

Concordia Theological Monthly



N O V E M B E R • 1 9 5 7

Concordia Theological Monthly

VOL. XXVIII

NOVEMBER 1957

No. 11

“The Nature of the Unity We Seek”

A Missouri Synod Lutheran View

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[EDITORIAL NOTE: This article appeared in the spring 1957 issue of *Religion in Life*, published by Abingdon Press, Nashville, Tenn., and is reprinted by the kind permission of its editor. It was one of five contributions in a symposium under the title “The Nature of the Unity We Seek.” Other contributors were: Lesslie Newbigin, bishop in the Church of South India; Edward John Carnell, president of Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, Calif.; Theron D. Price, professor of church history at the Southern Baptist Seminary, Louisville, Ky.; and John Yoder, director of the relief activities of the Mennonite Central Committee in France.]

“THE nature of the unity we seek” has the obviousness of a platitude. Like most platitudes, it is more easily stated (by those who hold it) and more readily caricatured (by those who reject it) than it is appreciated, appropriated, and lived. It is worth while, therefore, to spell out this platitude, in order that both we and those with whom we seek unity may be made aware of its basic simplicity and of its practical complexity and difficulty.

We seek unity in the common, free subjection of man to God as the God who has in measureless condescension drawn near to man. This means: We desire that men be united in a gladly resolute, radical, and total submission of faith to God as he has revealed himself in his Son Jesus Christ; for we can know and have the God of measureless condescension only in Christ, in the once-for-all historic act of his life, death, and resurrection. If we are to hear a word from God which does not annihilate us but gives us life in communion with him, that word must be the Word made flesh. This Word made flesh, this Son of God, in turn, is known to us only and can become ours only by the apostolic word of those who witness to him, those words which the living, potent, and creative presence of the Paraclete has made to be the divinely valid witness

to Christ, the effectual loosing and binding word by which Christ and the opened heavens are gained or lost. We have Christ in this inerrantly loosing and binding apostolic word, or we do not have him at all. We seek unity, then, as we seek it under God and in Christ, in a full and common obedience to the Holy Scriptures.

None of this is as yet peculiarly "Missourian" (indeed, we believe and hope that nothing in the nature of the unity we seek is peculiarly "Missourian" in the sense that it first came into the life of the church through us or exists only in us). There is nothing here as yet to set Missouri apart from other communions, much less other Lutherans. What seems to be peculiarly "Missourian" is the radicalness, or stringency, with which Missouri conceives of and applies the criteria of *theocentricity*, *christocentricity*, and *bibliocentricity* in its quest for church unity. This is, we trust, no mere whim of rigor on our part but is grounded in the revealed facts of the case, in the nature of man's situation before God, both under his judgment and under his grace.

The Second Article of the Augsburg Confession may serve to illustrate the inner necessity of Missouri's radical insistence on the three notes mentioned above. Here "our churches" set over against the God "of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness" who is confessed in Article One, man as the judicature of God reveals him; they teach "that since the fall of Adam, all men begotten in the natural way are born with sin, that is, without the fear of God, without trust in God, and with concupiscence; and that this disease or vice of origin is truly sin, even now condemning and bringing eternal death upon those not born again through Baptism and the Holy Ghost." Man as man, man by definition, when confronted by the immeasurable might of God will not fear him; confronted by his unfathomable wisdom, will not trust him; confronted by the immeasurable goodness of God, will not turn from his fatal inversion upon himself to find life in him — except by God's creatively renewing action.

Man being man, he has no option as to how seriously he may take God in his revelation of himself, in his dealings with man. From birth and by his birth man literally dies by the word that proceedeth from the mouth of God. However opaque this may be to man's vision, however impenetrable to his probing, it brings

home to him, at the very beginning and basis of his encounter with God, that God and God's revelation of himself lie completely outside the domain of man's disposing. We are not consulted; and we are not permitted to see into the matter. God's verdict in the Law strikes us in the totality of our existence — there is no place within that existence where we can stand and speak and think of that verdict objectively and critically, as if we were not being struck by it.

