

MEANS OF GRACE

The Wrong Address

*Why a Debate Group Could Never Have Given Her What She
Came For*

Essay · By **Larry Herzog Jr.** · *Ordinary Means*
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She was right to leave.

She was also standing at the wrong door, and she would have been standing at the wrong door even if every person inside had been kind to her.

What she was right about

Start with the part that needs no qualification. The tone she described is real, and it is a sin rather than a personality trait.

Confessional Lutherans online have inherited a tradition with sharp edges. Those edges were ground down over centuries against genuine error, by men who had something to lose, and we are the beneficiaries of that work. But a scalpel in the hands of someone who has never operated is just a small knife. The distinctions we inherited were made to protect frightened consciences from teaching that would devour them. They were not made so that we could win a thread against a stranger who phrased something badly.

Paul does not leave this open for negotiation. A man may speak with the tongues of angels, hold all knowledge, understand every mystery, have faith enough to move mountains, and without love he is nothing at all.¹ Not diminished. Not partially useful. Nothing. That verdict falls on the theologically correct with particular weight, because the theologically correct are the ones most tempted to think their correctness is a covering.

So when she says she found contempt and self-congratulation among people gathered under the name of Christ, the appropriate response is not to explain the context. It is to say she is right, and that the people who did it should repent.

That is the easy half of this.

What nobody told her

Now look again at what she said she came for.

She came for insight into evil. She came for peace. She came for hope. She came to have her fear addressed.

Notice that none of those is a request for information. She was not asking to be taught. She was asking to be consoled. And a debate group cannot console anyone, not because the members are bad, but because of what a debate group is.

There is a difference between talking about a thing and handing it over. A room full of people can discuss the terms of a will at great length, with real learning and real accuracy, and not one of them can give you your inheritance. Only the executor can do that, and he can do it only because someone with authority authorized him. His signature works precisely because it is not his own. The discussion is not a lesser version of the transfer. It is a different kind of act altogether.

This is the category she crossed without knowing it, and I suspect no one in the group noticed either, because we are all in the habit of treating theology as a subject rather than as a delivery. She went to a place that talks about the gospel and asked it to give her the gospel. It could not. It has no font, no altar, no pulpit, and no one in it authorized to say the one sentence she needed to hear.

None of this makes the discussion worthless. Debate groups catechize. They sharpen. They send people looking for the real thing. But sharpening is not feeding, and sending is not delivering, and the confusion of the one for the other is where this went wrong.

The gospel has an address

God did not release the gospel into the air as ambient truth for anyone to inhale.

He sent it. Paul walks the chain backward in Romans 10 and refuses to skip a link: no calling on someone you have not believed in, no believing in someone you have not heard, no hearing without a preacher, no preacher without a sending. “Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the preached word of Christ.”² Every step of that involves a person who was placed there by God to speak to another person who was not going to arrive at it alone.

Our own confession says the same thing without ornament. In order that we may obtain this faith, God instituted the office of preaching, giving the gospel and the sacraments.³ The ministry exists because faith is not self-generated. It comes from outside. It has to be brought to you.

And Christ is startlingly concrete about where the authority for that sits. “The one who listens to you listens to me.”⁴ “If you forgive anyone’s sins, they are forgiven.”⁵ Both sentences were spoken to men who had been sent — the seventy-two in the one case, the apostles in the other — and the church has always read them through the sending, which is why no one is supposed to take this office up on his own say-so.⁶ That is not a description of a well-moderated forum. That is an office, held by a particular man, exercised in a particular room, on a particular Sunday, over a particular person who came in afraid.

What she needed was not a correct account of the origin of evil. What she needed was a man standing in front of her, saying in the stead and by the command of Christ that her sins are forgiven,⁷ and then putting the bread and the cup into her hands and telling her that this is the body of Christ, given for her.

No comment section on earth can do that. The best possible comment section cannot do that.

Explanation is not consolation

There is a further trap in what she was looking for, and it deserves naming, because plenty of people who never post anything are caught in it.

