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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.¹⁾ 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,

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

WARTBURG LETTERS OF LUTHER.

(Continued.)

Troubles with his printers — the *crux* of the eager author for centuries — and anxiety because of the bold course pursued by Carlstadt in his effort to overthrow the enforced celibacy of the Roman priesthood, still harass the mind of our noble exile. Also this letter is a *de facto* rebuttal of the slanders

which modern Romanists have fabricated out of a fabulous connection between Luther's marriage and Luther's "apostasy." A special interest attaches to this letter because of Luther's account of a chase in which he took part, and which he describes in his quaint style.

TO SIR GEORGE SPALATIN, MY FRIEND IN THE LORD:¹⁾

Jesus.

1. Grace! I have received from you, my dear Spalatin, the second and the third (printer's) form of my treatise on Confession. I had received these same forms, together with the first, some time ago, from Philip. But I am chagrined, and displeased to quite an unusual degree, because of the printer's work. Would to God I had not sent you any German manuscript, seeing that the printing is done in such an untidy, careless, and jumbled style,²⁾ not to mention the bad types and the bad paper! That printer John is a John-a-dreams who sticks to his old ruts.³⁾

2. By all means see to it, I pray, that he does not get the German Postils to print, but keep all the manuscript that I have so far sent from him and return it to me, that I may send it to another printer. For of what use is all my labor on these manuscripts, if his untidy and inaccurate work will

1) The original of this letter is found in the General Archives of Anhalt. It is published in Aurifaber, Vol. I, fol. 349; in De Wette, Vol. II, p. 41, and in the Erlangen Correspondence, Vol. III, p. 217. — St. L. Ed. 15, 2521 ff.

2) The treatise to which Luther refers was translated for the THEOLOGICAL QUARTERLY (Vol. 10, pp. 185 ff.) by Prof. Kruse. For this translation the St. Louis edition was available. What labor the removal of the bungling work of the Wittenberg, Walch, and Erlangen editions in the numbering of divisions and paragraphs of this treatise had caused him, Prof. Hoppe tells in Vol. 19, col. 838, note 2.

3) The common saying, "*Hans in eodem*," meaning an incorrigible person, has been changed by Luther to "*Johannes in eodem tempore*," meaning: Johnny keeps his own time, or clings to his habits; you cannot make him do better. — De Wette held that the printer in question was Luft, but later research has shown that it was Gruenberg. See St. L. Ed. 19, p. 38.

cause other printers even to increase his errors? I should not like to have postils such as these committed against the Gospels and Epistles;⁴⁾ it is better they should be concealed than published in this style. This is the reason, too, why I am not sending you any more copy now, although I have nearly ten large sheets on this subject ready. Nor shall I send any more at all, until I have learned that these filthy mercenaries, in printing books, regard their own profit less than the advantage of the readers.

3. For these printers seem to think: We are satisfied if we make money; let the readers see how they get along with our books.—Philip has sent me three sheets of the treatise against Latomus, with which I am greatly pleased.

4. Oh, how I would like to see Carlstadt make an effort to refute celibacy with apter texts of Scripture. I am afraid he will bring himself and us into ill repute. For what sort of interpretation of Scripture, do you think, is this, *viz.*, that “to give your seed to Moloch” means to become polluted by seminal emission? Why, everybody knows that “seed” in that passage means children or offspring, as is shown by Ps. 37, 25. 28 and John 8, 33. Why does he not make use of the terms of Scripture, which names this vice effeminacy (*mollitiam*) and uncleanness, as the apostle usually does (1 Cor. 6, 9; Gal. 5, 19)? And now he is even perverting the passage in Timothy concerning the widows that are to be rejected, by applying it to celibates.⁵⁾ His opponent will in many ways successfully refute this argument.

5. It is an excellent subject that he has taken up, and a very good enterprise; but I wish he would also carry it forward to success in an excellent and accomplished manner. For you see how necessary it is that we write with great clearness

4) “Ich moechte nicht, dass man sich nach diesem Exempel an den Evangelien und Episteln versuendige.”

