

The following essay was prepared and presented by Professor Edmund Reim in Cheyenne, Wyoming on May 6, 1958 at a conference of Pastors, Professors, Teachers and Lay men who were in the process of forming our present synod: The Church of the Lutheran Confession. Professor Reim also furnished a supplement outline to facilitate discussion. This copy of the essay and supplement was prepared and edited by Pastor Robert Mackensen in March 1980 for study and benefit of his congregation: Mount Olive Evangelical Lutheran Church, Lamar, Colorado.

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THINGS TO GUARD AGAINST IN OUR APPROACH TOWARD RE-ALIGNMENT

"Dear Brethren:

When your program committee asked me to write a paper on the subject indicated in the above title, I welcomed the assignment, not for the sake of having something to keep me busy (that was the least of my problems during these recent months) but for the sake of the topic. Although the committee gave me a free hand to re-word its formulation, I have left it just as it appears on the conference program. It recognizes the necessity of a realignment. It suggests careful deliberation rather than precipitate action. It implies that we do not consider ourselves The Remnant, but as part of a remnant; not the end-product, but a stage in a process of sifting, the duration of which is entirely in the hands of our good Lord. Above all, it recognizes that there are "Things to Guard Against," dangers to be faced, pit-falls to be avoided, temptations to be overcome. I am well aware of the responsibility involved in the writing of such a paper. I know that this will call for searching and perhaps painful self-examination and self-criticism. I pray that you may not be disappointed in the trust which you have placed in me.

We are gathered as a group that has taken matters of doctrine seriously, both with regard to the statement of such doctrine and the way in which it is to be translated into life. We have come through a crisis and arrived at a decision. At such times it is so natural to relax, to find a certain measure of satisfaction in having stood one's ground, to engage in a process of building up one's own self-esteem, usually at the expense of others who (in our estimation)* ((*This does not imply, of course, that the issue itself is merely a matter of human judgment.)) did not meet the test so well. For after all, haven't we stood for the right doctrine?--Or we may sense the danger of such an attitude of complacency and, feeling the need of justifying ourselves before the world as well as before our own consciences, launch forth into an endless round of reviewing the issues, restating the arguments, re-refuting the counterarguments, reformulating our conclusions--all with the plea that we are contending for the doctrine! Yes, let us hold fast to the form of sound doctrine. But let us not forget another matter which also calls for our keen concern. In his letter to Timothy (I, 4:16) Paul says: "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."

This Apostolic word suggests not only the need for, but also the direction of our study. Let there be no doubt as to the need, namely that we take heed, that danger threatens. Paul spells this out for us in detail when he warns, "Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall." And the direction of our study must be that we search our own hearts, frankly and unsparingly. For the foe who has wrought such havoc and confusion in our beloved Synod* (*Referring to the outcome of the 1957 Convention of the Joint Synod of Wisconsin.) is still at work. The partial success that he undeniably achieved last summer will not satisfy him. If some have resisted him when he was seeking to move us to the left, in the direction of indifferentism and incipient unionism, will he not then seek to swerve just those into the opposite direction?

1272

To ignore this danger would be the very blindness against which the Apostle so urgently warns us. Satan is defeated when men stand on the simple truth of God's Word. But he gains precious ground, not only when men weaken in their adherence to this Word, but also when in an excess of zeal they go beyond it, when they seek to fortify it by well-meant but misguided additions of their own. That is how the Scribes and Pharisees became what they were in the days of the public ministry of our Lord. Let us clearly understand that one particular danger facing us lies in the direction of developing a superorthodoxy, an arrogant attitude of pride and self-esteem that someone in Germany has with rare discernment described as "Lehr-gerechtigkeit." I am not suggesting that this would be anyone's conscious and deliberate attitude. But that Satan will be trying to move us in that direction, of that there can be no doubt. And since he did not hesitate to use God's own Word in tempting our Lord Jesus, he will certainly come to us also with his deceitful "It is written." There is good reason for careful and even critical scrutiny of the way in which others have handled Scripture in our controversy. We shall need to continue this procedure. But in so doing, let us learn to be most critical of ourselves, of our own method of interpreting and applying Scripture. Having some rather strong convictions, and aiming at some rather definite objectives, let us be sure, very sure, that we are really drawing these conclusions out of Scripture, rather than reading them into it. The Devil is an expert on the psychology of controversy!

