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## CAN THE AMERICAN LUTHERAN CHURCH BE UNITED?

The issue involved in this question has been launched in a publication which has recently left the Concordia Press at St. Louis.<sup>1)</sup> The unification aimed at is one in doctrine. It does not advocate organic union, but a confessional consensus of all American Lutherans. This is a distinct merit of the book. Efforts to amalgamate, or federate, organized church-bodies must necessarily recognize other interests besides the one in which all Lutherans are agreed *a priori*, viz., that the confessional standards of the Church be maintained as a common norm of doctrine and practice by all who have adopted the denominational designation of Lutherans. It would not be easy to conceive a Lutheranism which would reject, in principle, the normative authority of the confessional writings of the Lutheran Church, and still claim recognition as a Lutheran society. Lutheranism, in such a case, would be a term of different import from the one which the term has in the common acceptation. Accordingly, the book starts with a fair prospect of having an easy sailing in Lutheran waters. The only pertinent question that could be raised in the premises is,

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1) *Zur Einigung der amerikanisch-lutherischen Kirche in der Lehre von der Bekehrung und Gnadewahl.* Im Anschluss an die norwegischen Vereinigungssactze und deren Kritiken. Von Dr. F. Pieper. St. Louis, Mo. Concordia Publishing House. 1913. 100 pages; bound in cloth; 40 cts. Carriage prepaid.

whether the helmsman has read his Lutheran chart and compass aright.

The American Lutheran Church has had its day of loose constructionism as regards the meaning of its confessional declarations. We remember the days when the Lutheran Confessions were said to deliver the teaching of the Scriptures "in a manner substantially correct," the days when men claimed that they subscribed the Confessions, not *quia*, *because*, but *quatenus*, *in so far as*, they taught Bible truth, the days when "open questions" in some of its teachings were discussed. Those days are not over yet, but no one who has observed the trend of Lutheran thought and study during the last two generations can have failed to note an evident desire in all parts of the American Lutheran Church, not only to accept *all* the confessional writings embodied in the Book of Concord, but also to accept them in their *plain, literal meaning*, though it cannot be said that the plain, literal meaning is everywhere admitted. So far as the cause of Lutheranism is concerned, factional, divisive tendencies in the Lutheran Church must disappear the moment the plain, literal meaning of the Confessions is understood and accepted,—accepted, that is, as of normative force. Accepting the Confessions means, to us, not expressing favorable sentiments about them, or voicing admiration for their historical dignity, their lucid style, and cordial tenor, etc., but to declare oneself willing and ready to be guided, in teaching and practice, by what the Confessions declare in the common and native force of the terms which they employ.

Dr. Pieper's book is a plea for confessional Lutheranism in the plain meaning of its declarations. The author's discussion is narrowed down to two controverted doctrines, that of predestination and conversion. Not that these are the only points in which Lutherans disagree, but they are admittedly the issues which have been before the American Lutheran Church most prominently during the last generation. It is reasonable to expect that if agreement could be reached on these points, a similar agreement would follow on other points. It should,

therefore, be set down as the second distinct merit of this book that it attacks the proposition of Lutheran union at its most knotty point. A person who seeks for union at all hazards should have begun his work at a different point. What renders many union movements abortive and fortuitous is, that the advocates start out with a statement of facts on which they are already agreed, in fact, never were disagreed. From this pleasing vantage ground they work forward, by a psychological process that is easily understood, to generous beliefs and assumptions in regard to the points in which they differ. This method is utterly foreign to the book before us. With commendable candor the author takes up at once the points of division among American Lutherans. His statements come with the precision of *sic et non*. Nowhere there appears the least desire to mitigate the disagreement. The argument is calm and deals strictly with facts. But it is not a cold, impersonal, stoic deposition that we get in this book, but a warm-hearted and winning presentation that creates an atmosphere of peace on the very battle-field and wraps itself around the reader's heart like the prayer of a saint.

