

SPEAKING AND LISTENING IN LOVE: A Meditation and an Encouragement¹ Part I

Paul O. Wendland

You have asked me to speak on the subject of how we admonish and encourage one another, particularly as you carry out your responsibilities as circuit pastors, but also bearing in mind how we engage one another in our ordinary discourse as pastor to pastor and pastor to people. A big subject.

Before I get any further into it, I should refer you to Dr. John Brug's latest foreword to the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, "Where There Is No Love, Doctrine Cannot Remain Pure."² It is an outstanding piece of encouragement on this very topic, applying law and gospel in a very *menschenkennend* way. It's one of those articles that makes you think, "How glad I am to be in the same church body as he!" And in some ways, I feel he's said all that needs to be said on the subject. Who wants Wendland coal, when he can have a Brug diamond?

But we each have our own gifts, given to serve the common good. And you have asked me to speak, not him. So here goes. To begin with I must tell you that I can't simply give you a dispassionate, exegetical discussion of the various relevant passages. The tone I'm looking for in this paper is more that of a *meditation* from the personal perspective of someone who has thought about what those passages mean for our common life in Christ. And as a person meditates in general on lovelessness displayed in tongue and ear, he must look at his own life. I want you to know that this is a struggle I share with all of you. I need the admonition. Although not autobiography, all of the cases mentioned are not artificial but shaped by my own experience. Finally I ask the Lord Jesus that it may serve both you and me as an *encouragement* to love one another deeply, fervently, unwaveringly, as he has loved us.

Because love is really what this subject is all about, love shown by the way we speak and love shown by the way we listen to one another. As he urges us to make every effort to "keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace," Paul encourages us to do that by "speaking the truth in love" (Eph 4:2,15). James gives us the other side of the equation,

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²WLQ 108 (1):3ff.

pointing out the importance of offering up to God a spirit that is far more eager to listen than to speak (Jas 1:19). As I consider these two sides of love's equation in this matter, I'm going to allow 1 Peter, in the main, to give us his encouragement. In his letter to Christians living as exiles in a world hostile to truth, Peter makes many points that are relevant to this topic and that sum up very well what Scripture has to say.

Listening in Love—Some Case Histories

A Depressed Pastor

It came as such a relief to talk about it. He had been struggling with these thoughts of anxiety and depression for some time now, but he found it difficult to share them with anyone, even his brother pastors. He was afraid they would condemn him as being weak in faith. Maybe it was wrongheaded, but that was how he felt. His depression had started to cause real problems, not only in the congregation but also at home. He was abrupt with his members. He flew off the handle over minor issues at home. He resented requests from his wife for help. "Can't she see I'm busy saving the world?" Ultimately he was angry with God who put so many problems in his path and never seemed to lift a finger to help him. These were not, perhaps, thoughts he was even fully conscious of thinking. But they were there in the background all the same. And the counselor, with his encouraging questions and sympathetic, listening ear, was able to bring them out of him so that he could recognize them for what they were.

A Surreal Mission Moment

The exchange was so bizarre as to be almost surreal. A missionary new to the field was giving a report on what the Word of God had to say about the marriage practices of the Tonga. In his audience sat a veteran national pastor, himself a Tonga by tribe. As the missionary warmed to his theme, the Tonga pastor tentatively raised his hand and gently spoke, "I'm not so sure that those particular practices are still generally observed among my people." The missionary insisted that they were. He had done the research. A book he had read was really the last word on the subject, and nothing more could be added. As the exchange continued and grew more heated, it became apparent that either the missionary felt he knew more about the Tonga than a Tonga, or he was just unwilling to admit the slightest error in what he had written. He certainly gave no evidence of a desire to listen to his fellow pastor.

Mr. Sarcasm I

He really had thought he was being entertaining, witty, amusing. He would hold forth in front of the coffee urn or in the bookstore dur-

ing break, discussing what he thought were the pressing issues of the day. And if some poor, wee, timorous beastie would offer an alternate point of view, he would set him straight in short order, using all the rhetorical skills at his disposal—including a little *ad hominem*. But after all, it was meant in fun, and that's just how seminarians talked to one another. The language of sarcasm was their way of showing love. Then he overheard a fellow student say about him, "Boy, I'd never want to talk with him about anything."

