

June 29, 2023

Dear Valde,

God's Peace, from your friends here in America! It has been several years since we visited (July 2019) and I fondly recall our visit there in your home. In an email to me after our visit, you encouraged us: *"We remember you in prayer and hope that the Heavenly Father will take care of the things (so) that shared love reigns between the children of God. We hope that God will hold an opportunity to discuss openly and in the spirit of love the things that are breaking the common love."*

Much has transpired since then. Many discussions have occurred. I was witness and participant to some of them. The topics presented in those discussions were good topics. Yet as soon as the focus went off the topic, instead of focusing on how we believe, the focus often went to people who are "of a different mind or different spirit" and those who are "battling against God's Kingdom". Concerns were generalized and groups of people were demonized and ostracized without a specific doctrinal basis. It became a focus that basically said: "if you are of a different mind, you are of a different spirit" yet without explanation. The rumor mill ran rampant, with claims of what this certain group of people believes, again without substantiation. My worst fears were that man would become impatient and tired of visiting and try to end any further discussion by declaring a heresy. Sadly, that has happened. I do not believe that God declares heresies, although the Bible does say that there will be heresies among us (1 Corinthians 11:19). Heresies are a work of the flesh (Galatians 5:20) and are not to be considered a way forward, but rather a damnable sin (2 Peter 2:1). Yet from some individuals, heresy was the expected outcome from the beginning of these discussions many years ago already.

I also believe that as children of God we should always work towards resolution and continued discussion, as the Bible instructs. Yet here in America, even for some time prior to the declaration of a heresy, sadly, we were hearing from 'trusted brothers' things like "the time for discussion is over"; "God is losing his patience"; and other similar statements. This saddened me when I heard it, and continues to sadden me now, that such an attitude would be expressed and fostered from even those in leadership positions. Leaders were even encouraged by some congregation members to resolve this and "get this over with". One person even told me personally: "why don't these people leave already?" Another (minister) said (admittedly from his flesh) that "if this were up to me, I'd go chop chop" (meaning cut them out). This was years before it actually happened. The attitude or expectation was that heresy and cutting people out was the way forward, despite claiming to have many loving discussions. Again, I believe we should always work towards resolution - I do not believe that heresy is the means to end all discussions, nor should it have been an expectation. Heresies will depart the kingdom of God under false doctrinal claims and deviate from the sound teachings of scripture, not be singled out as "different" or voted out on the basis of feelings. Even the actual declaration of heresy itself was the result of impatience. I personally witnessed the discussion and vote at the Summer Services Annual Meeting in 2022. While some speeches were loving, some were not. Some of the speeches expressed disdain and impatience towards those who were considered to be in error, yet without any explanation of what the errors were. This, all along, has been generally pointed at two congregations (Minneapolis and Wolf Lake). No doctrinal matters were brought up on the basis of the concern. There was a rush at the end to get the vote over with - some were even denied speaking turns at the end because they were not delegates - some who would have wished to encourage patience. People were crying out

“don’t do this”. Yet the chairman of the meeting hastened forward to get the vote in at the end of the day. In fact, the vote itself (after the fact) was said to be based on the bylaws, which was simply not true. The bylaws say that a congregation can be expelled for disobedience to the LLC and for not acting in accordance with the bylaws. Neither of these have been shown to be the case. It also was apparent that the Bible itself, the Holy Word of God, was not the highest authority in that discussion, but rather it became a sense of the spirit that expressed such sentiments as “we can’t really say exactly what the problem is, but you are of a different spirit.” Or, “If you see things otherwise, then obviously you have a different spirit.” Why? The common thread has been this: those who have disagreed with the strong statements and actions of a few have been falsely accused as “false prophets”, or “trying to broaden the way” or “separating the Bible from the congregation” or even as being “attackers of the kingdom of God”. These are all familiar accusations, as many of the same things were said in the 1980’s when people dared to even question the practices of the AALC at that time. Sadly, some of those who were at the center of those battles are still in leadership today and have the same approach, as expressed by one brother in a different meeting, which I also personally heard and witnessed: “to question boards (leadership) is to question God himself.” The brother who made this statement was corrected on this, but this same attitude has still prevailed among many. Another statement I heard personally was “if there are wolves in the sheepfold, we have to chase them away.” (Presumably meaning the ministers and board members have to chase the wolves out.) These statements were made years before the actual vote to remove two congregations. Those in leadership have risen to such a status that, while they admit personal failings and weakness, collectively their decisions are infallible. They themselves have become the unerring mother. While having been elevated, at the same time they have portrayed themselves to be victims of attacks against them. Congregations are expected to support them unequivocally. From the congregation side, personal watchfulness in doctrinal matters is left to those in positions of trust. I have personally heard people say things like: “aren’t the ministers the ones who should know the Bible?” “Didn’t Luther say all his works should be burned?” “I don’t know doctrine, and I don’t have time to study...” (this person was then also put up to be a minister). These are first-hand experiences of my own. I don’t say them lightly, nor do I intend to paint a picture that entire congregations are this way, yet it does show an attitude that is alarming. In regard to obedience, it is very true that we ought to “obey those who have the rule over you” (Hebrews 13), yet this ought not to be taken out of context. The context is that the word of God would be the authority, not man or any position of man (Hebrews 13:7). These behaviors of course are not a reflection of the kingdom of God, but rather of the tendencies of man that have surfaced throughout the ages. Without remaining diligent in sound doctrine, we are always prone to err and straying away from the sound teachings of Holy Writ. We are entirely corrupt, individually and collectively. The only infallible source of truth is the unperishing Word of God, which of course is opened by the Holy Spirit.

