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Foreword

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No. 1

Foreword

As one at the beginning of a new year views the religious scene, it cannot be denied that in the Lutheran Church more discussion of questions of doctrine and practice is taking place than has been witnessed in it for at least one, probably for more decades. The great issue is again whether the course of strict, uncompromising confessionalism which this journal and its chief ancestor, *Lehre und Wehre*, consistently sponsored from the very beginning is morally, that is, in the court of God and our own conscience, defensible, and not only defensible, but right, proper, just, and required. The opinion is frequently voiced that in this tragic world with its political convulsions, its class-strife and antagonisms and its bloody wars, to which must be added the wide-spread confusion, perplexity, and anxious seeking in the religious sphere, there is no room for a Church and a church-paper which firmly and unyieldingly insist on loyalty to the Lutheran Confessions and which oppose the plan of establishing fellowship on any other basis than such loyalty. The attitude of confessional Lutherans is called an anachronism, a survival from an age when allegedly religious polemics were the only diet people relished, and a person's orthodoxy, so it is said, was measured by the amount of verbal dynamite he hurled at his opponents. It is held to be one of the barriers hindering what is termed the coming of the kingdom of God. Moreover, it is declared to be thoroughly un-Christian and unscriptural, a blotch on the fair escutcheon of Christianity. The dawning of a new year is a good time for examining one's course, especially when it is criticized, and for determining anew whether it should be adhered to or abandoned. And so we purpose to devote the opening pages of Volume XII of the CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY to an examination of the charge that the position of unflinching loyalty to the Lutheran

Confessions which this journal wishes to hold and defend is wrong, indefensible, outmoded, and harmful to the best interests of the Church of our blessed Savior Jesus Christ.

In entering upon our investigation, we state that it is not our intention here to argue with Modernists. They have no conception of the true meaning of Christianity and of the Gospel of redemption, and to speak to them of doctrinal loyalty is as futile as to play a Brahms symphony for people that are totally deaf. Let the music be ever so sublime and beautiful, it will be ineffective if the sense required for receiving it is lacking. Before one can fruitfully debate with the Modernist about the importance of Christian doctrine, the latter will have to learn who Christ is and why faith in Him is essential for everlasting salvation.

Before our mind's eye arise men who love the Lord Jesus and His Word and trust in the saving power of His blood and who cannot see why anybody will champion aloofness from people that, professing to be Christians, disagree with him in one or the other doctrine of the Holy Scriptures. Among those who find such aloofness reprehensible are men that enthusiastically exalt the glories of the Lutheran Church and would give their life for its victory. What the latter in particular cannot understand is how a Lutheran can be so insistent on the correctness of his own beliefs as to refuse fellowship to other Lutherans who differ with him concerning certain doctrines of the Bible. It is the questions and arguments of people of this type which we intend to advert to as we once more scrutinize the position we in common with our Church are holding.

When we contend for the full, uncompromising acceptance of the Lutheran Confessions as a condition for church-fellowship, the key-stone of our position is the conviction that the teachings contained in our Symbolical Books are not the result of human speculation but the truth as revealed to us in the Holy Scriptures. While we do not consider Luther a divinely inspired leader, we do hold that the teachings which he, after the sad, long night of the Dark Ages, brought to light are the golden truths taught by the men of God that spoke as they were moved by the Holy Ghost. What the Lutheran fathers confessed at Augsburg and reiterated in the Apology and the Smalcald Articles, what Luther laid down in his Small and his Large Catechism, and what was given classical expression in the Formula of Concord, we consider to be not merely a valuable indication of the faith that lived in the authors but the unadulterated doctrine of the prophets and apostles. That is a far-reaching and weighty statement, we admit. It should not be lightly made, and we utter it in full awareness, we trust, of its implications. Without putting these Confessions on the same level

with the inspired Scriptures, we say we consider their teachings true, sacred, divine, binding. This high estimate we put on them not because they are found in books whose authors were called Lutherans but because their teachings agree with, and are taken from, the Book of books.

If in this connection the question should be asked whether we regard the Confessions of the Lutheran Church absolutely infallible, we at once reply, No, we do not. That there are historical and exegetical misstatements in them we unhesitatingly admit. The glory of our confessional writings in our eyes is not that they are without any imperfections but that they correctly set forth the teachings of the Scriptures, with the doctrine of justification by grace through faith at the center. To put it a little differently, our belief that the teachings of the Lutheran Confessions are true and in agreement with God's Word is not an *a-priori* one, held by us before we had studied the full contents of the Confessions, but rather an *a-posteriori* one, resting on our own investigation and on our comparison of the Symbolical Books with the inspired Scriptures.

In the conception of the Lutheran Confessions just stated the inquirer will find the reason for our antiunionistic attitude, for our so-called, much-publicized, aloofness. Holding the convictions before described, we believe no other course is possible for us. Loyalty to the Lutheran teachings forbids us to have fellowship with those who oppose those teachings, we say. And we add that naturally this principle holds whether those who oppose these teachings call themselves Lutherans or by some other name. Certainly an error does not lose its character if it is transferred from one camp to another. Labels do not affect the nature of an article; thistles are thistles whether they grow in the neighbor's garden or in our own. While we have more obligations toward those bearing the same name as we than to others, and while there will be a difference in procedure when a conservative Lutheran deals with errorists flying the Lutheran flag from that which he adopts when dealing with champions of false doctrine who belong to the Reformed churches, ultimately the course will be the same, the refusal of fellowship.

