

Dare to be a pastor: Meeting Bo Giertz

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✠ In the name of Jesus. ✠

A number¹ of biographical sketches of Bo Giertz start with some variation on the same theme: He was an atheist who became a bishop. He was a pastor's pastor. He was voted the most influential twentieth-century Swedish churchman. He wrote best-selling novels that powerfully preach and teach the Christian faith, like *The Hammer of God*, *Faith Alone*, *The Knights of Rhodes*, and *With My Own Eyes*. He wrote theological papers, devotions, commentaries, and hundreds of articles. There are a million copies of his books in print. He was sought for interviews, since he was a good quote ("The church has exactly as many sinners as members."²). Some equate him to C.S. Lewis or Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Yet he remains – at least in our circles – little known.

¹ Presented at the District Pastors Conference of the Dakota-Montana District, September 21-22, 2021, Missoula, Montana.

² *Liturgy and Spiritual Awakening [LSA]*, 4.

From 1950 to 1989 (which coincides with Giertz's time as a bishop and his struggle over women's ordination in Sweden) there are eight references to Giertz in the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly [WLQ]*. Most we find tucked away in reports of international Lutheran gatherings. I could find no essays dedicated to him or his work in the online Essay File of our Seminary. Between 2001 and 2021, when much of his work became available in English, neither the *Quarterly* nor the *Shepherd's Study* blog have reviewed his books.³ A search of our sister synod's journal, *Lutheran Synod Quarterly*, found nothing dedicated to Giertz. There was one 1979 review of his best-known work (the one you are most likely to know), *The Hammer of God*. However, that review consisted of extended quotations without commentary.⁴

³ There will be a review of Giertz's book, *Christ's Church*, published at *Shepherd's Study* soon.

⁴ In a move worth copying, the ELS does make use of *The Hammer of God* in their curriculum at Bethany Lutheran College.

This is not an indictment, as if it is unbelievable that we are unfamiliar with Giertz. It is understandable that a man who wrote primarily in Swedish and spent his ministry in a church not of our fellowship might not impact us. Hermann Sasse, whose works many of us know, was not only German, but also worked in English, and had interactions with our church during the break-up of the Synodical Conference. The Missouri Synod has produced various editions of Sasse's writings.

Giertz, on the other hand, because he worked in the Church of Sweden, a church connected to the Lutheran World Federation, had more of a connection in America with the churches that eventually formed the ELCA. Not that Giertz would wish – one suspects – to be associated with that body today. Though, to be fair, he never did disassociate from the Church of Sweden, which left him connected to the liberal elements of world Lutheranism.

This essay hopes to introduce you to Bo Giertz and make the case for meeting him in his writings. Many of us are familiar with C.S. Lewis because of his famous fictional stories of Narnia. We embrace him because of his Christian themes, which he also brings out in his nonfiction. If we love Lewis, an unordained Anglican, ought we not consider falling in love with a Lutheran pastor who writes equally powerful Christian fiction and non-fiction and who understands law and gospel?

Further, this essay lets you meet a pastor who cared about being a good pastor. This was a theme of his novels, essays, sermons, and articles: a pastor must be a pastor. He grew up in a church that required a reformation of spiritual life and pastoral care. His closing years were in a church surrendering the faith. In between, he fought to make pastors be

pastors, mostly by being one. And writing about it. He wrote about the pastoral office:

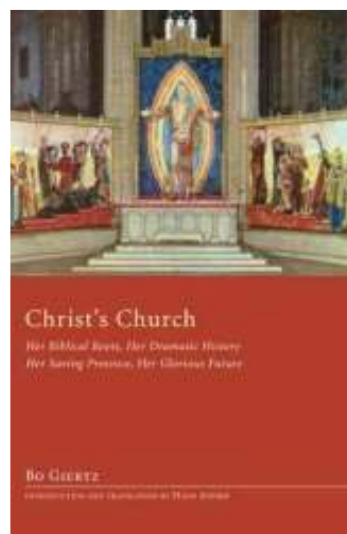
Equally bad is if the pastor out of sheer consideration for his person does not dare to be a pastor: if he would rather escape being seen in his pastor's coat, if he blunts his Lord's message and becomes an inoffensive nothing-sayer, who contents himself with being left in peace, where he should have preached repentance in his Lord's name.⁵

Giertz dared to be a pastor. He dares us to be pastors, soul doctors, soul worriers, bringers of the Word, one more in a long line of God's servants proclaiming his Word faithfully.

The Life of Bo Giertz

Bo Giertz was born in Sweden in 1905. His parents were atheist and agnostic. Yet, because of cultural dynamics in Sweden, his unbelieving parents brought him to the font and later to church for confirmation instruction. The Lord lays a foundation.

You wonder if Giertz thought of himself when



he counseled in his first book, *Christ's Church [CC]*, about how to deal with delinquents and the fallen away. One should not simply cleanse the rolls, he says. Let their Baptism stand. Go after them. Don't crush them.⁶ While he was brought to the font in a more

⁵ *A Hammer For God (HfG)*, 254.

⁶ Cf. *CC*, 59.

cultural and ritualistic way, without any faith attached, later, that Baptism became his hope. As Luther says in the *Large Catechism*, "If you did not believe it then, believe now and say this: The Baptism certainly was right. But I, unfortunately, did not receive it aright."⁷

This experience also helps us understand why and how Giertz could write about awakening, renewal, and revival in ways that make us nervous. He lived in a time when people universally received baptism and almost as universally fell away from the Church. Most Swedes were unbelievers who needed to be reconverted. There was a vast need for renewal and revival. It was like the beginning of the New Testament Church when everyone comes to the Church as an adult through the preaching of the Word. Renewal and revival were not just in the past for Giertz. It was a lived Swedish experience. A need.



Giertz

Giertz grew up preparing to be a doctor, following in his father's footsteps. He went to college to pursue medical studies, which is when the Lord grabbed him. In a reversal of our great fear about university for our children, Giertz went from atheist to Christian under the influence of college friends who confessed their faith. The amoral atheism surrounding him shocked him and led him to consider the Christianity among the other students. Not only did Giertz become a Christian, but he almost immediately determined that he must become a pastor. He also determined that he wanted to be a parish pastor, a resolve he expressed to the Queen of Sweden at an

audience. When she asked him if he would become an academic theologian, he demurred and said, "No, but a pastor." She made him promise to do just that, to be a true pastor.⁸

He made this choice at a hard time. The Swedish Church drank deeply of the higher critical method and was entrenched in liberal theology (as it remains today). The 1920s and 1930s also saw the rise of the worldwide ecumenical movement. There will be one church! There were, at the same time, renewal and revival movements in the Swedish church. There was a youth movement that was "suspicious of all traditional viewpoints and thus did not proclaim the gospel of the atonement with power or purity" and a higher church movement that was more liturgical and sacramental, finding the life of the Church in the means of grace.⁹ One could be pulled in any number of directions, feverishly and in a sectarian way if one let it happen. Giertz shows us this in his novels *The*

Hammer of God and *Faith Alone*. He also picks up these themes in *Christ's Church*.

Late in his life, Giertz talked about his education and early years. He described Sweden as a place where the "Lutheran means of grace had to be rediscovered." At the time, Sweden was seen as having no spiritual life, at least not the established church, only the free or awakening churches.

