

The Open Heaven.

Lecture at the Delegate Synod A.D.. 1929 by F. Pieper.

I.

Venerable Fathers and Brethren!

I would like to draw our attention to the open heaven at this year's Synod of Delegates. Holy Scripture does not always use the word "heaven" in the same sense. When it says in Scripture: "In the beginning God created heaven and earth" 1) [1) Gen 1:1] and: "The heavens were made by the Word of the Lord, and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth", 2) [2) Ps 33:6] it speaks of the heaven of creation, of the heaven we see with our eyes. This heaven is still beautiful even after the fall into sin. It is worth looking at. Scripture also invites us to do so. Thus in the 104th Psalm: "Praise the LORD, my soul! O Lord my God, you are very glorious; you are beautiful and splendidly adorned. Light is the garment you wear. You spread out the heavens like a carpet. You arch it above with water; you lead on the clouds as on a chariot and walk on the wings of the wind. ... O Lord, how great and many are your works! You have wisely ordered them all, and the earth is full of your

riches." [Ps. 104:1-3, 24] In his "Summaries of the Psalms", Luther comments on the 104th Psalm: "It is a psalm of thanksgiving for all other works besides man, which God has created in heaven and on earth, how they are so orderly, certain and wise in their works, fruits and benefits. Therefore he counts them one by one, so that the heavens are full of light and stand without pillars and beams like a carpet spread out; the clouds are like a vault without foundation or pillars; the winds fly without feathers; the angels, sent forth, come as a wind and flames. So play and take pleasure in God's creatures, so wonderfully created and so beautifully arranged among themselves." 3) [3] [St. L. IV, 179 f.](#)]

But of this heaven, which we see with our bodily eyes and contemplate with joy and admiration, Scripture says that it is passing away. The Savior says: "Heaven and earth will pass away." 4) [4] Matt. 24:35] But we will now speak of heaven, which does not pass away but remains forever. It is of this heaven that Scripture primarily speaks. It is for the sake of this heaven that Holy Scripture was written and given to us. It is the heaven with which the Savior comforts his fainthearted disciples when they are not granted a dwelling place here on earth, saying: "In my Father's house are many mansions." 5) [5] John 14:2] And in the high priestly prayer he prays: "Father, I want those whom you have given me to be with me where I am, that they may see my glory which you have given me." 6) [6] John 17:24] In short, by heaven, of which we want to speak in particular, we understand the heaven of eternal life, of eternal salvation, the eternal, blessed life in the fellowship of God, the holy angels and all the blessed. We understand the heaven of which St. Paul says: "But we know that if our earthly house, this tabernacle, is broken down, we have a building built by God, a house not made with hands, eternal, in heaven." 7) [7] 2 Cor. 5:1] We understand heaven, which St. Peter describes as the "inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and unfading, reserved in heaven". 8) [8] 1 Pet. 1:4] We mean the heaven of which we sing in the hymn:

	Jerusalem, you city built on high, Would to God I were in thee!
and:	O castle of honor, greet me now, Open the gate of grace!
and:	What a people, what a noble crowd Are already drawn there?
and:	Prophets great and patriarchs high, Christians too in general, Who once bore the yoke of the cross And the torment of tyrants, I see floating in honor, In freedom everywhere, With clarity brightly surrounded, With sunlit rays.

And of this heaven we say from Scripture that it is open to all men. Were this not the case, I would stop my lecture here and advise that we adjourn, cover our heads and draw our sorrowful steps. Human life would not be worth living, as St. Paul also says of Christians: "If in this life alone we hope in Christ, we are the most miserable of all men." 9) [9] 1 Cor. 15:19] But now heaven is open, and therefore I firmly advise that we remain in session. Our synodical assembly here in River Forest also applies to and serves the open heaven. And if in these days of synodical assembly we look in faith to the open heaven, remembering that the purpose of our synodical association is none other than to introduce people to the open heaven, we are rightly oriented from the outset and by God's grace will stay on the right track in speech and resolutions.

Yes, heaven is open! Of course, heaven was closed to us humans because of the Fall of our first parents. The fellowship with God, for which man was created, came to an end through the fall of man. When our first parents transgressed God's commandment through Satan's deceit, they not only brought guilt of sin upon themselves, but also upon all their descendants, upon the entire human race, and with the guilt of sin, death and damnation. All argumentation against this fact, which has happened and is still happening in abundance, is completely futile. "Through one man's sin condemnation has come upon all men." 10) [10] Rom. 5:18] Equally futile are all human efforts to regain fellowship with God through their own actions, through their own works, to reopen the closed heaven. Man must leave it forever. By the works of the law no flesh is justified. 11) [11] Gal. 2, 16] But as certain as this is, there is nevertheless an open heaven.

How is this so? It is because God did not abandon the human race for the sake of the Fall. According to Scripture, God loves people. "His delight is with the children of men." 12) [12] Proverbs 8:31] God loves people. God is a philanthropist, a "lover of mankind", as Luther preaches in the early Christmas Mass on the second day of Christmas on the text Titus 3:4-8. 13) [13] [St. L. XII, 130; AE 75, 232](#)] Luther uses the strange expression here: "God does not love the person, but the nature, and is not called a lover of persons but a lover of people." With this, Luther wants to indelibly impress the comforting truth that God's love for mankind "does not make a distinction of person among men", but "affects everything that is called a man, however small it may be". When God saw the human race made miserable by the devil's seduction, plunged into sinfulness and thus into

death and damnation, his love for the human race was not extinguished, but rather fanned into a bright flame. God did not turn away from the fallen human race, but drew even closer to it. He allowed his eternal Son, God from God, Light from Light, to become man, to take on human nature, i.e. to become a member of the human order, in order to lead and represent the cause of the whole order before Him. He committed his incarnate Son to fulfill the whole law given to men in the place of men.¹⁴⁾ [14) Gal. 4:4-5] He also committed him to take upon himself the whole guilt of sin that lay upon the human race.¹⁵⁾ [15) Gal. 3, 13] And this the incarnate Son of God did ¹⁶⁾ [16) Ps. 40:9, 13; Ps. 69:6] and thus opened heaven again completely to all men without exception.

