

An article that appeared in the "LWML Quarterly Journal"

TURNING IN OR TURNING AWAY?

Martin Luther defined sin as "turning in on self." Because we are sinners we are naturally self-directed. We focus upon ourselves. We worry about ourselves. If someone hurts our pride, we feel sorry for ourselves. In order to impress others, we brag about ourselves. We worry about our self-image and want to have our self-esteem enlarged. When accused, we are quick to defend ourselves. By nature, we are very self-*ish* people.

All thoughts, words, and deeds that the Bible defines as sinful are the result self-centeredness and pride. Think about it! Worry, bitterness, fear, resentment, anger, lust, etc. are all the result of "turning inward." As one person put it so well, if the spider webs are our sins, pride is the spider. So rather than trying to sweep away the spider webs, step on the spider.

Viennese psychiatrist Dr. Viktor Frankl observed during his time in a Nazi concentration camp that those who made it through the horrible experience were able to "get off themselves" and get involved in meaningful pursuits, such as helping others. On the contrary, those who turned inward and felt sorry for themselves or responded with bitterness and resentment did not survive the ordeal. After the war, Frankl developed his *logotherapy* based on the principle of self-detachment or "getting off yourself."

But God has a better idea! He calls us away from self and directs us in faith to his Son Jesus. This dynamic is the very heartbeat of Christian truth. In ourselves we will only discover sin and death, but in Jesus we find our righteousness, our forgiveness, our joy, and our peace. Our worship and esteem is not self-directed but is Christ-directed. Our real life is not found in ourselves, but in Christ. In 2 Corinthians 5:15 Saint Paul writes, "And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again."

In the eyes of the world, we Lutherans must be a weird lot. Consider, for example, every Sunday morning we begin our service of Holy Communion by saying, "Almighty God, merciful Father, I, a poor, miserable sinner." What a horrible thing to say! What an assault on our self-esteem and positive thinking! What is wrong with us? Don't we realize that this type of confession is potentially dangerous to our sensitive inner child?

The truth is, there is nothing wrong with us. We simply know something that the world does not know. By confessing our sins, we are turning away from self. We are stepping on the spider. If sin

causes us to turn in on self, confessing our sins causes us to turn away and flee to Jesus who declares to us through the pastor, "I forgive you all your sins."

In addition, Lutheran pastors are taught to preach Law and Gospel every Sunday. This is also strange. While many preachers seek to be loved by meeting the felt needs of their people and preaching heart-warming and emotion-tickling sermons, Lutheran pastors have the courage to "tell it like it is."

By preaching the Law, your pastor intends to "nail you," so to speak, or pin you to the pew. A good sermon should cause you to squirm. Your shoes should get a little tighter because the Law of God is exposing your sins.

Why does your pastor do this? Is he heartless? Has he no concern for your sensitive feelings?

He does this because he loves you. By preaching the Law of God and the wrath of God against human sin he is causing the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the life-changing message of God's grace, mercy, and forgiveness, to become real and sweet and precious to you. Concerning preaching, Martin Luther said that hunger is the best cook. In other words, the effective preaching of the Law creates hunger for the Gospel.

This dynamic of turning away from self and turning to Jesus, or the daily application of Law and Gospel, causes you to live the Christian life. You do not live as a Christian because you have learned some principles for being happy or successful. If sin causes you to turn in on self, you live the Christian life by daily by turning away from self to the Cross of Jesus Christ where your forgiveness and new life is found.

Put this into practice. Apply it to yourselves. Practice it in your families. Be quick to acknowledge your sin and by faith receive your forgiveness, and the peace of God that passes all understanding will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.†

Dr. Don Matzat is the host of Sunday night *Issues, Etc.*, a national radio talk show heard on the *Jubilee Network*, a broadcast service of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. Don and his wife Dianne have been married for 36 years and live in Pittsburgh, Pa. As a pastor in the Missouri Synod, he has served congregations in Indiana, Michigan, New York and St. Louis. Dr. Matzat also hosts a daily talk show on WORD FM in Pittsburgh.