Giertz never left the established church. He remained always in the Church of Sweden, for better or for worse. He probably always hoped that the reform would come, that the Word

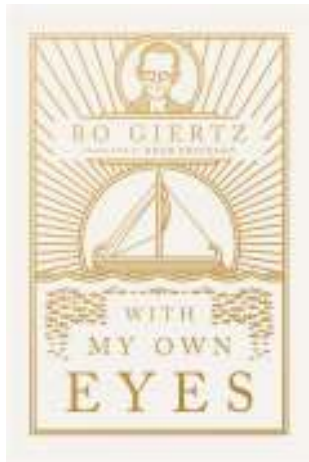
⁷ *Large Catechism*, IV:56.

⁸ *HfG*, 204.

⁹ *HfG*, 22-25.

would do its work. He put his hope, as the psalmist did, always in the Word. He credited the Word with his own personal reformation and any hope for the future. "For me it began, however, in exegesis.... We discovered that there was a reality behind the texts."

One of his teachers, Anton Fridrichson, pushed him in the exegetical direction, as well as a semester spent in the Holy Land. That semester resulted in a novelization of the gospels called *With My Own Eyes*. Written in the third person, it



tells the story of the gospels from the view of those around Jesus. It reminds one of the novel and film *Ben-Hur*, where Christ is the main character pushing everything, even though we do not always see him front and center.

In addition, it was a return to Luther, and seeing the history of the Swedish church that answered many questions. They found Christ's Church. They found it in the Bible.

To be an awakened Christian is this: that one sees his sins in a wholly different way than before and cannot completely conquer them but, on the contrary, fails. And it is God's will that we should fail, in order that we should trust in the undeserved grace which then really can carry a person. It was this discovery of the evangelical teaching that really was needed.

It saddened him that he did not see a reformation happen. He realized he could not be ordained a priest or elected a bishop in the Church of Sweden of his last years.¹⁰ He did what he could as a pastor, bishop, and author.

Giertz received his theological training and then went out upon the work. He spent a few years (1932-1935) working as a representative in a high school youth ministry, traveling around the country at what we might call youth rallies. Following this, he began parish work in small rural places like Ostra Husby and Torpa in eastern Sweden until the late 1940s.

During his time in the parish he had his theological crisis. He began to wonder about himself and his preaching and the word of God. He wondered if he was a good pastor.

Eric Andrae, a Giertz scholar and translator, says of one particular year of his work:

...the year he spent in Ostra Husby would turn out to be decisive for his ministry and for his view of the Church, the Bible, and the confession of the faith, for there he encountered a traditional, low-church, biblical, and sincerely faithful piety which caused him to recognize his shortcomings and struggles. One night...he asked himself, 'Can people actually be saved by what I have been preaching?'¹¹

Giertz shared these experiences with us in one of his novels. The character Torvik, in the third part of *The Hammer of God*, seems to be at least semi-autobiographical. Andrae quotes Giertz:

¹⁰ Read the interview in *HfG*, 321-327. I am thankful to Bror Erickson, a prolific Giertz translator, for conversation that informed this section.

¹¹ *HfG*, 29.

“The year in Ostra Husby... gave me much to consider regarding some of the most essential issues of the faith. Among us theologians at Uppsala [University], Christianity was first and foremost a series of theoretical problems which were to be discussed...But the YCM and academic piety questioned or ignored Christ’s work of atonement, in order to make the Gospel more understandable and acceptable to our time. In Ostra Husby I was given reason to re-think this approach. I could not help but notice that in the midst of all the love and appreciation with which I was met, there was, nonetheless, a touch of disappointment that I did not preach Christ as one would have wished.... [I did] not [struggle] regarding God’s existence..., [but] I felt unsure in the application of my Christian faith and I asked myself if I really had the right to call myself Christian.... The Christian answer is, of course, that he who believes in Jesus Christ – he has eternal life, [and] that there is a forgiveness which is valid despite all that is lacking.¹²

Like each of the three pastors Giertz wrote about in *The Hammer of God*, Giertz confronted the truth that a good pastor, a true pastor, preaches the Word of God purely and administers the sacraments rightly. A true pastor focuses on Jesus and the atonement. That’s it. That’s the program. Giertz wanted to dare to be such a pastor. He experienced this in Ostra Husby in 1936. Five years later he wrote *The Hammer of God*, for which he is best-known, and which shows that he was learning about being a good pastor, and wanted to teach others. Perhaps it was his confession.

During these years he also got married and had four children. His wife died tragically after the birth of their fourth child. He remarried twice more, losing one wife in death, before preceding the other with his own death.

His parish ministry overlapped with the Second World War. While Sweden was neutral, the war came to his home in the form of refugees from Denmark and Finland. His daughter, Birgitta, tells of this time in a charming, yet moving way.

His time in Torpa coalesced in great part with World War II. Even if Sweden wasn’t directly involved in the war it was to a great degree present in our childhood home because refugees came from Denmark and what they had to tell us about it. For a long time there were two families living in the wing of the parsonage; or actually two mothers with two, and four children respectively. The father of one of the families was in a concentration camp. The father of the other family was active in the resistance and occasionally popped in on his family before disappearing again just as quickly. In addition, there were two young boys that lived with us that were called the saboteurs by us children. These people came to us because their parish priest in Denmark said, if you are lucky enough to get to Sweden, say that you are going to see Bo Giertz in Torpa, and that way you can make it into the country. Later dad said that the first time the police in Helsingborg called and said, “There are some people here who say that they are to stay with you. Is that right?” He was a bit perplexed because he had no idea what it was

¹² HfG, 29-30

about, but he thought, "If they say so, then certainly it is God's will that they should be here." And so he answered, "Yes, that's correct."¹³

In his daughter's remembrance, we meet an extraordinarily gifted man. A father of four who had time to play with his children, yet also regularly worked until midnight on church affairs. She describes a busy, loving, engaging, thoughtful man. "Papa was an incredibly stimulating man who was full of life and made life rich for those found in his path."¹⁴

His daughter, and others, describe a pastor who held firm to the Word of God, but never became harsh, brutal, or brittle. Though in later years, he was the object of many personal and professional attacks in the press, he was able to "contend for the faith without becoming contentious."¹⁵ He was not a zero-sum man who had to have his way and called all others the devil. He was "always prepared to reconsider a position"¹⁶ and could see the wheat and discard the dross when necessary. Especially insightful in this regard is how he handled discussing the liturgy's value and spiritual awakening in the pamphlet, *Liturgy and Spiritual Awakening* (which is an excerpt from the 170-page pastoral letter he wrote at the beginning of his episcopate).



In 1949, after a little over a decade in the parish, Giertz was elected Bishop of Gothenburg. The parish was his heart, something he never wanted to leave, but as Christ says, to

whom much is given, much is expected. It was a unique election in three ways. He was incredibly young (43). He was an assistant pastor in a rural parish. He was an evangelical.

As a bishop, he strove to be the true pastor. He fought for the souls of his people and the soul of his church. While he put aside the writing of his novels, he wrote constantly. He sent out weekly exegetical notes, commentaries on the Scriptures and lectionary texts. He was a sought-after speaker at meetings and conferences. Most of one book, *Then Fell the Lord's Fire [TFLF]*, is dedicated to the brief talks (not just a sentence at laying on of hands, but just short of a sermon) he gave to ordinands as their bishop. He desired to be, and was, a writing, speaking, visiting, preaching bishop who cared for and loved the Word, his Church, and the ordinands. And over the years he became "known to the general public."¹⁷ Though he was not loved and admired by all, "when he spoke, people listened" because they saw his "profound pastoral piety."¹⁸

The great professional crisis in his life came in 1958. That year the Church of Sweden formally approved the ordination of women. Already in the 1930s, Giertz had been speaking and writing against this and he remained firm and consistent on this point. He was the driving force behind a confessional movement that formed around this time, and in fact, was the only bishop personally and openly involved in the movement.

