

This title carries with it an interpretive subtitle, which reads as follows:

Encouragement in Practicing Confessional
Lutheranism today in an Ecumenical Age

Editor Harold Wicke of the Northwestern Lutheran had the following pertinent words to say in an article pertaining to the Formula of Concord

"Since mid-1965 dialogues have been held between the U.S.A. National Committee of the Lutheran World Federation and the Committee for Ecumenical and International Affairs of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. That Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions are being compromised in these meetings becomes clear, when we read words like the following in one of the news releases: 'We Lutherans consider the need for symbols and centers of unity to be urgent....When we think of the question of the church's unity in relation to its mission, we cannot dismiss the possibility that under some form of the papacy, renewed and restructured under the Gospel, may be an appropriate visible expression of the ministry that serves the unity and ordering of the church.'" (1)

And in the issue of November 13, 1977, the same author states:

"In our own day the Lutheran Church is again torn by controversies. Almost all Lutherans today subscribe to the Formula, but ever so many of them do not allow themselves to be bound by the statements. For all practical purposes, the Formula has become a paper creed to which most Lutherans only pay lip service. How sad!" (2)

In the light of these quotations - and one could adduce many others from divers sources - faithful Lutherans have every reason for seeking encouragement to remain faithful in this ecumenical age. Ecumenism is a destructive force in the life of all churches, and especially of the Lutheran Church. An unknown author, quoted in the Lutheran Spokesman of February 1978, describes this terrible danger without mincing words.

"Ecumenism is an illogical and deplorable conspiracy to water down religious beliefs, until the intoxicating wine of spiritual communion becomes a flabby gruel for fatherhood of God and brotherhood of man's creed, to which anyone from Karl Marx to a Siberian shaman could and usually does subscribe." (3)

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In order to understand the full implications of the Prussian Union in the suggested encouragement of the theme, I considered it valuable to trace the development of the ecumenical spirit of the early 1800's in Prussia and then briefly to apply some of the lessons of this overview to our own age. And I hope that this is the real intent of this assignment.

First of all, one must clearly define what is meant by the term Prussian Union. What did the Prussian King Frederick William III have in mind when he issued the decree, establishing the union of the two branches of Protestantism in his lands? And how did he hope to attain his goal? The first question practically answered itself.

The second question is perhaps best answered by the word "Indifferenzierung," the word which Stahl uses to characterize the Union in his great history of the Union. (4) The ultimate goal of the King was the complete erasure of all doctrinal and cultural differences between the Lutheran and the Reformed branches of Protestantism in his domains. Meusel quotes Stahl with these words: "Die Einigung der Lutherischen und Reformierten Kirchen mittels Indifferenzierung (Gleichgueltigerklaerung, Unwesentlicherklaerung) ihrer Unterscheidungslehren." (5) A free translation follows. "Uniting of the Lutheran and Reformed churches by eliminating all differences (declaring them equally valid, declaring them of equal value) of their distinctive doctrines." At first this Union would not require that individual pastors, members, or entire congregations should surrender their own religious views, be they in matters of doctrine or of ritual. However, the goal was nevertheless a consensus church, in which all differences of doctrine and ritual and practice would be forgotten. Professor John Meyer quotes an order in council which reveals the early intent of the King quite clearly. It reads as follows:

"The intent and purpose of the Union does not demand that anyone surrender his former confession, nor is the authority which the Confessions of the two Evangelical Churches held so far thereby abrogated. By joining the Union a spirit of charity and tolerance is indicated which no longer regards a difference in some points of doctrine as a sufficient reason to deny external church fellowship to the other church body." (6)

Two contemporary historical developments lead to the growth of the religious cultus of the early 1800's. They are Pietism and Rationalism. And the development of each requires a brief overview of the immediate Post-Luther Era and beyond.