And these are not our thoughts. This is not man-made theology, not theology devised in Chicago or St. Louis. No, this is God's own teaching in his word. For we read 2 Cor. 5:19: "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them." These words describe exactly how heaven came to be open to all people. First of all, it is said here that we are dealing with a work that is not the work of man, but the work of God. It says: "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself." Here, on the other hand, we are told how God brought about or accomplished the reconciliation of the world. In the work of reconciliation, the world stood before God laden with sins. But God did not impute their sins to them, the sinners, but He did impute the sins of sinners to the One who, among all the sons of men, knew no sin, His incarnate Son, as is immediately added in the following: "For God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness that is before God." [2 Cor. 5:21] Furthermore, it is stated how far the atonement and the heaven that is open through it reaches. It says: "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, not imputing their trespasses to them." The reconciliation and the heaven it opens extends as far as the human world, from the first human couple after the Fall, from Adam and Eve, to the last man to be born on the Last Day. For the apostle does not say: "God was in Christ, reconciling" half the world or a quarter of the world to himself, but "the world." The world without restriction was reconciled with God 1900 [now 2000] years ago through the Lamb of God who bears the sin of the world, was absolved of the guilt of sin in God's heart and declared righteous. Just as through Adam's sin God's judgment of guilt and condemnation came upon the whole human world, so

also through Christ's righteousness performed for mankind God's judgment of justification and life came upon the whole human world. Scripture teaches this quite explicitly. Romans 5:18-19 says: "As through one [namely, Adam's] sin came condemnation to all men, so also through one [namely, Christ's] righteousness came justification of life to all men." This and nothing else is also illustrated by the miraculous event at the atoning death of Christ: "And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom." 17) [17] Matt. 27:51] God's wrath against human sin has come to an end. Christ has entered the holy place once through his own blood and has brought eternal redemption. 18) [18] Heb. 9:12] The sacrificial lamb chosen by God himself, who bears the sin of the world, has taken away the guilt of sin of all people. Heaven is open to all people. And finally, what God did in Christ for the whole human world 1900 [now 2000] years ago, without people asking him to do it, indeed without them even knowing about it, God did not keep it secret in his heart, but commanded it to be proclaimed to the whole world. "God has committed unto us the word of reconciliation." This does not refer to the reconciliation that takes place in the heart and conscience of man when he repents and believes in Christ. [I.e. not subjective, but objective!] 19) [19] 2 Cor. 5:20. Apology 101, 81] Here we are talking about the reconciliation by which God reconciled the whole world to himself through the atoning sacrifice of his Son 1900 [now 2000] years ago, before they knew about it and asked God for it. Here we are talking about the reconciliation of which it says: "We" — we human beings — "have been reconciled to God through the death of his Son, while we were still enemies", 20) [20] Rom. 5:10] in short, about the reconciliation through which — by virtue of Christ's unique atoning sacrifice — heaven is open to all human beings, no human being excepted. God wants this to be broadcast to the whole world. This divine message is expressed in the words: "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature!" 21) [21] Mark 16:15-16] Because preaching the gospel means preaching that through reconciliation, which has happened through Christ, heaven is open to all people. To preach Christ crucified is to preach that through Christ's blood and death heaven is open to all men. He who does not preach heaven open to all men through Christ does not preach the gospel; he does not preach Christ crucified; he does not preach the love of God for the lost human race, about the greatness of which Christ himself marvels when he says: "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son"; 22) [22] Joh. 3:16] he does not preach the reconciliation that came through Christ and which St. John

praises with the words: "Christ is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours alone, but also for the whole world." 23) [23) 1 John 2:2]

There is much talk today of the right "worldview". But everything that the world generally puts under the comprehensive heading of "worldview" is trivial. We only have the right worldview when we recognize and hold on to the fact that heaven is open to all people through the reconciliation that took place through Christ. For Christ teaches us that the world still exists for the proclamation of this fact when he says: "The gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world for a witness to all nations, and then the end will come." 24) [24) Matt. 24:14]

This is also the right worldview that we need for our work in Christ's kingdom. Wherever we proclaim God's Word, whether at home or abroad, we only meet people for whom heaven is open through Christ. Luther reminds us of this in the aforementioned Christmas sermon. He reminds us, as we have heard, that with regard to the word we have to proclaim, we should "make no distinction of persons among men", but should remember that the message "touches everything that is called man", however low or high he may be. As far as reconciliation through Christ is concerned, there is no distinction of race, color, class, culture and unculture, worldly respectability and worldly reproach. Our synod has its ecclesiastical work, as far as skin color is concerned, among people from the deepest black to the whitest white and all shades in between. Heaven is open to all through the reconciliation that has come through Christ. There is no difference of status between employers and laborers, between rich and poor, between king and pauper. Heaven is open to all through the reconciliation that took place through Christ. There is also no difference between civil honor and civil reproach. Heaven is open to the criminal who is led to the place of judgment and of whom we judge that what his deeds are worth is done to him, through the reconciliation that has taken place through Christ. As an example of this, the Savior of all men publicly received the penitent thief into his kingdom with the words: "Today shalt thou be with me in paradise." In sum: Heaven is open to all men, none excepted, through the atonement that took place through Christ. This is most certainly true!

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II.

