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A C A L L T O R E C O M M I T M E N T

II. WE RECOMMIT OURSELVES TO HOLD FAST TO SOUND DOCTRINE

CHURCH OF THE LUTHERAN CONFESSION

TWENTY-FIRST CONVENTION

IMMANUEL LUTHERAN COLLEGE

EAU CLAIRE, WISCONSIN

JUNE 20-24, 1994

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1467

A CALL TO RECOMMITMENT

II. WE RECOMMIT OURSELVES TO HOLD FAST TO SOUND DOCTRINE

Introduction A former pastor of the CLC recently wrote, "In my years in the CLC I observed that the Gospel is present, but it is not central. The primary message coming from them is the doctrine of church fellowship in one form or another." At the same time, a pastor member of the CLC writes: "If a poll were taken to determine the least popular teaching in the CLC, the consensus would likely indicate the doctrine of Church Fellowship."

These two statements appear to be in contradiction to each other, as is natural, since they are observations from without and within the fellowship of the CLC. The former writer is basing his comment on the historical development of our church body only, whereas the latter writer is considering the positive, evangelical effects of a strong doctrinal position. In a sense, the three-fold division of this convention's essay, designed to be A CALL TO RECOMMITMENT, needs to consider both of these two aspects: our history and our mission. But the validity and worth of these aspects depend upon the message we proclaim, namely, the doctrine. That is why we are today given the theme: "We recommit ourselves to hold fast to sound doctrine." It is the present writer's prayerful intent to demonstrate from several portions of the word of God the vital importance of such a recommitment.

1. Christ warns against false prophets.

"Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits" (Matt. 7:15-16a). This warning of our Lord is just as appropriate in our day as it was when He spoke it--and false prophets can be just as difficult to detect today also. We cannot complacently say to ourselves, "Why should we worry? When a false prophet denies God we simply won't listen to him!" Christ was not speaking of someone who openly denies Him, or, as we might say, one who comes in wolves' clothing; rather, He described a false prophet as coming in sheep's clothing. That is to say, he gives the appearance of being a true member of the flock of Christ, a necessity for the false prophet. He must disguise himself, or else all Christians would flee from him instantly, and he would succeed in trapping no one. Therefore, we are not surprised, for example, if a false prophet bears the name of Christian, or even Lutheran, for that matter.

A false prophet may preach in a way that is most attractive; he may use music and liturgy that has a modern beat; he may conduct himself in a manner that portrays his message as just like that of the fathers. A hunter also uses decoys and calls to give the unwary wild duck the impression that all is serene down below; but when the duck has fallen into the trap, then he leaps out of the blind with gun ablaze, and reveals himself as he really is. Thus it is

with the false prophet, for Christ tells us his true nature: inwardly he is a ravening wolf! Yes, false prophets are wolves whose nature it is to rend, tear, and kill with their cruel fangs. Vividly Jesus pictures their destructive work: it rends and tears the spiritual life of the Christian like the fangs of a wolf. How sad it is that in spite of this strong warning many still persist in thinking of deviations from the true word of God as being quite harmless! How much better it would be to accept this warning as we accept warning signs surrounding areas in which bombs are tested! After all, bombs are able only to destroy the body, whereas the deception of the false prophet can cause the soul to be lost.

In spite of this deception, however, the Christian can detect false prophets and beware of them. Christ tells us simply that we can know them by their fruits. But what are the fruits of false prophets? Here again, let us not make the mistake of thinking only of their external lives or works. They may appear to have great success at first glance, like "televangelists" or church growth enthusiasts, and thus many may be tempted to think that God is blessing their efforts. This appearance may deceive all the more because, as Scripture warns, there are so many false prophets! But this is not the fruit of which Jesus speaks. Their fruit is their doctrine, or teaching. We cannot judge their hearts; only God is able to do that and to distinguish hypocritical from genuine works. Nor can we judge the sincerity of the false prophet, for they may be ever so sincere! Then, too, they themselves may have been deceived by Satan, the greatest false prophet of all!

