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Theological Observer

REACTIONS TO THE OFFICIAL RESULTS OF INTER-LUTHERAN (LCUSA) THEOLOGICAL DISCUSSIONS SINCE 1972

Mere Lutheran union in America or even globally is small change in the lofty perspectives of Pastor Richard Neuhaus' *Forum Letter*, fervently heralding the ecumenical millenium Right Now if not sooner. Still, Neuhaus has generally been benignly tolerant of LCUSA, so long at least as that body seemed destined to herd the maverick LC-MS safely into the ecumenical corral. But now something has gone very wrong, and *Forum Letter* does not like it a bit. "Lutheran Differences Reinforced," grumbled its leading caption for June 30. The reference was to a report issued by LCUSA's Theological Studies Division on official inter-synodical discussions held between 1972 and 1977. The report is entitled, "The Function of Doctrine and Theology in Light of the Unity of the Church" (FODT for short). It is worthy of very careful study. Every pastor in the ALC, the LCA, and the LC-MS should have received a copy.

The reason for Neuhaus' displeasure is curious. He does not challenge the veracity of the report. What offends him, it appears, is not that differences between the churches are misstated, but the very fact that they are stated at all. To paraphrase a famous epigram: "How odd of FODT to vent dissent"! Such is Neuhaus' confidence in the theology of the ALC and the LCA that he seems to take it for granted that a public ventilation of that theology by its own practitioners will tend to reinforce "the suspicions and arguments against ALC and LCA that Preus' party has always nurtured In terms of rehabilitating stereotypes, the present document is an unquestionable success."

Anyone rushing headlong into the FODT document itself, however, his appetite whetted by Neuhaus' piquant suggestions, may soon find himself yawning. That would be a mistake. Bureaucratic committee reports simply are a *genre* very different from the racy readability of *Forum Letter*. One must make due allowances for the difference if one is to gauge the true import of the calm surface prose. One will look in vain in such documents for vulgar excitement, e.g., "The place is on fire; everybody out!" To catch such a message one needs to keep one's eyes open for judicious understatements like, "General evacuation may indeed be indicated, should responsible efforts to control the present combustion prove only marginally effective."

Given the limitations of the accepted dialogical idiom—and without a certain disciplined restraint fruitful controversial discussions would not be possible at all—the FODT report is extraordinarily candid and revealing. It frankly admits, for instance, that unlike the Missouri Synod's spokesmen, ALC and LCA representatives generally favoured the historical-critical approach to Scripture. This is explicitly acknowledged to involve the issue of "*the legitimacy of affirming the existence of discrepancies, contradictions, mistaken notions, or diverse theologies within the Scriptures*" (pp. 7-8; emphases added). Yes, "diverse theologies"! In other words, there is no such thing as *Christian doctrine*—only Pauline, Johannine, Lucan, etc. "theologies"! Neuhaus of course has known this all along: "Basically, there are no surprises," he says, "and that is not surprising." Why then begrudge Lutheranism a "full public disclosure," as we say nowadays, of such non-surprises?

One can only describe as a total lapse from objectivity Neuhaus' interpretation-in-a-nutshell: "The [FODT] document makes explicit what it

admits everyone expected in advance, that Missouri dissents from the understanding of doctrine, theology, and the Church that prevails in two-thirds of American Lutheranism." This deft public relations projection defies the dogmatic, theological realities. It suggests the existence of a more or less stable and standard US Lutheran "understanding of doctrine, theology, and the Church," unfairly torpedoed, however, by a petulant Missouri Synod stubbornly pursuing its own eccentric ways. But what if the real facts are altogether different? What if it could be shown that the real problem is not Missouri's dissent from "two-thirds of American Lutheranism" but the latter's dissent from the recognised criteria or standards of Lutheranism? As it happens, one need not go beyond the FODT report itself to make this very point. Since the issue is one of great moment, the relevant wording of the Report should be carefully noted, with due realization that the formulation before us is not some partisan "Missourian" confection but was stipulated to by official representatives of all three church-bodies under the auspices of the Division of Theological Studies of LCUSA (p. 8):

Representatives of the LCMS emphasize that the entire doctrinal content of the Lutheran confessional writings, including the implications of confessional statements dealing with the nature and interpretation of Holy Scripture, is accepted and remains valid today because it is drawn from the Word of God—that is, because it is a faithful exposition of Holy Scripture. On the other hand, some representatives of the other two church bodies, while affirming their continuing commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ as witnessed to in the Lutheran confessional writings, tend to emphasize the historical character of those writings and to maintain the possibility of dissent from confessional positions that do not deal directly with the gospel itself, such as some aspects of the confessional positions on the fall of humanity into sin and the nature and interpretation of Holy Scripture.

