

# CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL QUARTERLY



Volume 62: Number 2

April 1998

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# Theological Observer

## A Chapel Sermon on Matthew 8:24 Reformation 1997

I have shied away from watching to conclusion the several television and movie depictions of the sinking of the Titanic, because of the reality of its tragic ending. Tragedy in fiction is easier to take. After it is over, you can say to yourself that it never really happened. So confident were the owners of the ship's invincibility that it lacked enough life boats. What was declared unsinkable sank. As it sank, its sinking gave birth to more tragedies. Keeping the ship headed directly into the iceberg without turning the wheel would have inflicted less damage. A radio operator on a nearby ship had turned in for the night and the bleating SOS went unheard. On top of it all, men in evening dress, the upper crust of that day, stood on the deck singing "Nearer My God to Thee," and gallantly refused to take their places in the life boats only half filled with women and children. If success breeds further success, catastrophe multiplies with a cancerous zeal. The dying colossus steamed down into the cold depths of the Atlantic, there entombed as a perpetual memorial to the heady, empty human optimism.

If parable and history can be found in the same account, as Saint Paul does with the Old Testament, then our concern is not with nautical safety but with our Lutheran Church. Helmut Thielicke, a German theologian who understood himself as a confessional Lutheran with a clearly discernible streak of neo-orthodoxy, described the Lutheran Church as a ship on whose deck solemn Mass was being celebrated, while the clergy were blissfully ignorant that the ship was listing and waves were lapping on to the sides of the deck.

Traditionally Lutherans have commemorated the Reformation as victorious celebration, singing "A Mighty Fortress" and storming Rome's citadels with a zeal that would make the followers of Mohammed envious. At least that's how it looked in childhood. A less heroic picture of what really happens at Reformation celebrations is painted by that lonely warrior of Christ and twentieth century defender of the Lutheran Confessions, Hermann Sasse. His *Union and Confession*, written sixty years ago, has been distributed in English

translation by the synod president. Exiled from the once great Lutheran theological faculty of Erlangen, he found his way to Australia. In spite of a recommendation from the President of the Missouri Synod, John Behnken, the doors of the St. Louis faculty were shut against him. He saw the last remnants of the German Lutheran Church swallowed up in the 1930s. In these events he saw a replay of the great 1817 celebration of the Reformation in Prussia. History again proves itself to be parable.

Shortly after the Book of Concord was adopted for Brandenburg, the imperial elector prince converted to Calvinism and for two centuries his successors worked to bring the 7,000 Lutheran congregations under their care into the Reformed fold. What better time to bring this treachery to a climax than the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Reformation. And what better place than the Cathedral Church in Berlin. What a magnificent day. The court chaplain preached that Luther and Calvin could receive no higher honor than merging Lutherans and Reformed into one Protestant Evangelical Church. And the *coup de grace*, that quick damaging blow to the head, was administered by introducing a liturgy which shied away from that embarrassing identification of the bread and wine with Christ's body and blood. With a piety befitting one who had made the Lutheran Confessions irrelevant and meaningless, the king with the crown prince and the entire royal family approached the altar to receive a food which was no longer sacred or sacrament. The day ended with the king-electors making his way down to Wittenberg among cheering crowds to unveil the statue of Luther holding a Bible. It still stands in the square. But Luther was gone. His doctrines about Christ and the Sacrament, which had sustained him against Pope and Protestant, had been compromised. Luther's great faculty had long since disappeared by merger into the faculty of Halle, that Jerusalem of Pietism, which swallows up Christian truth by legalisms masquerading as love. Church anniversaries that are multiples of one hundred and one thousand can be occasions for mischievous fanaticism. At the dawning of the third millennium, the pope like a loving

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father waits for us and the Reformed still entice us to their altars which are no altars at all.

A Reformation anniversary that coincides with the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our seminary and synod, as this one does, may be less of a time for celebration than it is a time of self-examination on the basis of the teachings of Luther and our Confessions. If we are reluctant to do this, then let us divest ourselves of the name "Lutheran" and be done with it all. To be Lutheran means that we do not approach the altar with those who deny Christ, His Sacraments, and the Church's creeds. To be Lutheran means avoiding liturgies that are not recognizable as Lutheran.

