



Nikolaus von Amsdorf

A BIBLE STUDY ON NIKOLAUS VON AMSDORF

Martin Luther's Faithful Friend and Defender

“Preserve Your Word, O Savior”

(TLH 264; LW 337; LSB 658)

(1 Peter 1:5-7; Jude 3, 17, 20-21)

“Gottes wort ist Luthers lehr / darumb vergeht sie nimmermehr.”

“Luther's teaching will always remain because it's God's Word.”

— Motto from 17th-century Lutheran publications, coins and medals

Nikolaus von Amsdorf served as a faithful friend and defender of Martin Luther and the truths rediscovered by the Reformation. Von Amsdorf was an eyewitness of many of the events of the Reformation, traveling with Luther to the Leipzig Debate, the Diet of Worms and the subsequent “kidnapping” of the reformer on his way back to Wittenberg. Ever since Luther had sent the professor at Wittenberg a copy of the writings of St. Augustine, the two had developed a closer understanding of the teachings of Scripture. After Luther's death, von Amsdorf became one of the staunchest supporters of Dr. Luther. He fled to Duke Johann Wilhelm for safety after Roman Catholic forces defeated the Lutheran Schmalkaldic League at the Battle of Mühlberg (1547) and helped found the University of Jena, where he oversaw the printing of Luther's works. Despite some of his theological quirks, von Amsdorf continued to stress the importance of keeping the teachings of Scripture pure — those doctrines revealed by the eternal Word of God.

STANZA ONE

*Preserve Your Word, O Savior, / To us this latter day, /
And let Your kingdom flourish; / Enlarge Your Church, we
pray. / O keep our faith from failing; / Keep hope's bright
star aglow. / Let nothing from truth turn us / While living here
below.*

“Continue to be faithful to Your saving promises!”

This is the petition Nikolaus von Amsdorf sang as he defended the truths Luther rediscovered at the time of the Reformation. It may seem strange to pray to the Lord, asking Him to preserve His Word — the Word that will, by its very nature, endure forever. But the prayer of Martin

Luther, Nikolaus von Amsdorf and each one of us is not that the Word of God would be kept from being destroyed (an impossibility); the prayer of all Christ's saints is that the Word of God would be preserved among us, especially as we get closer and closer to the great and terrible Day of the Lord (2 PETER 3:10).

1. Reacquaint yourself with those sections of Scripture that clearly reveal the eternal nature of the Word of God (PS. 119:89; IS. 40:6-8; 1 PETER 1:25; REV. 14:6). Why did this (“Verbum Domini Manet in Aeternum” — “The Word of the Lord endures forever”) become the primary motto of the Reformation and the battle cry of the Lutheran Schmalkaldic League after the death of Luther? What comforting focus do these verses give to believers under persecution from forces inside and outside the visible Christian Church? Why is this an appropriate motto for Concordia Publishing House?

2. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. He is the light of the world, even though the world would not receive Him (JOHN 1:11). Yet to all who believe, Jesus is not only “Lord,” but “my Lord” (John 20:28); not only “Savior,” but “my Savior” (LUKE 1:47); not only “rock” and “deliverer,” but “my rock” and “my deliverer” (PS. 18:2). Von Amsdorf fought for the truth that we are saved by grace through faith in the substitutionary sacrifice of the Son of God. Through the Word of God sent from heaven, Christ's perfect life is my perfect life; His death is my death; His resurrection to eternal life is my resurrection to eternal life. Only through God-given faith can any of us confess Jesus as our own. “O keep our faith from failing; Keep hope's bright star aglow” — all through the Lord's saving Word.

STANZA TWO

*Preserve, O Lord, Your honor, / The bold blasphemer smite; /
Convince, convert, enlighten / The souls in error's night. /
Reveal Your will, dear Savior, / To all who dwell below, / Great
light of all the living, / That all Your name may know.*

Von Amsdorf knew full well that demonic forces desired nothing but the twisting and, ultimately, silencing of the Gospel graciously revealed to Luther and his

faithful followers. He had seen firsthand the attempts to force Luther to recant or be punished for not conforming to the demands of the Roman Catholic religious and political leaders of his day. He joined Luther and the other reformers in believing that only the light of the Word of God could change sinful, self-centered hearts and minds, as it had done in his own mind and heart. True faith in Christ prays, “Preserve, O Lord, Your honor! May Your saving name be hallowed — in my life and in the lives of all believers.”

