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September, 1966

Dear Brother:

I am sure you have not noticed it, but it has been a long time since I sent these yellow sheets your way. There were many reasons for the long silence: heat, work, riots, strikes and many other things. But these yellow sheets have outlasted all these matters. So here, with a special salute to the brother who was elected a full-time District executive this summer, is another wayward footnote to Church history in our time.

Now I must begin this letter on a bitter note. Have you paid any attention to the **current "God is Dead" binge** of some Protestant (heaven help us) theologians? I must confess that I have occasionally listened with a sympathetic ear to some strange views in modern theology. I remembered that the Holy Spirit is still around, and I tried to watch for the beating of the wings of the Eternal Dove—in the renewal of Biblical studies, the new openness of the Roman Catholic Church, the prolegomena of the Gospel in the Theatre of the Absurd, the anti-God guerrilla warfare of our novelists, the growing humility of our great scientists...

But the "God is Dead" kick leaves me completely cold. Isn't there room in a Christocentric theology for a "theology of contempt"—a theology which is completely contemptuous of the dishonest use of good and ancient words, of the "Theologian" to whom a headline is more precious than Jesus Christ, and the criminal way in which blind leaders try to make the young equally blind?

Note well that to say "God is Dead" for some people is one thing. Every preacher knows that. It is quite another and totally different thing to say "God is Dead" without any qualifying words. The Church has lived with atheists, even in pulpit and pew, for thousands of years. These new ones, however, making an evil mockery of words and ideas, will do her little harm. It may even do some good if they call our attention to the people in our churches on Sunday morning who live from Monday to Saturday as if God were really dead.

The heart of my new theology in this area would be "contempt." Its scriptural basis would be Psalm 2:4—"He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh. The Lord shall hold them in derision." These words would also contain overtones of St. Paul's Athenians—the cosmic Christ of Ephesians and Colossians —and the lofty eschatology of the Revelation of St. John.

Let's face it: The "God is Dead" theologian should be recognized for the double-talker and gobbeldygook expert that he is. Let me say again: I am all for the honest, seeking, humble theologian. He deserves our understanding and support. But for these new advocates of an old and sleazy atheism I have nothing left but a "theology of contempt."

Perhaps we should add to our Synodical Sundays, Missions Sundays, Bible Sundays, Youth Sundays and so on, just one more: **Contempt Sunday**. On that day the text for your sermon will, of course, be Psalm 2:4. The theme would be: "God is Dead, and you can hear Him laughing." The choir would sing "A Mighty Fortress," and the collection would go for missionary work at theological seminaries and psychiatric examinations of seminary professors who like to bask in headlines.

The answer to all this curious and temporary nonsense? The warm support of our own seminaries which must face this theological madness with real scholarship and total submission to a God who can really be contemptuous. Fortunately He is also a God who in Jesus Christ is a God who knows the children who seek Him in spirit and in truth and who loves them with an understanding, completely intelligent and everlasting love...

So dismiss the "God is Dead" theologians as a momentary ripple on the sea of time. There will be other problems in the years ahead, infinitely more difficult and more dangerous, but this one you can forget with the contempt of the Ancient Mariner for a momentary breeze.

Our own ominous albatross is not the "God is Dead" theologian. It is the pseudo-theologian who feels that hate is the fundamental approach of God to man and man to man and that God can be fully contained in human words understood fully by human minds—and the curious heresy that the Una Sancta can be built by throwing monkey-wrenches into the machinery of the empirical, visible Church.

Quotes from the Christian Century on this topic:

"Sir: I assume that nothing negating nothing equals nothing. If that assumption is correct, then Altizer (a leading "God is Dead" funeral director)) has written nothing about nothing. And that, sir, is three-and-a-half pages too much of nothing. And if you paid him for his article, you got nothing for something."

"Sir: In the men's room of an Iowa City tavern somebody wrote on the wall, 'God is Dead—Nietzsche.' Somebody else wrote underneath it, 'Nietzsche is dead—God.' Dr. Altizer's sophistic and confused article . . . reminded me of this inscription. If he really believes God is dead—and I assume he is honest to God—why doesn't he do something useful, like making money or discovering a cure for athlete's foot, instead of teaching Bible and religion at a Methodist school?"