And if God's universal verdict of condemnation in the Law lies outside the domain of our disposing and is opaque to our reason, so also is the verdict of acquittal spoken upon all men in the cross and resurrection of Christ and universally proclaimed in the gospel. God's grace is past all finding out and beyond all accounting, being an act of holy love for the weak who cannot merit it; for sinners who do not want it; for the godless who despise it; and for enemies who resent it. And the way which that grace of God went, the way of the vicarious atonement on the cross, is lucid only to adoration and becomes transparent only in the doxology of the redeemed. And so faith, the inevitable correlate of grace, is man's purely passive and merely receptive *yea* to God's act in Christ, is (as Schrenk has called it) "Pure relatedness to God's redemptive action." Believing man stands before God as Abraham once stood, at dead end so far as all human possibilities were concerned, with all human guarantees and securities stripped from him and only the naked word of Almighty God to hold to — "He staggered not at the *promise* of God."

Faith holds to the promise, the word of God, against reason, against experience, against feeling. This is what makes the question of the inspiration and the authority of Scripture so important and so crucial in the question of church unity; for "Scripture" and "Word of God" belong together, and it is our conviction that they cannot be too tightly bracketed. The statement, "The Bible is the Word of God," unquestioned for more than a millennium and a half of the church's history, is questioned on all hands today; a *significat* of some sort has in our days replaced the forthright *est* of earlier days here, as it has so widely in the case of the Sacrament. As in the case of the Sacrament, so here in the case of Scripture, the truth will not be discovered and the reality will not be found from without.

The question, "To what extent and in what sense is the Bible God's Word?" is not answered by disquisition and definition; it can be answered only in the act of submission. Only in submitting to the verdict of the law and in accepting the promise of the gospel in the concrete fullness with which Scripture conveys both, do we know the Bible as the word of God, as God's word *to us*, but also as God's word quite independently of our response to it nevertheless. For here is the voice of him whom we cannot control or master, who rather masters and controls us in might and mercy, whose word goes its triumphatorial way through mankind, cutting a furrow between life and death and evincing itself as the inescapably divine word in both its effects. It is only when the question of Nicodemus, "How can these things be?" and the question of the men of Nazareth, "Whence hath this man all these things?" have been replaced by the questions of Paul, "Who art thou, *Lord?*" and "What shall I do, *Lord?*" — it is only then that we shall be able to say with confidence, "The Bible is the Word of God."

It is therefore perhaps not merely the historical fact that the authority of Scripture was not in dispute between the Reformers and the Roman Church in the sixteenth century that accounts for the absence of an article on Scripture as such in the Lutheran Confessions; nor is that absence viewed by us as a lamentable omission, in view of present-day antitheses. If we give to the Scriptures the glad and whole assent which the Confessors gave them, we shall have our article *De Scriptura* plain and explicit enough for all purposes.

It is this glad and full assent to Scripture as the Word of God that we "Missourians" painfully miss in large areas of Christendom, including Lutheranism, today. It constitutes a block to unity, not merely formally (as constituting a lack of common ground for theological conversation and rapprochement) but also substantially; for here, in the question of Scripture, the fullness and soundness of our Yea to grace in faith becomes concrete and to some degree empirical; for here our Yea is tested in a way peculiarly offensive to our scholarship, our rationality, our intellectual respectability as modern men. Here we are asked whether Theology wants to preen herself as a science among sciences or even as queen of the sciences, or is ready to come under the cross of men's contempt. Here we

are asked in a concrete, inexorable way: "How seriously do you take the verdict of the Second Article of the Augsburg Confession upon man? How radical is your repentance, how resolute your assent to God's verdict in Christ?"