His advocacy for the biblical position caused him no end of pain. While many faithful churchgoers and confessional pastors rallied behind Giertz, the media and most of the

¹³ "My Father, Bo Giertz," part 2.

¹⁴ "My Father, Bo Giertz," Part 1.

¹⁵ From preface of *To Live With Christ [TLWC]*, 6.

¹⁶ "My Father, Bo Giertz," Part 1.

¹⁷ CC, xiv.

¹⁸ HfG, 111.

public did not. They could not but see his position as one of misogynistic chauvinism.

For the rest of his time as a bishop (until 1970) and for the rest of his life (until 1998) he labored under this cross. He lived in a church drifting ever farther from the Word. He called it “distressing” and a “deterioration” and a “deplorable state.” He looked around and saw a Church that had so many advantages, as Paul said about the Jews in Rome, they had the very words of God entrusted to them. Giertz thought of all that Sweden had received in the early Church, in the Reformation, in her liturgies and saw now “a church that does not dare to stand for Christianity.”¹⁹

In Bo Giertz, we meet something of an enigma. We meet a Bible-believing, confessional Lutheran Christian. Yet we meet a man laboring in an extremely liberal church for decades, even serving as a bishop in that church. He worked for a time in the Lutheran World Federation, yet he also wrote and preached that the Church must stand upon the Word of God and only the Word of God, and he advocated against many of the departures of the Word of God these groups proclaimed.

Giertz yearned for the renewal of his church, but it did not happen for him as thoroughly as, for example, it did for Dr. Luther in Germany. The Church of Sweden did not suddenly become a beacon and a light while he was a bishop. In fact, for much of his ministry, Giertz was a polarizing figure, a man loved, but also a man criticized, spoken against, and attacked.

He was polarizing among his own people, and perhaps that explains why he has not fully caught on among us. We wrestle with what to make of him. It has always been so. Eric Andrae

¹⁹ *HfG*, 235-236, cf. also “My Last Will and Testament.”



asks the question, “Who was Bo Giertz?” and answers:

The following labels have been variously applied to the man: high-church, low-church, old-church, the new view of the church, confessional, non-confessional, biblically traditional, not biblically traditional, man of awakening, arch-Lutheran, catholic, exegete, dogmatician, practical theologian, sacramentalist, not sacramental enough, non-Schartauan, non-pietist, Schartauan, pietist. It is these last two labels which will especially draw the attention of this thesis. Indeed, Giertz himself especially in various letters to Rosendal, defends pietism and contends that he is a sacramental ‘Rosenius-influenced disciple of Schartau.’²⁰

Giertz calls himself a “high-church pietist,” and you know what we think of both of those words.²¹

²⁰ *HfG*, 26.

²¹ *HfG*, 28.

Certainly, Giertz is not above criticism. He's human. The most obvious place that we would begin is with his remaining in the Church of Sweden for forty years after they decided to ordain women, and everything that came after it. Among the rare direct references to Giertz in *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, we find Siegbert Becker lamenting that Giertz does not seem to be doing anything, that he has decided to co-exist in a church that ordains women. We could paraphrase Becker to say, "You're letting it happen. You may be against it, but to what end?"²²



As an aside, the references by Becker to Giertz do indicate, at least with Becker, a broad familiarity with the man. Perhaps his awkward position vis-à-vis women's ordination kept him from becoming noticed among our men.

Other areas where some have criticized him include the doctrine of the Church, the Lord's Supper, his position on the Word of God, and the order of salvation (hinging on the question of whether Giertz is a pietist in our negative sense of the word).

On the doctrine of the Church and the Lord's Supper, I did not see many worrying or troubling signs. The reference made to the Church in the *Quarterly* (56:3, page 189) referred to an essay to which I could not gain access.

²² Cf. *WLQ* Volume 67:1, page 67; Volume 76:2, page 159.

On the order of salvation, see the work of Eric Andrae, who studies this question in depth. The order, referring to the "steps" or "parts" of the process of one coming to faith, can be used by some as giving a map which one must follow. "First, this happens, then this, then this." But, to Andrae's mind, Giertz, like teachers before him, could take the best and leave the worst. "Giertz first points out what the Order of Grace is not. It is not, as many assume, a teaching on how the soul finds its way to God. Rather, it teaches how God finds His way to man's heart."²³

For all that, the label that he would embrace, the one that, perhaps, we ought to consider most is that of pastor. Bror Erickson calls him a "seelsorger's seelsorger."²⁴ A pastor's pastor.

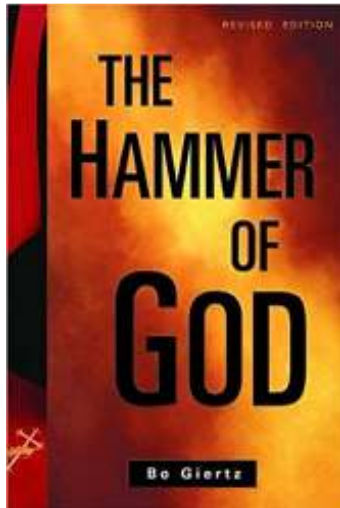
Giertz received his eternal reward in Christ in 1998. Shortly thereafter he received the accolade of "Most Influential 20th Century Swedish Churchman," beating out a Nobel Peace Prize winner (Nathan Soderblom) and an internationally known academic theologian named Gustaf Aulen (also a bishop).

²³ *HfG*, 39. See also pages 68-69, as well as his article, a shortened form of this thesis, in *Logia*, referred to in the bibliography.

²⁴ *TFLF*, v.

“Can anything be greater than to be a pastor in God’s Church?”²⁵

In his novel, *The Hammer of God*, which Bo Giertz subtitled a novel of “soul-care,” three pastors in the same parish over the course of about 130 years each get to the same place. They want to be a pastor, a real pastor, a true pastor, one who preaches the Word of God. Each, struggling with his own issues and problems, finally comes to this realization: there is nothing greater than actually caring for souls.



It is a pastor named Fridfeldt who says the above words. He is a committed revivalist, a born-again Swede who has given his heart to Jesus. He sees some success and a revival begins under his care, until suddenly sin rears its ugly head. A legal dispute breaks out between two farmers leading to a poisoned cow, someone getting hit over the head with a hunk of meat, and threatened lawsuits. And some swearing.

Fridfeldt cannot begin to understand. “How can true Christians act this way? How can the enlightened be so unenlightened?” His heart breaks. He tastes failure. He has nothing to give or offer.

Then his supervising pastor shows up, an older man who has spent many years in this parish. He settles the dispute, bringing in each man

and confronting them with the Word of God, with law and gospel.

In an especially wrenching scene, the older pastor holds out his hand and says that this hand which has baptized the man must now testify against him. He cannot lower this hand until he can say that all is well.

“Tell me, do you think it was pleasant that I happened to come here and heard the kind of language you used?”

“Do you think a Christian man ought to do that? Yes or no?”

“No, Pastor.”

