

PASTOR PAUL C. NEIPP OF RIDGECREST, CALIFORNIA:
A CONSERVATIVE LUTHERAN TAKES ON COMMUNISM

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April 29, 1981

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11831 N. Seminary Drive. 65W
Mequon, Wisconsin

There is a tendency in many people living east of the Sierra to picture California as a land whose populace tends to cluster at the left end of the political and cultural spectrum. This isn't quite an accurate picture. While California has perhaps more than its share of the more liberally oriented, it also has perhaps more than its share of the more conservatively oriented. California is a land of very little middle ground, a land where people tend to gravitate toward one or the other end of social spectra. It's only natural that the polarization that has occurred in the past three decades within the LCMS should be somewhat amplified in California. Thus, on the one hand, you have such phenomena as the Southern California District Walther League inviting leftist oriented folk singer Pete Seeger to their '64 convention at Squaw Valley. And, on the other hand, you have the crusade of Pastor Paul C. Neipp of Ridgecrest, California.

Pastor Neipp fits into California well; he is a man whom one of his ex-parishioners describes as being "either all for something or all against it." In 1960, Pastor Neipp launched a campaign to fight one of the things he was "all against": Communism. His campaign spanned over two decades, and its effects were felt all over the U.S. and Canada, perhaps nowhere as strongly as among the conservative laity of California.

Pastor Neipp was born on July 19, 1909, in Calumet, Michigan. He had his pre-seminary training at Concordia, Fort Wayne, and graduated from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, in 1935. Prior to his graduation he traveled over much of Europe, as well as Panama, Egypt, and Arabia, and served as president of the seminary student body and editor of the school paper, Alma Mater. The

congregations he took calls to were all in southern California, with the exception of a brief stint in Havana during 1947, where he served as the first Lutheran missionary to Cuba. Later in 1947 he was called to Our Savior's Lutheran Church in Ridgecrest, a town of about 20,000 at present, in the Mojave Desert. There he stayed until his retirement in July of 1980. He served there as a Circuit Counselor from 1955 until 1966. In 1956 he began a daily 15 minute broadcast of evangelical messages over a local radio station, KLOA, which he continued until his retirement. Pastor Neipp published four books of sermons and two books of prayer during his ministry in Ridgecrest, including the widely-used Gospel Prayers, as well as several devotional booklets and tracts.

In a letter dated April 6, 1981, Pastor Neipp relates that in about 1960 he became interested in fighting Communism. He was sent a copy of a tract by Dr. Fred Schwarz titled "It Can Happen Here." At about the same time, his son, Paul Walther, who was at the time engaged in pre-seminary college studies, sent him a taped lecture by John Noble, an American held in Russian prisons for 9-1/2 years. "These two events," he writes, "led me to study the horrible evils of communism and their avowed goal to enslave the world by trickery, deceit, torture, duplicity, wholesale slaughter and other satanic devices." And having studied, he came to the conclusion he relates in his book Win Now or Lose All: "Since Communism is opposed to all that we Christians stand for -- God, the Bible, salvation by faith in Christ, fixed standards of God's holy Law, individual dignity and freedom -- we have no other recourse but to fight Communism!"¹

He did not initiate his fight timidly or tentatively. Within a year's time he and his wife, Caroline, had begun compiling and editing material for a tabloid newspaper which he entitled Through To Victory, which was to be published eleven times a year for the next fifteen years. It consisted of twelve pages of features gleaned from the voluminous amount of reading he was constantly engaged in as well as personal and guest editorials. In it you could find articles detailing Communist atrocities, Communist policies, and Communist inroads on the American way of life, such as Communist instigation of inner city unrest, student protests, and ecumenism. It was peppered with slogans and catchwords such as "Register Reds not Rifles" and "The Constitution is to the Nation what the Bible is to the Church," as well as suggested prayers for the nation such as, "Heavenly Father, we pray Thee to give us victory over our Communist enemies for our enemies are Thy enemies...Expose those liberal clergymen who cry, "Peace, peace!" when there is no peace...Open our ears that we may heed the warnings of men like J. Edgar Hoover.."² The paper also served as a mouthpiece for conservative dissent within the LCMS, and in 1969, it carried the call for other conservative congregations to join Our Savior's in severing ties with the synod.

