Temptations That Especially Confront the Orthodox

By Rev. Martin Galstad


1. The Case

Is there not a danger that we have become quite satisfied with the definitive and the scholastic to the exclusion of the meditative and the mystical?  May we not have become occupied mainly with clear mental processes and principles (doctrines), with an attendant carelessness as to the bringing of their fruits to the surface in our lives?

Thomas Carlyle once pointed out a peril that threatens persons of considerable status and importance, and a student of that author said that Carlyle was speaking of himself: “It is a sad but sure truth that every time you speak of a fine purpose, especially with eloquence and to the admiration of bystanders, there is less chance of your ever making a fact of it in your poor life.”  That may be a special peril of churchmen.  In an unconscious way, we are tempted to let our mental processes climb over into the field of memory of things we imagine we have performed.  There they find a comfortable place and remain, much to our admiration of their excellence.  But they are sneak thieves who stole in there without going the roundabout way through our words and deeds.

With our orthodox Christianity we are in danger of becoming like a cup of good coffee in which the sugar remains lying at the bottom.  It needs to be stirred up, not in the way of emotionalism, but in the way of Jesus, St. Paul, and of many of the reformers—of every practicing Christian of whom it can be said as it was of Abraham, “He is a friend of God.”  The opponents of the disciples realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, and “they took note that these men had been with Jesus” (Acts 4:13).  Their faith flavored their lives, and this could be seen and tasted.

In The Travail of Religious Liberty Roland H. Bainton said, “We tremble for ourselves lest we too be engulfed, and even more lest in the effort to extricate ourselves we succumb to the very methods we abhor.”  Toward the end of the book he writes,

The noblest achievement of the Western world has been the conduct of controversy without acrimony, of strife without bitterness, of criticism without loss of respect.  But when men do not operate within the same framework, this becomes impossible.  Only those who believe in universal right, in integrity, law and humanity, if not in the Christian God, are in a position to clash on higher levels and retain personal friendship as did Roger Williams with most of his opponents.  But if one makes the will of a party into an absolute, and for it will lie and assassinate, then for the other side to fight according to the rules is very difficult.  The more the contestants are locked, the greater becomes the danger that the rules will be scrapped on both sides . . . . The very effort to control the unscrupulous for leads to unscrupulousness.

Edmund Reim, when president of the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, said: “We must realize that when we defend the cause of conservatism, when we resist the trend toward liberalism, we are in constant danger of a reaction in the opposite direction, of falling into a state of rigorism and legalism that is just as wrong as the errors we oppose.  Let us not close our minds against this possibility.  For such a false attitude can exist only at the expense of the true spirit of the Gospel.  Let us have eyes for the dangers that lie on the one extreme as well as the other.”
2. Equilibrium

The temptation is to lose our balance. We are tempted to forget that “every solution, however wise and necessary, carries within itself the possibility of some new abuse” (Bainton). “Even that which is imperative in any given situation opens the way to abuses of another sort.” Lord Acton put it sharply: “Every institution tends to fall from an excess of its own basic principle.” “If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall!” (1 Cor. 10:12).

Believing that good works are not necessary to salvation, one finds it easy to think they are not necessary. If one believes they are necessary, he finds it easy to rely on them for salvation. One who has humility finds it so easy to be proud of it. It would be easy to prepare a sermon on the dangers of being a Christian! Are we not to work that activity out with fear and trembling? It is foolish not to realize that there are dangers.

An English divine once remarked about a preacher who lived so ill that it was a pity he ever entered the pulpit, but once in the pulpit, he preached so well that it was a pity he ever got out. Every shade of liberalism has the extremes to which it runs, but our concern here is not with that. Our concern is with avoiding the perversions that especially tempt us.

The first requirement is an alertness to the fact that perversions lie in wait to corrupt every situation and position. Aristotle pointed this out in the Nicomachean Ethics when he showed that tyranny is the perversion of monarchy and oligarchy is the perversion of aristocracy. Too much courage leads to foolhardiness, and too little brings cowardice. Better than either is the golden mean.

Moses was meek above all men, and therefore he was strong. Being strong, he gained strength by being meek. When we are weak, we are strong; but there is a weakness which runs into despair even as there is a strength that leads us to tempt God and lose his protection.