This period was marked by a number of conflicts which tore the Lutheran Church apart. After Luther's death, Melanchthon, Luther's learned friend and aide at the University of Wittenberg, lacked the great Reformer's religious depth and decisiveness. Melanchthon himself began to weaken his position on several major issues. His colleagues at Wittenberg veered still farther toward Calvinistic doctrine. They did this in the interest of union between the two major branches of Protestantism. And soon Melanchthon's influence spread to many of Germany's universities together with the tendency to compromise. An outstanding example of the tendency to compromise is the weakening of

many Lutheran leaders in regard to the doctrine of the Real Presence of Christ's Body and Blood in Holy Communion. In turn this softening was based on the false Calvinistic teaching that Christ's body did not share the divine attribute of omnipresence, and therefore could not be present in the Sacrament in many places at the same time, since He had ascended on High. This heretical tendency and development was not made public. The laity was left under the impression that all was well and Lutheranism was being taught at the universities. But the affinity for Calvinism was at home in the classrooms of many professors of religion at the universities. (One is reminded of the situation at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, a few years ago.) Though these Crypto-Calvinists claimed to be faithful to Scriptural and Lutheran doctrine and the Augsburg Confession, the truth reveals that the spirit of Union at the expense of doctrine and confession was already present in the churches of the Post-Luther Era.

This unionistic movement was finally somewhat controlled and the Lutheran Church was saved from destruction, if one may use these words. Men like Andreae, Chytraeus, Chemnitz and many others fought valiantly for the Lutheran cause, climaxing their efforts with the acceptance and publication of the Formula of Concord and, a few months later, of the Book of Concord. (1580) The Formula was the reaffirmation of Genuine Lutheranism versus the Crypto-Calvinists and Rome. And in it the Scriptures were again acknowledged as the sole Standard and Rule of doctrine and life.

The next century might well be called the era of dogmatism, or the Age of Orthodoxy. The names of Chemnitz and his Loci, of Gerhard and Quenstedt (a favorite of Dr. Hoenecke in his Dogmatics) come to mind. It was they and many others who set forth the doctrines of the Reformation and defended them against the false doctrines of both Rome and Calvin-Bengt Haegglund, quoted by Marquart, has paid these men this high tribute:

"With respect to its versatile comprehension of theological material and the breath of its knowledge of the Bible, Lutheran orthodoxy marks the high point in the entire history of theology."

Marquart continues: "Lesser lights regrettably fell into a hair-splitting disputatiousness with little evidence of spiritual life and warmth." (7) Professor John Phillip Koehler adds this judgment over the era: "The world has become tired spiritually, religiously, and churchly." (8)

This weakening of spirit resulted in the growth of religious tolerance, climaxing in Pietism. This reaction against Orthodoxy, also influenced by Reformed theological thinking, gave Pietism its chief characteristic, expressed by someone as "antagonism to Lutheranism." Since doctrine and scriptural authority had been exiled, the pietistic movement stressed life rather than doctrine, sanctification rather than justification, experience rather than the sacraments. Marquart summed up Pietism's influence on the theologians of that time in this way: "Thorough theological work beyond the immediate needs of 'practical' piety seemed wearisome, even unspiritual. Unconditional subscription

to the Lutheran Confessions because they agreed with Scripture, was now felt to be inappropriate." (9) And Professor J. P. Koehler lists some fifteen accusations and aberrations versus Pietism, all of them faith-destroying. And Professor John Meyer has a very pertinent answer to his own question "What is the connection (of Pietism) with the Prussian Union?" It reads as follows:

"While orthodoxy did rouse a certain resentment and aversion to purity of doctrine, Pietism undermined the structure of objective doctrine still more and led directly into subjectivism, where everybody is left to the guidance of his own feelings to strive for aims of his own choosing. - The doors were wide open for Unionism." (10)

Since the church lacked doctrinal strength, based on faithfulness to the Scripture, rationalistic enlightenment had a field day, especially in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Reason eventually ruled supreme. (A harlot proclaimed as goddess in Paris.) Humanism permeated the philosophical thinking of the era. Revelation from God was deemed superfluous. Doctrines such as that of the Trinity or of Redemption were lightly discarded, "relegated backstage." Man considered himself sufficient unto himself.