As a professional fruit grower judges his fruit by comparing the fruit of excellent varieties with that of worthless varieties, so is the Christian able to judge the false doctrine, the fruit, of the false prophet, by comparing it with the pure doctrine of the word of God. The people of Berea are praised in the Bible because even when St. Paul taught them, "they searched the Scriptures daily, whether those things were so." If the Bereans had not learned the truth from scripture, they would not have been able to judge whether St. Paul was a false prophet or not! It must be added that the amount of false doctrine taught is not the proper basis for judging it. An apple that has only one small worm in it is still a wormy apple! So it is with doctrine: even the slightest deviation from the complete truth of God's word is false doctrine. Jesus is extremely narrow-minded when it comes to His word. When He gave the commission to His disciples to go into all the world, preaching and baptizing, He told them to teach "all things whatsoever I have commanded you." Therefore, when we hear any preaching, no matter who the preacher may be, let us habitually compare it with God's pure word. If what we hear is not in complete and full agreement with God's word, then it is false doctrine, and the one who keeps on teaching it is a false prophet, a causer of divisions and death traps who must be avoided, lest we be taken in by him and deceived.

2. Disunity in confession may arise among followers of Christ.

"Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which He hath purchased with His own blood. For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall

men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them" (Acts 20:28-30). When one looks back over the centuries since the Lord Jesus first founded His church on earth among a handful of disciples, one cannot help being plagued by a question which has arisen again and again: How did it happen that a once confessionally unified group of believers did not stay unified, as time went on? As we look about us in the world today, we are deeply saddened by the fact that so many who call themselves Christians nevertheless have such widely divergent confessions of faith (or virtually no confessions at all).

This distressing state of affairs is not according to God's will and desire. St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment" (1 Cor. 1:10) - that is God's will! And the unity of confession which God desires is to be a unity based upon Him and His holy word, nothing else! He is against all those who introduce something different from His pure word into their doctrine. The prophet Jeremiah, inspired by the Holy Ghost, described the will of God thus: "'Behold, I am against the prophets,' saith the Lord, 'that use their tongues, and say, "He saith." Behold, I am against them that prophesy false dreams,' saith the Lord, 'and do tell them, and cause My people to err by their lies, and by their lightness; yet I sent them not nor commanded them; therefore they shall not profit this people at all,' saith the Lord" (Jer. 23:31-32).

In Chapter 20 of the book of Acts we read that St. Paul had called together the elders of the congregation in Ephesus to meet with him at Melita, on his way to Jerusalem, where he would be taken captive by his enemies and eventually transported to Rome for trial. Under such circumstances, Paul wanted to give to these Christian leaders what might well be a last word. His words were a warning to them and to us that disunity in confession may arise among followers of Christ by attacks both from without and within. Those who attack from without Paul calls "grievous wolves," the same vivid term that Christ used in His warning against false prophets. The Ephesian elders were urged to provide the strong shepherding that is needed to protect the flock. No doubt, Paul was thinking of such attackers as the so-called "Judaizers," who taught that belief in Christ was not sufficient for salvation, but that one must also still observe all the Old Testament ritual and ceremonial laws. But, in a larger sense, Paul spoke of all who come with doctrines different from those taught in the sacred scriptures. One must surely be on guard against all such.

Even more urgent, however, is the additional warning: "Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them." Bringing in destructive false doctrines from heterodox churches or even from unbelievers is bad enough, but still worse are those who arise within an orthodox church or congregation and teach false doctrines! Wolves which enter from the outside, sparing not the flock and destroying souls, are easier to recognize and identify; when, however, perverse men who arise from within, especially when they are pastors or teachers, may conquer by dividing; they draw poor, deluded disciples after them and cause

great schisms and sects. The historical review which is included in the first part of this three-part essay surely reveals that the birth of our own CLC was the result of grievous error which was permitted to enter a formerly orthodox church body and synodical conference. May that experience serve to remind us again and again to recommit ourselves to hold fast to sound doctrine.