End of bitter note.

* *

A student drops on my desk a selection of words and phrases culled from a recent issue of one of the journals devoted to maintaining the "truth and purity of the Word of God." All these phrases were applied, the student tells me, to professors at St. Louis, River Forest, and to leaders of Synod. Here is part of this list. If I had the money, I would photostat them in order to establish their authenticity—but I do not believe in photographic journalism. It's a lazy and expensive way of doing things.

St. Louis: God's Word is now hated and despised where once it reigned supreme.

Theological obscenities go unrestricted year after year.

The pious mask is at last being torn off all this hypocrisy.

The Luther Tower stands helplessly enveloped in nebulous theology and unctuous rhetoric about the "Word," the "Gospel"—blatant attacks upon the Bible and the Reformation.

Official fury spends itself largely in a cowardly castigation of those who refuse to be dumb dogs.

This shamelessly massive assault upon the very foundations of the Church.

The institution (Seminary) which prides itself on its confusion of tongues.

I really like the spirit of these phrases—kind, brotherly, loving, patient. They always put the best construction on everything. They speak the truth in love—and surely, surely they will stand up on Judgment Day when our Lord will finally express His own anger and all earthly anger will disappear before the hot white anger of the swift coming of His feet.

Let's Face It Section: In the spring of 1966 the pre-Lenten drowsiness of the Missouri Synod was rudely disturbed by a survey report from St. Louis which indicated that our parochial schools (all 1400 of them with 160,000 pupils) were not doing everything we had expected them to do. According to the press reports the survey was cool, objective and cutting. It said that our greatest results were with children of "marginal Lutheran" families but that the rest were very disappointing. Parenthetical note: "I like that sociological word 'marginal.' It indicates that we may now have an ecclesiastical, this-worldly purgatory, neither heaven nor hell, neither Church nor non-Church—just marginal—suspended in space waiting for the divisiveness of the Last Judgment. Perhaps they could be the nucleus of a new synod. We could have LCA, ALC, Missouri Synod and Marginal Synod. Their pastors would be former Lutherans who had turned fundamentalist.

However that may be, I waited happily for the sound of the big guns from St. Louis and elsewhere. I saw a fight coming, and I ran for my nearest fence. A beautiful quarrel was in the making, and I wanted to get out of the cross-fire. It would, I knew, be a typical ecclesiastical fight with everybody quoting prophets, saints, apostles, evangelists, historians, the fathers—and now in 1966, heaven help us also sociologists and psychologists. Everybody would be half-right and half-wrong and the issue would be finally settled by a dismaying amount of visceral thought.

So I sat on the fence listening cheerfully to the big guns. After a few weeks of this I decided to pull out my water-pistol and join in the fracas. After all, I thought, I might be able to put out some brush fires. **My water-pistol had only two squirts.**

Squirt One: Our parish schools are a very, very good thing. Founded on some wrong notions concerning our nationalistic and cultural heritage, they have grown up into a significant and valid part of our pluralistic society. They contribute something fresh and vigorous to our nation—the salt air of educational non-conformism. Let the world worship John Dewey! We have better things to do.

Squirt Two: They can and should be better than they are, especially theologically.

Those two conclusions are based on my own survey of parochial schools. It began on a dark September day in 1906 when I started on a daily pilgrimage to St. Stephen's school—two and a half miles from our house in New York. For seven years, through snow and sleet and rain, through cold and heat, we walked to the little school behind the church. We had one of the best teachers I have ever seen, the sainted Otto Prokopy who handled all seven grades (for a while) with the powerful ease of a Christian gentleman. Voice from the rear: So you went to a one-room school. That explains a lot of things. You know nothing of buses and buildings of glass and aluminum, and the school psychiatrist waiting to ask you why you hated your father. An underprivileged child headed for the gutter. How did you ever avoid it—or did you?

Well, all I know is that when I got into the upper grades I would sit quietly while Teacher Prokopy was busy with the primary grades, and I would do my arithmetic, read my Bible history, or look at the pictures in my "Fibel." I did not know it then, but I was getting a liberal education. My seat was near the window where everybody had to sharpen his pencils and my course in "social living" (big stuff these educational days) was a series of sotto-voce conversations with my girl friend who had come there to sharpen her pencils. I could always gauge the state of her affection for me by the speed with which she broke her pencils.

