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# Editorial ✦

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## NONNEGOTIABLES IN ECUMENICAL RELATIONS

One of the least-known chapters in the history of the Lutheran Reformation is the story of the eventual fate of Lutheranism in central Europe. In the last half of the 16th century large portions of what today is known as Czechoslovakia were almost solidly Lutheran. Today few vestiges of Lutheranism remain except in Slovakia, where about 20 percent of the population calls itself Lutheran. The explanation of this loss is provided in this issue by Dr. Marianka Fousek of Duke University, Durham, North Carolina. Her account makes available a considerable amount of material that is otherwise inaccessible. The story of the fate of Lutheranism in central Europe is more than an account of historical interest; it is also a chapter in the history of interconfessional relations that all churches might be well-advised to study today.

In a nutshell, the demise of Lutheranism in Czechoslovakia can be attributed to two factors. One factor was the theological gutting of a truly Lutheran confession in the interest of union with the Reformed and with a theologically indifferent *Unitas Fratrum*. The other factor was the inept politicking by the Lutherans of Czechoslovakia, which becomes a modern illustration of the Biblical caution against putting too much confidence in the strength of a horse or in the legs of a man. But the first factor may well have been the more important one.

This pattern of compromise in which the numerically superior Lutherans sold their confessional birthright to the Reformed was repeated several other times in the century after the Reformation. The Lutheran theologians failed to recognize the nonnegotiable elements in their system of doctrine. Issues concerning the personal union in Jesus Christ, the sacraments, and the new life in Christ were obscured or confused, and then compromise arguments like the *Consensus of Sandomierz* (1570), the various editions of the *Bohemian Confession*, and the *Decree of Charenton* (1631) became possible. Lutheran leaders failed to understand that true ecumenicity can develop only when there is a clear recognition and appreciation of crucial theological differences and when each party asserts frankly the issues which it considers to be nonnegotiable in the light of God's Word and Biblically-grounded confessions.

Again today there is the same temptation for Lutherans to sell out the distinctively Lutheran understandings in the interest of wider ecumenical contacts. Perhaps something in our evangelical nature makes us prone to do this. There is a place for sharp-edged Lutheran thinking in the church today, just as there was in the 17th century.

Perhaps this article can also help us appreciate the history and present stance of the Synod of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (the Slovak Synod). Their tradition of devout and loyal adherence to the Lutheran religion in the face of both Reformed pressures and counterreformatory persecution has given them continuing determination to preserve the best in their own tradition.

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