

**Then Fell the Lord's Fire:
New Life in Ministry**
Ordination Sermons and Essays on Pastoral
Theology and Practice

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“And a highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Way of Holiness;
the unclean shall not pass over it.
It shall belong to those who walk on the way
even if they are fools, they shall not go astray.”
(Isa. 35:8 ESV [emphasis added])

With All Boldness
Pastoral Conference 1963

“With all boldness . . .”

There rings an appeal in these words that we know that we need, or perhaps a hint about a help and a concealed asset that we need more than all appeals. We are reminded that they are gathered out of Scripture. But where is it really?

We take a concordance. It belongs to the pastor’s most useful books. Sometimes it is quite exciting to read it. It enlightens us that there are three places where the words “all boldness” appear, one in the beginning of Acts, a second in the conclusion of the same book, and a third in the first chapter of Philipians.

Acts 4:29

We begin with Acts 4:29. The context is dramatic. We find ourselves in the weeks after the first Pentecost. There is already a Christian Church in Jerusalem. The first crisis in the relationship to society is brewing. From society’s viewpoint the matter ought to be decided. Jesus of Nazareth has been executed, unanimously condemned to death by the land’s highest court and the occupation power’s representative. His preposterous claim to be the Messiah, God’s Son, is refuted. Everything should have returned to the old calm. But the calm is disturbed. It is preached in the temple itself that the one who was lawfully executed lives. People believe it. Inconceivable and highly vexing things

are happening. One man who was lame his whole life and whom all saw sit and beg by the Pyle Horraia (the Beautiful Gate), the most used of all the temple's gates, has begun in everyone's sight to walk and allows these Galileans to stand as miracle workers. The police came immediately; they arrested the leaders of the new party and examined them. They had the audacity to stand before the Sanhedrin and say that all this had happened through faith in Jesus—"whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead" (Acts 4:12a ESV) During the examination, they had summarized the new and preposterous teaching in a pregnant formula: "there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (v. 12b ESV). They attempted to handle them with gentle means and only forbade them to speak or teach in Jesus' name. They answered that they could not be silent concerning what they themselves had seen and heard. For this reason they were forbidden even more strictly to speak of this Jesus and then let go.

And now Peter and John too, after their first night in jail, have come back to their own and told what the people's highest court, judging and exercising power with all authority, has made clear for them: that they will not be slapped on the wrist if they attempt to defy this council and their orders any further.

And then? When they heard this, Luke relates, they all cried together to God. It is in this prayer we for the first time encounter the three words "with all boldness." "And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your

servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness" (Acts 4:29 ESV).

"With all boldness . . ." There, out before them, lies Jerusalem in the flaming heat of summer days, the city that murders the prophets and stones those who are sent to it. Here one really feels the need to pray for boldness. The Word that one is supposed to preach is a challenge to both Jews and Greeks. It is not related to all the other religions that they were otherwise crowded by in the Hellenistic world and that all enjoyed an obvious tolerance. It is not a matter of a religion of the type that constantly grows out of men's longing for the divine and takes form in symbolic myths or philosophical systems. It is a question of fact, about something that has happened here in Jerusalem, which one himself has been a witness to and that has meaning for all men, final meaning, meaning for life and salvation. For the Jews it is an offense, a blasphemy that He who was crucified should be able to be God's Messiah. For the Greeks it is a folly that God would be able to die on the cross. For the Romans it is not worth more than a scornful shoulder shrug already because it comes from these fanatical and unreasonable Jews.

And then, there is the fact. One knows it, and one knows that one may see it and experience it because from the very beginning one has been pointed out to be a witness for God before the world. One knows what is expected. One has heard it many times from the Master's lips: "See, I send you as sheep among wolves." "They will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated

by all nations for My name's sake." "It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher." "Do not fear those who can kill the body, and after that there is no more they can do."

And now the hour has also come. One knew it before. Yet does it feel harder than one thought it would? Acts wastes no words on such feelings. But it says that they prayed, and they prayed for boldness.

The word *boldness* is *parrhesia* in Greek. This Greek word means more than its Swedish counterpart. The basic meaning is "to be able to say anything," to be able to speak freely, to venture to step forward with that which one has on his heart. In classic Greek it can be used for the democratic right that we call free speech. It can also mean outspokenness, occasionally with a bit of impertinence. Sometimes, even in the New Testament, it simply indicates that something happens openly or publicly.

