

An Evaluation of "An Ecumenical Declaration of Faith"

Introductory Note

The "preliminary draft" of the document under discussion was drawn up by a group calling itself the "California Contingent" and was first distributed at the Denver Convention of The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod in 1969. After receiving several queries about the document, and at the request of one of its authors, Pastor Alvin Wagner, the President and Vice-presidents of The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod requested the Commission on Theology and Church Relations to evaluate it. The commission's evaluation cites the revised form of the first two sections which have recently appeared in Sola Scriptura (Volume 1, Nos. 5 and 6, March-April 1971 and May-June 1971). It should be noted that the commission's evaluation deals only with the document itself, and not with the activity of groups or individuals who may choose to make use of it.

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The Commission on Theology and Church Relations shares the basic concern of the "Ecumenical Declaration of Faith" for our synod's continuing fidelity to its confessional position. However, the commission finds certain difficulties with the language of the document, and questions the need for such a confessional statement at the present time. These judgments are explained in the following paragraphs.

The "Ecumenical Declaration" deals in theses and antitheses with three subjects of vital concern to our synod: the Holy Scriptures, the Lutheran Confessions, and church fellowship. It is proper for Christians to set forth their positions publicly on such matters and communicate their concerns to their brethren, for mutual edification results when brethren speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:16). It is also good for Christians to recognize the antitheses of their convictions, for neither Holy Scripture nor the Lutheran Confessions permit the toleration of anti-Scriptural teachings in the church (cf. Titus 1:9; Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Rule and Norm, 14-20).

We especially appreciate the deep concern which the "Ecumenical Declaration" manifests for the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The authors contend for the divine

character of Holy Scripture, for example, because they believe that Christ is the center of Scripture (Assertion I, D) and its very reason for existence (Assertion I, C). The document makes its evangelical concern clear in its discussion of the third chapter of Genesis: "This is the essential Christian doctrine, the Gospel or good tidings to man, without which Christianity and its revelation do not exist. It is the constant theme of all the Scriptures. . . and throughout every book"(Testimony I, E, 1). Likewise, the first reason which the "Ecumenical Declaration" gives for its stand against unionism is that it "violates the very concept, nature, and purpose of revelation which was and is to provide objective, universal saving truth according to Christ's word, 'I am the way, the truth and the life; no man cometh to the Father but by me'" (Antithesis III, A, 1). The authors expressly claim that they have published their Declaration "to the glory and praise of our only Savior Jesus Christ in humble gratitude of the free unmerited grace He has earned for us by His vicarious sacrifice on the cross and has proffered to us through His Word" (Conclusion).

All orthodox Christians, moreover, will surely sympathize with the basic concerns which the "Ecumenical Declaration" expresses and will share the desire of its authors for a God-pleasing resolution of these and other problems in the church. The "Ecumenical Declaration" concurs with many official expressions of The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod when it confesses, and rejects notions contrary to, the divine authorship, infallibility, and authority of Holy Scripture, as well as the historicity of its records; the completely correct and normative character of the doctrinal content of the Lutheran Confessions; and the necessity of genuine adherence to this doctrinal content for the existence and continuation of altar and pulpit fellowship among Christians.

We also appreciate the fact that the authors of the "Ecumenical Declaration of Faith" have invited and encouraged the constructive criticism of their document. Because we believe that such criticism can serve the mutual edification of the church, we are calling attention to several difficulties we have discovered in the document.

In the first place, we note certain terminological problems. The usage of a terminology different from the "traditional language" (Introduction) is, to be sure, within the bounds of Christian liberty and is sometimes desirable for various reasons. However, in the interest of accurate communication it would have been helpful if the authors had defined certain key terms such as "objective," "formal," and "propositional." Even in the case of words traditionally used in statements of faith, the precise meaning of the authors is not always evident. The "Ecumenical Declaration" condemns, for example, "the opinion that the existence of a variety of differing theologies is the normal condition of the Church, to be not only tolerated but even welcomed" (Antithesis III, D, 3). The evaluation of this statement depends upon the meaning of the word "theologies"; condemnation is in order only if the term is being used to denote systems of thought which contain mutually contradictory elements.

Proper definitions would be particularly useful for "prophetic portions and elements" and "formally historical narratives" employed in the first section of the "Ecumenical Declaration" (Assertions I, D, a, and I, E). The authors do not specify the criteria by which one may recognize various parts of Scripture as such portions, elements, and narratives. The result is that the assertions concerning them are too vague to be useful for the refutation of false teaching.

In addition, the "Ecumenical Declaration" employs some terms which are

subject to considerable debate. An example is the use of the words "exclusive" and "inclusive" to characterize two conflicting ways of understanding the Lutheran Confessions (Assertion II, A, 3). The argument of that section of the document could probably proceed in a more straightforward way in the absence of the explanations which this vocabulary necessitates. A similar situation is the introduction of the linguistically dubious distinction between the terms "agape" and "eros" into the discussion of Christian fellowship (Testimony III, D, 1). In Greek literature, "eros" and "agape" can be used interchangeably. In the New Testament itself, "agape" or its corresponding verb is not used exclusively for the love which God gives, but also for the love which this world, contrary to God, seeks to stimulate (cf. II Tim. 4:10, "For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me"; I John 2:15, "If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in him"). Accordingly, it would be more accurate to employ some such distinction as "godly love" and "worldly love" or "self-giving love" and "selfish love".

