

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

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ARCHIVES

Vol. XL

May 1969

No. 5

Editorial ✝

Denver, Theological Comments

Magazines, newspapers, and journals such as this are inevitably influenced by the company that keeps them.

A study of the editorial coloring of CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY over the years would show a definite relationship to a theological spectrum analysis of the faculty of Concordia Seminary. This is inevitable, since the journal has always been edited "by the faculty of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri," as the title page indicates. This was possible in the early years because the faculty was small enough to gird up its loins collectively and to take up the staff work as a committee of the whole.

The character of the magazine has also been set by the fact that it is "The Theological Journal of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod," an identification which the title page also supplies. That this has not dictated a specific and monolithic theological position is apparent to anyone who would care to make a survey of a number of years of its publication. It would take a more careful analysis, if it could be done at all, to determine if the journal's changing character were a cause or an effect of the changing stance of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. No doubt there was a mutual influence, since the faculty has been constituted by the Synod and drawn from the membership of the clergy of the Synod, which the faculty then editorially represented.

Over the years the growing size of Concordia Seminary and of the Synod resulted in a faculty of increasing numbers and increased responsibilities. As a result the task of publishing the theological journal of the Synod was delegated by the faculty to an editorial committee, as the "Contents" page indicates. Their task was to edit the magazine for the faculty, whose task it was to edit the journal for the Synod.

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There has been a commendable concern and charity exhibited across all these editorial lines over the years for the edification of all the company of the brotherhood. Institutional cooking always takes on a certain blandness as it tries to please all of the people, whom you can't please all of the time anyway. The reader did not have to take the articles of CTM with a grain of salt—the attempt at consensus and the solid confessional stand of the Synod took care of that—but he might on more than one occasion have wished for a dash of spice.

This leisurely comment on issues that are in print and on file should at least provoke the reader to say, "Get on with it." This is the wrath toward which they were designed to provoke. For as you get on with the reading of these present pages you will find that they deal with an issue that is on the immediate agenda of the Synod and that will make its imprint upon The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. And this so decidedly that

there is no doubt that Denver will take on a significance for us as a church body as prominent as its geographical significance. It is now the city that leads to the great continental divide. It can become the city that establishes at least the foothills of the ascent to the plateau of the great American Lutheran unity.

In this issue the editorial committee makes as specific as possible what has been no particular secret: it is unifiedly in favor of recognizing with gratitude to God that unity exists between The American Lutheran Church and The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. The statement by Arthur Carl Piepkorn spells out the position of the editorial committee. The articles express the convictions of the committee.

In this issue the editorial committee continues to represent the faculty of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. That it does not represent the individual opinion of each member of the faculty is well enough known. The editorial committee, however, has not conducted a straw vote for this issue to identify the pros and the cons. Convinced that on this issue we are as a Synod faced with recognizing one of the great gifts God has again offered to our church body, we are urging the brethren, "Take this gift of fellowship."

Where this issue of *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY* will place the journal itself as the theological voice of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod will only partly be determined by the vote of the Synod on the larger issue of Lutheran unity. That question will appear on the agenda in another form. The report of the committee appointed to study the condition of Synod's official organs will recommend that the various institutions of the Synod continue the publication of theological magazines, but that no specific publication be given the title "The Theological Journal of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod." There can be, and there are, differing opinions on the wisdom and eventual outcome of such a decision. But the editorial committee in subscribing to the present issue would attempt in the fear of God to help lead the Synod to a positive resolution of the question of fellowship with The American Lutheran Church and thus be expressive, we hope, of the theological opinion of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

GEORGE W. HOYER

WILL THE DECISION ON FELLOWSHIP AT DENVER MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

We wish that there were some way of conducting a plebiscite on authorizing pulpit and altar fellowship between churches of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and churches of The American Lutheran Church. As of the date of this writing, the question would not be *if* the vote would favor authorizing such fellowship. The question would be only on the size of the margin in favor of it. From available indications a minimum of 70 percent of our people probably approve the authorization of such fellowship.

Conceivably the vote in favor would run much higher. Consider one of the recent indicators, the poll conducted among students at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. Disregard the votes of faculty members and graduate students—which ran 90 percent in favor

of authorizing fellowship. Consider only the votes of the students preparing themselves for the sacred ministry. A bare 10 percent of the students who cast ballots voted against authorizing fellowship; 5.6 percent declared themselves undecided; and 83.7 percent — five out of six — declared themselves in favor. These students represent a good cross section. They come from every part of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. In terms of age, they represent the variety of attitudes present among the adults who will shortly be inheriting the church of the immediate future.

