

# THE SPRINGFIELDER

Vol. XXXIII

Spring, 1969

No. 1

THE SPRINGFIELDER is published quarterly by the faculty of Concordia Theological Seminary, Springfield, Illinois, of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

## EDITORIAL COMMITTEE

ERICH H. HEINTZEN, *Editor*

RAYMOND F. SURBURG, *Book Review Editor*

DAVID P. SCAER, *Associate Editor*

MARK J. STEEGE, *Associate Editor*

PRESIDENT J. A. O. PREUS, *ex officio*

## Contents

PAGE

### EDITORIAL

*Toward Denver*

### RESPONSES TO "WHAT COMMITMENT TO THE 'SOLA GRATIA' IN THE LUTHERAN CONFESSIONS INVOLVES"

RICHARD J. SCHULTZ ..... 3  
ERICH H. HEINTZEN ..... 7

### RESPONSES TO "THE LUTHERAN CONFESSIONS AND 'SOLA SCRIPTURA'"

EUGENE F. KLUG ..... 12  
FRED KRAMER ..... 23

### RESPONSES TO "THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH IN THE LUTHERAN CONFESSIONS"

JOHN F. JOHNSON ..... 28  
JAMES WEIS ..... 34

BOOK REVIEWS ..... 42

BOOKS RECEIVED ..... 68

INDEX TO VOLUME 32 (1968-69) ..... 70

*Indexed in* INDEX TO RELIGIOUS PERIODICAL LITERATURE, *published by the American Theological Library Association, McCormick Seminary Library, Chicago, Illinois.*

Clergy changes of address reported to Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, Missouri, will also cover mailing change of *The Springfielder*. Other changes of address should be sent to the Business Manager of *The Springfielder*, Concordia Theological Seminary, Springfield, Illinois 62702.

Address communications to the Editor, Erich H. Heintzen, Concordia Theological Seminary, Springfield, Illinois 62702.

# "The Doctrine of The Church" and The Unity of American Lutheranism

JAMES WEIS

LUTHERAN SYNODS in the United States, in spite of divisions and disagreements between them, have been merging with one another in recent decades at such a rate that today about ninety-five percent of the Lutherans in the United States belong to either The Lutheran Church in America, The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, or The American Lutheran Church.

To overcome to some extent this remaining disunity, The American Lutheran Church and The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod in 1964 designated representatives to discuss with one another a number of major areas of doctrine dealt with in the Lutheran Confessions.

The essay, "The Doctrine of the Church in the Lutheran Confessions," developed one of these themes. This essay lays great stress on the seventh article of the Augsburg Confession. It reflects the agreement that exists between these two church bodies on the doctrine of the church. Unfortunately it leaves unclear the implications of the doctrine of the church for the visible or empirical unity of Lutheran church bodies in the United States at the present day. The essay does not come to grips with the problem of defining the basis for maintaining disunity in the visible church, the *ecclesia late dicta universalis*. It does not explicitly address itself to the relationship between the doctrine of the church and the contemporary phenomenon of church bodies. It rather can move from the comment, "Any teaching that is contrary to the Gospel impairs the true unity of the church," to the comment, "Churches endeavoring to establish or preserve unity in the church need earnestly to raise these questions [about differences in doctrine and practice]," (p. 14) without adequately distinguishing between the various ways in which the term "church" is being used and without coming to grips with the question: What is necessary for the unity of the visible church?

The presidents of the districts of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod wrestled with this latter question recently in connection with their deliberations concerning a recommendation for the establishment of pulpit and altar fellowship between the Missouri Synod and The American Lutheran Church. They resolved, though not unanimously, to recommend "That the Synod herewith formally declare itself to be in altar and pulpit fellowship with The American Lutheran Church." The recommendation is explained in part in the following clauses:

The Synod recognizes that some diversities continue to exist, and efforts to work toward a unified evangelical position and practice on the basis of the Word of God have been fruitful; . . .

