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Lutheran-Reformed Dialogues Concluded

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THE SECOND ROUND of Lutheran-Reformed Conversations, or Dialogues, has come to an end. The final meeting, the sixth in the series, was held at Princeton Theological Seminary, September 27, 1974. A primary purpose of this wrap-up session was the issuance of a report. The respective leaders of the Lutheran Council in the U.S.A. and the North American Reformed Alliance of Churches hoped for a joint report. But this was not to be. Because this final report included statements of consensus in regard to doctrinal points which had not in fact been resolved, the representatives of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod were not able in good conscience to affix their signatures and asked instead to file a separate report. The rest of the conferees, however, refused this request. As a result, Missouri was virtually silenced in the final assay. Towards the end of this essay, I shall convey the report of the Missouri Synod's representatives. Before giving more details about this silencing action, I shall review briefly the history of the Lutheran-Reformed Conversations.

The initial dialogues took place during the years 1962-1966. They ended with the publication of *Marburg Revisited*, a collection of the essays presented during the first round. Very little tangible effect came out of these meetings, even though they closed with the optimistic statement that "as a result of our studies and discussions we see no insuperable obstacles to pulpit and altar fellowship, and, therefore, we recommend to our parent bodies that they encourage their constituent churches to enter into discussions looking forward to intercommunion and the fuller recognition of one another's ministries" (*Marburg Revisited*, p. 191, Emphasis added). Virtually nothing ever followed from what appeared to be an amazing ecclesiastical break-through, apparently because nobody *really* believed that basic differences had actually been resolved and consensus achieved. None of the Reformed bodies even bothered to take official note of the dialogues. It was Missouri which considered most carefully the implications of the dialogues and the participation of its representatives, Professors Herbert J. A. Bouman, Martin H. Franzmann, and Paul M. Bretscher. Basic theological issues had been dealt with inadequately and, in fact, skirted. All this caused considerable alarm in the Missouri Synod, especially in view of the glowing statement of consensus that "no insuperable obstacles to pulpit and altar fellowship" remained.

Yet Missouri was ready to go the second mile and to explore further the claimed Lutheran-Reformed consensus in a second round of dialogues. As the leaders of the participating bodies laid out the program and selected representatives for the second round, they stated the following objective: "To assess the consensus and the remaining differences in the theology and life of the participating churches." Sponsorship was forthcoming from the Division of Theological Studies

of the Lutheran Council in the U.S.A. and the North American Area of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. The SPRINGFIELDER for September 1972, in the essay "From 'Marburg Revisited' to 'Princeton '72,'" lists the representatives and their respective church bodies.

It would be fair to state that the initial thrust on the part of almost all the participants in the second round of meetings was to accept *Marburg Revisited* as *de facto* evidence for existing consensus and to urge its conclusions upon the church bodies. Since the Missouri Synod's representatives could not accept *Marburg Revisited* as a statement of a Lutheran-Reformed consensus, the conferees next opted for the European union document, the *Leuenberg Concord*. A critique of this debated "concord" appeared in the SPRINGFIELDER for December 1972. Though its deficiencies were repeatedly voiced by Missouri, the conferees retained their affection for this unionistic document. In the final report, at the last and sixth meeting, the conferees stated: "It is possible that a formal agreement among our churches in America might have been achieved if our group had recommended that *Leuenberg* be sent to them to be signed." In so stating, the conferees—Lutherans and Reformed alike—were, of course, totally discounting Missouri's objections.

Missouri's strictures against a compromise document like *Leuenberg* were well grounded. This fact became plain enough during the dialogues, especially when attention focused finally upon one of the historically controverted doctrines, such as the Lord's Supper. Little wonder, therefore, that the final report of the conferees includes the admission that "we attempted to express our unity in terms other than *Leuenberg*, but were unsuccessful." Even though sharp cleavage surfaced on the matter of the Real Presence, the final report contended that these were not basic doctrinal differences, but differences merely "concerning the *mode* of Christ's presence." This assertion is beyond all credibility. Such differences, they held, "ought not to be regarded as obstacles to pulpit and altar fellowship." Even Zwingli's position had been openly avowed by some of the Reformed. Yet the final summation blithely and recklessly claimed that there "exists a consensus among Lutheran and Reformed Churches concerning the following *doctrinal* points: the Lord's Supper is 1) a sacrament; 2) a means of grace, in which 3) the true (proper) body and blood of Jesus Christ are present and are eaten and drunk." On the surface these appear to be good and clear avowals of the Scriptural doctrine. But the various presentations and discussions (the papers, as well as the final report, are available through LCUSA) had shown that there were deep doctrinal differences of the same kind and same significance as Luther had with Zwingli at Marburg and with the Sacramentarians in general. Artful phrasing cannot finally suffice to dispel all doubts and misgivings, particularly when the Real Presence is actually being denied. This truth the Formula of Concord makes brilliantly clear in its article on the Lord's Supper (FC VII).