“I knew it, Johan. You think just as I do, then.”²⁶

This whole scene gets Fridfeldt thinking. He thinks about a sinful nature that we will never conquer this side of heaven (a la, Romans 7). He thinks about his own pride in the revival he takes credit for. He thinks about how perhaps law and gospel remain ever relevant and the one true tool of revival and awakening, a revival and awakening that comes from outside of us, from God.

Later, we find Fridfeldt hurrying home after a pastoral call. It is Transfiguration Day. He must preach, but he has no sermon. He grabs a book of sermons his associate recommended. He reads the day’s appointed sermon. It hits him in the sermon’s refrain: Jesus only. He thinks, “I have lost sight of Jesus in all this mess.”²⁷

As he preaches, and then presides over the liturgy, a change takes place.

²⁵ *The Hammer of God [HoG]*, 191.

²⁶ *HoG*, 144-145.

²⁷ *HoG*, 171.

He had never really cared for the liturgical altar service. It bothered him to be bound by a fixed ritual. It had therefore always been his practice to make little changes and additions, and to put as much feeling and personal touch into it as possible. Today he did not feel able to do this. Strangely enough, it was a relief to be allowed to read them as they were, ancient and hallowed words that fell as heavy, life-giving drops on his heart.²⁸

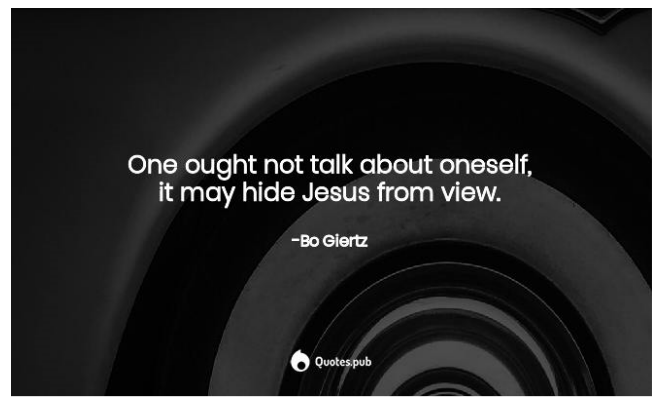
Later, he heads to a small group meeting where they will discuss the topic of infant baptism. He wavers on it, as do many of the newly enlightened. But now, now, he sees faith in a different way, a gift from God rather than a gift to God. He finally sees what his older associate had been trying to tell him: "One ought not talk about oneself, it may hide Jesus from view."²⁹

This, then, was the solution: Sin always remains, yet is always atoned for! Perhaps there was salvation after all for Frans at Sjostugan. Again he saw a picture: A large cross rising heavenward, overshadowing the whole community from the bluffs of Heding to the plains of Sunnerbo. An eternally valid atonement, effective to cancel the judgment; a merciful love, stretching out its arms to all these evil hearts, in which sin is still in motion like reptiles in a snake pit. Jesus only!³⁰

All of this brought Fridfeldt to the point where he says, "Can anything be greater than to be a pastor in God's Church?" He finally gets it. Jesus only. When you have that, you have the program, the whole program.

²⁸ HoG, 171.

²⁹ HoG, 151.



I share this extended anecdote from *The Hammer of God* not because I love the book and recommend it to you (I do). I share it, because it highlights three things about the care of souls that drove Giertz and drives us, and that I will focus on for the rest of our time:

1. Be a true pastor.
2. With a true message
3. Knowing who you were and are.

Be a true pastor

As Giertz said, it was in the exegesis, the handling of the Word of God, that things really came together for him. Wauwatosia theologians already know this. Pauline theologians know this. "Faith comes from hearing the message." Hearing this message creates faith and this message makes one a true pastor.

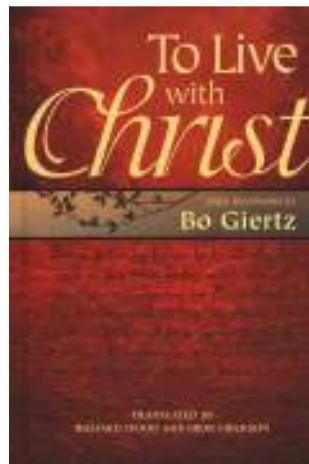
This was the constant refrain of a bishop to his people. For over twenty years he went to ordinations, conferences, visitations, and he told them to just preach the Word and administer the sacraments. That is what a pastor does. Giertz made it his life and work and he wanted all the pastors under his care to make it their life and work. We want it to be our life and work.

³⁰ HoG, 174.

And, like Luther, Giertz saw the audience as the people. Pastors take these things to the people that they serve in a way that they can understand it. You can see this in Giertz's style and method. He wrote theological novels so that the people could see the word of God in real life situations among real people.

But even his theological writing he aimed at the people, not the academy, not theologians. His first book, *Christ's Church*, he specifically addressed to those who rarely darkened the doors of the Church (which he estimated at that time to be about 90% of Swedes). Two of his other theological works, *Preaching from the Whole Bible [PWB]* and *To Live With Christ* achieve this goal.

Preaching from the Whole Bible, while intended for pastors as a brief commentary on the Gospel for the day, works easily as a *Meditations*-style devotional book. *To Live With Christ*, a book of devotions for every day of the year that follows the Church



year, Giertz planned as a book to answer, "what they should do to know more about Christianity" and as a help for the upcoming (or preceding) Divine Service and a "short doctrinal study."³¹ We read these, and it reminds us that simplicity does not preclude depth or theological insight. Something we might remember from our tiptoeing into biblical Greek through John's Gospel. Giertz masters speaking in the common way to regular people, while at the same time bringing forth the deep truths of the faith and the whole

counsel of God. He manages to do what pastors are supposed to do: preach the Word of God.

He preaches this Word with a goal that all pastors have. He wishes to draw people to the Church, to the means of grace that the Lord has placed into the Church's hands to use. The Giertz stand-in in *The Hammer of God*, Gosta Torvik, realizes that this is what he wants to do.

From this day he would preach God's Word as he had received it, without excuses or reinterpretations. He would be true to the doctrines of the Church and in employing its prayers and liturgy. 'And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.' Thus it was written about the first Christians. That was the whole program.³²

The pastor, Giertz believes, exists to draw people into a devotional life, which is to say, a life built upon and centered around the Word of God. Which also means that the pastor talks about people going to church. "For all true Christianity the divine service is the most obvious form of devotional life."³³

The reason for this is that only here will any renewal or awakening occur. The Word of God gives us new birth (James 1:18) into our living hope (1 Pt 1:3). And the Lord incarnates himself in preached words (preached also through the liturgy), in holy Baptism, and in the holy supper. That's what Christians are: baptized, Bible-using, communion eating people of God.³⁴ Each Advent, when a new church year begins, Giertz said in one devotion, you are

³¹ *TLWC*, 15.

³² *HoG*, 279.

³³ *HfG*, 259.

³⁴ *The Message to the Church in a Time of Crisis*, 15-17.

either closer to or farther away from God. "Faith has either grown or withered."³⁵

God gives pastors to help shape this devotional life for people, to draw them to the Divine Service to be fed and nourished. We show them that the Divine Service is the special thing because God himself is present.³⁶ There is nothing more special than that. We read this over and over in Giertz. Of course, we say, he lived at a time when nobody went to Church. As mentioned, he speculated 90% of Swedes did not bother with the Sunday service. We are coming to such a time. COVID decimated our service attendance, which was already falling before that. 40% became 30%. 30% became 20%. Even with streaming services, you can read the analytics and see just how long people are staying online for the service.