The findings of this poll confirm other recent indicators. Thus President Oliver R. Harms reports in "Memo to My Brethren" for February 1969: "When congregations [of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod] study the issue and meet with members of The American Lutheran Church, they generally report finding that there is agreement in their understanding of the doctrine of the Gospel. While there are variations, a solid majority reports finding this consensus. . . . A strong majority of those reporting consensus expressed the conviction that such consensus should lead to the practice of altar and pulpit fellowship" (pp. 1—2). A release of the Department of Public Relations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, dated March 21, 1967, reports the "solid majority" as ranging from 67 to 75 percent. The "strong majority" calling for fellowship, according to the release, includes three quarters of the reporting congregations.

More recently, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod's Council of Presidents, meeting at St. Louis on March 17 and 18, 1969, voted 25 to 13 to recommend that The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod "formally declare itself to be in altar and pulpit fellowship with the American Lutheran Church."

It is not, of course, at all certain that the delegates who will cast the decisive vote on fellowship at Denver will adequately represent the mind of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in the decision they reach. Suppose that with the best of intentions they vote contrary to the will of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and refuse to authorize fellowship with The American Lutheran Church, what then?

At least one voice has been raised exhorting its hearers to take comfort from the fact that in spite of such an unhappy outcome of the vote, those in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod who genuinely believe in our Lord and those in The American Lutheran Church who genuinely believe in Him will still be one in the bonds of faith. The statement is indubitably true, but it is also irrelevant! This much we can say with reference to authentic believers in Christ in every Christian denomination. It requires no vote and no effort. And it does precisely nothing to heal the divisions in the Church of the Augsburg Confession in the United States!

There are substantive areas where the vote at Denver will ultimately make little difference.

The process of association in countless civic, welfare, evangelistic, missionary, and pastoral activities involving The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and The American Lutheran Church has gone so far as to be practically irreversible. This is true at the local level in hundreds and hundreds of places. It is just as true at regional levels in almost all parts of the United States. It is no less true at the national level. A nega-

tive vote at Denver on authorizing fellowship might conceivably in a small degree slow down or even slightly complicate this process, but it can neither stop nor seriously interfere with it. But even a slowing down would affect negatively the cooperative promotion of the task of the church and to that extent would be genuinely deplorable.

There is a second fellowship proposal on the agenda at the Denver convention. It is the authorization of pulpit and altar fellowship with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada. The staff of *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY* favors affirmative action on both proposals. But they are not the same proposal. Action on one will not carry with it any automatic or necessary implications for action on the other. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada is an autonomous body. Although it was at one time a part of The American Lutheran Church, its links with the United States section of that body were far less intimate than say the links between the Canadian and the United States Districts of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. With its own seminary and a larger proportion of Canadians on its clergy roster, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada is an indigenous church with a strong conservative orientation. Fellowship with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada is chiefly a concern of our Canadian Districts. Our Canadian fellow members of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod have indicated overwhelmingly that they desire the authorization of fellowship with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada. Christian love for them dictates that, whatever decision the Denver assembly reaches on fellowship with The American Lutheran Church, we accede to the desires of our Canadian Districts and authorize fellowship with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada.

In a great variety of ways the congregations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and of The American Lutheran Church are practicing *de facto* fellowship already. Not least among these ways is the almost unrestricted exchange of members between The American Lutheran Church and The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod to a degree that is quite comparable to the exchange of members within The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. The exceptions merely prove the almost universal rule. These *de facto* fellowship practices are born out of the exigencies of Lutheran life in the United States in the late 20th century. A negative vote on fellowship at Denver will not stop them, but it may introduce here and there a profoundly regrettable uneasiness that is not conducive to the joyous carrying out of the mission that Christ has given to His church.

We have cited the exchange of members as an example. Other examples include the increasingly prevalent association of clergymen of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and of The American Lutheran Church in pastoral conferences, study groups, and action groups; the widespread reciprocal utilization of the education and training facilities of the other body at both the lay and the clerical level; the general reciprocal utilization of resource people of the other body to make available to both groups particular skills (in the field of specialized pastoral counseling, to cite only one instance) that neither could supply with its own resources: the all but normal cooperative enterprises in the areas of welfare and institutional ministries; the frequent conduct of joint workshops,

retreats, institutes, consultations, and colloquia; the cumulative opening up of membership in professional and other specialized organizations across synodical lines; and all the many other activities in which we mutually engage and in which we are practicing a de facto fellowship to our mutual profit and without any compromise of principle.