This, to be able to speak freely, applies both to God and men. There is a *parrhesia* before God. "If our conscience does not condemn us, we can have boldness to step before God," John says. It means to be able to venture before God to say like a child, "Abba, Father." It is possible only through the security of redemption, through the forgiveness that revokes and crosses out all that we are in ourselves or have earned in our own ways. For this reason it says in Ephesians 3:12 that we in Christ possess "*parrhesian kai prosagogen*," the ability to speak openly with God and the ability to go straight to Him. The same thought is found carried out in the famous verse in the fourth chapter of Hebrews: "Since then we have a great high priest who has

passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. . . . Let us then with confidence [*meta parrhesias*] draw near to the throne of grace" (vv. 14, 16 ESV). The *parrhesia* before God would be presumption without redemption. This is an impossibility for a wounded conscience. But it is every Christian's privilege through faith in Jesus. It is to venture to "say all" that we are open also in questions of that which one is ashamed of, to be able to go straight away, to draw near to the throne of grace, to receive mercy and find grace to help at the right time. But before everything it is to be a child of God in Christ Jesus, not slaves but children, heirs with Christ, initiated by God.

When it comes to *parrhesia* before men, the basic meaning of the word is the same: to be able to dare and say everything. Naturally then, it is a matter of what one will say. For one apostle the answer lies in the Great Commission: "teach them to observe all that I have commanded you." One apostolic *parrhesia* remains in this, that he preaches all that his Lord has taught him. What he heard whispered in his ear in the closet, that he shall preach from the rooftops. He shall do just that which the Great Council forbade: preach in Jesus' name, proclaiming salvation through faith in Jesus. It is to confess Jesus before men. It also does not do to sweep the offensive points under the rug, to attempt to lock up the religiosity as perhaps time bound, make monotheism and morals the chief points, and cautiously paint Jesus as God's revealer and ethical prototype. The religious situation in the Roman Empire

seemed ready for one such program. The time was religiously tolerant. Through the motley mishmash of myths and rites, there was an incentive to faith in the one and only God and a longing after a higher and purer ethic. One groped about for an answer to the question of the final meaning of life in eternity. One held to the summary of general revelation that the Enlightenment seventeen hundred years later would put in the three words: God, virtue, and immortality. It is the summary of the knowledge of God that we men can receive through the common revelation in nature and conscience, in the stars of heaven above me and the moral law in my heart, to speak like Kant. The Roman state pictured itself as understanding and tolerant to all this, but with one caveat: that one unquestionably acknowledged the state's sovereignty and its absolute right, embodied in the cult of Caesar.

But Christendom chose not to adapt itself according to the society in which it would now live. It would have meant betrayal to its own innermost being, the proclamation of Christ. For the Gospel is something more than the summary of God's common revelation. It is the joyful message of God's intervention in the world that gives humanity completely new possibilities to know God and come to Him. This news is not only a better message, a clearer insight than what one thought before. It is a deed, a saving intervention. Or to say as the New Testaments says, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself." The summary of this news being this: believe in Jesus, and you are saved.

The Gospel must therefore be an unhelpful offense for the principled religious relativism that stamped Hellenism—just as it so often stamps our time. The message of Christ's Lordship must get caught up in helpless conflict with the society that could tolerate almost everything in the religious sphere, if only one recognized the state's sovereignty. This conflict is prophesied in Jesus' own proclamation: "Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles" (Matt. 10:17-18 ESV).

Before this conflict, the Gospel gives no promise of success according to the meaning that we insert in that word. It just may be that the one who acknowledges Jesus will be hated by all and flee from one city to the next. But he who perseveres to the end shall be saved. That is the promise that is given.

Here a comparison can be made with Churchill at the point in England's history that came to be known afterwards in the world as "their finest hour." He promised his people blood, sweat, and tears—and the final victory. One could use these words for the Early Church. It was the promise one then lived with: blood, sweat, and tears and the final victory. The difference was only this, that the final victory for the lonely fighting Brits in 1941 was still something that they could hope to experience within a few years, see with their eyes, rejoice over like a palpable and undeniable fruit of their sacrifice. For the apostles and the

Early Church, it was the final victory, Christ's victory, the new age, something that was so much more than anyone could have ever dreamt of here in time. All hung on this: that He was God's Son, risen from the dead, sitting at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, from thence He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

In this situation, to have *parreia*, boldness, requires that one does not figure that what he now says, does, suffers, and works for will necessarily result in men being convinced and believing the Gospel. But it means to know that this is right, that this is true. So it has and will happen, whatever men might say about it. All hangs on faith in this Jesus. His path went from the cross to the resurrection. He who follows Him may count on taking the same path. He may take his cross.