Mr. Sarcasm II

He'd always had this picture of himself in his head as being rather meek and mild, by all accounts a rather affable fellow. Approachable. Easy to talk to. When his wife would come into his home office to share some of her problems, he would listen to them, analyze them, and propose solutions for them. "Here's what you do, hon!" He didn't really catch the disappointment in her eyes as she went away. So it came as some surprise when later she told him, "I don't feel I can lean on you." As the family used to gather around the television of an evening, he would make comments on the characters being portrayed or on the news of the day. He thought he was just being lighthearted. Around the house, he would joke with his children and tease them from time to time. He thought it was all done in good humor, a form of "daddy time." Later, when his kids were grown, one of his children said to him, "Dad, you raised us on sarcasm."

The Importance of Listening

We pastors are talkers.³ We are preachers, proclaimers, heralds of the good news of Jesus Christ. Through careful training and by long experience, we have learned how to analyze and communicate the meaning of biblical texts. This is all to the good. But what it also means is that we have grown up in an environment that prizes verbal dexterity. The man who is quick on his feet in the dining hall is the toast of his fellows. The man who can preach with passion, fluency, and power is admired (and perhaps envied) by all. As young men are by nature, so were we competitive during our seminary years.⁴ We all know what kind of verbal jousting went on in the dorms as we sharpened our linguistic swords by using them on each other. We'd tell ourselves "Sarcasm is our language of love," but I

³Dr. Susan Holtz, our coordinator of educational technology, said to us after meeting with the seminary faculty, "You guys are all so *verbal*."

⁴I still hear it all the time in student chapel talks. Pointed applications are made with respect to students comparing their gifts over against one another.

can't help but wonder, "Is it really?" Do the habits picked up in our younger days persist on the conference floor? In circuit meetings?

In our work as pastors, people are coming to us all the time looking for answers, sometimes practical, sometimes biblical. We're busy—often so busy we don't feel we have the time to do all the things that are on our plate. So we listen long enough to get a handle on what the problem is. All the while the wheels are churning as we analyze the issues involved and come up with possible solutions. Nine times out of ten, maybe our quick answers are really all that anyone is looking for. But there's always that tenth time. . .

Now it may seem like I'm segueing from listening to talking already, but really I'm not. People confide in one another and share their burdens in an environment that is conducive for doing so. People tend not to confide in someone who has a reputation of being that guy who tries to solve your problems before he really understands what they are. Or who gives the impression that he is just so busy, he really doesn't have the time to listen. Or who seeks to dominate every conversation by parading all his knowledge for others to hear. If the relationship you have with your pastoral peers is mostly experienced on the level of good-natured put downs, it's really hard to break through that linguistic barrier and unburden yourself to them of your sorrows and struggles and woes.

☞ We are good at analyzing texts, but are we as good at listening to people? We have spent an immense amount of time training ourselves to be fluent speakers. How much time have we spent training ourselves to be careful listeners?

To listen is an act of love. Listening in love means we seek to understand others on their own terms, as they themselves want to be understood. A good listener invites confidences and keeps them. He wants to hear the whole story and to give enough time for the speaker to tell it. Finally, a good listener withholds making judgments while he listens, because he first wants to make sure that he understands exactly what the issues are, and how his confidant views them.

It's this last part that perhaps may make us a little queasy. In my experience, some people confuse the act of listening with the act of saying, "I agree with you." Just because I listen to you, just because I hear you out, doesn't mean that I'm affirming the truth of everything you're saying. "Like apples of gold in settings of silver is a ruling rightly given" (Pr 25:11). But how can I arrive at the correct judgment unless I listen to the whole case? When a jury listens to evidence in a trial, no doubt they hear many falsehoods, mistakes, and misperceptions. But there is a time to listen, and there is a time to render judg-

ment. Any juror who blurts out, “That’s a lie!” when testimony is being given is apt to be dismissed from the case.

