

# Picture this!

## Johann Gerhard and the Church

by Harold Ristau

It is no secret that, as church membership and attendance decrease, many Christians are concerned about the future of the Church in North America. When we look at the Church as a human organization, its short term future may in fact look bleak. But when we rightly view it as God's creation and possession, we can be filled with great hope and joy.

When one reads the sermons and letters of many Lutheran Fathers of the past, one quickly discovers how similar their concerns were to our own. Just as we do today, their communities often worried about declining membership, the lack of young people in the pews, the demand to make services and preaching more "relevant", and too little offerings—in short, they worried about the overall health of the Church. As Solomon writes, "there is nothing new under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 1:9).

In my devotional readings I have recently rediscovered a work by sixteenth century theologian and pastor Johann Gerhard entitled *Sacred Meditations*. In this book, Gerhard explores the nature of the Church. Gerhard uses allegories, rooted in biblical motifs, to offer comfort for the faithful who love the Church yet worry about its survival. They also stand as a warning to those who have only negative and critical things to say about its present state.

Gerhard challenges us to identify ourselves not only with the church of our own short life-span, but with that of the Catholic Church throughout all of history. Although he was a sharp dogmatician and a respected academic, this book is written simply—as a direct dialogue with the soul, couching profound theological reflections in simple prayers. He does not simply write

about spiritual topics; he speaks about them poetically. Consider Gerhard's picture of the Church as a ship:

*The Church is that ship that carries Christ and His disciples (Matthew 8:23), and transports us at long last to the port of eternal blessedness.*

*The Church navigates her established course through the sea of this age with the rudder of faith, having God as her pilot, angels for oarsmen, and the company of all the saints for her passengers.*

*The mast in her middle* Johann Gerhard.

*is the cross of salvation, on which is suspended the sail of the evangelical faith, by which she is lead by the breath of the Holy Spirit to the security of eternal rest.*

How often do we panic in our sailing, though we are fully aware that Christ the Lord and Creator rides with us below deck, peacefully sleeping? Gerhard admonishes us



to hold fast to faith, and to look ahead to our destination point in glory with bright and high expectations:

*You have been carried in that ship. See that you do not throw yourself into the sea of the world (Matthew 8:25) before you arrive at port. Pray, lest you be absorbed by storms of affliction and the waves of temptation.*

In a similar way, Gerhard compares the Church to a garden infused with sacramental imagery. We often hear in sermons about the importance of the sacraments in the walk of faith, but sometimes we have a difficult time conceiving why they are indispensable. In lovely picture language, Gerhard paints a canvas compelling us to envision our position before God in terms of spirit, water, and blood:

*The Church is that vine that God has planted in the field of this world, watered with His own blood, surrounded with the protection of angels, having constructed the winepress of His own passion in her; having removed the stones and offensive things from her... You are called into the Lord's vineyard (Matthew 20:1).*

Even in his rebukes, we are edified by Gerhard's homiletic gifts. When calling us to a life of holiness, our free justification through Christ is implicit in his appeal:

*See that you labor strenuously. Let the thought of the denarius ease the labours of the day. You are the vine of the Lord. Throw away all the worthless branches, all the fruitless works of the flesh. Regard all the time of your life as a time of pruning. You are a branch in the true vine (John 15:1). See to it that you remain in it and bear much fruit, because the heavenly farmer takes away the branches that do not bear fruit and prunes them, that they may bear more copious fruit.*

The relationship between faith and good works, which are often unnecessarily juxtaposed by Christians, is effectively united in the traditional Lutheran language of Law and Gospel. With pruning, vines naturally produce fruit. Through repentance and suffering, Christians naturally produce good works. In driving this point home, can one think of a gentler image than God as our gardener and we, the Church, as His precious garden?