It is the Synod's conviction that these diversities are not divisive of fellowship and that they are a matter primarily of pastoral care; . . .

This brief paper addresses itself to the theological basis for these two potentially controversial statements against the background of the essay, "The Doctrine of the Church in the Lutheran Confessions."

The definition of the church and its oneness which Philip Melanchthon developed in the seventh and eighth articles of the Augsburg Confession and the Apology laid stress neither on the historical episcopate nor on obedience to the Bishop of Rome, but rather on the Gospel and the sacraments as the determinative and defining marks of the church. Melanchthon was nevertheless aware of the possibility that such a definition could be misunderstood. In the Apology, therefore, he took great pains to make clear that he was "not dreaming about some Platonic republic," but rather that he believed "that this church actually exists, made up of true believers and righteous men scattered throughout the world." (Ap. VII, VIII, 20)

This church, Melanchthon was quick to point out, includes "many weak people in it who build on this foundation perishing structures of stubble, that is, unprofitable opinions. But because they do not overthrow the foundation, these are forgiven them or even corrected. The writings of the holy Fathers show that even they sometimes build stubble on the foundation but that this did not overthrow their faith." (Ap. VII, VIII, 20, 21) Melanchthon went on to distinguish the "unprofitable opinions" of the fathers from the opinions maintained by the Roman Catholic theologians who condemned "our doctrine that forgiveness of sins is received by faith" and who removed "Christ as the foundation." (Ap. VII, VIII, 21)

These remarks support Melanchthon's contention in the Augsburg Confession that the Reformers sincerely condemned the Donatists. Absolute perfection in the church militant was not asserted by Melanchthon—even for those who were followers of Martin Luther. Rather Melanchthon recognized that the practice or discipline of theology—even the act of confessing one's faith—fell into the realm of the Christian's life of sanctification. Like all of life, theology and dogmatic confessions of faith partake in the incompleteness and imperfection which are characteristic of all that is done by those who are members of Christ's church militant.

Unfortunately, it is not all clear in what way these confessional statements about the church and about the dogma confessed by Christians in the church are relevant to a definition of the unity of the visible church as it manifests itself in various ways in the last third of the twentieth century. To put the question quite simply: In what way does a church body partake of the nature of the church?

It is quite clear that in the *Una Sancta* all true Christians are

united by virtue of their common saving faith (*fides qua*). It is, however, not clear what it is that unites the members of Christian church bodies or denominations. At first glance it might seem that members of the same church body are united with one another on the basis of their common confession of faith (*fides quae*). Yet it is self-evident that such unity in this life will never be perfect. The real problem remains: What separates the members of one church body from the members of another church body? What is the basis for refusing fully the hand of fellowship to those whom we recognize to be one with us in Christ—though at odds with us in one or more areas of Christian teaching?

Whatever else may be said, the words of Paul about the unity of the church cannot be ignored:

For as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Rom. 12:4-5. (Cf. I Cor. 12:12-15; Eph. 4:4-6, 15-16.)

There are, on the other hand, complementing these references to the unity of the body of Christ, numerous Biblical admonitions to preserve the purity of the church's teaching.

Jesus then said to the Jews who had believed in Him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." John 8:31-32. (Cf. Matt. 28:19-20.)

It is helpful to remember, however, that many other passages cited in support of separation in the visible church for the sake of the maintenance of pure doctrine, such as Romans 16:17, evidently refer to the discipline and exclusion from the church of individuals rather than of churches. It should also be noted that Paul's admonition to avoid "those who cause divisions and offenses" probably refers, as the Constitution of the Missouri Synod suggests, to schismatics rather than heretics.

The problem remains: What kind of separation should exist in the church militant between church bodies—whatever they are—because of differences over doctrine?