5) For a public disputation to be held June 21, 1521, Carlstadt had published seven theses. The first thesis read as follows: “As we reject the younger widows, so also monks and young unmarried priests.”

and by putting forward our best strength, because our opponents spurn even our clearest and most striking arguments. How much more ought we who are "a spectacle unto the world," 1 Cor. 4; 9, to exercise care that ours be "sound speech that cannot be condemned," as Paul teaches. (Tit. 2, 8.)

6. It may be that I am worrying about things that do not concern me, but they will be things that concern me if he gains his purpose. For is it not exceedingly dangerous to instigate such a multitude of celibates to marry by such unreliable and uncertain passages of Scripture, and thus bring upon them later continuous afflictions of conscience, worse than those which they suffer now? I, too, desire to see celibates free to marry, as the Gospel would have them to be, but I am not sufficiently clear in my mind yet how to go about this matter. But these remarks of mine are useless; perhaps he does not wish to be checked in his course, and we will have to let him have his way.

7. I am sending you, as you had requested, a brief explanation of the passage in John.⁶ It will be your business to insert it in a proper place. Though I have not the entire sermon in my memory, I think, however, that I have quite abundantly explained this matter before, and perhaps what I send at present is superfluous and was not needed at all.

8. Do not grieve because I suffer exile. I do not care where I stay; if I only do not prove a burden and molestation to these people in the long run. For I do not like to see any one burdened on my account. I have a certain belief, however, that I am staying here by order and at the expense of our prince. If it were not so, and I knew that I am consuming the substance of this gentleman,⁷ I should not remain here an

6) The letter to Melancthon of August 5 (see THEOL. QUARTERLY 13, 42) shows that Spalatin had asked Luther for a fuller explanation of John 20, 22 f. The explanation was inserted in the Sermon on Confession, in §§ 63—68 of the Second Part. (St. L. Ed. 19, 833, translated in THEOL. QUARTERLY 11, 28—31.)

7) Count Hans von Berlepsch, the keeper of Castle Wartburg.

hour, although he ministers gladly and cheerfully to all my wants.

9. If anybody's goods are to be wasted, you know, it ought to be the goods of princes, because to be a prince, and not to be something of a robber, is not possible, or hardly possible; and the greater the prince, the greater his robberies will have to be. You had better give me certain information about this matter. For I can learn nothing from this kind gentleman, except that he provides for me from the prince's purse. But it is a trait of mine to fear that I am a burden to people, when perhaps I am not a burden; and it is proper for a generous person to have such a fear.

10. Last Monday (August 12) I went hunting for two days, in order to get acquainted with the bitter-sweet pastime of heroes. We caught two rabbits and a few miserable quails. Truly, this is a proper occupation for idle people! Even amid the traps and dogs I was engaged in theological meditation, and while the outward aspect of those things gave me much pleasure, I felt a great and painful compassion because of the mystery hidden in those things. For what else is all this than an imagery of the devil who pursues and hunts poor little animals with his dogs, the wicked teachers? This extremely sad interpretation of the allegory, which applies the figure of the hunt to the souls of simple believers, was readily suggested to me.

11. I even hit upon a more horrible interpretation of the allegory. By my effort we had saved the life of one poor rabbit; I had wrapped it in a sleeve of my coat, and had gone away for a moment. In the meantime the dogs had found the poor rabbit, had broken its right hind leg through the coat, and had killed it by strangling. Thus the pope and Satan are raging so fiercely as to destroy even the souls of such as had been saved, and they do not mind my efforts at all.

12. Yes, I am tired of this hunt; I consider it more enjoyable to hunt bears, wolves, boars, foxes, and wicked teachers of that caliber, and to run them through with spears and

arrows. However, I take comfort in the reflection that my allegorical interpretation comes very close to salvation; for when rabbits and innocent animals are caught by men, that is an altogether different matter than when they are caught by bears, wolves, and robber falcons, and by bishops and theologians who are like these, because it means that when souls are caught by the latter they are swallowed up by hell, but when caught by the former, they are received into heaven.

13. These things I wished to signify to you in this letter in a playful vein, in order that you eaters of venison at court may know that you will be brought into paradise like game which Christ, the best huntsman, could hardly catch and keep with much effort. There is a (higher) chase exhibited to you while you are engaged in the sport of your chase.