An equally gentle image of the Church is that of a woman. Traditionally, because Christ calls Himself the groom, the Church is depicted as His bride. When this

motif is kept in mind, the believer hears many segments of Scripture with new ears. God sees you and me as His precious beautiful bride, covered by the wedding garments of Jesus Christ's righteousness:

*The Church is that woman clothed with the sun (Revelation 12:1) because she is clothed with Christ's righteousness. She tramples the moon underfoot because she despises the world, which is subject to manifold changes. You have clothed yourself by faith (Galatians 3:27) and you have been covered with the Sun of righteousness (Malachi 4:2; Revelation 12:1). See to it then that you tread the moon, that is, all the earthly things, underfoot and esteem all these things little in comparison to the good things of heaven.*

God sees us in a way that we cannot imagine ourselves; it seems too good to be true. When we begin to view God's people through the eyes of Christ, our attitude towards His Church is transformed. Gerhard helps us see the Church in this way, building on the pictures found in Holy Scriptures. Through them, Gerhard leads us to walk

by faith and not by sight: we see our own church as a community of sinners, "of whom I am the worst"; but He regards us now as glorious and perfect saints—as His bride—because of the atonement of His Son.

For those who mock, despise, and distrust the Church, however, Gerhard has harsh words, words

particularly important today when the temptation to replace church with personal spirituality at home and alone is all too common. The Church isn't just the bride of Christ; it is also our mother, and we need to respect her as such.

*Contemplate, devout soul, the dignity of the Church, and beware lest you engage in anything unworthy of her. The Church is a mother, so beware lest you despise her voice. She is a mother so you ought always cling to her breasts. The Church's breasts are the Word and Sacraments. The Church is a virgin. If then you are really her son, abstain from the embraces of the world. You are a member of the virgin. See to it that you do not associate the members of the virgin with prostitutes and with Satan through sin. You are the bride of Christ. See that you do not send away the pledge of the Holy Spirit that has been given to you.... Shine with the oil of your faith, lest in the coming of the Bridegroom you may be forced to wish for it in vain.*

Too often churches today, desperately trying to produce more active members, have begun to panic—like a salesman who has knocked on far too many doors with

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far too few sales. But the Church is not a possession of man. It's not a club or a business. It is Christ's sacred Body, heaven's powerful ark, God's beautiful garden, the Son of Man's precious Bride, and our holy mother.

*Contemplate, devout soul, this dignity of the Church and give the thanks owed to God. Indeed, the benefits that God grants through the Church are great, but they are not obvious to everyone. It is like a closed garden and a sealed fountain (Song of Solomon 4:12). Therefore no one recognizes these highest blessings in the Church unless he himself is in it. This ship is struck with various storms of persecution (Matthew 8:25). This vine is lifted up by being bound and enlarged by being cut back (John 15:2). The infernal dragon himself plots against this woman in many ways (Revelation 12:7).*

*The Church is a beautiful lily, but a lily between thorns (Song of Solomon 2:1). The most beautiful garden is the Church, but only when the north wind of tribulation blows through it, do its aromatic spices at last flow out.... The Church is the spiritual mother, but she is forced to stand under the cross, just as Mary, from whom Christ was born into this world, was standing under the cross (John 19:25).*

The tribulations that we face as Christ's Church are themselves instruments God uses for our spiritual growth:

"The vine is lifted up by being bound, and enlarged by being cut back," as Gerhard says. There is no doom and gloom underlying this sermon, despite the promises of many difficulties and trials. Did the persecuted Christians of the second century curse the sky because their congregation no longer had an active youth group? Did the Reformers join their adversaries because their Sunday schools had more children? Throughout his writings, Gerhard reminds us that God's grace is sufficient for us. The Church is bigger than one generation, and any one of our own subjective experiences.

Gerhard challenges us to remain faithful to the Church and her doctrine at all costs, as we fight a spiritual war. It often takes a lot of energy, perseverance, and deliberation. And the victories on the battle field may not always be obvious to every soldier fighting. But when we remain faithful to this call of duty, the death of every Christian is that of a martyr's:

*Whoever does not have a share in the Church militant will never have a share in the Church triumphant. O good Jesus, who has led us into the Church militant, lead us also at long last into that Church triumphant.*

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