

# CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

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# THEOLOGICAL OBSERVER

*The following brief address was delivered by Martin H. Scharlemann, graduate professor of exegetical theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, to the annual meeting of the World Interfaith Relations Committee of the World Convention of Churches of Christ. Dr. Scharlemann was responding to a position paper prepared by Lukas Vischer of the Theological Study Commission of the World Council of Churches, which is printed below.*

## LUTHERANS AS A WORLD CONFSSIONAL FAMILY

Your invitation to take part in this evening's discussion has offered the occasion to share in a rare experience. I thank you for the privilege of being with you tonight in response to Mr. Kirkpatrick's letters. [Lawrence H. Kirkpatrick is the General Secretary of the World Convention of Churches of Christ.]

He was thoughtful enough to include in his second communication a mimeographed document entitled "The Place of World Confessional Families in the Ecumenical Movement." This has been most helpful in determining the specific nature of this evening's discussion. What I have to offer is focused on the observations made in this document of yours.

My personal affiliation is with the second largest of the confessional families that have some connection with the World Council of Churches. That is to say, I am a Lutheran by background and commitment. My membership is in that segment of it which is not officially a part either of the World Council or of the National Council of Churches. My synod, moreover, is not a member of the Lutheran World Federation, which we would think of as the agency that gives expression to what your document refers to as a feeling of universal fellowship.

It would be pointless to attempt a statement as to why we belong to none of these ecumenical organizations. Perhaps we should

have joined long ago. It is possible that we have not always been guided by the more perceptive insights of the Lutheran tradition in trying to deal with the problem of our relationship and responsibility to the ecumenical movement. Fact is that it was not until 1964 that our national convention took the step of declaring The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod to be a confessional movement within Christendom. Until that time we had not taken the occasion to draw up any specific formulation on this point.

A statement of this kind has its source in a number of considerations which may be useful for our deliberations this evening. It reflects, for one thing, one of the major ecumenical aspects of our Lutheran tradition; namely, that the church is "the assembly of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered" (Augustana, VII). That is to say, we hold that the church is to be found wherever the people of God assemble around the Word and Sacrament. There Christ is fully present. This is another way of insisting that organizational distinctions are of rather secondary importance to us in any consideration of matters dealing with the unity and universality of the church.

Perhaps it is true in a rather general way that world confessional families "are all the result of divisions," to quote the last sentence in paragraph four of your document. Yet I would question the propriety of using the word "divisions" when it comes to contemplating the unity of the church. Distinctive and divergent denominational structures may not constitute divisions in the sense of sundering the unity which Christ has given to His church.

Any serious consideration of this matter would have to take into account the meaning of that oneness for which our Lord prayed when He asked the Father that we might all

be one (John 17:20-21). It is clear from the use of this numeral "one" in the New Testament that it intends to suggest oneness in purpose and function rather than identity in organization. That is to say, the high-priestly prayer of Jesus Christ was not spoken with a view to discouraging variety in organization, in life, and even theology. What it does envision is agreement "concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments" (*Triglot Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Ev. Lutheran Church*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921, p. 47). That is enough, says one of our basic Confessions, the Augustana.

The very diversity of theologies\* offered in the New Testament provides eloquent testimony to the awareness that variety may not of itself either destroy or detract from either the unity or the universality of the church. Within that unity and with a view to universality we think of ourselves as a confessional movement within Christendom on the conviction that wherever Christians assemble around the proclamation of the Gospel and the proper administration of the sacraments, Christ is present in His totality. At that place the church is exhibited in her unity and in her universality. There Christians function in the way that all the people of God everywhere are to serve, namely, to exhibit and express that which Christ has bestowed upon His church.

From this observation we must move on to a consideration of the nature and purpose of ecumenism itself. We do so by asking the question, "What is the ecumenical task anyway?" We would hold that this undertaking ought not to consist of attempting to find the lowest common denominator in our un-

derstanding of the Gospel. Quite the reverse! We would and do insist that the chief ecumenical job ought to be that of working toward maximum agreement concerning the Gospel.

Luther already saw this point. He kept working at the prospect of bringing together a truly ecumenical council for the purpose of coming to the greatest possible agreement on the Gospel. The Emperor had promised to call such a council. In fact, at Augsburg in 1530 he had agreed to call it within a year. But nothing came of this solemn agreement because the Roman Curia was determined to prevent any occasion that might provide for this kind of discussion. The desire for just such conferences has never completely died in the Lutheran tradition.

Until very recently, Lutherans have had very little part in the Consultations on Church Union, begun a few years ago, mostly because that undertaking appeared to be more interested in matters of organization than in seriously pursuing the aim of better understanding the Gospel. I have put this matter so bluntly because it is part of our Lutheran tradition to get at what we hold to be primary in any ecumenical activity, namely, exploration into the nature and meaning of the Gospel.

Some of our other peculiarities derive from this basic concern. I have already mentioned the matter of rightly administering the sacraments. We are so sensitive to this issue because we are persuaded that the sacraments are the means by which the redemptive work of our Lord is applied to the individual in his needs. It would be very difficult for us, just to point up the problem, to enter into any kind of serious discussion or negotiation where Baptism received rather light treatment; for we are sure that this is the means by which an individual is made a member of the church.

