

# The Virtue Of Christian Sobriety

[A Convention Essay addressed to the Eighth Convention of the Church of the Lutheran Confession, at Immanuel Lutheran College, Eau Claire, Wis., August 8-13, 1968, and published by request of the Convention.]

By E. Schaller

It must be regarded as cause for satisfaction and gratitude to be able to appear before the representative assembly of the Body known as Church of the Lutheran Confession which, in the few years of its existence, has been so manifestly blest and has seen its hopeful infancy grow into sturdy youth. The design of our God is a wonderful thing to behold. He who would preserve on earth the proclamation of the Gospel pure has seen fit to place this torch into our feeble hands and has provided therewith a fellowship of hearts and minds most precious and rare in this age. Many church conventions are being held this summer; and they are being addressed by many prominent and distinguished churchmen. But few if any of these enjoy the privilege of a servant who, in prosperous surroundings such as this campus, can call upon godly and dedicated Christians united in faith and purpose to lift up their heads and consider their present situation along the true way of salvation in which they have been so graciously led.

In a sea of troubled waters our church must seek to maintain a secure anchorage against the winds of apostasy and paganism in which churches all about it are foundering. Surrounding us is a world lashed into foam by those of whom St. Peter wrote as such who “walk after the flesh in the lusts of uncleanness, and despise government, presumptuous, self-willed . . . count it pleasure to riot in the day time . . . have eyes full of adultery . . . cannot cease from sin, beguiling unstable souls . . . cursed children which have forsaken the right way . . .” It is truly of the Lord’s mercy that we are not consumed. But his compassions fail not; they are new unto us every morning. And so we are here assembled in his name; imperiled but not destroyed; assailed but not overcome; threatened, yet vigorous in our sacred purpose.

What may we do, now, to shore up our defenses and improve our security under the shelter of the divine hand that rests upon us? There are, of course, many answers to that question. For Scripture is filled with counsel and exhortations for the saints beset by the world. And we have need of all the panoply of powers, means, armor and virtue with which the Holy Spirit supplies us for such a struggle. It would not be possible for us here to review the many endowments of mind and spirit for which we must daily pray so that our church may survive uncorrupted in the midst of an evil generation. But I invite you to center your attention upon one of the basic qualities of a Christian life which, when duly exercised, will contribute substantially to our well being as individual Christians and as a church body. It is one not mentioned often enough among us, perhaps. It is somewhat difficult to define exactly because it undergoes constant slight changes of form in response to changing conditions. It is therefore also not easy to cultivate, and requires daily attention. Yet without it the Church of the Lord must be subjected to constant harassment from within as well as from without. If we are to pursue our joint work in peace, preserving both our integrity of doctrine and practice and our effective fellowship, it is necessary that we be sensitive to the demands of what we call *Christian sobriety*, or soberness. The purpose of this essay is:

- I. To rehearse what Scripture says about sobriety
- II. To consider circumstances in which it is especially needed
- III. To evaluate it’s blessed effects

## I.

The concept of Christian soberness is essentially a New Testament value. Nothing in the Old Testament exactly corresponds to it, although the saints of the Old Covenant certainly also knew and exercised the believer's art of sobriety after their fashion. We see this from certain related expressions in the Old Testament. When the Psalmist prayed: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a 'right' spirit within me" (Ps. 51:10), he desired essentially the same grace of which we are speaking, but in its Old Testament manifestation. We must refrain here, and throughout this discussion, from a technical examination of the Hebrew as well as the Greek expressions involved, and try to set forth the facts in the simplest manner possible. David was praying that God might renew in him what he literally calls a "stable" spirit, that is, a spirit which is well balanced and not off balance. In the Book of Job we hear the Lord calling Job's three false comforters to account, saying: "Ye have not spoken of me the thing that is right, as my servant Job hath" (Job 42:7). We are familiar with the story of Job's period of severe trial; we know how Job sought to find and keep the proper balance between hope and despair, between God's justice and God's love, while his unwise friends gave lop-sided explanations of the cause of Job's sorrows and of God's purposes. For this the Lord chastises the friends, even as He praises Job for what we might call his level-headed judgment in the matter.

Another example, of an entirely different nature, may be cited from the Book of Numbers. Here we find the daughters of a certain family that had lost its father appealing to Moses in a matter of inheritance. It was a technical question that Moses referred to the Lord for a decision. The divine verdict was in favor of the petitioners; the Lord said to Moses: "The daughters of Zelophehad speak right . . ." (Nu 27:7). Again we meet that word translated as "right" by the KJV as well as by the RSV. The word actually suggests that the petitioners had correctly discerned the meaning and the intent of the Law in this matter. Their judgment was well-balanced, avoiding extremes, and was confirmed by the Lord.

The thought in this expression, then, approaches the idea contained also in our term "soberness" in its special sense. Another Old Testament expression of very similar content is used in such passages as Ecc 4:4. Here the Preacher is drawing up an index of the things that he observed in his search for something abiding; and he says: "Again, I considered all travail, and every right work, that for which a man is envied of his neighbor." Once more we note the appearance in translation of the word *right*. But in Hebrew a different word is used in this case, which means "fitting, proper." The Lord abhors, and men cannot profit from, any work which is not "right", that is, extreme or excessive or offbeat in one way or another. It need not be an unlawful, criminal work, like the assassination of a leader or politician, for instance, to be "not right." It can be perfectly legal and yet cause havoc because it is impetuous and unbalanced in its force and effect. Meanwhile a "right" work, especially in difficult circumstances, is comparatively so rare among men that, when it is seen, it causes men to envy and say; I wish I had done that.

