

An Evaluation of "A Call to Openness And Trust"

**By The Commission on Theology and Church Relations,
The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.**

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Introductory Note: On January 31, 1970, some clergy and lay member of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod meeting in St. Louis, Missouri, adopted the document referred to in the title as "an appeal for an attitude we think is needed in the Church in our time." Although the document is not a doctrinal statement in a formal sense, it does claim to present a "banner of convictions with which others may identify" (p. 2). The Steering Committee of this group has formally requested the CTCR's evaluation and review of the document, noting that "those who indicate support agree on the spirit, latent, and the process" and "disdain any infallibility of terms and vocabulary", Because sober theological evaluation of a document is impossible without taking seriously its "terms and vocabulary", the commission has consulted with members of the Steering Committee in order to gain clarity in understanding the intention of the document and the meaning of its language. The following statement intends to deal only with the most notable features of the document, and not with its every idea.

Although the Commission on Theology and Church Relations recognises the validity of some of the concerns expressed in "A Call to Openness and Trust", it finds that certain basic emphases of the document are in serious disagreement with the confessional position of the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod. The following paragraphs explain this judgment.

Valid Concerns

The Commission on Theology and Church Relations endorses the following valid concerns reflected in the document:

1. The Christian faith needs to be expressed "in terms that have meaning for our time and place" (p. 1). The church should constantly seek timely ways of expressing the timeless message which God's Holy Spirit has given the church to believe, teach, and confess on the basis of the Holy Scriptures.
2. The church in our day, as in every day, has the task of applying Law and Gospel to current problems and issues. To that end, it should employ whatever structures, patterns, and forms will enable it to carry out God's mission faithfully and effectively.
3. The church needs to recognize and welcome the opportunities of the new day" (p. 2). Contemporary Christians should indeed act "for principles of justice, peace, social order, and human welfare" (p. 5). "Movements among the young, the blacks, and the poor" as well as recent scientific and technological discoveries" have given the church a "new context for Christian action" (p. 2) as well as tremendous opportunities to bear witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
4. Openness and trust should characterize the relationships of Christian brethren under the Word of God. The church's obligations to be faithful to the Word of God and to love one another demand that Christians discuss and deal with their differences openly and candidly, and that they treat one another to subject their every idea, attitude, and action to the Word of God.

Inadequacies

In spite of such valid concerns as the foregoing, "A Call to Openness and Trust" advocates certain basic attitudes and positions which are in conflict with or weaken the confessional position of the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod. We note the following:

1. The document fails to distinguish adequately between God's presence in judgment and His presence in grace. To be sure, "God can be seen at work in what is happening in our time" (p. 2). But God's "presence and power in the vast changes we witness" (p. 2) may well be God at work in judgment. As such His presence would be cause for repentance and fear rather than celebration. Similarly, the document affirms that people see God today also in human relationships" and concludes that therefore "social and political action is of significant importance" and that "every action that helps people is God-pleasing" (p. 5). But human relationships and actions that help people, important as they are, are not in themselves means of grace, as are Word and Sacraments. Christians do need to be involved in such political and social action as glorifies God and serves the neighbor (1 Pet. 2:12), but such action does not lead to salvation.
2. The document does not observe the necessary limitations to freedom and diversity within a

confessional church. Christians have been freed from the curse of the Law in order to live in the Law by the power of the Gospel. Christian freedom does not give us the right to do as we please, but the opportunity to do what pleases God. To be sure, "the unity in which we live is based on our relationship in Christ and not in rules and principles" (p. 3). But "rules and principles" are necessary for ordering the life of the church, and those "rules and principles" set forth in the Word of God dare not be set aside in the name of Christian freedom. The Christian may indeed "speak, write, or set according to his convictions" (p. 5), but Lutheran Christians freely confess that their convictions are those taught in Holy Scripture and set forth in the Lutheran Confession. By their pledge to uphold those confessions, Lutherans have voluntarily assumed limitations in the freedom and diversity of their Christian speech and action.