Paul prefaced his admonition to the Ephesian elders by saying: "I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God." He was but echoing Christ's admonition to teach all things, "whatsoever I have commanded you." Paul's task among these people had not been to present his own personality or opinions to them, but to serve them as God's ambassador, to bring them the pure doctrine of God's word. In this Paul had not been remiss. Now, in his absence, he greatly desires that this continue to be done by the elders. To do so, they are to take heed, in the first place, to themselves. They are to examine their teachings in the light of God's word, to see to it that they are in agreement, in all parts, with that precious treasure of the church. When they are assured of this, then they are to care for the flock. Thus did Paul admonish them to recommit themselves to hold fast to sound doctrine.

This is not to say that the recommitment is only for the elders of the church; it is not to say that the flock merely follows blindly in whatever directions it is led! All too often, however, a congregation's doctrine and practice is guided almost solely by the individual called to be the pastor. If his doctrine and practice is sound and biblical, theirs is also likely to be; but if his doctrine and practice go astray, all too often so do theirs! What a great responsibility rests, then, on the shepherd! And what a tragedy it is when he misleads the flock! But it has also happened in church history that the flock has refused to follow the shepherd. Of course, when they refuse to follow a false leader, they are pleasing their Lord; but if their pastor is pointing out the right paths, if he is feeding them with the pure word, if he is trying with all his might to protect them from the wolves without and false teachers within, and they refuse to follow him: then he is helpless, for the kingdom of God is not governed by force, after all. In such a case, it must simply be said that disunity in confession and life has been caused by the failure of the flock itself to be on its guard against the temptations and dangers that surround it.

3. All Christians are to judge doctrine.

"These [the Bereans] were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the Word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so. Therefore many of them believed; also of honorable women which were Greeks, and of men, not a few" (Acts 17:11-12). As we examine the teachings of scripture, it is evident that God wants His church to present a united testimony and that He wants disunity to be prevented. This is a very serious matter, because it is the truth of God's word that is at stake.

In view of this, there is an incontestable thought that becomes more and more fixed upon our consciousness, as we meditate upon these things: namely, that our Lord expects us to judge doctrines as they come to our attention from this side and that in this world of change.

Quite often it seems that there are just as many different doctrines taught as there are individuals to teach them! What are we simple Christians to do, when so many different and conflicting doctrines come to our ears? How are we going to know what is true and what is false? With whom are we to fellowship, and whom are we to avoid? All too often, sadly enough, many people (perhaps most) have decided to leave such matters to the clergy to decide. Quite often it has become the practice of a particular church body to turn over all problems of doctrine to the judgment of a seminary faculty. However, this is a dangerous practice, for it lulls people into a complacent attitude. More than that: it is actually the selling of a birth-right, given by the Lord Himself, for a mess of pottage! For God has given to each individual the right and privilege to read for himself the precious word of life and behold with his own eyes and ears the great gospel mercies of the Lord. How tragic it is when a Christian casts that privilege away as though it has no value; how tragic it is when a Christian puts his trust in another human being and neglects his own personal privilege of judging doctrine!

Luke, the inspired writer of the book of the Acts of the Apostles, describes the Bereans as being nobler than those in Thessalonica for two reasons: (1) they receive the word of God with readiness of mind, and (2) they search the scriptures daily [to determine] whether those things [they heard from Paul and Silas] were so. The Greek word for "nobler" means "well-born" or "high-born," but also has the connotation of "high-minded." The nobility of the Bereans lay in the way they regarded the word of God. It certainly was not an attitude which they had by nature, for man's nature hates God and all His works, including His word! It was an attitude which the gospel itself worked in them. Beyond that, it does not behoove us today to ask why the Bereans were different from others; rather, let us pray that God would grant us a measure of their "nobility" also. What a blessing to receive God's word with all readiness of mind! What a blessing to search the scriptures daily, verifying that what we hear from our pulpits and lecterns or what we read in our bulletins and church publications is truly in agreement with pure doctrine!

