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BRIEF STUDIES

THE VALUE OF HISTORY *

By Oliver R. Harms

History, both that which was made and that which is being made, was never of greater importance than it is at this time. This statement I think will be accepted as true in secular affairs. As historians and archivists assembled here, we, however, are interested in secular history only in an incidental way. At this moment we are more interested in the history of the church.

It has been said by any number of people, I suppose, that they who cannot appreciate properly the meaning of the past will never lay hold on the opportunities of the future. Surely the present will present no occasion to them for enthusiastic reaction to the challenges of the day.

So, then we ought briefly to evaluate the objectives of this meeting. Why should investments be made in an endeavor to bring into a meeting a number of men from all parts of our country who are interested in the task of preserving a record of the more or less important events in the life of the church? Archivists are keepers of records.

Records of the church, records of individuals, records of congregations, of synods, of districts of synods, records of circuit conferences are all of extreme importance. No one could possibly understand The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod if he has not taken the time to inquire into the 116-year history of that church body. Some things were done in the early history which, because of changed circumstances, were not undertaken in the middle period, but which can supply an approach to the present situation. I refer, for instance to the free conferences. These

afforded an opportunity for a face-to-face consideration of differences that existed in the area of doctrine and of practice. How could we possibly know the position taken by our fathers if there were no records?

Hence archivists serve in evaluating the records and drawing from them not only the facts which are to be found but also the lessons contained in them.

We are not a church body which is bound by tradition, for tradition takes a secondary position in our activity. We believe, teach, and confess that the Bible, both the Old and the New Testament, must give us our directives for living as individuals and as a church body. It is, however, of great value to know what our fathers did in given situations as they sought their answers from the Word of God.

Our great concern today is the Word of God, its authority, its place in the church and in the home. In this problem the stored records must somehow prove useful as a guide to the future. This cannot mean that we must always repeat what is recorded in the past. Indeed, we may find indications that certain opinions were based on misunderstanding, misinterpretation, or even on misinformation. I think, for example, of the changed attitude in the social life of our synod regarding so-called life insurance, property insurance, or frequenting the theater.

Where should our activity as archivists lead us? As a result of our work we should be able to show our people clearly what the Word of God has meant and what it still means in the life of congregations, circuits, districts, and synods.

We live in unusual times. On the basis of the Word of God we must needs be sure of ourselves. St. Paul, the apostle, says in Ephesians 5:15, 16: "See that ye walk cir-

* The keynote address by the President of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod to the Archivists' and Historians' Conference, St. Louis, October 15, 1963.

cumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil" — or, walk "with caution and habitual regard to what is God's will, regardless of danger, perceiving the evil, and avoiding it" — seeing "the good and pursuing it" as you redeem or seize upon the time, which affords the opportunity of serving Christ, although the days, the present times, offer opposition on every hand.

The opportunity is ours, but we stand a good chance of making most serious and consequential errors. After the Saint Paul Convention a theologian of another body said something like this: "It is possible that the Missouri Synod could sweep all of us along." I believe this to be true even today. We have the theologians capable of doing it. Given the right guidance in this opportunity, they may do it. They will never do it if they fall in line with the "liberal" theologians of our day. But they can be aided in doing it by inquiring into all the facets of the answers given in the past. We must ask the question: "How did we come to be what we are? What is it that makes the Missouri Synod "tick"? Is it some form of activism? Or is it an activity motivated by the certainty that we have a Bible-based position

which is correct and that the old phrase, 'the true visible church of God on earth,' still obtains? Congregations persuaded that the latter is the case and moving out into the respective communities, will be a power in God's hands for the expansion of the kingdom.

The records in our archives will show how we came to be what we are and will give directives to this generation for the future. Assuming the continuance of this present world for some decades, there will be generations yet unborn who will look for and need guidance. Woe to us if we should fail them; but blessed, many times blessed, will we be if we will direct them to the cross, by way of the infallible Word of Holy Scripture.

In this Reformation month we will do well to hold fast to the three great phrases coming out of the work of the Reformation: SOLA SCRIPTURA! SOLA GRATIA! SOLA FIDE!

May the God of all grace help you in the important task before you and give you insights into the value of history in the expansion and development of the future work in the great kingdom of God.