

What Can and Must We Do to Preserve and Protect Our doctrinal Heritage?

by Theodore A. Aaberg

That we have a doctrinal heritage goes without saying, at least in this Forum. Generally speaking, however, even this much should not be taken for granted, for it is true as the saying goes, "familiarity breeds contempt."

Sometimes it takes an "outsider" to increase a person's appreciation for his doctrinal heritage. I would suspect that many a Bethany alumnus from the ELS, in attendance at the banquet at Bethany's Grand Homecoming this summer, went home with a greater appreciation for the doctrinal heritage the ELS received from the Old Norwegian Synod after hearing the banquet speaker, Dr. Paul A. Zimmerman, a former teacher, draw the compelling reasons for Bethany's existence from the doctrinal position of the Old Norwegian Synod as set forth by the sainted Pastor U. V. Koren. And what pastor hasn't been heartened, and himself strengthened, by the joy and wholehearted appreciation of an adult confirmand for the spiritual treasure he has come upon, whether in the WELS or the ELS?

That we are to seek to preserve and to protect such an heritage should be obvious. But the devil has a thousand and one different tricks either to turn us aside from such an effort, or should we say, insist on striving to direct us down a wrong alley.

For example, take the matter of divine grace, grace alone. The devil can corrupt even this for us. And he does corrupt it when he deceives a Christian into thinking that since he is saved by grace for Christ's sake through faith without the deeds of the law, he therefore need not strive against sin and fight to live a holy life.

There is grace as the *favor Dei*, as the sole basis of a sinner's salvation. But for the recipient of the *favor Dei* there is also *gratia infusa*, and on the basis of the *gratia infusa* the Christian is to strive, and strive mightily, against evil and for righteousness in his life out of love to his Savior.

Likewise in contending for the preservation of our doctrinal heritage. If in looking at our respective synods and our common doctrinal heritage, and recalling that it is all by God's grace that we possess it, we then lament the course of history as it pertains to the doctrinal purity of synods, twiddle our thumbs, and wait for the inevitable to happen, then we are some poor examples indeed of the recipients of God's grace.

Of course we must fight to preserve and protect our doctrinal heritage. Luther makes that clear in his treatise "That These Words of Christ, (This is My Body,) etc., Still Stand Firm Against the Fanatics." Showing that the devil is the cause of the controversy, and stating that the devil takes no vacation, he declares:

Choose, then, whether you prefer to wrestle with the devil or whether you prefer to belong to him. If you consent to be his, you will receive his guarantee to leave you in peace with the Scriptures. If you refuse to be his, defend yourself, go at him! He will not pass you by; he will create such dissension and

sectarianism over the Scriptures that you will not know where Scriptures, faith, Christ, and you yourself stand (LW, 37:17).

We can fight, and we can do something to preserve and protect our doctrinal heritage. We can do it because God in his grace, having made us His own, also gives us grace to stand firm and to keep what He has given us.

The preservation of our doctrinal heritage is a part of our sanctification and there is only one way to go forward in that and that is through the route signified in our baptism - repentance and faith, as we learned in our catechism in childhood: "It signifies that the Old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die, with all sins and evil lusts and again a new man daily come forth and arise who shall live before God in righteousness and purity forever." It is only through such a daily renewal that we keep our high regard for the Means of Grace and draw from them the courage and strength to fight to keep them pure and unadulterated in our midst.

It is in this spiritual setting of sanctification that we would now address ourselves to the question of what we can and must do to preserve and protect our doctrinal heritage, thinking in terms especially of synodical and congregational emphases even more so than policies and programs. At the same time we remember that the battle for the Truth is essentially no different for a congregation or synod than it is for the individual Christian.

It is essential that we do not come to look upon our synod or congregation as a substitute for the holy Christian church. In theory and on paper we would never confuse or mix the two. But it is possible by an overemphasis on the visible organizations accompanied by an under emphasis on the church of Jesus Christ, the believers, who are hidden there, as it were, to lead people into believing there are two churches, or to at least forget that the holy Christian church is real and actually does exist right there where the means of Grace are proclaimed and used. In this same connection it is possible to beat the drums for a congregational or synodical organization in such a way as to build up pride and loyalty to the form rather than to the true church which exists within that form. Of course our congregation and synod are to be dear to our hearts, but above all else they are to be dear because of the Gospel and because of God's people found there. Pastors and teachers and other church leaders must seek to foster this spirit, and to warn and protect the people from a false love and loyalty to an organization, which finally becomes idolatry. Such a false love and loyalty may not be so apparent or seem to be such a bad thing as long as the organization holds to and confesses the truth, but let the organization forsake the truth, and such a false love and loyalty becomes a difficult obstacle to those who would believe and confess the truth.

