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Foreword

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No. 1

Foreword

In prefacing a few remarks to another volume of the **CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY** as it begins its twelve months' pilgrimage, I cannot do better than submit in translation with some comments several paragraphs written in 1879 and published in *Lehre und Wehre* by the sainted Prof. M. Guenther on the topic "Is the Missouri Synod Really Guilty of Overemphasizing Doctrinal Differences?" (*Macht sich wirklich die Missourisynode einer Ueberspannung in den Lehrdifferenzen schuldig?*). The doctrinal debates in which we are engaged at present probably have called forth in the minds of many people today the very question which Professor Guenther discusses, and hence his essay may be considered as timely today as it was when it first appeared. His remarks, at any rate, will give every one of us an opportunity to examine the position which he personally holds.

What induced the sainted professor to write on this topic was the criticism which Pastor H. O. Koehler of Mecklenburg had voiced touching Missouri's course and which, couched in friendly, conciliatory language, treated the question, "Can the Demands Made by the Missouri Synod on the Lutheran Church Be Justified?" His contention was that in certain points Missouri places too much emphasis on doctrinal differences; and as belonging to this category he mentioned the teachings concerning the Antichrist, Sunday, usury, and the "transfer of the ministerial office" (*Uebertragungslehre*).

With respect to the teaching on the Antichrist, Professor Guenther defends the course taken by a congregation of the Synodical Conference which had deposed a minister against whom, among other things, the charge had been raised that he denied that the Pope was the Antichrist. Professor Guenther writes, "And if we now, for the sake of argument, suppose that the congregation

had deposed its pastor merely because he denied the teaching concerning Antichrist which is propounded in the Lutheran Confessions on the basis of the Scriptures, who will fault it for this action? Which word of God says that it did wrong, that it went too far? The confessional writings are a safeguard for a congregation, preventing its ministers from teaching anything at all that enters their heads. A congregation obligates its pastor to be faithful to the Confessions and demands thereby of him that he preach the Word of God in only such a way as the Confessions indicate. Very properly it dismisses a minister who does not keep his promise. If the minister in one point departs from the Confessions, who will guarantee that he will not soon depart in other points likewise?"

Concerning the charge which Pastor Koehler had raised against Lutherans holding the Missouri position in Germany who were reported to be unwilling to establish fellowship with Lutherans denying that the Pope is the Antichrist, Professor Guenther, after having drawn attention to the incorrectness of the report, says, "We repeat; the case was altogether different, but for the present we ignore the incorrectness of the report and assume that Pastor Muenkel's description is correct. In that case Pastor Koehler should have remembered the saying *Qui bene distinguit, bene docet*. There is a big difference whether one in a certain situation says to a person who denies that the Pope is the Antichrist, 'I cannot work jointly with you,' or whether one says to him, 'You cannot be saved.' And how can Pastor Koehler put these two expressions 'divisive of church fellowship' and 'connected with the soul's salvation' on the same level? Certainly he does not hold the principle that we have to have church-fellowship with all those people concerning whom we entertain the hope that they will be saved! Not even everything which is absolutely divisive of church-fellowship is necessarily destructive of the soul's salvation. Now, does Pastor Koehler really in all seriousness wish to prove from the above reports, which, we repeat, are in need of thorough-going revision, that the Missouri Synod as such absolutely denies church-fellowship to those who do not believe that the Pope is the Antichrist and declares that they cannot be saved? Yes, such is his position, for he continues, 'And hence fairness demands that we mention that even among the Missourians themselves many individuals do not go farther. Thus Brunn, as early as 1873 (*Lehre und Wehre*, 1873, p. 290) wrote the proposition "Although we are of the opinion that acceptance of the symbolical writings includes likewise those doctrines which are non-fundamental, for instance, that of the Antichrist, nevertheless we share the opinion of the fathers that a difference of opinion in non-fundamental doctrines

cannot be regarded as heresy, that it does not absolutely exclude one from the office of a teacher in the Church and does not hinder true spiritual communion if thereby a person does not knowingly reject the Word of God or cause divisions in the Church.””