This requires the true pastor to bring law and gospel to the people, not just about going to church, but about all of God's Word. I mentioned the anecdote about the old pastor showing the hand that must testify against his member Johan before the Lord. In *The Hammer of God's* third story, Torvik spends an entire service agonizing over a dear friend, Gunnar Schenstedt. Torvik wonders if he will come to communion today. He prays that he will not, because Gunnar impregnated a young woman and does not see anything wrong with his sinful sexual behavior. We have all been here, seeing that person in the pews and wondering will they come up. We have all had this lump in our chest, either during the service, or throughout the day, about how we will meet with someone, talk with someone, deal with someone. Or how they will deal with us.

But this is the task of the true pastor, to bring law and gospel to bear. We "preach God's Word

just as it is given to us in the Holy Scriptures." It is not given to us to dance around or to frame it "for our times." We preach it as it was handed down to us. Come what may.³⁷



We act as true pastors, regardless of the circumstances. Torvik worried about a broken relationship with a dear friend, but he worried more about hell for that friend. In another novel, *Faith Alone [FA]*, Giertz tells of two brothers living in the same region of

Sweden as described in *The Hammer of God*. Only now it is Sweden in the 1540s, when the country has just turned for the Reformation, but their king, Gustav Vasa, seems to be doing his best Henry VIII impression: seizing church property for himself.

In this story, the brothers, Andreas, a priest remaining true to the pope, and Martin, a secretary working for the king, both wrestle with the political challenges they face. They both eventually come to see the king as a wicked tyrant whom they must resist.

Both encounter an evangelical pastor named Peder. Andreas wonders why the king's tyranny does not bother Peder. Peder asks:

But, Andreas, the altar remains – and the chalice? The baptismal font and missal? You can still baptize children and hold mass like before, right? The church does not need silver for the salvation of souls. If you can still

³⁵ TLWC, 19.

³⁶ CC, 108.

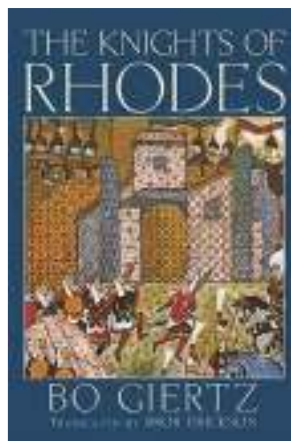
³⁷ HfG, 275.

distribute the holy sacrament and freely proclaim God's word, can you not do without the rest?³⁸

This, perhaps, echoes conversations we have had during the pandemic. Have governments gone too far or not far enough? Have they encroached upon the work of the Church? Even if they have, we still look to the work God calls the Church and her pastors to do, and we do it. Does the altar remain? Is the chalice still there, the font? Can we still preach? Then do that. We are not the first, nor the last, to labor under difficult political circumstances, nor the first or last to wonder about how "strange" "God's rule" is.³⁹

This too is a theme common to Giertz's other novels. In *The Hammer of God*, Torvik contemplates the possible invasion of Sweden by the Russians after they conquer Finland in the Winter War. Despite his fears, wondering how things might go, who might die, Torvik concludes, "They could not shoot God."⁴⁰

In a third novel, *The Knights of Rhodes (KR)*, written in 1972 after he retired as bishop, when he had time for novel-writing again, Giertz describes Christian knights defending the island fortress of Rhodes against Muslim invaders. It is a hopeless cause. They will lose. One Christian wonders, "If Christ was God's Son, why didn't He give them the victory?"⁴¹



Later, the Grand Master of the order and his chaplain have a conversation about just this, after a disastrous event.

The Grand Master asks, "God certainly has something to do with that? Or did the devil do it?"

The chaplain answers: "Possibly both."

"But isn't that impossible?"

"On the contrary, that is what most often happens in the world. God and the devil play chess. We are the pieces. But we are neither completely white nor black. In every heart there is a chessboard where God and the devil play."

"There are many pieces to keep them busy."

"And precisely for that reason, it is so hard for us to follow the game. Occasionally, God makes a move that we can't understand. In order to check something only He sees coming. Or to get into a position only He can exploit. Up until the end, all the small pieces stand together trying to discern what is happening in the big scheme of things."

"Do you mean that the devil had something to do with the play today? Though God took it home in the end?"

"Something like that."⁴²

The true pastor has to keep his eyes firmly fixed upon Christ so that he can keep his people's eyes firmly fixed upon Christ. Which is why he preaches law and gospel, why he encourages the devotional life, why he draws the people to the Service and the sacraments, and why he preaches to them in a way that they can understand.

³⁸ FA, 50.

³⁹ FA, 196.

⁴⁰ HoG, 285.

⁴¹ KR, 24.

⁴² KR, 47.

It is also why the pastor so desperately needs forgiveness for himself. This is the “heart of everything”⁴³: atonement won by Christ; forgiveness of *my* sins. This remains so vital for my own heart – the pastor’s heart – because Satan still works to have me. Satan himself, in fact, along with my Old Adam, survives ordination and can be a wonderful churchman. “If he gets some time to himself, he can get along wonderfully well in the cassock. If he is not subdued, bound, and crucified, he will gradually take control of the whole administration of the office. He does it by writing off what fits him least.”⁴⁴

In *The Hammer of God*, Giertz gives us a striking example, one that cuts to the heart. A group of pastors are guests at a dinner party. A man comes from one of the local villages because someone is near death and requires the sacrament, that is, a pastoral visit. Each man looks to the other one. They argue about whose responsibility it is. “Well, he lives in your parish.” “Well, he goes to your church.” Finally, the dean of the parish has to assign a pastor to take the sacrament to a dying man. By force. And that man is none too thrilled to go.⁴⁵

So, I need my heart changed. I need the Word of God spoken to me, about me, for me. I need to “underline heavily everything about what our Savior has done for us” and “if you like, write ‘for me’ in the margin. You need this yourself, and it is your duty to preach it to your congregation as well.”⁴⁶

Be a true pastor, which makes us worry after souls. Do not go around in mufti, hiding your office, either by your attire, your life, your message, or your conduct of the liturgy. It is an office from God. It is God’s office preaching God’s Word doing God’s work.



We can do this faithfully, just preaching and delivering the sacrament, because the work is God’s. The results do not even have to be our biggest focus. The Lord’s fire will fall, just as it did for Elijah. To some ordinands, Giertz said:

Until the end, the Lord’s fire falls. Maybe not so that it flares and burns in the whole congregation. It may only be a little here and a little there, individual people who wake up, worried souls that open themselves, new communicants who dare come to the Lord’s Table and remain there. If God’s servant stands the test, if he stays as a witness – even if he thinks he stands alone – if he patiently suffers persecution and disgrace, if he lets himself be disciplined and straightened out, if he continues to sow the Word faithfully and honestly, then he shall also see the Lord’s fire fall from heaven, maybe where he least expected it. For his gifts of grace and his calling are from God. He cannot repent of either the gifts of grace or the calling he bestows upon you today who will now be ordained to the holy pastoral office. For so says the Lord: Go out where I send you, and then speak what I ask you. Fear not for

⁴³ FA, 271.

⁴⁴ Cf. *TFLF*, 117; *LSA*, 11.

⁴⁵ *HoG*, 6-7.