3. Luther and von Amsdorf knew that the pure Gospel of Christ would be met quickly with opposition by the father of lies and his minions. Following Luther, Johann Sebastian Bach made it a point to constantly proclaim “Soli Deo Gloria” in the face of those who wanted to rob Christ of His glory and honor. The life of faith in Christ is a life of joyful response — a doxology to the Triune God — for making us who were dead to sin alive again in Jesus. Why are some Christians surprised when they suffer for the sake of the Gospel? Why do some believe that “the blessed Christian life” is one without struggle or persecution?

4. Why is it not enough to simply believe Jesus lived, died and rose again, but that Jesus lived *for me*, died *for me* and was resurrected *for me*? Why do the little words “for me” make all the difference in the world when it comes to our salvation? What’s the great difference between simply knowing the historical facts and knowing the saving truth that honors and says “Amen” to Christ and His Word (JAMES 2:19)?

STANZA THREE

Preserve, O Lord, Your Zion,/Bought dearly with Your blood;/Protect what You have chosen/Against the hellish flood./Be always our defender/When dangers gather round;/When all the earth is crumbling/Safe may Your Church be found.

The Lord’s Zion is His precious Church, redeemed by His life-blood upon the cross. In this life, the Body of Christ is flooded with temptations as it bears the cross of suffering and shame for the sake of the Gospel. Nikolaus von Amsdorf began to suffer from the attacks that occurred soon after Luther’s death in 1546. Fleeing to a safer region of Germany, he sought to strengthen Reformation defenses by founding a faithful university and publishing the writings of Luther that pointed to Christ and His promise that none of His sheep would be lost.

5. Von Amsdorf believed that faithful schools and printing houses were defenses against those who would attack the Christian Church on earth. How is this conviction also our conviction? Do you know of specific instances where a faithful Lutheran school or Lutheran publication announced the Gospel of Jesus to someone

who had not yet received the Gospel by faith? Why is it important for the inhabitants of Zion to continually pray for faithful Lutheran schools and publishing houses?

STANZA FOUR

Preserve Your Word and preaching,/The truth that makes us whole,/The mirror of Your glory,/The pow’r that saves the soul./Oh, may this living water,/This dew of heav’nly grace,/Sustain us while here living/Until we see Your face.

Many Lutheran congregations are named Redeemer Lutheran Church or Our Redeemer Lutheran Church. A possible explanation is the strong influence of Luther’s Small Catechism on our understanding of the person and work of Christ and the Church He creates and sustains. Specifically in the Explanation to the Second Article of the Creed, we confess Jesus’ great work:

I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true.

6. What verbs are highlighted in this beautiful confession of faith? How is this confession very different than merely stating historical facts?

7. The Reformation highlighted the characteristic of the true Christian Church on earth as much more than merely a museum in which the Word of God was placed under glass. The Christian Church is a “mouth-house” of the Word of God, where Christ’s Word is both preserved in its purity and proclaimed to any who would listen and receive Jesus’ saving truth by faith. How does this fourth stanza draw on imagery from John 4:1–26, 31–42?

STANZA FIVE

Preserve in wave and tempest/Your storm-tossed little flock;/Assailed by wind and weather,/May it endure each shock./Stand at the helm, our pilot,/And set the course aright;/Then we will reach the harbor/In Your eternal light.

In the same way the world would disintegrate into chaos if God removed His gracious hand, so the Christian Church on earth would cease to exist without the sustaining Word of promise from our redeeming Shepherd. The Church has been depicted as the Ark of Christ since the time of the apostles (1 PETER 3:20–21).

8. In this last stanza, we pray to the eternal Word of God incarnate, who pilots the ship of His holy Church through threatening seas (**MATT. 8:23–27; MARK 4:35–41; LUKE 8:22–25**). Here we sing of Jesus as the gracious guardian of His “storm-tossed” flock — a flock assailed by the devil, the refusing-to-believe world and the believer’s own sinful flesh. Nikolaus von Amsdorf joined Luther and the faithful saints that went before him in petitioning the Lord of the Church to defend and preserve His helpless and harassed sheep (**EZEK. 34:11**). In his last days, von Amsdorf witnessed the unchecked persecution of those who continued to give witness to the teachings of the Reformation, but he continued to fight for the truths of Scripture.

9. We remember the faithful friend and defender of Martin Luther, Nikolaus von Amsdorf, as we continue his prayer for the preservation of the true Christian Church under siege. Daily we join Luther and von Amsdorf and all the faithful as we ask that Jesus would graciously continue His work of preserving us — mercifully keeping us from all harm and danger until life everlasting:

I thank You, my heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, Your dear Son, that You have kept me this night from all harm and danger; and I pray that You would keep me this day also from sin and every evil, that all my doings and life may please You. For into Your hands I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things. Let Your holy angel be with me, that the evil foe may have no power over me. Amen. (Luther’s Morning Prayer)