The paper was printed by a local printer and mailed with the assistance of Our Savior's members. They began by mailing copies to pastors listed in the synod annual, advancing a few pages every month. Sympathetic pastors informed laypeople of the publication, who informed others. In a phone conversation on April 21, 1981, Pastor Neipp recalled that at its height, TTV had some 30,000 subscribers. To be sure, many of these subscriptions were unsolicited and not paid for, but many other subscriptions were

eagerly requested, read, and paid for. The fact that the paper had influence was evidenced by the results when it raised a protest beginning in the March, '65 issue, when Pete Seeger was invited to perform at the Squaw Valley Walther League Convention. A great outcry was generated in the synod, and although Seeger remained on the program, the vote was close when the case was reconsidered (311-302) at the '65 LCMS convention³ and scores of local Walther Leagues renounced their membership in the national Walther League. TTV was singled out as the primary instigator of the controversy in the May-June 1965 issue of the Oklahoma Walther Leaguer.⁴ The next year a play proposed for performance at the Third Synodical Convention of Sunday School Workers of the LCMS entitled "Round the Cherry Tree" was attacked by TTV⁵. At least partially as a result of the exposure in TTV, a resolution condemning the play was passed at the 1966 Southern California District Convention, and the play was ultimately removed from the program.

In addition to publishing TTV, Pastor Neipp's fight against Communism included going on a lecture circuit and publishing books and tracts. His first anti-Communist book, Let's Take the Offensive, was published in early 1962. By this time, he had already become such an experienced anti-Communist activist that in the autobiographical notes he speaks of being "instrumental in starting over 700 anti-Communism, pro-American study groups."⁶ This book was nearly 150 pages of exposure of Communist strategy in America, bibliography, and practical guidelines for combatting it through forming study groups and fostering public awareness. His second book, Win Now or Lose All, came out of a paper presented in January, 1963 to the Greater Los Angeles Pastoral Conference

of the Southern California District of the LCMS. He revised and expanded this paper to form the book. Pastor Neipp reports in his April 6th, 1981 letter that over 140,000 copies were sold, mostly by mail order directly from him. This book, like most of his tracts, concentrates less on scholarly analysis and practical application, and more on documenting case after case of atrocities committed under Communism. One might wish for fewer horror stories and more calm appeal to the intellect, but Pastor Neipp's position was that such documentation was simply a matter of exposing the real nature of Communism: "Communists act the way they do because they are Communists! They murder, rape and plunder because of what they believe!"⁷ His tracts included "Communism is Total Tyranny!", "If Communism Takes Over," "Why Christians Must Fight Communism," "Why Ministers Should Fight Communism," "Pacifism or Preparedness?" "For Women Only," and "While Men Slept."

Pastor Neipp carried on his campaign throughout the sixties and into the seventies, despite such things as threats on his life. In late 1969, following the Denver Convention of the LCMS, at which fellowship with the ALC was established, Neipp and his congregation severed ties with the Synod. His son, Paul W. Neipp, resigned his pastorate in the LCMS that same year and joined his father as associate Pastor of Our Savior's. In 1971, the Neipps and Our Savior's joined the Lutheran Churches of the Reformation, where they found kindred spirits both in confessionalism and anti-Communism. In 1975, due to lack of funds and the onset of severe health problems in the elder Pastor Neipp, TTV ceased publication. In 1978, more problems developed. In its 1977 convention, LCR adopted an essay on fellowship by Rev. Sheldon Twenge. The elder Neipp and the majority of the congregation