Take an analogy from politics to show that every situation is open to abuse. Both in Britain and in America steps were taken by liberals to protect the people against too much power of sovereigns, presidents, governments. Now true liberals are those who must protect the people against too much paternal government of their own making. So also Luther fought the tyranny of the papacy, but the fanaticism of the peasant revolts grieved him fully as much. St. Paul fought valiantly for our liberty in Christ, but he had equally strong words for the perversion of liberty into license.

Historically, the church has run into perversions from time to time. The orthodox at times committed sin to make heretics good. The story of persecution is the story of the actions of those who belonged to the established church. There is no more terrible thing than an entrenched ecclesiasticism. And it is a sad but sure fact that defection from a commonly accepted course or practice or profession is generally more intolerable to the devotees than is a failure to live up to it. Partisan belonging is more tangible and more easily made important that is religious rectitude. Place and nation is an easier rallying ground than is the plain of truth.

Consider our temptations: to minimize some truth in order to maintain the party; to appear as leaders rather than as prophets; to change nuances to appeal to followers. The leader will choke down something he ought to say so as not to discourage someone almost persuaded to be a follower. The prophet will be more forthright although he knows in advance that he may be cut down for it. The leader is tempted to be sticky with the honey of sweetness and light—tact and diplomacy fairly ooze from him, as from the oversocialized salesman. The prophet is tempted to be clipped and sharp—let the chips fall where they may. One uses procedures that others call questionable, but he lights fires as a missionary. The other is a great theologian and pulls no punches even in the pulpit, but he doesn’t get out to see people, confessing that he just can’t make missionary calls. Oh, for the kind reasonableness of God’s Christian who can do the one and not neglect the other!

In times of controversy and crisis, the allurement lies in not following through our confessions: to talk boldly till the trial is at hand and then fail to vote one’s conscience. It is risky to predict performance on the basis of someone’s pronouncements:

There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, “Son, go and work today in the vineyard.”
“I will not,” he answered, but later he changed his mind and went.

Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, “I will, sir,” but he did not go.

Which of the two did what his father wanted?

Fortunately, the day of grace allows for the changing of minds. “If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light” (1 Cor. 3:12f).

If someone takes us aside to question our inconsistent action, we are quick to assert the utter purity of our doctrinal commitment. Here one must question the thrust of that “utter.” Satan started the tactics of diversion: “You must not eat from the tree” he made into “You must not touch it” (Gen. 3:3). Note the psychological gymnastics! The Pharisees carefully tithed of their spices (mint, dill, and cummin). “But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy, and faithfulness. . . . You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel” (Mat. 23:23f). Their rabbis were expert at devising excuses for failure in the obedience of faith. “You have a fine way of setting aside the commandments of God in order to observe your own traditions!” said Jesus, and then he cut through their hypocrisy in the practice of Corban (Mark 7:9-13).

How strange people can be in their reactions! They will (contrariwise) add to the laws and so sharpen them that to their minds they become so impossible to keep that they are excused from even trying. In theology, that is where liberalism goes to work and perverts all doctrine. It reminds one of the little boy reprimanded for pilfering a piece of cake just before dinner: “You never let me have anything to eat!”

Such extremes should caution us not to move even slightly in either direction. When critics of orthodoxy point out this tendency in what they see as splinter groups, there is enough truth in that to alert us to the danger. Have not the supposed requirements of orthodoxy in a parish sometimes been made so exact that it is impossible to win many to it? Have not unnecessary inhibitions at times taken heart and spirit out of church members?

The requirements of faith-life should not be let down, but they should be upheld with becoming dignity. When the world hates us, as Jesus said, let us make sure it is for his sake. Let it not be for our failure to walk as friends of God. May no one have cause to call us cold, aloof, self-satisfied and supercilious, or worse. “When a man’s ways are pleasing to the Lord, he makes even his enemies live at peace with him” (Prov. 16:7).

Why the seemingly high correlation between being orthodox and having insensitive and quarreling personalities? We prefer people who are orthodox because they have to be, bound by the Word. One wonders wherein lies the quirk by which one who disagrees so easily becomes disagreeable. Why does one who speaks the law so readily convey the impression that he, of course, would never be guilty? Is it lack of insight that leads people to think that it is the loud crash of the hammer that cracks the shell of the erring sinner? It is not the tornado or lightening that breaks the rocks into sand and soil; it is oftener the quiet expansion of frost and ice that are not even heard on a cold winter night.

