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Brief Studies

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BRIEF STUDIES

GUIDELINES FOR DIALOG: A SERMON

Arthur Carl Piepkorn

In Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. — Gal. 3:26-28

If in 1950 a prophet would have dared to forecast that within fifteen years "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" would be sung as the processional hymn before the first mass of the Latin rite that a Roman Catholic cardinal would say in English, we should have hooted him down. But that has happened in Saint Louis on Aug. 25, 1964, less than 15 years later. Other events that would have seemed most unlikely forecasts in 1950 have happened. A Pentecostal body has joined the World Council of Churches. A major personage of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has been invited to attend the Second Vatican Council as the guest of the Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity and he has done so. Eastern Orthodox bodies on both sides of the Iron Curtain have joined the World Council of Churches in such numbers as to have displaced the Lutheran world community as the most numerous religious family affiliated with the Council. A distinguished Roman Catholic bishop by invitation addressed the international assembly of the largest Lutheran church body on this continent. A panel of theologians comprising Lutherans of all the major bodies of the country and Presbyterian and Reformed churchmen of all the major divisions of that denominational family are soberly investigating their respective churches' stands on the doctrine of Christ and the doctrine of the Sacrament of the Altar. Their purpose

is to determine if the chasm of almost 450 years' standing has at least been narrowed. It is no exaggeration to call this age of dialog and polylog an ecumenical springtime, an era of an excitingly different climate unlike that which we have witnessed in our generation.

There have been ecumenical springtimes in the past, and there have been efforts at bridging ancient chasms in other centuries, but the present situation has a particular significance for *us* because it is taking place in *our* lifetime and is confronting *us* with the necessity of reflecting on the part that *we* can play and the stance that *we* are being challenged to take. I should like to suggest to you

Ten Things That the Church of the Lutheran Reformation Needs to Do in This Age of Dialog

First, let us not fail to give thanks to God for this manifestation of the power and work of the Holy Spirit in our time. However, many other and nonspiritual factors may have been at work and may be at work, the important thing is that the Holy Spirit is performing His saving task in bringing about this day. This is not to deny that there are political motives and personal motives, motives of fear and of ambition, of envy and jealousy and even of disbelief that enter into the decisions of men and the counsels of churches. A look at our own hearts and at our own motives would make us suspect the presence of these motives in our fellow Christians. But the Christ in whom we are all one made it His prayer on the night when He was betrayed that this unity might be manifested so that the world might know that His Father had sent Him and that God loves His people as He loves His Son. Thus when we see this movement for the external

expression of the unity that we have in Him through our one faith, our one baptism, and our one hope, we should see in it the divine response to the prayers and the longings and the suffering of members of His body on earth. No matter how limited the expression, no matter how imperfect the structures that are devised, no matter how small the immediate result may be, this is something that we must learn to thank God for, and in thanking Him to learn to prize the more highly and to support the more enthusiastically and positively.

Second, let us see precisely where the tragedy of our separation lies. There are scores of bad reasons for encouraging the responsible encounter of Christians across denominational lines and for trying to unite or to reunite the divided communities that are the visible segments of the one holy catholic and apostolic church. The tragedy of our separation is not to be measured in terms of these reasons. Our separation is bad not merely because it may be wasteful of men and money at a time when the escalating challenge that confronts the church makes the waste of either men or money indefensible. Our separation is bad not only because it may stand in the way of a more effective witness to the world outside the church that can at best only be mystified by and that at worst takes malicious delight in the spectacle of internecine warfare among the professed followers of our Lord. Our separation is bad not only because it presents the constant temptation to perpetuate divisions because of some vested interest in the status quo, no matter how laudably we manage to disguise it. Our separation is bad not only because it tends to focus attention on peripheral issues rather than on the central issue of forgiveness of sins by God's grace for Christ's sake through faith and on the central task of being the body of Christ in the world. *Our separation is bad chiefly because it keeps the body of Christ from function-*

ing as it should. It is bad because it inhibits Christians from engaging in their fraternal ministry of encouragement and consolation and admonition across denominational lines. It is bad because it prevents the fullest possible sharing across denominational lines of those spiritual gifts of understanding and teaching and loving and ministering that God has given to each cell in the body of Christ for the profit and benefit of the whole body. Let us see in this the real tragedy of our separation and use the opportunities that are now opening to us to fulfill our ministry to one another according to our individual vocations and opportunities.