She wanted insight into the evilness of the world, and she expected that insight would bring peace. It is a reasonable expectation and it is false. No account of evil has ever comforted anyone at three in the morning. Even the true things we can say about it — that God permits what he does not author, that he works good out of what was meant for harm, that the present suffering is not worth comparing to what is coming — do not function as sedatives.⁸ They are true. They are not what stops the shaking.

What stops the shaking is that God dealt with evil by climbing into it and dying, and then walking out of the grave, and then arranging for that death and that resurrection to be delivered to individual people by name, in water and word and bread. God's answer to evil is not an explanation. It is a corpse that got up, applied to you personally.

She was hoping to be argued into peace. Peace is not something you can be argued into. It is something that has to be given to you by someone who has the authority to give it.

The one place she overcorrects

Her closing line is the only thing I would push back on — God can be the judge and jury; the group doesn't have to be.

About hearts, she is entirely right. Whether the man typing at her is a believer, whether his contempt is habit or malice, whether he will be saved — none of that is any of our business, and the confidence with which people online assign one another to hell is its own scandal.

But the sentence cannot be extended to teaching, and it is often used that way. The church has to judge doctrine. That is what a confession is: a public act of judgment, saying this is

what Scripture says and that other thing is not, and here is where the line falls. We do not get to stop doing that because the doing of it has been abused. The Lutheran Reformation was, from one angle, an enormous exercise in refusing to let “who are we to judge” close down a question that souls depended on.

The failure in that group was not that it distinguished truth from error. It was that it slid from judging teaching, which is public and open and about the teaching, into judging persons, which was never given to us. Those two things look similar from the outside and are not remotely the same, and the people who cannot tell them apart are the ones who drove her out.

What should have been said to her

She said nobody would even miss the fact that she had unfollowed the group.

Someone should have missed it. And what someone should have said to her is not “come back, we’ll be nicer.” It is this: you were right to go, and you were looking in the wrong place, and the thing you came for is real and it has an address.

It is down the street. It happens on Sunday morning. There is a man there whose entire job is to say to you, out loud and in the second person, the words you went online hoping to feel. He will not charge you for it. He will not make you win an argument first. He will not ask whether you have the doctrine of evil sorted out, because the arrangement does not run in that direction — the word comes first and the understanding follows it, sometimes by years.

Go get what is yours. It is being given away, week after week, to anyone who walks in.

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1. 1 Cor 13:1–2 (NET): “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but I do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so that I can remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.”
 2. Rom 10:14–15, 17 (NET): “How are they to call on one they have not believed in? And how are they to believe in one they have not heard of? And how are they to hear without someone preaching to them? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? ...

Consequently faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the preached word of Christ.”

3. The body text paraphrases the German of Augsburg Confession V — in my rendering, the office of preaching instituted, giving the gospel and the sacraments. The Triglotta, translating the Latin, reads: “That we may obtain this faith, the Ministry of Teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Ghost is given, who works faith, where and when it pleases God, in them that hear the Gospel, to wit,

- that God, not for our own merits, but for Christ's sake, justifies those who believe that they are received into grace for Christ's sake." *Concordia Triglotta*, ed. F. Bente and W. H. T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921); public domain.
4. Luke 10:16 (NET): "The one who listens to you listens to me, and the one who rejects you rejects me, and the one who rejects me rejects the one who sent me."
 5. John 20:23 (NET): "If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you retain anyone's sins, they are retained."
 6. Augsburg Confession XIV: "Of Ecclesiastical Order they teach that no one should publicly teach in the Church or administer the Sacraments unless he be regularly called." *Concordia Triglotta*; public domain.
 7. The formula of individual absolution in the Lutheran liturgy: "In the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you all your sins." Cf. Luther's Small Catechism, "The Office of the Keys."
 8. The first claim is the one that needs support, and it has two halves. That God does not author evil: Jas 1:13; Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration XI.7 — "the beginning and cause of evil is not God's foreknowledge (for God does not create and effect [or work] evil, neither does He help or promote it); but the wicked, perverse will of the devil and of men." That he permits it without willing it: SD XI.6 — "a limit and measure is fixed by God to the evil which God does not will, how far it should go, and how long it should last, when and how He will hinder and punish it." (Both *Concordia Triglotta*; public domain.) "What was meant for harm," Gen 50:20; "not worth comparing," Rom 8:18.