The mood among the conferees at this second round of Lutheran-Reformed dialogues was for a consensus statement in any case, and, we might say, at any cost. While they admitted that "the dif-

ferences may involve error," they were resolved nonetheless to reach this conclusion: "We observe that while The American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church in America and the Reformed Churches adhere to the *doctrine* of the Lord's Supper expressed in their respective Confessions of faith, in practice they are saying that the confessional differences concerning the *mode* of Christ's presence ought not to be regarded as obstacles to pulpit and altar fellowship." As the record will show, there had been virtually *no* discussion of the respective confessions and their stated differences on the doctrine of the Lord's Supper or any other doctrine. Virtually no attention had been given to the Biblical texts dealing with the Lord's Supper. With *Leuenberg* sticking in their minds, the conferees were in a mood to be dominated by the idea that the "historically conditioned thought-forms" at the time of the Reformation and in the historic confessions ought not bind us today, when "the historical/critical investigation of Scripture" had, according to *Leuenberg*, opened new doors to inter-faith alliances.

As might be expected, there was dismay on Missouri's part over the conferees' determination to press through for a statement of consensus in spite of its evident lack. As in the case of the first round of dialogues, it was a travesty to fabricate that sort of statement of consensus in view of the actual disagreement on a doctrine like the Lord's Supper. Such action could only confuse the churches. Honesty would have required a frank disclosure of failure to reach doctrinal concord. Nevertheless, the issues were again skirted by ambiguous wording which claimed sufficient consensus for altar and pulpit fellowship. Missouri's representatives respectfully declined to subscribe such a joint statement. Instead, they requested that their own report be appended to the report drawn up by the rest of the conferees. The majority of the conferees, however, rejected the idea of a minority report. Missouri's report was simply dismissed. The official minutes bear record: "When the group had completed its discussion of the LC-MS document, it was moved, seconded, and carried that the minutes show that the report of the representatives of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod had been 1) heard; 2) fully discussed; 3) held to be factually in error at points and procedurally incorrect." That Missouri's report had been heard was true. But it is at best an overstatement to say that it had been "*fully discussed*" and actually shown to be "*in error*" and "*procedurally incorrect*." It is a matter of record that the conferees hurried their report to a conclusion on the evening of September 27. They refused to hold the further sessions on the following day for which the schedule called. Perhaps little would have been gained by additional discussion anyway. For by this time, after six meetings, it was painfully plain that there was no serious intent to involve basic theological content in the dialogues. Some, it is true, expressed their concern that the dialogues might turn in this direction; but for the most part it was apparent that Missouri had already embroiled them too much in theological discussion of doctrinal differences and, in the words of one of the Lutheran conferees, caused them to become too "preoccupied with theology." Missouri was politely—sometimes impolitely, especially by some of the other

Lutherans—being shown the door. Needless to say, the end result of these dialogues for Missouri's representatives was the awakening, not entirely unexpected, to the fact that the other Lutheran participants were ready to adopt a basis for altar and pulpit fellowship which was totally inadequate, and unabashedly unionistic. This attitude is, of course, quite out of character for those bound by the Lutheran Confessions. The Reformed participants, in turn, indicated that they were tired out by discussions involving doctrinal strife amongst the Lutheran participants. Most of them had long ago adopted much less stringent basis for altar and pulpit fellowship, taking unionistic practices for granted. They were simply puzzled by a call for *de facto* unity in doctrine as the proper basis for altar and pulpit fellowship. It is for this reason, then, that the report of Missouri's representatives is being given here. As previously stated, the other Lutheran and Reformed conferees refused to publish it as an appendix to their final report. It ought not, however, to be hidden away by that action, if for no other reason than the need to complete the record.

