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A Response To The Leuenberg Concord

TRANSLATED BY JOHN DRICKAMER

The Outside Limits Of Lutheran
Confessionalism In Contemporary
Biblical Interpretation

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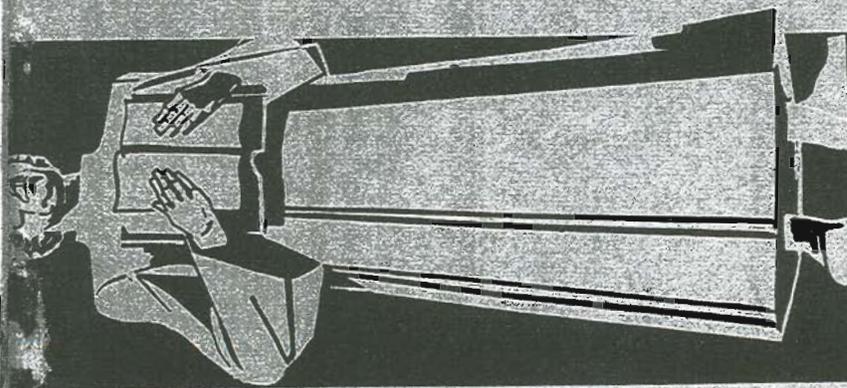
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A Response To The Leuenberg Concord

*Produced by the Churchly Gathering
for the Bible and Confession of the
Faith In the Evangelical-Lutheran State
Church of Hannover.*

Translated by JOHN DRICKAMER

THE DRAFT of a "Concord of the Reformation Churches in Europe" [translator's note: see "The Leuenberg Concord," *The Springfielder*, Vol. XXXV, No. 4, March, 1972, pp. 241-249] has been submitted to the respective churches so that they may react to it by March 1, 1973. Such a short time can result in hasty decisions with unforeseeable consequences.

Though this is our first critical reaction to the 'Concord,' it is not our intention merely to point out isolated inconsistencies. The intended ecclesiastical communion is really an attempt at unification. This it does with the Law and not the Gospel. There is a danger that this procedure might have fanatical [*schwaermerisch*] and legalistic results. According to the unanimous testimony of the Lutheran Reformation, the confusion and mixture of Law and Gospel with the substitution of one for the other is an apocalyptic phenomenon, signifying the apostasy of the last days. The confession of the church may not be replaced with an ecclesiological scheme concerned chiefly with the institutional church and lacking in historical perspective.

It is not just a matter of details. Rather, the Gospel itself is at stake. Luther's constant reminder that the Antichrist does not sit in front of but rather in the temple is the "handwriting on the wall" (Daniel 6:25-27) of a "progressive church" which listens ultimately to all kinds of voices but no longer to her Lord's. The draft of the 'Concord' is a misdirected undertaking with respect to the preservation of the heritage of the Reformation. We fear that it is nothing more than an official recognition of a Law theology, dictated by liberal theology, and intended to be a third confession.

The text of the 'Concord' indicates the serious crises which the ecumenical movement has encountered for some time. Ecumenism, involving the Protestant, the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox churches, needs even more the Lutheran voice. For the sake of the truth of the Gospel, this voice dare not be silent. Ratifying the 'Concord' can be the first, irreversible step, to a union based on consensus, spelling the end not only of Lutheranism but also of a genuine ecumenism.

We would like to point out also that the Churchly Gathering for the Bible and Confession has requested from the Lutheran Church of Hannover a definitive clarification on two points: How the necessary *magnus consensus* [great consensus] of the 'Concord' is to be determined? What is the status of the Hannoverian State Church

pastor who is bound to the Lutheran Confessions but who personally rejects the 'Concord'?

The draft of the 'Concord' presents many difficulties which make the document as a whole even more questionable. Little justice is done either to the large and long established churches or to the smaller denominations in Europe. If it has reference essentially to the Lutheran-Reformed dialogue, that should be more clearly expressed, especially if the draft is to be a sort of pattern for the future.

The objections to the draft may be considered more precisely under six headings:

I. TOWARDS A LUTHERN UNDERSTANDING OF THE CHURCH ACCORDING TO A. C. VII

1. In spite of the short and seemingly positive reference at the conclusion of Thesis 4 to Catholic Christianity and the significance of the three ancient creeds, it remains questionable whether the draft does justice to the concept of the *una sancta ecclesia perpetuo mansura* [the one holy church, which endures forever, A. C. VII, 1]. Perhaps reference to the creeds is a formality. The 'Concord' treats the facts of church history in a relatively careless manner.