So the situation must have seemed that summer day, 1,930 years ago, when the apostles in the face of threats from their enemies prayed to their Lord that they would be able to proclaim His Word with all boldness.

Immediately after, Luke continues, "And they continued to speak the word of God with boldness," they followed their program, the program that the Church has since had to follow in every age in the same situations.

How did it go after? The whole program?

Acts 28:31

We turn the pages of history, until we come to the last page of Acts. There in the last verse, we meet the same words again.

Twenty-eight years have passed. Paul, who this time in Jerusalem belonged to the sworn enemies, is now approaching the end of his long trip. He has come to Rome, under guard, in order to receive his sentence. He is met by Christians the moment he steps on land in Puteoli. From Rome, people have gone to meet him at the Three Taverns and Forum Appii, 60 kilometers south on the Via Appia. In Rome he was in custody of the police but still had certain freedom and could rent a home. He lived there for two years. People came and went, he received them, and he wrote letters. "Proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance."

Such is the abrupt end of Acts that has given rise to so many speculations. We leave them there and note only that here again we have the three words: "with all boldness."

In order to understand them, we must attempt to think of what it would be like to be in that stream of people who seek him in the home he rented in one of the numerous Roman apartment buildings, up to six stories high, built of thin Roman brick, not all that safe from collapse (they did that later under Flavius), with endless stairs and no chimneys so that the smoke from the many kitchens had to vent through the windows. In the stairs stood a legionnaire, provided he hadn't gone down to the tavern for a refreshment in the well-founded belief that this prisoner would not make any attempt to escape. Many people have passed through these stairs in the last few days. In the beginning there were great crowds of Jews who wanted to

hear what their learned compatriot had to say. They have thinned out now. Some of them belong to his conspiring opponents. There may be complications with him.

In Iconium and Lystra, in Thessalonica and Corinth, the opposition led to riots and abuse. In Lystra he was stoned and tossed out of the city as dead. It was only one episode in the series. Paul himself had some years earlier made up an apparently quite comprehensive list. It takes up over a half column in a Swedish Bible, a strangely parallel piece to the merit lists that accompany our employment applications. He says that he himself bears the wounds of Christ on his body. Perhaps he means all the honor. He who had not only been stoned but had been publicly flogged eight times, he bore the marks of it throughout his life. Naturally, one can see the marks of a quarter century of toil and drudgery, trips and adventures, vigils, cold, and hunger—not to speak of the stress of being overburdened. This is noticeable even here in Rome, where messengers are coming and going with reports from Ephesus and Colossae, from Antioch and Jerusalem, where as naturally as always, greetings of all kinds are dampened with all types of distress and hardships, persecutions, waste, and division crying out in pain.

Should we ask Paul how in the midst of all this he will continue with all boldness, he might look surprised. He has never thought anything else. It was done so from the beginning. The time when he sat blind in Damascus, the Lord had come to Ananias and commanded him with a greeting: "This man is a chosen instrument for Me. And I

shall show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake." Paul is fully prepared to come here to continue, if it doesn't get any worse. The deadly truth has followed him ever since he went up to Jerusalem. He is probably more surprised over how it came to be that there was so much future, that from his point of view he has been allowed to experience it as a final victory day. But this is also natural for him. He had said it some years earlier in a letter to Rome. To be Christian is on the one hand to be treated like sheep to slaughter: "for your sake we are being killed all the day long." And yet: "in all this we win a glorious victory through Him who has loved us."

Philippians 1:20

Perhaps Paul sits down just now and writes about this thing. In all likelihood, Philippians was written during this year in Rome. Here, for the third time, we encounter the words "with all boldness."

It is in the beginning of the letter where he describes his situation, prepared to depart and prepared to stay. "It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage [all boldness] now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death" (Phil. 1:20 ESV).