We have been reminded from the Holy Scriptures that heaven is open to all men through the reconciliation of the world which took place through Christ 1900 [now 2000] years ago. That was a happy chapter. But why don't all people go to heaven? Today we have to deal with the sad chapter that and how people fight against the heaven opened by Christ and thereby close the open heaven to themselves. They do this in several ways and forms: partly quite openly, by directly rejecting Christ's atoning sacrifice, partly in a more hidden way, under the appearance of Christian piety, with reference to the Holy Scriptures, even with the claim to orthodoxy. Himmelsverschluß has made the most decisive claim to be the flower of true Lutheranism. We must beware of all those who close the heavens. That is the purpose of dealing with this extremely sad chapter. We could also translate the content of this chapter as "heaven-locking".

Unitarians openly practice the closure of heaven. Under the general name "Unitarians" we understand all religious fellowships and associations which deny that God was in Christ and, through him, reconciled the world to himself. The Unitarians deny the eternal, essential deity of Christ and consequently also the reconciliation of the world through Christ's vicarious satisfaction (*satisfactio vicaria*, or vicarious atonement). In other words, they deny the doctrine that Christ reconciled mankind to God and opened heaven to them through his fulfillment of the law in the place of mankind and through his innocent suffering and death in the place of mankind. They deny the teaching of Holy Scripture, which Luther confesses in his Small Catechism with these powerful words: "I believe that Jesus Christ, truly God, born of the Father in eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me a lost and condemned

man, 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." This is what all Unitarians deny! Admittedly, many of them praise Christ. They place him in the first place among all known founders of religion. But at the same time they regard Christ as a mere man. They reduce him to a mere moral teacher who, through his sublime example of virtue, taught and encouraged people that and how they could and should open heaven for themselves through their own virtue and works. This is the delusion in which all Unitarians are caught up. From this delusion they also go on the offensive. They declare the Christian doctrine that God has reconciled people to himself through Christ's vicarious life and death, thereby opening heaven to them, to be not only superfluous, but also harmful to morality. Unitarians therefore go on — with the Unitarian lodges — to call on Christians to "kneel at a common altar" with Jews, Buddhists, Confucians and other representatives of pagan religions. Even more! Unitarians have dared to invoke Christ himself for their rejection of the Christian religion. They occasionally point to the words of Christ: "In my Father's house are many mansions." Christ did indeed speak these words. We find them in John 14:2. But the Unitarians forget that the same Christ declares very definitely that there is only one door to the many mansions in the Father's house. He says: "I am the way and the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me." 25) [25] Joh. 14:6] And again: "If you do not believe that I am he, you will die in your sins." 26) [26] Joh. 8:24] Therefore it is certain that Christ, the Savior of the world crucified to pay for the sins of the world, is the only door to heaven. There is no way past him into heaven. What a pity! Christ has also earned a place in heaven for the Unitarians. But if they continue to deny the Lord who bought them with his blood, 27) [27] 2 Peter 2:1] they exclude themselves from the open heaven. The mansions purchased for them remain empty. They bring upon themselves eternal condemnation, from which they have been redeemed by Christ. 28) [28] 2 Pet 2:1b]

What a sad fact it is, therefore, that the Unitarian religion, which closes the open heaven, has very generally penetrated even into such Reformed communities of our country, which formerly still confessed Christ's divinity and his substitutionary satisfaction! Unitarianism also prevails almost universally in the theological departments of the great and famous universities of our country. [E.g. [Harvard](#), etc.] Your speaker cannot forget that the long-time president of one

of our famous universities, even at the end of his term of office, declared that the American youth would never again be persuaded to return to the vicarious satisfaction of Christ as the only way to heaven. Of course, that is saying too much. Our American youth, whether originally of British or German or other descent, are also returning to the only way to heaven where that way is truly taught. We know that for sure. Where this way, the crucified Christ, is taught, the Holy Spirit ensures that this teaching is not entirely without fruit.²⁹) [Isaiah 55:10-11] Our own Christian youth is proof of this. Moreover, there is no lack of examples of even those Unitarians who fought the vicarious satisfaction of Christ all their lives returning to this teaching from their sick and dying beds. Here in the United States we had the Congregationalist Horace Bushnell († 1876), who in his life denied the vicarious sacrifice of Christ. But when it came to his death, he said, as L. W. Munhall reports: "I fear what I have written and said upon the moral idea of atonement is misleading and will do great harm. O Lord Jesus, I trust for mercy only in the shed blood that Thou didst offer on Calvary. "30) [30) Quoted in Strong, *Systematic Theology*, p. 739 f.] In Germany they had Prof. Albrecht Ritschl at the University of Göttingen almost at the same time, who had also become well-known in America. In his life he could not stand Paul Gerhardt's hymn "O Sacred Head Now Wounded". But when he was dying, he asked his son to read him the last two verses of Gerhardt's hymn:

If I am to part one day,
So do not part from me;
If I am to suffer death,
Then come forward.
When I am most anxious,
Will be for my heart,
Tear me from my fears
Power of your fear and torment.

Appear to me as a shield,
For comfort in my death,
And let me see your image
In your suffering on the cross.
Then I will look to you,
Then I will believingly
Hold you close to my heart.
He who dies thus, dies well.

Herein lies the confession that there is an open heaven only through Christ's atoning sacrifice and that all those exclude themselves from the open heaven who want to make their way into heaven by their own virtue and works, bypassing Christ's atoning sacrifice.