Paul's admonitions in the last chapters of Romans to patience and longsuffering with those who are weak in the faith should certainly be considered in connection with any discussion of the relationship between disunity in doctrine and the disunity of the church. It is certainly legitimate to ask: How can it be determined whether disunity in doctrine reflects the presence of one who is weak in the faith or one who is a false prophet or teacher?

As for the man who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not for disputes over opinions. . . . Why do you pass judgment on your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God. . . . Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for

mutual upbuilding. Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Rom. 14:1, 10, 19-20. (Cf. Rom. 15:1-6.)

Perhaps men must make judgments concerning what the standards of purity of doctrine shall be and what the criteria for determining the degree of purity shall be. It may be a valid venture for a church body to engage in such activity. Indeed, in view of the fact that church bodies—separated from one another—do exist, it is difficult to imagine how a Lutheran church body in the United States in the last third of the twentieth century could avoid making such judgments.

Lutherans in America have actually been wrestling with this problem ever since the first Lutheran congregation in North America found its precarious way into existence over three hundred years ago. First in congregations, later in synods, and finally in a general synod, Lutherans sought—always without success, however—an institutional basis for unity with one another. They were united by a common name, common cultural origins, and common traditions. They were separated, however, by differences in language and, perhaps most important of all, different ways of looking at the Lutheran Confessions.

By the time the Civil War broke out fragmentation of American Lutheranism was further augmented by the arrival of hundreds of thousands of conservative Lutheran immigrants from Europe, who established separate new synods in the American midwest. For a time these new immigrants, often called "Old Lutherans," attempted to unite the Lutheran synods of America on the basis of a common acceptance of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession. This became the hallmark of doctrinal unity. On this basis some of these synods in 1867 did establish the General Council. The guiding spirit of this new body was Charles Porterfield Krauth.

A few years later in 1872 a number of other "Old Lutheran" groups, among them the Missouri, Ohio, Norwegian, and Wisconsin Synods, united to organize the Synodical Conference.

In the Synodical Conference for the first time a new basis was defined for the unity of American Lutheran synods. In a series of theses on church fellowship, Dr. William Sihler enunciated the confessional principle of the Synodical Conference. Theses four through seven explicitly state that unity in doctrine and practice are necessary prerequisites for the unity of the visible church.

**THESIS IV** There is no such thing as an orthodox Lutheran congregation or church body that does not agree to the doctrinal and antithetical statements of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession in their clear and evident sense.

**THESIS V** Anyone who denies necessary, logically deduced conclusions derived from this confession, is also not a genuine member of the Lutheran Church, even though he may still improperly cling to the name of Lutheran.

**THESIS VI** It necessarily follows from the nature of this orthodox confession that ecclesiastical practice must be in accord with it. . . .

**THESIS VII** From this necessary connection between confession and practice, it necessarily follows that a Lutheran synod whose practice is in accord with its ecclesiastical confession will not enter into union or fellowship with a synod whose practice contradicts its confession, even though it may bear the name of Lutheran. (Cf. Lewis Spitz, *Life in Two Worlds*, pp. 145 ff.)

The assertions of these theses contradicted, to some extent, statements made a few years earlier in a letter by Dr. C. F. W. Walther. With reference to a discussion of the admission to congregations and the discipline of lodge members, he explicitly asserted that unity in doctrine, not in ecclesiastical practice, was the necessary prerequisite for unity in the visible church.

. . . May not rigidity in this perhaps easily lead to the Anabaptist concept of the necessary purity of the visible church?

Briefly, I maintain that we must separate doctrine and life, justification and sanctification. . . .

Dear brother, I do not wish, however, that you ever refer to me in this matter. I should not like it at all if a practical question were to be used by the Devil to throw a firebrand into our midst. (Cf. Conrad Bergendoff, *The Doctrine of the Church in American Lutheranism*, pp. 46 ff.)

It would certainly be pointless to cite either Walther or Sihler as a final authority on the definition of the proper basis for the unity of the visible church. Walther's line of reasoning, however, is very relevant to any discussion of the relationship between unity in ecclesiastical practice and the unity of the visible church.