So also when I’m listening, for example, to a member—deeply troubled—who begins to unburden himself to me about serious problems he’s having with his wife,⁵ my first task is to hear him out.⁶ I could of course preclude all conversation by simply saying, “Have you talked to your wife?” And if he says, “No,” to immediately direct him to her. But it seems to me that an atomizing application of Matthew 18 in this fashion is a good way to evade the passage’s whole spirit and point: in love I want to win the brother. In love, I want to “restore him gently” (Gal 6:1). How can I pay my full debt of love to him, not to mention his wife, if I don’t seek to clear up his thinking? And how can I do that if I don’t listen to him? No doubt there are many things that are mixed up in his mind. No doubt there are many misperceptions caused by frazzled nerves and bruised emotions. But he’s coming to me as his spiritual doctor. I want to work with him to help diagnose the true nature of the problem.

Now of course my debt of love is not paid in full merely by my listening. (Although in many cases, just the act of verbalizing things that were hidden in his heart may assist the brother in seeing himself how sin has taken a foothold there.) But the fact that his thoughts are now fully known to me means I have an opportunity to invite him to apply the truth of God’s Word to his situation. If it does seem as if, by what he’s saying, the wife too may have things for which she needs to repent, I might explore ways with him that he could approach her. At the same time, I will avoid taking his side or giving full credit to everything he says. “If what you’re saying is true, have you considered. . . ?” At all times I need to remember that I’ve only heard one side of a “one-flesh” story. I really need to listen to her side, too, and preferably the two of them together.⁷

⁵Of course if it’s just a matter of him inviting me to listen to him gossip about his wife, that’s a different matter altogether. There I might just point out to him that his grousing is neither edifying me nor showing much love for the precious gift God has given to him in his wife.

⁶Isn’t this really the office of a pastor? As Luther puts in in the Large Catechism, “It is not different from the case of a physician who is sometimes compelled to examine and handle the patient whom he is to cure in secret parts. Just so governments, father and mother, brothers and sisters, and other good friends [and we might add: pastors], are under obligation to each other to reprove evil wherever it is needful and profitable” (LC 275).

⁷The same thing may be applied at times, *mutatis mutandis*, if a member of another congregation comes to me as a circuit pastor. It depends on the seriousness of the issue of course. If it’s just a matter that he wants to complain because he doesn’t particularly like his pastor’s sermons, I would ask him if he’s said anything to his pastor about it. But if it’s something serious like child abuse, or illicit sexual relationships—

An analogy might be drawn here between this and the way a world missionary seeks to understand the culture to which he's been sent to preach the gospel. A good missionary in a cross-cultural situation had better learn to hold his tongue and be careful about making hard and fast judgments about what he's seeing and hearing, or he won't last six months on the field.⁸ As he grows in understanding of the people and the culture, he will learn—in partnership with spiritual men of the host culture—how to present the whole counsel of God in a way that truly applies to their situation.

Silence is a highly underrated gift also in the case of those who are deeply troubled and struggling. One thing I have learned when I studied Job as a middler, two things will I say: Job's counselors really were "miserable comforters" (16:2). Elihu was all full of himself, and the rest gave their best counsel when they said nothing at all, but rather simply sat in silence with the suffering man.

All right, but what if a brother pastor slips up in public? Well, I know we have an obligation to shout the truth from the housetops. I know we have a duty to admonish a brother who has publicly fallen into the sin of false doctrine. I know error must be confronted with the truth. Still, does that mean with every unhappy expression or slip of the tongue I immediately leap to my feet to rebuke my erring brother?

People often point to Galatians 2 and Paul's public admonition of Peter. "Public sin requires public rebuke!" True enough, but at the same time keep in mind that this was no food fight in the dining hall. This was a situation where the central truth of the gospel—justification by grace alone—was at stake. Paul's concern here was that "the truth of the gospel might remain with you" (Gal 2:5). Peter's sin was no mere slip of the tongue. He knew better!⁹ Furthermore, the poisonous toxins of false doctrine were already visibly affecting the body of Christ. Even Barnabas, Paul's co-pastor, was getting drawn into a type of behavior completely inconsistent with the gospel (2:13). I don't think this passage is urging us to demand a public recantation or apology for every expression that doesn't sound quite right to me at first. Brotherly admonition seeks to win the brother, not back him into a corner.

these are issues where peoples' earthly and spiritual lives may be in immediate danger. I should hear him out. Again, I do this not because I love to entertain juicy gossip, much less to harm my neighbor or to prejudge any case. But in my office I sometimes have to hear the seamier side of things just to get a sense of where to go to from here.