Furthermore, all those who teach that Christ has acquired grace and opened heaven for only a part of mankind are practicing the closure of heaven. This is the teaching of Calvinists old and new, including our American Calvinists. Calvin thinks that God wants to save about twenty percent of mankind; the remaining

eighty percent he created from the beginning for damnation. 31) [31) *Institutiones*, III, 24, 12; cf. III, 21, 5] God wants to save all kinds of people, but not all.32) [32) A. a. O., III, 24, 16] Calvin is quite rude to those who teach universal grace for the sake of Christ. He calls their doctrine "beyond measure nonsensical and childish".33) [33) A. a. O., III, 23, 1] Prof. Charles Hodge of the American Princeton University rejects somewhat more politely, but just as decisively, the scriptural doctrine that God has reconciled the whole human world with himself through Christ. He believes that this is an idea unworthy of God. He argues that no rational being would be foolish enough to go to the expense of an undertaking that he knew in advance would not lead to the goal. Much less should one attribute to the all-powerful and all-wise God that he reconciled the whole world to himself, since he knew very well that not the whole world would attain salvation.34) [34) *Systematic Theology*, II, 323 sq.] The *Westminster Confession of Faith* just as decisively rejects the doctrine that the redemption that happened through Christ refers to all people: "Neither are any others redeemed by Christ, effectually called ... but the elect only." 35) [35) Chap. III, 5] The Calvinist Reformed thus take the liberty of simply crossing out Scripture words like these: "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself", "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son", "Behold, this is the Lamb of God who bears the sin of the world", "Christ is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours alone, but also for the sins of the whole world".36) [36) 2 Cor. 5, 19; John 3, 16; 1, 29; 1 John 2, 2]

But in doing so, they are closing the open heaven to themselves and all those who follow them. How so? Well, as long as the conscience has not yet been struck by God's law, people are not particularly interested in the question of whether Christ died for one hundred percent or only twenty percent of people. He sees this as a question that theologians can argue about. But that changes as soon as man is struck by God's law, that is, as soon as he feels God's judgment of condemnation in his heart and conscience. In this state, he logically counts himself among the eighty percent whom Christ did not purchase from eternal damnation with his blood. And he must perish in despair if he cannot be pointed to the basic Christian truth that God was in Christ reconciling the world, not one person excepted, to himself. There is therefore no lack of testimonies from the Calvinist camp to the effect that the Calvinist must become Lutheran, that is, believe in God's completely unlimited general grace, if he is not to perish

through despair in temptation and agony. The same Calvin, who describes general grace as a childish notion, recommends the reference to God's general grace in the distress of temptation,³⁷⁾ [37) Inst., III, 24, 17] although he has actually lost the right to do so through his rejection of general grace. In contrast to Calvinism, Luther forcefully teaches that God's grace extends to all people and thus that heaven is open to all people. Luther knew from his own experience what a terrible distress it is when a person feels in his conscience that he is condemned to hell by God's holy law. On the other hand, Luther also knew from his own experience that there is a great doctrine, clearly revealed in Scripture, which saves from the greatest of all hardships, namely the completely unlimited grace of God, which embraces the whole human race and every single member of it. Luther writes: "Yes, you may say, who knows whether Christ also bears my sin? I do believe that he bore the sins of St. Peter, St. Paul and other saints; they were pious people; if I were also St. Peter or St. Paul! Do you not hear what St. John says here [1:29]? 'This is the Lamb of God who bears the sin of the world'? Now you cannot deny that you are also a part of the world. ... If you are [now] in the world and your sins are a part of the world's sin, this is what the text says: All that is called sin, the world and the sin of the world, from the beginning of the world to the end, rests on the Lamb of God alone." And our Lutheran Confession, the Formula of Concord,³⁸⁾ [38) M. 709, 28 ff.] says: "We must hold firmly and steadfastly in all ways that, as the preaching of repentance is universal, so also the promise of the Gospel is universal, that is, it is for all men." Every teacher who denies universal grace stands before the open door of heaven and, as far as he is concerned, refuses entrance to dearly bought souls. Let us therefore also be careful when recommending Calvinist writings. Even in our time there are Calvinists who earnestly want to uphold the inspiration of Holy Scripture and the vicarious satisfaction of Christ against Unitarians and others. But they do not allow these teachings to have their salutary effect if they also teach that Christ has reconciled only a part of mankind, about 20 percent, with God and therefore the Holy Scriptures should only be a word of grace for this part. Yes, that is the case: If Christ had died for all men except one, every sinner whose conscience is struck by the judgment of condemnation of the divine law would be inclined to consider himself the one unhappy man for whom Christ had not opened heaven. That is why our Lutheran Confessions warns so carefully: "We must hold fast in all ways that,

as the preaching of repentance is universal, so also the promise of the Gospel is universal, that is, it is for all men."

But the sad business of closing up heaven is practiced in even wider circles. It is practiced by all those who teach that there is a grace acquired by Christ for all people, but that this grace proclaimed and offered in the gospel and the effect of grace of the Holy Spirit to bring about faith in this gospel is not enough to get to heaven, but that this also requires man's works, his own actions and his own worthiness.

Thus the Roman Church. The Roman Church places itself before the door of heaven, which is open through Christ's perfect satisfaction, and demands that those who wish to enter must show a fulfillment of "the law of God and the commandments of the Church". This is what the Roman Church teaches in her principal confession, in the decisions of the Council of Trent.³⁹⁾ [39) Sessio VI, can. 20] Rome even pronounces a curse on all those who place their trust in divine mercy alone, which forgives sins for Christ's sake.⁴⁰⁾ [40) A. a. O., can. 12] That this requirement has the effect of shutting out heaven is taught in Scripture with the words: "You have lost Christ, who would be justified by the law, and have fallen from grace" and: "Those who practice the works of the law are under the curse." ⁴¹⁾ [41) Gal. 5:4; 3:10]