What was done in 1817 in Prussia was done by imperial force. What was done in 1997 was done voluntarily and with the full and conscious knowledge of repudiating the Lutheran Confessions. Luther is not honored by erecting statues, but his Reformation is perpetuated by preaching Christ and putting Him in the center of everything we believe and do and to trust in Him alone. He alone is truth, salvation and our life.

We do not shun our obligatory ecumenical witness to Christendom. The Confessions acknowledge that the Church of Rome holds to ancient doctrines of Holy Trinity and Christ, but the doors of heaven are shut when the people are urged to find salvation in Masses and prayers for the dead. Christ—not the saints—is our mediator with God. What is given with one hand in Christ's atonement is taken back by the other when the people are taught to look to themselves for salvation. The Reformed offer an even worse alternative. God is here in his majestic and often cruel sovereignty, but the Jesus by whom atonement is made for our sins is not here in this place. He is not here in preaching and He is not present in His Sacrament. We could well say, "they have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have laid Him." In the face of impending horrors, we confess that Crucified One is the final and perfect manifestation of the God who reveals Himself as Father and Son and Holy Ghost.

The 150 years of our seminary and synod are remarkable achievements. Even if God should bring a just and wise judgment against us, as He has the churches in Europe and our continent, ours has been a history of grace undeserved by us or by our fathers. Our Reformation commemoration in 1997 is still a time of celebration not because we have conquered, but because God has left us on the field of battle. We are bloodied survivors, wounded in battle, but called to follow in the footsteps of warriors more noble than we can ever be. Reformation is a time of penance and remorse. "Spare thy people, O LORD, and do not make thy people a reproach, a byword among the heathen." Reformation is a time for walking around Zion's walls and rebuilding them. "Do good to Zion; rebuild the walls of Jerusalem." "Consider her ramparts and go through her citadels" "and we will declare thy great deeds to a generation not yet born."

It is difficult for me to watch depictions of the sinking of the Titanic. There was another ship destined to sink in the depths of the sea, but you know it didn't.

And behold, there arose a great storm on the sea, so that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but [Jesus] was asleep. And they went and woke him, saying, "Save, Lord; we are perishing." And [Jesus] said to them, "Why are you afraid, O men of little faith?" Then he rose and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a great calm. And the men marveled, saying, "What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?"

David P. Scaer

### The Triumph of "Schmuckerism"

"It is not a pleasant thing to exhume a decomposed corpse," John G. Morris is reported to have said.<sup>1</sup> He was reminiscing

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<sup>1</sup>Joseph A. Seiss, *Notes of My Life*, transcribed from eleven volumes of original manuscript in the archives of the Lutheran Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, by Henry E. Horn and William M. Horn (Huntingdon, Pennsylvania: Church Management Service, 1982). John G.

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about the "Definite Synodical Platform" – the document written by Samuel Simon Schmucker, president of the Lutheran Seminary at Gettysburg and published anonymously in 1855.<sup>2</sup> In this document Schmucker articulated a firm theological basis for the Lutheran General Synod that rejected what he believed were errors and omissions in the Augsburg Confession. Among the "errors" were baptismal regeneration, the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the Lord's Supper, the retention of private confession, and the retention of pre-Reformation liturgical forms. What Schmucker believed the Augustana lacked was the "divine obligation of the Lord's Day," or what he elsewhere called observance of the Christian Sabbath.

Morris later reflected over the "corpse" of the Definite Platform because the reaction against it was strong, swift, and decisive. In fact, Schmucker had published the piece in a desperate effort to stem the rising tide of confessionalism, exemplified in the German community by the Missouri Synod, and among English speakers by the likes of Charles Porterfield Krauth, Joseph A. Seiss, William A. Passavant, and, ironically, Samuel Schumcker's son, Beale.<sup>3</sup> So decisive was its rejection that only three synods of the General Synod adopted it, all of which were in the west and quite small numerically. The mother synod of the east, the Pennsylvania Ministerium, rejected it outright. And so, again years later, Seiss was able to write, "This was the final burial of the 'Definite Synodical Platform'. May it never have a resurrection in this or any other land! Its ghost still lingers in certain dark haunts, showing itself once in a while; but, like all ghosts, quite harmless and unsubstantial."<sup>4</sup>

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Morris is perhaps best known for his delightful book of reminiscences about the Lutheran Church in the nineteenth century, *Fifty Years in the Lutheran Ministry* (Baltimore: Printed for the Author by James Young, 1878).