We note therefore that the people of God in the Old Testament were made well aware of the importance and value of a mind and heart that maintained a sober and well-balanced view, which was in harmony with the Law of the Lord and yet avoided unsalutary extremes of judgment or action. In their thinking such a talent was a form of true wisdom, and was often meant when they used their terms for wisdom and intelligence. Wisdom is a broad expression and includes many elements. That is true of the corresponding word in almost any language, and Hebrew is no exception. The root of the Hebrew word for "wisdom" means to be capable of

judging. So it is used to describe the discernment of good and evil (1 Ki 2:9), or prudence in secular matters (2 Sa 13:3), yes, even skill in arts and sciences, including that of magicians (Ex 7:11). The concept contained moral rather than intellectual values; it speaks of the ability to adapt what men know to what they have to do or ought to do. The New Testament speaks of the child Jesus as increasing in wisdom. When his Hebrew parents and friends thus observed him, they no doubt Spoke of his growth in the sense of the expression in their language: He grew in the exercise of wisdom., the application of knowledge to life (Lk 2:52).

Reinforcing this idea, the Hebrews had another expression for it that was less broad and more exclusive. Recognizing this quality of the word, our Bible sometimes translates it, not as “wisdom” but rather as “sound wisdom.” In Pr 2:7 it is said of the Lord: “He layeth up sound wisdom for the righteous.” Again in 8:14 that wisdom that is personified and represents our Lord speaks of itself saying: “Counsel is mine, and sound wisdom: I am understanding, I have strength.” In his torment Job asks: “Is sound wisdom driven quite from me?”(Job 6:13). (The KJV fails to be consistent here and translates only with wisdom). The correct wording of the passage Micah 6:9 is: “The Lord’s voice crieth unto the city, and thy name shall see that which is sound wisdom.” It will be observed that the specific gift and ability known as “sound wisdom” is always something for which man must ever hold out a begging hand. It is not to be acquired by his own efforts and is not inherent in his nature, but must come from above. “Evil men understand not judgment; but they that seek the Lord understand all things.” (Pr 28:5).

And so it is indeed. We need to keep this firmly in mind as we now turn to an examination of the fuller, richer concept as it appears in the New Testament. Here, too, the words for “wisdom” and “understanding” have their use; but in addition the Greek supplied two special terms which the Holy Spirit uses to describe that splendid Christian art of which we wish to speak. With the one we shall deal rather briefly. It occurs only six times in its various forms, although these instances include some well-known Scripture passages.

1 Pe 1:13: “Wherefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and hope to the end for the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” 1 Pe 5:8: “Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour.” 1 Th 5:6: “Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober.” “Be sober;” that is the expression with which we are here concerned. As in our own language, so in Greek the expression was used, by secular writers, to mean abstaining from drunkenness in a physical sense, with its unsteady and erratic behavior. But the word is never so used in the New Testament. The Holy Spirit employs it to call upon Christians to be free from every form of mental and spiritual drunkenness, from excess, inordinate passion, rashness, confusion, and thus always to be well-balanced, self-controlled. Even among profane writers this word was chosen to describe a proper state for people who intended to worship, or one of the qualities of a great ruler of men.

That spiritual soberness has an even more noble and vital significance in the Christian community, however, is plainly indicated by the other and more common Greek expression which so often appears in the New Testament. In form it is quite a different word than the one we have briefly discussed; and it has a most interesting pedigree. When a student of NT Greek first discovers this word, he may have to look it up in a dictionary; but he already has the vague feeling that he has somehow met it before in his study of the language. There is something familiar about it, even though he can’t quite lay his finger on the connection. And the student is right. The word, of which I speak comes from the same root as another more common term of the New Testament which, in its translation and meaning, is most precious to us all. This other

word means: TO SAVE. As our Lord Jesus came to seek and to save that which was lost, as he rescued and delivered us all from sin, death and the power of the devil, the flavor of this wonderful truth seasons the whole New Testament idea of soberness, sobriety. This is very important to our understanding, and I ask my hearers to tuck this information away in their minds for future reference.

But let us now look at the several contexts in which the term and its message is employed by the Apostles and Evangelists of our Lord. First we list the general exhortations to sobriety as addressed to all Christians. Peter writes: "But the end of all things is at hand: be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer" (1 Pe 4:7). In the Christmas epistle St. Paul urges us to recognize that the Gospel itself, coming to us, makes sobriety imperative: "For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared unto all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously and godly in this present world" (Tit 2:12). Paul likewise pleads that each of us estimate and appraise our characters and talents with Christian soberness: "For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith" (Ro 12:3). We may add these general admonitions to those already quoted before, in which the other Greek term is used.

