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Foreword

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No. 1

Foreword

By W. ARNDT

With thunder, lightning, and cyclonic disturbances, figuratively speaking, the new year approaches. What will it bring? Hunger, want, despair, stalk through large sections of our globe; injustice and cruelty cast their grim shadows over wide areas; the threat of another world war is felt everywhere. Well may men's hearts fail them "for fear and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth." Morally and spiritually hardly any improvement is noticeable; materialism, secularism, this-worldliness still are dominant forces in Christian lands. The world appears ripe for the final Judgment; "wheresoever the body (carcass) is, thither will the eagles be gathered together." It would be worth while to discuss, as we usually do, these portents in the Church, State, and society and to arm ourselves for the struggle which lies ahead. This year, however, we shall take a different course; our approach to a study of some of the menacing evils will be indirect. The charge has been prominently made that liberalism has invaded the Missouri Synod. Whether the accusation is justified or not, we shall not now endeavor to determine; let each one settle the question with respect to himself before the forum of his conscience. Our intention is to look at liberalism itself, to clarify our views on that subject, and through such a discussion to furnish food for thought which will be of aid in our preparation for another twelve months' pilgrimage.

I

Liberalism is a word which, Januslike, looks in two directions and can be used in a good and an evil sense. Whoever employs it should be careful to specify which signification he has in mind. Taken in its etymological meaning, the word bears a noble countenance; it designates the attitude of one who loves liberty and is eager to promote it. In common usage the term is almost entirely restricted to the political and the religious field. It signifies the views and actions of a person who refuses to submit to restraints which somebody endeavors to impose. Whether liberalism in a given instance is laudable or not depends, of course, on the nature of the restraints involved. If these are justified, the liberalism which refuses submission is reprehensible; if they are of the opposite nature, the liberalism which objects has our approval. Naturally, we are in this discussion thinking exclusively of liberalism in the field of religion.

II

From one point of view all who desire to be true Christians must strive to be liberals. We have to foster such a position if we wish to be faithful to the teachings and the example of the divine Founder of our religion. Jesus was rated by His Palestinian contemporaries as a liberal. Think of the opposition gathering against Him in the camp of the scribes and Pharisees! On what was it based? He refused to acknowledge as justified the yoke which they in their religious teachings put on people's necks. He ate with publicans and sinners, He did not insist on fasting by His disciples, He permitted His followers on the Sabbath to pluck ears of corn and to rub them to separate the kernels. Worst of all, in the view of His critics, He did not refrain from performing healings on the consecrated seventh day of the week. The traditions of the elders, handed down by word of mouth and regarded by the scribes and Pharisees as possessing equal authority with the written Law, He characterized as the commandments of men. His opponents were scandalized; while they said of John the Baptist that he was an ascetic, had a devil, they spoke of Jesus as a gluttonous man, a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners. In their opinion He was an arch-liberal.

The Apostles followed in the footsteps of their Master. In Caesarea we see Peter going into the house of a heathen centurion and there partaking of a meal. When the news reached his friends in Jerusalem, it caused not a little consternation. Had Peter become a liberal? When he returned, he had to explain, and his explanation entirely satisfied his co-workers. Paul, as is well known, was considered a dangerous liberal by many Jews and not a few of his fellow Christians. With triumphant power he proclaimed that the Gospel of Jesus Christ signified liberty, liberty from the coercion and shackles of the Ceremonial Law. The persecutions which he endured were largely due to the fervor and zeal with which he spread this message of freedom.

III

When we look into the history of the Church, we observe that some of the great men of God were considered liberals by many of their contemporaries. A striking case is that of St. Augustine, the most influential and renowned of all the Church Fathers. In his day the Church was disturbed by a sad schism, that of the Donatists. These people apparently were fighting "on the side of the angels"; their chief principle was that of opposition to the laxity which, so they maintained, was invading the Church and which allegedly manifested itself especially in gentle and generous treatment of such as had fallen into unfaithfulness in days of danger. Here there were people that were in dead earnest about preserving the purity of the Church and keeping its membership spiritually live and active. That they were following a course which was grossly unevangelical and legalistic, they did not see. But St. Augustine saw it, and with all the eloquence at his command he opposed them. In the eyes of these zealots he must have been a deluded liberal, tearing down divine barriers intended to protect the Church.