<sup>2</sup>*Definite Synodical Platform, Doctrinal and Disciplinary, for Evangelical Lutheran District Synods: Construed in Accordance with the Principles of the General Synod* (Philadelphia: Miller & Burlock, 1855).

<sup>3</sup>He would go on to become one of the chief liturgiologists of the Lutheran Church in the latter nineteenth century and played a determinative role in defining the principles that formed the Common Service.

<sup>4</sup>Seiss, *Notes*, 76.

The ghost of the Definite Synodical Platform has again risen to haunt Lutheranism. And this time it has proven itself to be quite harmful and substantial. I speak, of course, of the recent decision by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to enter into full communion with several churches of the Reformed Tradition. In *A Formula of Agreement* the ELCA claims to have reached “fundamental doctrinal consensus” with the Reformed on such previously problematic issues as baptismal regeneration and the real presence. Of note is the statement “in light of the radically changed world of the twentieth century, it was deemed inappropriate to defend or correct positions and choices taken in the sixteenth century, making them determinative for Lutheran-Reformed witness today.”

Which brings us back to Schmucker. What was the ecumenical purpose of the Definite Platform? Schmucker’s earlier works help give us a glimpse of his vision in this regard. When Schmucker was called to be the first professor and president of Gettysburg, he made quite an issue of “subscribing” to the Augsburg Confession. In this he was seen as somewhat radical, in that only the Tennessee Synod required any kind of subscription to any of the Lutheran symbols at this point in American Lutheran history. The character of Schmucker’s subscription, though, is worth noting. He subscribed to the Augustana in so far as it articulated the fundamental doctrines of the Scripture in a manner substantially correct—which, of course, is tantamount to no subscription. In 1838 he published his *Fraternal Appeal to the American Churches*. In this volume he proposed a generic “Protestant” creed, comprised of the “fundamental” articles of faith, namely, those on which all Protestants agreed (there was no room for Roman Catholics in Schmucker’s household of faith—and so his ELCA heirs depart from him on this point). How “Lutheran” was the result? Listen to the proposed Apostolic, Protestant Confession on the Sacraments: “The sacraments were instituted not only as marks of a Christian profession among men; but rather as signs and evidences of the divine disposition towards us, tendered for the purpose of exciting and confirming the faith of those who



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use them. . . . Baptism is . . . a sign of the covenant of grace. . . . The supper of the Lord is not only a sign of the love that Christians ought to have among themselves; but rather is a sacrament of our redemption by Christ's death."<sup>5</sup>

The language of the *Formula of Agreement* shows the evidence of Schmucker's influence. Yet, what is so distressing about the present state of the ELCA is its failure to consider the theological ramifications of its move to full fellowship. In the middle nineteenth century, English-speaking Lutherans were rediscovering the riches of Confessional Lutheranism. They were delving deeply into the substance of the faith and finding there a christological and sacramental expression. They rediscovered their past, and learned their tradition and history. The result was one of the single most productive periods for Confessional Lutheranism in America. This was the period that saw the publication of the Henkel *Book of Concord*, Krauth's *The Conservative Reformation and Its Theology*, the translation of Schmid's *Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Jacobs' masterful two volume edition of the *Book of Concord*, The Common Service, and Schmauk's *The Confessional Principle and the Confessions*, to name some of the more prominent works.

And yet today one is hard pressed to find a strong confessional spirit within the ELCA.<sup>6</sup> What is so striking about Schmucker's work and the recent Reformed/ELCA *Agreement* is how closely they parallel one another. The *Agreement* makes little reference to the signatories' histories. Clearly "Schmuckerism" has triumphed. What is more tragic is that the ELCA seems blissfully unaware of it. And one is left to wonder if the corpse of confessionalism in the ELCA will rise again.

Lawrence R. Rast Jr.

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<sup>5</sup>Samuel S. Schmucker, *Fraternal Appeal to the American Churches*, edited with an introduction by Frederick K. Wentz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), 180-181.

<sup>6</sup>Some pockets do exist, though they are the exception to the rule.