In The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod there is an increasing body of lay people and clergymen who have come to the conclusion that fellowship between The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and The American Lutheran Church is not only right but necessary in terms of the public teaching of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. They were profoundly disturbed by what they regarded as an indefensible inconsistency between the premises that the New York assembly posited and the practical conclusion that it drew from them. These people since then have simply chosen to act on the basis of their conscience and of what they see as the necessary corollaries of their church body's own professed view. They have not deliberately sought out occasions for practising fellowship in order to try to galvanize their fellow members of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod into a realization of what they see as a literally scandalous inconsistency. They have simply practiced fellowship as the opportunity presented itself, without argument, without defensiveness, without self-consciousness. Even if the assembly at Denver were to vote no on authorizing fellowship with The American Lutheran Church, it is quite inconceivable that a single one of these people would pause for a moment in doing what they have been doing. It is certain that their ranks would be greatly swelled by additional wholly like-minded laymen and pastors who have merely been a little more patient and who have decided to wait until Denver. The action that Denver may take will not make up the minds of these people; that has already happened. They have made their decision before the forum of their conscience; they sense no conflict between their loyalty to what they see as the demand of the Holy Spirit and the demand of their commitment to the principles for which The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod stands. These principles they see as far transcending any delegate assembly's contradictory decision. But if the vote at Denver is against approving fellowship, it will mean that much more of a breakdown of the unanimity of spirit and of action in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod that we have prized in the past. It will be one additional step toward decreased responsiveness to the idea of synodical solidarity. This would be a net loss that might cost us dearly in the future.

We anticipate no exodus of congregations or clergymen from our ranks if the vote on fellowship with The American Lutheran Church at the Denver assembly should be negative. Nor do we, in the light of past experience, expect that very many of those who are threatening to forsake our church body if the vote authorizing fellowship is favorable would carry out their threats when confronted with the actual situation. It is possible that if they were to do so, the result might be that both they and The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod might become more effective servants of God. In this sense, what happens at Denver will make very little difference in the short run. The long run is something else.

Whatever the decision, some of our own members will in the short run be frustrated,

resentful, and unhappy. This number will be greater in the case of a negative vote than in the case of a positive vote.

If the decision is favorable, as the bulk of the membership of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod hopes it will be, no golden age will have arrived. The implementation of the decision to authorize fellowship will call for dedicated effort. It will not be nearly as difficult as opponents of the idea make it out to be, but it will have its inescapable share of pain and difficulty, especially in some communities. The need for patience and mutual Christian love will be great. But one of the rents in the empirical community of God's people will have been sewn up, and we can address ourselves to new tasks. The spiritual blessings and even the mundane advantages will be abundant compensation. In the long run our mutual solidarity in the Gospel and in our commitment to the Lutheran Symbolical Books will have been heightened. For this reason the staff of *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY* bespeaks favorable consideration of the proposal.

If the decision is in the negative, the now potential loss will to a larger degree have become actual. Let no one think that the issue will go away; it will merely become more difficult to resolve. Additional amounts of time and energy spent debating, denouncing, and defending will distract us from our primary and indispensable task. A negative vote will have gained us nothing—no added respect, no exhilarating opportunities, no greater internal solidarity, no sense of growing community with our fellow Lutherans, no new directions. For the long run a negative vote will have merely reinforced and raised higher the walls of a ghetto of our own building and will have thrust us farther and more irreversibly in the direction of sectarianism.

What will change as a result of the decision on fellowship at Denver? Nothing, superficially—but at the level of reality where things count, just about everything! The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod will have taken, God grant it, a decisive step forward—or, God forbid, another tragic step backward.

ARTHUR CARL PIEPKORN

FELLOWSHIP AND THE YOUNGER SISTER CHURCHES

The decision which The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod will make on altar and pulpit fellowship with The American Lutheran Church at its 1969 convention carries important implications for the overseas sister churches of the LCMS. Particularly those young churches which have come into being through the mission efforts of the LCMS look to her for leadership and guidance as well as for financial support. Such leadership and guidance is vital in the area of interchurch relations.

Conditions in overseas fields are different. Members of the younger churches, for the most part, do not understand the differences among the Lutheran churches in America. They are much more interested in their own relations with the church bodies near them, some Lutheran and some non-Lutheran. The questions that face them, however, are remarkably similar to those facing the Lutherans in America. How much agreement is necessary for fellowship or union? Is the desired goal union or fellowship? How can

representatives on interchurch commissions communicate their findings so that they gain the trust of their constituents? What is the difference between God-pleasing loyalty to the Scriptures and the Confessions and the demand that every detail must be agreed upon? The LCMS cannot answer these questions for the younger churches; they must find the answers for themselves. She can, however, give guidance on the principles involved.