⁸The same might apply to pastors arriving at congregations to which they've been newly called.

⁹Implied by the *κατεγνωσμένος ἦν* (2:11), and as the case of Cornelius clearly shows (Acts 10, 11).

Maybe a better way of putting that would be to say, let's listen with a charitable ear to our brothers' papers and sermons.¹⁰ Perhaps I have not hit upon the ideal word-combination for making my biblical point, but is my overall intention clear? Perhaps it's not the best way of saying it, but can it be understood in the right way? Every time we listen to a paper, we ought to start with the assumption that we're listening to a brother, not a heretic. If we come to a writing—any writing—looking for trouble, we'll probably find it. Even Paul's letters have some things that are hard to understand! Gerhard warned, "It is wicked to interpret a poor choice of words as error when you know the right meaning was intended" ("Locus on Good Works," Section 38).¹¹

Finally I am absolutely convinced that no one has a complete lock on the whole truth. *Maanu oonse takhali mu mutwe omwe*—all wisdom does not reside in one skull, as the Tonga proverb goes. Listening to my brothers opens me up to the possibility that I might learn something. Maybe an opinion I put forth as the plain truth could use a little nuance. Maybe a firm judgment I have arrived at as the only right way to go would profit from a little tempering. "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another" (Pr 27:17). A corollary might read, "But iron can't sharpen iron, if one of those irons is a rock!" A man has to listen to learn.

Encouragement from Peter

1 Peter was written to Christians who were passing through the refining fire of suffering (1:6-7; 4:12). They knew what it was like to experience the slander and denunciation from the unbelievers among whom they lived (2:12,23; 3:16; 4:4,14-16). As the hostility from the outside world grew more intense, the pressure grew within the community of believers to lash out at one another (2:1; 3:8-12; 4:9).

Peter's encouragement to these men and women is grounded in the gospel. One of the striking things about the letter is the way gospel motivation is so closely intertwined with encouragements to godly living. *Since* they are a holy temple of living stones, a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, it follows that they exist to extol God's mighty acts in their everyday callings (Chapters 2 and 3). Not only has Israel's Word become their Word (1:10-12), Israel's God their God (1:16), but Israel's promises and glory also belong to them as the titles above make plain. Even more: Jesus' story has become their own story in baptism. The life he lived for them,

¹⁰And perhaps I should add "...and to reports of decisions made or actions taken by synod officials and entities."

¹¹Quoted in C. F. W. Walther, "Duties of an Evangelical Lutheran Synod," *Essays for the Church* vol. II, (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992), 57-59.

he now lives out in them (2:24; 4:1). They follow in his footsteps through sufferings to glory (1:6-7; 2:21; 5:6,10). Some of the most profound of all the Christological statements in Scripture are found in this letter, and yet it is often difficult to tell whether Christ is being held forth as the power or as the pattern for their lives. In most cases, it's both.

Jesus bore his suffering silently in the face of the most awful abuse. He did not trade insult for insult, threat for threat, but committed himself to the one who judges justly (2:23). So also Christians are to bear silently the unjust abuse that's heaped upon them from an unbelieving world (2:20). The sheer goodness displayed in their silent suffering will shame their tormentors (3:16). Through the inner beauty of their tranquil and gentle spirits, through their unwavering submission to their husbands, wives may even win them over "without a word" (*ἀνευ λόγου*) (3:1-6). Far from encouraging the kind of "in your face" Christianity displayed by a Westboro Baptist Church,¹² Peter even warns against getting a reputation as a meddler in other people's lives (*ἀλλοτριεπίσκοπος*—4:15). All the way through, his theme is: persist in doing what's right and then let the holiness of your conduct speak for itself.

Not only is silence sometimes the preferential option in the believer's relationships with the world, it is also at times useful in his relationships with his fellow believers. "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins." (1 Pe 4:8). Irritations, slights, grievances so easily build up among people in the church. "Sparks become fires, molehills become mountains, and through the magnifying glass of jealousy, specks of sawdust look like beams."¹³ No wonder Peter says, "Above all, love!" Given our sinful natures, without an unwavering commitment to love (*ἀγάπην ἐκτενῆ*), the devil would quickly tear every community of Christians apart. How does love act? It covers over sins, and not just a few, but a great big crowd of them.