The question of the sacraments goes even beyond that. It is of crucial significance also

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\* This does not intend to suggest that there are doctrinal differences in Scripture. What it does suggest is that individual evangelists and apostles view the work of their Lord from a different perspective and were led by the Holy Spirit to convey this diversity in the things they proclaimed and wrote.

to the whole question of the church's involvement in social issues.

We would agree with all men of goodwill that social improvement and political advancement are noble pursuits. We would hold further that Christians and church bodies must be concerned with such issues. Yet we keep insisting that these are penultimate values. We do so in the interest of keeping the Gospel from being obscured.

What that means may be indicated by our belief that the only ultimate signs of our Lord's resurrection are the Gospel and the sacraments and not elimination of poverty, the extension of justice and freedom. The latter betoken the interest of a God who is righteous and sovereign. They exhibit, in token form, what God has in mind for His children beyond history. Yet no amount of justice, affluence, or freedom will either manifest or bring in that kingdom of God which Jesus set out to proclaim.

In other words, we still take seriously Luther's distinction between what he called the kingdom of God's left hand and of His right hand. We do not understand this difference as amounting to some kind of dichotomy. We think of it in terms of one God dealing in two different ways with men, since they live both in the old and in the new age. The church's chief business is to deal with them as redeemed children. What we call the orders of preservation exist to deal with them as God's creatures living in a world that is fallen and so subject to the forces of disruption and destruction.

It follows from this that Lutherans sit rather loosely to the question of social and political structures, even in the church, believing that God's "real work" of reconciliation can and does go on in, with, and under many forms. The kingdom of God cannot be identified with any visible structures; it is at work wherever men live in repentance and with forgiveness.

This Gospel, we believe, is of such im-

portance that the way men formulate and express it is a question of sufficient significance to undertake doctrinal discussions with a view to developing agreement. Our interest in this area, too, is in unity and not in uniformity. When, therefore, officials of the Lutheran World Federation were contacted, right after World War II, by representatives of the Batak Church in Indonesia, the former asked that the matter of doctrine be given serious consideration.

Fully aware of the fact that people living in Indonesia belong to a culture different from that of the Christian West, leaders of the Lutheran World Federation asked the Batak Church to reproduce the substance of the Augsburg Confession in a form intelligible and acceptable to both Indonesian and European Lutheran theologians. Once again the primary concern of this venture was that of agreement concerning the Gospel.

The oneness of the church is part of this Gospel. Lutherans live, therefore, with the awareness that as members of the church they have the primary responsibility of exhibiting that unity which is the gift of the ascended Lord to His people. Lutherans are persuaded that their own specific contribution to the ecumenical movement is an abiding interest in working at agreement concerning the Gospel. We believe that to be the most effective way of manifesting oneness.

If all of this sounds rather sketchy, let me confess that it is. In 30 minutes it is not possible to explore any question in depth. What I have attempted is a kind of summary reply to your question regarding the Lutheran view on the relationship of our particular tradition to the ecumenical movement.

In the chronicles of that movement the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910 certainly constitutes something of a watershed in Christian history. From that date streams of church life began to flow in the

direction of ecumenicity. An American Episcopalian, Bishop Brent, subsequently headed Faith and Order; a Swedish Lutheran, Archbishop Söderblom, Life and Work.

Lutherans responded to the challenge of both of these ventures. At the Stockholm Conference they showed a readiness to take part in a program of attacking social and economic wrongs as well as personal sins. At Lausanne they declared their intention of entering the ecumenical ranks as a confessional group rather than as parts of geographical units. They contributed significantly to the emphasis on the teaching of the grace of God, which characterized the Edinburgh Conference of 1937. A considerable portion of world Lutheranism joined in the formation of the World Council of Churches at Amsterdam in 1948. It did so at the hand of its abiding ideals that unity consists in a consensus of what is preached, taught, and practiced, that the Gospel creates the church by the Spirit, and that its unity is to be found in a common witness to Jesus Christ as its Head and Lord.

Speaking generally, the reaction of the Lutheran tradition both to that easy-going oneness of all Christians called for by certain segments of Protestantism and to the claims for unity under a hierarchy directed from Rome was clearly stated by a pioneer in the ecumenical movement, the Lutheran Archbishop Nathan Söderblom. Said he:

The proud idea of a sole world-conquering organization of the church is for the purity of religion a perilous one and has for all time perished. Now the idea of the universalism of Christendom must be realized in the respect the separate communions have for each other as co-workers or competitors. The sense of the whole is strengthened in the degree that the particular communion boldly carries out its purported duties. If a new *corpus evangelicorum* is to be established, not as a political creation but as a truly catholic attitude without sectarian self-sufficiency, it cannot be through a mixing or disregarding of those differences which in reality are character forming. In a dynamic

catholicity we need a sharper perception of the authentic gifts of grace in our church. Faithfulness to our own heritage is accompanied by respect for the ideals of others. (Cf. Conrad Bergendoff, *The Church of the Lutheran Reformation* [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1967] pp. 316—17.)