If "two-thirds of American Lutheranism" really do in principle defend dissent from the doctrinal content of the Lutheran Confessions on such issues as the very nature of Holy Scripture and the fall into sin (no doubt the historicity of Genesis in general and of Adam in particular is the main sticking point here), then surely this cannot simply be waved aside as "not surprising"! At the very least we should then hear no more of the glib propaganda untruth that while all parties accept and subscribe to "the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions," the problem is that Missouri insists on yet other documents in addition to these, and that it is these peculiarly Missourian specialities which are causing all the trouble.

Neuhaus notes that by no means all Missouri Synod pastors or people agree with their Synod's official stand. Sad to say, he is right on this score, although his numbers are inflated. Genuinely informed opponents of the Missouri Synod's official doctrinal position are difficult to find. In most cases Missourians who imagine themselves to be opposed to their Synod turn out to be simply well-meaning, conservative Lutherans whose normal human sympathies have been taken advantage of. But of the real doctrinal issues they are blissfully innocent. This deplorable spectacle attests the success of ELIMAELC'S well-nigh cynical strategy of avoiding and evading a thorough ventilation of the precise theological matters in dispute, and of concentrating instead on endless sob stories about alleged injustices with which to exploit Christian sentiments.

That *Forum Letter* should overestimate the dissent within Missouri is not really surprising. But why is there no suggestion at all of any internal dissent from the "prevail [ing]" direction of the other "two thirds of American Lutheranism," the ALC and LCA? Certainly anyone who knows enough about

the situation not to be surprised at the FODT report must realize that at any rate the radicalized theologians taking part in the LCUSA talks do not by any stretch of the imagination represent the rank and file clergy, not to mention the laity, of the ALC and the LCA. The tragic chasm between pulpit and lecture-hall, pastors and professors, church and seminary, is after all a characteristic curse bequeathed to theology in and through historical criticism. One cannot permanently cultivate the divine covenant of Christ in the parishes and the legacy of the Rationalist Enlightenment in the seminaries. Nor can such church-destroying schizophrenia be conjured away with "practical" trickeries, scholarly obscurities, or liturgical escapisms. Returning now to the FODT report, let us consider a paragraph like the one on page 6:

The ALC and LCA representatives also affirm the reliability and truthfulness of the Scriptures, but they link those characteristics with the purpose of the Scriptures—their gospel-bearing function. This view sees the Scriptures as completely reliable in communicating all the promises of God to humankind, not to the exclusion of history but through it. The concern is that this central message of the Scriptures not be clouded, called into question, or confused in its application by creating false tests of faith.

There can be little doubt that this kind of language, standing by itself, would win overwhelming votes of confidence, and not only in the ALC and the LCA but also in the Missouri Synod. But now let us add a bit of context. The immediately preceding paragraph of FODT reads as follows (p. 5):

The LCMS representatives argue that a less-than-complete commitment to the Scriptures, an uncertainty about their truthfulness, a hesitancy or disagreement with regard to some of their contents, will endanger the proclamation of the gospel. The question is not simply how far the Scriptures should be trusted in what they say about Christ, but really whether the Christ we confess is the Christ of Scripture or a Christ constructed according to some human standard.

If *this* is the context—more precisely: the alternative—then the ALC/LCA formulation becomes considerably more dubious. An affirmation of the "reliability and truthfulness of the Scriptures," which when decoded turns out to mean something more akin to "less-than-complete commitment to the Scriptures, an uncertainty about their truthfulness, a hesitancy or disagreement with regard to some of their contents," is bound to seem somehow fraudulent, and not only to Missourians. The broader ecclesiastical context moreover is distinctly ominous. LCA theologian Philip Hefner, for example, was able to state in a recent LWF-sponsored study that there is for his church "a certain authority in modern thought *per se*," hence a "dual authority of doctrine and modern thinking," with the "proper relation of the two . . . as yet an unresolved problem."¹

The final sentence of the FODT paragraph under consideration states: "The concern is that this central message of the Scriptures not be clouded, called into question, or confused in its application by creating false tests of faith." (FODT, p. 6). A Christ-centered approach to Scripture is, to be sure, a deeply Lutheran attitude. But what are these "false tests of faith"? A wide variety of answers is possible here. For example, the official publication of the LCA's predecessor-body, the ULCA, at one time used to print, with full approval, statements by Reinhold Niebuhr like these: "The young men are accused, among other things, of not believing in the virgin birth of Jesus or in his 'physical resurrection' or ascension. Are these beliefs really *tests of the quality of faith?*" (emphases added).²

More recently LCA theologian John Reumann, in a glowing editorial commendation of the English translation of Hans Conzelmann's famous essay, *Jesus*, described Conzelmann's theological position as "an Evangelical (Lutheran Reformation) 'theology of the word.' Hence the emphasis on preaching (proclamation) as that which contemporizes Jesus for us today."³

