

# CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

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# Editorial ✠

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One of the basic reasons for ecumenical endeavor in the churches today, as always, is the desire to reflect in association with one another the commitment in faith and service to God, who is one. The fundamental contradiction that lies in distinctive organizational, liturgical, and personal relations between men and women, priests and people, leaders and followers, who confess the same faith in the same God—Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier—should and does disturb those who inherit, promote, and prolong the division.

True, the Christian communion as a whole is by no means the only one that suffers schism. Present-day rivalries divide Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism, to cite only three other world religious communities with international fellowships. Then, too, the apparent fissiparous character of Christianity, a malaise known to us all, is not just a post-16th-century problem.

In a sense the confrontation in a missionary situation over against one or more Christian denominations and the communities they have spawned is responsible for the 20th-century ecumenical movement. This movement, if it did not start with the 1910 Edinburgh Missionary Conference, certainly can make use of that year as a convenient date to mark a watershed. The three resulting ecumenical streams are identifiable as Faith and Order (doctrine and government), International Missionary Council (propagation of the faith in coordination instead of competition), and Life and Work (the pragmatic impact of the faith on life as lived in a precarious century).

But behold, confessional, denominational concerns either for or against the ecumenical river known as the World Council of Churches have somehow produced the consolidation of Lutheran, Methodist, Anglican, Presbyterian international organizations as well as of new intra- and interdenominational alignments. Contradicted but not contravened by the horrendous wars of our century, the political reflection of an awakening sense of the solidarity of the human race, of whatever political, social, or racial complexion, is a startling phenomenon parallel to the ecclesiastical growing-toward-one-another manifest to all who can see.

It is well known and not necessarily a matter for apology that The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in its reaction to ecumenical events on the level of the parish and in its worldwide program has been not merely suspicious and cautious but militantly opposed to ecumenism in most of its forms. Anything written, preached, taught, and promoted in the last century and a quarter by Missouri on such subjects as unionism and fellowship is evidence of this. The magnificent and oft-cited passages from such fathers as C. F. W. Walther and Franz Pieper on the faith in the one holy, catholic, *invisible* church were invariably accompanied or overshadowed by Missourian separatism. The record, however, will show that this can be duplicated in almost any denomination. As a matter of fact the proliferation in America of new denominations is simply the application of a principle of religious and creedal apartheid in which, to

be truthful, all existing churches still share in some measure. A survey made of only one journal, the CTM in the years from 1930 to 1959, revealed to the writer of these lines a consistency of hostility to interchurch activity. Presumably this could easily be duplicated from other journals of other denominations. We have here, ironically, an ecumenical non-ecumenism that measures orthodoxy by the degree of readiness to stay apart from others who are similarly if not equally determined to stay apart.

The issue of our journal you now hold in your hand is one of a growing number of contributions within our own church to a development observable throughout the whole Christian world. Some would call this development catastrophic; others may deplore its slowness; most actively support and promote it. The development is simply and honestly this: The Missouri Synod as a corporate body, both in its separate organizational structures and in the lives of its members, is involved in the ecumenical enterprise, by whatever name it is called—dialog, council, convention, federation, fellowship. It is trying, we believe, rather manfully and resolutely, as it always tries to do things, to work out a way of genuine participation in Lutheran and more broadly Christian work. The stimulation and invigoration that stems from such participation does not only produce overt actions—joining LCUSA, resolutions recognized as bases for fellowship with another body—it affects all levels of synodical existence in fields of education, mission, finance, social welfare, and others.

Do writings from synodical officials appear too seldom in theological journals? If there is such a lack, it is filled in some measure with material such as we here print. Oliver R. Harms is president of the Missouri Synod. His remarks to a meeting of editors affiliated with several Lutheran churches in North America appropriately open this issue. There is no mincing of words, no compromise of Lutheran loyalty, no blurred vision of ecumenical work; here a pervasive spirit of Biblical and confessional ecumenism has informed the thinking of our presidential author. This speech reminds us that the field of journalism, particularly media with large synodical circulation, needs to be enlisted with honesty and candor if the ecumenical boat is not to be missed. Our hope is that leadership in our own church as well as in other churches will be aware of the straightforward readiness expressed here for the tasks that lie ahead. Truly, a new day has dawned—and we hope its light is widely welcomed and shared.

The inevitability of ecumenical adjustments is reflected in the title of John E. Groh's contribution: "Interaction: Ecumenism and Confessionalism." This paper should be especially useful, also to non-Lutherans, in assessing the conflict that may exist between one's denominational heritage and the claims of the larger church. Do things like a synodical conference, a national council, a federation such as LWF constitute helps or hindrances for progress toward understanding and permissible church fellowship? Pastor Groh's contribution, as we see it, will help you find the answer. He urges a combination of retention of what we have and acquisition of what we still need.

Thomas Coates, writing from conviction born of experience and reflection over many years as leader of youth and teacher of youth and teacher of the church, gives

us much to ponder in his article "Fellowship." He reflects what we suspect is true of our readers as well: an anguished hope, often cheated of fulfillment, that brothers should be brothers and act accordingly. The international and broadly Lutheran nature of his approach is quite in character with Missouri's ambitious and often successful programs overseas.

Our colleague, Arthur Carl Piepkorn, has allowed us to publish what was essentially a visitation paper presented to Roman Catholics. Its main lines of argument and chief directions for future continuation of gatherings with Roman Catholics can well serve anyone whose work and situation as a Lutheran pastor or teacher brings him into ecumenical involvement with those from whom we have been separated the longest (450 years at the latest count!).

Undergirding any action Lutherans take or refuse to take in their household of the faith in 20th-century church life in these matters of doctrinal understanding and practical cooperation is an abiding appreciation and reassessment of the Lutheran Concordia. Expressed in writings too little understood because they are too little known and read, the Lutheran consensus, as Herbert J. A. Bouman tells us, can contribute something uniquely valuable to all Christians. What we believe about the church, in relationship to what we believe about anything else, including our monotheistic trinitarianism and fideistic soteriology, is persuasive in urging us to seek that which is good and not to reject imprudently what is new or unfamiliar in the time in which we are privileged to live.

In sum, the March issue is clearly telling us to march, or walk, so that in one respect we will not distance ourselves from truth and Truth, but in marching will also find religious and theological surprises in the most unexpected places—all of them, however, contained in the one place where we are all to be found, the church, the fellowship of the faithful redeemed.

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