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Theological Observer

FELLOWSHIP AND MERGER: SOME LUTHERAN COMMONPLACES

According to a widely held attitude, pulpit and altar fellowship is a fairly innocuous gesture: the really serious business is organizational merger — properties, presidencies, politics! So it was argued, at the time of the ill-fated declaration of church fellowship between the American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod in 1969, that, since there was no thought of merger, many points of conflict could safely be left to one side. “Mere” church fellowship, after all, could always be retracted and so required only minimal agreement, it was implied. Only if merger itself were under consideration would the differences have to be studied more thoroughly, for that would be much more difficult to undo.

From a Lutheran point of view this light-weight estimate of fellowship, in comparison with merger, is perverse. Precisely the opposite ought to be the case. It is pulpit and altar fellowship, not parliamentary machinery, which defines churchly boundaries. When two churches declare mutual pulpit and altar fellowship, they thereby become one church theologically. For they have thereby agreed to share unrestrictedly in each other’s administrations of the divine mysteries of salvation, the life-giving gospel and sacraments of Christ. Organizational regulations are pitiful trifles by comparison. The joint jurisdictional arrangements of merger may or may not follow fellowship — they are an optional detail, governed by the Christian liberty of the Bride of Christ. It is shallow, bureaucratic externalism to hold otherwise.

These considerations of principle find ready application in the turbulent realm of current Lutheran union efforts in the United States. There is much ado about the decision to merge the ALC, LCA, and AELC into one new body. But more significant than this external reorganization of the three uniting bodies — after all, they have been one church, through altar and pulpit fellowship, for years — was their decision to accept “interim sharing of the Eucharist” with the Protestant Episcopal Church. The goal clearly remains that spelt out by LCA Bishop James R. Crumley, Jr., before the Missouri Synod Convention in St. Louis on 8 July 1981:

I suspect that the next round of dialogues will propose full intercommunion. I hope so, for I consider our divisions at the Lord’s table scandalous and something to be overcome. We propose to take official action to implement agreements reached in confessional conversations. The same will be true of our relationships with the Reformed, Methodist, and other Protestant denominations, and even, I hope, with the Roman Catholic church.

Such massive renunciations of the Lutheran church and confession are unlikely to occasion much surprise, largely because they will not be recognized as such. No informed person, of course, believes that such miraculous ecumenical progress happens by the way of doctrinal agreement. The Anglican Thirty-Nine Articles, for instance, despite England’s early and close ties with the Wittenberg Reformation, embody the Calvinistic rejection of the Real Presence of Christ’s body and blood (Articles XXVIII and XXIX). Is this fact no longer relevant just because a handful of professorial diplomats are able to devise more pleasing language in the course of a “dialogue”? And what can “doctrinal agreement” possibly mean in the case of churches which are in principle “pluralistic” or latitudinarian? That the limits of this “pluralism” are rather ample in the case of

both "Lutheran" and Episcopal partner-churches is well known. The rankest Bultmannian heresies freely exist in both.

On the Lutheran side, theological consciences have for years been chloroformed by things like (1) *Marburg Revisited* (1966) (2) Warren Quanbeck's *Search for Understanding* (1972), commissioned jointly by the ALC and the LCA, which asserted that in the new climate of diversity, Reformed and Lutheran theologians "can recognise each other as fully Christian and orthodox" (p. 68); (3) the Lutheran World Federation's conception of "reconciled diversity" (1977), which envisions full church fellowship alongside "the legitimacy of the confessional differences and therefore the need to preserve them"; and (4) the ALC-LCA Communion Practices Statement of 1978, which recommends reception of the sacrament in non-Lutheran churches as "proper because of the universal nature of the church." Perhaps one should mention here too the uncritical acceptance in the ILCW *Contemporary Worship, 2: Services: The Holy Communion* (1970) of the Anglican Gregory Dix's "four actions" scheme of the sacrament, with offering, thanksgiving, breaking the bread, and reception as the constitutive elements! Compare with this formalism the Formula of Concord's understanding of what is essential: Consecration, distribution, and reception (FC VII).

Given the general state of religious illiteracy and the undisputed reign of "up-beat" public relations in the controlled and manipulative media of modern bureaucratic churches, it seems unlikely that the enormity of these developments will be perceived by the rank and file of the merging Lutheran church-bodies, at least until it will be much too late. How grateful the present writer would be were this prediction to be proved wrong by events! The plight of the confessionally sound pastors and people, mainly of an older generation, who can see what is happening but find themselves unable to stop it, must be agonising indeed.

What is sadly clear in all this is that the merging churches have abandoned all pretence of continuity with the standard Lutheran understanding of church fellowship, as it was stated, for instance, in the *Minneapolis Theses* (1925) of the old American Lutheran Church:

Where the establishment and maintenance of church fellowship ignores present doctrinal differences or declares them a matter of indifference, there is unionism, pretence of union which does not exist.

They agree that the rule, "Lutheran pulpits for Lutheran pastors only, and Lutheran altars for Lutheran communicants only," is not only in full accord with, but necessarily implied in, the teachings of the divine Word and the Confessions of the evangelical Lutheran Church. This rule, implying the rejection of all unionism and syncretism, must be observed as setting forth a principle elementary to sound and conservative Lutheranism.

Where this principle is thrown to the winds, would it not be more honest to abandon the Lutheran name altogether?

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