Professor Guenther then continues, “It is inexplicable to us how Pastor Koehler can argue as he does; we do not know what to say. Let the reader consider the situation. His assertion that the Missouri Synod looks upon the denial that the Pope is the Antichrist as divisive of church-fellowship and, at that, as absolutely, under all circumstances divisive, he tries to prove by two events concerning which he, in addition, is misinformed and in which the issue was not at all refusal of church-fellowship on account of denial of the doctrine that the Pope is the Antichrist. The other assertion, however, that in the Missouri Synod there are people, and not a few at that, who will not go so far, he proves with a statement in an official publication of the Missouri Synod. Should a person not expect that he would prove what he charges a body as such with by reference to declarations in its publications, reports, and journals? For whatever appears in the latter must be considered official unless the body rejects it. . . . But what shall we say if the position which he quotes as an exception voiced in *Lehre und Wehre* is not merely the opinion of many individuals but of the whole Missouri Synod? And that precisely is the case. The examples adduced by Pastor Koehler, by means of which he endeavors to prove what is the dominant position in the Missouri Synod, by no means . . . contradict the proposition of Brunner quoted from *Lehre und Wehre*, according to which a difference of opinion in this question cannot be regarded as a heresy, does not absolutely exclude from the position of a teacher in the Church, nor hinder the true spiritual communion, provided a person does not thereby knowingly reject the Word of God or cause divisions in the Church. Pastor Koehler evidently has overlooked the words in the quotation ‘not absolutely’ and the appended limitation ‘provided thereby,’ etc. This simple presentation will without a doubt convince Pastor Koehler and every impartial reader that there is no overemphasis concerning the doctrine of the Antichrist on the part of the Missouri Synod.”

Next Professor Guenther examines the charge that with respect to the teaching concerning Sunday our church-body is guilty of such an overemphasis. Pastor Koehler had stated that, on the whole, he approves of Missouri’s position. His criticism is that Missouri is too polemical in its presentation of this doctrine, opposing the Puritanical conception of Sabbath observance without stressing the correct keeping of Sunday. Professor Guenther in reply submits passages from Missouri Synod literature showing

that what Pastor Koehler thinks is neglected is given much emphasis. Concerning Johann Gerhard, to whom Pastor Koehler had referred, Professor Guenther writes, "Since later theologians, among them the esteemed Gerhard, in this question do not fully agree with the Augsburg Confession, we cannot fully join them in the manner in which they treat the positive side of this subject." After having shown that Pastor Koehler is wrong when he holds that we have to acknowledge a natural foundation for the observance "of this holy day," Professor Guenther continues, "Very strange we find Pastor Koehler's conclusion of this section, 'Well, in the question of Sunday, I base my position on Luther as well as Missouri does — hence on account of such researches we cannot grant the Missourians the right of saying *Damnamus!*' That Pastor Koehler in the teaching concerning Sunday places himself on the position of Luther and teaches as Luther does is a cause for rejoicing, but we have to add that Luther himself would protest against the attempt of Pastor Koehler to make him his authority for the hypothesis that the keeping of a weekly holiday rests on natural observations. With respect to 'researches' we shall refrain from uttering '*Damnamus!*' if only Pastor Koehler through them does not wish to limit the evangelical freedom from the Old Testament Sabbath law. We now put the question, What of the overemphasis of Missouri on doctrinal differences with respect to the question of Sunday observance?" — Reading the remarks of the two debaters on this matter, one finds that no proof is brought that Missouri considered the position held, for instance, by Gerhard that according to God's will one day out of seven has to be set aside as a day of rest and worship as an error which is absolutely divisive of church-fellowship nor that it became one-sided in its rejection of Puritanical views on the keeping of Sunday.

From the discussion of the question of usury, in which quotations from Luther play an important role, it is sufficient that I quote the last paragraph of Professor Guenther, "The criticism which Pastor Koehler voices against Missouri, claiming that it requests a law [that is, of the State] and goes beyond Luther has no foundation in fact. And when he himself admits, 'These differences in the teaching on the taking of interest are according to the own statements of Walther and Brunn not divisive of church-fellowship,' etc. — one really cannot see why Missouri should here be accused of overemphasizing doctrinal differences, at what point there might be such an overemphasis, and why such a charge is made at all."