felt that the position espoused by the paper was too rigoristic and rejected the essay. The younger Neipp, by this time Coadjutor of the LCR, endorsed the essay. In the rift that developed, the younger Neipp resigned as associate pastor on July 31, 1978, and in a letter to the congregation dated August 2 called on the members of Our Savior's to join him at his home for Sunday worship. The split ended up going four or five ways. The group that went with the younger Neipp became Pilgrim Lutheran Church. Others joined the local ALC church. Another group for awhile were ministered to by an LCMS pastor from neighboring Lake Isabella. Another group joined the WELS. The group remaining with the elder Neipp and Our Savior's requested membership in the LCMS. It wasn't until Pastor Neipp retired in July of 1980 that he and Our Savior's gained readmission into the synod. Pastor Neipp moved to Salton City, California, where he still offers his devotional and anti-Communist books and tracts by mail order.

Someone observing Pastor Neipp's career might wonder why a conservative Lutheran minister of the gospel should become so heavily involved in a political concern such as fighting Communism. Isn't this at odds with Luther's teaching of "the two kingdoms?" Pastor Neipp didn't see this as a conflict of interest. He related in a telephone conversation on April 21, 1981, that when he was faced with other pastors who derided his anti-Communist stance, he would ask, "Do you preach the Ten Commandments? Do you preach against atheism? Do you preach against immorality?" etc., and when his detractors would answer in the affirmative, he would reply, "All these things you're preaching against are summed up in Communism. Why don't you fight the big enemy?"

It must be stated at the outset that Pastor Neipp is first of all and above all a minister of the gospel. His anti-Communist zeal was not his overriding concern in his ministry. His daily radio show, for instance, was reserved for proclamation of the gospel, not for sounding off against Communists. And when the Ridgecrest Daily Independent did a somewhat extensive interview with him in December, 1975, his political views weren't mentioned once; only his concern for the gospel was discussed.⁸ As extensive as his anti-Communist activities were, they did not completely take over his life and career. As one of his ex-parishioners said, "He was an extraordinary man; he could handle both jobs," as a minister of the gospel and as an anti-Communist activist.

For the most part, he did not use the pulpit for proclaiming his anti-Communist views. Only on national holidays, such as Thanksgiving or the Fourth of July could one normally expect to hear an anti-Communist Philippic. But on those occasions, he left no doubt as to what his position was or what attitude and action his hearers should adopt. In one Thanksgiving Day sermon he stated:

While all these festivities are going on, a cloud of gloom that is hard to shake, quietly intrudes itself upon the mind of the thinking man...He looks at the world situation and sees that we are in a desperate race against a political force that would dehumanize and depersonalize man and strip him of his individual dignity and make of him a faceless being, a number, a cypher of the state. He observes the monumental battle of nerves going on between two colossal giants, one fighting with truth and good will, the other with deceit and propaganda and every foul and unfair means at his disposal...⁹ As citizens of this great stronghold of freedom, let us alert ourselves to all these dangers by keeping ourselves well informed on what is going on, especially by keeping ourselves well informed on what the gangsters in the Kremlin are trying to do to destroy our freedoms.

8

For this I would recommend the reading of such books as Masters of Deceit by J. Edgar Hoover; I was a Slave in Russia, and I Found God in Russia, both by John Noble.¹⁰

He maintained that it was mandatory, not optional, that Christian ministers should become actively involved in fighting Communism. "To do less," he wrote, "is to ^{be} untrue to yourself, to your calling, to your congregation, to your family, and to your Lord Jesus Christ, whose servant you are."¹¹ He recommended such actions as the initiation of anti-Communist study groups "in every Christian congregation"¹², inserting anti-Communist tracts in church bulletins¹³, and the minister's presence at anti-Communist study group meetings for leading the group in prayer and briefly discoursing on spiritual subjects.¹⁴ When Win Now was published, he distributed a copy to every family in his congregation.

