., and there the apostles used the word of God to preciously testify how God granted the Holy Spirit unto the Gentiles just as He did to us, and made no distinction between them and us, purifying their hearts with faith. When the meeting was concluded, then, on the basis of God's word, it was concluded that the Gentiles need not fulfill the Law of Moses. And then it was put beautifully – "For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost and us." (Acts 15: 28) The order here is important. The decisions believers make must first seem good to God, and to us only after that. The decisions of the congregation of God are not even now made on the basis of majority, nor according to the opinion of some leader in a congregation, but the basis always and exclusively is the word of God. It is the supreme authority in these issues of salvation. It is secure for us to be believing according to the Bible.

Even yet today it is necessary to call the congregation of God together and then together seek to learn what is the will of God in those numerous issues of the times that arise before us. Often we do not ourselves understand how to make the right decisions, and that is why it is safe to ask the counsel of the

congregation. This is exactly what has been done. The children of God teach, according to the word of God, for example, as follows:

- Sexuality: Sexuality is a God-given power for marriage, and that is why we condemn premarital sex, common-law relationships, and extramarital sex as sins that are against the Sixth Commandment in opposition to the teachings of the Bible.
- Children: God has decreed that through marriage the next generation will be born into the world. Children are gifts from God. Birth control in all its forms is a sin of this time in the world. God gives life, and He will one day take it away. God also grants us a livelihood.
- Television: The unanimous opinion of believers is that television, due to its bad programs, is not an appliance to have in a believing home.
- Alcohol, beer and drugs: The word of God clearly teaches us: do not get drunk on the liquor that leads to all manner of evil acts. We do not wish to drink of those alcoholic beverages, whatever they are called, that are intoxicating. Drugs also defile the entire body, which is a temple of the Holy Spirit.
- Sports: Health is a precious gift given by God, and we should take care of it. We can maintain our fitness by practicing many forms of exercise – running, walking, calisthenics, playing soccer, broom ball, volleyball, etc. We believers do not consider competitive sports to be acceptable because in competition the athletes seek glory for themselves, sometimes even by cheating. It also seems bad if believing youths go to cafes or other such places to watch sports events.
- Videos: Nowadays many believers have videos. It is interesting to watch videos of celebrations and everyday life and, why not, also of this trip to America. It is particularly interesting to review the growing up and development of one's own children after some years have passed. Nowadays the schools, as well as our opistos, have many educational videos. It would be good if the teacher would first watch the video, for often even the educational videos may have bad music or other things that are not acceptable to our faith. Believing students may participate in learning that takes place through videos that do not cause wounds upon their consciences. The world offers many kinds of videos. Which of them might be suitable for believers? Of course, the believers do not have any lists of good and bad videos, but the suitability is decided on the basis of their content. A believer whose conscience has been taken care of by the word of God, will carefully consider what he will watch so that the permissiveness of sin would not gain a victory over him by this means either. The parents bear a great responsibility over their families on what kinds of videos are watched in their home. This too is a place of watching, so that the enemy of souls could not deceive us. The prayer of Jesus on behalf of His own is still appropriate, as he urges us: "Watch and pray that ye not be led unto temptation, for the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak."
- The Internet: The Internet is a working tool for many believers, something that is an aid to us in our everyday lives. This is entirely proper, but many perils lurk in the use of the Internet, and I want to specifically address some of these.

The January 11, 2001 issue of the *Päivämies* had an article on the Internet that was written by Simo Tölli. I will quote some things from this good article. The Internet is a relatively new thing, which is reason enough for talking about it.

"It is extremely easy to obtain information from the Internet, but finding accurate information on the Internet may be difficult, and that is why it is very important to be critical when using the Internet. By

means of the Internet it is possible to conduct business, become familiar with various cultures, keep up with world events, listen to services from other parts of the world. But the Internet also contains a lot of unchaste pictures, videos and text, as well as worldly music. There have been persons who have had their lives drift into financial crises due to Internet addiction. When we use the Internet it would be good to consider how we might surf so that we would preserve faith and a good conscience. It would be good to discuss this matter in a broader forum than just one's own family. The Internet will provide every user with temptations and perilous situations, where the wrong choices are but a mouse click away. The choices that emerge come up as a surprise, and they do not allow time for true consideration. Using the Internet emphasizes the importance of personal faith. The urging to be watchful in faith is not vain, and neither is the urging: "Watch over one another and all the more so as ye see that day approaching." The parents are responsible for their children's use of the Internet. They need to monitor it and also to discuss it and warn about the use of the Internet. It is worthwhile to consider beforehand the reasons why one would want to get Internet access for a home. The writer follows this with a beautiful description of the safety provided by the word of God. Christians want to endeavor in obedience of faith and to journey with a pure conscience. Even though the world is changing rapidly, we may still remain feeling secure. Jesus has promised to be with His children until the very end of the world."