14. I have changed my mind, and am sending the rest of the manuscript for the Postils, because I happened to think that it might not be possible to postpone or delay this business, in case you have already begun to print what I sent you. I would, however, like to see the printing done in a large quarto form and with Lotther's types, because it is going to be a large book. I shall divide it according to the four seasons, quarter by quarter, so as not to have it become too cumbersome and dear.

15. But my wishes are useless, because not that which I wish will be done, but what people at your end will choose to do. No matter what is done, however, see to it, I pray, that my manuscripts are preserved in good order, or returned to me. I know what sort of a devil is after them. I shall feel surprised to see my *Magnificat* published at last. Fare well. Pray for me.

On the Festival of the Assumption of Mary (August 15),
1521. MARTIN LUTHER.

The letter which we offer now is a most important document in the history of the Reformation. Through vilifications of Rome, extending through four centuries, Luther has been represented as a reckless religious dare-devil, and a spiritual

mountebank, who would adopt any course of action that promised him success. To thoughtful minds it has never been easy to believe this; for the Lutheran Reformation has such strong elements of truth and righteousness, and the Creed which sprang from those battles with Rome four centuries ago shines with such a brilliant luster of Scripturalness and apostolicity, that even the layman of average intelligence is forced to confess: If Luther, who produced these things, was the scoundrel that the popes say he was, he was a blessed scoundrel.—In this letter of September 9, 1521, posterity can see the mind of Luther wrestling with an ethical question which strikes at the tap-root of the pope's power. A revolutionary would have made short work of monasteries and monastic vows—and of men's consciences. Luther is more concerned about the rule of God's Word in the hearts of men than about the overthrow of the seminaries and hotbeds of papism.

TO PHILIP MELANCHTHON.¹⁾

Jesus.

I am greatly pleased with your doctrinal compend.²⁾ My (mental) poverty is so great, compared with your wealth, that I have no criticism to offer. Continue by all means, and do what you think best. I should like to be with you, in order to reach some definite conclusion in the matter of vows. It is very unsatisfactory to argue this point in our letters; for, as a rule, one correspondent writes a great deal about what the other does not need to be told at all, and omits the main question, as happened to us on the subject of Confession. If possible, I shall arrange for a secret meeting with you at some place, because this matter is weighing on my mind. Meanwhile I shall indulge in some useless prattle about it.

1) This letter is found, in Latin, in Cod. Jen. b, f. 11; in Aurifaber's collection, Vol. I, fol. 351 b, and in De Wette's, Vol. II, 45. Prof. Hoppe has rendered the letter in German from De Wette's text in St. L. Ed. 19, 1794 ff.

2) Melanchthon's *Loci Theologici*, the first Lutheran Dogmatics.

You write that you insist on your view, that a vow which it is impossible to keep must be canceled, lest it be kept with sin to the party trying to keep it. Pray, is not that stating the matter quite unintelligibly? You talk as if you would have a vow canceled for the reason that it is impossible to keep it. By the same argument you could be compelled to grant that the divine commandments must be abolished.

Or does it make a difference that the commandments were imposed on us, while the vow was freely assumed by us? That would only prove that the vow must be abolished, not because it is impossible to keep it, but because it has been freely assumed. However, this matter, which was freely assumed, is become a law of God; for Scripture says: "Perform your vows." Do not follow reason, but Scripture, in this matter, and abolish vows *a priori*, not *a posteriori*; that is, refute the law of vows and their ordinance, as I am struggling to do. I care nothing whether a vow can be kept or not; you cannot prove anything to me that way; for in that way you might also prove that married people may separate if they cannot agree with one another. In my judgment all seems to depend on the question whether the vow is valid or not.

Your doctrinal compend states, with a good deal of propriety, that the bondage of vows is foreign to the Gospel and hostile to the bondage of the spirit. But we are arguing the question of vows, not of the bondage of vows. For you know what liberty and bondage in this matter means, and where it is found: not in the vows, but in the spirit. For a free man can, with the Apostle Paul, submit to all laws and to every dominion, as St. Bernard and others who were true monks (*feliciter religiosi*) did when they submitted to vows.