That was the beginning of my life-long survey of our parish schools. Later I found that this foundation was solid and strong. We knew nothing of the modern six R's—Remedial Reading, Remedial Writing, Remedial 'Rithmetic—which form so large a part of modern education. We just knew that we had to read well and fast, or we would find ourselves standing in the corner reading one paragraph over and over until we thought we were ready for another hearing.

And religion? We were surrounded by the ecology of faith. The prayers at 9, 12 and 3 o'clock—the hymns, the choir rehearsals (I still remember my sense of achievement when I graduated from soprano to alto and could imagine myself as a "basso profundo" in a Bach cantata) and the memorizing of the Scripture passages in the Catechism.

Even now, sitting on my fence, I can hear my educationist friends saying: "How utterly horrible! Such indoctrination! Such brain-washing! Such primitive methods as standing in the corner! Were you ever really free to do what you wanted to do?" Answer: Holy smokes, we never thought of that! We had been told to obey our parents and teachers (there was always the Fourth Commandment) and most of the time—we instinctively felt that this was a good idea. When we did something wrong—like breaking a window or stealing an apple or hitting a smaller person—and were punished for it—well, that was the way life was. This was the way God wanted it, and sooner or later, we knew that there would be forgiveness, because that too was the way God wanted it.

This is the end result of my survey extending now for sixty years. In all these six decades, conducting my survey from both sides of the teacher's desk, I have never lost my respect and admiration for the parochial school. Its basic theory, educational, social and theological, is sound. It can make a distinctive contribution to the life of the Church and of society.

One more squirt from my water pistol—our schools could be better than they are. Academically? but this is not the major problem. The St. Louis survey seemed to indicate that our children are at times receiving religious instruction which is not really religious in the good sense of that term. In fact, some of our instructors are theologically unsound. There is no religious value in being able to recite the books of the Bible, to know the height of Mt. Nebo or the distance from Jerusalem to Jericho. We must do exactly what the Bible does—no more and no less—teach Jesus Christ, His atoning life and death, His coming and going in life and in history. His blessed dominion over our hearts—Jesus Christ always and forever, the same—His breaking of the backbone of history—His indwelling Holy Spirit—His intercessions for us night and day—all that He is and can be—for us.

This we clearly have not done too well in our schools. Too many of our teachers—especially those who have not been trained in our own schools—have become un-Lutheran fundamentalists, legalists, rationalists. It is easier to teach a fundamentalist approach to Jesus Christ because it is rationalistic. Theology is faith in search of understanding, but never at the expense of faith—the final mystery and miracle of a forgiving God.

Now I shall return to my perch on the fence and wait cheerfully for the next blast from armies who clash by night.

In the very heart of the dog days in July (temperature above 90 for 13 days) my door opened slowly and Theophilus staggered in. He pulled a chair toward the little air-conditioner and collapsed into it. There was a long silence while he wiped his sweating face. Then he spoke slowly: "Don't think for a moment that I came to see you on a day like this. All I want is to sit near this heavenly little machine and rest a while. We would have one at home but Deacon Sauerbraten says it is forbidden by Gen. 3:19. One of these days I'm going after that guy's hermaneutics, but it's too hot today.

The silence grew big and oppressive, broken only by the frantic buzzing of a fly trying to escape through a closed window.

Finally Theophilus spoke: "I really came to discuss a problem and perhaps this heat is a good place to start. I have a profound, decisive question: "What are you throwing in the waste-basket these days?" I looked at him in wonder: "Theophilus, it's hot but not that hot. Why should you be interested in the contents of my waste-basket?"

Theophilus looked weary: "These blistering days I suddenly realized that my own life depends not only on what I read but above all on what I do not read. I thought I might begin to check this insight on a low level by asking, "What, these days, do you throw into the waste-basket? What do you not read? What is your non-reading quotient? You know very well that all journals of thought and opinion, even the venerable and rejuvenated C. T. M. tells us what to read. But who tells us what not to read?" Theophilus closed his eyes and there was silence in the room except for the eschatological buzzing of the fly.

