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# Theological Observer

## HOW TO GIVE UP THE CONFESSIONS WITHOUT SEEMING TO

Bishop David Preus' article "Fellowship with other Christians," in *The Lutheran Standard* (20 January 1984), the official organ of the ALC, marks a major mile-stone in the history of Lutheranism in America. At least three lines of comment suggest themselves.

### [1] *Scuttling the Minneapolis Theses*

Bishop Preus proposes changing what he calls "ALC policy regarding altar and pulpit fellowship." Specifically, he claims that the "results of bilateral dialogs with Reformed, Roman Catholic, and Episcopal Christians indicate that the ALC should, if those bodies agree, enter into altar and pulpit fellowship with them."

The enormous significance of this suggestion lies in the fact that the ALC's chief spokesman here publicly calls for the scuttling of his church's official position. That position was embodied in the *Minneapolis Theses* (1925), which served as the doctrinal foundation for both the (old) American Lutheran Church (1930) and the American Lutheran Conference (1930). Section III, on "Church Fellowship," in the *Minneapolis Theses* is so excellent, that it must be quoted in full:

1. These synods agree that true Christians are found in every denomination which has so much of divine truth revealed in Holy Scripture that children of God can be born in it; that according to the Word of God and our confessions, church fellowship, that is, mutual recognition, altar and pulpit fellowship, and eventually cooperation in the strictly essential work of the church, presupposes unanimity in the pure doctrine of the Gospel and of the confession of the same in word and deed. Where the establishment and maintenance of church fellowship ignores present doctrinal differences or declares them a matter of indifference, there is unionism, pretense of union which does not exist.

2. 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.

The "new" ALC's Articles of Union (1958) reaffirmed the *Minneapolis Theses* of 1925, and also the *United Testimony of Faith and Life* of 1952. The *United Testimony* also specifically affirms that "Article III, Church Fellowship, *Minneapolis Theses*,...furnishes the correct principles on fellowship for our Churches." But, adds the *United Testimony*, "in the application of these principles, situations calling for exceptions will arise." This may seem to relativize the *Minneapolis Theses* to some extent. Nevertheless it is clear that what Presiding Bishop Preus is calling for is not simply more exceptions, but an abolition of the principles themselves.

It is interesting to note Fred W. Meuser's judgement that the *Minneapolis Theses*, on the one hand opposed "the suspicious and isolationist spirit of the Synodical Conference," but, on the other hand, "bore witness that on the issues of inspiration of the Scriptures, the Lutheran Confessions, fellowship with other churches, and attitude toward secret religious societies the U.L.C.A. was seriously deficient" (*The Formation of the American Lutheran Church*, 1958, pp. 247-248). Yet the *Minneapolis Theses* had, on the question of fellowship, taken their stand squarely on the "Galesburg Rule" (1875) formulated by the great Charles Porterfield Krauth for the General Council, a predecessor of the U.L.C.A. (now L.C.A.). This means that whatever differences existed in application, the traditional Lutheran fellowship principles were not a "Missourian" peculiarity, but were held in common by all the antecedent bodies of the ALC and by the General Council and the Augustana Synod components of the LCA. In abandoning this common Lutheran ground, today's merging bodies are deliberately taking their stand far below the level even of the old, confessionally flabby General Synod!

### [2] *Churches or "Other Christians"?*

That tell-tale word "policy" in the very first sentence already suggests that the whole matter of church fellowship lies in the plane not of basic doctrine, but of practical action, hence "policy." This is probably inevitable if one thinks of fellowship as having to do with individuals rather than with churches as such. And that is clearly the case in this article. The very heading proclaims that the issue is perceived to be one of fellowship with "other Christians," rather than with churches. Churches are mentioned, to be sure, but the over-riding category is that of "Christians," that is, individuals. That notion, in turn, is no doubt heavily colored in terms of actual people one has met, or, in Bishop Preus' own words, "personal enrichment through shared experiences with non-Lutheran Christians" and "deepening fellowship experiences." If fellowship is seen only or mainly under the aspect of individuals, perhaps of persons near and dear, and if churches are seen basically as aggregates of such individuals, then charity will of course dictate a "policy" of broad inclusiveness.