3. The document appears to hold that the recognition of Christian discipleship is an adequate basis for altar and pulpit fellowship. It thus would base such fellowship on something less than "mutual, agreement in doctrine and in all its articles" (Formula of Concord, Epitome, X, 7). Discipleship, that is, being a believer in Jesus Christ, is certainly more important than external membership in a denomination as such. But discipleship is not some kind of abstraction or "style of life" apart from corporate involvement with other Christians. Moreover, Christian disciples will seek to hear the words of their Lord and to teach all things that He has commanded them. They structure themselves together on the basis of Christ and His Word, and not merely because they are "like-minded people" (p. 3). In that sense, Lutherans understand that the principles governing their denominational membership and their fellowship with other Christians are more than "rules and regulations which identify brothers in Christ organisationally" and which "exist by human ordinances only" (p. 4). Nor can "discipleship" and "membership" be equated in the manner suggested by the parallel placement of these terms in point five, page five (last three lines).

Both the Scriptural warnings against false doctrine and the confessional view that the practice of fellowship among Christians is to be based on "agreement in doctrine and in all its articles as well as in the right use of the holy sacraments" (Formula of Concord, Epitome, X, 7) are violated by the document's minimalistic assertion that we should not remain separate from "those who share with us a common faith in God based on His action and revelation in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord" (p. 4). Lutherans guided by their confessional principles cannot agree that "When Christians desire to express their unity in worship, witness, or work, denominational identification should not be used to bind consciences" (p. 4). The Christian desire to express unity in Christ in and through ecclesiastical fellowship cannot ignore doctrinal differences that impede or threaten that unity.

4. The document downgrades the importance of true Christian doctrine, not only by its failure to distinguish between true and false doctrine, but especially by treating articles of faith as open questions. The document criticises certain abuses of theological formulation, but reveals little interest in condemning what is doctrinally false or even heretical. It acknowledges that doctrinal formulations may represent individual or group convictions, but fails to underscore the fact that Christian doctrine comes from God through His Word and therefore cannot be arbitrarily accepted or rejected. Furthermore, the document argues, at least implicitly, for the adequacy of a synodical doctrinal position that is both minimalistic and pluralistic. It is minimalistic when it describes no other doctrinal basis or norm than the Lordship of Christ. It is pluralistic in maintaining that certain differences of doctrine should not "divide the Christian fellowship" (p. 5) or be the basis for excluding people from membership in the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod. This pluralistic plea evidently has its basis in the questionable notion that "God makes men free to follow diversity in understanding Scriptures because Jesus Christ is held as Lord and Savior" (p. 3). But in each of the areas where the document seeks doctrinal latitude (number 5, p. 5), the synod has a dearly defined position which it believes to be in conformity with the Word of God. Consider each of these areas:

- a. On "the manner of the creation of the universe by God", the synod's most recent comment was made in Resolution 2-31 of the New York Convention, which asserts that "Scripture teaches and the Lutheran Confessions affirm that God by the almighty power of His Word created all things in six days by a series of creative acts" (1967 Proceedings, p. 95).
- b. On "the authorship and literary form of any books of the Bible", the synod has affirmed that we are to accept whatever the Bible says about itself, including its human authorship, but has also recognised that isagogical matters not conclusively answered by the Scriptures are not matters of doctrine and should therefore not be treated as factors affecting the Christian fellowship (cf. Resolution 2-35, 1965 Proceedings, p. 103; "A Review of the Question "What Is A Doctrine?", III, 6, in 1969 Convention Workbook, p. 506; and "A Lutheran Stance Toward Contemporary Biblical Studies", 1967 Convention Workbook, pp. 393-396).
- c. On the "definition of the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper", the Lutheran Confessions clearly reject all inadequate definitions of the Real Presence (such as the Roman Catholic teaching of transubstantiation, the Calvinistic notion of Christ's spiritual presence, and the grossly physical or Capernaitic understanding). The mystery of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper cannot be fully understood or explained. However, the confessions insist that Christ is

truly and substantially present in His body and blood and that all communicants receive Christ's body and blood orally. The confessions also hold that definitions of Christ's presence which they reject are divisive of altar and pulpit fellowship. The document's proposal on this matter allows for the introduction of ambiguity and error in a central article of faith and so causes confusion among our people.