Thesis 4, which states that the Lutherans and the Reformed together opposed the "ecclesiastical tradition of that time," overlooks the fact that the Lutherans understood themselves as the true adherents of the *ecclesia catholica*. This is attested by the Augsburg Confession and by the understanding of Roman Catholics and Lutherans of their legal status in the Empire up to the time of the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. The historical position of the Reformed should also have been more exactly presented. The common protest of the Lutherans and Reformed against the Roman Church of the 16th century is hardly grounds for a concord in the 20th.

The Gospel must be defined over against an external legalism and fanaticism whose chief character is protest. It has to be asked whether in Thesis 4 the intra-Protestant disagreements have been overlooked in any case, Luther included Zwingli among the fanatics. The significance of the transition of leadership from Zwingli to Calvin should have been discussed.

2. Concerning the hazy concept of ecclesiastical communion, there is already a great deal expressed in saying that the concept of the *una sancta ecclesia perpetuo mansura* [the one holy church, which is to endure forever] contains in itself elements of ecclesiastical communion which have never been questioned. That is just as true for the church in relationship to the Third Article of the Nicene Creed as it is for the church with respect to Baptism as the one ecumenical sacrament.

3. While the Lutherans certainly do not want to back down from the *satis est* [the statement that agreement in the doctrine of the gospel and in the administration of the sacraments is sufficient for ecclesiastical communion] of A.C. VII, the question still remains, in view of Thesis 6, whether the 'Concord' uses an unclear definition of the Gospel which makes consensus easy. Precisely for this reason the *satis est* dare not be interpreted to allow relativism.

II. WHAT IS ECCLESIASTICAL COMMUNION?

1. Misgivings about the 'Concord's' concept of the church is further confirmed in the discussion of the debatable concept of an ecclesiastical communion. The primary goal is not a union but an accommodation in which the old confessions will retain their validity as a formality. Still a closer ecclesiastical communion of the Reformation churches is desired.

2. In view of the Third Article of the Nicene Creed it must be asked whether one can really say that there has been absolutely no ecclesiastical communion till the present. Ecclesiastical communion in the 'Concord' is evidently understood in an institutional sense. This is a considerable shift of accent right at the start. Surreptitiously involved here might be the notion that practical considerations take precedence over doctrinal ones, a notion that does not come from the Reformation.

3. From the perspective of dogmatic theology, it seems that such a concept of the church is derived from Schleiermacher's idea of the *congregatio sanctorum* [the congregation of saints] in Section 115 of *The Christian Faith*, "The Christian church takes shape through the coming together of regenerate individuals to form a system of mutual interaction and co-operation." The 'Concord's' concept of denominational communion as the coming together of the confessional groups for common action is similar to Schleiermacher's ideas on the congregation. Ecclesiastical communion would then be something manufactured by the application of the Law. Thus the *communio sanctorum* becomes meaningless.

At the same time denominational communion [*Kirchengemeinschaft*] is not guided by altar fellowship [*Abendmahlsgemeinschaft*]. In this connection it must be pointed out that the Arnoldshain Theses on the Lord's Supper have not been officially accepted by the churches. Silence on this issue dare not be interpreted as acceptance.

Attaining agreement on the individual theological points is obviously becoming increasingly more difficult, as the work of the Committee on Baptism of the Evangelical Church in Germany shows. Therefore the 'Concord's' attempt is questionable to settle all the disagreements with one stroke and so extensively as to make inter-denominational communion possible. If the minute points are becoming increasingly difficult, this will be even more so for the entire issue, unless the parts are relativized for the sake of the whole.

III. THE RELATIVIZING VIEW OF HISTORY

1. This relativizing tendency is quite clear in Thesis 5: The "questions of the new era, historico-critical Scripture research, and the ecclesiastical renewal movement" are said to have brought about an advance in the church's thought and life. As superficially true as this is, this statement shows a tendency to relativize, especially with respect to the "challenges of the new era." The church should be guided by the truth of the Gospel, not by current problems.

This results in such meaningless statements as: "It was simply no longer possible to meet the intellectual and social demands in the new era with the thought forms of the 16th and 17th centuries." On

the contrary, Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms still seems relevant today. A concord can not achieve its purposes if it simply dismisses as antiquated the doctrines of government and of the royal lordship of Christ. To this very day they are the subject of theological discussion.

2. The 'Concord's' claim to see a distinction between the fundamental witness of the confessions of the Reformation and their "historically conditioned thought forms" is unclear, unless a more exact explanation of what is intended is given. The historic confessions are obviously relativized when the 'Concord' speaks of the "actualized confession." Any confessional statement can be neutralized by "historisizing" and "actualizing" it.