While organizations are very important, and not to be despised, in this respect we need to put the emphasis not on the organization but on the people who make up the organization. The church is people, and the whole purpose of the organization is that the Gospel and people, many people, an ever-increasing number of people, might meet so that the Gospel as the power of God unto salvation might bring the people to Christ and keep and preserve the people with Christ as their Savior, and that clinging to Christ as their Savior, the people might walk worthy of their calling, serve Christ, and live with Him forever.

It will likewise help to preserve and protect our doctrinal heritage if we remember and stress not only that the church is people but a pilgrim people. For example, consider pastors and professors and church officials. When a congregation or synod forsakes its doctrinal heritage for the sake of earthly prestige, numbers, influence, etc., nine times out of ten it is the spiritual leaders in the church who spearhead the move. Or when pastors, professors and other leaders are being pressured against their better knowledge to cave in, if they would go out to a cemetery and quietly measure out their grave lot, 4' x 8', give or take a little, and do a little long-term thinking on the basis of the Word about temporal and eternal matters, earthly and spiritual values, they would be renewed in a right sense of values, and go back to battle rather than to compromise.

I have stood at the graves of Norwegian Synod leaders H. A. Preus, U. V. Koren, and J. A. Ottesen who stood fast to their dying day for the truth, and I have stood also at the graves of those Norwegian Synod leaders who were torn between the truth which they dearly wanted to confess, and the preservation of earthly organizations at the expense of truth, and who tried to do both, tragic figures, such as C. K. Preus and I. B. Torrison, and I tell you the difference comes across when you know the history of it. If one remembers his Christian pilgrimage and his heavenly home, the earthly things will pale into insignificance, and one's greatest concern will be to stand up for the truth so long as life shall last, leaving a clear light to guide those who follow after.

If we remember that the Gospel is the thing, then the preservation of the Gospel in our midst rather than the preservation of an organization becomes the key issue. If we remember that not only is our spiritual life and future tied up in the Gospel, but that we must have the pure fountain of Israel to bring to unbelievers, then the preservation of the Gospel in our midst, rather than the preservation of the organization, takes priority. And not strangely, this becomes the best way and offers the best guarantee that the organization too will be kept on the foundation of the truth.

In a practical way, there are a number of dangers confronting us in our efforts for the preservation and protection of the truth in our midst.

There is the danger of a gradual deterioration, seemingly little things in doctrine or practice that, when viewed against the large body of doctrine and practice that is correct, seem of little consequence. To preserve the peace, to avoid looking like a "nit picker," one may look the other way. But you know how it went with the nice long salami. It went piece by piece - the slicing of no one piece seeming to use up the salami as such. Finally, all that was left was the butt end with the string and price tag.

There is the danger of making our doctrine of church fellowship too shallow. By this I mean that we may so limit our preaching and teaching on the doctrine of church fellowship that it appears to consist only of a few passages such as Romans 16:17; Matthew 7:15; I John 4:1, so that our people fail to appreciate that our doctrine of church fellowship in both its so-called positive and negative aspects is closely connected to such doctrines as that of Justification, the Church, the Means of Grace, etc.

There is also the danger of omitting the positive aspect of the doctrine of church fellowship as it relates to the Holy Christian Church and also to those with whom we are in confessional agreement so that our people come to think of the doctrine of church fellowship as pretty much of a negative thing. Then they are confused and bewildered as to how to respond to the persistent emphasis of a Reformed evangelist or a liberal Lutheran on the oneness of the church of Christ etc.

There is also the danger of failing to appreciate where our people are in their understanding and grasp of the doctrine of church fellowship, and of failing patiently to instruct them in the doctrine so that little by little all come to make also this part of their doctrinal heritage their own, thus basing their church fellowship practices ever more fully on inner spiritual convictions rather than on mere outward conformity to the authoritative directives of the pastor or the congregation.