For this, too, is part of the evangelical liberty, that we may submit to vows and laws. The Law of God, says the apostle, is not of faith, nor is it altogether of liberty and contrary to the Gospel; nevertheless, we live freely under the Law. Many persons have freely served under the bondage of their vows; otherwise your cogent syllogism would be perfect: Whatsoever

is contrary to Gospel liberty is under the everlasting curse and must be abolished. Observing vows is of that nature. Therefore, etc. Oh, what a happy and desirable conclusion!

How now? No law whatever, nor any bondage, has been abolished for the reason that they are harmful and contrary, but because they are to be free. Yea, all laws have been confirmed, for by faith we establish the Law. For this reason also the law of vows is consistent with the liberty of the Gospel, yea, is confirmed by the same.

What I wrote you in my former letter did not quite satisfy me, excepting the passage in 1 Tim. 5 (v. 12), where Paul condemns the widows who have fallen from faith. But I wanted to give you an opportunity to direct your attention to the root of the matter, that is, to the law of vows, not to the fruits, or effects, of the law. I shall write you what progress I have made in this matter.

I hold that we cannot make use of any other advice in this matter than that which we see Paul apply in his Epistle to the Galatians, and everywhere, for the canceling of vows. Don't you think that the Galatians accepted circumcision with a sincere heart, imagining that they were serving God, and that they were under obligation to do so? Did they not submit to the Law for God's sake, and offer themselves up to God just as a person makes an offering of himself to God by taking the monastic vows? But what argument does Paul employ to get them to forsake their position? He does not argue the point that they had submitted to the Law, but that they had submitted to it with a slavish conscience, which he declares to be a most wicked thing, contrary to the grace of Christ and His Spirit.

It seems to me that we should confidently do the same thing in this matter, and should reduce our thesis to the following syllogism: A person living in a condition of mind that is contrary to evangelical liberty, must be made free, and his vow shall be accursed. Now, a person who takes a vow, intending to obtain salvation or righteousness by his vow, is

living in such a condition of mind. Therefore, etc. However, since nearly the entire vast multitude of those who take vows do so with a mind as afore described, it is manifest that their vows are wicked, sacrilegious, and contrary to the Gospel, and, hence, should be utterly abolished and placed under the curse.

How many, do you think, would have taken a vow if they had known that they would obtain neither righteousness nor salvation by their vow? Hence, nearly all of them are captives to their slavish conscience; yea, they take their vow, hoping that their vow may please God, and that they may become righteous and be saved. What else, they say, would I want to do in the monastery? Now, then, since this is their intention in taking the vow, their declaration means nothing else than this: Behold, O God, I vow to Thee to spend my whole life in wickedness and idolatry. For they vow to become good by their own works, and do not give the least thought to justifying faith. Now, since this error does not occur in the temporal affairs of a person; since, moreover, lawful marriages are broken up on account of it; since, lastly, it is altogether intolerable, because the person thus taking the vow sins against his own soul and works in the interest of wickedness and in opposition to godliness: therefore, this error must be utterly abolished.

But how is it to be abolished, unless such vows are either canceled, or taken afresh, that is, by submitting to the vow in a spirit of liberty? What would you say if wicked Manasseh, pretending to follow the example of Abraham, whose liberty he did not possess, had vowed to offer his son to God by the idol Moloch, but had not executed his vow if he had known that he was committing a wicked and sacrilegious act?

Verily, then, people taking such vows do not render their vow to the living God, but to the lie and idol of their own heart; therefore, they deserve the severest blame for their vows, and must not be told at all that they are under obligation to keep them. Surely, if I had known this at the time I took my vow, I should never have rendered it. I am not

certain, however, what was in my mind when I took the vow. I was forced, rather than drawn, into it; God so willed it. I fear that I, too, took the vow in a wicked and sacrilegious manner.

I hold, then, that we must not only advise, but command, our Galatians that they must not hesitate to trample their vows under foot, and to crush them on account of their wickedness and blasphemy; and that they must not allow the fact to worry them that they were meantime bewitched and fooled with the (so-called) holy orders. Especially such persons must be given the liberty to do this, yea, must of necessity do this, who took their vows when they were young people or children. For these have not learned as yet what faith or the Law is, and go into these snares like foolish birds. For this reason they should be put at liberty, and reprimanded for their wantonness and folly.