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Yet Reumann admits at the same time that Conzelmann represents the "Bultmann school" and assumes, for example, "the general non-historicity of the Fourth Gospel." Worse yet, in the essay itself Conzelmann describes the opening chapters of Matthew's and Luke's Gospels as "cycles of legends," treats even the Davidic descent of Jesus as doubtful, and regards the Baptismal accounts as legendary. Further, according to Conzelmann's essay, Jesus did not claim to be the Son of God—this title being originally understood "adoptionistically" in any case—and had no intention of establishing any church! The account of the Last Supper is a "cultic legend," and so on. How many pastors and members of the ALC and LCA would agree that this sort of thing is "an Evangelical (Lutheran Reformation) 'theology of the word'"? Certainly nowhere near Neuhaus's "two thirds of American Lutheranism," most of whom would surely be horrified if they thought that their seminary professors were even toying with such notions.

It is the great merit of the LCUSA discussions, as reflected in this significant FODT report, to have begun the daring process of facing up to the real issues posed for Lutherans by today's theological climate. And once one has gazed at the depth and enormity of the problems, one cannot simply shut the lid, as it were, and pretend that it is all a question of a few little interpretations of a few little Bible-texts. Some doctrinal differences may well prove to be irresolvable in the end. But surely no one has a right simply to give up without trying. Projected solutions are at this stage clearly premature; first the real nature of the problem needs to be traced with the utmost honesty and precision. If LCUSA's theological discussions can avoid church-political short-circuitings and can patiently lead the Lutheran churches of America into a clear understanding of today's theological options and their various implications and ramifications—and the FODT report is a promising token in this direction—they will have given the churches something of infinitely greater value than all those impressive ecumenical displays which still leave consciences uninformed and doubting. The outcome is beyond the control of men; it is up to the church's Head, who can give far more than we can ask or think.

NOTES

1. John Reumann, ed. *The Church Emerging: A U.S. Lutheran Case Study* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), p. 150.
2. *The Lutheran*, December, 1955, p. 18.
3. J. Raymond Lord, tr., *Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973), p. x; Hans Conzelmann, "Jesus Christus," *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart: Handwoerterbuch fuer Theologie und Religionswissenschaft*, ed. Kurt Galling et al. (Tuebingen: J. C. B. Mohr, III (1959), cols. 619-53.

K. Marquart

NEW INITIATIVES IN THE DANISH LUTHERAN CHURCH

Today there is much that is problematic in the State Church of Denmark. There would be no difficulty in finding public denials of the most central Christian doctrines, of open immorality among the clergy, of congregations suffering spiritual neglect by their pastors, and of nearly empty churches. Since 1948, indeed, the Church of Denmark has been burdened with women priests. Such a deplorable plight leaves the door wide open for other denominations to gain a foothold, although none have as yet been able to exploit this ripe situation. Some Danes have been attracted by the cults, but the overwhelming majority have followed the path of practical atheism with its

blatantly materialistic outlook. Alcoholism, not uncommon among people, is only symptomatic of the general spiritual impoverishment.

Committed Lutherans do have bright hopes for the future. Independent missionary movements working within the church have a wide following among the youth in whom a growing spiritual commitment and devotion are easily detected. Such missionary movements without any state support or control have been a much more significant factor in the actual spiritual life of the people than the state-controlled church. These movements with their own meeting-houses, preachers, and financial support, have alerted the people to the reality of their churches and have directed the people to a more conservative theological posture and to a greater interest in evangelism. The Danish Christian Association for Students (KFS), though only new, is already an influential factor in Danish church life. The KFS, theologically orthodox and confessionally Lutheran in its orientation, has been quite effective in awakening interest in the Bible and evangelism among high school and college youth. Along with the revival of interest in Biblical studies connected with the youth movement, there has been a vast production of literature on current subjects written from a conservative Lutheran viewpoint.

Quite naturally many young men attached to the KFS have been attracted to the ministry, but they have found the theological training at the state universities to be not only unsatisfactory, but downright dangerous. In Denmark no real connection exists between the university theological faculties by whom the pastors are trained and the church in which the pastors later serve. Theological professors are sometimes not Lutheran or even Christian.

In the late 1960's several conservative Lutheran pastors and laymen determined to counteract this situation by establishing a Lutheran seminary independent of state, church, and university control. A theological school has been established at Aarhus under the name of the *Menighedsfakultetet* literally the faculty of the congregations! The school, with a student body of more than one hundred, has an easier time recruiting students than faculty members. Students supplement their education by attending lectures at the state university in Aarhus. A similar institution, the Danish Bible Institute, has been established in Copenhagen. Though smaller than the Aarhus school, it is also theologically conservative and confessionally Lutheran.