Twice now experience has shown that Lutheran-Reformed dialogues, structured under the sponsorship of super-boards, like LCUSA and the Reformed Alliance of Churches, lead nowhere. This is especially true for a church body like the Missouri Synod which is still committed to Scriptural integrity and confessional loyalty. There has been an "updating" of so-called confessional theology and Biblical study according to the historical-critical methodology among most Lutheran and Reformed church bodies. This methodology has by now eroded a genuine confessional stance and trusting reliance upon the Scriptural Word as divinely inspired, authoritative, and inerrant. Dialoguing with other church bodies under such circumstances is a whole new ball game. One option is to adopt a watered-down platform for doing theology. The other option is to insist that it is imperative that all talks or dialogues be conducted on a one-to-one basis with other church bodies, particularly Lutheran, that (1) profess sincere interest in effecting unity on the basis of doctrinal oneness of mind and heart and mouth and (2), above all, are willing to proceed with unquestioned regard for and acceptance of Holy Scripture and the articles of faith clearly taught there. Dialogues or conversations, after all, are not needed to reveal that there are other professing Christians in the world. Lutherans have always recognized the truth of this fact on the basis of their doctrine of the Church. But it is absolutely essential that the settling of controversies and differences on doctrine be done in keeping with God's command and in line with the only rule prescribed in God's Word, unity of faith and utterance! When Luther compared faith to a mathematical point, he stressed the clarity, the certainty of faith's content. That content is provided not by that by which the Christian believes, his faith itself, but rather by that *which* he believes, the external Word. And that external Word, Holy Scripture, is clear—above all, in its proclamation of Him in whom alone there is salvation, Jesus Christ.

Report of the Representatives of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod on the Lutheran-Reformed Dialogues in the U.S.A. 1972-74

IN SUBMITTING A SEPARATE REPORT, we, the representatives of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, do so earnestly, aware of the apostolic injunction to Christians everywhere that they “endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4, 3) and “that there be no divisions among you” (1 Cor. 1, 10); but equally mindful, too, that included in the exhortation is this, that “by the name of the Lord Jesus Christ ye all speak the same thing” and “be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (1 Cor. 1, 10). To be “like-minded one toward another,” to glorify God “with one mind and one mouth” (Rom. 15, 5.6), is not an option which Christ’s followers can take or leave, but a God-given presupposition for genuine Christian fellowship.

We herewith express sincere appreciation for the friendly invitation to share in the dialogues, for the genuine good will shown us by our fellow participants, and for the generally patient hearing given us as we joined in the attempt to assess the claimed consensus and the admitted remaining differences. In the background for us all loomed the controversial opinion of *Marburg Revisited* that there remained “no insuperable obstacles to altar and pulpit fellowship.”

Accordingly, when we now find that we are unable to subscribe the joint statement, we do so with regrets and with the plea that we not be understood as judging the personal faith of our fellow conferees. But we cannot in good conscience set our signatures to a document that claims sufficient consensus for altar and pulpit fellowship. We do not feel that such consensus exists or even that we have made any concentrated effort to heal our fundamental doctrinal differences through the patient and obedient study of and listening to the Word of God, Holy Scripture.

We gratefully attest that our meetings have not evidenced any direct attacks on Holy Scripture. In fact, there has been frequent and professed respect for Holy Scripture. But there has been some reluctance to recognize unequivocally that Scripture is the Word of God whose authoritative voice speaks clearly to us on controverted points of doctrinal difference.

The result is that the conferees have *not*:

- attained a genuine basis for fellowship;
- reconciled any existing doctrinal differences, even though they have somewhat inconsistently admitted “serious errors”;
- demonstrated valid grounds for accepting the Leuenberg Agreement of 1973;

- shown *de facto* adherence to their respective Confessions, but have set them aside as viable instruments for the sake of declaring fellowship without formal agreement;
- recognized the seriousness of divergent methods of Scriptural interpretation, but merely profess that there is need for “fresh hearing of the Gospel in the light of their (each of the conferees) understanding of Holy Scripture,”
- stated clearly the nature and content of the Gospel itself, but have sometimes obfuscated it with ambiguous references to contemporary social issues.

We regret, therefore, that our conversations have not been more fruitful in terms of tangible results in the quest for church unity. If nonetheless there has been some positive fruit to our efforts—and we believe there is some—it has to do with recognition of the fact that search for unity in the church must be grounded on an unequivocal and unambiguous subscription to the articles taught by God’s Holy Word. Only such unquestioned acceptance of Biblical authority can afford a proper basis for fellowship based on actual agreement on the articles of faith.

In looking forward to future dialogues in the interest of unity and fellowship, we believe that experience has now shown that there is likely to be more promise of and potential for God-pleasing success if future meetings are conducted between individual churches rather than with larger groups of churches. On that level the prospect would seem to be brighter, and the hope more realizable, for delegated representatives, or commissioners, to address directly the differences which divide the churches and to work for a God-pleasing consensus.

May God graciously grant that Christians everywhere be filled with holy zeal, so that the unity which Christ’s church, the *una sancta*, possesses under His Lordship, may by the power of the Word be furthered here on earth among the splintered divisions of Christendom.

September 27, 1974

Signed:

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