While Pastor Neipp kept his anti-Communist zeal from taking over his life and thought, and making "Fight Communism!" the application of every sermon, his loathing for Communism was an extremely pervasive force for him. For instance, at a free conference at Redondo Beach, California, in 1966, he blasted a CLC pastor present for using the RSV. He maintained that this translation should be shunned because some of the translators were Communists. When he split with the LCMS in 1969, and urged others to do so, his reasons were mostly confessional, but even there his anti-Communist sentiments were not completely out of the picture. He explained in a TTV editorial at the time,

The fellowship confusion becomes even worse when we consider that the ALC is a member of the pro-Communist, revolutionary World Council of Churches, and the LCA, with which the ALC is in fellowship, is a member of the unionistic, far-left National Council of Churches¹⁵.

He saw anti-Communist zeal as a motivating force for every

aspect of a Christian's ministry and mission:

We must out-preach [The Communists], out-teach them, out-print them, out-distribute them in tracts, out-do them in speaking to others about our faith, our Savior, our doctrines, out-give them, out-sacrifice them, and out-study them in our Bible reading and Bible Class work.¹⁶

While his anti-Communism was not constantly on his mind as he carried on his ministry, apparently it was seldom far from it.

What are the results when a capable, dedicated, and very determined conservative Lutheran pastor embarks on a campaign like Pastor Neipp's? The effects of his undertakings on the Missouri Synod as a whole are probably not too great. There were some: The Pete Seeger controversy and the scuttling of "Around The Cherry Tree" have already been noted. And there has been at least some official effort to balance the anti-Communist excitement whipped up by Pastor Neipp and others, such as the Concordia Tract Mission's "Communists: Ten Feet Tall?" Actual effects on synodical policy, or national policy for that matter, would be difficult to assess. Pastor Neipp's main goal was to affect the thinking of individuals, and for better or for worse he did accomplish this goal to a great extent.

One WELS pastor, who has been an enthusiastic supporter of Pastor Neipp, sees a great good in what Neipp has done. He writes, "[Communism] is something Christians will want to be informed about so they can do what they can as Christian citizens and so they can pray more effectively." Pastor Neipp's campaign was certainly effective in this respect. Undoubtedly many Christians were alerted to possible danger and moved to effective prayer by his warnings. And ^{if} any people who held the

from a Christian standpoint happened to read Pastor Neipp's writings, they were quickly made aware that "The Communist Party in any country is not just another political party."¹⁷ Although a large amount of his anti-Communist writings were devoted to cataloguing Communist atrocities, he did devote quite a bit of writing to describing the humanistic, anti-Christian principles upon which Marxism is based. For instance, in Win Now he devotes a chapter to "The Evil Roots of Their Philosophy", citing such things as

Ludwig Feuerbach, the renegade preacher, from whom Karl Marx absorbed this philosophy, said, "The turning point of history will be the moment man becomes aware that the only God of man is man himself."¹⁸

If there were any Christians whom Pastor Neipp's educational campaign discouraged from espousing Marxist Communism by making them aware of the philosophy's unScriptural premises, then Pastor Neipp has thereby done the Church a service.

As was stated at the beginning, the effects of Pastor Neipp's crusade were most manifest in individual lay Lutherans in California. And here, in addition to the positive effects noted above, many pastors have experienced effects that are at best annoying and at worst detrimental to the carrying out of the Church's mission. One pastor observed that there has been an increased tendency toward suspicion on the part of people who have been influenced by Neipp, citing as an example a WELS mission in northern California where several avid supporters of Pastor Neipp's crusade set up a covert screening operation for potential church members, in an effort to prevent Communist infiltration.

Troubles resulting from hatred for Communism competing with love for the Savior have been noted. Pastor Neipp did work to make the foundation of faith in the Lord underlie

anti-Communist zeal, but often his call for hatred for Communism sounded forth as loud or louder than his call to faith. And as one southern California WELS pastor observed, commenting on Neipp, "You can only go so long on hatred." One former member of Our Savior's noted an example of this unhealthy competition, citing an instance where Pastor Neipp tried to get an evangelism campaign going at Our Savior's, but failed to get any appreciable response from the congregation, due, this former member believes, to the fact^{that} the congregation was largely "burned out" from the anti-Communism campaign, and had little time, energy, or enthusiasm left over for an evangelism effort.