The Apostles do not content themselves with the general call to sobriety, but address themselves in the matter to individuals and groups, listing Christians according to their calling with specific application to their several needs. Who of us is not familiar with the stress that is laid upon soberness in those who hold the office of the public ministry? "A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober . . ." (1 Ti 3:2); "For a bishop must be . . . a lover of good men, sober, just, holy, temperate . . ." (Tit 1:7-8). And what about the other stations in the Christian life? Hear Paul as he speaks of God's children in their age groups, and in both genders: "The aged women likewise, that they be in behavior as becometh holiness . . . that they may teach the young women to be sober . . . to be discreet (Tit 2:4-5). "In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety . . ." (1 Ti 2:9). "Young men likewise exhort to be soberminded" (Tit 2:2). "That the aged men be sober, grave, temperate, sound in faith . . ." (Tit 2:2). The married woman in the congregation is given the assurance: "Notwithstanding she shall be saved in child-bearing, if they continue in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety: (1 Ti 2:15).

And so the refrain is repeated over and over. We shall leave out of our discussion the rare and unusual uses of the expression in the New Testament, such as the reference of Mark and Luke to the demon-possessed man who, when delivered by the Savior, was seen by the people "sitting and in his right mind . . ." (Mk 3:15; Lk 8:35); or Paul's statement in his defense before Felix, where he said: I am not mad . . . but speak forth the words of truth and soberness" (Ac 26:25). Examination of such passages would not add to the yield of our study. We may close our listing with the beautiful affirmation of St. Paul ringing in our ears as encouragement and incentive: "For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind" (Literally: "of sobriety") (2 Ti 2:7).

Of what sort is this spirit of sobriety? Obviously it is important. It is essential to the individual Christian, to the congregation, to a federation of congregations such as we here in attendance represent. It is a necessary ingredient of every phase of our sanctified life. It will determine the quality of our separate and joint efforts in the confession and defense of our common faith; and it is not too much to say that the very life of our church is conditioned by its influence. But what, exactly, it is? Let us now go back to what was mentioned earlier: The

relation between the word for being sober and the word that speaks of “saving”. And now I will take the liberty of introducing the sound of the Greek term that the Apostles used. It is *SOPHRON*. The word has various endings, according whether it is employed as a noun, a verb, an adjective or an adverb; but basically we can pronounce it as I did. A bishop, a Christian woman, every child of God is to be “*sophron*.” Literally this means, “having saving thoughts.”

“There is a way of thinking which destroys and a way that saves. The man or woman who is *sophron* walks among the beauties and perils of the world, feeling the love, joy, anger, and the rest; and through it all he has that in his mind which saves. Whom does it save? Not him, but, as we should say, the whole situation. It saves the imminent evil from coming to be. (G. Murray, “Rise of the Greek Epic,” quoted in Moulton-Milligan, *Vocabulary of the Greek NT*, p. 623).

Let us make that excellent statement a bit more specific. We are children of God by faith in Christ Jesus; and we understand the admonition of St. Paul even as we understand the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul writes: “If there be therefore any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any compassions and mercies, Fulfill ye my joy, that ye be like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others” (Php 2:1-4). And the same Apostle affirms that he and his co-laborers “have the mind of Christ” (1 Co 2:16).

Our Savior’s mind was a sober mind; a mind dedicated to and centered upon one thing, upon the central issue of his incarnation, upon the one purpose of his life: to save the situation, the dreadful course of man’s life which must end in eternal death. He was true man, and thus endowed with all human qualities save that fatal curse of sin, for of this he was free. He was nevertheless affected by hunger, thirst, pain, hostility, human emotion, and earthly needs. He stood against Satan and world; but he stood always for men, whose substitute he had become in his Person. And he addressed himself, with all his powers and all his qualities, to saving them. This determined action and reaction. He sized up every event, every act of others, every word and occasion from this posture. He did not swing wildly to and fro in his labors, his feelings, and his expressions. Every task that lay at hand he discharged by fashioning impulse and response to meet it in a saving manner.

Never did he compromise or ignore by so much as one jot or tittle the Word of divine revelation; yet with what sensitive care did he not vary his approach to men and situations. When a father implores him in behalf of a demon-possessed son, Jesus meets the need without further ado; when a woman of Canaan pleads for her daughter who is vexed by a devil, He puts her off again and again. When the two sons of Zebedee approach him with their strange request for seats of honor in his kingdom, the Savior chides them gently: “Ye know not what ye ask.” But when Simon Peter attempts to dissuade him from setting his face toward his death at Jerusalem, the Lord rebuffs him with the words: “Get thee behind me, Satan” Such instances and contrasts could be cited in numbers. The Lord could attack the profaning of the Temple by moneychangers with controlled indignation and admonish the Pharisee Simon with measured patience. And in each and every case the Christian student of such events can readily see that the Lord’s words and actions were carefully tailored to the saving approach that each circumstance dictated. This is the quality of the ultimate in soberness, which has in itself the virtue of seeing in each case how Gospel truth, spirit and power will best be employed to promote a truly salutary result.

Our Savior was and is perfection, and all his works are done in truth. We cannot hope to equal his performance; we can only learn from it. "In him are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col 2:3). Moreover, even during his life of humiliation on earth, as John tells us, ". . . he knew all men, and needed not that any should testify of man: for he knew what was in man" (Jn 2:24-25). He could say to Nathanael: "Before that Philip called thee, when thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee" (Jn 1:48). He was able to declare to Peter with absolute certainty: "Verily, I say unto thee, That this night, before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice" (Mt 26:34). With this penetrating insight to the human heart and the vision that enabled Jesus to anticipate precisely the outcome of events, who of us could hope to match him in finding so unfailingly the equation of time plus need plus opportunity that resolves itself into a flawless dealing with situations and issues involving the spiritual welfare of men?

