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The Lutheran Church and Unionism.

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This summer a notable discussion of the subject of unionism was embodied in several articles published in the *American Lutheran Survey*, the writer being the editor of that journal, Dr. W. H. Greever. The articles in question had, for the greater part, been delivered in the form of lectures at a pastors' summer school and were printed in the *Survey* at the request of those who had heard them. The author treats the general subject: "The Lutheran Church in America," the articles having these headings, respectively, "The Inner Life of the Lutheran Church in America"; "The Inner Relationship between Lutheran Bodies in America"; "External Relationships of the Lutheran Church in America"; "The Promotion of the Lutheran Church in America." The statements we have reference to are found in the second and in the third article. Dr. Greever's remarks are characterized by candor and frankness and should be productive of much good. Believing that what he says on unionism is an important contribution to the debate on this matter, we shall submit copious quotations from his articles. He says, p. 463: "From this study we conclude further that the chief obstacles at present to Lutheran unity, union, fellowship, and partnership in this country are in two matters of practise, which involve doctrines and principles concerning which there is agreement in formal confession. We do not overlook the obstacles of personal prejudices and deplorable obstinacies nor the weighty obstacle of the difference between the legalistic and the evangelical spirit in dealing with these two matters of practise, but we still insist that these two matters in themselves are the chief obstacles to better Lutheran inner relationships. We will speak plainly here, but we desire to give no offense through what we shall say. These two things are *Unionism* and *Secret Societies*.

"*Unionism*: This question will be more fully discussed in the

lecture following, and it would seem to be unnecessary to say much about it here. But we wish to put upon record in this connection what our conclusions in the matter are, as a challenge to that part of the Church against which the charge of unionism is made, to clear itself of all grounds for that charge. Those conclusions are, (1) that no part of the Lutheran Church can consistently practise unionism (a) without disloyalty to the truth which it confesses and (b) without unfaithfulness to the tasks which are specifically its own; and (2) that, this being true of the Church as a whole, local, individual violations of the principle must do more harm, even locally, than any imagined good could offset; and (3) that all social and religious responsibilities involved in external relationships can be fully and effectively met through contacts which do not involve unionism. Moreover, this position and course of conduct is as binding, by the rule of consistency, upon other religious bodies as it is upon Lutherans and can be maintained without offense to any, where the true Christian spirit inspires tact in adherence to sound principle instead of submission to compromising policy. Our prediction is that the whole Lutheran Church in this country will finally accept this view and will order its practise accordingly, and when it does, one of the greatest of all obstacles to Lutheran union will be removed." (The remarks of our author on secret societies will be found elsewhere in this issue.)

All this is well said. That the question of unionism has been one of the chief rocks on which in the past the hopes for unification of the Lutheran Church in America came to grief is well known. Two of the famous four points dealt with this evil, namely, those relating to pulpit-fellowship and altar-fellowship. It is remarkable what vitality error possesses. While indeed one of the four condemned positions, Chiliasm, has retired into the deep background and is in a fair way of leaving the scene entirely, its three sisters, membership in secret societies, pulpit- and altar-fellowship, are still quite vigorous and militant. In the lecture following the one from which the above extract is taken, Dr. Greever develops his thoughts on our topic thetically and antithetically. We shall quote what we consider most important, p. 465 f. :—

"Now, from these unionists and from the leaders of many unionistic movements, associations, and federations, Lutherans are constantly receiving invitations and petitions to join in and cooperate. Many of the specific programs are not bad in themselves, but in almost all instances unionism is involved and is

a hidden, if not an open, purpose. That part of the Lutheran Church to which we belong is the part most persistently and most insistently solicited, and in the light of its history, is supposed to be the most accessible and responsive of all the Lutheran bodies in this country. We need not add anything here to what we said in this connection in the lecture this morning. The position of the Lutheran Church on this point, including the body to which we belong, is now pretty well understood. For the most part the Lutheran Church in America has steadfastly said no to all proposals which involved compacts. Will it remain steadfast unto the end in a positive declination of all entangling alliances with unionism? If it remains true to the greater cause of genuine Christian unity, it will be steadfast in such declination. It has solemnly and explicitly so declared itself; and yet this question remains a problem, for these reasons:—

“(a) The unionists will not cease their efforts, but will increase their insistence to draw Lutherans into their alliances. To this end they will work within the Lutheran Church itself, by various methods, to create sentiment in their favor. Besides, they will use the pressure of every crisis and emergency that current life may present, and they will come in through every open door, even if they have to cross an ocean to find the door.

“(b) There are those within the Church, some of whom have other external relations and are committed to other programs, who will be advocates from within. We doubt if the number of such is decreasing. There is a veiled reference here, but the veil is thin, and we think it unnecessary, maybe unwise, to draw it aside.

