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## Tribute to John W. Behnken: Ministry in the Acceptable Time

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## Tribute to John W. Behnken

# Ministry in the Acceptable Time

**I**n our worship this morning two lines of thought converge. In the first place, it's the beginning of a new academic quarter, the last of this year. That raises questions: How are we doing? Are we reasonably close to schedule? Are we able for another three months to take the mounting pressures and to finish our courses? If we are concerned about the long-range and not just about today or tomorrow, next week or next May, what about our ministry?

The second line of thought comes at us because it pleased our heavenly Father, ten days ago, to call to Himself out of this life into eternity His servant John W. Behnken, an outstanding alumnus of this school, who served sixty-one years in the ministry of the Gospel, and who during much of that time rendered excellent services also to his alma mater. He was a frequent speaker on this campus during the past four decades, beginning with his sermon at the dedication of the original complex of buildings erected here in 1926. As president of The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod he wielded much influence on the development and history of this school. He had

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*The staff of CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY presents the following chapel talk by President A. O. Fuerbringer of Concordia Seminary as its tribute to the memory of the distinguished former president of The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod, John W. Behnken, who died February 23, 1968. He had served twenty-seven years as president of the church body. The talk was delivered to the faculty and students of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, March 4, 1968.*

a voice in the selection of the two seminary presidents who have been in charge of affairs here for the past quarter century and of no less than seventy faculty members. We could cite other proof of the influence he wielded.

As we run these two lines of thought together, we do it under the shadow, as it were, of the two initial verses of the Epistle for yesterday, *Invocavit*: "Working together with him, then, we entreat you not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says, 'At the acceptable time I have listened to you, and helped you on the day of salvation.' Behold now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation." (2 Cor. 6:1-2)

The theme suggests itself, "Ministry in the Acceptable Time." We begin with the past. Immediately before and after John Behnken's funeral, many remarks were made to the effect that his death marked the end of an era, the end of an age in the history of the Lutheran Church in our country, particularly The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod. It seems to me that we might better say that Dr. Behnken's ministry covered two ages. I know that in most cases it's not proper to close an era in the life of a nation or a church very neatly with one year and begin a new one with the next, but in this instance I think it's quite appropriate to say that one age of our Synod's history began about 1906, when Behnken was ordained, and extended to 1935, when he was elected president of the Synod. The second lasted from 1935 to 1967.



When John Behnken was ordained, he was admitted to the clergy of the *German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States*. I think it's quite significant that while the foreign designation in that name was dropped during the earlier portion of his ministry, the change to the Synod's present name came much later, during the second era. We can characterize the former age with a German word, *gemütlich*. As we read about those days, or as we who experienced them look back upon them, we recognize that our pastors served simple folk in simple direct ministry. There was not much affluence among the members of our churches, nor did we seek the wealthy and the influential people. Our ministry was largely to those of German descent, especially in the rural areas of the country. There were few among them who had gone to high school, and very few, except the pastors and teachers, who had attended college.

It is interesting, in retrospect, to see what the issues in the Missouri Synod were. Behnken and a number of his friends were what we might call the "young Turks" of that day. They emphasized the fact that there would have to be more English services, not only in the congregations of the English Synod or the English District but in the German congregations. They argued that the hallowed hour of ten o'clock on Sunday mornings was not inviolably set aside only for worship in German. They emphasized the fact that the *Christenlehre* was obsolescent, if not outdated; that it was time to begin to organize Sunday schools on a larger scale and particularly to use these as means of outreach to the non-German unchurched people in the communities.

As they noticed the increasing affluence of the members of the church, they began to say that people would have to abandon the old method of annual subscriptions and quarterly payments of church dues and introduce weekly envelopes. They insisted that it was time to begin to use contemporary methods of publicity for the work of the church; that it was high time to update programs of youth work. Behnken, with others, also forsook some of the dignity of the pastoral office of that day in allowing himself to be seen on the golf course occasionally.

