

Dealing with the Neglector of Word and Sacrament

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As it is God who gave us, and preserves in us, our earthly life, so it is, God who not only created faith and spiritual life in us, but who also keeps us in our faith and spiritual life. “(We) through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time” (1 Peter 1:5). “He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1:6). “He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 1:8). From these passages of Holy Scripture we see that God does not merely bring our faith into being, but God also strengthens and preserves us steadfastly in faith until the end.

As God preserves physical life through certain means, such as food and drink, God preserves spiritual life through means, the means of grace. The same means by which He created faith He employs to nourish, strengthen and preserve faith, namely His Word and Sacraments. The power of God by which our faith is nourished and preserved comes to us through the Gospel, which is “the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Thessalonians 2:13.) “Through the same Word and the forgiveness of sins (He) bestows, increases and strengthens faith.”ⁱ “Through the same Spirit and His grace, by means of daily exercise of reading and practicing God’s Word, He would preserve in us faith and His heavenly gifts, strengthen us from day to day, and keep us to the end.”ⁱⁱⁱ

As it is vital to use the means which God provides for the life and nourishment of the body, so it is vital to use the means by which God nourishes and preserves faith. “Blessed are those who hear the Word of God and obey it” (Luke 11:28). “Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly” (Colossians 3:16). “Blessed is the man...(whose) delight is in the Law of the Lord, and on His law he meditates day and night” (Psalm 1:1,2). While God certainly could preserve us in faith without using any means whatsoever, He has not promised to do so. He has chosen, instead, to deal with us and to convey His Spirit and power to us through His Word. God’s Word is our lifeline. Neglecting to use the Word of God means spiritual starvation, spiritual suicide. The light of faith continues to burn as long as the Word of God supplies oil for our lamp.

But as the Lord is not willing that any should perish, so the devil is desirous that all should perish. The devil looks for every opportunity to feed our natural tendency toward indifference and negligence concerning everything that the Lord want us to do. Sad to say, at times he is successful. It happens in every Christian congregation. Satan successfully leads God’s children away from their spiritual lifeline, the source of their spiritual life and strength. Through various devious means Satan leads Christian people into the realm of spiritual negligence where they fail to feed their souls with the only spiritual nourishment known to us, God’s Word and Sacrament.

In this paper we shall not speak about dealing with those who neglect the Word and Sacrament. Our paper is divided into five parts: First, we will receive encouragement; then we will assess the problem, thirdly, we will speak about applying the cure; fourthly, we will mention some pitfalls to avoid; and finally, we will focus our attention on employing some preventive measures.

Receiving the Encouragement

To the Christians in Galatia the Apostle Paul wrote: “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6: 1,2). This is a serious exhortation to us to be vitally concerned about anything that hinders or interferes with our fellow Christians in their relationship with their Savior.

It should be a matter of great concern to us that hundreds, if not thousands, of persons are dropped from the membership lists of WELS churches each year. It should distress us still more when we realize that many church rolls continue to carry the names of members who give little evidence, if any at all, of spiritual life and strength. The members who are not faithfully feeding their souls with God’s Word and Sacrament need our love, our concern and our ministry. The greatest disservice we can do to those who are neglecting the Word and Sacrament is to let them drift away from their Lord and Savior, unaware of the spiritual tragedy taking place in their lives. Only a heartless person would sit and watch a person drown without trying to save him. How much worse it is to sit idly by and watch a soul sink slowly into eternal damnation by means of spiritual suicide, through the neglect of Word and Sacrament! Certainly, Christian love for blood-bought souls behooves us to move into action when we see someone drifting away from his Savior.

The encouragement to minister to those members who are not faithfully feeding their souls with Word and Sacrament can be received from our Savior Himself in three parables as they are recorded in Luke chapter 15.

A pastor writes: “The parable of the lost sheep typifies those who are straying from the fold. Lost in the wilderness of sin, separated from the Great Shepherd and the flock, they must be found and brought back. You note that the Shepherd was greatly concerned about a one-percent loss. As under shepherds, members of the flock, our concern should be no less. Let us not feel that there are enough left in the flock for us to meet our financial budget, nor believe that the strays will sometime stray back. Souls are at stake. One soul is important. If you do not think so, just suppose that it is your soul!