Nathan did not storm and threaten when he so effectively spoke the Word to David after his affair with Bathsheba. Nathan told a little story about an imaginary neighbor. And I often wondered if it was more than barely audible when Nathan managed to say, “You are the man.” A challenging tone might have led to the speedy liquidation of Nathan, for the might David was a bloody man when riled, but he was touched by quiet truth. Jesus melted Peter to salty tears of repentance with a look. We would do well to have a tear in our eye when we correct a brother.

3. Overside

Now we turn over the coin. Whereas the orthodox generally spoke boldly, and perhaps too boldly, as when the gospel was preached with a figurative closed fist (we have seen it actually so!), there also come times when men are tempted not to say the final word with firmness when it ought to be spoken. Have we fallen for the allurement to speak boldly when the consequences are not evident, neither apparent nor imminent?—and then become silent
when we must and ought to speak? It is easy to fall under the stricture of the Homeric line, “Thou dog in forehead, but in heart a dear!” And then, even more strangely, it is sometimes easier to be firm and final when the crisis is upon us if we have not said too much before!

Is it not a tempting tool of punishment, as a sadistic outlet for something uncomfortable within against which people are helpless; to use it somewhat as the unhappy maladjusted teacher does in dominating his little sphere some six or seven hours a day; or like the man who mercilessly manhandles his automobile or other machinery?

It’s painful to see someone emphasize pure doctrine with a curl of the lip, closing sermons with a whining amen, slamming the Bible on the pulpit! And is not communion sometimes used as a club to frighten people? It is easy to sit back and denounce, but twice as hard to go and win someone with meekness as did Nathan. Or do we sometimes desire more to score a point than to yearn earnestly to win a soul?

Roland Bainton on this score once more:

Nor is persecuting religion to be regarded as insincere. Dostoevsky misrepresented the Spanish Inquisitor when he portrayed him as cynically ready to burn even Christ should he return. The Torquemadas were not cynics, but passionately sincere fanatics. All of which should make abundantly plain that virtues are not without their vices. A concern for truth can end in inhumanity and love itself can be perverted to cruelty. This too is obvious: that Christianity as such cannot be regarded as a panacea for all the ills of the world. It all depends on what kind of Christianity. And whatever else may be added, this certainly is an appalling reflection: that the barbarities practiced in modern times to ensure conformity to the program of a party are but refinements of the methods employed by those who invoked the name of Christ.

Dorothy Thompson was equally incisive in a syndicated newspaper column:

Nothing, it would appear, more induces cruelty than a sense of righteousness. Cruel acts performed for a noble cause—such as the salvation of humanity—permit the perpetrators to have it both ways: to satisfy their unconscious sadistic natures and salve their consciences.

No wars are so brutal as religious wars, such as the Thirty Years war of the 16th century, or the last two world wars to make the world safe for democracy, or the four freedoms, or end the exploitation of man by man, and thus one way or another usher in the millenium.

Fortunately, and encouragingly, Kenneth Scott Latourette could write in *A History of Christianity* of the “Luther” of America, C. F. W. Walther:

Characterized by an extraordinary combination of organizing ability, a genius for friendship, magnetic charm with audiences large and small, generous hospitality . . . a skill in vigorous polemics, and a self-denial which was content with frugal living . . . he exerted a continuous and pervasive influence.

Our plea is for watchfulness that we do not get in the way of our own testimony, that our manner and tone do not justify someone’s not listening. We need not sound desperate nor act as though we are on the defensive. Our words shall judge the world! Somewhere I read that a contemporary called Luther’s voice sweet, melodious, and winning. He could also thunder at the right time! We are not denouncing orthodoxy, but its perversions.

### 4. Irony

Who said that our vices often stem from our virtues? “Men fired with what they believe to be devotion to the will of God as seen in Christ have been nerv[ed] to prolonged combat, not only with non-Christians, but also with one another” (Latourette). It was as much the great warmth of Peter’s heart that got him into a jam that Thursday night as it was his weakness. Those who stand must watch out for falling. If they are not afraid of falling, they are neither good
theologians nor good Christians. Every position and situation has a way open to abuse. The grace of God itself suggests a way to abuse it. People can easily become proud of their humility. A new car is a good thing, but don’t drive it as to kill yourself. Live in a glass house, but don’t throw stones. Paradise was a grand place, but there was one thing not to do.