And yet sobriety is required of us all, as we have heard. It is asked of us that we take a sober stance at all times, in all our relationships with people, with events that confront us in our lives. This requires a circumspect, judicious mind that can properly evaluate the elements in a situation and respond to it in a sound and helpful manner. The people of the world know of something similar; but the resemblance is no more than superficial. The world speaks of tact, of diplomacy, of being circumspect, of adapting oneself to situations, of the art of compromise. But such arts are, without exception, in nature and spirit the very opposite of Christian soberness. For they are self-serving and self-seeking. They relate easily to a lax morality, indifference to principle, and the advancement of fleshly ambition. The pursuit of self-interest causes men to walk a crooked line and makes them efficient in evasion or double speaking, but not in Christ-like saving. Christian sobriety, on the other hand, searches out and finds the point at which the converging lines of full and explicit obedience to the Gospel and of the true need of men meet, and there takes proper action in love.

In order to give concrete form to such abstract definitions, let us now, in the second part of the essay, consider some circumstances in which Christian sobriety is especially needed.

## II .

Much of the Scriptural admonition to sobriety is found in connection with the listing of qualities required of people in the public ministry and for their duty to instill a sound spirit in the members of their flock. In some manner this soberness has a profound bearing on sound doctrine. This is impressed upon us in Tit 2:1ff. Addressing Titus, Paul gives directions for his preaching; yet not in the department of doctrine itself—Paul says enough about that elsewhere—but in the things that become, befit sound doctrine: "But speak thou the things which become sound doctrine." One of these things is soberness, to be fostered in the life of everyone connected with the congregation: "That the aged man be sober, grave, temperate, sound in faith, in charity, in patience. The aged women likewise . . . that they soberly teach the young women to be sober . . . ." And further: "Young men likewise exhort to be sober minded . . . ."

This linking of sobriety with sound doctrine must not be overlooked. Nothing is more destructive of the purpose for which the Son of man came into the world than error. Nothing so nullifies the gracious work of the Holy Ghost in the hearts of men as messages falsely attributed to God. There is no power on earth that can erect a barrier between children of God as error can. This alone is able to keep them apart, prevent them from exercising and enjoying the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Other sins and offenses can and do cause disruption and dissension in the Christian fold; but if properly dealt with, they are removed as occasions for division, either by repentance or by exclusion of the guilty from the Christian congregation. But doctrinal error compels faithful believers to walk apart from those who may indeed still be brethren but have

been overtaken by error and cause offense by holding to a false confession. For error adulterates and dilutes the saving truth of the Gospel and thus threatens our soul's salvation. Pure doctrine alone retains unimpaired the effect of the saving power of the Word.

Similarly there is an essential connection between sound doctrine and a godly life. Those who preserve the Truth in purity in their midst and hearts are of course not therefore perfect in their conduct but continue to sin daily in weakness. But error never sanctifies; it corrupts heart and life. Therefore Dr. Luther also said on one occasion:

“Doctrine and life must be distinguished. Life is bad among us, as it is among the papists, but we don't fight about life and condemn the papists on that account. Wycliffe and Hus didn't know this and attacked the papacy for its life. I don't scold myself into becoming good, but I fight over the Word and whether our adversaries teach it in its purity. That doctrine should be attacked—this has never before happened. This is my calling. Others have censured only life, but to treat doctrine is to strike at the most sensitive point, for surely the government and the ministry of the papists are bad. Once we have asserted this, it's easy to say and declare that the life is also bad.

“When the Word remains pure, then the life (even if there is something lacking in it) can be moulded properly . . . .” (*Luther's Works*, Vol. 54, p. 110)

Nor can the situation be reversed, as though in the last analysis outward godliness makes any doctrine sound. Works do not produce truth; works done in contradiction to the Truth are evil, even when men describe them as works of love. Here again we may quote a rarely heard remark of Luther:

“In their books and writings the sacramentarians have pestered us with ‘love.’ They say to us, ‘You Wittenbergers have no love,’ But if one asks, ‘What is love?’ we are told that it means to be united in doctrine and to stop religious controversies. Yes, do you hear? There are two tables of the Decalogue, the first and the second. Love belongs in the second table. It's superior to all other works there. On the other hand, in the first table it is commanded: ‘Fear God. Listen to his Word.’ The sacramentarians don't bother with this. ‘He who loves father and mother more than me is not worthy of me,’ (Mt 10:37), said Christ. You should have love for your parents, your children. Love, love! Be good to your father and mother’ However, ‘he that loves them more than me . . . .’ When this ‘me’ comes, love stops. Accordingly I'm glad to be called obstinate, proud, headstrong, uncharitable, and whatever else they call me. Just so I'm not a participant in their doctrine! God keep me from that.” (*Luther's Works*, Vol. 54, p.463f.)

Because of the extraordinary profit to be derived from hearing it, we shall take the time to listen to a further word from Luther, spoken in connection with a discussion of the passage Gal 5:9: “A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump.” He says:

“And this is a caveat or an admonition which Paul standeth much upon. And we also ought greatly to esteem the same at this day. For the Sacramentarians, which deny the corporal presence of Christ in the Supper, object against us in like manner that we are contentious, obstinate, and intractable in defending our doctrine, seeing that for the single article concerning the sacrament we do break Christian charity and rend the concord of the churches. We ought not (they say) to set such great store by this little point of doctrine, which is obscure and insufficiently expounded by the Apostles, that for its sake alone we have no respect unto the whole sum of Christian doctrine or unto the general concord of all the churches; especially seeing they agree with us concerning the other articles, which are more necessary and of greater moment.