“The parable of the lost coin typifies those who are still *in* the church but out of circulation. Use the broom! Sweep—not to sweep anyone out but to find him and make him serviceable to the Lord and His kingdom. The parable of the lost son typifies those who have willfully left their Father’s house. They must be reminded that they are wasting their substance and that an anxious Father is eagerly awaiting their return.

“It should be on our consciences. How shall you and I answer to God for the way we have been our brothers’ keepers? Can we do a better job of safeguarding the members of our congregation so that none shall be lost? We are God’s instruments.ⁱⁱⁱ

Let us furthermore ponder our Lord’s description of the satisfaction and joy in that home when the prodigal son had a change of heart and returned. Listen to that happiness and jubilation as Jesus describes it in Luke 15: “So he (the prodigal) got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you, I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again: he was lost and is found! So they began to celebrate.” Luke 15:20-24.)

Surely, the joyful privilege of being the Lord's instruments in leading straying, blood-bought souls back into our heavenly Father's household should stimulate our zeal and action.

Assessing the Problem

If a person has no appetite and is not eating, the real problem is not the fact that the person isn't eating. The real problem is the fact that some underlying cause has stolen his desire to eat. When a person is absenting himself from the Lord's House and the Lord's Table, his absence is a symptom. It's a symptom that some underlying cause has overtaken and destroyed his spiritual appetite.

No reputable physician will make a diagnosis simply upon the basis of the symptoms. Instead, he will first listen as the patient describes the symptoms. Then he will make a thorough examination of his patient, which may necessitate some extensive and painstaking probing. Only then will he make his diagnosis; and only then will he prescribe his cure.

When we discover that one of our members is failing to feed his soul on God's Word and Sacrament, let's be careful of coming to false conclusions. Let's be careful of coming to a quick diagnosis of the problem without making a thorough examination. Not only is it imperative to probe the underlying reason for absenting oneself from the Lord's House and Table, it is also vital to ascertain the degree of severity of the problem before a cure can be prescribed.

Scripture tells us that Luther in his catechisms reiterates that underlying all our spiritual problems and troubles are the "unholy three": the devil, the world, and our flesh. These three will manifest themselves in a variety of ways, in areas where people are the most vulnerable. We shall not list some of the areas in which the "unholy three" manifest themselves.

A sudden, continued absence from the Lord's House could be the result of an argument or disagreement with a fellow member. It could be caused by a sharp insult or a personality clash. It could be something that really happened. It could be something imagined. It could be something serious. It could be something superficial.

Gradual disinterest in spiritual food could be caused by a lack of understanding true Christian doctrine. Perhaps, rather than receiving vivid explanations of Scriptural teachings, the members receive the comment, "You shouldn't question it or try to understand it. Simply agree to it because this is what the church believes. This is what the Wisconsin Synod believes." "Whenever honest doubts and questions pertaining to Scriptural matters are disregarded, passed off lightly, or left unanswered by spiritual leaders of the church, such things can lead a person to become frustrated and disillusioned in his spiritual life and can cause him to lose his spiritual appetite for the public dispensing of Word and Sacrament. In like manner, it could be a misunderstanding of the doctrine of the Lord's Supper (i.e., an ungrounded fear of taking the Sacrament to one's damnation) that keeps a person away from the Lord's Table.

It could happen that the church may not be reaching the person with its message. A person may, in some instances, feel that he is living in the 20th century world during the week but in a 19th century atmosphere on Sundays not so much in doctrine as in the pastor's attitude and in his choice of words. The impression that the pastor is out of touch with the times, that he really doesn't know what it's like in the real world, can lead a person to lose his desire for spiritual food.

As Jesus pointed out in His parable of the Sower and the Seed, some can become captivated by worries, cares and worldly desires, which will eventually destroy the good seed of the Word. Financial problems, health problems, family problems, each in its own way can be used by the "unholy three" to lead a person to lose proper spiritual perspective and cause him to

lose his spiritual appetite. Materialism and desire for personal pleasure can overtake our members' hearts and lead them astray. In like manner, a member can become so engrossed or so entwined in a particular sin that his spiritual appetite becomes completely annihilated.