Finally I said something that is popular in the age of the dialogue: "Theophilus, what about you? You seem to be ahead of me in this matter. What do you throw in the waste-basket?"

Theophilus opened one eye: "It's just like I figured. You need some guidance. I will now instruct you. I throw away all articles and books which are supposed to be in dialogue but are really only the image of one guy beating a dead horse, all attacks on the Church, all franked letters from Congressmen, all letters that begin "since you are a leader in your community," all epistles from brothers "I read your article in the 'Ecumenical Weekly' and I want to know," all mimeographed stuff (let one of the other recipients answer), anything that looks like your yellow sheets, birthday cards, sermons that smell too much of the lamp and not enough of the street."

Theophilus paused and I said: "What about those journals that build the Kingdom by tearing down the Church and its leaders? Surely they go into the waste-basket?"

Theophilus opened both eyes: "Oh no, not at all. I read them word for word. They are here to keep us humble, to show us again the great mystery of God's love for us and for them, and to remind us that we are still in the Church Militant, the Suffering Church, the Church Waiting for the apocalyptic day when words will finally be swallowed up in the Word. I do not like those troublers of Israel but I have learned to take them as the great contemporary evidence for original sin."

I could see that Theophilus had been ready for that question. I turned my attention to the fly. It was still beating its wings against the window. For a moment I thought that it would be better for the fly if the window were unwashed and dirty—it would be much easier to see that it was struggling against something that was real and hard and more lasting than a fly.

Theophilus heaved himself out of his chair and laid some paper on my desk. He had been unusually talkative during the past few months:

Dear O. P.:

I came down to the office this evening to study the proposed budget for next year which the chairman of the finance board dropped off at the house this afternoon. But it has been a hard day and my mind refuses to accept any further discipline. It insists on roaming into what it apparently finds greener pastures and I am too tired to corral it and bring it back.

For the last half hour or so my mind has been dawdling over the pictures of my predecessors which hang on the wall opposite my desk. I am the seventh pastor of this 107-year-old congregation. Much of what I have been able to do, some of what I have been unable to do must be ascribed, under the Holy Spirit, to the godly labors and the human weaknesses of these men, all of them now at rest. In many ways this is still their parish. Its constitution and articles of incorporation date from the years of its first pastor. His successor founded the school. The third pastor built the church building in which we still worship. His successor baptized most of our older members and carried through the change-over from German to English. The fifth pastor gave this congregation the best thirty years of his life and left his people a concept of the dignity of the pastoral office which I am afraid I do not often live up to. My immediate predecessor died young, after a very short ministry, but he apparently had a remarkable way with young people, if the vitality of the youth program which I inherited from him is any valid standard of judgment.

And now I am here, destined one day to remain in the memory of this congregation only as a picture on the wall with a name under it and two dates. And it is sobering to reflect that all of my achievements and failures, all of the great and wearying hours of my ministry here will be reduced to a dash set between those two dates. Some infinitesimally small dot on that line will mark the point at which the debt-retirement drive, which absorbed the best energies of our congregation for more than three years, eventuated so successfully that we had a special service of thanksgiving. Another tiny dot represents the long months that the Board of Elders and I spent leading one of our families patiently and, I hope, evangelically through the grades of admonition to the painful point of excommunication. Somewhere along that line are dots, invisible to the human eye, representing hundreds of sermons, thousands of pastoral calls, tens of thousands of committee meetings, many hours of joy and a few hours of near despair.

But I recall from something I once read that any line we draw represents only a minute segment of a line which extends from infinity to infinity. (I may not have that formulated correctly, but at least that was the sense of it.) I look at the picture of the stern-faced young man who was the second pastor of this congregation and I know that the scope of his ministry here cannot be compressed into a dash separating the dates 1873 and 1891. For good and for ill, the line extends back into infinity and forward into infinity, that is, back to God and forward to God. And although I have no way of knowing what any specific dot along that line meant to the ongoing life of this parish and its people, I know that it did mean something, just as my apparently random musings tonight have some lasting significance for this congregation. For in Christ our every moment is redeemed and impregnated with meaning. Getting back to that stem-faced young predecessor of mine, I can't help wondering whether this was his usual expression or whether it was a mask put on for the photographer on the theory that the dignity of the pastoral office demanded it. I would not like to think that his theology was all that joyless or that he walked so unsmilingly among his people. I shall have to make a note to check the photographs which I have had taken. If I am ultimately to be reduced to a picture and a name on the wall, I should at least like to be remembered as the kind of pastor I have tried to be to these people.

