

17. Lutheran World Federation Report

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This report should be presented by a theologian who attended the meetings of the V Assembly of The Lutheran World Federation in Evian. Through the presidency of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, we received an invitation to attend these meetings as an observer. But, since the leaders of the LWF refused to hold them in Porto Alegre, Brazil as scheduled, the Brazilians refused to attend the sessions at Evian, France. For this reason this report can be based only on documents which were distributed in advance and the reports given by the official LWF information bureau. This implies that this examination of the policies and actions of the LWF is of necessity not complete. But, since it is based on reliable sources, it touches on some of the major problems which were involved.

One certainly may speak of the positive sides of such a meeting as well as of the positive intentions of the LWF. They are known and thus need no special commentary. We are concerned with a critical examination of some of their actions and pre-supposition to realize the importance of the direction which this association of Lutheran churches is taking. Since The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod still holds an invitation to join the LWF as a member church, it is necessary to see clearly the implications of such membership.

When a Brazilian provides this analysis it should not be interpreted as being made out of nationalistic feelings even though the LWF leaders have offended the country and the government of Brazil through their action and affirmations concerning Brazil. It is known that the V Assembly was called off in Porto Alegre and transferred to Evian in view of political and social conditions which allegedly would imply compromises of the LWF. However, these conditions already existed at the time the invitation to meet in Brazil was formulated and accepted. At that time Brazil already had the revolutionary government with its exceptional laws, and had even more social problems than it has today since the new government has certainly made every effort to improve the conditions of the Brazilian people.

It is certainly not the political system as such to which the LWF could possibly object, since they had invited themselves to meet in Weimar, in the German Democratic Republic, where the socialist government did not even allow them to meet. Brazilian news commentators interpreted the opposition of the LWF to the Brazilian government as being against the philosophy of the government, which is outspokenly anti-communist. Since the LWF was willing to meet in a communist country and was not willing to meet in a rightist country, it is to be expected that some concluded that the philosophy of the LWF was in the line of a "theology of revolution."

The press in Brazil based their conclusions on the report received concerning the meeting of the World Encounter of Lutheran Youth in Thonon, France, some days prior to the V Assembly. Since the assembly of the LWF did not criticize the youth meeting and the orientation which the Lutheran youth received on this occasion, the newsmen in Brazil concluded that the LWF was following along the line of the leftist speakers at the Youth encounter.

The tone set at the youth encounter was clearly that of leftist activism and revolutionary indoctrination. One issue called special attention to the commentators, namely the fact that Mr. Paulo Freire, a Brazilian who is

considered a leftist and has on his record revolutionary activity in North-east Brazil, was scheduled to speak to the Lutheran youth at this meeting, also that he is on the official staff of the World Council of Churches in Geneva. The LWF agrees that they work in close relationship with the WCC. This gave evidence to the news commentators in Brazil that the LWF was also influenced by this leftist leader from Brazil.

Another feature which justified the formation of the public opinion of the Brazilian against the LWF is the official approval of the name of Archbishop Helder Camara as a candidate for the Nobel Prize for Peace. Helder Camara is known in Brazil for his opportunism. Monsenhor Alvaro Negromonte accuses Mr. Camara even of leftist connections. He says that Mr. Camara uses the social problems to project his own personality, rather than to really work with the government to improve the social conditions of the suffering people, especially those of the Northeast. It is very clear to the public opinion in Brazil that other Catholic bishops have done more for the improvement of social peace than Mr. Camara. For this reason the news commentators expressed their concern about the real intention of the LWF when they honored Bishop Camara with this special distinction.

One of the reasons advocated for the cancellation of the meeting of the V Assembly in Porto Alegre was the overemphasis given to the cases of torture in Brazil. Although the government declared officially that it was ready to punish all those who tortured prisoners, and did so where this procedure was proven to exist, the LWF decided in its meetings to tell the Brazilian government that torture should not be practiced. One of the hilarious aspects of the big story about tortures in Brazil is the fact published on August 25 in Brazilian newspapers which showed pictures of tortured soldiers, pictures which were published in Paris as being proof that the torture procedures had existed in Brazil.

The real fact of the matter is that those soldiers had made torture exercises so that they would be able to resist should they fall into the hands of terrorists, which are the ones who really torture the Brazilian people. Unfortunately the LWF did not make any effort to investigate the real situation in Brazil. That much has to be done is clear to everyone. The LWF lost a very important occasion to help Brazil on the real issues. The only result which they may credit is the repulsion of those who analyzed the causes and the actions of the LWF during the already famous Brazil affair.