Finally, Professor Guenther looks at the charge that Missouri overemphasizes doctrinal differences with respect to the office of the holy ministry. Professor Guenther writes, "The fourth point

to which Pastor Koehler has devoted attention reads, 'All these doctrinal differences (Antichrist, question of Sunday observance, usury) are just now put into the background by the doctrine of the transfer of the ministerial office (Uebertragungslehre).' In the first place, Pastor Koehler introduces a declaration made at the colloquy with Buffalo. Next he makes the admission 'that this congregational principle of the Missourians is widely different from the modern tendency which is sponsored especially by the *Protestantenverein*,' but he adds, 'Nevertheless, this so-called transfer teaching has offended many people and has caused the Immanuel Free Church and the Missouri Synod to cease having altar-fellowship and fraternal relations.' Professor Guenther very correctly continues, "We inquire, Does this prove that the transfer teaching is false? May the fact that a doctrine causes offense and leads to the separation of churches be made a criterion of its Scripturalness? In that case the whole teaching concerning Christ must be thrown overboard." Then there follows a lengthy discussion in which it is brought out that this so-called transfer teaching is that of the confessional writings and of the dogmaticians of our Church and that it agrees with the Holy Scriptures. As far as the bearing of differences concerning this doctrine on church-fellowship is concerned, this paragraph of Professor Guenther is pertinent, "Continuing, Pastor Koehler says of Diedrich [leader of the Immanuel Synod] and his followers, 'They criticize Missouri'; and of Missouri he says, 'It pronounces the sentence of excommunication on Diedrich and his adherents.' The former statement is not entirely true, and the second is altogether untrue. Pastor Diedrich and his followers not only criticize Missouri, but they express the most bitter, hateful, and unjust judgments against us. On the other hand, Missouri has never pronounced a sentence of excommunication on them. It is not proper to utter such an untruth."

The final paragraph of Professor Guenther reads, "Pastor Koehler laments, 'Konsistorialrat Kuehn with the Eisenach Conference and Lentz in Amsterdam, besides von Nolcken in Livland and Max Frommel in Baden, have urged that peace be made and have in one way or the other offered their mediation, but in vain.' We put the question, Can Pastor Koehler prove that the basis of the peace proposal mentioned was the true teaching of the symbolical books, especially of the Smalcald Articles, and that Missouri refused to entertain them merely because the word 'transfer' (Uebertragung) was not found in them, and that it stubbornly insisted on its acceptance? We need no mediation and proposals of peace. What binds us is unhesitating, sincere acceptance of our Confessions; hence the last sentence of Pastor Koehler

likewise is not to the point: "The doctrine of the ministerial office is the matter which hinders church-fellowship between the various free churches.' Now what remains of the 'overemphasis of doctrinal differences'?"

Only few comments are required. That the article of Professor Guenther from which the above paragraphs are taken had the full approval of his colleagues, Professors Walther, Lange, Schaller, and Pieper, is beyond all doubt.

The significance of what Professor Guenther writes is apparent. It is evident, in the first place, that he is not willing to surrender one iota of what God in the Holy Scriptures has revealed to us. Whether it is Johann Gerhard or some more recent Lutheran theologian who has diverged from the pure doctrine of God's Word in a certain point, the error is not, on account of the eminence of the men advocating it, treated with indifference. Nor is the *aura popularis*, the popularity of an idea, permitted to be the arbiter for him when the question arises whether a certain teaching is right or wrong. Professor Guenther's words breathe the spirit which all the world has come to regard as characteristic of Missouri, an uncompromising insistence on loyalty to Scripture teaching. Professor Guenther as well as the other fathers were of the conviction that indifference toward anything the Word of God says is a *crimen laesae maiestatis divinae*. On that score they held there could be no surrender, no weakening.

But the article of Professor Guenther brings out another important fact. It shows that our fathers were not of the opinion that every doctrinal aberration has to be regarded as by itself divisive of church-fellowship. For example, while they believed that it is Scripture teaching that the Pope is the Antichrist, they did not hold that a denial of this teaching necessarily makes all fraternal relationships impossible. They believed that the doctrine which identifies the Pope as the Antichrist is a non-fundamental doctrine, that is, a doctrine not belonging to that group of teachings which form the foundation of our faith. It was clear to them, of course, that the rejection even of a non-fundamental doctrine might become absolutely divisive. If such rejection betokened unwillingness to bow to God's authority, they held that it necessarily, if persisted in, had to lead to a separation and raise a barrier between church-bodies.