In a day when so little sacrifice is asked of most of us as theologians, this sacrifice looms large, because it is often the only one. It is not, however, a *sacrificium intellectus* that is being called for (the intellect will always be called into full and fruitful play by theology) but a sacrifice of will: are we willing to be consciously and boldly noncritical in our approach to Scripture and thus bear the stigma of being "uncritical" or, what cuts even deeper, "pre-critical"? If we are, we are on the way to discovering that the Bible is not a perplexity and an agony but the good gift of God, the Good Book of which our fathers affectionately spoke. And we are on the way to unity.

The hyphenation "historic-critical," as used of the approach to Scripture, is an insidious one, for it brackets two entities that have become highly disparate. In interpreting Scripture historically man is remaining faithful to Scripture itself, is remaining obedient to the dictates of its "sundry times and divers manners" proclamation. Since God is the God of history and not of myth, since his making and shaping of history together with his interpretation of it (which makes the "secular" transparent as the *magnalia Dei*) is the essential content of Scripture, our study of Scripture must be historical if we would have Scripture as what it is, the continuing revelation of that God who has acted, does act, and shall act for us men and for our salvation.

But there is a tremendous fallacy involved in the hyphenation *historico-critical*, at least when "critical" is understood as it usually is — in the sense that the interpreter steps, as it were, out of his baptism and scrutinizes the words of God "objectively," and puts their validity as God's revelation under question. Is not this to attempt to determine *a priori* what ways the God of history can go and should go? Is not this a regression behind one's baptism to the Adamite man, without fear of God, without trust in him, and with a concupiscence which makes the "*eritis sicut Deus*" ring sweetly in his ears? And is it not in the last analysis as stultifying as it is irreverent — has not the interpreter, who should be the historian of

the mighty and overwhelming acts of God, become the pseudo-historian of whom Stauffer has said that he can make no discoveries because he always knows in advance what can happen and what cannot?

The alliance between "historical" and "critical" is therefore theologically not tolerable. Intolerable, too, is any alliance between theology and philosophy. For philosophical man is no longer man under the verdict of God, minded to live by every word which proceedeth from the mouth of God, but is man in revolt against God, whether he knows it or not, whether he wills it or not. The church which mingles the water of philosophy with the wine of God's word is not merely diluting that wine; it is drawing water from poisoned wells. Any attempt to shore up, or to give shape to, theology by means of philosophy is not, therefore, a more or less legitimate approach, depending on how valid or germane the philosophy which is employed happens to be. It is the repetition within Christendom of that "ungodliness" which Paul in the first chapter of the Epistle to the Romans scores as the prime sin of man; it is, in however partial or modified form it may appear, the attempt of man to be something apart from God, to stand outside the judicature of God. And so we have to do here, not with a tolerable latitude in approach but with intolerable revolt.

Any attempt to reduce the revelation of Scripture to philosophy is, moreover, a desperate one. For that very quality of God's revelation which makes it accessible to the simple and therefore makes it universal — the fact that it is the proclamation, not of ideas and of principles, but of an act and a fact — makes it highly resistant to abstraction and any kind of theoretic schematization. Fact and act are not malleable quantities; they will not lie upon the anvil of men's minds or take shape from the hammers of men's reasonings. Creation, redemption, and the eschatological consummation confront us in the banality of once-and-for-all actions of God; when we wrap them in the rawer breath of our speculation, we do not thereby make them more accessible to men who are offended at the fact; we lose them.

It goes almost without saying, therefore, that *any* attempt at selectivity over against the revelation of God in his word is doomed to failure — whether the selection be based on the subjectivity of

sentimental preference or on the subjectivity of what we at any given point in history deem to be suited to the needs of the then modern man, makes little difference.

If we Missourians "still" speak of the verbal inspiration of Scripture, we are primarily confessing the incredible miracle of a divine word spoken to sinful man and are proclaiming that that word, for all its servant's form, is of an inviolable sanctity; that if it means anything, it means everything.