It is instructive here to see what Paul puts in opposition to proclaiming Christ with all boldness. It is to be ashamed. By shame, the apostle does not mean how he was beaten or laughed at, scourged or executed. By shame he means being silent. If he compromises and cuts out some of the

offensive aspects in the message about Christ, then Christ is no longer glorified. It is the same thought that he developed in another place, in 2 Corinthians. There he speaks about how God carried him forward in triumph and through him spread His knowledge as a pleasing aroma everywhere, just as the aroma of the censer envelops a procession that proceeds along the Via Sacra. Is that too much to say, is that not presumption? Paul hesitates like others and asks, “Who is sufficient for these things?” (2 Cor. 2:16 ESV). And the answer is this: “For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God’s Word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ” (v. 17 ESV).

Here again we encounter the apostolic certainty of having been entrusted with a message that cannot be changed. Just as Paul himself has received it as something that went contrary to what he had thought and wished before, so he is guilty of being an ambassador, who does not change or keep secret one word of that which he has been tasked to speak. He speaks before God. He knows who must take responsibility for that which will now happen. Therefore he speaks with *parresia* all that he has been commanded to say.

And that he does so also means, according to the verse just mentioned in Philippians, that Christ be glorified, now as always. Perhaps it can be a bit presumptuous again, but not from Paul’s mouth. He knows what it costs to be Christ’s herald. He bears the marks of it all over his body. But this is that manner in which Christ shall be brought out

into the world and be glorified, praised, made great before men as the word means. “For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh” (2 Cor. 4:11 ESV).

So we wonder here why Paul, as so often, changes the wonderful expression, that Christ with all boldness shall be glorified in his body. When this tired and worn, scarred and crippled body that is now, to crown everything, bound in chains, when it can still be used in the Lord’s service, when he sits here and dictates, when he receives people, comforts and warns and gives advice, when he instructs and preaches, when the work drags out long into the night’s late hours and begins again before the first street vendors have woken or some of the small stalls down on the street have rolled up their windows of wood slats, it is then that Christ is glorified.

And here the great apostle, human, and Christian comes close to his little brothers in the Swedish priesthood, for whom it also means to persevere with all boldness. The basis for boldness is, of course, the same: not some guarantee that it pays off if you figure statistics or weigh on the scale of church politics, but simply this, that He is with us every day until the end of time, He to whom all power in heaven and on earth has been given.

The prisoners are also the same, these whom Paul calls “to forsake their righteousness and purity before Christ.” They are imprisoned when Christ is made into something other than He is to fit into a religiosity that is monotheistic,

believes in salvation through moralism, and only knows the truth as relative. Or the prison can be faithfulness. One finally wants to escape, finally get some peace, to finally get away from the tension that it costs to serve Him who has been placed as a sign of opposition. Even Paul has known this prison. One sees it already in the oldest of his preserved letters, 1 Thessalonians, where he writes, "But though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict" (1 Thess. 2:2 ESV).

Much conflict and still boldness in God, so it is in the apostle's wake. And Paul says in the same breath who it is that gives him boldness amidst much conflict. It is the word that every pastor in every time ought to be able to write of his heart: "For our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive, but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts" (1 Thess. 2:3-4 ESV).

To Preach Justification by Faith

*Tota haec doctrina ad illud certamen pertinet
conscientiae referenda est, nec sine illo certamine intelligi
postest.*

"For the whole of this teaching hangs together with the fight, which a tortured conscience has to endure, and without such a fight cannot understand."

So it is written in the Confessio Augustana (XX). It is concerned with the teaching of justification by faith: the whole of this doctrine belongs together with the fight that a tortured conscience has to endure, and which it cannot understand without such a fight.

This wise word speaks from the Reformers' deepest experience. We ought to always remember it if we are to be able to make the doctrine of justification by faith living for our time and preach it so that men of our age can understand it.

As is known, this question was the topic of discussion at the Lutheran World Federation's conference in Helsinki in the fall [of 1963]. The attempt to interpret it in new terms and metaphors failed. One could not find any formula that satisfied everyone. And I believe that the failure was in large part because for too many it was not clear that this article cannot be understood if one has not felt what the Augustana calls a tortured conscience's fight, also man's agony under God's judgment, that judgment that he feels as just and right. On the contrary, it appeared often enough as