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Editorial ✦

TOWARD A RECOVERY OF "EVANGELICAL"

Justification by grace through faith constitutes the unifying theme of this issue. Profs. Robert Bertram and George Hoyer treat the topic from different points of view. Bertram's paper was originally delivered to an international group of army officers in Europe; Hoyer spoke to a group of American architects in Kansas! The warm reception accorded both papers is evidence of the continuing relevance of this Lutheran shibboleth.

This formulation, justification by grace through faith, centers attention on the redeeming action of God in Jesus Christ. Thus it is an evangelical summary. When the Lutheran World Federation met at Helsinki in 1963, theologians worked with this formula and tried to interpret it so that it could still speak to the questions of contemporary human beings. Their efforts were not wholly successful, and the debate reveals cleavages among the theologians involved. We understand that a similar effort at formulating this pivotal doctrine was made a few years ago at a free conference of conservative Lutherans in this country, and that that effort likewise failed. The issue before the Lutheran Church is: What understanding of this ancient formula will make it a living formulation for today? To put the question in this way is to expose the nerve end of any Lutheran. But it is before us, and it demands resolution.

In the first issue of *Context*, the theological journal edited by the faculty of the new Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, James Scherer suggests that Lutheranism is facing an identity crisis today. We believe he is right. He argues that Lutheranism has faced this kind of crisis at several points in its history. It was, for example, a crisis of the evangelical understanding of the Scriptures and of God's purposes with man that brought the Lutheran Church into being as a discrete confessional movement. There were other crises, but Scherer, professor of missions, stresses the crisis occasioned by the 19th-century mission impact on Lutheranism. He is — although we also put a few words into his mouth here — arguing that certain understandings developed of the meaning of evangelical, of justification by grace through faith, of church and the meaning of confession, understandings that are different from those of the 16th century and which may or may not be adequate for the present crisis.

Scherer makes a point that deserves consideration. The difficulties at Helsinki, which some critics wrote off as another illustration of what happens when the old moorings are abandoned, are symptomatic of this identity crisis. How does "justification by faith" relate to the historical framework in which all theological questions are being posed today? What room does it allow for the New Testament emphasis on the kingdom of God? What motivation does it provide for social action or the healing ministry of the church? What does it say about the relation between the church and contemporary culture? In this issue the two major articles suggest ways in which justification by grace

through faith can be related to the lives of military men and to those who try to shape one aspect of culture. But these are only first steps. Homework remains to be done.

Some answers have already been proposed. One group of Lutheran theologians argue that the traditional understanding of nature and grace is neither Biblical nor relevant and that, therefore, the 19th-century understanding of "justification by faith," which was built on these prior premises, is also irrelevant to the full understanding of the Biblical task of the church today. Others argue that the affirmation of the inerrancy of Scripture is a crucial first step toward resolving the present identity crisis (crisis is not our favorite word, but it's the in-word today, apparently). Scherer calls for a rediscovery of the meaning of "evangelical," in the powerful sense that Martin Luther understood it. To us it seems that this is the primary theological challenge facing Lutheranism today. There is widespread confusion on this term. What is the "evangelical" understanding of the authority of the Scriptures? of the Church? of church fellowship? of the Christian's daily walk? of church discipline, especially in a period of fellowship proposals? We need to reclaim the word and make it once again the hallmark of Lutheranism.

The present discussions between members of The American Lutheran Church and The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod are structured about the meaning of evangelical. These discussions promise to be beneficial to members of both bodies. The prospect of 5 million American Lutherans, 14,000 Lutheran pastors, and 7,000 parochial teachers united in a working understanding of the meaning of evangelical is exciting. The impact of this united theological understanding on the lives of people is hard to calculate.

If this common understanding of the meaning of evangelical is kept as the primary goal in the intersynodical discussions, the issues will be seen in proper perspective. Those involved will demand an answer to the fundamental question, Do we all preach the Gospel and live according to a pure understanding of it? Secondary importance will be assigned to the question, Are there differences in practices among us? Both church bodies have already reached the conclusion publicly that they understand the Gospel in the same way. This public agreement forces another question to the fore, How serious are we about theology? After the 1962 Cleveland convention of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, a writer in the *Christian Century* observed that if the Missouri Synod ever begins to take its vaunted theology seriously, it will carry American Lutheranism and some of American Christianity along with it. This observation is correct. It is encouraging to see that in recent years to an increasing degree the Synod's members have changed their ways of thinking and living because they have taken theology seriously. Each change has created practical problems for individuals, but all the changes have been or are in the process of being resolved. Consider the joint Lutheran seminaries that have come into existence in many mission fields as well as in Canada. Look at the progress (and the frustrating failures) in student work. When we became aware of our

unity in the Gospel with non-Missourians, we also made the pleasant discovery that practical problems could be worked out.

The present discussion about the meaning of justification by grace through faith and the contemporary fellowship proposals are taking place in a religious context so different from previous decades that new answers must be provided. We do face a crisis of Lutheran identity, similar to those faced in the 16th, 17th and 19th centuries. Changing cultural contexts demand different answers. Some will solve this tension, which can be excruciating, by affirming in a literal way the answers of a previous generation or a previous century. This is fatal, as the history of religions makes abundantly clear. Some will throw the baby out with the bath water, as happens in every time of identity crisis. Such answers betray either fear or petulance. Nor does the answer lie somewhere between these two, a lukewarm amalgam of both.

The true answer lies in a concerted effort to recover the Biblical understanding of what it means to be evangelical in theology and in life. The reformers' answers provide invaluable counsel and experience. Again and again the pre-Reformation church wrestled with the same problem in a variety of disguises. The Biblical material offers a rich variety of descriptions. The resources available to the Lutheran Church today are more than adequate to the assignment. Excellent beginnings have been made in our own circles by the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, by professors in the classroom and conference lectures, and particularly by pastors and the people of God who usually have a better feel for the meaning of "evangelical" than their religious training may have on occasion given them. The answers will be forthcoming — perhaps in the next 18 months!

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