The Arminian Reformed also stand before the door to heaven that Christ has opened completely. In contrast to the Calvinist Reformers, they want to teach that God's grace extends to all people. But, they add, God's grace in Christ is not enough for man's conversion and salvation; man must contribute to this through a power for spiritual good that has remained with him even after the fall. They maintain that God's grace in Christ cannot prevail without the cooperation of man's free will, non posse exire in actum sine cooperatione liberae voluntatis humanae.⁴²⁾ [42) Apol. Conf. Remonstr., p. 162; in Winer, Kompar. Darst.3, p. 81 f.] How impossible it is for man to fulfill this requirement and how heaven-closing this requirement is, is taught in Scripture when it says of every natural-born man after the fall: "Dead in sins";⁴³⁾ [43) Eph. 2:1-3] Note: not half-dead, but dead in sins. Furthermore: "The natural man hears nothing of the Spirit of God; it is foolishness to him and he cannot recognize it." ⁴⁴⁾ [44) 1 Cor. 2:14] The crucified Christ is "an offense to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks".⁴⁵⁾ [45) 1 Cor. 1:23] "The imagination of the human heart is evil from its youth."

46] [46] Gen. 8:21] How can this state of the natural human heart lead to the cooperation required by the Arminian Reformed for the attainment of faith and salvation? Truly, all who place themselves before the door of heaven with this demand, erect, as much as is in them, a firm blockade against the heaven opened by Christ.

We now come to the saddest event in the history of the Church and the world in recent centuries. Through Luther's ministry, God gave back to the Church the heaven opened by Christ, which had been closed to poor sinners for so long by the Pope's doctrine of works. Luther proclaimed with a strong voice to the church and the world that although all men were condemned to death and eternal damnation by God's holy law, there was also a gospel of God in the Holy Scriptures, alongside the law of God, which made known to men that, for the sake of the satisfaction that Christ made to the law of God, heaven was open to all men without their own worthiness or works. Luther says: "Thus the Gospel of God and the New Testament is a good story and cry, heard throughout the world through the apostles, of a true David, who fought with sin, death and the devil and overcame them, and thus redeemed, justified, made alive and saved all those who were trapped in sin, afflicted with death, overcome by the devil, without their merit, and thus satisfied them and brought them back to God."⁴⁷) [47] St. L. XIV, 86] Furthermore: God "has given us the gospel, in which is pure forgiveness, before we asked for it or ever thought of it".⁴⁸) [48] Large Catechism; M., p. 478, 88] Luther calls the interference of human merit and works in the opening of heaven "an intolerable and terrifying blasphemy against God", because we know from Holy Scripture "that God cannot be reconciled in any other way than through this immeasurable and infinite treasure, namely through the death and blood of his Son; for one drop of the same is more precious than all creation".⁴⁹) [49] On Gal. 2:20. St. L. IX, 237 f.] In agreement with this, Luther says of the attempt to supplement Christ's work of reconciliation through human activity and human works — a "nuisance" that should be dismissed from the church.⁵⁰) [50] op. cit., 236] But unfortunately, it cannot be denied that this offense was already stirring in the midst of the Lutheran Church during Luther's lifetime and openly raised its head soon after Luther's death — in Wittenberg itself. The later Melancthon, formerly a faithful assistant to Luther, taught and found followers for his doctrine that the Holy Spirit and the effect of the Holy Spirit in the Gospel of grace were not sufficient to convert a person to God, but that man's own will, which was directed to God's grace,

had to be added as a third cause (*facultas applicandi se ad gratiam*) [**“the ability to apply oneself to grace”**]. Thank God, the Formula of Concord removed this offense from the Lutheran Church and restored the open heaven, whereby Christ's doctrine of salvation is violated and people's salvation is based on their own actions. Nonetheless, this offense continued to resurface within the Lutheran Church. The German theologians of the nineteenth century, who are regarded in wider circles as representatives of Lutheran theology, almost generally do not follow the paths of Luther and the Lutheran Church, but follow in the footsteps of the later Melanchthon. They believe they must teach that man's conversion and salvation ultimately rest on man himself, on his right conduct, his self-decision or self-determination to accept grace. God's grace accompanies man to the door of heaven. Then it leaves people to their own devices. Man must open the door himself.⁵¹⁾ [51) The evidence in *Christl. Dogmatik* II, notes 1296, 1317] Thus German neo-Lutheran theology. But within the American Lutheran Church in particular, "by grace alone" was also fought against and rejected with great seriousness. In this country it was not only taught that conversion and salvation depended on the right conduct of man, but it was also added that whoever did not teach this, but attributed conversion and salvation to the grace of God alone, was mistaken in the foundation of faith, was a false teacher, a wolf in sheep's clothing, a Calvinist.⁵²⁾ [52) The evidence in "Zur Einigung"², p. 24] Those who fought us so earnestly in this country in the doctrine of conversion and election of grace, truly stood before the door of heaven opened by Christ with the demand, which has been summarized briefly but quite correctly as follows: Admission only on the basis of right human behavior, no admittance except on good behavior. One objected: We do not mean right behavior per se, but only comparatively. We only mean that those who want to go to heaven must show less reluctance and less guilt compared to those who are not converted and saved. But if we argue in this way, we make it all the more obvious that we are practicing the exclusion of heaven. For it is precisely with the comparatively better behavior and the comparatively lesser guilt that we ascribe to ourselves that we enter the order of the Pharisees, who go down to their house unjustly,⁵³⁾ [53) Luk 18:14] that is, exclude themselves from heaven as long as they remain members of the order. For this is how the Savior describes the thoughts of a Pharisee: "I thank you, God, that I am not like other people: robbers, unjust, adulterers or even like this tax collector." Luther uses strong language in relation to wanting to be comparatively better, language that offends our civilized

ears. Luther calls it a "secret" and "abominable treachery" of the devil when someone lifts himself up in his heart before God even above a harlot. Luther literally says: "God forbids you to exalt yourself above any harlot, even if you were Abraham, David, Peter or Paul." 54) [54] St. L. XI, 515] The scholarly oracle of his time, Erasmus of Rotterdam, in his writing *De Libero Arbitrio* (1524) wanted to persuade Luther that he (Luther) should not attribute the attainment of salvation entirely to God's grace, but rather make a compromise and include human good behavior, the *facultas applicandi se ad gratiam*, in the way of salvation alongside God's grace. Luther replied in his *De Servo Arbitrio* (1525): *Jugulum petisti*, You are at my throat, 55) [55] Opp. v. a. VII, 367] that is, you want to rob me of "by grace alone" and thereby close to me the heaven opened by Christ.