The list is by no means complete. The purpose for the above listing is to illustrate the fact that the initial neglect of Word and Sacrament does not mean that the individual has become defiant to the Word or even indifferent to the Word. Neither does it immediately mean that the person has lost his saving faith. We further wish to point out the fact that since there are a variety of causes which trigger a person's absence from the Lord's House, not all absences are to be handled in the same way. Each is to be dealt with separately. And yet each has the same prescription for cure, the Word of God.

Applying the Cure

In our highly technical, electronic, impersonal age where we bank 24 hours a day with a plastic card and special code number and not infrequently receive letters from national distributors addressed to our first name typed on a computer, it is very easy for the church to think that it can carry out an effective program of dealing with the neglecter of Word and Sacrament by means of several cure-all form letters. Form letters are so distasteful to some of us that we don't even read them. How many mimeographed or xeroxed letters to those who have not been in the Lord's House for some time are warmly received or even read? At times there are circumstances in which the only way people can be reached is by means of the mail. Under such circumstances we have no other choice. We have to use the graphic arts. However, when a soul is see-sawing between the Lord's kingdom and the clutches of the devil, how can we want to deal with that situation in any other way than a personal, face-to-face, eye-to-eye communication?

Our first objective when we meet with the person who has not been feeding His soul on the Word and Sacrament should be to listen. We should be quick to hear and slow to speak. Instead of quickly pointing the finger, accusing and condemning the person for not being present in the Lord's House on the Lord's Day without ever giving him a chance to explain why he has lost his spiritual appetite, it is well to listen. With some sincere, heart-felt, loving words we should show the person that we are genuinely interested in him and truly concerned about his spiritual well-being. When that is established he may be sufficiently at ease to unburden his heart, to reveal his gripe, to unmask his bitterness, to disclose his hostility, to expose his frustration, to divulge his lack of spiritual insight, or to simply tell us whatever it is that is keeping him away from His Lord's House.

Of course, it goes without saying, many are the times when the excuse that is made is not the real thing which is eating away at the person. That's why it is so important to be patient and to display genuine, loving concern. Perhaps, if the person is allowed to talk it out, he may eventually come to the real thing that is gnawing away at his spiritual life. On the other hand, the excuse that he gives may be nothing more than a crutch that holds no weight.

Once we have demonstrated our genuine concern for his soul and he has had ample time to express how he truly feels, then it is time to apply the prescription for the cure. Since it is the Holy Spirit who creates, nourishes and strengthens faith in people by means of the Word of God, our dealing with the neglecter of Word and Sacrament must always have the Word of God as the foundation. Humanistic appeals and pressures have no place in dealing with the neglecter of Word and Sacrament.

Since the person to whom we are speaking may have established the reason why he has stopped coming to church was that he had a falling out with another member or that he finds the liturgy monotonous and dull or whatever his excuse, it is so very easy to be tricked into dealing immediately with that excuse.

Our first concern, however, is not the person's relationship with his church; our first concern is not the person's relationship with his fellow church members; our primary concern is the person's relationship with his God. That relationship comes before everything else. Nothing else can be settled or squared away, unless and until the relationship with God is taken care of first. No matter how long the person may have been a member, no matter whether at one time he was a member of the Church Council or taught Sunday School; no matter how long he may have been a faithful attendee in the Bible Class, no matter how many gripes he may have about people, no matter how many complaints he may have about the church; the first discussion should center solely on his relationship with God. This means a careful presentation of sin and grace, Law and Gospel.

We should never take for granted that the person who has been staying from God's House, for whatever reason it may be, correctly understands God's plan of salvation. By means of thoughtful questions it can be established, as the plan of salvation is being unfolded, whether the person has the proper comprehension of his sin and God's grace. It has happened more than once that a faulty concept of justification by faith through God's grace was discovered when presenting the plan of salvation to a life-long Lutheran who had fallen away from attending God's House. A simple testimony about the truth of God's grace in Christ can achieve much. Our primary concern is not to change church and communion attendance habits. Our main concern is to bring about an active relationship between the person and His God by means of the Holy Spirit working through the Word of God.

If after our presentation of the plan of salvation the person acknowledges his trust in God's grace manifested in Jesus Christ, the next step is to show how our gracious God has given His Word and Sacrament as means by which His Holy Spirit nourishes and strengthens faith. In that discussion we can lead the person to put worship and communion attendance into their proper perspective and spiritual importance. It goes without saying, Scripture is the basis. Each time we present a Scripture passage or a Scriptural concept, it would be well to make sure the person understands and at the same time we should ascertain as to whether he agrees with what Scripture says.