Now in many cases, that just means letting it go without saying a word about it. Perhaps your brother did say or do something that wasn't the best. But making a federal case out of every peccadillo is not the way of love. Was this perhaps just a slip of the tongue? A sin of weakness? Let it go! "Love is patient, love is kind. . . it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs" (1 Co 13:4-5). In other cases, it may mean seeking a wholesome way to work the problem though with the brother.

¹²www.godhatesfags.com. Among other things, they feel it their mission to picket synagogues since the Jews killed Jesus. They celebrate the death of soldiers, because it's evidence that God is punishing this nation for accepting homosexuality.

¹³Brug, "Where There Is No Love," 4.

Don't press too hard. Don't press too fast. . . Give the brother time to study and reflect. Don't involve others prematurely. It is for good reason that Jesus instructs us that the first step should be to talk to the brother alone. Love does not hastily and prematurely involve others.¹⁴

To do any of this, careful listening and reflection is required. Peter says, "Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic (συμπαθεῖς), love as brothers (φιλάδελφοι), be compassionate (ἐὐσπλαγχνοὶ) and humble (ταπεινόφρονες) (1 Pe 3:8). To experience a fellow feeling (συμπαθεῖς), one must understand; to be compassionate (ἐὐσπλαγχνοὶ), one has to know what this person is going through. To accomplish this, one must listen.

And in all this, Peter reminds us, pastors (and all the more: circuit pastors) are to lead the flock by example (5:3). Then he gives this encouragement, "When the Chief Shepherd shall appear, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away" (5:40).

SPEAKING AND LISTENING IN LOVE: A Meditation and an Encouragement* Part II

Paul O. Wendland

Speaking the Truth in Love—Some Case Histories

Mr. Synod I

It was always a pleasure to spend time with him. He certainly saw the seamier side of synodical politics. He had to: he worked at the Synod Administration Building all day. But you'd never know it to sit with him as his guest at the dinner table. He was always so optimistic, always on the lookout for the latest great thing that the synod was doing, "Did you hear about Northside Ministries? Wow, those Kingdom Workers are really doing a great job!" Or, "I look at those new profs at the seminary, and I gotta say: there's some really sharp cookies up there. Good things are happening. We're really blessed." And his attitude was infectious. You couldn't help but be enthusiastic and optimistic about where our synod was heading when you got done spending time with him.

"Do you mean it?"

He had been told that he didn't have to fire his shotgun at every fly that flew through the house. To pick his battles carefully. And in general there was a lot that he could let slide. But when he listened to the representative of the women's baseball team pour out her concerns, he knew this was different. On one level, it seemed so trivial. A baseball league composed of church teams from various denominations. A brief huddle—both teams together—before each game. A little harmless joint prayer. They had been doing it already for weeks, all unbeknown to him. He could just hear his members say, "What's the big deal? We're not swapping pulpits!" But he also heard another voice. It almost felt as if Jesus was pointing to his last Bible class on the subject and asking him, "Did you mean it?" He knew he'd have to say something. And he knew it was going to get messy. He prayed that the Lord Jesus keep him from overstatement or emotional excess in the heat of the battle.

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"They just don't get it"

They had met at a conference on small church ministry. When they discovered that they were both WELS, they immediately began swapping notes. It sure did seem as if they had a lot of similar problems. And the most encouraging thing was, they were also like-minded when it came to trying out innovative solutions. They decided to continue meeting together and invite some other guys along. It was great. It was a relief to meet with people that built each other up for a change. It felt wonderful to escape those stodgy minded stick-in-the-muds from their pastoral conferences, whose last original ideas had been bronzed along with their baby shoes. They spent all their time criticizing *them* for doing something while they themselves did nothing. "They just don't get it," one said. They all laughed.