Familiar as well as instructive is the case of the great Reformer, Dr. Martin Luther. Was there ever a tyranny like the one which existed in the Church when he was born? The right of private judgment for the individual Christian, that is, the right to decide for himself whether a certain teaching or a certain course is right or wrong, was gone. Not he himself through searching the Scriptures, but the bishops and

priests settled for him all questions of faith and morals. Only one course was open to him — to obey. Instead of the sweet Gospel of Jesus Christ human traditions and theories were preached and taught, and whoever opposed such teachings was anathema. Very well did Luther entitle one of his flaming treatises, a tract published in 1520, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*. The Christians were kept in a prison. When they quoted Scripture, their words were brushed aside with the remark that it was the Pope's function to interpret the Scriptures and that his word was normative. Against these and similar oppressions Luther hurled the thunderbolts of the divine Word and asserted Christian liberty. "I declare that neither Pope nor bishop nor any other man living has authority to impose the least thing upon a Christian without his own consent. Whatever is done otherwise is done in the spirit of tyranny."¹ Here there was a noble, emphatic declaration of independence from the yoke which the hierarchy had forged and had laid on the necks of humble Christians. Through Luther's work the open Bible and the right and duty of every Christian to read and study it and to use it as the measuring rod for all teachings confronting him were restored. With tremendous vigor the Reformer destroyed the prison walls which superstition, traditionalism, and legalistic views as to the nature of repentance and the true Christian life had erected. The result was that he was called a seditious, rebellious person and a contumacious heretic. In the eyes of Rome and its adherents he was an incorrigible liberal.

And finally, we may here well think of our Saxon fathers and the great work they accomplished when they laid the basis on which they could establish the Church for themselves and their children. When they had arrived here, hierarchical notions on the nature of the Church and the office of the ministry dominated their thinking. The pastor, duly ordained, is vested with special authority and has the right to demand obedience from his flock — such had been their view. After severe mental struggles and earnest studies of the Scriptures, the Lutheran Confessions, and the writings of Luther, Pastor C. F. W. Walther arrived at the conviction that all Christians are priests of God and as such possess com-

¹ Cf. *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*. St. Louis Edition, XIX: 68.

pletely the treasures of the Kingdom, the power of the keys, and the right to establish the office of the ministry in their midst; that the pastor is not the lord or master of the congregation but its servant; and that only when his dicta are the Word of God given in the Scriptures, these dicta must be obeyed. The position taken was one of freedom, opposing hierarchical, Romanizing tendencies. The teaching of Walther prevailed in the establishment of the new Church. At once the cry went up that these people had accommodated themselves to the American spirit to such an extent that they even constituted their congregations on a democratic foundation, giving the laity powers and privileges which according to the Scriptures and the Confessions allegedly it does not possess. The accusation of liberalism was distinctly expressed.² While open-eyed observers, like Professor Guericke in Halle, spoke with commendation of the *evangelische Geistesklarheit* with which the Saxon preachers in America built their Church, others regarded them as poor, misled liberals.³

IV

If we wish to be loyal followers of Christ and the Apostles and to remain true to the heritage, the birthright which we own as children of the Reformation, we have to be liberals in the sense of the New Testament. As we enter the new year, one of our resolutions must be not to surrender the liberties which the Head of the Church has invested us with and the enjoyment of which Luther nobly and successfully strove and fought to restore to God's children. The rocks on which the ship of freedom might founder are well known; it will be profitable to look at some of them.

One danger which besets a church body which, like ours, has attained a considerable age and looks back upon an honorable history is traditionalism. Where it enters, one finds that instead of deciding all questions by the Word of God people make the opinions and sayings of the fathers regulative. Healthy growth and development will be stifled with the argument that the road suggested must not be trav-

² Cf. F. I. C. Hochstetter, *Geschichte der evangelisch-lutherischen Missourisynode*. Dresden, 1885, p. 198.