One of the greatest dangers is to become passive and neglect the activism that Scripture calls for. Sometimes our opponents must call our attention to this perversion. Kierkegaard insisted that true Christianity demands decision and action, a commitment which abandons the role of the spectator. Can we not have the blessed balance of doing the one and not neglecting the other? The Gospels with their Jesus who “went around doing good and healing” and the apostles with their many directives are our source of power. There is no better summary than “To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8).

Lutheran imbalance in this matter was pointed out in someone’s remark that Lutherans are the best fed and the least exercised of all Christians on earth. Franz Pieper was once quoted as musing, “Why is it that so many others have too much of that of which we have too little?” The answer can hardly be that we have too much of that of which they don’t have enough!

5. Solutions

Our own thinking has suggested one possible explanation and solution. Both lie in the area of method. Has our habit of dealing in abstractions dulled the stimulating facts of the naked Word of God? Generalizations do not have the flavor and appeal of the facts from which they are made. One might counter that bread and cakes are not the abstractions of their elements but the happy combination of things well put together.

Just so, Christian living is the happy working out of a blessed eternal feeding on the bread of life broken for us in the living Word. Unless we go through the process of finding the ingredients, of digging for the treasures, of thrilling to their discovery, of being edified and inspired by their direct action upon us, of being enlightened by the sometimes electrifying contacts with the Scriptures first hand—unless we have gone through these processes there is something second-hand about our Christianity. It gets to be so easy to say as did the man who didn’t know what he believed, but he believed what the church believes! Of that he was sure!

To preach and teach the findings of others, their generalizations and abstractions, is tempting. To succumb to it is fatal to the faith. “Let it be our one concern to make sure that our loyalty is not to human tradition, but to God himself and to what he would teach us. Here we need not cast about in uncertainty and doubt.” It is not possible to have vigorous, informed, and committed Christianity that is not born of knowledge of the naked Word, of struggle, of prayer, of agony and perhaps even of despair at times—of decision, of surrender (those are good words!), of having come to grips individually with the facts and truths as they stand there in revelation.

6. Analogy

We have a comparison in education. Students may memorize what the books say and what the teacher tells in chemistry, biology, English, or whatever—but unless they become self-activated learners and dig for themselves they are hardly to be called students. In the same way, we like to give them the conclusions and creeds and findings of others also in the church—good enough so far as it goes, but it doesn’t do much to inform (shape, fashion) effective Christian personality. A few hardy souls dig for themselves and keep the teacher jittery with their questions and demands. Generally it is with parishioners who ask questions that there is urgent religion astir.

When active minds whet one upon another there is learning going on, strengthening and solidification. I got much of my useful theology from two brilliant and concerned women in a parish one time who sent me home every time I called with more points to study than were ever stirred up within me by any professor in the classroom.

It will hardly do just to sit back and wait for more Priscillas and Aquilas and a rare Apollos to come along. It would be better to ask earnestly whether the churches have fallen into some practices that are quite common to those who have inherited a good confession. Have we fallen into satisfaction that we have Abrahams as our fathers, forgetting that people have to wrestle as did Jacob on the banks of the Jabbok to keep
the faith and grow in it? Joseph didn’t coast into the kingdom, and it wasn’t exactly a picnic for Saul to become Paul. I gather that Martin Luther was so excited about the faith because he had to dig it out for himself.

Gatherings of pastors have wondered how we can get back the spirit (Spirit) for this activity. I have found that the best way to get people interested and sparked into committed devotion to the cause is by original study of the bare Bible. If testimonies are in order, I want to say that I have tried it and found it to work. I have heard earnest Christians say that they would starve on anything less.

7. Clarification

Talking about these things can clear up our minds and purge out some stale notions. We should accept the challenge that we restate our faith in meekness and fear. We should be as ready as these seven [note: there are only six given in the original] gleaned from the New Testament:

You are the Christ, the Son of the living God (Peter, Matt. 16:16).

Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel (Nathaniel, John 1:49).

Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ? (a woman in Samaria, John 4:29).

We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God (Peter, John 6:69).

Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who has come into the world (Martha, John 11:27).

My Lord and my God (Thomas, John 20:28).

Suppose that every congregation, or every member of it, were required to declare its faith from time to time—and in their own words! Suppose they had to write their own creed, say, every ten years! There would be more merit in that than in having one delegate represent some 20 churches to vote on some document prepared by a committee. Do we react with our own confession when questions about faith are asked? That would no doubt call for some perspiration, but there is much good in that method of making plain what we believe.