The Bereans did not know it, but they have occupied a shining place in the New Testament scriptures for nearly 2,000 years. What they did is exactly what God desires of the CLC today, as we recommit ourselves to hold fast to sound doctrine: namely, that we daily examine, truly examine, the scriptures. The Bereans' examination could result only in one verdict, regarding what they heard from Paul and Silas: "These things are so!" Such faith could only result in holding fast to the doctrine they learned, for it rested solidly on the word of God. What a great gift of God it is, that all doctrines are based upon what are called, in Latin, "sedes doctrinae" ("seats of doctrine"), that is, specific passages of scripture which are so clear and so precise that they need no interpretation whatever to be understood.

Can all Christians judge doctrine? Indeed, they can, for the Holy Spirit has come, as Christ promised, to create faith and grant enlightenment. Surely we desire that those who are called to proclaim the Gospel publicly, as pastors and teachers, shall be solidly trained in theology and, as much as possible, in the original languages of the scriptures. But, especially in our day, when the Bible is so readily available for everyone to read, there are many opportunities

for all Christians to read their Bibles and grow daily in knowledge and understanding — and then to testify to others. One is reminded of the golden opportunity that came to a married couple named Aquila and Priscilla, who were living in Ephesus when an eloquent preacher named Apollos came to town. Apollos was bold and diligent, but his knowledge of the gospel was incomplete. When Aquila and Priscilla had heard Apollos speak, they took him home with them and "expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly" with the wonderful result that when Apollos went on to Achaia he "helped them much which had believed through grace, for he mightily convinced the Jews, and that publicly, showing by the scriptures that Jesus was Christ" (Acts 18:24-28). We cannot predict when such a glorious opportunity may come our way! Therefore, let us pray that we may be ready and prepared to hold fast to sound doctrine when the time comes!

4. All Christians are to be united in doctrine.

"Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment" (1 Cor. 1:10). There was once a flourishing and healthy congregation of people who had joined together in the common worship of the Lord Jesus Christ. This congregation had many advantages. First of all, it was located in a city that was growing rapidly and was filled with ever-increasing commercial development. Secondly, this congregation had the advantage of having a succession of pastors who were eloquent and well-trained in the scriptures and preached God's word faithfully and well.

Into this wonderful situation, however, crept a disease that was threatening, finally, to force this congregation to dissolve in the worst sort of disunity. Some members of the congregation boasted that they had been baptized by a certain one of their ministers; others responded with a boast of their own, namely, that they were followers of another great minister. Still others stood proudly apart from this bickering and claimed to be the real leaders of the congregation because they followed only Christ! Other problems arose, a long list of them, to be sure: Worldly wisdom as opposed to God's wisdom, envy, strife, division, fornication, unrebuked incest, law suits against each other, eating meat offered to idols, idolatry, marital problems, problems over the Lord's Supper, problems with Christian liberty, the headship of the man in church and marriage, heresies, problems over spiritual gifts, problems with worship practices and women preaching, problems with resurrection! — What a sad state of affairs!

This sad story of a Christian congregation is not fiction. It is the true account of what actually occurred in the early church in the city of Corinth, in the southern part of Greece. Our hearts go out to the people of that congregation in their distress. But we also cannot help thinking with pity of the ministers who had brought the gospel to them; particularly, we think of St. Paul, who had founded the congregation. When he heard of the situation, though absent, he did not leave them in their distress; inspired by the Holy Spirit, he sent them a marvelous letter, in which he brought to them the sound doctrine of the word of God, which alone could help them. Paul's words have a deep meaning for us also, as we recommit ourselves to hold fast to sound doctrine, for they give us a true insight into

the doctrine of the Church. All members of the Holy Christian Church (the communion of saints, believers) are truly united by the common faith in Jesus Christ bestowed on them by the Holy Spirit through the means of grace; the Lord desires that the visible assemblies (congregations, synods, church bodies) of individuals gathered around the preaching of the gospel be perfectly united and of one voice in confession, doctrine, and practice. Though Paul gave the Corinthians counsel in all their problems, he began at their underlying difficulty (disunity) and admonished them to seek unity in the only way possible, namely, on the basis of sound doctrine, the word of God.