It is then, after God's plan of salvation has been thoroughly discussed, and a proper understanding of the use of the means of grace has been established, that we can move on to deal with whatever was originally given as the excuse for not faithfully attending the Lord's House and the Lord's Table. (It could happen that the discussion thus far has eliminated the problem.)

Should the person return to the Lord's House we and the members will want to make him feel welcome and encourage him in his God-given desire to strengthen his relationship with the Lord by means of Word and Sacrament. Should it happen (and it does happen more often than we would like) that the person comes to the Lord's House several times and then reverts back to his old ways, a visit from us as soon as possible is of utmost importance. Starting with step number one as outlined previously would be the suggested procedure. Our fervent prayer should be that the Lord would supply us with the kind of patience and love for the weak person's soul that God would want us to demonstrate.

Should a person announce his agreement and trust in God's plan of salvation as well as in the proper use of the means of grace, but still fail to appear at the Lord's House, it would be well

to make a return visit as soon as possible to go over the Scriptural points once again; making sure the person has a proper understanding of what Scripture is saying. Once that is established and the person still claims agreement and faith, then perhaps, we would introduce the passages of Scripture which indicate that faith is more than a profession of the lips. It is to be found in the heart and expressed in one's lifestyle. Scriptural passages pertaining to the fruit of faith would be appropriate.

Under the blessings of the Spirit, the exhortation of Scripture should move the person to express his faith through his attendance in the Lord's House. If that does not happen within a reasonable amount of time, the next steps as outlined in Matthew 18 may be in order. First, there is the attempt of the Pastor with others (perhaps the Elders) to lead the individual to see that he is despising the public preaching of God's Word and failing to respond to the Lord's invitation to His Supper; a sin for which repentance is required. The purpose of the two or three others like the purpose of the one in the first place is not to kick him who is down or to "kick him out." The purpose is that for which Jesus Himself sought us; they are to seek and to save that which was lost.

We might point out that Scripture does not say these have to be Elders or that they have to be church officers. Why not try taking along a witness or two whom the straying brother will consider unbiased? Why not take along a good friend of his; one who loves his Savior and his Church and one of whom the straying brother must say: "He loves me. He's after my welfare, my salvation. I have confidence in him."

If no visible evidence of repentance is forthcoming, the final step is to "tell it to the Church". If there is still no visible evidence of repentance, the loving thing to do is to excommunicate the individual. We all dread a surgical operation. The surgeon's knife often inflicts more wounds and causes more pain and suffering than was endured at any one time before. But it is through such operations that the health of many has been restored and the lives of countless human beings have been rescued from the clutches of death. And so this step of excommunication was devised by Jesus as an act of love.

We quote from *The Shepherd Under Christ*: "Excommunication is the solemn declaration of the church that a sinner because of his impenitence is no longer a member of the church, that he is to be regarded 'as a heathen man and publican' (Matthew 18:17), that his sin is bound upon him on earth and in heaven (Matthew 18:18). Exclusion from the visible church takes place because it has become evident that by his impenitence the sinner has excluded himself from the communion of saints. The church declares the Lord's verdict, which stands on its own merits and is not supplemented by any human power or authority. The purpose of excommunication is that this last and most severe preaching of the Law might yet bring the sinner to see his error and that he thus may in the end still be saved. All of this implies that the congregation must be as sure as humanly possible that the sinner is indeed impenitent."^{iv}

It may happen in our discussions with the person who is less than faithful in his attendance at the Lord's House and Table that we learn some doctrinal differences exist. The person may express some disagreement with the church's position in one or more areas. After ascertaining just where the differences lie, it would be well for us to restate what we think the differences are to make sure we understand fully the person's position. Then we should set up some study discussions of the Scriptural points involved. We point out again, the discussion of these doctrinal issues should not be initiated until God's plan of salvation has been thoroughly discussed and a proper understanding of the means of grace has been established. Once that is accomplished, we can go on to our doctrinal discussions. Should difficulty arise in reaching

doctrinal agreement, the time will come to introduce the Elders into the discussions. The Elders should not be introduced as a legalistic weapon, as an attempt to get the person to shape up or else; rather, their presence should be purely out of love and a earnest desire to lead the individual to the truth of God's Word. Prayer and praise to God should be given when doctrinal agreement is reached.

