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Editorial ✠

WHAT IS LUTHERAN TODAY?

Denominational churches appear to be marked by an interesting confessional rhythm. The one pattern is that of “withdrawal,” in which the confessional basis becomes increasingly narrow until the Biblical message may actually be officially excluded from its preaching and teaching. If this rhythm runs its full course, death must be the result. The other rhythm is that of “return,” in which the confessional basis of the denomination becomes increasingly broad. It may even go so far beyond Scriptural teaching that the denomination will find room for a “death of God” theologian in its pulpit. (See the *Theological Observer* in this issue.)

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is now caught up in a rhythm of return after a period of cultural and theological withdrawal. This rhythm was officially underscored when delegates at the 1965 Detroit convention of this body affirmed that the Lutheran Church was a confessional movement within Christianity. This affirmation is a call to take the Lutheran Confessions very seriously, just because we have committed ourselves to the rhythm of return.

This issue observes the 449th anniversary of the posting of the Ninety-five Theses by suggesting several positions that are characteristically Lutheran and must be preserved in this time of return to the mainstream of Christianity.

Heinz Bluhm directs our attention to the centrality of Luther's new understanding of God's righteousness, or justice, as Bluhm prefers to call it. He maintains that the earliest written indication that Luther has taken a radically new theological position is to be found in *The Seven Penitential Psalms* of 1517.

Werner Kümmel of the University of Marburg combs Luther's prefaces to the New Testament to demonstrate the Reformer's insistence on the centrality of Jesus Christ and on the authority that apostolic preaching derived from the fact that it witnessed to the Christ. Luther's thesis that there are theological contradictions in the canonical writings of the New Testament has been rejected by many scholars, and we do not find ourselves convinced by Kümmel's similar thesis, either. The incisive description of Luther's pastoral understanding of the nature of faith gives the article a value that far outweighs the few passages with which many readers may not agree.

The round table review of *Christian Beliefs and Anti-Semitism* is an implied reminder to all of us to affirm the dignity of every person. Many Lutherans have homework to do in this crucial area of Gospel living.

The report from Japan on the declaration of fellowship between the Japan Evangelical Lutheran Church and the Nihon Ruteru Kyodan reflects Luther's understanding of the unity of the church. This understanding, crystallized in Paul's letter to the Ephesians, has been the single most influential factor in the rhythm of return into which the Holy Spirit has impelled almost all denominations today.

This issue is unified, then, by a call to confidence, to confidence in the Christ as

Lord of the church and the only Savior of those who believe. This call to confident return is timely, for there are those who oppose the increased tempo of the ecumenical movement because they are fearful. It is a call to affirm full faith in Jesus Christ, with all unnecessary rational props swept aside. It is a call to affirm the authority and reliability of the apostolic Scriptures because they witness to Him. It is a call to follow His spirit with the same reckless determination that characterized the man who posted the Ninety-five Theses on the 31st of this month.

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