Venerable fathers and brothers! In this way we have demonstrated to ourselves in a few key points how people close heaven to themselves, which is open to all people through Christ's atoning sacrifice. May God's grace save us from closing heaven to ourselves in every form!

No more, because: My dear Lord,
Your death will be my life,
You paid for me!

Just as I am, without one plea
But that Thy blood was shed for me
And that Thou bidst me come to Thee,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come. **F. P.**

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The Open Heaven.

Lecture at the Delegate Synod A.D. 1929 by F. Pieper.

III.

Finally, we ask: What can and should we do so that, as far as it is up to us, heaven, opened through Christ, remains open to men? The answer is clear from what we have said so far.

First of all, we have seen that it is not a man-made doctrine, but God's own teaching, revealed in his Word and on the basis of this Word also attested in our Lutheran Confessions, that God has reconciled the whole human world to himself through the vicarious life, suffering and death of his incarnate Son, and that heaven is thereby open to all people without exception. We must teach and confess this truth clearly and tirelessly. On the other hand, we saw how people themselves close the door to an open heaven. In particular, we had to realize that not only Rome, through its openly expressed doctrine of works, but also the so-called Protestant camp practiced the closure of heaven. Among the Calvinist Reformed this is done by limiting the reconciliation that has taken place through Christ to about twenty percent of the people. The Arminian Reformed and the derailed Lutherans do this by only wanting to let people into heaven who, in addition to God's grace, also have their own good behavior as a saving and decisive factor. In this situation, it is our task to hold fast to both universal grace (*universalis gratia*) and grace alone (*sola gratia*) against all human objections. This is what the fathers of our Synod have done before us, by God's grace. By God's grace, we must do the same if we want to be their true children and rightly bear the name "Lutheran".

In 1863, the Reformed theologian Emil Wilhelm Krummacher wrote an article in the Reformed Erlangen "Kirchenzeitung" entitled: "Why we are not Lutheran, but Reformed." German Reformed church newspapers in the United States printed Krummacher's

article. They wanted to use it to propagandize for the Reformed Church against the Lutheran Church in this country. Against this attack, an article appeared in the ninth volume of *Lehre und Wehre* (1863) under the heading: "Some Remarks on a New Apology of the Reformed Church." This article, written by Dr. Walther, extends through four issues of *L. u. W.* ([vol. 9, Sept.](#) to [Dec. 1863](#)) and is, incidentally, one of the most thorough refutations of the entire Reformed doctrine, insofar as it differs from the Lutheran doctrine.

Of course, the doctrine of conversion and election of grace is also dealt with in this dispute with the Reformed Church. And two things are held up as Lutheran doctrine against the Reformed licentiate who wants to conquer the Lutheran Church: unrestricted universal grace, *universalis gratia*, and unrestricted grace alone, *sola gratia*. Why is the affirmation of both truths necessary? Humans have become quite strange people since the Fall. Although they still know that there is a God, they do not want to believe God's revealed Word. In these days we have again convinced ourselves that God's Word teaches both: the *universalis gratia* and the *sola gratia*. But we super-smart people consider it an unbearable imposition, to be rejected with indignation, to believe both. Calvinists take the liberty of concluding that if we are to believe that God saves people "by grace alone", we must necessarily abandon the idea that God wants to save all people. There is no room for both in the human mind. Likewise, the Arminian Reformed and the derailed Lutherans allow themselves the conclusion that if one is to believe in universal grace, then one must necessarily abandon "by grace alone" and teach that man's conversion and salvation are not decisively based on God's grace, but on man's friendly response to the gospel (*facultas applicandi se ad gratiam*). Walther opposes both false conclusions in his article against Krummacher and points out that the Lutheran Church in its Confessions believes God in his Word, namely that it holds both side by side and together: the general and the sole grace of God. The contradiction that limited human reason finds here, however, is only an apparent one whose solution will be found in the light of glory. God's Word does not go beyond Hos. 13:9: Israel, thou art destroyed, the iniquity is thine; but that thou mayest be saved, it is my mercy. Dr. Walther says literally: 56) [56) This quotation was not read out in the lecture, which was limited in time]. "The Calvinists conclude: If God

has chosen a number of people for salvation out of free grace, and if he alone does everything to bring them to faith, to keep them in faith and finally to make them saved, without them contributing the slightest thing to it, then of course, since all men by nature lie in the same ruin, it must be up to God alone that the others do not come to faith or do not remain in it and are not saved but damned. ... And it is certainly true that unenlightened reason, that is, reason that does not follow the Word [of God], cannot do otherwise; reason, if it does not inquire into Scripture and follow its own thoughts, must come to this conclusion. But not our dear Formula of Concord and with it the whole orthodox Lutheran Church. It does not draw this conclusion. It maintains that the reason why people are saved is solely due to God's free grace, whereas the reason why people are damned is solely due to human sin and guilt. ... Since both are written in God's Word, that God has chosen the elect only according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace from eternity, and that the reprobate, while God desires the salvation of all men, are rejected because of their own sin and guilt, believe, the Formula of Concord teaches and confesses both, does not build a bridge of reason with the Calvinists over the yawning abyss of this inexplicable mystery, leaves both and humbly worships God in his incomprehensible wisdom, awaiting the solution of this apparent contradiction in eternal life."57) [57) [L. u. W. IX, 298 f.](#)] In particular, Walther also points out this very important truth in this article: He who has not yet learned to hold both — universal grace and grace alone — unreservedly side by side and together, has not yet passed the last necessary test of his ability to teach within the Christian Church.58) [58) [Ibid. p. 297](#)] For both are needed by every man whose conscience is rightly struck by the condemnatory judgment of the divine law, if he is not to perish in despair. This was explained in more detail in the second lecture.