Third, let us remind ourselves what it really means to be Lutheran and try to make this clear to others. Our very name too often gives people the false impression that Martin Luther founded the Lutheran Church or that at least his novel insights are normative for our faith and for our preaching. But let us also realize that the pressure of four centuries of events and of invincible public opinion has often forced us against our will and often without our own realization into the very position that we profess to reject. At too many points we have come to think of ourselves as really fashioned and determined by a variety of things that are actually the incidental byproducts of four centuries of history. For many Lutheranism is often superficially defined and identified in terms of a style of hymn, in terms of a kind of architecture, in terms of a dogmatic tradition that often reflects the conflicts of bygone generations rather than the issues that we encounter today. It is sometimes defined in terms of a narrow view of church history that sees nothing of importance as having happened between the conversion of St. Augustine and the posting—whether that be a matter of mailing or of nailing—of the 95 Theses, and that sees a curtain of unimportance once more mantling the centuries from the death of the Great Reformer to the planting of our par-

ticular tradition of Lutheranism on these shores. Lutheranism is thought of in terms of customs imported from other countries and reflecting other circumstances of both church and society. It may bring to mind images of an individualistic personal piety, of a stolid kind of unemotional acceptance of indoctrination, and very likely of a specialized denominational jargon that other Christians either misunderstand or do not understand at all. What we need to make clear is that these are only the transient masks of Lutheranism. The authentic Lutheranism of the Reformation sees itself as being at heart that body of teaching which finds its expression in the three ecumenical creeds as possessed of supreme authority under the Sacred Scriptures, in the Augsburg Confession as a correct exposition of Biblical doctrine, and in the remaining Lutheran particular creeds as guides to and commentaries on the correct understanding of this Biblical faith. To take our proper role in this age of dialog we all need to recover a just sense of what in our experience is indispensably and essentially Lutheran and what is transient and incidental and therefore neither to be defended to the death nor imposed upon others.

Fourth, let us learn in this connection to abandon prejudices against perfectly acceptable practices and ceremonies which are a legitimate part of our own tradition as heirs of the Reformation and which in certain circumstances may actually promote ecumenical understanding, but which we have banished because we regarded them as either Roman Catholic or Reformed. I have in mind such features of our tradition as the use of the sign of the holy cross to bless ourselves in our private and corporate worship and to invoke the protection and the saving help of the crucified Redeemer. I have in mind such an institution as private confession for the individual reassurance of the penitent who in the word of absolution hears

the very voice of the Gospel speaking to him from the tribunal of God. I think of the recognition that the whole service of the Holy Eucharist has both a sacrificial and sacramental end. I think of such things as the celebration of the Holy Communion in our churches at least once a week, and of episcopacy as the preferred type of church government. All of these have the explicit indorsement of our Lutheran symbolical books. In the field of practice I think of so universal and ancient a practice as having the celebrant at the Holy Eucharist stand behind the altar facing the congregation. I think of the maintenance of a daily schedule of services in our church buildings. Let us ourselves recover some of the aspects of Lutheranism that are catholic and ecumenical but that we have indefensibly frittered away.

Fifth, let us on the other hand not be minimalists, aspiring only to a less than Christian and catholic minimum of agreement. A flush of excitement inevitably overtakes us when we discover that in other communions and in other denominations the Gospel of the grace of God is being preached and effective sacraments are being administered and men and women are receiving the new birth of the Holy Spirit. It is heartwarming to realize that these communities by that very token are parts of the one holy catholic and apostolic church. In this perfectly proper emotional reaction, however, there lies the peril that we shall forget our commitment to the totality of the truth that Christ has committed to his church and thus be tempted to be unconcerned about vital and important aspects of the truth that is in Christ and that is Christ and which by God's providence He has committed to our care for all of Christendom to profit by. Let us take our standard from the divine self-revelation in the Sacred Scriptures and in the creeds that express the mind of the whole church about the way in which these Scriptures are rightly to be understood.