The 1965 Synod meeting in Detroit made an auspicious beginning in this matter by adopting Resolution 3-04. Synod acknowledged that interchurch decisions must be made at the place where the people of God gather about Word and Sacrament. She professed her confidence in the younger churches' ability to act responsibly in these matters and pledged her support to them as they acted. She also acknowledged her responsibility toward the sister churches who were engaged in fellowship discussions, promising to consult with them on her own progress and suggesting that she be consulted by them on their progress in establishing fellowship ties. Resolution 3-04 was designed to increase the two-way flow of consultation on fellowship matters.

Many of us who work in the sister churches have learned much from the LCMS. In our judgment, the Synod has shown a strong loyalty to the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions, balanced by an eagerness to enter into conversations with other Christians. The Synod has consistently been represented in such conversations by delegates who are not only loyal to Lutheran principles but also represent the varied concerns of the Synod. She has also been meticulous in ironing out as many of the details as possible before action is taken; no one accuses her of unseemly haste. Yet the Synod has acted decisively in joining the Lutheran Council in the United States of America (LCUSA) and in refusing to cut off conversations with other church bodies, though memorials have occasionally demanded this. She has consistently expressed her confidence in those who represent her on interchurch commissions.

At Denver, however, the Synod's stance will receive a more decisive test. The decision on fellowship with The American Lutheran Church will, after all, be a milestone. Though the Synod has been preparing for this for decades, no fellowship decision of this magnitude has taken place in the memory of any living member of Synod. The younger sister churches are waiting eagerly to hear the Synod's decision.

If the Synod approves a resolution to declare altar and pulpit fellowship with The American Lutheran Church, the younger churches will understand it as a carefully prepared action taken by their elder sister. No doubt, the Synod will support this understanding with communications informing the younger sister churches of her action and explaining the background to it. The difference between this action and the earlier actions regarding LCUSA will be made clear to the younger churches who have similar challenges with local councils and federations on the one hand and churches on the other. If Synod acts against fellowship with The American Lutheran Church, the younger churches will have difficulty in understanding; the task of explaining will be far more difficult and, for that reason, far more necessary. They will want to know why this apparently orderly development did not reach fruition. Was Synod unwilling to trust

her representatives who recommended such fellowship? What are the lessons to be learned so that similar orderly developments overseas don't end up with negative outcomes? How much trust should the younger churches place in their representatives in similar situations? This task of explaining is vital; if the Synod fails in this task, she will have abdicated the leadership of her younger sister churches in matters of fellowship.

The younger churches are seeking guidance in the area of fellowship. They are not asking for answers to specific situations. They realize that they themselves must decide under what circumstances they can enter into fellowship or union with other churches in their area. The LCMS cannot answer this question for them, nor should she attempt to do so. But she can carry out her leadership by the way she continually restates principles in her own situation and acts according to them. Specifically, the Synod can make clear by her actions how she understands the principles that "for the true unity of the church it is enough to agree concerning the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments." Her actions can best explain what she means by terms like "loyalty to Synod," "loyalty to the Confessions," "loyalty to Scriptures," and "loyalty to the Gospel of Jesus Christ." The way the Synod chooses representatives for interchurch matters will demonstrate her concern for these matters. How she receives the recommendations of these representatives and acts upon them will demonstrate the trust and confidence she places in them.

These actions, to be demonstrated once more at Denver, will serve as guidelines for the younger sister churches. The sister churches will use them in plotting their own courses between rigid separatism and careless unionism, between suspicion of others' opinions and unthinking trust in communities and representatives. Most of these younger churches are enjoying comparative political calm; at times like this the natural tendency is to avoid anything new, also in fellowship matters. Recommendations for new relationships will not be accepted easily. But if fire like that of Biafra strikes the other sister churches, the natural tendency may well be to run for refuge wherever it seems available. Then fellowship can easily come as "the only way out." Right now the Synod has the opportunity to demonstrate responsible churchmanship to her sister churches and to help prepare them for whatever lies ahead.

HERBERT M. ZORN

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SYNODICAL CONVENTIONS: A THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

In this brief introduction I must begin with a candid observation that it is much simpler to read than to write about the next convention of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Further, I would be less than candid if I did not confess at the outset that my comments are written at least somewhat in reaction to certain popular notions about church conventions in general. It is not my intention to say much about the machinery of our conventions, to discuss the issues under consideration, or even to react to specific concepts of church conventions that are popularly held. Rather, I hope to

establish a general context from which the next convention of The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod ought to be viewed.