“(c) The arguments used in behalf of some affiliations are subtle and plausible, however unsound. One of the favorite ones is, ‘Go in and change what is not right’—‘This offers a great opportunity to bear our testimony.’ The Lutheran Church has not had much experience in this connection, but it has had quite enough to answer, once for all, this and all similar arguments. The argument that we should go in for the sake of publicity and popularity, very seriously proposed by some, compromises our integrity. Perhaps special attention should be given to the recurring hysterical plea for a united Protestantism to meet the aggressions and transgressions of Romanism. Such a union as might be effected for that purpose would add nothing to, but would only hamper, evangelical truth in its conflict with Romish error, and any union to meet the political aggressions of the

Roman hierarchy should be effected by *citizens* upon political grounds. Such a union of Church and State as Rome proposes is not justified among Protestants as a means to prevent Rome from realizing her purposes.

“Such compacts as might be desirable and legitimate for social or civic ends, if made, should be made outside of the Church. The Lutheran Church cannot consistently form compacts with other religious bodies not in unity with it in faith, for two major reasons:—

“(a) Because it cannot compromise its loyalty to revealed truth. The doctrines held by the Lutheran Church are not held as doctrines of human origin, even their formulation being nothing more than honest interpretation of revelation, but they are held as the very essence of revealed truth. To concede any part of it is to go against conscience and to become disloyal to truth, and to compromise it is to concede it. No part of revealed truth may be conceded because of the unity of truth, as well as because of the essential value of all truth. Even that which might be judged as of minor importance in revelation is inseparable from that of major importance, and all revelation is God’s truth, given to man for his full and hearty acceptance, not to be ignored or modified at man’s will. The Lutheran Church does not deem this a narrow or bigoted loyalty to what it believes to be the truth, but the same that is to be expected of any and every other Church which justifies a separate existence on the ground of doctrine. Compacts compromise confessions, evidently or by implications, sooner or later. Principle is here involved.

“(b) Because it cannot turn from great and plain tasks to lesser and questionable ones. This involves practical policy. The Lutheran Church in this country has never had either men or money half sufficient for the work which without question was its own God-given work. Its available resources have always been vastly overtaxed, and yet, more work has been left undone than has been accomplished. To have done its own work better would have been to exert its widest possible influence upon the nation and upon the world. Such compacts as indicated above would mean diversions of both men and means, men of the greatest ability and money in large amounts, from work for which we are immediately responsible, to what in most instances would be mere dissipation. This point, even though it be but a point of policy, not to be compared with the first point in importance, is not to be regarded lightly. And any other Church which justifies its

separate existence on the ground of its faith must feel also that it has a separate mission in the world, which calls for all of its resources of men and money."

These are valiant words, and they are all the more noteworthy because they come from a member of a church-body which has been known for deviations from the policy outlined above. Continuing, our author points out that, while refusing to make compacts, we Lutherans must not fail to manifest, first, a certain kind and degree of tolerance; secondly, respect for honest sincerity of those whose convictions are different; thirdly, a just appreciation of whatever is good; fourthly, patience; fifthly, Christlike love. The author then dwells on contacts between Lutherans and people of other churches, classifying these contacts as social, civic, intellectual, and religious. And finally, he urges that the proper impacts be made. We have added this brief summary to give a hint of the wealth of material presented in this article of the series.

On account of the importance of the subject our readers will indulge us if we append a few remarks of our own.

1) Dr. Greever is unquestionably right in arguing against unionism on the ground that it involves denial of the truth, and his argumentation is very valuable and effective in combating this evil. When we attack unionism as being a compromise with error, we place ourselves on a platform universally recognized as sound, that of truth and honesty and faithfulness to the standards that one loves and reveres. Men are careful in other affairs not to make alliances with advocates of what they consider wrong or harmful. We regard it as contrary to truth and honesty that a man should contribute to two campaign chests, that of the Democrats and that of the Republicans. Let him be either a Democrat or a Republican. He cannot be both, is the universal sentiment. The vacillating position favored by unionists in religion is of a type which everybody finds unjustifiable in other spheres. The child of God, above all other people, should be honest and truthful. How, then, can he adopt an attitude which gives the lie to the profession of his mouth? This is the sin Peter committed, according to Gal. 2, 11 ff.: "But when Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face because he was to be blamed. For before that certain came from James, he did eat with the Gentiles; but when they were come, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing them which were of the circumcision. And the other Jews dissembled likewise with

him, insomuch that Barnabas also was carried away with their dissimulation." Observing the world-reforming activities of many Reformed and some Lutheran clergymen, we notice that a minister who is a "dry" refuses to open with prayer a convention of "wets" or to deliver on such an occasion an address of welcome. Such an invocation or address would be wrong and would be misconstrued, he maintains. It would mean aiding and abetting something he believes to be detrimental and sinful, and it would create the impression that he holds views which in reality he rejects. As an honest man he says he cannot do such things. *Fiat applicatio.*

