

Admonition and Romans 16

What part does admonition play in regard to the application of Romans 16: 17-18 to a sister synod that has fallen into error?

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There are at least two reasons why this topic should be discussed in our JOURNAL, discussed with particular reference to the way in which it is pointed up in the sub-title. The first is the appearance in the Lutheran Synod Quarterly (June, 1962) of an article reviewing our CLC statement "Concerning Church Fellowship." The article was written by the Rev. Theodore Aaberg, who has since then been elected to the presidency of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS). The article expresses a deep concern for the position taken by our body, a position which it describes as not allowing for admonition in a case "of separation from those with whom one has been in fellowship." This is a charge that we shall certainly not brush aside lightly, as being of no consequence. If it is true, we shall indeed have to review and revise our position.

The other reason for our taking up this question is that in a recent meeting with a committee representing the Wisconsin Synod this matter was indeed treated at length, without agreement being reached, however, on how long such admonition may properly continue before decisive action can be taken. Or to put it differently, just how much is to be included in the debt of love that one owes one's erring brethren.

Much has been written these last few years about Romans 16, particularly about verse 17 (Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them) and to some extent also on the following verse (For they which are such

serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple). Almost every word of the first of these verses has been thoroughly explored: what is meant by "causing;" what constitutes "divisions and offenses;" what is implied by "contrary to the doctrine that ye have learned," and just where this phrase belongs; what is the force of "mark" and "avoid;" and when those actions are to be carried out, etc., etc. In the following verse the description of "those who are such" has been fought over (that they "serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly"), with some going so far as to contend that this would automatically forbid the application of this passage to any church body bearing the name "Lutheran." But little, too little by far, has been said about the purpose of this entire disciplinary procedure as it is indicated in the closing words, that "by good words and fair speeches they deceive the hearts of the simple."

What is this purpose? We must bear in mind that Paul is writing to a congregation that he has as yet not even met face to face, the Christians in far-off Rome. Nevertheless, there was a church there, a congregation of believers. In the absence of any scriptural indication of an apostolic founding we may well conclude that it had come into being through the witness of individual Christians who had come to know the Gospel elsewhere, people like Aquila and Priscilla and the others to whom Paul sends greetings in the preceding verses of this closing chapter of his letter. Perhaps this accounts for the exceptional detail with which the Apostle sets forth his doctrine in this weighty epistle. Filled with concern at the thought that someone might cause them to stumble in their faith, pry them away from the body of believers, deceive them as to their simple following of Christ, Paul is moved to the earnest and heartfelt plea ("I beseech you, brethren") to mark and avoid such causers of divisions and offenses. Paul appears here as a faithful shepherd, filled with deep and constant concern for the welfare and safety of the flock. We find this also elsewhere in his writings, even in that most joyful letter to the Philippians, where two esteemed women had to be helped to overcome their differences lest thereby a rift be caused that would divide the flock. As the Apostle writes to the Corinthians and

Thessalonians, as he addresses Timothy and Titus, he voices that same concern, though varying in degree according to the circumstances of each case — with Galatians representing a climax of intensity and indignation because of the way in which works were being substituted for grace and faith in the article of justification, and these Galatians, many of whom must have belonged to the first-fruits of Paul's missionary activity, were being deceived by "another Gospel," a counterfeit — with their soul's salvation at stake!

We hold that Paul's purpose with regard to the Romans lies on the same plane. The procedure which he describes in our passage is plainly a protective one: to halt the destructive spread of error, to shield the simple believing Christians against anything that might corrupt the purity of that Gospel which is the sole power unto salvation. One may therefore illustrate the point by comparing the situation with one that occurs again and again in man's endless battle against disease, for in doing so we are simply following the example of the Apostle himself who warned his young helper against the word of certain teachers "who have erred from the truth, saying the resurrection is past already; and overthrow the faith of some," in which connection he then uses the simile of a spreading malignant disease: "their word will eat as doth a canker." (II Tim. 2:17-18)

Paul's language is drastic, and his meaning is clear. The governing consideration in his handling of such cases of spreading error was the protection of the rank and file of believers. And let us not forget that he spoke by divine inspiration! Let no one think that Paul lacked pity for weak brethren. He wrote Romans 14! Let no one think that he did not know what it means to be overtaken with a fault. He wrote Galatians 6:1! Let no one think that Paul lacked humility. He wrote Romans 7! But when he spoke so sternly and incisively as he does in our passage he was instructing his readers in what they should do when they would find themselves confronted with a similar situation, where error is being promoted and defended and where the potential spread of error is endangering precious souls. His counsel is simple and direct. Mark and avoid. Make your identification, and then take the necessary protective action. Or to revert to the medical parallel: make your diagnosis and then

apply the indicated treatment, whether it be isolation or major surgery. That is the purpose of this passage.