We do not perceive Paul's admonition to be the approach of legalism. "Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" is an evangelical approach, and at the same time we realize that it is the apostle of the Lord speaking inspired words from Christ Himself. All Christians are to speak the same word of God's truth, and there are to be no divisions among us. When the word of God is taught and practiced in its truth and purity, there will be doctrinal unity and no doctrinal divisions. We cannot stress this point too much, for in our own times there is much discord and disagreement among churches and church bodies that identify themselves as Christian, let alone the many religious organizations that cannot or do not desire to make that claim. Even among the "Lutheran" church bodies it does not require much research to observe that the vast majority of their members seem to be willing to have a great variety of false theological opinions, doctrines, and practices carried on together with what remains of orthodox doctrine and practice, to say the least. Some Lutheran theologians in ELCA seminaries, for example, are even willing to deny that Jesus arose physically from the dead! Sad to say, there are many who defend this wide variety of doctrines and practices, saying that, after all, "no one has all the truth, and therefore we need the differing testimony, with each one presenting truth as he sees it." Thus they deny the verbal inspiration, inerrancy, and infallibility of scripture!

When our Lord Jesus Christ once declared that "the scripture cannot be broken," He was saying that every word of the inspired scriptures combines with every other word to form a complete unity. There simply are no contradictions in the Bible; apparent contradictions are due to human lack of understanding. Scripture is its own interpreter and guide. The word does not teach contradictory doctrines; rather, it is "a lamp unto our feet, and a light unto our paths." God has caused it to be written that He is against the prophets who proclaim their own dreams and claim that "He (God) saith"; He adds that He did not send them! (Jer. 23:31f.)

When there is unity in confession, doctrine, and practice, then no doctrinal divisions will be suffered among Christians, unlike the Corinthians who had suffered the case of incest in their midst. "Schismata" is the Greek term that Paul uses for "divisions," meaning "factions" or "parties that disrupt." The natural consequence of permitting two or more differing and opposing doctrines to stand on an equal par within a congregation or church body is that each will attract its followers. The result can only be that, instead of a group with a unified doctrine, there will soon be factions, separate parties, each insisting that its teachings are correct. Many would then be tempted to try to effect some kind of compromise, as we are accustomed to do in politics or labor relations. Compromise has become "the name of the game" in modern church negotiations. Two examples are the 1950

so-called "Common Confession," adopted by the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) and the American Lutheran Church (ALC) as a settlement of past doctrinal differences which were, in fact, not settled, as was amply pointed out: "... the adoption of the Common Confession by the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod involves an untruth and creates a basically untruthful situation, since this action has been officially interpreted as a settlement of past differences which are in fact not settled"; and the extensive negotiations leading to the formation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) in the late 1980s, in which it was recognized by the three merging church bodies that many doctrinal matters remained unresolved. What happened in both of these instances is what always happens when an attempt is made to compromise opposing doctrines, namely, that wordings and phrases are eventually found and used which are at least partially acceptable to everyone, with the doctrine becoming so vague and indefinite that everyone can read into it whatever he wants. Dr. Franz Pieper wrote concerning this: "(St. Paul) clearly says that Christians are to use the same words also in the same sense. Agreement in words with disagreement in meaning is altogether contrary to the unity God calls for, and to seek such a 'unity' ('we agree to disagree') is immoral, a trifling with sacred, divine things, which is unseemly for Christians."

How tragic it is that the admonition of Paul that all Christians are to be united in doctrine is not taken to heart by so many, in the past and also in ^{our} day! How it must grieve the Savior to behold those for whom He ~~lay~~ ^{paid} down His life to be in such lack of agreement concerning His teachings! Let us most earnestly pray that the Holy Spirit may rest upon us and abide with us always, so that we in the CLC may hear and heed the Lord's admonition to remain united in doctrine and practice.