This person-centered approach is by no means unusual. It is in fact the prevailing view of things, which we take in with the very air we breathe. Contemporary culture, disseminated by the mass media, knows nothing beyond the immediacies of individual human existence, understood largely in biological terms. Knowing no history, democratic mass culture cannot sustain the mental effort to think trans-personally, in terms of great historical movements or long-term strategic relationships. It is easier to gush about individual people and their hopes and fears, to assume that everyone in the world is basically "just like the folks next door," and to project Madison Avenue fantasy worlds, in which peace and survival depend not so much on tough-minded strategic realism as on the magic of personal feelings and relations. (Hence the cosmic significance, on silly celluloid, of CIA-KGB love affairs!) We have here that "preoccupation with the self and its experiences, promoted by and promoting the subjectivist analysis of moral, aesthetic, metaphysical and theological judgements" which C.E.M. Joad has so well placed among the "stigmata of decadence." Given this sort of cultural mood or climate, churches are soon following suit. The Missouri Synod's own CTCR produced in the early sixties a rather wobbly sort of "Theology of Fellowship." Henry P. Hamann wrote of it in the Australian sister church's

## official critique:

The tendency throughout — and it is intentional — is not to speak of churches, but to speak of individuals. For with them, in accordance with the subjective *proton pseudos* at the basis of the whole presentation, we can — at least so it is held — distinguish those who are plainly not of Christ...and those who are true Christians....

Surely one must see that the true counterpart in our day to the false teachers of the New Testament age are the heterodox church-bodies themselves.

Now, the great confessions of our church also know and speak of Christian individuals — but how differently! The church, as a seven-year-old child praying the Creed knows, is “holy believers and sheep who hear the voice of their Shepherd” (SA, III: XII). The holy believers and sheep, whom only God knows as such, are accessible to us only indirectly, through the voice of their Shepherd, in the purely proclaimed Gospel and the rightly administered Sacraments. Even the much maligned Formula of Concord is at pains to aim its doctrinal condemnations at *false systems, not their victims as such, viz.,* “those persons who err ingenuously and who do not blaspheme the truth of the divine Word, and far less do we mean entire churches....” (Preface) But the presence of captive Israel in Babylon is not allowed to soften or blunt faithful resistance to the latter. The Formula does not hesitate to say that the Augsburg Confession “distinguishes our reformed churches from the papacy and from other condemned sects and heresies” (FC SD, Rule and Norm, 5)!

Here lies the theological greatness of Luther’s “ecclesiology of the cross” (just the point of Augsburg Confession VII!). This understanding of the church is broad enough to include every single child of God and narrow enough to exclude every denial of the uniquely saving Gospel and Sacraments. The whole church is bound up with the whole Gospel—one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism! This ecumenical perspective is truly evangelical because it pays attention only to the saving gift of God, not to the impressive vanities of “religious man.” It therefore liberates one from being “blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming” (Eph. 4:14 NIV). This is precisely where Luther and the modern ecumenical movement part company. Both confess one single universal church — but where Luther walks humbly, by faith, the ecumenical movement insists on sight. For him the starting point is the Gospel, the *known*, which alone determines the value of the *unknown* in the “ecumenical equation,” the church. The ecumenical movement does the opposite. Its starting point, or the known, is the visible, institutional church organization, or rather the aggregate of such organizations. The Gospel is the unknown, the “X,” which must be calculated from the institutional givens — that is, where at least two or three hundred million are gathered together. This is “theology of glory” with a vengeance!

For Luther the church is part and parcel of the Christ mystery and, as such, totally inaccessible to all human wisdom. Humbly “hidden under the cross” in this age (Ap, VII–VIII, 18), the church is to be found and grasped only in the holy Gospel and Sacraments of Christ, but there fully. Uplifting encounters

with "other Christians" are no substitute for the one holy church known and recognised by faith alone, in her pure marks alone. Based on, and limited by, these marks, church fellowship does not depend on our subjective guesses about just how far afield "other Christians" might still be found.