Peace-

Theophilus

Theophilus Again-

Dear O. P.

I usually receive my copy of your yellow journalism a day or two after the holiday season to which it is addressed. This is all right; I get your reflections on Easter, on Easter Monday. That gives me 364 days to mull them over before my next Easter sermon comes up. But it leads me to have little motivation to fill your request that I drop you a line about my current reading for 'Advent.' I'd rather talk about Christmas-gift books, not because they are tied in to either season but simply because it's possible to talk about more expensive books that way. Usually the **Frauenverein** or the **Junior Walther League** comes through with a little book money for Herr Pastor and for a few days he can look at something other than paperbacks.

All right, suppose it's splurge time. I'd suggest that your pastor-readers use some of the money to buy the kids an Erector set. Then ask them to build a little cart, to haul around your first bookpurchase, the new three volume Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church, written by Julius Bodensieck and 722 other people. 2,600 pages, boxed, \$37.50 from Augsburg. Leave room in the cart for the Oxford Annotated RSV Bible which now includes the Apocrypha. I think that costs \$10.50.

I suppose many of the brethren will be using big-book money for either Sorenson or Schlesinger on Kennedy; I have a radical non-establishment suggestion. While discussing 'the secular:' why not read **The Autobiography of Malcolm X** (Grove) or Brown's **Manchild in the Promised Land** (Macmillan). These are shocking books, but I think they will help more of us understand why there are Watts' riots, why not every one accepts middle class Lutheran standards, and how far we have to go to become empathic.

On safer soil: tuck in Thielicke's The Trouble with the Church from Harper and Row: it's the only book I have mentioned which was small enough to fit into my stocking on Saint Nicholas' Day, way back on December 6.

O. P.: I'll bet you will get this out before Advent, just to embarrass Your Faithful Servant,

Theophilus

Footnote: I have embarrassed him by three months—a record even for me. By the way, this Theophilus is a smart fella. He is also honest. He has really read the books he recommends. **O. P. K.**

Notes on a Frayed Cuff: During the forty years in which I have wandered around The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod I have quite frequently been astonished at some of the very scholarly work which is being done in quiet parsonages throughout the land. Some time ago I ran into a brother who has an excellent collection of Luther's works and is doing some very real pioneer study in this important area.

All this by way of introduction to the fact that **Brother Arthur E.** Beck of Swanville, Minnesota, has spent considerable time during the past few years in translating Stoeckhardt's "Biblische Geschichte." I used this volume many years ago at the seminary and found it exceedingly valuable. Stoeckhardt undoubtedly was the greatest exegete that we have produced and his sharp insight into the meaning of Holy Writ is very unusual in these shoddy days. Brother Beck has translated Stoeckhardt into a volume called "Wisdom for Today." He points out that in the two volumes on the Old Testament and the New. Stoeckhardt answers 3.782 questions. I have seen an advance copy of Brother Beck's work, and I think it is tremendously worthwhile. In fact, we are stocking it in our University Bookstore. Meanwhile, if you should like to see a copy, write to Brother Beck at Swanville, Minnesota and enclose the necessary money—\$3.95 plus postage.

You can use this volume most effectively in your confirmation classes and in Bible classes on various levels. By the way, Brother Beck also informs me that the cost of publication has at least partially been borne by support from the good people in his congregation.

* *

Theophilus pops up again.

Dear O. P.:

From somewhere—probably from my peasant ancestors—I got this notion that if it's raining, a man is entitled to stay inside and take it easy. So that's what I have been doing most of the morning. Apparently Heaven agrees with my views on this matter, because the only mail I got this morning was **Dr. Harms' "Memo to My Brethren,"** which I consider a kind of classic example of the sort of thoughtful, lowkey thing that a man ought to save for reading when it is raining outside and he is under no immediate pressure to save the world or the church.