- d. On "the moral obligation of Christians in individual or corporate action", the Lutheran confessions insist that "we must do all such good works as God has commanded" (Augsburg Confession, VI) and that "True believers learn to serve God not according to their own notions but according to his written law and Word, which is a certain rule and norm for achieving a godly life and behavior in accord with God's eternal and immutable will" (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, VI, 3). In other words, the Christian's moral obligations are determined by the Word of God and are therefore not purely existential or situational, as the document seems to allow. To be sure, Christians may disagree on the morality of actions where God's Word does not give clear direction, just as they may disagree on the best manner of pursuing God's ethical imperatives in a given instance; such disagreements should not be a cause for dividing the Christian fellowship.
- e. On the "question of factual error in the Bible", the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod has followed Luther, the Lutheran Confessions, and most of the pre-Enlightenment tradition of the church in affirming that the Bible is true, infallible, and inerrant. The terminology "factual error in the Bible" is in itself unfortunate, since it is capable of interpretations which are unsatisfactory from the perspective of the Scriptures themselves and of our confessional documents and synodical resolutions. Although the Bible contains matters which human reason might consider to be discrepancies and contradictions, the authority of Scripture and of the Gospel of Jesus Christ compels us to affirm the full truthfulness of Holy Scripture. The truthfulness of Scripture is affirmed by the synod's Brief Statement, its Statement on Scripture adopted in the 1959 synodical convention, and the subscription of its Constitution and Bylaws by all of its members (cf. Bylaws 4.19c, 4.21, 4.23, and 4.25). [See also such synodical convention resolutions as Resolutions 2-03 and 2-38 of the 1969 convention, Proceedings, pp. 85 and 93].
- f. On "the role and authority of clergy in the church", the Lutheran Confessions clearly recognise that the office of the ministry is instituted by God and is not to be understood in purely functional terms or equated with the general priesthood of all believers. Moreover, the confessions insist that the role and authority of clergy is intimately associated with the proclamation of the Gospel and administration of the sacraments. In this ministry, the clergy are not lords but servants of the whole people of God in carrying out the divine mission of the church.

It is clear that all of the above questions are not equally central to the Christian faith. Moreover, in pointing out false positions compatible with the language of the document, the commission does not imply that supporters of the document hold such positions or that they wish to tolerate all of them within the fellowship of the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod. But the commission does hold that the document's plea for a pluralistic doctrinal position is opposed to the primary objective of the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod as stated in Article III of its constitution, namely, "The conservation and promotion of the unity of the true faith and a united defense against schism and sectarianism".

5. The document challenges the synod's historic understanding of what it means to be a confessional church. It does this principally in the ways set forth in the above paragraphs. But the document's understanding of confessionalism is also unclear. Our synod has regarded it as inadequate to "identify with" the historic confessions of the Lutheran Church (p. 1) without also subscribing to their doctrinal content. We have interpreted them "in the historical setting and terms of their time" (p. 1), but have maintained that they retain their validity today and are therefore the doctrinal confession of the contemporary Lutheran church as well. We have seen them "as setting forth a life of Christian freedom in the Gospel" (p. 1), but also as a true exposition of the Word of God and therefore as a valid norm for our faith and life. We do not say of our Lutheran Confessions that the "assertions of the past cannot be shored up or maintained any longer" (p. 3). The creeds and confessions are doctrinal norms under Scripture, and therefore are not employed solely "to help each Christian develop his own theology and life-style" (p. 4). Perhaps the document does not intend to disagree with our historic understanding of the meaning of confessional subscription, but such expressions as the foregoing appear to do so when considered in the larger context of the document as a whole.