Church conventions are human arrangements. While the first convention in the history of the New Testament Christian church is recorded in Acts 15, there is no indication that God directed the church to conduct its affairs for all time by means of the instrumentality of a convention. In this sense, that the church is a human institution, it often functions much like other human institutions. As human institutions change, it may be prudent for the church also to change and to adapt its polity, its policies, and its procedures accordingly. Certainly the church should feel free to alter human arrangements in an effort to achieve more effectively and efficiently the goals which God has set for His people.

But the church is much more than a human institution. The church in all its forms is still the creature and possession of God. The church belongs to God, not to its members. The members of the church, regardless of their office in the institution, are all members of that body, and Christ is the Head of that body. Ultimately, the church is completely the product of God's doing. By His grace He calls, gathers, enlightens, and remains among His people. Some rather important conclusions soon become apparent from this assertion:

1. Members of the church and human institutions within the church are at best only stewards under God. He has bestowed a high honor on His people by calling them into partnership with Him. In this partnership God calls His people to serve one another for their common welfare and to work together to achieve His gracious purposes in His world.
2. In the life of the church we are dealing with the bride of Christ. This is what Christ Himself calls the church, and it is this term that embraces all the attitudes of love and affection with which He deals with this bride. We can do no less than to regard the church for what she truly is and to deal with her in His Spirit.
3. By virtue of His claim on His church, God Himself establishes the purposes and also the style for the life and the work of people.

Several applications may help to clarify the distinctions which I am trying to set forth here. It is God who brings us into fellowship with Him and into fellowship with one another. He does this by forgiving our sin for Jesus' sake. In a special way, God creates and sustains the unity of the church. At the same time God has set the church free to make certain human arrangements for nurturing and exhibiting the unity which all members have in the Gospel. It is for us to recognize and to practice the privileges and the responsibilities of fellowship. At times we may choose to do this through a declaration of altar and pulpit fellowship and at other times this may be done by merger. Similarly, it is God who sends His people on His mission to His entire world. How the church carries out this mission in a specific time and place is for the members of the church to decide.

The power of the church is the Word of grace. It is by this power that God overwhelmed every obstacle when He sent Jesus Christ into the world. This is the only power

that overcomes all barriers in the life and the work of the church. The mercy of God deals with sin by forgiveness, whether this sin is to be found in the church or in the world. The life of the church, including church conventions, is a test of the church's trust in the Gospel. What we do and how we do it in the life of the church tells whether we truly rely on the power of God at work in the Word; or whether we trust more in convention resolutions, men chosen by elections, clever manipulations, voting majorities, and the realities of churchly politics. We are undergoing the same stringent test also when we deal with other church bodies. Then it is a question whether or not we are depending on human arrangements to do what God alone does by His grace. Likewise, the concern of every program of the church is to give God the chance to extend His gracious influence just as nakedly and tenderly as possible by all that Christian people may undertake to say and do.

Church conventions are more than a testing ground, however. They are a gathering place where the people of God in larger than usual numbers rally to the source of their life and energy. Church conventions are a point of renewal because God is mightily at work through Word and Sacrament. Church conventions are the assembly where the members of the communion of saints come to edify one another. Church conventions are the conference places where God's people plan their strategy and pool their gifts for pursuing the mission of the church.

In its own way the Synod has recorded many of these thoughts I have been expressing in the formal style of the *Handbook*. There the Synod has put down the Scriptural and the Confessional foundation on which we live and move and have our being. This is the place where every member is reminded of his highest allegiance. In this small book we have set down what our objectives are and how we intend to pursue these objectives.

The distinctions I made at the beginning of this brief article are observed in a remarkable way in the Synod's constitution and bylaws. Every provision is careful to assure that men do not intrude where members of the church have no business asserting themselves. The Word of God rules supreme. Where the Word of God gives freedom, there the Synod has assured that the will of the Synod will prevail, as much as such assurance can humanly be provided. Due consideration is given to the recommendations and wishes of all members of the Synod. There is ample opportunity to hear and to be heard. When the procedures are carefully followed, it can be assumed that Christian men are able to exercise their open mind, willing hearts, and sound judgment. The procedures of the Synod are designed to entrust the affairs of the church body to faithful hearts and good hands.

In many respects The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod is not the same as it was in 1847 simply because the world and the people are not the same as they were more than 120 years ago. The issues before the church from time to time and place to place have changed. At the same time some of these issues are remarkably the same in every place and every time. Conventions have served a wholesome purpose in the past and will likely do so in the future. As in the past, the quality and the quantity of the 1969 convention

will depend not so much on the shape or design of our organizational machinery as it depends on the attitudes with which we conduct the business of the church. And nothing determines these attitudes so much as does our willingness to receive and to respond to the voice of our gracious God.

OLIVER R. HARMS