About eight years after the rejection of the Reformed attack on universal grace, there was a public attack on "grace alone" from the Lutheran Church in America, with a vehemence surpassing all previous ones, as has already been noted. It was asserted in often repeated expressions and phrases and presented as a Lutheran doctrine: man's conversion and salvation stand on man's right behavior, namely on man's self-decision to accept grace. Man's eternal destiny is rooted in man's right self-decision. God lets it depend on man's own decision

whether he will have mercy on man.⁵⁹) [59] Monatshefte 1872, p. 87. 88] It was also added that the Missouri Synod, which did not want to accept this doctrine as Lutheran, had become Calvinistic, that is, had fallen away from the general grace of God, just as Luther had denied general grace until about the year 1527, especially in his work *Wider Erasmus* (Against Erasmus).⁶⁰) [60] Monatshefte 1872, p. 21] This challenge to "grace alone" from the Lutheran camp was answered by [Lehre und Wehre in the 18th volume \(1872\)](#) in an article under the heading: "Is it really Lutheran doctrine that man's salvation is ultimately based on his own free decision?". This article, also written by Dr. Walther, is very detailed. It extends through six issues of *Lehre und Wehre* ([July](#) to [December](#) 1872) and explains in detail that, according to the teaching of Holy Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, man's conversion and salvation depend not only in part or even for the most part, but on God's grace alone, and the contrary assertion that God's will of grace and God's will of salvation depend on God's grace alone, that God's will of grace and God's mercy towards man is conditioned by man's good behavior, transforms the article of God's grace in Christ into an empty phrase and lets it "[go up in smoke](#)", thus closing to man the heaven open through Christ.⁶¹) [61] [L. u. W. 1872, p. 322 ff., 329\]](#)

Dr. Walther is very reserved, mild and friendly in his judgment of the real position of his opponents' hearts.⁶²) [62] [op. cit. p. 329\]](#) He accepts the possibility that they are on the "dangerous wrong path", "without wanting to", indeed that they are presenting a doctrine which, insofar as they are Christians, they themselves do not believe. Luther also points out in his essay against Erasmus that such strange things also occur among Christians. Erasmus accused Luther of saying that "saints", that is, people to whom Luther did not deny the Christian faith, still attributed free will to man in spiritual matters. Luther replied: "They did indeed do so, but only *inter disputandum*, that is, when they argued before men. But when they went before God in prayer, they completely forgot (*penitus*) their free will in spiritual matters, despaired of themselves, and implored for themselves "only the pure grace" of God (*solam et puram gratiam*).⁶³) [63] [St. L. XVIII, 1729](#). Opp. v. a. Erl. VII, 166 f.] But although Walther also gives credit for this inconsistency to the opponents of the Missouri Synod, he remains firm, like steel and diamond, in his judgment and condemnation of the opposing doctrine that God's grace and mercy are dependent on human good behavior. He describes this doctrine as a counter-reformation rising within the Lutheran Church. He

writes in the same year's L. u. W.:64) [64] [L. u. W. 1872, p. 352](#)] "A theology that makes faith man's own act and seeks the reason why certain people are saved while others are lost in their free personal decision, in their behavior, in their participation, differs from the Roman doctrine of justification only in its terminology," i.e., not in substance, but only in expression. Just as Walther, now sixty-seven years ago, relegated the theology that places salvation on man's good behavior to the Roman camp, so did Martin Chemnitz, the main author of the Formula of Concord, 351 years ago at the colloquium in Herzberg. The text of our Formula of Concord was already available in 1577. The Formula of Concord teaches that those who are saved must acknowledge the same guilt and the same evil behavior on their part as those who are lost. Otherwise they would be in apostasy from the Christian doctrine of grace. When, at the [Herzberg Colloquy in August 1578](#), the Anhalt delegate declared that, following the example of the later Melanchthon, he wanted to stick to different human behavior as the reason for conversion and salvation, Chemnitz finally called out to him: "So send your confession of free will to Andradius in Spain, to Tiletanus in Louvain; indeed, send it to Rome, and the Pope himself will approve it." And even before that, at the Colloquy, Chemnitz broke out in complaint: "It is a pity that we have been debating for so long and that no distinction is made between our [Lutheran] and the papists' doctrine of free will." 65) [65] The Acts of the Colloquy, reprinted in [L. u. W. 28, 452. 449](#)] Thus God has also given the Lutheran Church of America, which he has graciously led back to the doctrine of the Church of the Reformation, the task of opposing a Counter-Reformation, that is, a return to the Roman camp, which has arisen here under the Lutheran name and is still at work. For Walther is absolutely right when he says that a theology which seeks the reason why certain people are saved while others are lost in their free personal decision, in their behavior, in their participation, differs from the Roman doctrine of justification only in its terminology. Thus, even where this theology is put into practice, its effect can only be Roman, namely doubt and despair about God's grace and thus the closure of heaven.