He's got a good paragraph in this one. I'm going to paraphrase it and pass it off as my own in the next issue of my Bulletin. He says: "We adopt good resolutions but little happens. In my judgment we do little personally to implement resolutions because we have comforted ourselves in the conviction that others are the cause of our difficulties and they alone can remedy the situation." That's the story of my life, O. P., and it reads like the history of my congregation.

I guess I was never cut out to be president of anything. I look at a guy like Dr. Harms and I ask myself, "How can he take it?" Here he is, pushing his middle sixties and when he isn't in an airplane he's in some meeting with some crying one thing, and some another and most of them not knowing why they have come together (cf. Acts 19:32). I wouldn't be surprised if, when he went to bed at night, there wasn't somebody still tugging at his pajama top and wanting "just a couple of words with you, Mr. President."

You know me. I would tell them to take their cotton-pickin' hands off'n me and let me alone. But he manages to keep a smile on his face and a spring in his step and a hopeful attitude toward the future.

What I was especially never cut out to be is President of Synod. Just contemplate for a moment the kind of reading Dr. Harms is going to be doing these next six months. With that New York convention coming up, he is going to be up to his ears in overtures, reports, and memorials—about half of which, I would guess, will come from somebody who is mad at somebody else and wants Synod to "deal with" (i. e., liquidate) them. And it will probably be worse than usual this year because a lot of the brethren will either be looking for some good excuse to refuse to participate in this Ebenezer Thank-offering or will be raising cane about how the Thankoffering money is to be divided.

I've got a real sharp member, Joe Powalsky, who has been a politician around these parts for years. I was with Joe and some of our men the other night and we had each had a beer, so naturally, like any group of Missouri Synod Lutherans that has had a beer, we were talking about the state of the church. A couple of the young men from the new computer factory were really disturbed by some of the stuff they have seen circulated around the church. They don't know whether to believe it, in which case they figure that the leadership of the church has to be corrupt, or whether to disbelieve it, in which case they were all for racing through the stages of admonition and getting down to the serious business of delivering the offenders over unto Satan.

Old Joe listened to them for a while, but finally he couldn't take it any more. "For God's sake!" he roared. "Can't some of these things wait until the last Judgment?" If he hadn't got so worked up that he forgot that the preacher was present he would have softened that "For God's sake!" to something more suitable for clerical ears. Which would have been too bad, because I suspect that it is only for God's sake that we can trust each other, put the best construction on one another's words and actions, and bear one another's burdens.

I thought of passing this anecdote along to Dr. Harms. But do you think he might be offended by the profanity?

Dear Theophilus-

Your letter at hand. President Harms will not be offended by anything which comes from a Christian. I shall assume that you and Joe are such. There is some evidence to the contrary—but I'll let it go. O. P. K.

Notes on a Frayed Cuff: An ancient brother with a bizarre sense of humor sends me a picture of his grandson, age three, reading these yellow sheets. What a horrible way to raise a child! The poor kid looks puzzled and frightened. He had not bargained for this kind of world. I was so shocked that I wrote the youngster a note:

"Dear Synodical Official of 2016 A. D.—

Under separate cover I am sending you copies of Luther's Catechism and the Synodical Handbook. Please read them and tell your old man to use the yellow sheets elsewhere. And with regard to the two books I am sending you, please remember: 'Men have risen to greatness on one or the other of these but never on both. This is one reason why we were in trouble back in 1966—somebody thought that the Synodical Handbook was as good as Luther's Catechism.'

As ever yours,"

O. P. K.

Vatican II has given birth to a host of stories — some of them properly scurrilous — but all quite funny. Our Roman brethren have not lost their sense of humor. Sample: relayed by Lutheran Hour speaker Hoffmann, who as an observer had two eyes and an intelligent ear on each side of his head. The story: "What are the four things that God does not know? Answer: God does not know a) what a Benedictine will say when he enters the pulpit, b) what a Capuchin has said after he leaves the pulpit, c) how many orders of sisters there are, d) what the Jesuits are up to today."

So much for today.

Sincerely yours,

OP Kretzmann