

Piepkorn in PERSPECTIVE

[In “Viewpoint,” Missouri in Perspective
1:5 December 24, 1973]

Arthur Carl Piepkorn does not need for us to say this, seeing how obvious it is: he was the Missouri Synod’s most sweetly orthodox teacher, not only to the Synod itself but in behalf of the Synod to the rest of Christendom. Yet that same Synod in its recent convention condemned the teaching of this man of God – along with that of his colleagues at Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis – as “false doctrine which is not to be tolerated in the church of God.”

It does not take much imagination to see that God, with characteristic irony, has now taken the Synod at its word. He will indeed no longer “tolerate” the likes of Arthur Carl Piepkorn to be squandered on such an ungrateful church. So He has now recalled one of His most favored ambassadors, thus granting the suicidal wishes of the host country.

How many more of His recalls will that country demand before diplomatic relations are damaged beyond repair?

“Not to be tolerated in the church of God.” Dr. Piepkorn took those words with awful seriousness, not only for himself and his colleagues but more so for his church on whom those words would surely backfire – as now they have. For that condemnation was imposed at New Orleans not by ordinary church-members who speak only for themselves, but by church delegates. They were to represent the whole church.

So when they condemned the ministry of a Dr. Piepkorn, they did so in the name of millions of other Christians – in the name of the thousands of pastors he had trained, in the name of the parishioners he had served, in the name even of his own wife and children. Consequently, all of these together now had to bear responsibility for that hideous action of their representative spokesmen.

When Dr. Piepkorn re-entered his classroom after New Orleans, he was mindful that probably none of these young seminarians had ever before had to sit in the same room with someone whom the church had charged with heresy. So with typical compassion he offered to let them transfer to other classes.

Worse yet, Dr. Piepkorn's opponents on the seminary's Board of Control recently scheduled him and some of his colleagues for "retirement," and then, as if to dignify the action, offered to call it an "honorable" retirement.

Hearing that, people have not known whether to laugh or cry, since Dr. Piepkorn was in the very prime of his professional life. The board members who wanted him out did not dare to admit why. Not one of them, nor anyone else, could ever have succeeded in proving their real grievance against him, "false doctrine." They knew that and so did Dr. Piepkorn.

Therefore he was going to decline the retirement on the grounds that it could not possibly be an "honorable" one unless the church first exonerated him of its condemnation against him. He was willing to give his church that second chance. But now, as God has seen fit, the church does not have that chance after all – except posthumously.

The loss of Arthur Carl Piepkorn cannot be undone but it might still, thank God, be kept from going to waste. There might yet be time to redeem this tragedy, thanks to a God who allows even His grimmest judgments to be used for our repentance. But in order truly to repent, to put an immediate stop to the disastrous purges afoot in our Synod and to rescind the scandals of New Orleans, we need one huge resource.

We need the courage to trust our forgiving Lord. Without that courage we shall be too afraid to admit how terribly, lethally wrong we are being. Scared, we shall simply go on justifying the purges or concealing them. Or as the synodical administration now proposes, we may shortly be treated to a new "peace offensive," but only after several more heads are made to roll. These are the actions of a church too afraid to acknowledge its shame, and to reform.

Yet the only thing which can free us to do so is the liberating promise of Jesus our Lord that He will spare us the ultimate shame. We have all been helped to believe that by Arthur Carl Piepkorn, who now has gone on to confirm the promise at first hand.

Meanwhile the rest of us can be rehearsing for the final confirmation, by learning to "tolerate" a God who tolerates even us, all of us.

Robert W. Bertram