3. How really valid is the assertion that the thought forms are outmoded? For example the old Reformed formula that the *finitum non capax infiniti* [the finite cannot contain the infinite], can be found as recently as in the Arnoldshain Theses and in Karl Barth's *Commentary on Romans* with its theology of the *diastasis*, the final form of his doctrine of reconciliation, and his doctrine of Baptism with its distinction between spirit and water baptism. Barth's work shows that the old formulas, *finitum capax infiniti* and *finitum non capax infiniti*, are not outmoded for contemporary theology.

On top of all this, the concluding sentence of this section with its call to "freedom of faith," can only cause skepticism. There are no controls preventing a relativistic and subjectivistic misinterpretation.

IV. IS THERE A COMMON UNDERSTANDING OF THE GOSPEL?

1. This common understanding of the Gospel must be doubted right from the start if the 'Concord' does not even make an attempt to distinguish the Law from the Gospel, so basic for Lutheranism. This shows how little real progress has taken place. The definition of justification as "the message of the free grace of God" (Theses 7-12) covers only the antitheses discussed there. Therefore it remains unclear what meaning justification has for the Reformed.

2. The theology of the cross also remains vague (Thesis 9). The *satisfactio vicaria* is hinted at, at least, but the understanding of the cross in the sense of the revelation of the love of God is open for all the misunderstandings, from the Socinians' to Ritschl's and to that of current liberal theology. Luther's theology of the cross is so weakened that justification can no longer be understood as the "happy exchange of places." A logical consequence in Thesis 10 is a tendency to depersonalize Christ. It is unclear whether the expression of the righteousness in Christ also contains his *praesentia* [efficacious presence], a weakness which showed itself already in the Arnoldshain Theses on the Lord's Supper.

3. The christological view of the future also remains unclear. What is meant by the opening of the future for the world through Christ as the coming One (Thesis 9)? Also, the expression in Thesis 10, the certainty that 'God will consummate his lordship,' should be under eschatology and not Christology. Christology would assert that Christ will come in majesty and for judgment in the real future. The

last judgment is thus omitted. So is forensic justification. The Pauline tension between the righteousness of faith and judgment according to works is not found in the 'Concord.' Thesis 10 should conclude by referring to a 'new communion,' rather than to a 'new humanity.'

4. The responsibility of the Christian for the future in connection with the new righteousness should be more clearly expressed in several respects. The new righteousness [*Gerechtigkeit*] and earthly justice [*Gerechtigkeit*] should have been more clearly distinguished from one another and more closely related to one another. The accent on judgment is too weak, especially since a misunderstanding in the sense of a non-efficaciousness of the judgment is not excluded. Also, the righteousness of the Christian certainly is more than a renewal of understanding of natural law. This certainly must be mentioned in view of current notions of the 'second Enlightenment.'

Failure to come to a definite position results from not giving Luther's doctrine of the kingdom of the left hand its rightful place. The royal lordship of Christ, important for the Reformed, also does not appear. Thus the 'Concord' sacrifices theological principles and does not come to a real agreement.

Besides, the missionary task disappears behind the limp formulas of a program of social work. The Reformed and Lutheran traditions are too important either to become casualties of historically conditioned accommodations or simply to be obligingly dismissed. In the alternatives between real missionary work and a program of social work there is more at stake than a mere devaluation of Christian activity. At stake is the concept of Christian activity that conforms with the Gospel.

V. THE DOCTRINE OF THE SACRAMENTS

1. Unmistakable throughout the document is a strong reliance on a theology which fits well with a spiritualizing interpretation of Christ's presence by the Holy Spirit in the Sacrament of the Altar.

No mention is made that only one baptism is necessary. Obviously for the 'Concord' there is no *proprium*, no special individual or specific function for baptism. This follows from such a general theology of the word of God. This reference to following Christ can be ambiguously interpreted as a call to *mortificatio* [mortification] in the sense of sanctification but also as a historically conditioned call to action. It seems as if in the 'Concord' certain traditional Reformation doctrines are to be silently removed without explanation as to their scope and content.

2. The Thesis 15 on the Lord's Supper renounces the Real Presence. The elements are misunderstood with respect to their meaning in a manner which reminds one of the Altered Augsburg Confession. Thus the presence of Christ, who gives himself to us in the assurance of the forgiveness of sins, remains oddly obscure. Also, the new experience of membership in Christ's body threatens to replace the presence of Christ and of his work as central. Further, it must also remain clear that belief in the 'Real Presence' of the body and blood of Jesus Christ is more than just a means to a new experience of fellowship, a misconception which has led to weird caricatures

of sacramental fellowship in questionable celebrations of the Eucharist, especially in "ecclesiastical" youth work. The impetus to Christian service can be supplied by other fellowship experiences.