Every chain, as Dr. Walther used to remind us, is only as strong as its weakest link. Let us imagine: A chain would have a dozen links (left). Eleven of them would be so strong that you could hang a thousand pounds from it without fear of the chain breaking. But one link, the weak one in the dozen, could

withstand only ten pounds of strain. The result would be that the durability of the whole chain would be reduced to ten pounds. Let us apply this to the chain of salvation. The chain forged by God for our salvation is strong, very strong. It can carry heaven and earth and the whole of humanity. It is the eternal mercy of God in Christ for the lost world of sinners. It is the eternal mercy that surpasses all thought; it is the open arms of love of the One who leans towards sinners. The links of the heavenly chain are: God's reconciliation of the whole human world with himself through the atoning sacrifice of his incarnate Son. And as a consequence of this: not merely a human message, but God's own message of the reconciliation that has taken place in the means of grace that he himself has ordained, namely the word of the gospel and the sacraments, Baptism and the Lord's Supper; furthermore, the divine effect of the Holy Spirit for the production and preservation of faith in the hearts of men, whereby the hearts are founded on the rock foundation of the divine promises of grace. "The mountains shall be removed, and the hills shall fall, but my mercy shall not depart from thee, neither shall the covenant of my peace be removed, saith the Lord thy mercy." 66) [66] Isa. 54:10] But now — O pity! — people have come up with the idea of improving the divine chain of grace by inserting human good behavior. But what about human good behavior towards the gospel? How many pounds of burden can it carry? Neither ten pounds, nor one pound, nor a thousandth part of a pound. Why? Human good behavior toward the gospel and the work of the Holy Spirit in the gospel does not exist; it is a human imagination. For thus Scripture teaches, as we have already heard: "The natural man hears nothing of the Spirit of God; it is foolishness to him, and he cannot discern it." 67) [67] 1 Cor 2:14] The crucified Christ, that is, the opening of heaven through the crucified Christ, is "an offense to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks".68) [68] 1 Cor 1:23] According to this, there is no good behavior in any human being compared to the grace acquired by Christ and offered in the means of grace. If this product of human imagination is now inserted into the divine heavenly chain, then the teaching and preaching are as follows: There is a grace of God, but only for those people who exhibit the right behavior. God's mercy is certainly there, but it is dependent on man's own free decision. The Son of Man has come to seek and save that which is lost, but this is conditional on the right behavior of the lost. The Gospel, Baptism and the Lord's Supper are indeed ordained by God as a means of forgiveness of sins, but are conditional on right human behavior (conduct). Thus right human conduct, by which God's heavenly

chain is to be improved and enriched, interposes itself like a monster between the gracious God and us poor sinners, and actually pushes aside the one mediator between God and man, who gave Himself for all for salvation. Hence Luther's cry of pain when Erasmus urged him to insert the right behavior of man, man's ability to incline himself to grace, the *facultas applicandi se ad gratiam*, into the heavenly chain — hence Luther's cry of pain: "You have gone for my throat", you want to strangle me!

Hence Dr. Walther's earnest words at the dedication of our seminary building on Jefferson Avenue in 1883: He wished that the majestic and graceful building would sooner sink into dust and ashes than that the doctrine of grace would be falsified and truth and error would be taught or tolerated side by side. It was in the same spirit that we opened the numerous new buildings on the new square on De Mun Avenue three years ago. And this is true of all the synodical buildings in all the seminaries and all the colleges in this country and abroad. May they rather become ruins than places in which the Christian doctrine of grace is touched and thereby the entrance to heaven is barred to souls who have been bought by Christ for heaven. And as for our synodical periodicals, may this be the last number of the *Lutheraner* and *Lehre und Wehre* and also of the *Lutheran Witness* and the *Theological Monthly*, in which, besides the truth, errors are also taught, especially the seductive error that man's conversion and salvation stand not only on God's grace in Christ, but also on man's good behavior, an error which, by its nature, as we have seen, closes to every sinner the heaven open through Christ. May God grant us grace to overcome victoriously all temptations to allow room for this error!

Venerable fathers and brothers! Let me point out in a few words what is and is not proper for those who, by God's grace, teach and believe in the heaven open through Christ. There is no need for many words, because the matter is self-evident. We, who by faith see heaven open, should be diligent, very diligent, in proclaiming the open heaven. When the time had come, our Savior rushed, as it were, to Jerusalem to suffer and die and thereby open heaven to the whole world.⁶⁹) [69] Mark 10:32] So we should not be lax in spreading the message of the open heaven, but rush out into the world with it, as it were. Our Savior's express command in the words: "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature!" also applies to this. For preaching the gospel is nothing

other than preaching the open heaven through Christ. Those of us who teach and believe in the open heaven can therefore not even think of limiting the training of preachers and teachers; on the contrary, we must increase in it. Our Savior expressly admonishes us: "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send laborers into his harvest!"⁷⁰) [70) Matt. 9:37-38] Let us not forget, especially in the recent times, a word of our Savior that he spoke to his disciples at Jacob's well, John 4:35: "Lift up your eyes and look into the field, for it is already white for harvest." Let us think of India, for example, where God has sent not just a few hundred Samaritans, but hundreds of thousands of Indians to come to us and ask for workers. Truly, in this state of affairs, holy zeal and God-pleasing enthusiasm are appropriate for us. But we also see something among us that does not befit those of us who see heaven open. This is a deficit in our missionary funds and our synodical funds in general. The open heaven and deficits in our kingdom funds do not go together. The means by which we can eliminate this impropriety is known to us all. We need only think of heaven, which is open to us through the blood and death of our dear Savior and which we already possess by faith. Then our love for our Savior and for service in his kingdom will be rekindled again and again. May God grant us all grace to remember the open heaven, not just occasionally, but daily! Amen.