⁴⁶ *HoG*, 251.

them, for I am with you and will help you. And it is the Lord who is God. Yes, the Lord is God.⁴⁷

With a true message

Of course, it is not enough to simply stand up and preach. True pastors preach the true message. For Giertz this meant the atonement, the atonement, the atonement. As passé or clichéd as it may seem. It may feel like “the old way” to some, or “such rude means.”⁴⁸ To talk about blood and death, God’s Son dying. To talk about sin and grace. But this is it. This is what we have and what we preach. It goes back to the beginning, a woman’s son who will crush the devil. “I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2). Thus, Giertz chose as his episcopal motto, “*Verbum crucis, Dei virtus.*” “The word of the cross is God’s power.”

The true message is that man cannot save himself. Just as we cannot deliver ourselves from so many other manmade problems. We need rescue, deliverance, help. So pastors need to dare come with the message that all your help comes from outside of you. There is nothing inside of you. It’s God who “finds his way to man’s heart.”⁴⁹ God finds your heart to bring it Christ. “One becomes holy in Christ Jesus, never outside of him.”⁵⁰ God takes our rusty tin can of a heart and makes something new of it. It is Jesus alone. Jesus alone. Jesus alone.

And then Giertz can preach on a Good Friday: “Remember this next time your soul languishes, when everything is mysterious and



dark. Look at the cross. Complain to God. Christ understands you, receives your prayer, and carries it to God.”⁵¹

So, the prescription Giertz has is Jesus, and then Jesus, and then some more Jesus. You might be afraid that Giertz is some sort of gospel reductionist. Perhaps you see the time in which he came to maturity, exactly the time when such theology emerged stateside in the Missouri Synod, which emerged in full bloom in the walkout at Seminex. Our hermeneutics training urged us against such an error, to eliminate all else of Scripture for the sake of Christ, to perhaps even suggest that all else is less, or not even divinely inspired, but the message of forgiveness.

Perhaps it would be helpful to consider Giertz as living in a time similar to Luther in his early years. Luther commented that his early years he had to battle against the Roman conception of works so much that he had to overemphasize grace. But do we see Luther as an antinomian gospel reductionist? By no means. We have read his catechism.

Likewise, we see Giertz, and he does not just preach Jesus and ignore the rest. He does not revel in the sinful condition and say, “Sin all the more.” He does not suggest that some parts of God’s Word are less than others. We need only see his lifelong struggle against women’s ordination to see that all of God’s Word came into his preaching. He also clearly spoke against homosexuality in his commentary on Romans.⁵² In *To Live With Christ and Preaching From the Whole Bible*, he touches on topics

⁴⁷ TFLF, 4-5.

⁴⁸ HoG, 271, 11

⁴⁹ HfG, 39.

⁵⁰ CC, 56.

⁵¹ *A Year of Grace, Part 1*, 166-167.

⁵² *Romans*, 16.

throughout the catechism, throughout our lives, applying God's Word to them all. In other words, he preaches law and gospel, the whole counsel of God. But, like Walther, he sees that the gospel must predominate. In other words, the atonement. That rock upon which Christ's cross stood is the rock of our salvation. Our hope is built on nothing less.

This is not to put Giertz above reproach. I already mentioned some areas above where people have found fault, or asked questions, the biggest one being his relationship to the Church of Sweden when it was (and he knew it) so obviously heterodox and getting worse. But we put no pastor above reproach, only the Lord and his Word. In the case of Giertz, his good outweighs in most instances his bad. And even in the case of women's ordination, while his lived testimony may be inconsistent, he continually testified in his preaching and writing about the truth of God's Word in this matter. From the 1930s to the 1990s he testified against it as a sinful reordering of God's holy office.

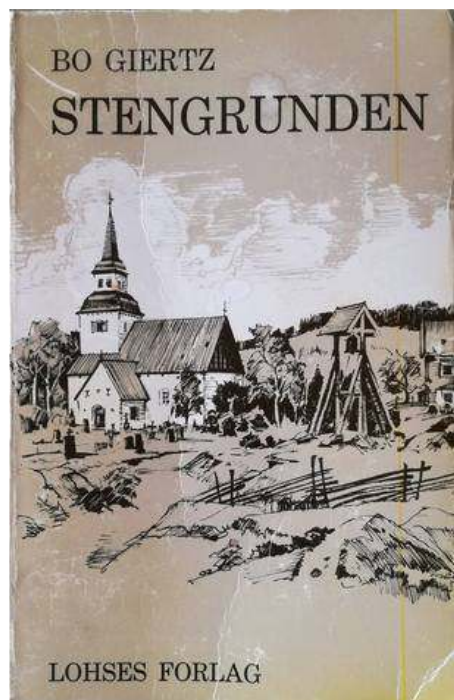
To return to the atonement, by putting this at the center of his preaching and teaching ("we preach Christ crucified"), this allowed Giertz to be careful and balanced in other areas. I mentioned above that he has been called everything under the sun. Too pietistic, not pietistic enough. High-church, low-church, etc. Perhaps that means he struck a fine balance, a Lutheran middle in areas where he could. Because he wanted to preach the atonement of Christ and to know nothing else, he could avoid being zero-sum about the

liturgy and worship (though he thought the liturgy, especially the Swedish liturgy, a blessing from God and the Divine Service that without which one cannot be a Christian). He did not have to drift into the legalism we see in so many characters in his novels, especially *Faith Alone* and *The Hammer of God*. We can even see some of the disciples of Christ wrestling with these matters in *With My Own Eyes*.

Because the atonement played such a role in Giertz's life and work, he did stand firm, in a zero-sum manner, about one thing: the devotional life of the Christian. This is part of the true message that the true pastor brings. "You need Christ. Christ comes through the Word. The Word comes to you in a devotional life. The devotional life begins in the Divine Service." This is Giertz's logic, which is not far off from Paul's in Romans 10:14-17.

To Giertz, you either have a devotional life, or you are spiritually dead. "You actually can be eternally lost by using Sunday after Sunday to loaf about, run outdoor races, or dig in your garden."⁵³ When discussing the rituals and customs of the church, many of which Giertz sees as rightly neither forbidden or commanded, he then goes to the mattresses to say, "There are good and bad customs. Not attending worship is a bad custom."⁵⁴ Not just at church, either:

That we should have home devotions ought to be self-evident. No one is a Christian by his own doing. Even at



⁵³ HfG, 254.

⁵⁴ TLWC, 103.

home we have a faith and a God who is everyone's Father. Every 'Our Father' we recite for ourselves reminds us that we also ought to pray with each other according to the true meaning of the words of the prayer that the Savior gave us, when He taught us to say not I, me, or my, but we, us, and our.⁵⁵

In *Christ's Church*, he writes, "Becoming a Christian means to be received into this life-fellowship through baptism. Being a Christian means living there through the Word and the Sacraments, in faith. A Christian by oneself is no Christian. One cannot live as a disconnected member."⁵⁶

Giertz felt so strongly about this, because only in the devotional life do we live in the doctrine upon which the Church stands and falls. "It's either atonement and forgiveness or it's culture, progress, and the human mind."⁵⁷ We either stand on the atonement, or upon our own piety, which so often ends up being "false holiness."⁵⁸ Then we end up back in the pope's camp, the false hope of works righteousness.

It is the same leaven: the proud old Adam, who can't possibly keep his wits about him when it is revealed that Christ's righteousness is really enough for a sinner and that one has everything when one believes in Christ. If we shall be saved by poverty, or obedience, or repentance or anything else, then Christ is nothing. One must choose here. The pure gospel tolerates nothing at its side....