Another vulnerable target at which he (Satan) is sure to aim is our flesh, the flesh which we admittedly all have. Was he not already doing this when, long before we came to the point of breaking with our Synod, he showed us in greatest detail just what the dire consequences of such an action would be for our respective careers, when he pointed up the external advantages of staying with an organized church body, when he suggested methods of modulating one's voice of protest just sufficiently to remain in good standing, even while quieting one's own conscience by what one has said? Was not this the old familiar "Spare thyself!" "This shall not be unto thee!"... And if, by the grace of God, this temptation has been recognized for what it is, will not he (Satan) not come right back with an attack at the other side of this same flesh, seeking to move it to an excess of righteous indignation, to a type of polemical discussion which is deliberately provocative and insufferably sure of having a monopoly of the truth? Furthermore, he knows all about the corrosive effects of self-pity, and will make every effort to lead us into feeling ourselves wronged, misunderstood, mistreated,—to see ourselves as men whose true worth has not been recognized—until we yield to discouragement and withdraw into a shell of bitterness and paralyzing hopelessness. There are many facets to this morbid phenomenon of the martyr complex, and he (Satan) will explore them all in his efforts to ensnare us. He will try to close our eyes, our understanding, yes, even our hearts, to the efforts that others are making—perhaps along other lines than we have chosen, yet with the same end in view; (and in sincere support of the same principles), perhaps by methods, the inadequacy of which has already been demonstrated to our satisfaction, but to which they still are clinging in a desperate effort to stave off what they—even as we—consider a profound catastrophe. If he can get us to ridicule their efforts, to denounce them with an air of lofty condescension, if he can get us to judge them without first sincerely seeking to understand their thinking, then Satan will again have scored a signal success in his unceasing warfare against the souls of men.

These are at least some of the dangers that confront us, or—as our topic has it—"things to guard against in our approach toward realignment." I trust that recognizing the quality of these dangers will immediately suggest the nature of the cure.

There is first of all, of course, the example of our patient Lord and Savior Himself: who, when He was reviled, reviled not again; when He suffered, He threatened not; but committed Himself to Him that judgeth righteously. Let us learn to pray the "Father, forgive them...." but not with an air of smug superiority, but as men that are keenly aware of our own need for forgiveness, and who desire nothing more than the restoration of the fellowship that we have lost.

The Apostle Paul elaborates the thought suggested by the above words of Peter, when he writes to the Philippians (ch. 2:5-8):

"Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross."

The point which the Apostle is here making, the mind that he would cultivate in his Philippians, is the double one of humility and obedience, or better still, the blending of these two concepts into a single one of a humility that manifests itself in absolute obedience. We shall do well to take each of these concepts by itself. Note how Paul emphasizes the amazing quality of the humility of Christ by pointing to the fact that though He was God, He did not exploit this to His own advantage. Forgoing by deliberate design the opportunities to build His own reputation, He took the successive steps that were to lead to His shameful death. The mind fails to grasp such utter humility, such complete forgetfulness of self. Yet that is the attitude which Paul is trying to instill in us. This will cure us of all posing, of the striking of heroic attitudes, of any attempts to become dramatic in the role that has been assigned to us--as well as of any tendency to become impressed with a sense of our own importance. This will make us willing to be truly humble servants of God, after the pattern of the great Servant of the Lord of Isaiah 53. And yet, even here a word of warning must be spoken. For true humility is not achieved by talking about it. It is not for us to describe ourselves in such terms time and again. Such an attitude can become both pharisaical and nauseating. Rather than talk about it, let us simply be humble, and let others say it of us. We know that we shall never achieve perfection in this Christian virtue, but we shall be on our way.