“With this very plausible argument they not only bring us into disrepute among their own people, but they also lead astray many good men, which judge that we dissent from them out of mere obstinacy or some private affection. But these are the crafty fetches of the devil, whereby he goeth about utterly to overthrow not only that article, but all Christian doctrine. To this we answer therefore with Paul, that ‘a little leaven maketh sour the whole lump.’

“In philosophy, a small fault in the beginning is a great and a foul fault in the end. So in divinity, one little error overthroweth the whole doctrine. Wherefore we must separate life and doctrine far asunder. The doctrine is not ours, but God’s whose ministers only we are called; therefore we may not change or diminish one tittle thereof. The life is ours: therefore, as touching that, we are ready to do, to suffer, to forgive, etc. whatsoever our adversaries shall require of us, so that faith and doctrine may remain sound and uncorrupt; of the which we say always with Paul: ‘A little leaven ‘ etc. In this matter we cannot yield even an hair’s breadth. For the doctrine is like a mathematical point, which cannot be divided, that is, it can suffer neither addition nor subtraction. Contrariwise, the life, which is like a physical point, can always be divided, always yield somewhat.” (Luther’s *Commentary on Galatians*, Revell Edition, p. 472)

Sound doctrine therefore is the first and highest good in the Christian’s life. Yet it is not an end in itself, to be sought as an object of prideful possession and boastful superiority, a house-idol to be enshrined and to guard the home while the family goes out to serve the flesh. The wrong orthodoxy (*Rechtgläubigkeit*) is not orthodoxy at all, but Phariseeism. The Truth is a blessing because of its saving power; the privilege of working with and for it, as we enjoy it in the CLC, is cherished because it enables us to be of service to the Savior and to the world of men in unparalleled strength and effectiveness. It is the instrument for bringing deliverance in a bad situation.

All who labor in the Word and doctrine, then, whether as teachers and bishops or in the common exercise of their spiritual priesthood, are to adorn the doctrine with corresponding qualities of heart and mind and life. The Apostle embraces the entire scope of this obligation in his admonition to the Philippians: “Only let your conversation (conduct) be as it becometh the Gospel of Christ . . .” (Php 1:27). With this in mind Paul has listed for ministers of the Word the proper qualifications, among which soberness is central and decisive because of its bearing upon all the others.

And if it is proper to speak of degree in this connection, one might well ask who of all Christians would need more richly and constantly the endowment of sobriety than pastors and teachers. They are not only professionally dedicated to the service of the Gospel but will, in their Calling, exert a profound influence upon the thinking and actions of their fellow Christians. At the same time the nature of this work confronts them critically with the issues and needs in their own lives and in those of other men, as well as with the changing patterns of this world as they influence the life of the Church. No one is more decisively confronted with situations in which soberness of mind and spirit is essential to the well being of the Christian community. Where such soberness is lacking, dire results are often evident.

Thus we are daily bombarded with reports of professedly Christian pastors and church leaders who, under pressure from the popular socialistic concept of Christianity current today, become embroiled in radical reform movements. Christians are startled and confused by the sight of members of the clergy spear-heading freedom marches, loudly advocating revolt against existing laws and institutions and begging to be sent to jail for violations of order . . . all in the



name of Christ and the imperatives of the Gospel. It is shocking to read of a Lutheran clergyman who, with other men of the cloth, chained himself to a protesting AWOL service man and occupied a church so that the police might be forced to violate a sanctuary and arrest him. From their own profession we must classify many of these rabble-rousers as enemies of Christ who falsely assume his Name for their cause. Yet we would not be justified in ordering them all under this heading. Some no doubt think they are doing the true Gospel a service. But they have utterly failed to meet social problems with Christian soberness. They are confused by the wild absurdities of the modern pseudo-Christian slogans and their jargon, as exemplified by statements like the following, chosen almost at random, by Dr. Harvey Cox of "Secular City" fame:

"The hope that we have to state for the men of our time is one that articulates that promise of the Kingdom of God in a way which engages the imagination of man with all its scientific and political configurations." (*Christianity Today*, July 5, 1968, p. 6)

He knows neither whereof he speaks nor what he affirms, of course. But some pastors who hear him and others like him, shaken as they are by events that are rocking the foundations of churches in metropolitan centers and in the Inner City, and shocked as they are by the evidences of social and economic injustice crying out for attention, have thought their ministry challenged as never before. They have been panicked into a reappraisal of the Church's mission, carried away by the emotions of those who are angry at the world and resolved to use violence in order to force an improvement.

Because the clergy of our church has, through our doctrinal heritage and thorough training, been blest with a fundamental understanding and appreciation of the Gospel, its members have been spared from suffering a breakdown of sobriety in dealing with this phase of modern life. None of our pastors and teachers is known as advocates of civil disobedience or of the social gospel in any form. Our problems, where they exist, lie on a different level. The contemporary moral and social climate often puts the sobriety of pastors as well as of all Christians to severe tests. Dealing soberly with the rapidly changing values of our generation strains our capacity for making right judgments. The area of adiaphora, that is, of things in themselves neither commanded nor forbidden by God, constantly seeks to expand itself. In addition, the Biblical concept of what is lawful, but not expedient, finds it more and more difficult to obtain uniformity in its application among us. We cannot discuss all of the areas in which such problems make themselves felt, but must limit ourselves to a very few.