³ Cf. H. E. F. Guericke, *Handbuch der Kirchengeschichte*. Leipzig, 1867, Vol. III, p. 259.

eled because the giants of the Church in former generations did not use it. The giants of the Church—let their memory be honored by all means! But how wrong to give them the place which belongs to the great God and His Word! The works of the fathers should certainly be studied and pondered. Let no one think that we here express the fear that too much time is spent on the perusal of the writings of Luther, Chemnitz, Walther, Stoeckhardt, and Pieper. Would to God that their books and pamphlets would be read twice as much as is actually the case! But when *their* opinions are considered decisive and binding, then a wrong use is made of their noble works, and the spiritual liberty implied in the words of Jesus, "One is your Master, even Christ, but all ye are brethren," is brushed aside.

Again, in a closely knit body like ours the danger of over-emphasis on synodical authority and rules is not remote, but ever lurking around the corner. As in the case of most of our prized characteristics, the enormous advantage of having a smoothly running synodical machine has a corresponding threat pursuing it—that of giving the organization the place which rightfully belongs to the Word of God alone. The fathers were keenly aware of this danger. To avoid it, they stipulated that Synod should not be a consistory with legislative powers, but an advisory body. For the sake of efficiency it has often been urged to make Synod's powers more comprehensive and formidable, either forcing congregations which manifest a non-co-operative tendency into line or forcing them out of the organization. How easy to forfeit the liberty of congregations and individuals when the alternative to be gained seems a better-working synodical organism!

Moreover, in a church body which is definitely doctrine-conscious, as ours can truly be said to be (God be praised for it!), the danger of legalism is ever endeavoring to make itself felt. The earnest, laudable desire to be faithful to the Scriptures in every respect takes on a morbid complexion and sees commandments and prohibitions where the divine Word has granted freedom to the Christian and merely enjoins that the law of love be observed. Certain innocent pleasures are castigated as sinful, and legitimate charitable dealings with erring children of God are branded as disloyalty to the pure doctrine of the Scriptures. In addition,

owing to human imperfection, the precious doctrines of the Gospel are regarded as so many paragraphs in a constitution which has to be accepted by all who wish to join the organization; conformity with these doctrines is enforced by a reference to the constitution rather than to the Word of God, which furnishes them their content, power, and authority. Ignorance of the teachings of the Word or neglect, through human weakness, of one of them is treated as a cause for expulsion from the brotherhood. How very real is this danger, for instance, in the handling of the lodge problem! The Christless lodge has to be opposed; quite likely a paragraph in the constitution of the congregation prohibits lodge membership for all who wish to belong to the Church, and this paragraph rather than the Word of God is stressed in dealing with lodge-connected applicants for membership. Where legalism has entered, true Christian liberty has been compelled to retreat; God's children, especially those whose steps are still uncertain, are compelled to travel at a pace for which their spiritual constitution is not ready; fanatical zeal or some other unworthy passion has changed the garden of God into a threshing floor where the labor is hard and the food meager and unwholesome.

Now and then the thought is voiced by well-meaning brethren that there must be uniformity of exegesis in the Church if it is to be faithful to the Scriptures and the Confessions. It is held that there is such a thing as a Lutheran or Missouri Synod exegesis of certain passages which must be normative for everybody who wishes to be a member of our church body. What a limitation of Christian liberty the insistence on uniformity of interpretation would represent! The Lutheran Church is indeed deeply interested in exegesis; it cultivates this branch of theological study and endeavor with loving devotion and concern. But the bond that unites us as Lutherans is not uniformity of exegesis, but rather agreement in the doctrines of the sacred Word. In interpretation Luther and Melanchthon, Walther and Stoeckhardt, differed now and then. The Church confesses *Scripture truths*, it puts the divine oracles themselves on its banner, it does not as such enter the field of exegesis. Whosoever subscribes to the symbolical books does not thereby obligate himself to endorse all the exegetical processes contained in them.