The humility of our Lord culminated in His obedience unto death, an obedience that did not falter even though it was the most shameful and cruel death that human ingenuity could invent. It was an obedience that followed faithfully along the way that the Heavenly Father and His Holy Spirit led, that implicitly accepted every decision that was thus made for Him.--Here again our obedience inevitably falls far short of that perfection of our Lord, so that our sole comfort is that He was obedient for us, fulfilling all righteousness. And yet we follow after, haltingly indeed, but earnestly nevertheless, in order that this mind be also in us, which was in Christ Jesus. Learning His spirit of utter willingness (I delight to do Thy will, O My God.--Ps. 40: 8); observing His method (It is written--It is written again); striving for that attentive listening which notes every inflection, every shading of the Word (which is the real listening); and finally, the full and unqualified acceptance that simply says, "Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth". Admittedly, we have much to learn in this respect. But surely, we can desire no other way.

In addition to these references to the example of our patient Lord there are also given, for the sake of fortifying us further against the dangers about which we are

speaking, many other Apostolic injunctions. But surely, none goes into the matter more thoroughly, and none appeals to the heart more strongly, than Paul's great Hymn in Praise of Christian Love. And what can be of greater practical value than the section that describes this love in action?—Verses 4-7 of I Corinthians 13.

"Charity suffereth long, and is kind." In the face of severe trials and opposition, of injustice and malice, of injury and persecution, it does not give way to anger, does not aim at reprisal, but reveals something of that long suffering which is most often attributed to God in His patient and forbearing way of dealing with sinners. It shows something of that kindness that was characteristic of the ministry of Christ. In short, it shows something of a spirit of which the human heart is utterly incapable, save when it has been transformed by the gracious work of the Spirit, where a spark has been kindled that has its origin in the pure flame of the Love of God, the God whom we love because He first loved us.

"Charity envieth not," is not given to jealousy, even where there is such a wide difference in the distribution of what are commonly called "the good things in life," as in the case of Dives and Lazarus.

"Charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up." The thought of proud boasting or idle bragging is utterly foreign to it, even as it always must be when we remember the example of Him who made Himself of no reputation, but took upon Him the form of a servant. It does not become enamored of its own reflection as seen in a sort of mental mirror, it aspires to no place on a pedestal. It is a very sober thing, having both feet on the ground, the solid base of God's Holy Word.

(Charity) "doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own." Even in what are often considered the minor matters of common courtesy, of polite conduct, of good manners, Charity has no difficulty in conforming to the pattern that constitutes the accepted pattern of the life that brings us into daily contact with countless other men. It has no difficulty here, because it has discovered the secret of all true courtesy: not seeking her own. To be considerate of others—how different things become when viewed from this perspective! And how many doors are opened that might otherwise have been barred only the more firmly by the lack of these qualities!

(Charity) "is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil." The "easily" of the Authorized Version (King James) may be misleading, as though grave provocation would justify stern retaliatory measures. The Greek simply says that Charity is not enraged, does not react violently to insult and injury, nor is it embittered thereby. It does not brood over the evil that it may have suffered. It does not keep book on these things, taking each separate incident that has occurred, each wrong that one may have suffered, and entering it, as it were, in a voluminous ledger with indelible ink! How wonderful that in the one account book that includes the sins of all the world, God is not imputing their trespasses unto them. Let that serve as the cure for bitterness on our part.

(Charity) "rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth." Just when it seems that Charity must be a weak and ineffective weapon against evil and error, as though it were simply yielding the verdict by default, there comes this turning point. Charity does not abdicate in the face of evil. It does not fail to react, does not yield to indifference. When confronted with wrong, it is fully capable of recognizing this for what it is, namely an affront to, and a denial of, the righteousness of God. It is grieved, as indeed it must be, particularly when this wrong is threatening to dis-

rupt, or has perhaps already disrupted, a very precious bond of fellowship. And therefore Charity is ready to go into action, as was the case when Paul took the Corinthians to task for their disorderly conduct at those feasts that were dedicated to the cultivating of love, but which had nevertheless degenerated until a true observance of the Lord's Supper was made impossible thereby (I Cor. 11). We see it when Paul re-proved this same congregation for its default in a serious matter of church discipline (chapter 5), as well as for their factionalism (chapter 1). He did it likewise in the case of the seducers of the Galatians, even as he had done to a fellow-apostle, Peter, withstanding him to the face, because he was to be blamed. Galatians 2:11.-- For Charity knows the one remedy for such a situation, the one way of restoring what once was and removing the occasion for grief: It rejoiceth in (with) the Truth. It does not trust in the skillful use of human reason, it does not operate with human argumentation. It invokes the Truth, the absolute Truth of God's Word-- that Word of which our Lord said, "Thy Word is Truth." That is the one measure which under such circumstances can alone be effective.