Although the political involvement of the LWF destroyed the image of this association of Lutheran churches and so made the people in Brazil look critically to the name Lutheran, the ecumenical involvement of the LWF is even more disturbing. Since the meeting in Evian the LWF has received official recognition for its "active role as independent partner in the ecumenical dialog." This means that the LWF has developed into such an ecclesiastical structure that it speaks for world Lutheranism and interprets the Lutheran stance even without the consent of the affiliated Lutheran churches and certainly without the acknowledgment of those churches who have not affiliated with the organization.

To engage effectively in ecumenical dialog means to have a clear set stance by which the dialogical meaningfulness may be measured. For Lutherans the standard for ecumenical dialog has always been Scripture and the Confessions. One wonders whether there has been a unanimous consent on this stance in the LWF and whether this stance will guide the ecumenical dialog of the LWF as an independent partner.

MORE THAN UNITY OF CHURCHES

One has to agree that the theological stance of the LWF is certainly set by its Commission on Theology. It would therefore be rewarding to examine a document of this Commission on Theology which was presented by its president, Dr. Mikko Juva, to the V Assembly to stimulate the discussion on church unity. The *document* which we shall endeavor to analyze briefly is entitled "*More Than Unity of Churches*," and was *received with approval by Section II of the V Assembly*. It is in the light of this document that the ecumenical endeavor of the LWF has to be examined.

The document operates with statements which are not always univocal. It seems to be in the light of the concept of freedom when assertions are made which are true but which do not cover the whole issue. Starting from the principle that theology, as given by God, is univocal, the church is not permitted to make unclear statements which may be used according to the need of ecumenical accommodation. This may not be the intention of the writers of the document, but their statements are open to misinterpretations.

The general thesis of the document offers such an occasion for misinterpretation. It asserts that "Jesus came to save the lost and to unite people." This certainly is true; but if taken as an absolute proposition it is totally misleading. The argument which can be introduced is the following. Since Jesus came to unite people it is necessary for the church to tear down all divisions, even the confessional, for the sake of unity. This conclusion seems to lie at the bottom of the whole paper, as will be seen. It is true that the document allows the possibility of divisions, but only as "a tragic necessity required by loyalty to the commission given by Jesus", which may again be interpreted in the sense that only those who do not want to be united according to the fundamental intention of Jesus, have to be considered as separated. One has to ask whether this unity is presupposed on the basis of the ideal of a unified society of people, since, as the document says, "the world (is) desiring and struggling for unity," which would set the Melancthonian concept of society as the standard of Christian ethics, or whether the unity of men would come into being through the unity with Christ through faith.

The document takes up the question of reconciliation. But this concept is not univocal again, since it does not qualify this reconciliation. Scripture knows of one essential reconciliation, namely the one between God and men, effected through the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is the one uniform and immutable message of the Christian Church. But the document must have another reconciliation in mind when the authors say: "The gospel of reconciliation is directed toward all races and all peoples. It is meant for men of all times and of every social class. For this reason the message of reconciliation which the church has been commissioned to proclaim is never uniform or immutable. It must be proclaimed in diverse and constantly changing forms." One certainly has the right to ask whether this is meant to introduce the whole range of theological existentialist reinterpretation of the Christian message, or whether this is simply to mean that the Word of God has to be applied to the individual sinner throughout the world, as it is done in the sermon and in the area of pastoral care.

The document appears to aim at other goals than the reaffirmation of the traditional Lutheran stance. This becomes evident when the authors affirm that the church has to consider "new problems," and mention as examples "the problem of revelation in the scriptures, (and) the relationship of faith to autonomous reason." Being recognized as "problems" these new trends in theology which, according to the document, cut across the existing confessional groupings, receive a relevance which they could never have among those who are committed to the Lutheran Confessions. One is led to conclude that the Commission on Theology of the LWF itself is struggling with these so-called "problems."

But, according to the document, the question which lies at the heart of the whole issue is that to the Commission on Theology the Confessional and Scriptural writings became subject to historical evaluation. The authors affirm that "the theological problems and statements of the period in which the confessional churches came into being seem to be largely outdated." This means that the theological affirmations of the Confessions, even the Lutheran Confessions, are no longer relevant to the modern age. They may be accepted only as historical formulation of the Church, that means, as historical expressions of the faith of the confessors, but not as valid truth for the present age. It would seem to indicate that each new generation has to express its faith in terms of its own self-understanding, and not according to the one God-given theology.