2) The foremost reason why unionism is such a prevalent plague in the Church of to-day is that skepticism with respect to revealed truths is so wide-spread. People lack the assurance that the teachings which they profess in their creed are eternally true, hence they are lukewarm in their adherence to these teachings and not earnest and zealous in defending them. We meet the strange phenomenon of Christian people being unwilling to appear on the same platform with enemies of their country, but quite willing to fraternize with enemies of the divine Christ. Oh, for that fire of deep, honest conviction which burned in the hearts of our fathers and made them love and cherish the doctrines of the Bible as an immovable and everlasting foundation! Their firm conviction amounted to a consuming passion for the sacred teachings, which would not entertain the thought of a compromise with the gainsayers. Where you have such staunch convictions, unionism does not find a fertile soil.

3) In addition to the argument of Dr. Greever it may be pointed out that the whole Bible is a protest against unionistic practises. Whether we think of the Old Testament, where the syncretistic worship, seeking to honor both Jehovah and Baal, is branded as an abomination, or whether we turn to the New Testament, in which the Church is warned concerning the attempts of false teachers trying to gain a foothold in its midst, everywhere fraternal relations of a religious nature with persistent errorists are frowned upon. It would be easy to quote texts. Let me but refer to that great warning issued by Paul to the Christians in Galatia, Gal. 5, 9: "A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump." The commentators differ as to whether the teachings of the Judaizing propagandists or their persons and personal influence are meant. We need not endeavor to decide this question here. It does not matter materially which of the two interpretations one will

adopt. In either case the danger of contact with proponents of doctrinal errors is described. Deviations in doctrine — such is the lesson inculcated — must never be treated lightly. They are like the camel, which, when once permitted to put a small part of its head into the tent, will not rest till it is in full possession of its master's quarters.

4) Unionism is not only one of the chief obstacles to Lutheran harmony, it is one of the greatest evils that are harassing the body of Christ these days. We point warning fingers at Modernism, and quite justly, because it destroys the very fundamentals on which Christianity rests. But Modernism would be a comparatively insignificant foe if it did not possess such a strong and cunning ally in unionism. The former represents, as it were, the poison gas shells intended for the Christian ranks, while the latter, serving as cannons and mortars, sends the deadly missiles to their mark. Atheism is another bitter foe of the Church; but not having the support of unionism, at least not in a great degree, it has not had the disintegrating influence upon the Church which we with a sorrowful heart have to ascribe to the teachings of the Modernists. Unionism opens wide the gate of God's temple to all the errors of modern theology as long as they are professed by people who call themselves Christians, and in many a case not even the Christian name is insisted on before fraternal relations are begun, but a religious attitude is considered sufficient. That such a policy is suicidal for the Church ought to be apparent to all who still have eyes to see.

5) What Dr. Greever says evidently holds good with regard to errorists in general. It does not make any difference whether they be labeled Roman Catholics, Baptists, Presbyterians, or even Lutherans. If there is a group of Lutherans who profess false teachings, we cannot consistently fellowship with them. Surely the name Lutheran is not a shield that one can hide behind to carry on unreprieved whatever attacks on sound doctrine one desires. We do not mean to say that immediately when an error is proclaimed, church-fellowship has to be discontinued with the guilty party or parties. Patience, forbearance, charity, — let all these be duly exercised. But if a clear teaching of the Holy Scriptures is denied or repudiated and that position is held to consistently, in spite of admonitions and warnings, then no course but that of severance of fraternal relations remains. Anything else would be unionism. We hardly think that Dr. Greever will dissent from this view, which is simply a corollary of the principle

he laid down. But we believe that it is not superfluous to make mention of it here.

In conclusion, we are well aware in writing about unionism that it is an easy thing to utter the right principles, but that to follow these principles in practise is not so easy. To determine in a given case whether a certain act or attitude is unionistic is often fraught with much difficulty. But while casuistry will here, as elsewhere have its legitimate sphere, all Lutherans should agree that unionism, that is, treating errorists as though they were brethren in the faith, is a denial of the truth and hence reprehensible, and that it is prejudicial to the cause of the Gospel. May God grant that the real nature of this evil, which has been preying on the vitals of the Lutheran body like a cancer, will be seen in ever-widening circles of the Lutheran Church!