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Here, too, there is liberty, and we must not permit it to be curtailed.

It seems to us that when the factors mentioned, to which others might be added, are surveyed, it will have to be granted that the admonition urging us to be liberals in the sense of the New Testament is by no means a superfluous one, one to be compared to the touching off of a false alarm, but one that is really needed. "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty," 2 Cor. 3:17. "Stand fast, therefore, in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage," Gal. 5:1.

V

While all the above is true and needs emphasis, it must not be forgotten that there is a liberalism which is utterly wrong and must be abhorred. The Bible speaks of it in clear terms. The Apostle Peter (1 Pet. 2:16) says: "As free and not using your liberty for a cloak of maliciousness, but as the servants of God." How pertinent! He says, as it were, that our conduct should be that of free men, but that we must be careful not to make a reprehensible use of freedom. "Beware of employing it as a screen for evil-doing!" When St. Paul in Galatians has upheld the cause of Christian liberty, and, at that, in words that were red-hot with zeal and with indignation against curtailers of liberty, he begins a new section with the words: "For brethren, ye have been called unto liberty, only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another," Gal. 5:13. There is, then, an assertion of liberty which is reprehensible, a practice of it which is vile in the sight of God and of the holy angels, a liberalism which we strenuously have to oppose. It consists in changing liberty into license, in taking liberties with God's revelation in the Scriptures and with the Moral Law, in setting aside the restraints which the Lord Himself has fixed and ordained.

VI

Need it be said that the life and the teachings of Jesus condemn such liberalism? He, the Friend of sinners, said to the man whom He had healed at the pool of Bethesda: "Sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto thee," John 5:14. His love for the wayward and erring did not mean that He per-

mitted them to lead a life which suited their carnal desires. Or did He grant His followers the liberty to set aside any of the teachings of God, proclaimed by Himself and the Apostles and Prophets? "If ye continue in My Word, ye are My disciples indeed," John 8:31. Here there is no latitudinarianism which concedes freedom to people to do with God's revelation as they please. Of the many words of the Apostles that could be quoted one may suffice. St. Paul, in holy concern about the preservation of the message which he has preached, exclaims in his Epistle to the Galatians (ch. 1:8): "Though we or an angel from heaven preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed." Thus the very Epistle which has been called the *magna charta* of Christian liberty contains a terrific blast against the liberalism which would tamper with the divinely given Gospel.

VII

And what of the great men of God of whom we spoke before, men who lived since the days of the Apostles? Known for his independence of mind and unwilling to surrender an iota of the liberties with which God had invested him, St. Augustine nevertheless spurned the liberalism which is presumptuous enough to set aside the teachings of the divine Word. In Book XII, par. 23, of his *Confessions*, he says that he is ready to consider a certain section of the Scriptures (it happens to be the opening verses of Genesis) with those who look upon the writings of Moses as the oracles of the Holy Spirit. But as for people who deny the truthfulness of the sacred record, he says that they may bark and shout as much as they please; he will try to win them, but if he does not succeed, he will dismiss them, engaged as they are in blowing into the dust and filling their eyes with it.

Of Luther it is well known that in spite of his grand struggle for Christian freedom, he was far removed from the unholy liberalism which refuses to accept what God has taught. In his sermon on the Christian's armor (Eph. 6:10 ff.) he says: "For if the devil brings it about that men yield to him in one article, he has won the battle. This thing for them amounts to losing all articles and Christ Himself. Thereafter Satan can well corrupt and take away others: for they all are bound and wound together like a golden chain; if

one link is broken, the whole chain falls apart. There is no article which the devil cannot overthrow if, through his leading, reason interferes and poses as wise. He can in that case easily twist and stretch Scripture so as to make it agree with reason; people drink this draught like sweet poison. Hence we observe now, too, since the devil has obtained elbow room for himself, that he introduces one heresy and sectarian corruption after the other, that he today attacks this, tomorrow that, article. Observe him proceed at present through his advance guard, by means of which he desires to attack the deity of Christ and likewise the resurrection of the body. It is through assaults of this kind that he makes war upon all Christianity" (St. Louis Edition, IX:827).