The same worthless, no, godless drivel was also proclaimed from the Lutheran pulpits of Germany, driving the laity out of its churches. The hierarchy had gradually fallen prey to Rationalism, the second development referred to at the beginning.

What was Rationalism's connection with Unionism? None other, than that of Pietism. It had destroyed, or helped to destroy, the resistance of Lutheranism to all anti-scriptural attacks upon it. And therefore the church was ready for Unionism. (One is reminded here of the modern God-is-dead theology.)

Nevertheless, there was considerable deep-rooted faith in the Scripture to be found among the common people, as Professor Meyer points out in his afore-mentioned article. This fact is clearly shown by the popularity of the Lutheran hymns among the people and by the many men who, like Paul Gerhardt, wrote a great number of hymns.

Toward the end of the eighteenth century, this inherent faithfulness of the common people led to a renewal of doctrinal study and a strong reaction against both Pietism and Rationalism. However, Lutheran theologians were no longer able to stand alone in the Scripture. Rather, under the influence of scientific methods, they fell prey to dogmatic formulism. That is, they used dogmatics rather than the Bible to defend pure doctrine. Dr. Hoenecke, quoted by Marquart, describes their thinking quite well. "Verbal inspiration was given up in the delusion that in this way one could gain the upper hand over the newer criticism." (12)

Before discussing certain political developments, which played a part in the establishment of the Prussian Union, a word or two about the theological thinking of Schleiermacher is in place, since he was perhaps the foremost and most influential theologian of the early 1800's. And he was one of the staunchest supporters of the Union, though he differed

with the King about the methods used in introducing the Union. One writer sums up Schleiermacher's theology with these words: "Doctrine is the formulated expression of the Church at any time."

This admittedly brief resume of the religious background for the establishment of the Prussian Union had a political counterpart to which we must refer at least briefly.

The Treaty of Westphalia, which ended the Thirty Years' War in 1648, returned the religious adherence of the people back to the provisions of the Treaty of Augsburg. (1555) This treaty stipulated that the rulers of the various parts of Germany should determine the religious beliefs of their subjects according to the old rule "Cujus regio, ejus religio." However, as one might expect, on occasion princes changed their religious adherence, sometimes for political, sometimes for dynastic reasons. This happened, for instance, in Saxony. Under the influence of the Reformation, Saxony and its rulers had been some of the main protectors of Lutheranism. But in 1697 August of Saxony turned to the Catholic faith in order to accept the throne of Poland. And gradually the archdukes of Brandenburg assumed this protective role for Protestantism in general.

But these Hohenzollern rulers were Calvinist or Reformed. Naturally they favored this branch of Protestantism. They even permitted large numbers (25,000) of Huguenots from France to immigrate into Brandenburg and Prussia. And Unionism was a pet idea of the entire Hohenzollern line, until they were dethroned in 1918. However, they were also tolerant over against their Lutheran subjects, who had come under their rule as a result of the Seven Years' War and the War of the Austrian Succession. This at the time of Frederick the Great (1740-1786).

The Church became the object of special attention in Prussia at about this time. The rulers from 1700 on looked upon the Church as the pillar of the Prussian Kingdom. For this reason the successor of the great Frederick, Frederick William III, merged the Reformed and the Lutheran church administrations into a single department of government. (1814) A more integral union seems to have been in his mind, but the Napoleonic Wars interrupted the carrying-out of these plans, at least for the time being. A personal problem strengthened the King's keen desire for integral union of the Protestant churches. He could not receive Holy Communion together with his wife, who was a member of the Lutheran church and he was Reformed.

But sooner or later, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, conditions would be right to attempt the complete Union of Lutherans and Reformed. Politically the Union was desirable to the ruling house of Prussia. And spiritually the church was conditioned to accept the Union, since it has fallen prey in some measure to Schleiermacher's subjectivism and a general apathy in regard to Scriptural truth was present among a great number of the clergy.