Yet, in all this, Charity is still Charity. Love has not ceased to be Love. But it is Love bound by the Word of God. It is Love together with the Truth. The two go hand in hand. If Charity would forsake this Truth, it would cease to be Love, a love that is a reflection of the Love of God. If, therefore, that Word of God prescribes stern measures, Charity does not hesitate to apply them, for it knows that they have their origin in God's desire that all men be saved. It may shrink from the thought of a separation, and yet will accept it nevertheless, if God directs it. It has but one thing to go by, and that is the Word, to which it resorts ever again--for its own enlightenment as well as for the means of restoring the joy that once was. And it is in the use of this weapon against wrong that God's grace has put into our hands that Charity meets its final test.

(It) "beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things."

Yes, it is no light task that Charity is undertaking. There will be many difficulties with which to cope, mountains of misunderstanding to be removed, pangs of disappointment to be endured. Nor will it be easy to gain even a few successes--for there will be failures without number. Yet Charity assumes the burden, for it has not lost sight of the goal. This is why it is also so ready to believe the best, so unwilling to let its efforts be undermined by suspicion or doubt. Charity really works and speaks "in all good faith." It has no time for pessimism. It hopeth all things--not with a fatuous Pollyanna (unrealistic) type of optimism, but because it has committed matters to the grace of God, because it trusts in the power of His Word. That is why it endureth all things. It has learned to wrestle with God like Jacob, and like an Abraham interceding for Sodom and Gomorrah it has learned to win one concession after another with its unabashed pleading. It has a tenacity that time and again has snatched victory from defeat--and will do so again.

That is charity! We need it!

Without it--

"Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge: and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing."

But with it—

"Now abideth faith, hope, charity; these three; but the greatest of these is Charity."

God grant us a full, rich, ever increasing measure of His Love!

Amen

SUPPLEMENT (By Professor Edmund Reim)

In order to facilitate discussion and at the same time focus attention on the several areas that should come under consideration, I have drawn up an outline which is meant to cover the main points only, and which may help to keep the discussion from overlapping. The outline divides the area of discussion, sets up certain aims or objectives that we should be pursuing, and then lists certain "things to guard against." The entire arrangement is under the heading of ATTITUDES.

I. OUR INNER ATTITUDE

AIM: To hold fast that which we have. Revelation 3:11

- with the intellect
- but above all, with the heart

DANGERS: -overemphasis of intellect and form in matters of doctrine (Dogmatism)

- bitterness
- bolstering of Ego (self-importance)
- indulging in heroics
- hypercritical attitude
- Pietism, rigorism, legalism
- libertinism

II. OUR ATTITUDE TOWARD EACH OTHER

AIM: Serving each other with the gifts we have received (I Peter 4:10; note also the context, verses 7-19)

- the need that we have of each other
- the help that we can give each other
- the mutual gain

DANGERS: -suspicion (snooping)

- contentiousness (theological chip on shoulder)
- becoming a mutual admiration society

III. OUR ATTITUDE TOWARD KINDRED MINDS

AIM: -to recognize truth wherever we meet it
-to be of help wherever possible
- to strive for honest fellowship relations

DANGERS: toward such as have made their decision

- exclusiveness
- self-sufficiency
- clannishness

toward such as have not yet made their decision

- superior, critical attitude
- lack of understanding
- judging of motives

IV. OUR ATTITUDE TOWARD SYNOD AS A WHOLE

AIM: -the spirit of Paul in Romans 10:1 (the necessary changes having been made)

DANGERS: -speaking the truth without love
-perfectionism

"LET YOUR MODERATION BE KNOWN TO ALL MEN." (Philippians 4:5)