I have exercised some restraint in this area on the conviction that we are not assembled here to rehearse our virtues but to reveal our deep interest in the common task of exhibiting that unity which was bestowed on the church to help her in the task of healing the many hurts that divide men from God and from each other. In carrying out that single assignment we, the members of our particular confessional family, have often been remiss. For our failures we ask for your forgiveness. For your willingness to provide this occasion for discussion we express to you our thanks.

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POSITION PAPER: "THE PLACE OF  
WORLD CONFESSATIONAL FAMILIES  
IN THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT,"  
BY LUKAS VISCHER

1. The term "World Confessional Families" is used here for the various Christian traditions taken as a whole. Each World Confessional Family consists of churches belonging to the same tradition and held together by this common heritage; they are conscious of living in the same universal fellowship and give to this consciousness at least some structured visible expression.

2. World Confessional Families differ widely in nature, and in all contacts these differences need to be constantly kept in mind. While in some families both the churches and the individual members have a strong consciousness of their belonging together as a universal fellowship, in others they are hardly aware of it. While in some families the visible structure of the universal

fellowship is part of ecclesiology, in others it is mere organizational convenience. The differences have various reasons, e. g.:

- a. The historical origin of a family plays an important role. How did it come into being? How did it develop into a fellowship transcending the borders of one or several countries?
- b. The particular convictions and characteristics of a tradition, particularly its teaching about the nature of the church. Differences in the understanding of universality will inevitably lead to different self-understanding and organizational structures.
- c. The relations to other churches, i. e., both the need to be distinct from them and to remain related to them.

3. The differences between the various World Confessional Families can be illustrated by the fact that it is extremely difficult to find a term which is equally appropriate for them all. The term "confessional" is misleading because it seems to indicate that all families are bound together by their "confession of faith." World Confessional Bodies is inadequate because it carries too strongly the connotation of organization. The term "World Communion" is acceptable to some because it points to the Eucharist as a bond of unity, and even families which have not yet realized full communion are earnestly seeking to establish it as soon as possible.

4. World Families are on the one hand a historical fact and at present a necessity. Each church needs to give some expression to its universal character. It is therefore natural that churches belonging to the same tradition form a world fellowship and organize themselves in order to speak and act together on the universal level. World Families, however, are on the other hand a reminder of the fact that no single tradition is accepted as fully expressing the universality of the

church as it has been instituted by Christ and the Holy Spirit. They are all the result of divisions, and by their legitimate need to express universality they also project their division on the world level.

5. The World Families and the World Council of Churches are closely related to each other. Today they are both constituent parts and indispensable instruments in the service of the Ecumenical Movement. The World Council of Churches reminds the World Families of their limits and their role in the Ecumenical Movement. It provides the churches with a place to meet and cooperate and thus to realize a fuller universality than any single world family will ever be able to realize. The World Families remind the World Council of Churches that there is true universality only if it is rooted in truth. This interdependence needs to be mutually recognized.

6. From this recognition the following conclusions may be drawn:

- a. There is need for contacts both between the World Families and the World Council of Churches and between the World Families themselves. For the furthering of the Ecumenical Movement it is necessary that these contacts be coordinated. Each World Family in its activities needs to take into account the cause of the whole Ecumenical Movement.
- b. Many of the World Families organize studies. It is important that such of these as have a bearing for other churches be carried out in close cooperation with them. Some theological problems, ecclesiological in particular, can find their answer only through a common effort on the part of World Families, e. g., the theological problem of the catholicity of the church and its practical implications. Studies conducted by the World Council are somewhat different, since they are mainly directed toward furthering the common

ecumenical task, whereas studies conducted by the World Families aim at clarifying the contribution to the Ecumenical Movement of churches within one tradition. The two types of study should be related to each other. There is therefore need for mutual information and some measure of coordination. The invitation of the Faith and Order Commission to the World Families to appoint liaison officers for this purpose has been welcomed. These officers will also be able to bring study projects of other WCC departments to the attention of appropriate groups and persons within their constituency.

- c. There are increasing possibilities of practical cooperation between World Families. Opportunities should be more systematically seized.
  - i. There have been promising developments in the field of interchurch aid as between the WCC and the Confessional Families, primarily the LWF. Such cooperation should be extended wherever possible.
  - ii. There is an obvious and urgent need for joint consultation and action for mission.
  - iii. In the field of international affairs there are many points of common interest. It might well be that closer cooperation could be established between the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs and the World Families. The revised constitution of CCIA to be submitted to the Fourth Assembly of the WCC envisages that closer links be negotiated with World Families. Given their differences in nature and structure, the World Families will respond differently to this invitation, but in principle it is most desirable that the cooperation be strengthened. It would decisively contribute toward a common witness of all churches on international affairs.
  - iv. Both the WCC and the World Families face problems of religious liberty in many countries. Coordination and cooperation is of the utmost importance.
- d. The number of churches engaged in union negotiations is rising. World Families whose member churches are committed to union require further conversations about the problems arising from this commitment. Everything possible should be done by the Confessional Families together and by the Confessional Families and the World Council of Churches to encourage the realization of fuller unity among the churches.