The basis of the unity we seek is essentially very simple; it is what St. Paul calls "the obedience of faith." But since it is personal, it is both profound and comprehensive. The verdict of the Law strikes man in the totality of his existence, and the acquittal of the gospel transforms his whole existence. Revolt and perversion are a possibility at a thousand points, and are a real threat at every point; the obedience of faith is actualized at a thousand points and is crucial, for weal or woe and forever, at every point. Therefore the unity we seek takes creedal, confessional form, and The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod appoints a Committee on *Doctrinal* Unity. For the essentially simple act of theocentric, christocentric, bibliocentric submission in this aeon, where men are still in the flesh, needs spelling out.

Ours is a theology of wayfarers, wayfarers who, for all their triumphant and jubilant certainty of the goal, have a very realistic sense of the way they still must go, of the loose stones of uncertainty under their feet, of the crevasses to the right and to the left, and of the invisible but whipping and palpable winds of satanic assault all about them. And in this we are sure that we stand in the apostolic succession. For what is Paul's letter to the Colossians but a spelling out of what it means to call Jesus Lord, to call Him Lord wholly and without reserve, with our whole thought and will, and with all our lives, down to our eating and drinking? And what is Paul's letter to the Romans but an elaborate and detailed spelling out of that common obedience to Christ the Lord without which there can be no common work? If the Romans are to be partners in the gospel as it goes to Spain, their lives, in Paul's opinion, must be brought wholly under that gospel.

We treasure and subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions because they are a classic spelling out of the revelation given in Scripture,

a spelling out with a clarity and a profundity not given to every generation or every century of the church. They are to our minds and hearts the classic response of the church to the great gift of the inspired word. They do not, of course, make every other or further explication of the church's confession superfluous.

The practice of men and of churches, their confession in act to the faith and the hope that is in them, also belongs under the rubric of "the unity we seek." For the word of God deals with whole men; the law of God convicts them wholly; the good news of God transforms their lives wholly; the grace of God in Christ Jesus claims them inexorably and completely. The apostolic word would create men in the image of the apostles and of the Lord who sent them: "Be ye imitators of me, as I am of the Lord." Pure doctrine calls for and creates pure lives. This does not mean that we would overleap the church militant and seek to establish the church triumphant here and now, and make a "pure" church, such as cannot exist this side of the Parousia, the condition and criterion of unity. The church in this aeon is a pure church and has pure doctrine when it knows that it is made up of sinners under the forgiveness of God in Christ; it is translating pure doctrine into practice when it calls sin sin and summons the sinner to repentance, and forgives him with divine authority and without measure or restraint. The church leaves no repentant sinner outside her full fellowship; and she cannot include the man who prefers his sin to that fellowship.

That is why what is usually termed church discipline (a not too happy term, perhaps, for what Matthew 18 describes as the cumulatively benign pressure of the love of the brotherhood upon the erring brother with the intent to win him) looms large in our thinking on unity. It was no Missourian, however, but Adolf Schlatter who said that the church which has lost the power to exclude has lost all real inclusiveness also. This is the basis, to cite but one example, of our often-misunderstood witness against the fraternal orders; James has hard and penetrating words for the two-souled man, and the man who seeks to cleave himself between the cross and the deism and moralism of the fraternal orders is a two-souled man indeed.

Such, then, is the unity we seek. And we do seek unity. If we have remained aloof from ecumenical aggregations, it is because we

have not seen in them any real and divinely given opportunity for the advancement of real unity, and not because we have sought to hide our light under a bushel. One may seek unity by founding a club, loosely organized and broadly inclusive; or one may seek it by raising a standard about which men may rally. In this embattled aeon the standard would seem to be the more apt and likely figure for the search for unity.

But the military metaphor should not becloud the fact that we seek this unity in meekness, that we have sought to keep ourselves free of arrogance, of doctrinaire cocksureness, and of sectarian bigotry. We are deeply conscious of the fact that we hold this standard aloft with most frail arms and strive to hold it ever more firmly, in the certitude of faith and with a sense of eschatological responsibility. We take no particular pleasure in the role of "His majesty's loyal opposition" which current ecclesiastical history seems to have thrust upon us; and we would assure all men that we seek unity not on our terms but on our Lord's, and that that is an act of love.