Then came 1817 and the tricentennial celebration of the Reformation festival. The pious king, and a king humbled by the results of the Napoleonic Wars, seized upon the occasion to proclaim the Union. And he arranged a joint Lutheran-Reformed commemorative service in the royal

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chapel. The Lutheran pastors of Berlin supported the King's action and, of course, the Reformed clergy were happy.

In his decree of September 27, 1817, Frederick William first of all called attention to the fact that his forefathers of the Hohenzollern ruling family had desired the union of the Lutheran and Reformed churches of Prussia. Then he continued, and I translate freely:

"I gladly join them to honor their memory and their wholesome intentions. And I hope to see a God-pleasing work - which experienced unsurmountable hinderances in the former unfortunate sectarian spirit. But now, laboring under a more favorable atmosphere, which has removed the non-essential and which retains the essentials of Christianity to which both Confessions agree, I hope to see this work completed in my lands to the honor of God and the welfare of the Christian church; and that it go into effect in connection with the coming Reformation festival." (13)

After enumerating what he considered benefits which would result from this union, the King continued:

"But though I must sincerely wish that the Reformed and Lutheran churches in my lands might share this my deep conviction, nevertheless, I am far removed from forcing the Union on them, because I respect their rights and liberties. Therefore I shall not order or command anything in this matter." (13)

Briefly stated, the decree was not to be introduced by use of force. People were to retain the right to worship according to their confession. Neither confession was abolished. Rather, the stress was to be placed on those doctrines, customs, and ritual which the two churches had in common. The rest was to be forgotten. But in spite of these mild provisions, there was little enthusiasm for the Union in major parts of the Lutheran Church.

Harsh methods to enforce the Union were to follow. In 1821 the King published his "infamous" agenda, as one writer described it. In it he included the Calvinistic Breaking of the Bread in Holy Communion. Only about one sixteenth of the clergy approved the agenda. This irritated and disgruntled the King and he ordered the agenda to be introduced by force, hoping that would further the Union movement. Also, in 1825, he ordered the ordination vows of the clergy to be given on a "Consensus of Confessions" (not quia, sed quatenus) basis. Naturally faithful Lutherans could accept neither the Agenda nor the new ordination vow.

Basing on Sasse, Marquart offers a very fine summary of the enforcement process.

"Distinctive Lutheran services were now simply forbidden, and conscientious Lutherans like Professor J. G. Scheibel of Breslau, removed from office and persecuted in various incredibly ferocious ways - despite Prussia's claims that it followed an enlightened policy of freedom of religion!

Noblemen and merchants were fined heavily for allowing Lutheran services on their properties. Lutherans had to meet secretly in forests, cellars, and barns. Judas-money was paid for the betrayal of faithful pastors. Midwives had to report the birth of all Lutheran children. Lutheran baptisms were declared invalid, and babies were sometimes forcibly rebaptized in the official union-church under police compulsion. Faithful pastors were imprisoned. In one village the faithful Lutherans were attacked on Christmas Eve by a military force of five hundred men, who drove the weeping women away from the church with swords and bayonets, forced open the church-doors, and "installed" the union pastor with his union liturgy. The army refused to end the occupation till the protesting parishioners would start attending the union services." (14)

Besides Scheibel, one might mention many other leaders of the opposition to the Union, men like Claus Harms, Kellner, Berger and others. Harms had written the following already at the end of the jubilee year 1817:

"The Lutheran church is to be treated like a poor maiden who is to be made rich through marriage. Be sure you do not perform the ceremony over Luther's bones. This will restore them to life and then woe to you!" (15)

This prophecy was soon to begin to be fulfilled. The Lutheran laity left the state churches in great numbers. The younger clergy were driven back into the study of Scripture and Lutheran dogmatics, although their opposition to the Union was based on dogmatics rather than on the Scripture directly. Large groups of the laity, often whole congregations together with their pastors emigrated to America, where they founded the Missouri and the Buffalo Synods, for instance. In Germany itself faithful Lutherans in Silisia founded the Breslau Synod and in Saxony the Saechsische Freikirche was organized. (Our Synod was in complete fellowship with these two groups at one time.) And Lutheran literature began to appear in great volume.