Does this show a lack of evangelical spirit? Is this legalistic? Consider that the detection and isolation (quarantine) of a person who is a carrier of some communicable disease, while indeed not a pleasant experience for him, may yet prove to be the means of saving even his own life. Nor will any conscientious physician ever lose sight also of this particular objective. But he will not let his natural pity and concern for the one patient keep him from applying the stern isolation measures needed for the protection of the many, the other members of his community.

Now let us retrace our steps through our passage and check the procedure. Here we beg the indulgence of our readers and particularly our critics if we seem to oversimplify. Perhaps the entire matter is not so complicated as it has been made. We begin with the simplest question: What is to be done when one church body in its relations with another, specifically with a "sister synod," is confronted with the situation for which Romans 16 was written? Here Wisconsin, and more recently ELS, hold that "avoid them" implies a definite breaking off of fellowship relations. And we agree with them. Attempts have indeed been made to let this "avoid" mean simply the beginning of a gradual process of withdrawal, a "leaning away" from those who have become manifest as "causers of divisions and offenses." But these attempts, which would defeat the very purpose of the passage, have fortunately not met with general acceptance.

A second question is, "When is this to take place?" Here even Wisconsin and ELS go apart. For Wisconsin grants that after the positive identification has been made, when the "marking" is complete, then the "avoid" is to follow without further delay. But in the Synod Quarterly, in the article under discussion, the author puts it this way: "The ELS position of long standing has been this, very briefly, that when a person or church body with whom we are in fellowship causes divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which we have learned, we mark them immediately, then admonish (our emphasis — Ed.), and if this proves fruitless, avoid them." (Lutheran Synod Quarterly, June, 1962, p.21)

Now we contend that when the "marking" represents the identification, as Wisconsin holds and the text implies, then to inject the process of admonition after this point and to postpone the "avoiding" until "this proves fruitless" is nothing less than to defeat the purpose of the Apostle's plea for the protection "of the simple." For the error is in the meantime still being spread. The "good words and fair speeches" continue to work their havoc. The diagnosis has been made, and yet the means for halting the spread of the infection or contagion are not being applied.

This writer is inclined to grant the good intentions of those who plead for admonition at this point. Yet those who insist on making it a part of the procedure outlined by Paul and demand that also this stage must be carried out before one may take the decisive (and protective!) step of avoiding those causers of divisions and offenses make it the occasion for an unwarranted and perhaps fatal delay. The urgency of the situation admits of no temporizing. Nor does the text itself speak of admonition, either at this or any other point in our passage which we consider the vital *sedes doctrinae*. It simply does not use the word. This, and nothing more, is what we mean by the much criticized passage in our Statement Concerning Church Fellowship: "that the admonishing per se and by itself is not an absolute must, a *conditio sine qua non*, for the application of 'avoid them'." (CCF, # 65 — emphasis by Ed.) But that there is a situation where admonition is indeed a must will be pointed out presently.

We have stated that Wisconsin and ELS differ on this point of admonition after the marking. Wisconsin holds that when the causers of divisions and offenses have been marked as such, the "avoid them" is then to be applied without further delay. It appears that this is a difference in form rather than in substance. In effect Wisconsin's argument allows for the same delay that we have noted in the ELS position. Hence we ask a third question: Just what is to be included in the "marking"? On the one hand the ELS uses the term with commendable precision ("when a person or church body . . . causes divisions and offenses . . . we mark them immediately"), though erroneously bringing in

the admonition afterward, Wisconsin on the other hand includes not only the careful and conscientious scrutiny which is called for by the process of identification and diagnosis (to use our familiar terms once more), but it has also carried the continuation of fraternal admonition into the "marking" as something that must be done "until the full debt of love has been discharged." Then, and not until then, will it apply the "avoid".