Those who have earnestly wanted to go to the scriptures to resolve these issues have been told that they are forgetting about the congregation. The congregation has received a higher position than the Holy Word of God, and those who wish to uphold all teachers and teachings in this light (even as our bylaws state) have been told that they separate the Bible from the congregation and have wrong doctrine for expressing this. Yet amongst the congregation, an attitude (with some, not all) has prevailed of “just be obedient to leadership”. At a personal level, the importance of doctrine and the study of God’s Word is minimized.

Valde, I know this sounds alarming and I know it doesn’t line up with what you have heard from trusted brothers within the organization. Yet that is my experience. Personally, all I have wanted to do is simply believe and trust that God is guiding and leading and will carry us through. I have wanted to be patient. Yet it is from the leadership level that actions have

continued that force things to happen. This unfortunate vote was one example. There have been many other actions stemming from leadership that have caused much turmoil and confusion in the congregations here in America, much prior to this vote. I will list a few others to bring them to your awareness: Removing archives of certain ministers' sermons; disinviting certain ministers from speaking; labeling people who would use God's Word and speak up in discussions as having a 'foreign voice'; removing certain ministers from speaking, in some cases even contrary the bylaws; and overall casting doubts and aspersions on people's faith, especially those from the two congregations in question and on anyone who would dare to express support of those congregations or speakers, or who would even question why this was happening. In the end, I fully recognize that this has been a tide of events that has been difficult to navigate, here and afar. Many are left in sadness, despair, and even anger and bitterness. We are human beings with faulty flesh and blood. We have become weary in the battles and have said and done things that we ought not to have done. All of us, without exception, have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We have all needed and still need much forgiveness.

Yet I will relate a couple more matters. One is regarding the visits by a few brothers in leadership to the two congregations, Wolf Lake and Minneapolis. I attended one of those meetings personally. Almost every congregation member spoke up. They expressed sorrow, concern, and even regret for any faultiness on their own part. They asked for and received forgiveness. Interestingly, not one of the leadership brothers had any faults to confess of their own – not one of them even asked for the Gospel for themselves. This was alarming to me, yet it was not something that I wanted to dwell on because this is not a requirement for salvation. Yet it spoke volumes to me in this sense – they have been right all along and there is no need to admit any fault or wrongdoing because they haven't had any. In fact, not long prior to these last discussions, I had a personal text exchange with one of them. He said that he disagrees that there's no completely right side (in other words, he believes they have been completely right). This corroborates with why there was no need to ask for the gospel themselves. And going from those final meetings, rather than conveying a positive message to the other congregations, such as relaying that people wanted to care for their matters or that they wanted to continue believing, the message was instead one of division. It was a message of 'we are drifting further apart'. It was basically a message that told the other congregations that discussions were over and we mutually have our differences and that as such we cannot continue together in the same faith. It is true that there is only one Spirit of God, one body, and one faith (Ephesians 4:4-5). Yet it is also true that we are a battling congregation, there are divisions among us (1 Corinthians 11:18), and there is strife and carnality (1 Corinthians 3:3). These stem from our corrupt flesh, and Paul's exhortation in those letters is to NOT create divisions, but continue to "endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace". (Ephesians 4:3). He did not advocate for division, but to labor to keep peace, and also as the writer to the Hebrews exhorts, "teach again of the first principles of the oracles of God" (Hebrews 5:12). This would seem to be an exhortation to return to the core foundation of faith, to return to how we are saved, and to the joy of personal salvation. This cannot be attained by focusing on one another's faults. At the same time, we are encouraged to care for one another with brotherly love and care, putting away our own faults and helping others along the way. As the Bible instructs, we are not to ignore wanton living in the flesh, nor are we to ignore clear doctrinal errors. So we care for one another in these, in love and truth, according to the Word of God.