Sixth, in this same vein, let us not be ungrateful for our own church's past. It is not difficult to find fault with our own church, to regard some of her ways as out-moded, some of her standards as out-of-date, and some of her norms as irrelevant and restrictive. But if we believe that God's Holy Spirit is active wherever the Gospel is preached and the sacraments are administered, we must believe that He has been and is active in our midst as well. If we believe that God acts in history and in the history of the church, we must believe that He has acted and is acting in the history of our church also. It is not necessary for something to be essential for it to be useful, and an institution does not have to be indispensable to be salutary. Thus we may find it beneficial for us and for our fellow Christians to be very pragmatic in a sanctified fashion and even in those things which we may feel to be dispensable to consider if we cannot gratefully continue to use them. We do not honor God by despising the wisdom with which He endowed our forebears. As long as we avail ourselves of their insight and their solutions to perennial problems without giving them absolute force and validity, we shall be better equipped to meet and to help our fellow Christians in their dilemmas.

Seventh, let us not be impatient. We have come a long way in this age of dialog, but the way still to be traversed may prove to be much longer. Universal intercommunion among Christians, the happy situation where our ministries and our altars and our pulpits and our parishes are interchangeable, does not lie immediately over the horizon. The problems created by four and sometimes more centuries of separate development cannot be made to evaporate by a stroke of the pen, or even by days and weeks and months of conscientious striving. The same spirit of separatism and sectarianism that played a role in the schisms that we alas now know

is not dead, and it is not improbable that the course of ecumenical encounter will be a wavering line on the graph of history as it alternates between successes and new failures. Misunderstandings are too deeply ingrained. Prejudices and biases are too deeply engraved. Subconscious and unconscious hatreds are too potent. Our patience will be tried, our hope will be disappointed, our resolution will flag, our human flesh will rebel, our own sinfulness and that of our fellow Christians will rise to thwart us. Again and again we shall be tempted to cease our effort and to quit our purpose. When the temptation comes, let us not be impatient.

Eighth, let us not drag our feet. This is the opposite to impatience. Altering thought patterns that have been part of us for a lifetime is not easy. Exposing ourselves and our convictions to the criticism of those who do not share all our assumptions may prove difficult. This is particularly true for those of us who have enjoyed the coziness of the religious ghettos in which Christians of different denominations have tended to settle. Yet where God puts before us the opportunity to share our insights with other Christians and to receive from them insights that we may not yet possess, the obligation to give and to take in the obedience of a committed faith in our common heavenly Father is not something that we can evade. In the meantime we can act to insure that the common witness of those who bear the Lutheran name will be as unanimous and as consistent as it can be made. We can lend our individual and corporate support to the creation of an effective successor organization to the National Lutheran Council and thus provide an agency for the maximum degree of cooperative effort. We can encourage such projects as a common hymnal and service book for all the Lutherans of America. We can join ranks in local efforts to achieve a consensus of conviction and a common purpose

in achieving common objectives. And on a broader basis we can work together with other Christians in every movement and activity where the support of Christians can help to right wrongs and to achieve the justice that is God's design for His creation. Where God places opportunities before us to practice the charity that we have learned from Him in His love for us in Christ Jesus, the important thing is that we accept the opportunity according to our vocation and responsibility.

Ninth, let us equip ourselves to represent our faith as effectively and as intelligently as possible. Centuries of separation have helped to make our religious languages mutually unintelligible across denominational barriers. When we talk our special Lutheran language, we cannot expect members of other religious communities to understand us. Nor can we blithely assume that we really understand what they are saying when they are talking in their own denominational tongues. We may use the same words and mean different things; we may use different words and mean the same thing. This applies even to fundamental concepts of the Christian faith, where in all honesty both parties believe that they can appeal with utter correctness to the same Sacred Scriptures — concepts like grace, and faith, and salvation, and church, and rebirth, and holiness, and hope, and authority, and inspiration, and real presence, and baptism, and conversion. We know so many things about other people's beliefs and other people's churches that are not so, and they know so much about ours that is not so. Fruitful dialog demands careful preparation and the effort to achieve a sympathetic understanding of the other person's position even when we cannot share it.