Another problematic area of the "Ecumenical Declaration" is the relationship between Holy Scripture and the Word of God. In stating that the Holy Scriptures and the Word of God are "identical" (cf. Antitheses I, B, 1; II, A, 2; and III, D, 3), the document does not appear to recognize that the term "Word of God" is a broader concept than "Holy Scripture". Every word of Scripture is, to be sure, a word spoken by God, and Holy Scripture is without qualification the written Word of God. But the Scriptures themselves apply the term "Word of God" to other referents as well, such as the Lord Jesus Himself (Rev. 19:13, John 1:1-14) or the good news of salvation (Acts 12:24). In the Lutheran Confessions, the term "Word of God" ordinarily refers to Holy Scripture; but it is also used with reference to Jesus Christ, the Gospel, and the proclamation of Law and Gospel. Although Scripture is the Word of God, the word "identical" is unfortunate because it implies that nothing besides

the Scriptures can rightly be called the Word of God. A related problem is the condemnation which the "Declaration" levels at those who, in the threefold summary of Reformation theology, substitute the phrase solo verbo Dei ("by the Word of God alone") for sola Scriptura ("by Scripture alone"). Although the document rightly objects to faulty connotations sometimes associated with the term "Word of God" (cf. Antitheses III, D, 3), it does not explain that it is the faulty connotation, rather than the formula solo verbo Dei itself, which is objectionable.

We are also somewhat dismayed by the document's implicit criticism of the Synod's "Theology of Fellowship" and "Mission Affirmations" (cf. Antitheses I, A, 5). The implication appears to be that these synodically adopted statements support the latitudinarian position (condemned by the "Ecumenical Declaration") which allows for "a diversity of views" on doctrinal matters without exclusion from fellowship and "abolishes the concept of heterodoxy" and "denominational distinctions." Suffice it to say that neither the "Theology of Fellowship" nor the "Mission Affirmations" abolishes the concept of heterodoxy or denominational distinctions, nor do they permit a "diversity of views" concerning the inspiration and infallibility of the Bible, the Real Presence of Christ in the Sacrament of the Altar, or any other article of faith (as Antitheses I, A, 5 would seem to imply).

In this connection, it should be noted that the "Theology of Fellowship" quotes as "official" the Brief Statement's repudiation of "unionism, that is, church fellowship with the adherents of false doctrine, as disobedience to God's command, as causing divisions in the church, Rom. 16:17, John 9:10, and as involving the constant danger of losing the Word of God entirely, 2 Tim. 2:17-21" (Part III, B, 1). The "Theology of Fellowship" also warns against unionism as a serious danger to the church which the church must shun

for its own safety: "Unionism ignores genuine differences in doctrine, and treats them as though they were unimportant. It tends to foster laxity in doctrine, which like a little leaven, will in time leaven the whole lump (Gal. 5:9)" (Part III, B, 3). The "Ecumenical Declaration of Faith" itself, at a later point (Testimony III, A, 3), quotes the "Theology of Fellowship" with apparent approval with reference to Augsburg Confession VII: "Lutheran doctrine must not merely be subscribed to on paper but must actually be taught in pulpit, instruction room and in the church's seminaries and publications" (Part III, C, 2, 1 on point c). In this same clause the "Theology of Fellowship" evaluates as correct the principle which the Synod has followed from its beginning, namely, "that all who departed from this norm [the Lutheran Confessions] were to be disciplined" (Part II, C, 2, c). Nor has the Synod contradicted this position by means of the 1965 "Mission Affirmations"; in its official interpretation of those statements, the Synod explicitly declares that "the affirmations offer no license for unionism" (Resolution 2-20, 1967 Proceedings, p. 93). In short, neither of these synodical statements abolishes the concept of heterodoxy or supports doctrinal latitudinarianism.

Finally, a word is in order concerning the emphasis in the "Ecumenical Declaration" upon the need for a new Lutheran confession and the suggestion that the "Declaration" itself might serve as the "preliminary draft of a sorely needed confessional statement addressed to the errors troubling and dividing modern Lutheranism" (Conclusion). We realize that circumstances could arise when an additional confession would be necessary. We doubt, however, that such an additional confession is in fact necessary at this particular time, and we question whether the "Ecumenical Declaration of Faith" could serve that purpose. It should be noted that the historic Lutheran confessions deal with the three basic concerns of the "Ecumenical

Declaration": Holy Scripture, the Confessions, and church fellowship. On the first point, the confessions testify many times and in various ways that Holy Scripture consists of words which came from God, by virtue of whose authority it is infallible and supremely authoritative (e.g., Apology IV, 108; Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Rule and Norm, 3 and 9). With regard to the second concern of the "Ecumenical Declaration", the confessions leave no doubt that the only proper way of accepting them according to their own intent is to acknowledge that their doctrinal content is the correct exposition of Holy Scripture, and, on that account, to regard them as normative in every respect for "teaching, belief, and confession," for speaking and writing, whether "privately or publicly" (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, XII, 40; Rule and Norm, 4-13). On the third issue treated by the "Declaration", our confessions clearly insist on agreement "in doctrine and in all its articles" as the only legitimate basis for church fellowship (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration X, 31; cf. also Rule and Norm, 1). Thus, the sixteenth century Lutheran Confessions deal decisively with the basic concerns treated by "An Ecumenical Declaration of Faith," even though they contain no specific articles on Scripture, the confessions themselves, and church fellowship. The Commission on Theology and Church Relations concludes, therefore, that it is not so much a new confession which is needed in the Lutheran Church today as a call to remain faithful in belief and teaching to those confessions to which the members of The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod have already pledged themselves.

Adopted by the Commission on Theology and Church Relations

May 1971