The King of the Blogs

It was the last straw, he figured. He had attended one too many worship services conducted without reverence by a pastor who acted like a would-be game show host. He had heard one too many praise songs with a mindless refrain repeating endlessly. He had heard one too many sermons with a fixation on sanctification and a formulaic gospel. And he had heard one too many excuses from his circuit pastor and his district president. Patience? Schmatience! It was time to do something, time to start a blog and expose every last one of them for their betrayal of authentic Lutheranism.

Mister Synod II

In class it was such a recognizable pattern, it was almost funny. Some guy would give a wrong answer—even one bordering on heresy—and the good professor would carefully construct a silk purse out of that sow's ear. He had this laser-like ability to cut through all that was wrong, find the single golden thread of truth in what the man had said, and use it to make a larger point. It made his classroom a safe place. You knew that he wasn't going to shoot you down in flames. People spoke freely. Outside of class it was the same. He was one of those guys who was so encouraging that just to be in his presence made you want to be a better person. He seemed to find the best in you and in others, and he inspired you in Christ to fan it into flame.

A Tongue Governed by Love

We all know what James says about the tongue. "A world of evil," he calls it. But also with the potential and power to do a world of good. Even a cursory read of the New Testament reveals a profound concern on the part of the holy writers for sins of speech. They were deeply

conscious of the power of loveless words to cause a hellish conflagration within a Christian community (Jas 3:3-5). Using language reminiscent of fighting dogs or biting snakes, Paul warns the Galatians that words kill (βλέπετε μὴ ὑπὲρ ἀλλήλων ἀναλωθῆτε—Gal 5:15). We've already noted Peter's encouragement to exercise special care in this regard when Christians are experiencing pressure or conflict.

But who would ever deny the apostles' equal zeal for truth? Their passion for getting the Word straight and then getting the Word out? We'll let Peter give us more encouragement on this later. It's enough here to note that those who have experienced the δύναμις θεοῦ εἰς σωτηρίαν (Ro 1:16) are filled with a restless, fiery love to help others into that same joy that they now know—only ever and always “truthing in love” (ἀληθεύοντες ἐν ἀγάπῃ—Eph 4:15). While we may at times have to speak the sharp word of rebuke or correction when love calls for it, the gospel will predominate in the words and ministry of a man who knows that his authority has been given to him for building up, not for tearing down (εἰς οἰκοδομὴν καὶ οὐκ εἰς καθαίρεσιν—2 Co 10:8).¹ It is a sin if we fail to admonish a brother who needs it, but the goal in all our speaking is always a saving one: to find the lost, to win the brother.

When I consider the men who mentored me in the past, who built me up and encouraged me, I would have to say that their words were far more redolent with praise than with blame. And this is certainly not because I was in any way less an heir of Adam than others. As I think on their behavior, I am convinced that it just became a settled choice of theirs in Christ Jesus to find the best in others, to find what was good and to praise it. I am not saying that I never profited also from the occasional verbal kick in the rear. But even there, I sensed in the righteous man's rebuke the words of a friend.

In this connection I cannot help but reflect on my own parenting, pastoring, and teaching. Like many pastors, I have an analytical mind. And sad to say, I have to admit that far more often I use whatever analytical powers I may possess to find what is wrong rather than to rejoice in the good. I can personally testify that a chill falls over a class period whenever a thoughtless, sarcastic remark of mine has wounded another hapless victim. I can testify to the opposite as well. When I humbly ask Jesus to help me guard my tongue and use my lips to declare his praise, the whole classroom becomes alive with grace.

As I think about the wider scene of pastor to pastor relationships, I am delighted to say that, in the vast majority of cases, I observe a

¹A common refrain in Paul's letters. See also Ro 15:2; 1 Co 8:11; 1 Co 14:12; 2 Co 13:10; Eph 4:16; Eph 4:29; 1 Th 5:11.

great deal of good brotherly encouragement going on: among the men with whom I serve, in circuits where I visit, at churches I attend. But there is also the other side as well. Sometimes I wonder whether the political polarization in our own country and the level of mutual spite it has inspired doesn't in a subtle way have an impact on our own psyche within the church.