I will yet add a quote from the February issue of the Finnish version of Reader's Digest. This issue had a warning of the dangers of the Internet and the article included the following: "The Internet is a wolf in sheep's clothing. For practical purposes it is possible to find all human knowledge therein, but also all of the dark sides to the human experience. The writer continues: "The Internet has an abundance of pages that are totally unsuitable for children that contain, for example, pornographic, sadistic or pedophilic material. Young people are not mature enough to govern the contents of the Internet. Simply put: the responsibility rests with the parents. It is the duty of the parents to monitor the use of the Internet. We will not get along without the Internet. We must learn to pick the good fruit from it and to reject the spoiled fruit." Thus the writer of this article teaches and thinks exactly like the believers do.

I will refer yet again to brother Tolli's article, and observe that my heart joins with the teachings and counsel of this dear brother. But if we do not wish to comply with the counsel from the congregation of God, then there has already in our heart been a fall into sin. No longer do we then see the congregation of God as a golden candlestick. It is no longer the pillar and foundation of truth, but we begin to see this kind of advice as "the decisions made by some old men." Living faith is not dos and don'ts, instead we are free grace children. These mutual instructions are only there to protect us from the enticements of the world. All God asks of us is obedience to His word. Paul writes beautifully: "Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded: and if in any thing ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you. Nevertheless, whereto we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us mind the same thing." (Phil. 3: 15-16) "We having the same spirit of faith, according as it is written. I believed, and therefore have I spoken; we also believe, and therefore speak." (II Cor. 4: 13) We can ask for a humble mind so that we would remain obedient to the counsel of the congregation, even though we might not always immediately understand all things. God promises to provide us with understanding. God well blesses obedient children! But if we arise in opposition to the congregation of God, then we, at the same time arise in opposition to God Himself, as Moses said to the rebellious people of Israel on the wilderness journey: "Your murmurings are not against us (Moses and Aaron) but against the Lord." (Exo. 16: 8) Often this kind of person loses his faith because he is "hard of hearing" and disobedient. We need faith to become saved, and obedience of faith to indicate that we are endeavoring in faith.

5. The Hearing Ear and Treasuring Heart

We often ask in the opening prayer of services: "Grant us hearing ears and treasuring hearts." This is a precious prayer even today and at this event. The hearing of the word does nothing for us if we believe it not, and the hearing of the word does nothing for us if we do not endeavor according to it. Why

do not all people, then, hear and believe? Jesus answered this question in his Parable of the Sower. There were those who could not at all comprehend the message of faith, there were those who denied their faith when they encountered persecution or problems because of the Word, and a third group of hearers of the word were overcome by the enticement of wealth and the enjoyment of worldly pleasures. Man cannot serve two masters: God and Mammon. These rejecters found the narrow way too narrow to live and dwell upon. They were unable to see faith revealed as the most important treasure in their lives, and the kingdom of God did not become their dwelling place.

God threatened to harden the hearts of these fallen ones when He said: "With your ears you will hear but not understand, by seeing you will see but not perceive, for this people's heart is waxed gross." This is also the case with many people in the world today. The enemy of souls consumes all of their time and the hearing of the word of God does not interest them and their heart remains devoid of faith.

Then Jesus spoke blissful words to his own disciples and, at the same time unto us: "Blessed are your eyes for they see, and blessed are your ears for they hear. For verily I say unto you, that many prophets have desired to see that which you see and to hear that which you hear and have not heard them." (Matt. 13: 17) Oh, child of God, together with me you are fortunate. God continues to speak to us from His kingdom with the audible sermon, and God promises: "He who hears you, hears Me, and he who despises you, despises Him whom God has sent." Even yet Jesus is calling those not enjoying faith into His kingdom when He says: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with Me." (Rev. 3:20) This has been granted to happen to me and to you, my beloved brother and sister. God opened our ears to hear and our hearts to believe this heaven-sent gospel, in which our sins were preached forgiven in Jesus' name and blood. In His grace God has preserved us until this very day. Even now when we believe in this way and dwell in the kingdom of God, we can feel secure as we say, as did the foregone saints: "Yea, amen, come Lord Jesus!" And beyond the boundaries of time we will yet, before the throne of God, hear these words: "Come, ye blessed of my Father, and inherit that kingdom that has been prepared for you from the beginning of the world. It is worth our while to for a moment yet believe and struggle on preserving faith and a good conscience. Soon, He who is coming, will come and He is bringing His reward with Him.

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Introduction for Congregational Evening
2001 LLC Phoenix Winter Services
February 23, 2001