The life in our Christian homes, and therefore in our schools and congregations, has been confronted with conditions adverse to godly, sanctified living by what is often called a permissive attitude. Parents are allowing themselves a broad freedom of conduct that has naturally spilt over on their children; there is a growing liberal attitude toward matters of deportment, of dress, of speech. It expresses itself freely, with a certain impatience, over against the voices that are raised to question the propriety of following the example of the world in such things with so little reservation. Such objections are laid to old-fogeyism, fuddy-duddyism, or squareness. They are explained on the basis of the generation gap—as though there has not always been such a gap.

An example or two will not be out of place. Some of the unhappiest children in our affluent society are those whose Christian parents have introduced them to a subjective standard of conduct which is falsely hailed as a product of Christian liberty. These children are brought up to do what appeals to them and what they think is right for them, within the framework of Christian morality but with little regard for the effect of their actions upon others. They are then

astonished and disconcerted when they are told that they ought not to do a certain thing, not because it is wrong but because it distresses or offends others, or is in bad taste. For this they have acquired little sensitivity. When they then are confronted by unaccustomed supervision by an authority that lays down certain rules of polite, considerate, ethical conduct, they begin to suffer inner tensions. Half of each young heart welcomes such guidance because of an innate, natural need, while the other half resents unaccustomed restriction. And so they become bewildered, sullen or rebellious. They are untrained in the art of Christian soberness that regards expedience and a saving quality as the true test of an action rather than its carnally pleasurable effect.

A startling departure from tradition is being seen on occasion when a young man and woman, unmarried and uncommitted but good friends, gaily decide to take their vacations together and drive somewhere to visit friends or go skiing many hundreds of miles from home. They may even enlist another, like-minded couple to share in the jaunt and make it a foursome. And off they go, with parental consent. All arrangements conform to decency and order, including appropriate separate sleeping accommodations during the holiday. Yet only a few years ago even the world would have questioned the propriety of such unchaperoned intimacy; and in the churches Christian discipline would have been applied to those indulging in it. Sensational Spring vacation gatherings of college students on Florida beaches and elsewhere, duly publicized, have by their very extreme nature helped to flatten out public sensitivity for what is proper in such matters. And this is one of the numerous test areas for Christian soberness, which would ask whether arrangements of the sort we have described can possibly be regarded as having a salutary, saving influence, or whether they are not needlessly hazardous to sanctified bodies and souls and therefore not expedient, to say nothing of the risk of giving offense. There can be no legitimate doubt as to how true soberness would deal with such proposals of our young people. To say that we are all children of our time would be to beg the question. Soberness is designed to serve as a shield against the soiling influence of our time. Alas, soberness seems often lacking. One could expect that pastors, at least, would speak to their people of what is fitting and favorable to godliness in such matters and what is not.

The same situation obtains in matters of dress. Here too we have witnessed a radical revolution in the world and its effect in the church. Miniskirts, subminiskirts and mini-miniskirts or other non-concealing clothing for street or school wear have come to be regarded as legitimate fashions, in one degree or another, by Christian mothers and their daughters. Modesty in dress has become a concept without definition. Immodesty is considered a state of mind rather than a practical standard of measure. If Christian soberness were more widely given accredited status among us, the Sixth Commandment would be heard sounding a clearer note as arbiter of fashion among Christian women. But this would require a more realistic view of chastity than has prevailed of late in circles where it ought never to have been lost. One marvels at reports of purely secular schools in America where rigid rules of modest dress length are still being enforced without the slightest apology to youth or its parents. Have they perhaps always known what a fading Christian soberness has ignored—the connection between immodest dress and the delinquency which causes endless trouble, not to the world alone, but to Christian congregations and schools and their pastors and teachers? One might ask whether these leaders, with becoming sobriety, require observance by their own household of a saving standard of decency and diligently instruct the Christians under their care toward a similarly sober discipline.

But let us hasten on to another field that is perhaps more immediately related to the interests of a church convention. We have been reminded often enough of the fact that our

church body was born out of a struggle for preservation of the Truth, and in much agony of spirit. Issuing from a womb agitated by a necessary disruption of fellowship and struggling to place its feet squarely upon the true foundation, it was but natural that our church should experience some of the distress that the weakness of human nature inflicts in such a situation. There would be, there was and is, a tendency of the pendulum to make wide and erratic swings from the perpendicular. We have been in danger, on the one hand, of an immoderate super-orthodoxy which goes beyond faithfulness to the inspired Word by shouting “heresy” and threatening or claiming disruption of fellowship relations if a doctrinal sentence is uttered which may through inadvertence or carelessness not have the proper syntax or use traditional terminology. Coupled with this is the inclination to a rigorous demand for uniformity of action, sometimes extreme in concept, in difficult areas such as church-state relations. That such firmness is intended as the expression of a loyal resolve to permit no infringement of the majesty and sanctity of the inspired Word we have no reason to doubt. The question is whether we always exercise our devotion to the Truth under the rule of Christian sobriety. We need to be reminded of the significant fact that the majesty and authority of the Word of God needs no protection from us; it is well able to take care of itself and has done so throughout the ages. It will accomplish that which its author pleases, with or without any one of us. It comes into jeopardy only when we use it otherwise than for its saving power; when we employ the Gospel as though it were law and wield the Law as a club upon the hearts of God’s children; when we treat the Word, not as a precious trust but as a private preserve where all are adjudged trespassers who do not walk in absolute and slavish conformity with us. Godly soberness of mind and spirit will try the spirits indeed, whether they be of God; but it will do so in a context of healing and saving. We need its moderation, which is not weakness but true strength.

