

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary
2012 Symposium

Reaction to Pastor John Koelpin's Essay
Brotherly Admonition in the Congregation: God's Seeking Grace

Thanks, John, for some excellent and timely reminders about the urgency of brotherly admonition.

The seminary faculty proposed this symposium topic in part because it seemed to us that the state of public discourse in our country is perhaps influencing the way that we communicate as Christian brothers. The vehemence with which opposing sides express their disagreement in public debate today has created a stalemate on many national issues. We are concerned that this "way of the world" not affect the intimate interdependence that we have as brothers and sisters in the family of God. As Jesus said when responding to another "way of the world" that was creeping in among his first twelve disciples, "Not so among you."

We thought that the discussion would progress best if we broke the topic down and began with the microcosm of the body of Christ—the congregation. As the family is the basic building block of society, so the congregation is the building block of the church. Brother John, you have shown us why God interlocks us with brothers and sisters on the local level. Our brothers and sisters are there to hold us accountable when we are incapable of self-accountability. As you noted more than once, it is an uncomfortable thing to confront a brother or sister. But as you also pointed out, it's inevitable. It's a thread that runs through the entire Bible—God confronting his erring children, often through his representatives—through the Nathans, the Elijahs and the Isaiahs of Scripture. We as leaders of congregations are inevitably going to be called on to confront.

Thanks for the reminder of the compassion and the empathy it takes to do so in a constructive way. We dare not give our brothers and sisters the idea that we're approaching them about a particular sin because we have the temptation to that sin "mastered." On the other hand we can't allow ourselves to be cowed from admonishing just because we've been guilty of the same sin. We are prone to retreating to our natural fallback position, "Who am I to judge?" Satan likes nothing better than when we think, "I'm no better. Who am I to say something?"

Thanks too for the reminder that when we do confront a brother or sister, it needs to be a clear-cut **sin** that we are confronting them with, not just something that offends our personal preference.

But thank you most of all for the reminder to **GO**—to DO it! It's striking that the command to admonish begins the same way as the Great Commission—Go!

"Go and show him his fault . . ." **"Go** and make disciples . . ."

Just as the unchurched of our communities are not going to call us and say, "Why aren't you evangelizing me?" so an erring brother or sister isn't going to ask us, "Why aren't you rebuking me?" We

don't go because they ask us to pursue them, just as Jesus didn't come because we asked him to come and save us. He came to our world because of the goodness of his **ἀγάπη**. It's because Jesus came and rescued us that we go and seek out our brother. It's because we recognize ourselves in the parable that precedes the command to admonish our brother. We were that one lost sheep that the Shepherd abandoned the ninety-nine in order to pursue. He sought us out and brought us back. So we go in pursuit of our straying brother.

How interesting that Jesus' command to admonish our brother is one of the few times where the New Testament outlines "how to" steps (p. 10). Was it because Jesus knew how difficult this command would be for us to carry out? Was it because he knew we would need a checklist? Whatever the case, it is striking that in the New Testament, with its lack of ceremonial laws, we find these carefully prescribed steps for admonishing a brother.

This is a sensitive issue for Christians at any time and in any place, but how much more so in this time and in this place. We live in America, a place that prides itself more on individual liberties than on group cohesiveness. We have lived for decades in an atmosphere that has breathed "I'm OK, you're OK"—that has made a virtue of condoning sin rather than confronting it. Is it any wonder that it's particularly painful at this time and in this place to admonish brothers and sisters?

Thank you, Pastor Koelpin, for leading us into this topic from the pastoral perspective and not just presenting it as a mere academic exercise. If we're going to approach this issue merely with an attitude that says, "We need to clean house," we in the church will soon experience a great divide like the one we hear about daily in the news. But if we approach it from the angle of love—the love that Christ has for the church, the love that brothers and sisters in the faith have for one another—then we will not be offended when our brother confronts us. Then we will not let fear overcome the impulse in us to pursue our brother with God's seeking grace.

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