Concerning Walther, wherever he is known at all, people are aware that he was an implacable foe of unscriptural liberalism. While he fervently defended evangelical teaching and practice against the attacks of legalism and other factors that destroy freedom, he was an uncompromising opponent of every attempt to water down the teachings of the Gospel and the precepts of the Moral Law so that they might become palatable to human reason and carnal desires. His sermons, preached at the opening of synodical conventions, frequently stress the importance of adhering to the divine revelation in its full purity. In a sermon of this nature, printed in *Brosamen*, pp. 391—405, the text being 1 Cor. 1:4-5, he says: "Earthly treasures one may and should possess without giving one's heart's affections to them; indeed, it is expressly stipulated that they are to be considered relatively insignificant. This is not the view to be taken of spiritual, heavenly treasures, and especially not of the treasure of pure doctrine and its correct understanding. If ministers and their hearers begin to be lukewarm in their adherence to this treasure and to cease valuing it as their most precious jewel and their crown, worth more than all the gold and goods of this world; if they begin to be indifferent toward this possession; if coldness, satiety, weariness, drowsiness, and finally, disdain seize them, they may, indeed, for a while, like the Jews, have an outward form of knowledge as to what is right according to God's Word, but the real treasure, entrusted to them above others, is even then thrown away and lost. It may be that for a while they will still carry the light in their hands, but

no longer in their *hearts*; they themselves in such a case are no longer burning and shining lights, but merely sleepy, lamp-bearing servants; nothing but a little temptation and affliction is required to make them drop the lamps. They do not recognize the time of their visitation, and hence their house will be left to them desolate."

VIII

The danger of our being swept along in the flood of ungodly liberalism is indeed not merely imaginary or fancied. Protestantism about us is largely cultivating this attitude toward revealed truth; theology is made a science which treats the Scriptures like other records of antiquity and does not hesitate to criticize whatever in God's Word does not agree with its own canons of right and wrong, of truth and untruth. Even in comparatively conservative circles the spirit of unionism and doctrinal indifference is present; and constantly to be swimming against the current may finally, if God's Spirit does not prevent, weary us and bring about our surrender to the prevailing mood of the times. This pseudo-liberalism will manifest itself in various ways. In the case of the individual Christian it will take on the form of an "I do not care" attitude toward Biblical teachings and morals. For the pastor and his congregation it will mean a shift away from the preaching of repentance and faith and a loose congregational practice. For our church body as a whole the invasion of this liberalism would signify that the Scriptures cease to be normative, that the Lutheran Confessions are merely a historical ornament, that outward success is given prime consideration, and that questions of church fellowship are decided, not in the light of Scripture teaching, but according to the dictates of our human preferences and prejudices.

A classic illustration of this false liberalism we see in the Auburn Affirmation among the Northern Presbyterians, in which the doctrines of the plenary inspiration of the Scriptures, the virgin birth of Christ, the substitutionary atonement, the bodily resurrection of Jesus, and the literal genuineness of His miracles were declared to be open to debate and not of such a nature that rejection of them would mean defection from the Christian faith. These teachings are indeed offensive to the human mind when it is guided by nothing but rational

considerations. To remove the difficulty, they were simply put into the category of open questions. It was a triumph of Modernistic liberalism.

In world Lutheranism the teachings that are attacked by some who claim membership in it are at present chiefly those pertaining to the plenary inspiration of the Scriptures and the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the Lord's Supper beside the conditions which the New Testament has established for altar and pulpit fellowship. What unscriptural liberalism has to say on these doctrines everybody can ascertain, through a minute's reflection, by merely asking himself how his own carnal mind reacts to them.

As the new year dawns, may there arise in the hearts of all of us the prayer that God will keep us from being caught in the snares of this sinful liberalism! May the waves of unbelief as they dash against the Christian Church in wild fury find us firmly established on the sacred Word, standing on that Foundation other than which no man can lay, which is Jesus Christ!

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