The establishment and growth of these freely supported institutions shows a growing desire among Lutherans in Denmark for church work which is Biblically based. It also clearly shows the dissatisfaction with modern theology. The sincere hope of many Christian laymen is that the pastors being educated at these newly founded institutions will preach nothing more nor less than the word of God, and that through this preaching many of their countrymen may repent of their sins and believe in Jesus Christ. In Denmark the harvest is indeed great, but the laborers are few. Pray that the Lord of the harvest will send forth many laborers.

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CHURCH LIFE IN NORWAY TODAY

About 95 percent of Norway's four million inhabitants are members of the Lutheran state church and have deep spiritual roots. The state church accepts the three ancient creeds, the unaltered Augsburg Confession, and the Small Catechism. As a state Lutheran church, the Norwegian church and government have official commitments to each other. The Norwegian constitution binds the state to the Lutheran Confessions and gives to the state the right to

appoint the church's ten bishops and the parish pastors. The clergy like other government officials receive their salaries from government taxes. This relationship has operated smoothly for centuries, but problems and tensions are now causing disruptions. Though the church is under governmental control, the state church has its own internal structure but without effective power. There are certain divisions in this internal structure. On the local level there is the congregational council. A council of bishops has a limited number of tasks. A newly created church council representing all aspects of the Norwegian church has created all sorts of problems. These intra-ecclesiastical councils have no real theological or financial power, but tensions between them and the state controlled system of bishops and pastors exist.

Here are a few hard statistical facts about the Church of Norway. In 1976 there were more than 1,500 pastors. One million of the four million members of the church were counted as communicants; 70,000 church services and 123,000 other gatherings at which a pastor preached were conducted; 250,000 pastoral visits were made; and twenty-eight million kroner were contributed for church work. Thirty percent of this sum was designated for missions.

Students for the ministry receive their education at either the University of Oslo where the faculty is strongly influenced by the liberal theology of the post-Bultmannian period or the independently supported *Menighetsfakultetet* with a more pronounced conservative direction. Atheism is not uncommon among theological students at the University of Oslo. The state university faculty has an enrollment of about 150 students, and the independent faculty has about 600. Started in 1908 as a protest against the liberal theology of the state faculty by Norwegian Lutherans connected with mission revival, the independent seminary has been eminently successful. Its founder, Professor S. Odland, was conservative and belonged to what was then known as the school of "positive theology." He was greatly influenced by Professor Theodore Zahn of Germany and was not entirely immune from the historical criticism of that day. Odland was, however, more concerned with textual criticism than with criticizing the content of Scripture. There might be errors of memory and history in the Bible, Odland claimed, but not errors in matters of salvation and ethics. For his day that was a very conservative position, and Odland gave a strongly confessional character to the independent faculty. Women pastors were an abomination to Odland. At one time the school's founder stated, "The Scripture says something about it, and that is enough for me."

The Norwegian Christian laity supported the independent faculty wholeheartedly. This confidence was upheld by Professor O. Hallesby, a dogmatician strongly influenced by the Erlangen school of experience theology, Haugeanism, and pietism. Hallesby, a gifted speaker, attracted large lay audiences. His influence among the laity helped contain the liberalism of the university-trained pastors.

Today the situation at the independent faculty is somewhat confusing. What the school has gained in size, it has lost in theological firmness. One wing of the faculty has taken a more open view to modernism. This is especially true of Old Testament studies. A majority of faculty is willing to accept women pastors. A new direction has set in and it is impossible to see where it will all end. But amidst the current theological instability, a conservative group within the faculty maintains the old faith.

The church life of the people focuses around two centers, the church buildings themselves, which are part of the church-state arrangement, and the prayer-houses. There are more than 2000 of these prayer-houses, which have their origin in the lay revival and mission movement of H. N. Hauge. Three things were distinctive aspects of this Haugean awakening: (1.) sorrow over sin and surrendering of one's life to Christ; (2.) joyful experience of God's saving grace; and (3.) certainty about God's calling with a willingness to work for the salvation of souls. Hauge was charged by the clergy and suffered many

years in prison, but his movement is still alive as can easily be seen in the several national societies for the mission work at home and abroad. The state church plays no role, financially or administratively, in this mission work.

The 284 foreign missionaries that Norway had sent out in 1920 had more than doubled to 658 in 1938. World War II was a time of spiritual growth. By 1948 the number of missionaries had increased to 749. Twelve years later in 1960 the number stood at 850 and in 1971 at 1,277. Very few Lutheran churches in other countries could match this record. Twenty-seven thousand lay groups are organized to support various types of mission work. One thousand lay preachers preach in the meeting houses and churches. The clergy of the state church and the lay movement work together in a mutually beneficial relationship. In 1977 the church mission council applied to the Norwegian government to use one hundred million kroner outside the country. In the same year only thirty million kroner were contributed by the people to the official church. To me this indicates that the people find their real spiritual life and nourishment in their mission societies and not in the state-regulated churches.

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