Groups of the like-minded coalesce around various causes (worship, education, evangelism, etc.). And while in the initial phases it may all be entirely innocent, it often doesn't take long before those inside the group become dismissive of those on the outside. Would it surprise you that I've heard the phrase, "They just don't get it!" both from groups of pastors who considered themselves to be synodical innovators and from those who considered themselves to be defenders of the synod's confessional virtue? I guess I'm just not a big fan of the "they just don't get it" approach to brother pastors.

Or a circuit is all on fire with a good and godly zeal for truth. And well they should be, because truth is at stake! But it often doesn't take long before the language used in defense of the truth becomes fiery and denunciatory. Overstatement vies with the impugning of motives as the rhetorical coin of the realm. Impatience and a desire for a quick resolution triumph over brotherly care. Then, after the dispute is over, it can happen that the circuit settles into a spirit of suspicion, where motives are constantly questioned and synodical conspiracy theories abound. Luther taught us to pray, "Lord, save us from the disputes of faith, and the despair that follows." We all get what he means.

Especially in times of conflict, the common, human tendency to demonize the opposing point of view must be vigorously resisted. I mean where we characterize the other side in our hearts as not only wrong, but evil. In conflict or controversy we simply must show special care to take our time and think carefully over not only what we are saying, but how we are saying it and our motives for saying it.

In this connection, may I close out this section with a word on exercising a careful choice on the medium of communication we use? When my dad served in Africa, my mom was his secretary. All communication between him and the Africa committee was through snail mail. A single round of correspondence took a month. Dad would get a letter from the US, and he would get riled. He would fire off a blistering epistle. Mom would dutifully type it, word for word. Then she would put it back into his in-box and gently say, "Here it is, Ernie. Maybe you better sleep on this one before you send it." He would, and that draft ended up in the circular file the next day.

We have so much less social insulation between us these days. In this world of blogs and emails and constant contact there is no lag time

between thought and utterance. In the heat of passion I pick apart the other guy's email argument. I pour contempt on all his pride. I chuckle as I write, intoxicated by the power of my words. This in turn inflames me to reach even new heights of rhetoric. When I get done with him, I think, he's not just going to be set right, he's gonna be toast! I finish with a flourish and press "send." Soon, often immediately, I feel the bitter taste of regret in my mouth. But it's too late. The damage is done.

By hard experience, brothers, I've learned this much. In communicating in times of conflict, first ask yourself if this really is one of those "do you mean it" moments. If it isn't, cannot a generous love simply conceal my brother's offense against me? Answer him gently, if answer needs to be made at all? If it is a moment where you must speak, examine your own heart first. Why am I doing this? Did I meet this brother once and conceive a dislike of him for some reason? A feeling of resentment for something he said or did? Do I feel myself superior to him for some ungodly reason (position, intellect, whatever!)? Once I've humbly examined my own heart in the light of Jesus' truth, I'll be in a much better position to speak words fitted to win my brother.

Wherever possible, prefer face-to-face speech over a phone call, a phone call over an email, and (needless to say) an email over a public pillorying in a blog. If an email is the only way to go for now, maybe let it sit in your "draft" box for a while, overnight if possible. Read it over in the clearer, less impassioned light of morning.

Encouragement from 1 Peter

Keeping silent when truth is called for is never an option for Christians. On the contrary, setting apart Jesus in their hearts as Lord, they are always to be ready to give answer "to anyone who asks you to give a reason² for the hope that you have" (3:15). In context, Peter has in mind a situation of conflict, in which the Christian way of life is being scrutinized and slandered by unbelievers. So he reminds his brothers and sisters to speak "with gentleness and respect" (μετὰ πραΰτητος καὶ φόβου—16), and not in a contentious or argumentative way. Are we reading too much into this passage to believe that Peter's own experience during Christ's passion might be a backstory here? Peter writes with a sense of grace as one who himself failed in the crisis, yet was forgiven.

Peter's entire letter is in itself a perfect model of speaking the truth in love. We observe the way he encourages these exiles to find

²Perhaps it might better be rendered, "give an accounting for" or even "give an explanation for."

we meet in the gospels and transformed him by his pardoning grace into the man who wrote 1 Peter. Jesus can do the same for me. For us all! Dear Jesus, work out your own will and way in us that, dying to sin, we may rise up new in baptismal grace to offer to our brothers a charitable ear and a loving tongue!