There is another direction in which the pendulum may swing; and the inherent danger of this is no less serious. It arises if we become correspondingly lax and tired of holding the line; if we forget the rock from which we were hewn and begin to ask whether the cause is worth the struggle. Have we perhaps heard voices among us suggesting that we must modify our attitude and our insistence upon position lest we lapse into obstinacy or vindictiveness? There are those in our fellowship who have been moved to charge the CLC with just these sins and have expressed doubts as to the quality of its leadership. Here too the exercise of soberness in judgment is urgently necessary. Such soberness will lead the God-fearing to the conclusion that, while purity of motive may at times have been colored by sinful thoughts, and judgments, even with the best of intentions, may sometimes have been faulty, it would save nothing and help no one were we to let such an awareness of our human frailty induce us to yield one iota of the Truth of God’s Word as upheld in the doctrinal position we confess; nor would it induce the gainsayers to recognize and repent of their error. A sound judgment anchored in the Word knows that health and healing comes with a “right” spirit which offers and heeds Christian admonition in love. Thus sobriety will lead us, on the one hand, to avoid the danger of denying or minimizing our own shortcomings or mistakes, and at the same time to persist firmly in a Scripture-directed course of confession and admonition which alone holds promise of a salutary result.

Most or all of us are quite aware of the tensions that have been created by the appearance of numerous Bible translations and the varying response to their use in our practical church life. The overtones in the dialogue among us on this subject make us mindful of the dangers of extreme positions. Some who have stressed the value and importance of the traditional KJV have sometimes been understood as implying, if not actually saying, that the KJV is the inspired

translation and that he who speaks favorably of another translation must be at least warned, if not suspected, of heterodoxy. Some who regard the RSV as the one and only translation for the instruction of our generation have perhaps made it seem as though KJV advocates are tragically unresponsive to the needs of modern evangelism and mired in irresponsible traditionalism. This is not the place to discuss the respective merits of translations; but it is the place and time to remind ourselves of the critical need for sobriety in such a discussion and the practices out of which it grows. Christian soberness will certainly not fail to begin where one must begin, namely with awareness of the overwhelming importance of the saving work and purpose of the Church, to which all considerations must be subject, and the vital need for the purity of the Means, namely the Gospel. It will carefully appraise the forms in which this Gospel is available to us. It will objectively evaluate the known pedagogical principles involved in teaching this Gospel to others in the way most effective for, and in keeping with the dignity of, its purpose. And it will thus help us to arrive at a practical, helpful solution to the problems involved. To make a shibboleth of any one Bible translation, or to adopt it with a radical fervor that makes it a cause of offense rather than an instrument of blessing would be to renounce the use of one of the qualities most necessary to heralds of peace—the soberness of saving love.

So we have attempted to show, by a few practical examples, some of the stress factors of Christian life for which true sobriety is an essential antidote. We cannot possibly treat them in clinical detail, nor can we possibly exhaust the list within the proper boundary of our discussion here. But we can turn now to a final consideration. Our reflections would not be complete unless we spend a few moments in describing and evaluating the blessed effects of sobriety in our personal lives and in the life of our church.

### III.

Soberness is rarely mentioned alone in the New Testament, but usually in connection with other Christian gifts and graces. Yet when we know what it is, we come to see that without it we may well come short of the full measure of the blessings which are held out to all who walk circumspectly and in wisdom. Whenever soberness appears in the text, there is, somewhere in the context, a warm and persuasive reference to the glory and dignity of our redemption and Christian calling as a people destined unto salvation and appointed as surrogates of our Savior Jesus Christ with a mission of peace and salvation. And soberness is like an enabling factor that makes the other Christian qualities effective. Thus we should “live soberly, righteously and godly in this present world;” but to be righteous in conduct and God pleasing in our endeavors, we must above all operate with sobriety, each in his earthly station.

It is no small responsibility that our Lord has committed to us; and it is no easy matter. When he says to us: “But the end of all things is at hand: be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer” (1 Pe 4:7), or again: “Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober” (1 Th 5:6), he expects us to flesh out this pointed reference with all the detail that Scripture supplies in its vision of these “last days.” The massive complexities and dislocations which must afflict the world before the end of time have surely begun to come upon us; and they are putting us all to a severe testing. Old and young, pastor, teacher, wife, and mother, husband and father, son and daughter, are urged to walk in the old paths, in the ways of God, amid the increasing contradictions and distress of our age. The Church of the Lutheran Confession, a fellowship born late in the history of the New Testament Church, is in men’s eyes like a fossil among the living, an anachronism in a day of false ecumenicity and social Christianity. Yet we are called upon to “gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and hope to the end for the grace

that is to be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Pe 1:13). Moreover, we are to walk so that the Word of God is not blasphemed because of us.