Lutheran theologians today need to take seriously the problem of defining their church bodies in terms of a critical reappraisal of the many ways in which the church has been described in theological treatises produced by American Lutherans. Perhaps in this way they will clarify for themselves what is the nature of the unity they seek.

The distinction developed by C. F. W. Walther and perpetuated by Francis Pieper between the local congregation as a divinely ordained institution and an intercongregational organization (such as a synod) as an institution existing *de jure humano* must be critically reevaluated in terms of its theological soundness and also in terms of its implications for the life of Lutheran church bodies in America. Assuming, however, the validity of Walther's distinction between congregations and church bodies, it is difficult under the present circumstances in the church today to understand how congregations (which exist *de jure divino*) of two different Lutheran synods in the same community could find themselves in fellowship

with one another and still be hindered from exercising that fellowship because the synods (which exist *de jure humano*) of which they are members are not in fellowship with one another.

Pieper, in his *Christian Dogmatics* seems particularly careless in observing this distinction between congregations and church bodies. So, for instance, in his discussion of the church he moves directly from a discussion of "The Local Church a Divine Institution" to a discussion of "Orthodox and Heterodox Churches." (III, 420-423) In this latter chapter, without defining what a church body is or indicating how and to what extent it may be bound by divine ordinances, he simply asserts that "The distinction between orthodox and heterodox church bodies and congregations [note the confusion of the two levels of ecclesiastical organizations] is based on this divine order [of Rom. 16:17 and I Tim. 6:3 ff, according to which 'all Christians without exception are to avoid' those who 'deviate from the Word of God']." (III, 422) The obvious question remains: How and to what extent do these and similar Biblical citations really apply to the general unity of the visible church militant? How do they apply to the unity of church bodies?

It might be suggested that in Pieper's lengthy section on the *ecclesia repraesentiva* he would provide an adequate definition of a church body. Unfortunately he failed to define the relationship between the church (*Una Sancta*), the churches, and the church bodies. (Today we could add a fourth category: church federations or councils.)

Probably as a result of his failure to observe the distinction between the visible and the invisible church, Pieper, in his discussion of orthodox and heterodox churches, ignores the important fact that the church militant is never perfectly obedient to God's will for it. To support, as he does, a separation in the church with the observation, "Chaff and wheat do not belong together," (III, 422) reflects what seems to be a curious twist to Jesus' Parable of the Tares among the Wheat, which, if anything, supports the maintenance of church unity in spite of the presence of "tares" within the community.

It seems possible that the traditional definitions of the church—on various levels of existence—which have been developed in the Missouri Synod might well be more closely examined. While the *Una Sancta* may well be defined in terms of ideals of perfection, completeness and holiness, the institutional—and especially synodical—organizations of the church only share partially in that purity. The unity of the church, insofar as it is a human institution, must of necessity be understood in terms of a church which, like its members, is *simul justus et peccator*. To claim perfection for the church militant—much less for church bodies—is to lapse into an Anabaptist sectarian understanding of the church.

Perhaps the truth is that the necessary purity of a church body is not clearly defined by God in the Bible. It is surely not insignificant that Adolf Hoenecke in his discussion of the *ecclesia late dicta*

(the visible church) in his *Dogmatik*, introduces no Biblical citations to support his discussion of true and false churches.

The true *ecclesia late dicta* (visible church) is to be distinguished from that which is false. This distinction is not absolute. It does not imply that the true church is the church while the false church is in no way the church. This distinction is rather a relative one (*distinctio relativa* or *privativa*). The true church is that external church fellowship which proclaims in their purity the articles of the faith necessary for salvation and administers properly the sacraments. The false church (*ecclesia falsa, impura, corrupta*) is that in which articles of faith are mixed with error and the sacraments are not administered in the right way for the right purpose. (Hoenecke, IV, 160).