And then finally, there is the matter of your update from January, under SRK news that I want to address. This update was printed in the March 2023 Voice of Zion here. You expressed how "questions related to doctrine and faith have again and again been brought up by some for

critical examination.” That is an opinion which I take issue with. While that may be true for some, this is not generally the case in my experience. Matters were not usually brought up for critical examination, but rather for clarity in light of scripture. This is what was hoped for. You also mentioned the authority of God’s Word as “partly this can be considered strange”. Why would this be strange? There are many writings and articles from the time of the Reformation to today that express this authority. I agree, the congregation and the Word of God are inseparable, but there is no question of which has the higher authority, is there? You made the statement: “‘...So where is the authority when it comes to interpreting the word of God? Isn’t the answer that it is God’s congregation..’”. Surely you are not saying that the congregation or church has the authority of interpreting God’s Word? This sounds dangerously close to the Catholic Church’s claim to have authority to interpret scripture. Consider this decree from the Council of Trent, Fourth Session, in 1556, which “*decrees, that no one, relying on his own skill, shall,--in matters of faith, and of morals pertaining to the edification of Christian doctrine, --wresting the sacred Scripture to his own senses, presume to interpret the said sacred Scripture contrary to that sense which holy mother Church,--whose it is to judge of the true sense and interpretation of the holy Scriptures...*” Your statement, by implication, comes dangerously close to the same kind of church dogma that Luther took issue with. Please assure me that this was not your intent, as it is contrary to our beliefs in the Lutheran tradition. Luther believed and taught, as do we, that the Bible is the highest instruction for faith and life and is also the authority of the congregation. To state otherwise is nothing other than a return to a Catholic style church authority.

And finally from your update, I have to say I was a little confused with your quote from Luther, where he states thus: “This, I say, we know, because our creed says this: I believe in a holy, catholic [universal] congregation. It is therefore impossible for the congregation to err in even the smallest point of faith”. This is very much a true quote, but I urge you to consider the context of that quote from Bondage of the Will. Did you see that Luther is actually refuting the fact that Erasmus was claiming that he would have to believe that the congregation could have erred for a long time in order to believe what Luther was saying? That is how I see this context. Luther’s response was your quote, which is accurate, but he goes on to say this – and especially note the part I underlined: “*And even if we should grant that some of the Elect are held in error through the whole of their life; yet they must, of necessity, return to the way of truth before their death; for Christ says, (John 10:28) ‘No one shall pluck them out of my hand.’ But this is the point – whether it can be proved with certainty, that those whom you call the church, were the Church.*”. In other words, because a group of people claims to be the church, in all of history, does not automatically make them the Church. This is very sobering. He goes on to show from scriptures that even under “heretics”, Christ preserved His true Church, often in small, unknown, insignificant people. A label or claim does not make any group the Church, and this has been shown throughout history. So I hope you are not trying to portray the idea that as an organization we are the Church and therefore unerring and must always be obeyed, because that is essentially what Erasmus was claiming. Again, that is Catholicism. All organizations can and have erred throughout history. I sincerely hope you were not saying that the organization(s) represent the unerring kingdom of God?

What now? My hope and prayer is that all would be corrected. Luther believed that, as Jesus taught, none of the elect will be lost. I believe that also. Despite all of this, the kingdom of God does not change. The beauty of the light of Christ shines forth, preaching Grace and Truth by Him. Salvation is only in Him. This I believe. Though man would create division, sometimes God uses this to preserve His own and to preserve the truth and purity of His Word, which remains as the highest authority for doctrine and for life. The house on the rock will stand. “And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it

fell not: for it was founded upon a rock.” (Matthew 7:25). I encourage you, dear Valde, to consider all of these matters from your personal place of watching. Have you, dear brother, heard and believed only one side? Have you considered that there might be more than one perspective? Have you wanted to believe trusted brothers because you know them personally? Have you also elevated the organization(s) to an unerring place? Remember the exhortation of scripture, when Peter had to be shown that all are worthy of the same salvation plan, not just certain ones or certain peoples: “Then Peter opened his mouth and said, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him. The word which God sent unto the children of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ: (he is Lord of all).” (Acts 10:34)

Of course, it is possible that my own perspective is wrong or erring. I have many experiences of which I could relay even more, but that is not the point of this letter. I am willing to consider all matters, including my own errors and misunderstandings in the light of God’s Word. These are just my own personal experiences and perspectives. Yet through it, I believe God has shown me that I have no righteousness of my own. This is a beautiful matter, because I can look to another, my Lord and Savior, to His goodness, His righteousness. As a partaker of His Kingdom, all other things then fall into place. And I hear you are coming to America to preach this summer. Welcome! May God bless your travels and your serving here. I hope we can also have an opportunity to personally visit about this letter and any matters. I welcome that!

Love and God’s Peace,

Craig Kumpula