5. God's word shows us when to terminate existing fellowships.

"Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them. For they that 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" (Rom. 16:17-18). Historically speaking, it is indeed true that the CLC would not have come into existence if the church bodies of which we were formerly members had been obedient to the sound doctrine contained in Romans 16:17-18. For nearly two decades the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) and the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS) had taken note of the fact that their sister synod in the Synodical Conference, the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS), had drifted away from sound doctrine and had become deeply involved in the sin of unionism (joint worship and work among churches and church members who are not united in doctrine and practice). In 1955 the convention of the WELS had unanimously declared that the LCMS was causing divisions and offenses which were "of long standing." Nevertheless, in spite of the Lord's admonition to avoid such causers of divisions and offenses, the WELS and ELS postponed such an action. In 1959, in another WELS convention, the false doctrine which lay at the heart of such postponement was revealed, when the WELS accepted the following doctrinal statement as correct: "Termination of church fellowship is called for when you have reached the conviction that admonition is of no further avail and that the erring brother or church body demands recognition for their error."

*Clarification
needed?*

The CLC was formed, then, in obedience to God's word, by those who knew that they had no other choice, under God, than to avoid the WELS and ELS also. A review of our past reveals this, as a view of our mission demonstrates that we exist for a larger purpose than to protest and avoid! Throughout, as a commitment to hold fast to sound doctrine was the foundation of our past, so a recommitment to hold fast to sound doctrine is the keynote of our mission.

"Holding fast" includes the awareness of how precious sound doctrine truly is. All the doctrines of scripture are the handmaidens of that most precious good news, the gospel, which tells the world of its redemption through the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus. We are grieved whenever such doctrine is denied, or altered, or disobeyed, for it is the truth which makes us free. It is, therefore, an extremely serious matter when an individual, or a congregation, or a church body, causes divisions and offenses contrary to the pure doctrine which we have learned. It is not enough merely not to listen to such causers; they are to be spiritually avoided, that is, we are no longer to worship or do church work with them in any form.

It is wrong to avoid only when we come to some sort of subjective judgment that admonition will never be heeded, for that judgment is not in our power to make (only God reads the heart). When, then, do we terminate the practice of fellowship? God's word shows us. "Mark" means "keep on watching out for" or "keep your eyes open for." "Them which cause" or "causers" is a present participle in the Greek, indicating an on-going activity, rather than a temporary lapse which is soon corrected. "Divisions" are the very opposite of that confessional unity which God asks of His people (1 Cor. 1:10). "Offenses" is a very serious term; it literally means "death traps." The seriousness is emphasized by describing divisions and offenses as being "contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned." "Avoid" means to terminate fellowship relations, as already indicated. Therefore, the CLC has declared the doctrine: "When it has been ascertained that a church body is causing divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine of Holy Scripture, the directive to avoid is as binding as any word addressed to us by our Savior God in Holy Scripture. The apostle's peremptory ekklinate ("avoid") is the voice of the Good Shepherd Himself, as He lovingly protects His sheep and lambs from the deception of error and as He graciously gives warning to the false teacher. ... We reject any interpretation of Romans 16:17-18 which, in the name of Christian love, would make the avoiding of causers of divisions and offenses contingent upon the subjective judgment that admonition is of no further avail and that an impasse has thereby been reached." We earnestly pray that our Heavenly Father would enable us to hold fast to this sound doctrine.

When the CLC statement is viewed side-by-side with the 1959 WELS statement, it is easy to see that there is a clear doctrinal difference between us. We have been told that members of the WELS do not recognize that there is a doctrinal difference, even though the WELS did recognize that such a doctrinal difference exists, in its 1973 convention. How this can be is very difficult to understand. The recent meetings in the late 1980s and the former meetings in the early 1970s, between representatives of the respective church bodies, resulted in the same conclusion on our part: the WELS and the ELS still retain their false doctrine. Both their doctrinal statements and their practice reveal

that to be the case. In addition to the two series of joint meetings with the WELS and the ELS, the CLC has presented discussions of the doctrinal difference in at least 49 articles in our Journal of Theology; the Lutheran Spokesman has also contained numerous articles on the subject. While we have no access (nor should we have) to the general membership of the WELS or the ELS, their leaders have had ample occasion and opportunity to read what we have written. There can be no doubt that testimony has been given and received, though not accepted. One is reminded of the church father who once said that when two individuals disagree over whether or not the sun is shining, there is nothing more to say!