Hoenecke goes on to point out that the standard of purity for the True Visible Church is absolute. Unfortunately he did not define precisely how such purity was to be measured. For that matter neither did C. F. W. Walther in his three major works on the church. In Part C of Thesis XXI of *The Evangelical Lutheran Church the True Visible Church of God on Earth*, he merely asserts;

The Evangelical Lutheran Church rejects all fraternal and churchly fellowship with those who reject its Confessions in whole or in part.

In similar fashion the General Council asserted in the Galesburg Rule on Pulpit and Altar Fellowship: "Lutheran pulpits for Lutheran ministers only; Lutheran altars for Lutheran communicants only." (Wolf, *Documents of Lutheran Unity*, Document 79). In his 1877 Theses on the Galesburg Rule Charles Porterfield Krauth defended the existence of a separate Lutheran Church by the following observation in Thesis 50:

If the present *division of Christendom* can be justified, if the so-called *denominationalism* is to stand before the judgment bar of God, it must be able to show a ground of supreme necessity for its existence. Unless a denomination has a divine warrant for its separate existence, it is simply a sect. If it claims no divine warrant, but alleges mere human convenience or preference for its existence, it is a self-convicted sect. (Wolf, Document 80)

Since the period between 1866 and 1872 when the General Council and the Synodical Conference were organized, the principles enunciated by Krauth have come to be reflected in the constituted organizational structures of most Lutheran church bodies in the United States. Thus, for instance, the Washington Declaration, adopted by the United Lutheran Church in 1920, asserted:

We believe . . . that distinctions must be recognized between one group and another . . . We believe that those groups in

which the Word of God is most purely preached and confessed according to the Holy Scriptures, and in which the Sacraments are administered in the closest conformity to the institution of Christ, will be the most complete expression of the one, holy Church. (Wolf, Document 148)

In spite of all that has been written in these statements and in others such as the Brief Statement and the United Testimony on Faith and Life, no real Biblical or theological basis has been developed to serve as a foundation for the development of structured Lutheran church bodies in the context of American denominationalism.

Among Lutherans in the United States two basic principles for determining the unity of the visible church—and of Lutheranism in America—are currently in tension with one another. The one principle defines unity in dogma, confessed in the symbols of the Lutheran Church, as the proper basis for Lutheran unity, while the other principle defines total unity in doctrine and practice as the necessary prerequisite for the establishment of Lutheran unity which would manifest itself in pulpit and altar fellowship. The synods which were affiliated with the Synodical Conference—among them the Missouri Synod—were inclined to assert the correctness of the second principle, but the constitutions of the three major Lutheran church bodies in the United States—among them the Missouri Synod—commit them to the first principle, the confessional principle of unity on the basis of a common acceptance of the symbolical statements of faith contained in the Book of Concord.

In the context of American denominationalism, if Lutheran church bodies avoid the attempt to define clearly their unity and their relations with one another and with the rest of Christendom, it will probably cost them their very existence. If the conclusions tentatively drawn in this paper are correct, the principle of *total* unity in doctrine and practice is an improper and unrealistic basis for church unity—and of course also for pulpit and altar fellowship between church bodies. Rather, the principle of unity on the basis of a sincere, common acceptance of the Lutheran Confessions seems to provide the precision as well as the flexibility appropriate for the determination of the existence of unity in the church militant. It was evidently this latter principle which was followed by those who were involved in the Missouri Synod's discussions with The American Lutheran Church and also by those who are recommending that the Missouri Synod at its 1969 convention in Denver, Colorado, resolve to establish pulpit and altar fellowship with The American Lutheran Church.

Under the guidance and blessing of God, Lutherans will hopefully continue to attempt to clarify on the basis of the Lutheran Confessions both in theory and in reality that which evidently can ultimately be neither clarified nor perfected on this side of eternity—namely the visible church.