Eventually then, Prussia ended up not with one Protestant church, but with three: the Lutheran, the Reformed, and the Union churches. And Frederick William IV was obliged to end all persecution and grant all three branches the right to worship according to their own consciences. The Lutherans had won the struggle, though not as completely as one would wish. Professor Koehler has a short summary for this victory. I translate freely:

"One is amazed at the difference between the completely clear position of Luther in regard to the effect of the Gospel on all external relationships and the position of the opponents to the Union. Even though their testimony against mixture of doctrines was beautiful (herrlich), nevertheless their leaning toward high churchism, combined with a tendency toward legalism, helped to bring it about that the struggle against the Union was not completely cleared up anywhere." (16)

What can we and our Church learn from the faithful believers of the times of which we have spoken? Over all, one would have to say that the most important lesson for our day is this that faithfulness to the Scripture is the chief, yes, the only enduring defense against the inroads of false doctrine and practice. And encouragement in that direction is the most important, the vital necessity of our day.

It is the relegating into the background of Scriptural truth, for instance, that makes the historical-critical method of Scripture study the destructive force that it is. Actually it is Rationalism at its worst and can only end in the religious statement of a few years ago that "God is dead." Thus Edgar Krentz, one of the chief theoreticians of historical criticism at "Seminec" admits: "Historical method is the child of Enlightenment." (17)

Again, as the emotionalism and subjectivism of Schleiermacher had its detrimental effects on the Church and could be counteracted only by the Word, so today the emotional Charismatic Movement and its false teaching about the Holy Ghost can only be opposed by faithful adherence to the Word. And is not the entire Ecumenical Movement based on the same doctrinal indifference to the Word? What better encouragement could one propose to oppose it? Included under Ecumenism are all kinds of excrescences of the movement: Scouting, military chaplancies, the union drives in the liberal branches of American Lutheranism: the Lutheran Church in America, the American Lutheran Church, the American Evangelical Lutheran Church, and Elim.

I should like to refer to one other important danger threatening our Church, the more or less great influence of Reformed literature on our clergy and our people. After all, unionism is an inherent characteristic of Reformed theology, dating back to Zwingli and continuing to the present time. A solid study of the Word and a firm commitment to the Scripture and Lutheran doctrine is far better than the study of Reformed literature. Dr. Martin Scharlemann writes as follows:

"Within the American theological setting, the Lutheran Church confronts no more dangerous enemy than the many influences from Reformed doctrine by way of tracts, journals, well-organized programs of stewardship and expanding church membership, as well as an abundance of church literature, often written in such a way as to disguise the theological traps designed to snare the unwary. One of the chief sticking points is now what it was over four hundred years ago; namely, the meaning and role of the Sacraments." (18)

Other areas of concern might be mentioned, but let those mentioned suffice. (Dialogues between Lutherans and other church bodies.) In closing, permit me to use the words of Professor Meyer:

"A church without a clear confession lacks vitality. You can never win victories for any truth by sidestepping the issue, especially not in a struggle against the forces of darkness." (19)

And the source of clear confession is the Scripture alone!

ENDNOTES

1. Northwestern Lutheran, June 11, 1978
2. Ibid. November 13, 1977
3. Lutheran Spokesman, February 1978
4. Stahl, Die Lutherische Kirche und die Union.
1859, page 376
5. Meusel, Kirchliches Handlexicon, Leipzig, 1902
6. John Meyer, Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, 1945, page 221-222
7. Marquart, Anatomy of an Explosion, 1977, page 11
8. Koehler, Kirchengeschichte, Page 507
9. Marquart ibid. page 12
10. John Meyer, ibid. page 227
- 11.12. Marquart, ibid. page 39
13. Rinn und Juengst, Kirchengeschichtliches Lesebuch, page 347
- 14.15. Marquart, ibid. page 13
16. Koehler, ibid. page 618
17. Marquart, ibid. page 37
18. Christian News, July 17, 1978
19. John Meyer, ibid. page 222