We ought not to discount the fact that avoiding is in itself a very great testimony against those whose on-going doctrine and practice is contrary to the word of God. Testimony that involves a continuing contact presents a certain risk, even though no practice of fellowship is involved. That is laid out for us in that part of God's word in Romans 16:18 which should serve as a serious warning: "For they that are such (i.e., causers of divisions and offenses) serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple." It may seem harsh and judgmental to speak so of former brethren; yet it is not our judgment, but God's! Though their false doctrine and practice may please themselves, it certainly does not serve Jesus! And their pleasant words and expressions, whether or not sincere, do deceive the unwary, whether or not that is the intention! This warning of our Lord is for our good; may God grant that we heed it as we recommit ourselves to hold fast to sound doctrine!

6. A final exhortation.

"Till I come, give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine. Neglect not the gift that is in thee, which was given thee by prophecy, with the laying on of the hands of the presbytery. Meditate upon these things; give thyself wholly to them; that thy profiting may appear to all. Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee" (1. Tim. 4:13-16). Paul addressed this message to a pastor and mentions some matters of particular importance for Timothy as such. But the chief exhortation contained in the words applies fully to all Christians, and they should take it to heart: "Give attendance to doctrine; take heed unto the doctrine!"

Doctrine is what the word of God teaches regarding law and gospel, sin and grace. It points out the sin of lost mankind and proclaims salvation through the death and resurrection of Christ. When Paul exhorts to give attendance and heed to doctrine, he is pointing to the means by which the Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies us. What are the ways in which we may follow Paul's exhortation? First of all, we are to read, and continue to read, God's word. That was the way in which Martin Luther finally arrived at the firm convictions which led him to the Reformation. He **read the scriptures**, and there he found the clear presentation of doctrine. Through his reading he realized that the church of his day was not teaching the doctrines of God but man-made laws and ordinances proclaiming man's work-righteousness rather than the righteousness of God. We, too, in the face of all the modernistic trends in theology, need to become

immersed in the word of God, for it is our only defense. As we read God's word, our concern ^{for} the word of men fades away. That is why we read the word of God at home and in our church services. That is why we are concerned that our children are trained up in schools where every subject is taught in the light of the word of God.

We are also to give attendance to exhortation, that is, to preaching. We are to see to it that God's doctrines are not only read and studied, but also proclaimed among us by word and deed. Let us pray that our lives and practices also are proclamations of doctrine, both at home and abroad.

True doctrine is the precious gift of God, for, as Paul concludes, Christian doctrine is saving knowledge, for through it we are brought to know Christ as our Redeemer, and whoever believes in Him shall be saved! May our gracious Lord keep us in the faith He has granted to us. We pray that He will lead us and be with us, as we recommit ourselves to hold fast to sound doctrine. Amen.

Speak, O Lord, Thy servant heareth,
 To Thy word I now give heed;
 Life and spirit Thy word beareth,
 All Thy word is true indeed.
 Death's dread power in me is rife;
 Jesus, may Thy word of life
 Fill my soul with love's strong fervor
 That I cling to Thee forever.

Lord, Thy words are waters living
 Where I quench my thirsty need;
 Lord, thy words are bread life-giving,
 On Thy words my soul doth feed.
 Lord, Thy words shall be my light
 Through death's vale and dreary night;
 Yea, they are my sword prevailing
 And my cup of joy unfailing.

Precious Jesus, I beseech Thee,
 May Thy words take root in me;
 May this gift from heaven enrich me
 So that I bear fruit for Thee!
 Take them never from my heart
 Till I see Thee as Thou art,
 When in heavenly bliss and glory
 I shall greet Thee and adore Thee. (LH 296)

Prof. John Lau
 21st CLC Convention
 June 20-24, 1994
 ILC, Eau Claire, Wisconsin