If in the course of time an impasse is reached where the person shows himself unwilling to budge and continues to claim the church is in error, then we should attempt to lead the person to see he is no longer in fellowship with the congregation. Should he continue in his belief that the church is wrong in its Scriptural stand and should he fail to take any steps to terminate his fellowship with the congregation, the congregation is left with no other choice but with a heavy heart to officially terminate the fellowship by means of resolution of the voters' assembly.

If the person persistently adheres to a doctrinal error which subverts the foundation of faith (denial of the Trinity, the divinity of Jesus, salvation by grace, vicarious atonement, resurrection) the congregation may proceed with excommunication. In other doctrinal differences the congregation will declare the fellowship terminated with the persistent errorist; the congregation will not declare that the person is to be regarded as a heathen and publican. All action regardless of what it is should be motivated by love and a genuine concern for the person's eternal destiny.

Experience has shown that oftentimes, a person who is being dealt with in any of the aforementioned steps, will simply request that his name be removed from the membership list. Prior to any congregational action on his request, a personal visit may be in order to make sure this is what the person really wants.

Avoiding the Pitfalls

Dealing with the neglecter of Word and Sacrament, particularly the persistent one, can be one of the most frustrating and disheartening aspects of the ministry. The "unholy three" can easily ensnare us in some unsuspected traps. Hence, we will list some of the pitfalls that are to be avoided. The list is by no means complete.

- a) Be careful of thinking those who have strayed will someday and someday stray back on their own accord. Highly unlikely. The devil wants us to forget about those who are straying into his fold. He wants us to leave them alone for him. Our love for their souls should move us to be zealous and persistent in leading them back to the Word.
- b) Be careful of equating doctrinal difference with unbelief. Just because a person does not agree with us in all points of doctrine does not mean that he is a "heathen and a publican", outside of the kingdom of God.
- c) Be careful that our action does not push a person away from his Savior and eternal life. Hasty, harsh, cruel, unloving actions have no place in dealing with the neglecter of Word and Sacrament.
- d) Be careful of considering membership in the local congregation more important than membership in the invisible church. A pastor related the following experience when he made a witnessing call upon an inactive church family.^v A discussion took place concerning the family's relationship with Jesus Christ and what it means. After a short discussion with the teenage boy, who had joined the conversation, the question was asked what he thought about the church. He said, "Well, I didn't like the letter I got from my church a couple of months ago, telling me I would be kicked out if I didn't attend church." The letter evidently indicated a strong tendency by that

congregation to emphasize church attendance more than a relationship with Jesus Christ.

At the invitation of the family, the visit lasted about two hours and centered on relevant questions relating Jesus Christ to the individuals and to the family. When the pastor left, the father said, “Thanks for coming, and please come again soon. This is the first time in eighteen years that our family has had a discussion about our relationships with Jesus Christ.” Our concern should not simply be that people maintain church membership and that they attend church regularly. Our primary concern should be their relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

- e) Be careful of wrong motivation. Our goal is to lead all people to eternal life and not to have a “clean” membership list.
- f) Be careful of letting the Synod’s Mission Board policy of basing congregational monetary responsibilities on a per communicant basis become the determining and motivating factor in our dealings with those who fail to feed their souls faithfully. Swift, unscriptural action against those who are negligent in making use of the means of grace, simply to reduce the congregation’s financial responsibilities is reprehensible to say the least.
- g) Be careful of the “easy way out”; simply removing the inactive person’s name from the membership list without any earnest attempts to save the soul.

Employing the Prevention

“An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure” the old adage tells us. That is so very true in so many different areas of life. It certainly is true with the subject matter we have been discussing. It is well for each of us to do some self-examination and some reevaluation to determine the ways in which we as much as possible with God’s help can prevent the faithful Christian from slipping away from the means of grace. We shall mention a few suggestions.