### [3] *Confession versus Church Politics*

Contrary to the Gospel as understood in the Book of Concord, the ALC's Presiding Bishop Preus urges full church fellowship with both the Roman and the Reformed churches. He cites in support the results of "bilateral dialogs." How vacuous these results are is clear from Bishop Preus' own admission that "debate with the Reformed churches as to the mode of Christ's real presence in the sacrament can continue without separation at altar and pulpit." But of course it is totally false to suggest that the Lutheran and Reformed churches agree on Christ's real presence but differ only about the "mode." No Zwinglian or Calvinist has ever denied that Christ, the Person, is "really present" in His divine nature, not only in the Sacrament, but at any meal at all, and indeed everywhere. What the Reformed churches have denied, and continue to deny, is that the Savior distributes His real body and blood under the consecrated bread and wine, so that all communicants receive these, and not simply "by faith," but bodily, with the mouth. That, and not a vague, Calvinistic "real presence of Christ," is the clear and unanimous sacramental teaching of our Confessions, from the Catechisms and the Augsburg Confession to the Smalcald Articles and the Formula of Concord. Current diplomatic compromises and evasions about the Sacrament of the Altar are meant to allow just the sort of positions which "cannot be tolerated in the church of God, much less be excused and defended," according to the Formula of Concord (SD, Rule and Norm, 9).

As for the Roman-Lutheran dialogue in the U.S.A., the lengthy justification document is impressive in some ways, but finally signals an impasse at best or a Lutheran surrender at worst. For while the Roman Catholic party retreats not one inch from the Council of Trent, the Lutherans, with some assistance from the Lutheran World Federation, are torn between the Bible and their Confessions on the one hand, and historical criticism on the other. In the end the Lutherans yield to the traditional Roman confusion between justification and internal renewal or transformation (par. 156-5)! Yet this is the very article by which the church either stands or falls, and of which our church confesses with Luther in the Smalcald Articles: "Nothing in this article can be given up or compromised, even if heaven and earth and things temporal should be destroyed" (SA, II,1,5). And now full church fellowship is urged on the basis of what is admittedly "not fully equivalent to the Reformation teaching on justification" (par. 157).

Bishop Preus is of course aware that all is not well: "We continue to have significant theological and organizational differences with such bodies." But he thinks that the difficulty can be met:

Hence, it is important that Lutherans and others maintain their ex-

istence within their confessional bodies. The differences are significant enough that confessional identities should be acknowledged, but the differences are not significant enough to keep us from expressing our unity at the altar and in the pulpit.

This proposal, however, really makes matters worse. It amounts to the Lutheran World Federation's notion of "Reconciled Diversity," which expressly combines "genuine church fellowship" with "the legitimacy of the confessional differences and therefore the need to preserve them" (LWF 1977 *Proceedings*, p.174). The LWF has here radicalized the approach of the Prussian Union (Lutheran and Reformed) of the last century: each church can keep its confession, but the differences are no longer regarded as church-divisive. The Church of the Augsburg Confession is downgraded to one school of thought among others, within a broad communion in which many confessions have equal rights.

To think that one can preserve "confessional identities" while granting church fellowship to contrary confessions is pure illusion. If the confessions are not allowed to define the boundaries of church fellowship, then they have been set aside as confessions. To yield the theological substance of church fellowship while withholding organizational trifles is sectarian. It preserves nothing more than "bureaucratic identities." So called "confessions" which are not confessed in pulpits and at altars are play confessions. To rely instead on some sort of institutional, organizational pressure, is to put church politics in the place of theology. And this stands Augsburg Confession VII precisely on its head: the one thing needful, agreement in the pure Gospel and Sacraments ("in the doctrine and in all its articles," FC SD X,31) is given up to promiscuous altar and pulpit fellowship, while the "human traditions" which are "not necessary" are, in the form of bureaucratic structures, relied on to project pseudo-confessional "identities."

How do Lutheran churches respond today to such public abandonment of their confessions? It remains to be seen. One can agree, in one sense, with Presiding Bishop Preus: "These matters must be discussed and debated in the church. Bring out your best biblical thinking. Do not be intimidated by anyone who sounds like [sic] he or she has all the answers." But those who have in Confirmation confessed the Faith of the Small Catechism, and especially those who have, in Ordination, sworn a solemn oath to teach in accordance with the Book of Concord, should have *some* answers.

K.E.Marquart