Conclusion

"A Call to Openness and Trust" rightly insists that the church needs to employ contemporary language, structures, and forms as it applies Law and Gospel to the many needs of modern man, and that in this ministry the relationship among Christian brethren should be characterised by openness and trust. But the document is in disagreement with the confessional position of the Lutheran Church- Missouri Synod

when it ignores the difference between God's presence in judgment and His presence in grace, fails to apply the confessional limits on freedom and diversity, and advocates a pluralistic doctrinal position that would enable the practice of altar and pulpit fellowship among Christians without prior agreement in "doctrine and in all its articles as well as in the right use of the holy sacraments" (Formula of Concord, Epitome, X, 7). In so doing, the document not only weakens the synod's doctrinal position in a number of areas, but also challenges her historic understanding of what it means to be a confessional church proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ under the authority of Holy Scripture. Such an "attitude" is not "needed in the church in our time" or in any other time. We therefore urge our brethren who have produced this document or identified with it to re-examine their position with a view to bringing it into harmony with the position of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.

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- b. On "the authorship and literary form of any books of the Bible", the synod has affirmed that we are to accept whatever the Bible says about itself, including its human authorship, but has also recognized that inagical matters not conclusively answered by the Scriptures are not matters of doctrine and should therefore not be treated as factors affecting the Christian fellowship (cf. Resolution 2-35, 1965 Proceedings, p. 103; "A Review of the Question 'What Is a Doctrine?'" III, 6, in 1969 Convention Workbook, p. 506; and "A Lutheran Stance Toward Contemporary Biblical Studies", 1967 Convention Workbook, pp. 392-396).
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IF IT BE OF GOD

The prayer of LUTHERANS ALERT-National has always been: "Lord, if the controversial work in which we are engaged be not Thy Will, may it not prosper!" We who are on the front lines of this zealous and bold ministry know that we have not made ourselves popular with most of the officials in the leadership of the Lutheran Church. In fact, I am sure that many have been very vehement in their denunciation of us as an organization. Humbly speaking, nobody likes to be criticized. Synods, as well as nations, seem to prefer "peace at any price" rather than to face up to honest criticism. Sad, but true! Lutheran Officialdom would much prefer failure to our success. Perhaps they are even praying for it! However, it might be well for all of us—advocates and opponents alike—to pray the prayer of Gamaliel: "If this counsel or work be of man, it will come to nought; but if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it . . ." (Acts 5:39-40).

It indeed would be strange, however, if God were not guiding our efforts. For we exist not for self-glory, but to uphold the Bible as His inerrant revelation to men. We are saying to the whole Church: Return to the faith of your fathers. Hold fast to the Word of God. Reaffirm verbal inspiration. Come back to the authority of "Thus saith the Lord." Let the infallible Christ be honored through the infallible Scripture. Stand up and be counted for historic, Biblical Lutheranism. While Synods flirt with liberal councils and continue to allow greater inroads into apostasy by failing to check false doctrine, we are saying with strong voices—not as judges but as concerned, evangelical Christians—stop this emasculation of God's Word! We are saying to committees of Openness and Trust: Quit trying to compromise solid, Lutheran, Biblical doctrine. We are saying to Church Synod conventions: How dare you waste time taking "pastoral looks" at abortion, pre-marital sex and homosexuality? Are not these things Sin? We are saying to the whole Church: Return to the absolutes of God's Commandments and cease catering to men! We are saying to the Church: Preach sin and grace. Preach repentance and conversion. Let's get America back on its knees!

God is blessing the work of LUTHERANS ALERT-National. Since launching out on faith nearly five years ago we have continued to grow numerically and financially. Both our publication and our Seminary continue to be adequately supported. These signs point to the blessings from God.

So we say again to the Church—listen to what we are writing month after month and repent; for if our work be of God you cannot destroy it.

R. H. Redal, President
LUTHERANS ALERT-National