We are overwhelmed by the responsibility. Yet how else can we exercise our saving assignment and purpose? How else do we achieve a break-through in the babel that surrounds us, and find success in our joint efforts, than by being without offense as we glory in the Truth through our message and a conduct consistent with it?

And such is the virtue of sobriety, that it makes it possible for us to meet the challenge successfully. It is an instrument that gives access to the blessing of those who truly preach the Word. “Thou shalt save both thyself and them that hear thee”—This is a promise that bespeaks our most profound hope and ambition.

Christian sobriety is a gift conferred upon saving faith and has no true parallel elsewhere. Spiritually it has nothing in common with human practicality, intuition, sympathy or cunning. Nor has it any relationship with purely temperamental or intellectual aptitudes for administration, for educational know-how, or for diplomacy. These can and should become its humble servants; yet we have seen enough of what such talents can do in a church when they are employed without the saving influence of sobriety. They become the instruments of glib, well-coordinated church politicians who can bridge every difficulty with sophistry, stifle every protest with a blanket of parliamentary device and ecclesiastical double-talk and keep a church a smooth-running organism that serves futility in glittering style.

What a marked contrast to this do we not find in apostolic example. As an instance we need only call to mind some of Paul’s dealings with his Corinthians. Here we find rich ground for reflection in that remarkable first chapter of II Corinthians, especially in the verses 12-22. Some of the detractors of the Apostle had agitated the congregation with charges that Paul was not a man of his word; that he was fickle and unreliable, and that therefore not too much importance should be attached to things he had said in his epistles. They had, of course, misread or ignored some of his plain statements and ascribed to him things, which he had not written. This, incidentally, is characteristic of those whose minds are controlled by hostility or resentment. They lack focus, read between the lines, and build a case on emotion. They do not think soberly.

Paul has been compelled by circumstances to alter his travel plans, and thus did not come to Corinth at the time and in the manner he had announced. This fact was being used by prejudiced and perhaps disgruntled men, not merely to smear Paul’s person with petty criticism, but to discredit his entire ministry.

How did the Apostle meet this adverse attitude? He might have launched into a detailed explanation of his change in plans. He had a perfectly good and compelling reason for revising his itinerary; and if he had been interested simply in justifying himself, in clearing his name, he might well have done so and then dismissed the matter. But unreasonable hostility is not combated or removed by reason, logic and honesty alone. Those so inclined could always have denounced Paul’s explanation as a mere alibi. Besides, there was something greater at stake than Paul’s reputation as an individual. He sees the picture in its framework of the Gospel and the salvation of souls. Thus he writes:

“For our rejoicing is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God, we have had our conversation in the world, and more abundantly to you-ward.

“For we write none other things unto you, than what ye read or acknowledge; and I trust ye shall acknowledge even to the end; as also ye have acknowledged us in part, that we are your rejoicing, even as ye also are ours in the day of the Lord Jesus.

“And in this confidence I was minded to come unto you before, that ye might have a second benefit; and to pass by you into Macedonia, and to come again out of Macedonia unto you, and of you to be brought on my way toward Judaea.

“When I therefore was thus minded, did I use lightness? or the things that I purpose, do I purpose according to the flesh, that with me there should be yea yea, and nay nay? But as God is true, our word toward you was not yea and nay. For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by us, even by me and Silvanus and Timotheus, was not yea and nay, but in him was yea.” For all the promises of God in him are yea, and in him Amen, unto the glory of God by us. Now he which stablisheth us with you in Christ, and hath anointed us, is God: who hath also sealed us, and given the earnest of the Spirit in our hearts.”

The answer of Paul is the answer of saving love; and its fashion is conditioned by sobriety. This gives it a unique and, to the unwise, an incomprehensible character. Paul suggests that, if Jesus Christ, whom the Corinthians received through Paul’s ministry and who is the very Yea and Amen of the unchangeable God, dwells in their sanctified hearts, they will hardly be prepared to believe, on evidence so irrelevant and immaterial as a change in travel plans, that Paul and his helpers were all constitutional and compulsive liars. And even if it were true that Paul was inconsistent and undependable in his personal affairs, yet the promises of God which he preached are unfailing. May the Corinthians but cling to what they have received!

Thus Paul not merely pleads his own defense, but defends his associates and, indeed, all the Corinthian Christians; for he defends the Gospel in its saving power. Now the further explanations concerning the change in his schedule could be properly given and received by people united in Christ and sanctified by the Spirit. Here was a fruit of true sobriety; and it is wonderful to contemplate. If only we always sought in prayer the grace to meet our tasks and confrontations in the same manner.

Let us see our church as a fellowship in which, by unanimous agreement, only one interest governs the hearts and is reflected in their response to every challenge: The Gospel-oriented desire to save what can be saved, to restore what can be restored, to heal what can be healed. Then one will say of this church: Lord, it is good to be here! For from this Spirit-filled community will flow the wholesome harvest of a God-given sobriety. It will constrain and train each of us to know and experience what it really means to “do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God” (Mic 6:8). Sobriety will be finding viable and rewarding solutions to problems that would otherwise frustrate or disrupt our hopes. It will focus our eyes upon the end and measure of our holy purpose, and keep us in peace through the fears and threats of the gathering darkness.

IN NOMINE JESU.