If a man lives in justification by faith, then he knows that he is a sinner who can only be saved for Christ's sake. Then he is happy if only the gospel is freely proclaimed and there is access to the sacraments. Then he can leave all ceremonies and leave off all judging the lives to others. There is no good deed that can be prescribed beforehand. When a sinner believes in Christ and is pardoned, then Jesus and the Spirit take their abode in the heart, and it is a joyful and willing spirit that sincerely wants to serve his neighbor and do all good wherever it presents itself. But these good works cannot be prescribed beforehand. They come of themselves, and so they are done well, as God would have them done, and it is always something good for the neighbor. Then he does not wear his horsehair shirt, but day after day, he goes and is decent toward his sour neighbor... But if we want to become holy through our works, then the deeds must be prescribed. And because there is no such description in the Bible, one has to try to knit them together himself. One person finds one thing and the other another, and there is quarreling without end because work-saints are jealous self-promoters. Because they have become so exhausted and sour by their holiness, they will not let anyone else's holiness come into fashion....

Want to be pious! I will tell you one thing, Martin: It is the greatest sin there is to want to be pious! So long as a man wants to be pious and holy, he

⁵⁵ HfG, 260.

⁵⁶ CC, 22.

⁵⁷ CC, 87.

⁵⁸ FA, 175-176. This is a theme of *The Hammer of God* as well.

thinks only about himself. He is captivated by his own notability. He wants to be someone – even before God! If he does something good for his neighbor, he does it only for his own sake because he heard that that is what a saint should look like. The whole time he looks out for himself and the good he does, he gathers it all up together and amasses it like the dragon with his worthless gold in order to have something to praise himself for before the throne of God. This is why God has to make every self-sanctified fool into a truly great sinner in order to overcome them. Sometimes he lets them fall into coarse sin, others he plagues with their sinful depravity until they despair and recognize that they really deserve condemnation. So long as we watch ourselves and want to be holy, we are nothing but coarse sinners, even if we see a halo in the mirror. The worst is that people have such an unbelievable desire to look at themselves. They are normally not cracked before they see that the mask of sin creeps in everywhere and that they are more loathsome to watch than a decaying dog's corpse on the side of the road. Then they might finally desire to see something different. And then the Holy Spirit will be able to turn their eyes to Christ in earnest. Then they notice that the Savior alone in all the earth can atone for such abominable sinners. Then they think that Christ is the loveliest person there is to look upon. And he who sees him and believes him, he at

that moment receives the wonderful gift that only God can give: to be able to see his neighbor and discover him just when he needs help. He no longer thinks about doing good deeds, but he does good. He no longer wants to be holy, but he has the Holy Spirit, and therefore he serves. He does not see the holy saint before him as a model for how he ought to be, but he only sees the neighbor who suffers need, and he goes to him to serve him.⁵⁹



Though we think we are ever so strong, as Fridfeldt discovered, sin always wins. Paul felt this way too (Romans 7). So we need Christ. And then more Christ. We need God to deliver Christ to us. So we can “never think highly enough of our Baptism.”⁶⁰ We think less of ourselves and more of our Baptism, more of the Supper, more

of the preaching, which means we think more highly of Christ than of anything. For when we do that, we see that we are sitting on the ash heap, like Job, and when you are on the ash heap, then all you have left is God.⁶¹ The word of Christ is the power of God.

So, “Justification is not a matter that one hits upon one or two Sundays a year. It is a theme that must permeate all our sermons. It must be built, be explained, be made clear, deepened, repeated, and drummed in Sunday after Sunday.”⁶² Because “God alone can cure evil. This is why he gave us Christ.”⁶³

⁵⁹ *FA*, 177, 187-188, 203.

⁶⁰ *Life by Drowning [LD]*, 3.

⁶¹ *KR*, 211.

⁶² *TFLF*, 195.

⁶³ *TLWC*, 154.

Desperately then, as we seek to be true pastors, we bring this true message, the one true message, the foolishness of the cross which is the power of God. A message that begins: "Repent!" And then shows us that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting men's sins against them" (2 Cor 5:19). And then teaches about holy living. True pastors bring this true message. And when we do, well, then as Gosta Torvik's wife said one Sunday morning, "What would life be without the church?"⁶⁴ To hear that from the lips of your children, your people, from your own lips, would that not be a joy beyond all joys? It is the fruit of being a true pastor bringing the true message.

Knowing who you were and are

Finally, if we will dare to be a pastor, then we must know who we were and who we are. Bo Giertz clearly had a lively self-awareness. He never forgot his atheist upbringing and his own atheist "faith." He could not forget where he had been when God found him. Just as one of my own members confessed to me this past summer. After preaching on Acts 1:12-14 for the minor festival of Mary, the mother of our Lord, an elderly saint confessed to me how it reminded him of how wrongly he had prayed for so many years.

Giertz also never lost sight of the situation in which he lived in Sweden, the lack of spiritual life, the loss of the means of grace. What is the American scene in which we live? How has it impacted our church and our lives?

Nor could Giertz forget his own feeble attempts at preaching and spiritual care in his early years, which he envisioned in the character of Torvik in *The Hammer of God*.

⁶⁴ HoG, 329.

⁶⁵ HoG, 201-202.

Early on, Torvik begins to consider whether he wants to be a pastor at all. Year one was not a good year. It was a hard parish, and he did not help himself out much.

His parish work had really not been encouraging. He was too shy to talk with people, would rather sit undisturbed at home and read, and literally had to force himself to make sick calls and visit the shut-ins. He did not, for that matter, feel competent to talk with these people.⁶⁵

I do not know about you, but this hits too close to home for comfort. Or, when Torvik "felt a strange mixture of surprise, of irritation at being disturbed just as he was ready to engage in the studies planned for the day..."⁶⁶ It is not just who we were, but who we still are. It is the temptation to be as arrogant as Savonius (the smarty-pants pastor of *The Hammer of God's* first novella) or Fridfeldt, for we know so much more than the people do. It is the temptation to be legalistic in our advice, our applications, or our life.

Then Giertz reminds us of how those who dare to be pastors must take heart in knowing what God has made us. In his devotional book, *To Live with Christ*, Giertz encourages us all:

I myself once began with a clean slate, not knowing much at all about Christianity. It was the beginning of a long life of continuous exploration. I have written this book in the hope that it will help some reader follow the same path. He will not regret it.⁶⁷

He shows us this again and again in his novels as people make the turn. Whether it is

⁶⁶ HoG, 204.

⁶⁷ TLWC, frontispiece.

Savonius, Fridfeldt, or Torvik (the three pastors in *The Hammer of God*), Martin or Andreas (in *Faith Alone*), or the various men encountering Jesus in *With My Own Eyes*.

Faith Alone provides us with, perhaps, the most striking examples of this. Martin, the king's formerly loyal servant, falls prey to the Anabaptist type allure of some lay preachers and he becomes a "real Christian," who has thrown off all the dross of the papist church. But then, when lost, he hears again the prayers of the old church, "Lord Jesus, place your bitter death and pain, your worthy dignity and innocence between your righteous judgment and my hard sins. I do not ask for what I deserve, but I hope and ask on behalf of your holy and very blessed death..." and he thinks of the hymns, "*Qui salvandos salvas gratis*" ("who salvation freely sends us"). Or Andreas, the fervent papal priest and supporter, now imprisoned for murder, defrocked, but hearing from Pastor Peder about the atonement of Christ. And he says, "It can't be so simple." But he learns that it is.⁶⁸ And they become new men, new creations in Christ.