This position is not easy to analyze. Any discussion that may still be necessary at this stage of the "marking" (and experience has taught how difficult it is to make a clean break where there once has been fellowship) will of necessity still have the character of admonition, even as it will still have the purpose of winning them from those erring ways in which they are persisting. Yet making such admonition an essential part of the "marking," a determinative part that fixes the time when the "marking" must cease and the "avoiding" begin — this is again something that obviously defeats the plain purpose of the procedure. It offers talk where Paul calls for energetic action. It prolongs the period of inactivity and indecision while the error continues to do its destructive work, and while men battle over the question whether the final point of admonition has actually been reached, whether the "debt of love" has been fully paid. And it leaves men hopelessly divided in their opinions because the factor of human judgment has been invoked where Scriptura Sola — Scripture alone — should reign. So, at the risk of seeming once more to be "anti-admonition," we venture to say that it is a mistake to include admonition as a determinative part of the process of "marking," a mistake because it goes beyond the clear words of the text which, after all, has not a word to say about admonition, which does not even mention the word.

So we come to our fourth question: If what has been said so far is correct, and if, as we have insisted, we are not "anti-admonition," where then does admonition belong? It is a fair question. All we ask of our critics is a fair look at our answer.

It will be seen that the question which we have here stated in its simplest form is in substance the same that we have put into the heading of this article. We have restricted our

discussion to one specific situation, the application of our passage to "a sister synod that has fallen into error." Much might be said about other bodies with which one is not in fellowship, about individuals with whom one has been in fellowship or others with whom one has not. But that would only complicate our study. The one situation about which we are all equally concerned is the one stated above. We are speaking of a church body with which one has been in fellowship for many years, and which by a tragic chain of events has fallen into error. What shall be done in such a case?

In answering this question one must keep in mind that synods do not change overnight from a position of unquestioned orthodoxy to one of false doctrine and practice. That will be a gradual process beginning with individuals in the body. There will perhaps be disturbing incidents of deviation from principles and practice on which there had once been agreement. There may be occasional pronouncements by this or that person, pronouncements that fill one with increasing concern. Yet one trusts that the sister synod will be capable of dealing with these individual deviations and willing to do so, that it will speedily fulfill its obligation of brotherly admonition toward its members. But if and when it becomes obvious that there has been a breakdown of such doctrinal discipline, then it becomes the duty of brethren in the other synod to inquire and eventually to admonish the synod itself. Even then it will not be easy to determine whether these incidents really reflect a change of position on the part of the sister synod. But if that should be the case, this change will begin to appear also in its official pronouncements, in certain resolutions, in the actions taken on some particular committee reports, in the official decisions on various appeals, etc. So again there will be inquiry whether those resolutions, those pronouncements, those decisions really mean what they seem to say. And in connection with this inquiry there will of course be admonition, a wholehearted, singleminded, sincere effort, having but one goal — that the Truth may be served. That effort must be made, else all previous expressions of fellowship would be sheer hypocrisy. Yet it must be a patient, prayerful effort. There dare be no thought of "When do we get to Romans 16?" The admonition must be thoroughly Scripture-based, and offered

in the spirit of meekness. It must be relevant to the issue, it must be directed to the responsible persons, those whom the body has chosen as the ones by which it wants to be represented in such matters.

When such efforts at brotherly admonition have been made and have nevertheless been rejected — whether in so many words or by deliberate adherence to the error — then one must come to the reluctant conclusion that this is indeed the very situation which the Apostle had in mind, that one is dealing with causers of divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine that we have learned.

It is this rejection of admonition that has made the identification not only possible but positive. Now one can "mark" with certainty. Now nothing is to be gained by further delay, by a process of marking. To call for further admonition now would be like a surgeon calling for further tests after he knows that he is dealing with a ruptured appendix, like postponing isolation measures when the plague spots have plainly erupted. With such evidence before us, we know with what we are faced. We know what to do. We know why it should be done: for the prevention of error's spread, for the sake of the simple, and yes, even for the sake of those who are the causers of the offense. So let us mark, let us avoid. To demand still more evidence, still further admonition can only make a mockery of the entire procedure. It makes a threat of Romans 16, albeit a weak one, a sort of an ultimatum that is nevertheless constantly being postponed. It raises the inevitable question, "Do they mean it this time?" And in the meantime the real purpose of the procedure is being defeated.

