

August 2008 Theological Convocation
Opening Devotions - Wednesday, August 20, 2008
By Dr. Robert Kuhn

Theme: Theology and Polity
Text: Jeremiah 18:1-10

Theology and polity – that’s what we have been talking about for the last day and a half and why this conference was called at this particular time. As the BRTFSSG goes about its task of studying structure and governance in the LCMS it is critically important that there be an obvious, real connection between the theology and doctrine we believe, teach, and confess, and the way we choose to govern this segment of the Lord’s church. Just in case you missed it in the introduction of the booklet *“Congregation – Synod – Church”* these words are written: **Before the Synod goes about its task of developing, considering, and determining better ways of “walking together,” we must first identify, review, and recommit ourselves to those “organizing and governing principals that are in harmony with the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions”...** Theology and polity! What does the text say to us about this?

It was in Xian, China, not too far from where the Terracotta Warriors are being uncovered that I had the privilege of seeing a potter working at his wheel. Not the electrified type of wheel as we see here in the US, but rather the type I can only assume the prophet saw when he went to the potter’s house, one that operated on “foot power.” It was fascinating to note the sensing of the potter when the vessel was not as he wanted it. An observer would think “What a waste” as the vessel being formed was crumpled together and the work effort started all over again; but to the potter, the end result had to be without flaw and just as he wanted it to be. Getting to the basics, it is all a matter of substance and form. And I suggest that theology and polity are a matter of substance and form.

For the potter the clay was the substance. Without it, he could make nothing, but with it he could do as he pleased. He could discard it after an accident, or finish the marred vessel, or make an entirely new vessel out of the clay, one like the former one, or one altogether different, exactly what seemed good and right to him. The clay in his hand was in his power. It was the substance of his product.

That which the potter designed and made was the form. It may have been a vase, or a pitcher, or a dish, or anyone of a number of things. The substance in no way dictates the form. That is entirely up to the one who is molding the substance. In the text the Lord is saying to the prophet that He can do to and with a nation or a people just as He wished. He could destroy a wicked nation and could prosper it upon repentance. Just as the potter could change the form of the vessel, so the Lord can change the form of a nation.

For us, as we wrestle these during these days and parts of the LCMS wrestle during the next months, during which time a battery of suggestions or recommendations come to the BRTFSSG, it is the form with which is being dealt. The substance is the Word. Yes, the Lutheran Confessions are also a real part of it, but as we know and express, the Confessions are a correct exhibition of the Word. How does our God in His Word give us guidance to be used in making decisions how to govern ourselves? He obviously doesn't dictate a specific type of government. But if the LCMS is a segment of the Lord's church, how it decides on its government to go about its task of mission and ministry must be from the substance of the Word.

One more thought this morning, and this makes the text more personal. We have all been born out of the substance of sin. Sin is in us and a part of us through and through. None of us has escaped; none of us was given life without it. Original sin, that is from the time of conception. And this affects the form of our lives. Not the way we look, but it affects the way we live. As the potter could rub over the sides of the vessel, smooth out the flaws or wash it clean, so our Heavenly Father washes us in the waters of baptism and chooses us as His own. He then looks at us through the blood shed and the life given by Jesus on the cross of Calvary and declares us to be righteous. He doesn't crumble us together in a heap and leave us rejected, but recreates us daily as a new person comes forth to live in righteousness and purity forever.

When you go home from this conference and thinking back to it remember little that was said or presented, please do remember that you are a child of God, chosen by Him, redeemed by Him, to be His forever. Help us, Holy Spirit, to keep this in our memory. Amen.