One wonders about the ease with which the Commission on Theology of the LWF discards the authority of the Lutheran Confessions to follow the line of modern subjective theologizing. The whole line of modern syncretistic universalism seems to claim a right in the line of thought of the Commission on Theology when they state that "the historical mode of thought . . . allows us to recognize the historical relativity of biblical assertions as well as of ecclesiastical confessions." This affirmation is at least univocal. It declares that Scripture and Confessions are no reliable sources for an ecumenical dialog. There is even no dialog necessary on this basis, since they continue to declare that there will never be a valid standard for theological affirmations.

The document declares that even "a new formulation of the truth of the gospel . . . cannot claim timeless value for itself." God's immutable revelation is so relativized that no truth at all remains. In this line of thought not even the initial affirmation of the authors, which says that "nothing other than Christ the one Lord and Reconciler" may serve as basis for the unity of the Church, may stand as a timeless truth. Modern history of theology has already shown how easily one may substitute Jesus Christ by other names or ideas which could bring about the reconciliation of man with himself and with others and so to be reconciled with the idea of God.

The document supports the movement of the "younger generations against every form of establishment and institutionalism." Instead of evaluating this movement of the younger generations as their natural desire to change and improve existing situations, the Commission on Theology of the LWF evaluates this movement in such a way that it may serve to "press the churches to surrender every kind of provincialism, including the confessional type." According to this statement, the document is advocating free play for the LWF as an independent partner in the ecumenical dialog. No confessional provincialism should hinder the efforts in favor of a universalistic unity of the Churches. And since there may never be any valid truth, this trend justifies the philosophical principle of Ernst Bloch, who affirms that "what is cannot be true," calling for a continual change in order to discover within the change the true humanity in which God may be found. This is the principle of the "theology of revolution."

One wonders about the inconsistency which is apparent in the document. At the one side one finds the affirmation that the Confessions do not provide formulations of timeless truth about the Gospel, and at the other side, the document appeals to a specific formulation of Augustana VII, where it says the agreement on the gospel and the sacraments are the true marks for the unity of the church. But the document is not univocal concerning the meaning of the term "gospel." When the document interprets "gospel" to mean that "men receive the assurance that sinners are justified through grace alone for Christ's sake," it says something very important, but it does not say what it means. The authors know that this affirmation requires a series of other statements which are considered problematical in modern theology, as the identification of the God of grace, the identification of Christ as the Son of God who died for the sins of the world, the identification of the sinner in a qualified sense. It is clear that their statement was not

intended to be univocal, since they affirm that "the differences which still exist . . . are no longer valid reasons for dividing the churches." One certainly has the right to ask how it is possible to proclaim the gospel jointly with all other churches if one does not even know what that gospel really is.

That here one has to do with a completely new understanding of the term "gospel" becomes evident from the fact that the document says that the purity of the gospel has to be measured on the effect of its proclamation and not on the revelation of God. The document states that "the proclamation of the gospel shows itself pure and right only when it declares justification to sinners." This affirmation becomes wholly problematical when the document states very clearly that "there needs to be an openness to the possibility that the gospel may be described in other terms than the Pauline concepts and formulations, or the traditional Reformation doctrine of justification."

No wonder that it was impossible for the Helsinki assembly of the LWF to formulate a doctrine of justification for the LWF. The later formulation of this doctrine of justification, provided by the Commission on Theology, gives evidence of the fact that the traditional Reformation doctrine of justification suffered a reinterpretation which can no longer be recognized as Lutheran, since it speaks of a justification of sinners, where sinners are no longer qualified, nor Jesus is recognized as the divine Savior. Jesus is only the earthly man who justified sinners in their natural conditions, without a change effected by supernatural interference of God.

If it is no longer possible to speak of the gospel and of justification in terms of the Pauline understanding, which is in the line of revelation of the whole Scripture, where may one find a valid interpretation of the gospel and of justification? The recurrence to anthropological standards has been tried by theologians of the past and the present. But this does not mean that any human formulation is able to identify God as He identifies Himself in Scripture. Lutheran theology is affirmed from the point of view that there is a revealed theology given by God Himself in Scripture. There are no Pauline formulations, but there is revealed theology in Scripture, which is standard for faith and life of the Christian.