Wanting to show how true this is for all people, Giertz wrote the way that he wrote. He wrote about "flesh and blood"⁶⁹ people in novels because he understood that the Word of God endures forever. It remains the same always and it has the same effects. "Faith comes from hearing the message." It is always that God's thoughts and our thoughts are not the same.

But at different times, in different places, in different circumstances that same Word works in the same way. It takes us as we were and makes us what we are. What God would have us be in Christ. Whether it is among the people of Galilee and Judea (*With My Own Eyes*), knights fighting in the Mediterranean in the 1520s (*The Knights of Rhodes*), Swedish brothers fighting in a civil war (*Faith Alone*), or Swedish pastors in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (*The Hammer of God*). Christ is the solid rock upon which we stand, all other ground is shifting sand. Christ turns sinners of every time and every place into saints. And sinners of every time and every place need the same Christ found in the same Word of God.



Giertz also knew that we all deal with the vaunted Wisconsin Synod rugged individualism. We all wish to go our own way. So he shows us men and women finally confronted by God's way. In *The Hammer of God* and *Faith Alone* he shows us men who mock and scoff at the liturgical heritage passed down to us who suddenly realize the great comfort found in devotion to the fellowship (Acts 2:42), in a passed down heritage, which, when the liturgy is done right, is merely passing down the Word of God. In *Christ's Church*, Giertz says:

When we learn from the past, we are learning from our brothers in Christ. The church lifts us over the limits of time. She places the generations side by side. The blessed saints are alive

⁶⁸ *FA*, 213, 241-244.

⁶⁹ *HfG*, 156.

now. They are part of Christ's body. Thus Augustine, Chrysostom and Luther are our contemporaries in the Spirit. We live in fellowship with martyrs and reformers. Not everything which they have said or done was right. Therefore we must listen to them with an alert conscience, bound to God's word. The testimony of our forefathers does not place a new Bible in our hands. But it continually gives us new reminders of its richness. If we ourselves are bound to the Word, we can hear God Himself powerfully speak through the voice of our forebears. Deeply moved we see the infinity of His work throughout the history of the church. Humiliated we recognize our own limitations. Maybe we discover the frightening poverty of our own time, its spiritual impoverishment and one-sidedness. But at the same time we are caught by a sense of infinite jubilation. After all, this whole richness is ours! The past is not the past, it is as real as it was on that day when it first emerged in history. We ourselves are partakers of it, as we truly live in an indissoluble connection with the Church which has these inexhaustible assets of faith and strength and willingness to sacrifice, of sanctified characters and burning spirits. In this catholic fellowship the paralyzing sense of weakness is overcome. In fellowship with the victory-crowned martyrs, we are always enabled to continue on the Way."⁷⁰

For this reason we read the Bible and never stop. Because of who we were and who we are,

⁷⁰ CC, 68.

⁷¹ CC, 109.

who God makes us. We always read the Bible looking for Jesus, with "the intention to learn about salvation."⁷¹

Because we cannot possibly know Christ well enough, or his Word well enough, because we know that who we were lurks so dangerously close to the surface, we also stay the course. We stick to the Word. We stick to prayer. We stick to the Divine Service. We stick to our Baptism and the Holy Supper.

And if God does not tire, then you must not either. At least do not give up before you have exhausted that message which the Church proclaims and tried all the means she administers unto our salvation. If one has not before asked for private confession, then it is time to make use of it during the awakening. The whole collective experience of the Church exhorts us at least to discard our shy anxiety and resolutely seek a Seelsorger and ask for a private conversation.⁷²

That is, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest" (Mt 11:28). Giertz has not reinvented the wheel. He stands on the shoulders of Luther and the Reformation who stood on the shoulders of St. Paul and Christ and all the apostles and prophets. We need the Word. It is the most special thing there is. We need to be convinced that there is nothing more special than Christ, though our deceitful hearts clamor to tell us that it is so. We are not so far away from the sickness unto death Giertz observed in his beloved Swedish church.⁷³ We watch churches in America retreat step by step away from the Word. We see the temptation in our own

⁷² LD, 16-17.

⁷³ "My Last Will and Testament."

hearts, in our own ministries. We might stand firm for a moment, a pretense of solidity, only to give up and retreat so quickly. We wrestle with loss, as the Knights of Rhodes did when they saw Muslim victory after Muslim victory. We wonder where we stand on the chessboard and who moves which piece when.

But God never stops. In *The Knights of Rhodes*, there is a Jewish doctor who secretly serves as a spy for the Muslim armies. He received Baptism and acted as a Christian for years. Throughout the novel we view his interior struggle. "Oh, this Jesus of Nazareth! Could he not leave him in peace?"

Caught out in his treachery, the man faces death. He speaks with the chaplain who points him to Christ. The Jewish doctor cannot believe that he could see Christ. "The Doctor only has to turn his head a little so he can see him. The Doctor's Jesus." And then he points the man to John 11, "Whoever believes in me, he shall never die."

The doctor asks, "But all my unfaithfulness? All the times I took the sacrament without faith?"

"Those he has long ago suffered for. He has only been anxious that he might forgive them.... We are never righteous.... Only Him, He is always righteous."

Upon the doctor's execution, the chaplain shocks the other men by saying he died as a true Christian. "The most important thing is that one may keep his hand on Jesus when the time comes."⁷⁴

I am not so far away from that Jewish doctor. I live in the deepest depths so often. But there,

just there, we find Jesus. A dying knight sees Christ.

He folded his hands. A great calm came over him. He was not alone. He knew that, but that needed to be clothed in word. Here was someone who went around between the sickbeds. Just like on the streets in Capernaum. He stayed and bowed down. His breast had a great wound too. His hands bloody. It seemed that he knew all about it. When those at home could never understand. He had been through it, the cold and rain, dirt and vermin, beaten and wounded, the fear of death and defeat. He was the God who descended down into all this. He was very near. It was good to have such a God.⁷⁵

"God descended down into all this." This answers the pop song's question, "What if God was one of us?" He was. He came down into the ash heap of this sinful world because he knows who we are. And he knows what he wants to make of us.

This knowledge makes Christians. This knowledge makes true pastors. It makes us dare to be pastors. It makes us preach what Christ says. It makes us hear what Christ says. Because one day, one day, it happens to us all. For so long, we did not pay attention. "Then one day it begins to speak to us, maybe on an occasion we will never forget, and we realize it's me God's talking to."⁷⁶

And what he says is about Jesus. Jesus only. Then, like Martin, we ask, "Isn't it strange that everything is so simple when one has the forgiveness of sins? Is it not the heart of the

⁷⁴ KR, 161-164.

⁷⁵ KR, 201-202.

⁷⁶ TLWC, 389.

whole of our existence this atonement and the forgiveness of sins?"

And Pastor Peder smiles "again for the first time after the execution" (of Martin's brother Andreas), and says, "Yes, so it is. This is the heart of everything: the atonement and the forgiveness of sins."⁷⁷

Now we know who we are. We know what God has made us. We know what it means to dare

to be a pastor. We dare it. And we pray, "Everything is in Your hands, if You want to, You can. If You don't want to, then it's better that it doesn't happen. I want only one thing: You."⁷⁸

And "Do what You will, but do not let go of me."⁷⁹

It is good to have such a God. To have Jesus. Jesus only.



⁷⁷ FA, 271.

⁷⁸ TLWC, 126.

⁷⁹ TLWC, 162.

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