Each year an auditing committee is appointed to go over the financial records of the congregation with a fine tooth comb, examining the records of the congregation right down to the penny. If such a high importance is attached to keeping good financial records, doesn’t it stand to reason that the records pertaining to the spiritual nourishment of blood-bought souls is of an even greater importance? Accurate records indicating in what manner and how often each of the members is feeding his soul would seem to be a helpful tool in quickly detecting those who are beginning to slip away from their Lord. Certainly this should not be shouldered by the Pastor alone. The responsibility could be shared with the Elders and the other responsible officers. Accurate records make it easy to send out the bulletins, newsletters and whatever other literature is disseminated at church to those who have been absent. Accurate records make it easy to send out a letter or make a phone call of encouragement to the person who is just beginning to slip away from faithful usage of the means of grace. Such measures could possibly ward off future spiritual harm.

An excellent preventive against spiritual neglect is a pastor who makes calls. A calling pastor is one who keeps on top of things. He is able to keep his finger on the pulse of congregational life. He is able to detect the trouble spots before they become disasters. He is able to give encouragement before the situation turns into one which requires admonition. But the larger the congregation, the more difficult it is for the pastor to get out and make the calls he wants and needs to make. Since time is a chronic problem with all of us, it is well for each of us

to make periodic evaluations, time-studies, to determine just how we are using our time. Are there areas to which we are devoting our time which can be done equally as well by others? For example, we may have members who are far more qualified than us to make decisions concerning the church's insurance program, concerning the maintenance and upkeep the church property. A pastor doesn't have to do everything in the church. He doesn't have to be involved in everything in the church. Look for the areas in which you can turn the responsibility over to someone else or in which you can train someone to take over for you. Training someone do something which you presently are doing is well worth the time. For it will free you to do those things which you may be the best person to carry out, one of which is making personal visits on the members, particularly those who are beginning to slip away.

The training of our Elders should not be overlooked. Time spent in training them, particularly in the presentation of God's plan of salvation and the proper perspective of the means of grace, will reap benefits for years to come. For then, even after their terms as Elders have expired, they still are qualified to make calls on those who are slipping away. The more people you have making calls, encouraging and exhorting with God's Word, the less likely those who begin to slip away will be overlooked and forgotten, left to be swallowed up by the jaws of Satan.

Another area of worthwhile examination is the worship service itself. Have you examined your vocabulary lately? Are you unconsciously using archaic and theological terms which are no longer relating to the person in the pew? Are you interjecting variety and life into the worship services? Does your choice of hymns reveal a sameness week after week, or do your hymn selections show a diversity? Are you a leader in worship? Can we expect a lively singing of the hymns by the congregation if we pastors don't sing out from the bottom of our hearts? Can we expect our people to be enthusiastic about worship and put their hearts into their worship, if we worship leaders listlessly go through the motions?

Surely, fervent personal prayer should not be overlooked. Let's keep the well-being of every one of the precious souls entrusted to our care in our frequent and fervent prayers. Remember how Jesus prayed for His own, how for instance, Satan desired Peter that he might sift him as wheat, but Jesus prayed for him that his faith fail him not. Let's make this whole subject matter an object of our prayers. Let's continually seek a special measure of the Holy Spirit so that we may have the God-given ability to lead the straying souls back to the security of their Savior.

In the parable about the fruitless fig tree Jesus shows His great concern for the Christian who bears no fruit. When the owner of the vineyard found no fruit on the fig tree, he said to the caretaker: "For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use the soil?" (Luke 13:7). The caretaker replied, "Sir, leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down." (Luke 13:9). Certainly, the caretaker had a beautiful, loving, caring attitude toward the fruitless fig tree. Is that not an indication of the kind of attitude which the Lord wants us to have towards those within our congregational vineyards? May God give us the desire, the wisdom and the ability to cultivate carefully each member of our vineyard, particularly those who have become lax and are failing to feed their souls on God's Word and Sacrament.

ⁱ Large Catechism, 111, 62, *Triglotta*, p. 695.

ⁱⁱ Formula of Concord, Th. D., Art. 11, 16, *Triglotta*, p. 887.

ⁱⁱⁱ Werning, W. J., *Winning Them Back*, Augsburg Publishing House, Minneapolis: pp. 14, 15.

^{iv} Schuetze, Armin and Irwin Habeck. *The Shepherd Under Christ*, Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, p. 173.

^v Werning, W. J.; *Vision and Strategy for Church Growth*, Moody Press, Chicago: p. 28.