Further, the confession of the 'presence of the risen One' is evidently intended to replace the 'Real Presence' (Thesis 16). On the other hand, the celebration, the action, the execution receives the heavy emphasis. The Lord's Supper is understood as a confessional act, resembling the Reformed position. In the entire discussion the statements on the sacraments in no way do justice to the Lutheran position. Traditionally this would have to be the decisive norm in a concord of this type.

VI. CONSEQUENCES FOR ECCLESIASTICAL COMMUNION

1. In the light of these positions it is only logical that the censures of the churches against each other no longer apply (Theses 17-28). The old antitheses have already been so extensively neutralized and harmonized that it is only a formality to declare that they do not exist. Therefore a concord produced in this manner would be held together not by the bond of unity and peace but rather by relativism. Both parties could then be given new definitions of what was meant by their disapproval and could replace the condemnations in the Augsburg Confession with these new definitions.

2. A few discrepancies in Thesis 18 should be pointed out. The formulation "without reservation" stands in tension with the idea of judgment. In connection with the *praesentia* [efficacious presence] of Christ in the Lord's Supper only the reception of bread and wine is mentioned. The reception of the body and blood of Christ is omitted. Could it be that the doctrine of the *manducatio impiorum* (unbelievers also eat the body and blood of Christ in the Lord's Supper) is being revoked with respect to its content, even though the words are used?

3. In accord with the thoroughgoing antisupernaturalism, the eating and drinking take precedence over the *est* [the essence]. Agreement on the actions involved (Thesis 19) can also be misunderstood as an agreement on the objective reality so that an exclusively anti-Roman unity is produced without a sufficient definition over against antisupernaturalism which relativizes the *est*.

4. The formulation "he [God] makes Jesus as the crucified and risen One present for us" (Thesis 21) should be scrutinized. The true divinity is not included with respect to the cross and resurrection so that only the humanity remains. This does not agree with the Council of Chalcedon [A.D. 451]. At this juncture the intensity of the struggle between Luther and Zwingli threatens to break out again. The *vere Deus* [the divinity of Jesus] is conspicuously avoided. (Cf. also especially Thesis 9).

5. In the 'Concord,' Christology is handled separately from the doctrine of the Trinity. Here again the background of the *non capax* [the teaching that the finite cannot contain the infinite, cf. III, 3] is seen.

6. The self-disclosure of God (Thesis 22) remains unconnected with the trinitarian framework. If they refuse to make state-

ments about the supernatural, only antisupernaturalism, i.e., 'a closed universe,' is left. Thus the old theological arguments (Thesis 23) are artificially resolved. The old Lutheran-Reformed points of contention are dissolved in favor of a non-supernatural "self-disclosure."

7. In relation to Theses 24-26, where has the Reformed party retracted its old position on double predestination? Here the Reformed should be more precise. In Thesis 24 the phrase "unconditional acceptance of the sinful man" might suggest that there is no need for repentance. Predestination, as an eternal call to salvation, is inadequately handled.

8. In connection with the worship forms (Thesis 28), the legalistic tendency of the Reformed with respect to offices and ordinances dare not be overlooked. The total failure to consider the distinction between Law and Gospel is seen in a trifling with questions of order and congregational structure. This does not do justice to the Reformed. There is no mention of the fact that the *praesentia* [the efficacious presence] of Christ in the worship service cannot be accepted by the Reformed in the same way Lutherans do. At the same time there is a trifling with the concerns of the Lutheran divine service in the sense of Luther's 'German Mass.'

9. All of the earlier misgivings are concentrated in Thesis 33. Unavoidable is the false impression that the mutual recognition of churches as churches depends on pulpit and altar fellowship, an impression that is in direct contradiction to the Lutheran assessment of the catholic tradition. It appears extremely questionable to understand ecclesiastical communion entirely from the perspective of ordination and intercelebration.

ANOTHER RESPONSE FROM EUROPE

Prof. Dr. Ernst Sommerlath, editor of the *Theologische Literaturzeitung*, together with Dr. August Kinme and other well known theologians have responded to the 'Leuenberg Concord' in a document entitled "Response of the Lutheran Unity Group to the Draft of the 'Concord of Reformation Churches in Europe.'" According to this document the 'Concord' is not precise enough in defining the Gospel. The administration of the sacraments is hardly dealt with at all. In addition, this document expresses concern over the lack of time for consideration before the 'Concord' is expected to be finalized. Finally, the Lutheran Unity Group is concerned that dealing interdenominationally but on a regional level is running the risk of offending the churches in the rest of the world and hindering more far-reaching ecumenical attempts.