Tenth, let us remember what God has given to us to share with the rest of Christendom. In setting forth the points that follow I would not have you understand me as denying that other Christians hold some or even

all of them in common with us. My purpose in listing them is to recall to you and to myself the perennial need for affirming them against their perennial denial either in Christendom or in our society.

First is the conviction that God is indeed the creator of our entire universe and that He holds in His hand all the might of man and of nature.

Second is the recognition of man's constant need of the grace of God and of the availability of that grace. We must counter both the optimism that man can build his own bridges to God and the pessimism that affirms that man is hopelessly mired in his painful existence beyond the power of even God's grace to rescue him.

Third is the unshakable faith that God has reconciled His world to Himself in Jesus Christ. Without trying to explain what remains inexplicable mystery, we have the assurance that in Christ God did what we are unable to do. He Himself became a human being in the completely human individual whom His contemporaries knew as Jesus, the son of Joseph of Nazareth. As this man He lived a life of utter perfection in all that He did and all that was done to Him, never swerving a hair's breadth from the demand of total obedience to the will of His heavenly Father, even when it involved death on a cross. In this fashion, although in a way that we can only dimly and vaguely understand, He thereby atoned for all our sins. By His death He has destroyed death for us and by His rising to life again He has restored to us everlasting life.

Fourth is the assurance that the Holy Spirit is dependably accessible to men and women through the channels that He Himself has created. One channel is the holy community of the one catholic and apostolic church and the sacred ministry that proclaims God's Word and administers

His sacraments. Another channel is the washing of Baptism that makes us participants in and beneficiaries of Christ's death and Christ's rising to life again and that washes away our sinfulness in God's sight and that imparts to us daily power for holiness. A further channel is the sentence of holy absolution that imparts God's personal pardon of the sins of which our conscience accuses us. Still another channel is the body and the blood of the crucified and risen Christ in the Eucharist, to give us forgiveness of sins, the divine life itself, and salvation here and hereafter.

Fifth is the certainty that this same Holy Spirit spoke through the prophets and the apostles. In this way, the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures—however varied in their talents, their vocabularies, their outlook, and their personal theologies the human authors may have been—have as their principal author God Himself. Here is the guarantee of their authority, their truthfulness and their dependability—their inspired disclosure of God's self and of His purpose to save the world in Jesus Christ.

This is the heritage of truth that we can bring to our dialog with others for our mutual encouragement and assurance in the one faith.

Here then in sum is the prescription for the church of the Lutheran Reformation in an age of dialog: First, let us not fail to give thanks to God for this manifestation of the power and work of the Holy Spirit in the church. Second, let us realize where the tragedy of our separation really lies. Third, let us learn what it really means to be Lutheran. Fourth, let us abandon our prejudices against acceptable practices and ceremonies which we have rejected because we thought them to be the peculiar patent of an alien denomination. Fifth, let us not be minimalists. Sixth, let us not be ungrateful to God for our own past. Seventh, let us

not be impatient. Eighth, let us not drag our feet. Ninth, let us equip ourselves to represent our Lutheran faith as effectively and as intelligently as we can. Tenth, let us gratefully remember what God has given us to share with the rest of Christendom.

What result this era of dialog will bring I do not know. No one living knows. I do know and you know what God wills—that His holy community on earth manifest its oneness as a sacrament and a symbol of His oneness in Himself and with His own. I know and you know too what the adversary of God and man desires—the splintering and the division of the oneness that the Holy Spirit gives to God's church, so that it will be less effective and less efficient in its warfare against him and against his dark kingdom. I know and you know what the adversary does—that he uses every means, every lie, every perversion of the truth and every human weakness to divide in order that he might rule. I know and you know what God through His Holy Spirit does, that He calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies all of Christendom on earth—I shall repeat, *all of Christendom on earth*—and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. And because God is stronger than His rebellious adversary, and because Christ has won the victory through His cross and has made us more than victors through His love, I bid you pray to Him in complete confidence a prayer which in the worship of the church has a long and intimate association with the sacrament of unity:

O Lord Jesus Christ, as You once told Your disciples, Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you, so do not now regard our sins, but look upon the faith of Your church and give her that peace and unity that is in harmony with Your holy will, just as You live and reign with the Father in the oneness of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

ST. LOUIS, MO.