The author's Prefatory Remarks give a foretaste of what the book offers. "During the last forty years there has been a public discussion within the Lutheran Church of America of the doctrine of election and, in connection therewith, of the doctrine of conversion. The controversy concerning these doctrines was of such seriousness that it brought about divisions and new alliances. Also the oldest Norwegian church-society in America, the Norwegian Synod, was not only drawn into the controversy, but also suffered grievous damage in consequence of a division which occurred among its constituents. Recently efforts of greater magnitude than at previous times have been made to reunite the Norwegian Lutherans. Moreover, these efforts have produced palpable results. Articles of Agreement have been drawn up by a joint committee and have been almost unanimously adopted by the respective synods. These events, however, have caused a renewal of the public

discussion, in the press of the Church, of the doctrines of election and conversion.

“We need not regret this. The subject about which everything turns in the last analysis is the subject *De servo arbitrio* and *De libero arbitrio*, that is, the question whether in matters spiritual the natural will of man is of no moment, or whether it can accomplish something. This subject will retain a decisive importance for the Church until the end of days. Luther treated this subject not only at Heidelberg in 1518, and over and against Erasmus in 1525, but to the end of his life. In comparison with the subject of free will, he calls all other controversies which he had with the Romanists ‘puerile affairs’ and ‘remote matters.’ He addresses Erasmus, who ascribed to man a *facultas se applicandi ad gratiam*, a good conduct in spiritual matters, thus: ‘This is what I commend and praise in you, *viz.*, that before all the rest you alone have attacked the real matter, that is, the central issue, and have not wearied me with those remote matters (*alienis illis causis*) concerning the papacy, purgatory, indulgences, and such matters, which are puerilities (*nugae*) rather than issues. With such matters nearly all others have hitherto vainly pursued me. You are the only person that has seen the real point in controversy, and have taken me by the throat (*cardinem rerum vidisti et ipsum jugulum petisti*). For this I thank you with all my heart; for I delight to be occupied with this subject, as far as my time and leisure will permit.’<sup>2)</sup> A discussion of this subject is necessary also in our times. It is not easy for theologians to keep their balance in this question. It is different with Christians. On the basis of Scripture, Christians simply believe: A person who is converted and saved is converted and saved by the grace of God alone; if a person remains unconverted and is lost, the blame rests on himself. This fact is expressed in theological parlance thus: On the basis of Scripture, Christians believe the doctrine of *sola gratia* as well as

2) *Opp. v. a.* VII, 367, St. Louis Ed. XVIII, 1967.

that of *universalis gratia*. However, we meet with a different state of affairs among theologians. Theologians imagine that they are forced to deny or to 'limit'—thus they usually put it euphemistically—either the one doctrine or the other. Shedd, with the utmost seriousness, divides all Christians on earth into two classes of people: such as deny the doctrine of *sola gratia*, and such as deny the doctrine of *universalis gratia*.<sup>3)</sup> From the view-point of the theologian he denies to the Lutheran Church, which confesses and maintains both doctrines, especially in the 11th Article of the Form of Concord, and which places its veto, in the very premises, on every effort to mediate between these two doctrines, also on the so-called theological effort, calling such efforts 'presumption,' the right to exist. Shedd and other Reformed theologians of recent times designate the position occupied by the Form of Concord 'untenable ground.'<sup>4)</sup> Luthardt shares this opinion.<sup>5)</sup> The difference between Shedd and Luthardt is only this, that, of the two factors which come under consideration at this point, the former cancels or 'limits' *universalis gratia*, the latter, *sola gratia*. The position which is in accordance with Scripture, and, hence, is the only correct one from the theological view-point, *viz.*, the position which maintains both *sola gratia* and *universalis gratia*, without diminishing the force of either, has been expressed, as far as we can see, only three times in public documents issued by churches, and recorded in the history of the Christian Church: in the decrees of the Synod of Orange in 529, in the 11th Article of the Form of Concord, in 1580, and in the 13 Theses of the Missouri Synod, in 1881.

"In participating, by means of this publication, in the discussion of the Norwegian Articles of Agreement, and of the criticism to which they have been subjected, our aim is to aid,

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3) *Dogmatic Theology*, I, 448. According to Shedd there are only "two great systems of theology which divide evangelical Christendom, Calvinism and Arminianism."

4) See also Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, II, 325.