This brief description of our church in the early decades of the twentieth century is perhaps an oversimplification, but I think that it includes some of the distinguishing features of that age, the items that consumed much time and energy in the congregational meetings and discussions elsewhere. I'm using only this one aspect of lack of sophistication to paint the background in simple color, because the point that I really want to make is that this simple age was also "the acceptable time." The men in those days served their people with the Gospel of the grace of God, and proclaimed God's favor to all men. They did it to these simple people in a simple and direct way, and God blessed their ministry and made that era a basis for many fine future developments, whose roots lie in the time of the German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States.

Then came the second era, the time of Behnken's presidency of the Synod. It was quite different. The country had gone through a depression and was about to become embroiled in World War II. It was an era of much activity in a church which



noticeably was acculturating itself. It was characterized by expansion of various kinds: expansion of missionary efforts, of parish education, of ministerial education, of secondary and higher education, of publicity work, of the use of the mass media. One might almost say, "You name it. If it was a practical thing, we took it and expanded it." If you say, "True; but a deplorable activism also had its beginning in those days," I think you are right. But again I would say that this age was used as an acceptable time by the membership of the Missouri Synod under the leadership of President Behnken. It was an age for proclaiming the fact that God is still favorable to His people and that He will have all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. If Paul rejoiced that Christ was proclaimed even when it was done "out of partisanship, not sincerely" (Phil. 1:17), we look back at the most recent period of our synodical history, happy that *sola gratia, solo Christo, sola fide*, and *sola Scriptura* came through.

It was an era, too, in which, in spite of a trend toward theological rigidity and isolationism, a beginning of openness to the results of contemporary Biblical and historical studies became evident. For instance the fact that the kingdom of God is not simply to be identified with the church and that Luke 17:20-21 is therefore not a proof-text for the invisibility of the church. Again, that Romans 16:17-18 is not to be applied indiscriminately to people who don't agree with us in every respect and does not demand that we not even pray with them. So this age laid the foundation for the age in which we are now.

In essence, Behnken's was a typical Mis-

souri Synod ministry; in quality it was outstanding. He was an indefatigable worker. One could say that the text from Ecclesiastes 9, "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might," applied to him. He was tireless in expending his energies for the cause of the Gospel and of the Synod which he loved and served. He was a man who loved people and, like Abraham Lincoln, especially the common people. He was a man who had a good sense of humor and enjoyed both hearing and telling Texas jokes.

A strange combination of permissiveness and tenacity was evident in him. I suppose that, as the people of his day were often at odds over whether he should have been permissive in one respect and tenacious in another, the historians of the future will also argue about it. But there can be no doubt that he was a genuine leader; for forty-eight years he held elective synodical office, and that without ever being a compromise candidate.

The age and the church produced John Behnken, and he in turn had his influence on the church of his age. That reminds us of the line in the hymn we sang before, "Each age its solemn task may claim but once" (*The Lutheran Hymnal*, No. 483). The ages of Behnken are past. We have now come into our age. We ask ourselves, "How will our descendants and the historians of the future judge us?" I say this not that we should become self-conscious and allow our actions to be influenced by the thought of future judgment of them but in the hope that it will mitigate our frequently harsh judgment of the men of past generations. I hope also that, as we judge our own age and ourselves and as future generations do this, it may be said



that we recognized ours as an age in which we knew ourselves as workers together with God and were conscious of living in the acceptable time. Because, you see, the question is not whether you and I are going to be used by God, the question is whether we are going to be used as unconscious tools or as conscious partners. Shall we be like Nebuchadnezzar or Caesar Augustus, Ho Chi Minh, or perhaps H. Rap Brown? Or will we be like Saul of Tarsus or Martin Luther or Martin Luther King, if you will, John XXIII, John Behnken, or many others. That's the question that confronts us.

In the first day of this new quarter, as we make our plans for the next three months in which for many of us the die will be cast for years to come, I trust that

we shall recognize that this is still the acceptable time, no less. It's the new age. The power of God's new creation is still available. Every day in this eschatological period is filled with all the possibilities of the very last day. Every moment is pregnant with the potential of eternity. As we let God's Word guide us in considering our ministry, we want to use this quarter to make ourselves more able ministers of the New Testament. I trust that we shall all recognize that the call that our Lord has graciously given us is to a ministry of reconciliation in this acceptable time and that we use it to entreat men, including each other, not to accept the grace of God in vain. Amen.

ALFRED O. FUERBRINGER