Again, there can be no other rule set up in this case by which we may know which persons have taken their vows in this sacrilegious mind, but we must leave the matter to their own conscience, as we do in every other good work. For who but the spirit of man that is in him could know with what intention he takes a vow or does a good work, since any work of the Law or the bondage of a vow is judged, not by the work itself, but by the condition of the heart? Thus He who proves the spirit, and has commanded us to do likewise, has bidden us do.

I remember that my father was very indignant when I had taken my vow, and even after he had acquiesced in my action, I had to take this reproof from him: Would to God that it was not a delusion of the devil! This remark took root in my heart so firmly that I do not recollect having heard from him anything that my memory holds as tenaciously. I have the impression that, although a long time had passed meanwhile, God addressed me as from a distance by the mouth of my father for my reproof and admonition.

With this reason for the canceling, or at least for the renewal, of all vows, I should rest satisfied; beyond this I shall

not try to do anything, and rest the case here, because it is quite manifest that such vows, being contrary to faith and the Gospel, because they are the worst kind of idolatry, are properly taken and kept when they are kept with a mind such as I have described. However, when you have taken the vow with a free and evangelical mind, and have voluntarily made yourself a servant, it is fair that you keep and perform your vow. But I would not like to claim that a person of evangelical mind ever would attempt, or has attempted, to take the vow thus, unless it was through deception.

I send you a treatise on this subject.³⁾ If you wish to publish it, I shall add brief explanations, and dedicate it to the church at Wittenberg. For I hold that this view, which rests plainly and quite firmly on Scripture, can bear the light of publicity. For of what use is it to argue against this view with what is said in the law about vows?

There remains only the passage of Paul concerning widows that have received their sentence. I shall not grant that this passage is opposed to our view of the Law and of faith, nor shall I make any concessions because of this passage, but shall rather confess that the passage is dark, or take this to be its meaning, *viz.*, that those widows took their vow in the liberty of their faith, which had then been published in Asia a short time before, and which Demas and Phygellus and all in Asia forsook. But ours is a pagan people who have never been taught a single point in the faith. Write me what your opinion and judgment in this matter is. For I imagine these have long been very trite subjects to you.

The folly of the vows is also shown in this, that they obligate to poverty and obedience. These things are either fictitious, or they were prescribed for children receiving their first instruction, so that this whole business of taking vows

3) "Dr. Martin Luther's Brief Conclusions regarding Monastic Vows and the Monastic Life." St. L. Ed. 19, 1480 ff. This treatise was probably published before the end of 1521, in several independent prints, both Latin and German. The Latin editions contain the remark in the title, that the treatise is "addressed to the bishops and deacons of the church at Wittenberg."

seems to have been a sort of discipline for children during their young life. Nowadays men who ought to serve others by works of love take these vows, and even make them perpetual vows.

How now? Am I become free myself, and have I ceased being a monk? I hope you are not imagining that you act the part of Demea to me, and foist upon this Mitio some Sos-trata,⁴⁾ in order to take revenge on me for having given you a wife, as they say. But I shall take good care that you may not succeed.

Concerning the sin against the Holy Ghost, I shall not say anything, because you are more learned and spiritual than I. However, for the expression "burn," which you do not want me to weaken, I shall render a weaker term, because I believe that the word signifies only a very great heat of desire. For you know that he speaks of pollutions, and calls them uncleanness. And in 2 Cor. 11, 29 he says: "Who is offended, and I burn not?" A stronger "burning" than this you will find it difficult to prove.

Meanwhile I shall meditate on the sin of blasphemy. For it is only this that Christ declares to be the sin against the Holy Ghost, and unforgiven. It is evident that neither Peter nor Paul had committed this sin. I still believe, with the same simplicity as that on which you base, that there is a kind of sin which, before other sins, is irremissible, and which John terms the sin unto death, and Paul heresy, Tit. 3, 10 f.

Fare well. Pray for me. I have so little compassion on you that I wish you were burdened ten times more than you are, because, though often warned not to burden yourself with so many tasks, you will not listen, and despise all faithful warnings. The time will come when it will be too late, and you will uselessly condemn the foolish zeal with which you are eager to bear all burdens alone, just as if you were made of iron or stone.

From my desert, on the Day of the Birth of Mary, 1521.

4) These names represent characters in Terence's play *Adelphi*.