We should for our own benefit and well-being study the Missouri Synod more, especially the decades of the 1920s and 1930s before she started down that fateful path. How could such a church body, rightly orthodox not only in doctrine but also in practice, begin a march that took it to the very brink of disaster? I personally cannot believe that the education of many of its men at heterodox graduate schools and the leadership of especially the St. Louis Seminary are wholly to blame. Is it not also possible that their doctrine of church fellowship, though orthodox, became shallow, and that their rigidly orthodox church practice, coupled with an emphasis on the Synod, tended toward regarding the Synod as being almost the equivalent of the Holy Christian Church on earth, tending toward an unhealthy pride and complacency so that they were ripe for picking, even though outwardly they appeared as the Rock of Gibraltar? We need to study them in order that we may learn and profit for the future.

I would also like to say a few words on what we can and must do in an intersynodical way to preserve and protect our doctrinal heritage.

Mutual trust and charity must prevail between us. The sainted Pastor Justin A. Petersen wrote an essay for the 1938 ELS Convention on "Our Debt, under God, To Our Brethren of the Missouri Synod," in commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the Saxon immigration. Among other things he warned the ELS against picking away at little things in Missouri. He wrote that one of the ways we could pay our debt to Missouri was by:

A humble, sympathetic understanding of the position and problems of our brethren. We shall be quick to praise, and slow to find fault. We shall not act like little dogs that constantly bark and rant at every shadow. We shall look for the bright and not the shady side. Our very position as members of the Synodical and especially of the Norwegian Synod makes it so easy to develop the holier-than-thou attitude. We should shun suspicion and carping criticism as the devil himself and ever be mindful also in Synodical relations of the Eighth Commandment which admonishes us to excuse our neighbor, speak well of him, and put the best construction on everything (1938 ELS Report, p. 57).

Unfortunately the ELS did not wholly heed this good advice and it later hindered the needed testimony that the ELS did seek to give the Missouri Synod. May we do better towards our brethren today.

I hope I will not be misunderstood when I now say that we, in our intersynodical relations, should not take ourselves too seriously. We should always keep a wholesome sense of humility and frailty so that we always recognize that we can “goof.” With the above, we also need a sense of humor. For example, a few years ago our Synod put out a brochure describing the ELS. The brochure contained a short statement of doctrine, about 18 brief paragraphs or so. In a hurry to stress the Bible as the source of revelation for our doctrine, the statement started right out along those lines, and it wasn’t until a year or two later that someone happened to notice that nowhere in the statement did the ELS confess the doctrine of the Trinity. The new brochure sent out recently took care of the matter. Our Wisconsin brethren have something in their statement, “This We Believe,” which is a well-meaning blunder too, in regard to the last things, where the intent was clearly to reject modern interpretations which do away with the truths regarding the end of the world and judgment, but which instead came out rejecting the symbolical language of Revelation. Do we not all gain when we recognize how easily such things can happen?

When doctrinal questions do arise between our synods we should not immediately go on the defensive, magnify them, think of them as a great calamity, or think we have the last word. Rather, we should welcome the opportunity to turn to the study of the Word and the Lutheran Confessions on that particular doctrine, and then to sit down together as brethren for mutual discussions, remembering that over the years we may have let slip some of the depth of this or that doctrine, and that this is an opportunity to recapture for ourselves its full dimensions on the basis of the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. We should gladly confront such doctrinal questions, doing it in the confidence that as we all bow to the Word we will come out together on it, and both be the better for it.

These, dear brethren, are some of the things that we can and must do to preserve and protect our doctrinal heritage. “The Lord our God be with us, as he was with our fathers: let him not leave us, nor forsake us.” (I Kings 8:57).

God’s word is our great heritage,
 And shall be ours forever;
 To spread its light from age to age
 Shall be our chief endeavor;
 Through life it guides our way,
 In death it is our stay;
 Lord grant, while worlds endure,
 We keep its teachings pure,
 Throughout all generations.

137, The Lutheran Hymnary,

Theodore A. Aaberg
 Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary
 Mankato, Minnesota