5) *Die Lehre vom freien Willen*, p. 276.

on our part, toward the recognition and maintenance of the doctrinal position of the Form of Concord as the only one which is in accordance with Scripture and correct from the theological point of view. Our wish and our prayer to God is, that the Norwegian Lutherans of America in their union, which is most desirable, would place themselves upon a platform which fully corresponds to the glorious confession of the Lutheran Church in the 11th Article. When they have done this, all other Lutherans of America, whether they speak German, English, or any other tongue, should follow the example of the Norwegian Lutherans.

“If circumstances had been different, we should have preferred to treat the glorious confessional position of the Lutheran Church in the Article of Election once more in the same manner as was done at the intersynodical conference at Watertown, Wis., in 1904. On that occasion we presented the controverted doctrine without quotations from controversial writings which had appeared in America. This was done in order to avoid, as far as possible, the arousing of party feeling. This method is not feasible as matters are at present. The Norwegian Articles of Agreement have been given to the public, and have been publicly praised as well as censured in the periodicals of the Church. In these public discussions there is still special mention made of us, the so-called Missourians. On the one hand, the Norwegian theses are being praised for the reason that the doctrinal position of the Missouri Synod is being combated by them. On the other hand, the same theses are being censured, for the reason that their contents are essentially Missourian. Moreover, individual persons in our circles are being specially referred to in these discussions, *viz.*, Walther before others, but also members of the present St. Louis Faculty. Quite a number of particular questions are being treated more or less exhaustively, for instance, the question, whether there are two forms of presenting the doctrine of election, which ultimately merge into one doctrine, as far as their contents are concerned. Since the Articles of Agreement mention the names of Ger-

hard, Scriver, and Pontoppidan, a new discussion has arisen regarding the position maintained by ourselves and our opponents as regards the doctrine of the later Lutheran dogmaticians. Since the doctrine of election cannot be treated without reference to the doctrine of conversion, the question has again been called up for debate, whether a person's conversion is dependent upon the grace of God alone or also upon the person's proper conduct; again, what is the meaning of the 'call,' and whether it is admissible to speak of 'the possibility of being converted,' and of 'acts preparatory to conversion.' Lastly, also this delicate question has been raised, 'Which side has changed its position?' Our purpose is to throw some light on all these questions, however, solely to the end of aiding in bringing about a union on the glorious platform of our Lutheran Confessions."

It is a rich program that is submitted in these introductory remarks of the author. The union movement among the Norwegian Lutherans of America — comparatively an event of lesser importance — assumes vast proportions, both intensively, as regards the doctrinal issues at stake, and extensively, as regards the parties affected by these issues, now that we are shown in this book the full bearing which the union movement must have on the Lutheran Church at large in our country. The program is carried out in 14 chapters, as follows: 1. The Norwegian Articles of Agreement. 2. The Two Concepts of Election. 3. The Fundamental Difference in the Controversy. 4. A Wrong that is Inflicted on the Norwegian Synod in the Articles of Agreement. 5. The Articles of Agreement and the Rejection of Synergism. 6. Conversion "by Means of Powers Conferred by Grace." 7. The Presentation of the Point of Difference by the Form of Concord. 8. The Assent of all Christians to the Presentation of the Form of Concord. 9. Review of the Old Dogmaticians. 10. "Preparation" (*praeparatio*) for Conversion. 11. The "Possibility" of Conversion. 12. The Twofold Meaning of Calling. 13. Fellowship of Faith and Church-fellowship with Such as Occupy the Position of Gerhard. 14. Which Side has Changed Its Position?

An English edition of this epochal publication is now being prepared, and will be issued as speedily as possible. This is in deference to numerous wishes which have been expressed for such an edition.

The candid, yet amiable, restatement of the chief issues which divide the American Lutheran Church, particularly at the present time, is an invaluable service that has been rendered to the cause of Lutheranism. The Church cannot afford to pass by this publication without exhaustive notices. The entire plan and scope of the book, and the spirit which animates the author's thorough discussion of his various subjects, is such that one feels himself attracted, in every portion of it, to the main thought. A union such as is here advocated would, indeed, be what the author thinks it would be, the most magnificent monument which American Lutheranism could erect in commemoration of the quadricentennial of the Reformation. God speed the mission of this book!

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