Many California pastors have had to deal with the problem of having congregational members who have been fans of Pastor Neipp and read TTV, and who came to expect that all conservatives will think the way Neipp thought. Pastor Neipp does tend to picture liberalism and conservatism in a monolithic way, leading people to conclude, "This is the way any given conservative will be." He says in Let's Take The Offensive, "It is almost an axiom that when people are liberal in religion, they are liberal in politics; if they are liberal in politics they are liberal in religion. There are few exceptions to this rule."¹⁹ And in his April 6, 1981 letter he says, "I found that the pastors who were liberal in doctrine more or less defended communism or didn't feel that it was a threat to our way of life. The conservative pastors... strongly backed my position to the hilt." In TTV one found articles defending confessional Lutheranism side by side with articles dealing with Communism, as well as such matters as gun control, ownership of the Panama Canal, wage-price controls,

the evils of rock music, revenue sharing, etc., as well as petitions to Congress for a stronger antiballistic missile system and to declare war on North Viet Nam. One could easily become confused as to what belongs to the realm of conservative politics and what belongs to the realm of conservative Christianity, and this was the case for many California Lutherans. Prof. Joel Gerlach, while he served as a pastor in southern California, had to deal with instances where people had this confusion, and he spoke of it in a 1966 conference paper:

some see a relationship between conservative theology and conservative politics. Consequently, they seek membership in churches which espouse a conservative theological position, and then also expect that their churches will bless, sanction, and promote the cause of conservative politics. They assume that by virtue of one's adherence to the Gospel he must be therefore pro-right and anti-left.²⁰

Conservative Lutheran pastors who have fans of Pastor Neipp in their congregations learn to keep quiet about it if they happen to favor gun control or defense budget cuts, or if they voted for Carter, for fear that they'll lose their credibility as conservative ministers of the gospel. And conservative Lutheran pastors who have people influenced by Pastor Neipp in their congregations learn what it's like to have members who insist on putting out right-wing political literature for distribution in church and bringing up things like, "What are we going to do about Communism?" under new business at voters' meetings.

Perhaps the most disturbing and potentially destructive aspect of Pastor Neipp's campaign was the pervasive sense ^{of} fear, fear incompatible with Christian trust in God's providence. Pastor Neipp was himself a courageous man, but he breathed an air of immanent doom, doom for America, and doom for Chris-

tianity, if the Communists managed to take over. In a chapter of Win Now entitled, "Our Survival Is At Stake," he quotes at length with approval Dr. Emil Brunner, who says,

What this tyranny would be like after the defeat of all the powers working against it, when it could freely wreak its will, we cannot even comprehend in horror... It possesses completeness--thereby differing from all former tyranny. It completely monopolizes all the means of forming a man...Done away with are all traces of Christianity and all the means by which Christianity is spread and can remain in existence. Done away with are all religions, all churches destroyed, all Bibles destroyed...²¹

In his tract "If Communism Takes Over" he tried to goad readers into action by stating,

After they have conquered the world, the family will be destroyed...If the criminal conspirators of the Kremlin take over, they will turn your church into a warehouse, burn your Bible, destroy all Christian devotional literature...²²

Conspicuous by their absence are statements of trust in God's power. Instead, the reader is left with the scary feeling that if we fail to stop the Communists, all will be lost; even God's hands will be tied. The only hope he mentions is our own actions. For example, he concludes Win Now with a series of exhortations beginning with, "If we...": "If we understand...If we realize that we are at war...If we completely dedicate ourselves...then we will win!... Let us get into the struggle now and with God's help we shall win the victory."²³ The phrase "with God's help" appears almost as an afterthought. Confidence in God's power to help his people isn't much encouraged. In the introduction to Win Now Karl Prussion states,

Reverend Paul C. Neipp is representative of the Christian spirit in this fight against atheistic Communism. Because of this spirit the pagan Kremlin cannot defeat Christianity any more than the pagan Roman Empire when they tried--and failed miserably.²⁴

Here at least is a statement of confidence that God's cause

will win out, but this confidence is directed not so much toward God's sovereign power to work his own will, as toward "the Christian spirit". This breathes an air more akin to Schwärmerei than to confessional Lutheranism.