That is our position on admonition. We maintain indeed that it does not belong into the procedure that Paul here outlines for a very specific kind of situation. For this we offer no defense beyond the plain fact that Paul is simply not speaking of admonition in this text. Yet we insist that we believe in admonition, practice admonition, demand admonition — but in its proper place. For we are speaking of brethren who have fallen into error. We have no right to consider them anything else than weak brethren, brethren overtaken in a fault. That is where we owe them an obligation, a debt of love, if you please, and where admonition is a

"must." We pray and labor that it may succeed. But when it does not, when it has been rejected — then the admonition that has been practiced, or rather the rejection of such admonition furnishes firm and valid reason for now applying Romans 16. This act supplies an objectively recognizable basis for identification, for proper diagnosis. It is unthinkable that Scripture would ask us to apply so stern a measure and then leave us in doubt and uncertainty as to when it is to be applied. The recognizable symptom is there, waiting to be seen and acted on.

Yet it is an undeniable fact that not all men see it, not even all who are united by a common and genuine fellowship. And among those who do see it, not all do so at the same time. But when we make this admission, let us recognize where the fault lies — not with the clarity of the Word that gives us the directive, not with any lack of clarity of the evidence, but simply with our own reluctance to see, our hesitance to draw the indicated conclusions, in short, with our flesh. That is true of all of us who have had to wrestle with the problem in that specific form which has now sundered the Synodical Conference. It would be regrettable if any reader would draw the conclusion that we of the CLC claim to have timed our action exactly right. It is the firm conviction of this writer that if we look back over the course of events that have now come to such a painful climax, none of us will have any cause to reproach the other, none may assume the mantle of superior wisdom and righteousness. For the symptoms were clear long ago, the evidence of what was happening in Missouri was conclusive, and so long ago that we have almost forgotten. Nothing is to be gained now by raking over the ashes of the past in order to pinpoint the precise moment when all of us should have acted in unison. Something will be gained for the future, however, if we can but re-establish a clear set of principles, jointly held on a sound Scriptural basis. To this end this effort is herewith dedicated.

Our final question deals neither with the Romans text nor the position we have taken on admonition, but rather with our Statement Concerning Church Fellowship which is under fire. Are we trying to cover up for our statement? Are we trying to provide a new face for our CLC? We believe that the following quotations from our statement will show that

the points we have stressed above have all been expressed before, even though in other words. We quote without comment except for the emphasis we have added to bring out the salient points.

"Now let us state at the outset that we fully believe in dealing patiently and lovingly with weak brethren. In every congregation there are Christians who are strong and others who are weak. Each individual Christian is at times strong and at times weak. Certainly this is a prime reason why our Lord does not leave us alone, but setteth the solitary into families, that we may serve one another in humility and love. There are members of congregations who are also weak in doctrine. This may be due to immaturity, since they may be novices and need more instruction, or it may be due to ignorance. It may be that some leader has sown confusion in the ranks of a group. Thus the Church is ever busy at this task of strengthening the weak in its midst, the "teaching them to observe." There are many, many Bible passages and Scriptural examples of this constant activity of the teaching, strengthening, edifying Church. But we most assuredly object to this that this teaching and admonishing function be of necessity carried into the process of separating from errorists." (CCF, # 63)

"Then there is also the weakness of language. A person may not express himself as he intended the meaning, or others may read something into his words which is not there. We do therefore teach that any Christian ought to be very sure before he will raise the cry of false teacher. He will make careful inquiry and ascertain exactly what is being taught by the suspected speaker. This may require little or much time. In the case of a person or group with whom one has been in fellowship it will by its nature involve an admonition, or several admonitions. But we emphatically teach that the admonishing per se and by itself is not an absolute

must, a conditio sine qua non, for the application of "avoid them." As we have seen, there may be years of admonition before a person is revealed as causing divisions and offenses by his errors, or it could become clear at one meeting that the basis for fellowship has been removed by adherence to error. The argument that separation must be delayed as long as the errorist will listen to admonition does not take into account that he is not only listening, but he is teaching his error at the same time. The Devil is very happy to have this errorist listen to endless admonition, if this will enable him to continue to fellowship and address the entire Church." (CCF, # 65)

"In the case of one who trespasses against me, my one concern — of which he should be assured — is the sinner and his forgiveness. In the case of false teachers, however, there is first the immediate concern for the honor of God and for the endangered lambs. This does not by any means preclude a sincere concern for the erring man's soul. The separating action taken in obedience to God is for the sake of His glory and the safety of souls entrusted to the Church. Previously, concurrently and subsequently, as the Christian has call and opportunity, he will of course try to correct the erring one." (CCF, # 72)

That is our confession on this matter. We do not claim to have stated these things perfectly. Others could, and undoubtedly would, have said it better. But the things needed to be brought out at this time. So we have said them — in our own simple way.

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