The document states that confessionalism is one of the dangers "to the proper understanding of the gospel." It speaks of a confessionalist envelopment of the gospel" which should be torn down. It calls for freedom from the "traditional confessional formulas" and says that "here we are free and for the sake of unity are summoned to tolerate differences, respect diversity, retain what we have in common, accept what is new, change what already exists, or surrender traditions." This means that the LWF does no longer care about the confessional paragraph in its constitution. And the fact that not all Lutheran churches have accepted the Formula of Concord is used as an argument to indicate "that agreement here is not necessary for church unity. Hence we are free, on the basis of agreement on the right proclamation of the gospel, to enjoy full fellowship even with churches of *other* historical confessions."

This very clearly means that the LWF does no longer care to be a Lutheran federation, but intends to transform itself into a universalistic and syncretistic association. The document states very clearly that "not only missionary, diaconis and social cooperation and joint action, but also participation at regular and special worship services and joint ministerial acts . . . and even the occasional common celebration of the eucharist" are completely in order. Although this is supposed to be provisional, it is a practical declaration of pulpit and altar fellowship with all and with any of the so-called "Christian" churches.

One wonders why the LWF has gone this careless way. It can only be understood in the light of a "theology of revolution," where everything becomes fluctuating. Rigid formulations, as those of Scripture, are explosive and create tensions to the natural man. To avoid this one has to encounter

man in his natural anxieties and reconcile him with himself and with his fellowman. For this reason the idea of a God of love should supersede man's natural tensions. Maybe it is for this reason that the document of the Commission on Theology recommends the "surrender of confessional complacency and the respect for the convictions of others" to attain one goal, namely, to "help to diminish the explosiveness of human and social conflicts." For the sake of the social reconciliation of all men the authors of the document are ready to "reformulate the truth of the gospel" and to eliminate the "confessionalistic envelopment of the gospel."

INDEPENDENT STANCE

It is certain that the Commission on Theology of the LWF does not speak for the churches which form the federation, but, since the LWF assumed the stance of an independent partner in ecumenical dialog, the document represents the stance of the LWF as a whole. Instead of bringing all churches together into one unity, this independent stance of the LWF will add a new theology to the already existing multiplicity of theological formulations. Instead of uniting the Lutheran churches it will divide them even more, since it speaks in favor of an everchanging reformulation of the gospel, according to the needs of man in his ever-changing social environment.

One of the Pentecostal leaders in Brazil, Mr. Manuel de Mello, expressed his concerns about the situation of the LWF by saying that he feels sorry for the Lutherans in the world. And certainly one is able to appreciate this feeling in view of the fact that the LWF wants to advocate the establishment of a Lutheranism without any theological security. Faith should be based on faith and nothing else, according to such thinking; where not only the Confessional standards should fall, but also Scripture itself may no longer be regarded as the basis for faith. The attack on the Pauline formulation of the Gospel is clear evidence of this new stance taken by the LWF in the document on "More Than Unity of Churches."

According to reports received from Geneva the V Assembly approved the engagement of the LWF in what is called the "secular ecumenism". It is said to be "an expression of the disillusionment of younger as well as older people over the results of ecumenical activity to the present time" and "a conscious awakening to the need for common action on urgent world problems in which Christians find themselves beside non-Christians as never before." Although one recognized the danger "that the church may fall into a secularist ideology" one is willing to "cooperate with all men of good will . . . so that the love of God may be transmitted" through the changed structures and mechanism of society. The report of Section II says that "the credibility of the Christian witness is at stake if theological reflection on the meaning of the Gospel is not combined with earnest attention to social and political problems." This means that the effectiveness of the preaching of the gospel is no longer dependent on the supernatural action of the Holy Spirit through the Word, but is directly proportional to the social and political activity of the church.

Where the political activity of the church may lead one has seen in the LWF affair in Brazil. It certainly did not help the Brazilian people to find the gospel more acceptable when preached by Lutherans who get involved in political activities. The Evangelical Church of the Lutheran Confession, which was to be the host of the V Assembly in Brazil, promoted an evangelism program after the cancellation of the assembly in Porto Alegre. It happened that, instead of advertising it as a Lutheran program of evangelism, they announced it as a program of the Evangelical Church. One certainly may feel sorry for the Lutherans of the world!