Somewhat ironically, in the same year that Pastor Neipp, operating within the geographical boundaries of the WELS Arizona-California District, began to address the subject of Communism with his newspaper, Prof. Elmer Kiessling also addressed the subject of Communism, in a paper delivered to the WELS Arizona-California District Convention in 1960. In it he concluded,

If then you would ask me point direct what I should advise the church to do in the face of even the worst type of Communism, I should say: Follow the command of your Lord with new consecration...Teach it to the young and trust in it as a power that is mightier than sin and evil. And don't worry too much about the kind of government under which you must labor. The church has lived through every conceivable type of government from the despotisms of Nero and Hitler to the benevolent systems in English speaking countries. If Communism with all its excesses should ever come to this country, that would be all the more reason to preach the gospel...persecution has more often tested and strengthened the church than destroyed. But I see no reason for such a gloomy possibility.²⁵

To be sure, Marxist Communism is hostile to Christianity, and if a Christian can do anything to prevent its takeover, he should of course do so. But if Communism is opposed out of a sense of fear that displaces Christian confidence, if Communism is viewed as a force with power equal to God's, a force that can effectively prevent God from answering the Christian's prayer, "Thy Kingdom come", then Satan has already won his objective, without Communism taking over.

ENDNOTES

1. Paul C. Neipp. Win Now Or Lose All. Ridgecrest, CA: Through To Victory, 731 N. Sanders, 1964. (Henceforth to be referred to as WNOLA) p 49.
2. Through To Victory, 731 N. Sanders, Ridgecrest, CA. (Henceforth to be referred to as TTV) Vol IX #7 (Jul 1969) p 2.
3. TTV, Vol V #8 (Sep 1965) p 2
4. TTV, Vol V #8 (Sep 1965) p3
5. TTV, Vol VI #2 (Feb 1966) p 2
6. Paul C. Neipp. Let's Take The Offensive. Nashville: Parthenon Press, 1962) (Henceforth to be referred to as LTTO) p 4
7. WNOLA, p 21
8. Ridgecrest Daily Independant, Dec 26, 1975, p A-9.
9. Paul C. Neipp. Sermons for Special Occasions. (Nashville: Parthenon Press, 1961) pp 96-97.
10. Sermons for Special Occasions, pp 103-104.
11. "Why Ministers Should Fight Communism" A tract by Paul C. Neipp, 731 N. Sanders, Ridgecrest, CA.
12. "Why Christians Must Fight Communism" A tract by Paul C. Neipp, 731 N. Sanders, Ridgecrest, CA.
13. LTTO, p 33.
14. LTTO, p 37.
15. TTV, Vol IX #8 (Aug 1969) p 4.
16. "Why Christians Must Fight Communism"
17. "Why Ministers Should Fight Communism"
18. WNOLA, p 25.
19. LTTO, p 32.
20. Joel Gerlach. "Is There A Relationship Between Confessional Lutheranism and Political Conservatism?" Paper delivered to the WELS California Delegate Conference, 1966, p 2.
21. WNOLA, pp 47-48.
22. "If Communism Takes Over" A tract by Paul C. Neipp, 731 N. Sanders, Ridgecrest, CA.
23. WNOLA, pp 60-61.
24. WNOLA, p 9.

25. Elmer Kiessling. "Communism In Its Effects Upon The American Way of Life." Paper delivered to the WELS Arizona-California District Convention, 1960. pp 23-24.

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