8. Hope

Perhaps it is not an idle dream. While it is customary to think that orthodoxy is established by voting, we ought to do more work at the grass roots. We are tempted to look upon the church as made up largely of the clergy and to find our faith confessed in utter purity there. Faith dwells in the hearts of believers, and it is they, as Luther pointed out, who should require that their shepherds speak according to the truth.

There is a striking finding on this point in a writing on the decadent church period in Germany by John Fletcher Hurst in his History of Rationalism:

It was very evident that the Lutheran church would require a long period for self-purification, if indeed she could achieve it at all. The shorter and more effectual way would be to operate individually upon the popular mind. And does not the entire history of the church prove that reform has originated from no concerted action of the body needing reformation, but from the solemn conviction and persevering efforts of some single mind, which, working at first alone, has afterward won to its assistance many others? Its work then reacted upon the parent organization in such a way that the latter became animated with new power.

The enemies . . . made the same objection to it that all the opponents of reform have ever made: “This is very good in itself, but do you not see that it is not the church that is working? We would love to see the cause of truth advanced and our torpid church invigorated with the old Reformation-life; but we would rather see the whole matter done in a perfectly systematic and legitimate way . . . .”

The proposal for betterment is still valid today, but the strictures from the proponents of
Method is not a matter of personal style and tact. It is a thing of deep understanding and insight, clear as day in the Bible but obscured by the approach to knowledge that has become common in our western culture. Years ago Brubacher analyzed methodology in timeless words in *A History of the Problems of Education*:

> Ever since the social culture had been reduced to written symbols and ever since education had take the social shortcut of vicarious learning through the written or printed word rather than through direct experience, one of the most persistent aberrations of education had been that the oncoming generation had often memorized the literary form of their social culture without always comprehending its actual meaning. Of this difficulty reformers of nearly every century have been aware. Yet, though many had urged that comprehension go hand in hand, little or nothing had been done to mark out the steps in facilitating understanding. Few teachers realized, as Pestalozzi so clearly did, that “when a third person, to whom the matter is clear, puts words into my mouth with which he makes it clear to *people in his own condition*, it is not on that account clear to me, but it is and will remain his clear thing, not mine, insomuch as the words of another cannot be for me what they are to him—the exact expression of his own idea, which is to him perfectly clear.”

The only way to correct this misunderstanding between teacher and pupil, according to Pestalozzi, was for the teacher to commence with sense impressions to the object of the lesson. Only after time for these impressions to take effect elapsed should the teacher proceed to the naming of the object. Once named, the object could be studied as to its form, that is, its various qualities could be discussed and compared . . . . In this way language and observation or experience are always so closely linked that education should henceforth be well on its way to eliminating forever *memoriter* without comprehension.

Obviously, from the foregoing, activity of the pupil is an essential part of learning. Without activity he can hardly get lively sense impressions. It will behoove the teacher, therefore, not to develop the lesson in the spirit of dogmatic exposition. On the contrary, he will rather conduct the lesson so as to encourage the pupil to exert his own powers. Teaching, instead of creating vicarious experience for the pupils, will have to create opportunities for firsthand experience itself. For this same reason, Pestalozzi early abandoned emulation as a way of motivating learning. He held that the child should learn to feel pleasure in exercising his own powers for the discovery of truth rather than in comparing himself with others.

Pestalozzi’s lay public did not always see eye to eye with him on his activity program. While he was trying to develop children’s potentialities by and exercise of their capacities, the public was anxious about how well their children knew their ABC’s. While he was interested in how children were learning to think, feel, and act, they were inquisitive about what the children knew of their catechism.

It is a temptation to the orthodox, who have well defined and well stated truth in their minds and hands to try to transport people mentally to their intellectual destination. We would do better to help them arrive on their own. We make it easy for them to relax as they hear us repeat it—every day the clock makes you *not* hear its ticking, but it is ticking off the time truthfully all the while. You don’t pay attention until something goes wrong. But religion that doesn’t stir us until something has gone wrong with its even hum and repetition is pretty insipid stuff. Only grant that in orthodox communions we have been likely to go to sleep, and we will then be thankful for anything that stirs us awake to see how we are doing.