

Dear members and friends of St. John Lutheran,

Relationships form the very basis of life on earth. We usually think of relationships as being between (at least) two people. These people interact with each other, and we measure these collective interactions in personal and emotional terms. We tell others that our relationship with another is "good", "bad", or "complicated." There are *close personal relationships*, and *informal business-like* ones.

Many Christians in America have been told that they **must** also have "a personal relationship with Jesus." But what does that mean? Some may wonder: "Maybe I'm deficient at this? Maybe I don't have a relationship at all?" Author Rev. Bryan Wolfmueller, in his book, *Has American Christianity Failed?* (St. Louis: CPH, c. 2016), writes about something that's called **Relationship Theology**. This **false** theology has spread throughout American Christianity, and has even influenced Lutheran churches. Like all false theologies, this is destructive to faith. The question above, "Maybe I'm deficient at my personal relationship with Christ," is the first of many dangers Wolfmueller highlights. The ambiguous nature of a "personal relationship" creates doubts and even fears among the faithful. "Maybe I'm not saved because my relationship isn't good enough?"

Historical Lutheran theology corrects this error. Having been baptized in our Lord's name, we are brought into the family of God. Faith in Christ **guarantees** that I have a "relationship status." Jesus has taken my sins upon Himself and has died on the cross for me. I am covered by His shed blood. **I believe. I am saved.** That leads to what the author correctly identifies as the second danger.

Second, we are introduced to the concept of "distance and measurement where they should not be." The author aptly points to marriage as an example of the error of this way of thinking. In marriage we do **not** use the word *relationship* to describe the bond of marriage. The Bible teaches us that through marriage we become "one flesh." "To ask a husband or wife, 'How's your relationship?' is, in fact, to put separation and distance between them," Wolfmueller informs. The bond of marriage makes the couple one. We don't try to measure, assess, or critique this. It's just what God says it is: the union of two into one.

The same is true of our bond with Christ. We are united to Christ, and trying to assess the "bond strength" (or "weakness") is foolish. We are bonded together – period.

The **third danger of Relationship Theology** is that it examines our existence in **emotional terms** – rather than through "guilt and sin." When you go down this path, a person's very salvation becomes tied to being on "good terms" with Jesus. "**Religion**" is understood to be the Law, what God demands of people. "**Relationship**" is the "nice stuff," the friendly Jesus, the casual and non-judgmental time of getting to know each other. So what becomes of the Law? It's set aside for those other people "who are lost in religion," those who are not in a relationship with Christ.

So how is a Christian called out for their sin? How are they led by God to repent? When does God lead them to public confession and to the truth of the cross – what Luther correctly calls the "daily" need to see oneself for who we are and to allow God's forgiveness to work in us? **The need for repentance is ongoing.** It's the message that hasn't changed in four thousand plus years, for "*for no one does good – no, not one*" (Rom. 3:12).

Furthermore, **if our real problem is our emotional disconnect from God** (distancing ourselves from Him), **the solution that the Bible provides makes no sense.** Why would the Son of God need to suffer and die due to His Father's wrath – a wrath that originates due to ***your failings***, if all you need to do is correct your relationship problem with Him? In the end, Relationship Theology weakens the preaching of the Law, and destroys the real need to preach Christ crucified. Wolfmueller states, "Relationship replaces repentance, and the Christian life is taken up into the thrill and devastation of a high school romance."

The **fourth danger** is that **this false theology "expects things of God that He never promised."** In our relationships, we talk and we expect the person to reply. It may be face-to-face, by phone, text, e-mail, etc. When you take this expectation into your "relationship" with Christ, you expect the same – direct feedback. We pray and we expect to "feel" something. "Did God move you? Did you hear His still, small voice speaking? We're you touched by Him?" "No need to read God's holy Word. No sir! God will speak to you directly! You just need a closer relationship for this to happen." Wrong. Very wrong and very dangerous. Wolfmueller: "This is a subtle and pious-looking denial of the sufficiency of God's Word..." More than that, God never promises to talk with you directly – He ***only*** promises to speak to you through His Word. The false thinking of direct revelation is the foundation of the Pentecostal movement (a movement that originated in the early 1900's) that has corrupted Christianity by removing Christians from our highest possible state of belief, child-like faith, and replacing it with signs and wonders (see Mark 10:15, Matthew 12:38-41): The signs and wonders of God's direct revelation to man.

Notice that this involves man's constant quest to replace God's holy Word with something more pleasing and easy to digest. Relationship Theology fills this bill completely. It's much more "human" and seems more tangible. But **it replaces the certainty of our salvation with the shallowness of our emotions.** "I don't feel forgiven." "I'm not sure my relationship with Christ is real?" The promises of our Lord that come through His word of Baptism and the Lord's Supper – trashed. The sure and certain hope of salvation – now, nothing but a giant question mark. Placed on the pendulum of pride and despair, man is led away from the truth of God's Word.

Lutherans celebrate a doctrine that dates back to the Reformation - a doctrine wholly based on Scripture. For 500 years our doctrine has stood the test of time, and the attacks of Satan. Whenever you hear words like, "What is your relationship with Jesus like?" you can respond with, "I am Baptized into His death and resurrection. Through Word and Sacrament, I have the sure and certain hope of eternal life with Him in heaven. **I believe – therefore I am saved.**" Amen.

Pastor Travis