That the position briefly sketched here in its two aspects, that of uncompromising loyalty to the Scriptures and of willingness to bear with a brother or a church-body differing with us in non-fundamental teachings, was really the position of our fathers can be seen not only from the article of Professor Guenther submitted here in its salient paragraphs, but, among other declarations,

from the Foreword of *Lehre und Wehre* of 1876, likewise written by Professor Guenther, and published in part in translation in this journal in the April, 1941, issue and from the splendid essay of Dr. Walther on the topic, *The False Arguments for the Modern Theory of Open Questions*, which was published in *Lehre und Wehre*, 1868, and was translated for this journal in 1939 in the issues from April to November inclusive. Perhaps the clearest and most definite utterance of Dr. Walther on this subject was penned by him in 1871 when he, in an article published in *Der Lutheraner* (*Lutheraner*, Vol. 27, p. 131), wrote thus, "Let, then, everybody who wishes to know it take note that we are able to distinguish between articles of faith and such doctrines as do not belong to this category. It is true that we do not permit any person to change a Scripture doctrine, whether it appear significant or not, into an open question. But while we deem it necessary to contend to the utmost for every article of faith, every one of which belongs to the basis of our faith and hope, and while we cannot but condemn the opposing error and withdraw the hand of fellowship from those who stubbornly entertain this error, we by no means consider it necessary under all circumstances to wage the same sort of warfare for Scripture doctrines which are not articles of faith; and much less do we consider it imperative to pass the sentence of condemnation on the opposing error, though we reject it, and to sever fraternal relations with those who err in this point only. If in a doctrinal controversy the dispute pertains to doctrines which do not belong to the articles of faith, then for us everything depends on the question whether the opponents manifestly contradict because they are unwilling to bow to the Word of God, hence whether they, though ostensibly not attacking the fundamental teachings of the Word of God, nevertheless subvert the very foundation on which these teachings rest, the Word of God itself." These words are so lucid that interpretation is superfluous.

It must, of course, be granted that the mere fact that our pious and honored fathers held a certain position is no proof that this position is Scriptural. They were fallible human beings, just as our whole church-body is fallible and can err. But their adherence to a given principle certainly should induce us to bestow on such principle earnest and prayerful study. Knowing their devotion to the truth, we quite properly are predisposed in favor of accepting what they stood for. However, when all that can be said on this head has been stated, we all have to agree that it is not the fathers, but we who have to decide what we must regard as Scripture doctrine; that not they, but we, with our contemporaneous fellow-believers, constitute the Church of 1942; and that we ourselves have to examine all doctrines in the light of

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the Holy Scriptures and see whether they are given by God or made by men. It is incumbent on us to examine whether in our position today we become guilty of giving an exaggerated importance to doctrinal differences. These lines are written in the conviction that if we adhere to the two principles set forth above, that of unswerving loyalty to everything the Scriptures say and teach, and that of willingness to bear with those who err in non-fundamental doctrines, as long as their error must not be regarded as due to disloyalty to the Scriptures, we cannot justly be accused of over-emphasizing doctrinal differences. It would be a calamity if in a day of confusion and apostasy, when a deluge of heretical teaching and unbelief rushes upon the Church, our Synod should cease to manifest the firm, manly, courageous attitude of Luther, Chemnitz, and our own synodical fathers in behalf of the truth and adopt a compromising stand in matters of doctrine and church practice. It would, however, be a calamity, too, in these days when Christians need mutual strengthening, if in our zeal to defend the truth we should violate the principles of love, patience, and forbearance which the Scriptures plainly inculcate, and give to certain doctrinal differences an importance, which they, taken by themselves, do not possess. That there are numerous questions which suggest themselves as this topic is studied and that an examination of the Scriptural considerations underlying the stand of the fathers is urgently required, no one will deny. My hope is that in the coming months conferences and individuals will give earnest and prayerful attention to this subject in its various ramifications. May the great Head of the Church mercifully grant all of us His Holy Spirit as we ponder the work and the responsibility which at the opening of the new year rest upon our shoulders.

W. ARNDT

Verbal Inspiration — a Stumbling-Block to the Jews and Foolishness to the Greeks

(Continued)

There is no end to the sophistries, misstatements, and puerilities which the moderns marshal against Verbal Inspiration. But there is an end to the readers' patience. So we shall bring our examination of the first objection to an end with the present writing.

No. 18. When the moderns ask us to yield up Verbal Inspiration, frankly to admit that the holy writers made many mistakes, in order to give the infidel less cause to be offended and keep men from being forced into skepticism, they commit a psychological fallacy.—The moderns actually make this proposal. "Take the