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Theological Observer

IN MEMORIAM
WILHELM MARTIN OESCH, 1896 - 1982

After a long career as a theologian, Dr. Wilhelm Oesch, emeritus professor of systematic theology of the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Oberursel, Germany, passed away during the night of January 18, 1982, at the age of 85. While it is not unusual for Germans to immigrate to the United States, Dr. Oesch was born and educated in America but rose to prominence in Germany. Upon graduation in 1922 from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, he was assigned to Germany and remained there with the exception of a few years during the 1930's spent in England. In 1948 he joined the newly founded seminary of our German sister church at Oberursel. His name became synonymous with the seminary and church there. For twenty-three years he edited the *Lutherische Rundblick* and was widely read. He remained professor until 1968 and editor until 1975. Though his teaching career was behind him, Dr. Oesch remained active as a theologian, addressing church problems. Until the end he remained alert and continued to write. At the time of his death he was urging that a more explicit reference to Scriptural authority be made part of Lutheran confessional subscription.

His chief theological purpose was maintaining a confessional and orthodox understanding of Lutheranism. Brought up in America in the English language, he became an amazingly prolific writer in the German language. Some claimed that this style surpassed that of native German theologians. As an editor from 1953 to 1975, he addressed much of his material to the American church situation, especially the Missouri Synod. After World War II, theological commerce between the German and American churches started up again. Dr. Oesch was a frequent visitor in the United States, especially to St. Louis, where he counselled Missouri Synod leaders. Missouri Synod Lutherans travelling to Germany visited the Oberursel campus. He also directed many personal letters to American church leaders. He came to be a modern-day Lutheran Elijah, who expressed himself freely and openly on issues which he found disturbing in the church. His Elijah role meant that at times his message was often received with less than complete enthusiasm.

In Germany Dr. Oesch became the recognized theological spokesman of the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church, to whose establishment he contributed. His dogmatic stamp impressed itself upon the church. He worked to bring together into the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church the Saxon Lutherans, who shared common religious cultural roots with the Missouri Synod's founders, and the Prussian Lutherans, who had resisted the Prussian Union of Lutherans and Reformed in the early nineteenth century. Springing up from the ashes of the war, the church is self-supporting with a highly qualified seminary faculty. Overseas missions are maintained in Africa.

Dr. Oesch did not understand Lutheranism as a provincial or parochial religious activity, but was concerned with its global impact. His ecumenical perspective impelled him to address issues in Lutheranism on both sides of the globe. As recognition of this fact, the Lutheran seminary in Australia awarded

him the degree of Doctor of Divinity. He lived long enough to see a change in a more confessional direction in the Missouri Synod. This change must have brought him great contentment, since he worked so long and hard for it. But he never rested in correcting aberrations from the confessional norm as he saw them. He wanted to be the confessional Elijah to the end. The bulk of his writing will probably continue to remain unknown to the English-speaking Lutherans of America. His typical German theological style provides its own resistance to translation. His rare distinction is that his ideas exercised a great influence through those Americans who read them and shared them with others. His name will be long remembered. He rests in peace, but his battles will still be fought.

David P. Scaer

SHOULD CHILDREN GO TO THE COMMUNION RAIL FOR A BLESSING?

A FOLLOW-UP BY HELMUT THIELICKE

A serious theological discussion of children coming to the communion rail for a blessing is offered by the German Lutheran theologian Helmut Thielicke in his recently published *The Evangelical Faith, III: The Holy Spirit, The Church, Eschatology* (Eerdmans, 1982, p. 299). Though his discussion is extremely brief, it does lay down the theological principles for his understanding of the practice. For Thielicke, children may receive a blessing of the hands or the bread and wine. In a footnote, he writes:

This way of relating faith and understanding suggest that children, too, should be allowed to participate. Whether they are given the bread and wine or are simply blessed is a secondary question. Either way, the main motif in infant baptism is here taken up again, namely reception into the fellowship of believers and incorporation into the body of Christ.

Thielicke's understanding that a blessing of the child is on a par with that child's receiving the bread and wine must be interpreted against the backdrop of his doctrinal attitude toward the sacraments. The emeritus Hamburg University theologian, in analyzing the sixteenth century debate over the Lord's Supper, comes down on the side of Calvin against Luther. He speaks of "the real personal presence of Christ in feeding through Word, bread, and wine" and heavily scores as unacceptable Luther's identification of the elements with Christ's body and blood as "ubiquitarianism." The offense against the Lord's body (1 Cor. 11:29) is the selfish disregard for others in the fellowship and not the lacking of a awareness of the nature of the sacramental bread. The uniqueness of the Lord's Supper is described as "the gift of fellowship that transcends all traditional, historical, and confessional limits." To be avoided is a real presence "in itself" in favor of a "presence 'for us.'" Benefits of the Supper include "incorporation into Christ's body through the bond of love." Thielicke himself recognizes that this is not Luther's position.

With such a view of the Lord's Supper, the elements of bread and wine become incidental in accomplishing its purpose. The child as part of the worshipping fellowship can share in Christ's body as fellowship either by receiving the bread and wine or simply being there to receive a blessing. The effect is the same.

Following Schleiermacher's lead, Thielicke understands Baptism as an incorporation into the Christian community and coming under the influence of

grace. The infant within the framework of the Christian congregation becomes a target for the preaching of the Word of God. He has no use for Luther's concept of infant faith in connection with Baptism, a thought which he explicitly finds unacceptable.

For Thielicke, as Baptism ushers the child into the community, the Lord's Supper nourishes the child within the community. The focus is not a one-to-one relationship with God, but a relationship with God through the community. The use of elements, water, wine, and bread, as the sacramental rites themselves, are expendable.

Dying infants are not to be baptized, but "they should be given the blessing of the congregation which commends them to this Father" (p.280). Baptism and the Lord's Supper are community activities and not direct divine intervention into the lives of Christians. The dying infant needs no Baptism, since it seems certain that he or she will not participate in the future fellowship of the congregation. On the other hand, the surviving child may go to the altar during the communion distribution to receive either the sacrament itself or a blessing, both of nearly equal benefit, since the child is already sharing in the fellowship of the community.

There is no evidence that Thielicke's devaluation of the sacraments has had any influence in our circles to date. He may, however, be expressing the increasingly influential motif concerning the Lord's Supper that its value lies in giving symbolic expression to the intimate fellowship of the congregation rather than being a real and actual participation in Christ. His view that 1 Corinthians 11:29 warns against offending Christ's body, the church, and not Christ's body present in the sacramental elements, is not without its serious defenders. Such a view removes the difficulty raised when it is asked whether children are cognitively or consciously aware of the sacramental bread; the child would only have to be aware of some sort of friendly relationships within the congregation. Certain arguments favoring infant communion also stress the sacrament as fellowship from which even the younger children should not be excluded. This is not the rationale of the custom in the Eastern churches.

Now is the time for some serious study into the increasingly popular custom of children going to the communion rail for a blessing. Among the supporters and detractors themselves, diverse reasons for their attitudes towards the custom probably exist. Thielicke has offered a theological rationale. Regretfully it is based on a deficient sacramental understanding.

David P. Scaer