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## Brief Studies

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## BRIEF STUDIES

### "DER BAUM IST NICHT DICK SONDERN GRUEN"

Professor Kinder coined this phrase to characterize a phenomenon common in present-day theology: the setting up of false alternatives. One is reminded of it when one surveys the thinking and feeling on the question of church fellowship within our Synod and within the Synodical Conference. We are in danger, it would seem, of making two trees of what God intended to be two branches of one tree. Two points of view, the confessional and exclusive emphasis, on the one hand, and the witness and outreach emphasis, on the other, tend to absolutize themselves; and two things, both good and holy and altogether laudable in themselves, are in danger of becoming exclusive and antithetical opposites, and each is therefore in danger of becoming a one-sided caricature of itself.

The confessional and exclusive outlook or emphasis operates by preference with passages like Romans 16:17ff. and 2 John 9-11 and has in it an uncompromising zeal for the glory of God and the truth of His Word. It emphasizes the severity and the inescapability of the either/or which loyalty to the One Lord and His Word involves. It therefore emphasizes the authority and the infallibility of the Word. It is conscious, too, of the weight of history, of the burden which the past imposes on the present; it reminds us that history is with us and upon us and that we cannot shuffle it off by saying so, that we are all of us since Adam born into a given situation with which we must deal. That is the health and strength of this emphasis, and the Church should be everlastingly grateful to the voices that sound the confessional note for us, in season and out.

But a thing that is good is not necessarily in itself complete. Romans 16:17 ff. and 2 John 9-11 are not the whole of Scripture on fellowship; and we must in charity warn our brethren against incompleteness and one-sidedness; they dare not, for their own health's sake and for the sake of the health of the Church, continue to bite on iron until they lose all taste for honey and the honeycomb. They dare not, in their emphasis on the authority of the Word, unconsciously grow distrustful of the power and efficacy of that Word; it overcomes and has its victories still in the twentieth century as well as in the sixteenth or the nineteenth. They dare not, in their zeal to learn history's lessons and to be guided and instructed by history, let themselves be hag-ridden by



history until they lapse into a mood not far removed from fatalism, a temper that is likely to confuse rigidity with strength and is inclined to see in the oversimple answer the only and honest answer. (St. Paul, for instance, found it necessary to give a long and rather complicated answer to the question, "May a Christian eat meat offered to idols?") Such is the strength, and the weakness, of the confessional exclusive emphasis.

The other, the witness and outreach emphasis, is also marked by a holy sense of responsibility; it hears the Lord's words: "Ye shall be witnesses unto Me!"; it lives in fear of hiding that one talent which is death to hide, of becoming the light under a bushel and the salt turned saltless. Over against the Word it shows a glad and confident trust in the power and efficacy of God's Word and in the continuity of the Spirit's working: it looks toward the one new man as the goal and intention of the Lord of the Church at work in the Church through His Spirit. Over against history it emphasizes the ongoing character of history, the fact that no situation in history is forever static; each new day in history is, for it, a new opportunity for the Church, which the past cannot completely overshadow or destroy. Such is its strength, and a healthy Church will thank God for those who sound this note.

The weaknesses of this emphasis, in isolation, are also apparent. The men who sound this note are often inclined to be naively optimistic and to fail in the sober and realistic appraisal of men and situations. They sometimes lack a sense of the gravity of history, of the with-us-ness of the past, whether we will or no; ignoring the past, they are in danger of misunderstanding the present. In the eagerness of their witnessing fervor they incline, all unconsciously perhaps but inexcusably nevertheless, to blur the line of a full and unbroken confession; instead of cutting error with the sharp edge of the sword, they massage it with the flat of the blade. The extremes to which this bent can degenerate need only be mentioned: *Macherei*, the success-and-results complex, the willingness to cut corners for results, statistics-consciousness, publicity-consciousness, the unwillingness to accept the fact that the Church is always a minority, accommodation to the world, its methods and its ways, and so on.

Men of either bent can say, "We have the clear testimony of Scripture on our side." And they can indeed cite chapter and verse, many chapters and many verses. Both will insist that Scripture is clear. Both will probably fail to ask: "Is my head as clear as Scripture is? Have I taken the time and the trouble to hear Scripture out on this? Have I heard it *all*?" Both also should ask: "Have I taken the *mutuum colloquium*



*fratrum* seriously in this? Have I sought to know *together with all the saints* what is the length and breadth and height and depth of God's counsel in the matter of fellowship?"

We are all what God has made of us by His leading; our lives personal and ecclesiastical have shaped us a certain way and pointed us a certain way; and it is good so. Each of us is therefore inclined to emphasize more strongly one or the other of the two alternatives sketched above; and that is good so. God uses us in our diversity to help one another and to further His work. But it is not good, and it is a sin when we seek to make our emphasis the exclusive emphasis and the all-controlling emphasis, in effect asserting that God has led only us and has opened only our eyes and as a result refusing to listen to our brethren in their equally Scriptural, equally holy, and equally necessary emphasis. And how shall we answer for it if we as brethren do not meet and share, but collide — and each drives the other and provokes the other, not to love, but to a rigid and opposition-tempered fixity in his way? Unless we learn to say *A and B*, instead of the easier *A or B*, we shall all of us, each in his own isolated way, become *theomachoi*, fighters against God; even Gamaliel did not want to be answerable for that.

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