Probably critics will here interrupt us to remark that what we have maintained thus far rests on two sheer assumptions—that the Lutheran teachings agree fully with the Word of God and that loyalty to what one believes God-given doctrine implies refusal of fellowship toward those who do not accept these doctrines. More or less gently we shall be reminded that our affirmations do not contain anything new but that precisely these two things have been the subject of debate since the days of the Reformation, the

question whether the Lutheran teachings throughout are Scriptural and whether acceptance of a creed involves separation from those who do not accept it. In our reply we at once admit that there is nothing new in what was stated above, furthermore, that indeed the two points mentioned have been the subject of unceasing controversy these many years. It is because of our realization that they are still a battle-ground and at present are again hotly contested that attention is here focused on them.

To show that the teachings of Lutheranism are the unadulterated Scripture doctrine would require a discussion of all these teachings, such as is contained in the compends written by Lutheran dogmaticians. In these works is furnished the demonstration that what the Lutheran confessional writings in their doctrinal declarations set forth is not the wisdom of man but the revelation of God Himself. For more than four hundred years these teachings have been before the world, and through their very existence and their being taught and spread they have flung the challenge to all opponents to show that they are not Scriptural. Innumerable attempts have been made to prove them not in harmony with God's Word, but all these attempts have failed. The antagonism to them usually gave up the endeavor to convict them of being in conflict with the Bible and degenerated into the position that the Bible itself is not an absolute authority and that hence full agreement with it is not a sufficient guarantee of the correctness and truth of a certain doctrine. In these brief paragraphs it is obviously impossible to undertake an examination of the various doctrines the Lutheran Church stands for. We here have to content ourselves with repeating that no deviation from God's Word has been proved against the teachings of the Lutheran Confessions. Until the critics have brought evidence that our confessional writings contain doctrinal errors, we shall say with Luther: "The whole world wonders and must confess that we have the Gospel just as purely as the apostles had it and that it has altogether attained to its original purity, far beyond what it was in the days of Jerome and Augustine." (X:471.) To the charge that this sounds boastful we make the rejoinder: "Show that we are wrong, and we shall be the first ones to cast our Confessions into the fire"; and we add, appropriating the words of Luther: "Here we stand; we cannot do otherwise. God help us. Amen."

The question is unavoidable whether we consider the doctrine of verbal inspiration, which has again become a topic of controversy, as belonging to the teachings contained in the Lutheran Confessions. We state that such is our conviction. A doctrine, it is true, does not need the confirmation of the Confessions to receive standing in the Lutheran Church. If it is contained in

the Scriptures, it is welcomed, whether the Confessions set it forth or not. There are undoubtedly some teachings of the Scriptures on which the confessional writings are silent, because at the time when the Confessions were written these teachings were not attacked or extensively discussed. Thus the teaching pertaining to the so-called sin against the Holy Ghost is not dwelt on, or treated at great length, in the Confessions, and still no loyal Lutheran will say that this doctrine, because it is not listed in the Confessions, must not be regarded as Bible teaching and binding for us. The case is different respecting the teaching of verbal inspiration. Although it was not a controversial article of faith at the time when the Confessions were composed and hence no special exposition of it is presented, there are enough allusions in the Confessions indicating that the Lutheran fathers held this teaching. Let these words be considered, written by the authors of the Formula of Concord: "Now, although the afore-said writings afford the Christian reader, who delights in, and has a love for, the divine truth, clear and correct information concerning each and every controverted article of our Christian religion, as to *what he should regard and receive as right and true according to God's Word of the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures* and what he should reject and shun and avoid as false and wrong; yet in order that the truth may be preserved, . . . we have clearly . . . declared ourselves." (*Trigl.*, p. 857.) It must be conceded, of course, that these words do not set forth the teaching of verbal inspiration, but the implied attribution of absolute authority to "God's Word of the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures" is a sufficient indication that the Scriptures are here considered as divine in everything they say. Several other statements of the confessional writings of our Church which are of like tenor and probably even more explicit should be set down here. "First, then, we receive and embrace with our whole heart the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the pure, clear fountain of Israel, which is the only true standard by which all teachers and doctrines are to be judged." (Formula of Concord; *Trigl.*, p. 851.) "Do they [the adversaries] think that the same [the teaching of justification] is repeated so often [in the Scriptures] for no purpose? Do they think that these words fell inconsiderately from the Holy Ghost?" (Apology; *Trigl.*, p. 153.) In our view these words show sufficiently that the fathers of the Lutheran Church in our confessional writings express adherence to the doctrine of verbal inspiration. Perhaps even more impressive than such occasional statements about the Scriptures is the method in which the authors of these documents use the inspired writings. Their manner of Scripture quotation, their

constant appeal to the decisions found in the writings of the apostles and prophets, their unquestioning submission whenever the Scriptures have spoken, the utter lack of a hint on their part that certain sections or statements in the Scriptures need not be considered divine and binding, make it very evident that they believed in plenary inspiration and wished to have everybody reading the Confessions understand them as holding this position. In contending for verbal inspiration, we are certain we are upholding not merely the view of Johann Gerhard and Abraham Calov but the position which the Confessions themselves take with respect to the Scriptures. That a strong group in the U. L. C. A. denies this doctrine is well known. We charge this group not only with unscriptural teaching but with disloyalty toward the Confessions. May God grant those worthy men in this large church-body who are defending the inerrancy of the Scriptures strength, wisdom, and success!

We must, however, hasten to comment on the second so-called assumption of ours mentioned above, the principle that confessional loyalty implies separation from those opposing the Confessions. Some of the arguments of those who favor a unionistic course, such as the contention that a larger merger of church-bodies is necessary in order that Christians may impress the world with numbers or that, after all, not creeds but deeds are that which counts in religion, we brush aside as unworthy of consideration in our present discussion. The critics whom we have in mind would not reason in this manner. Our concern is with those earnest people, many of them Lutherans, who wish to be loyal to everything that God has said, who furthermore accept the Scriptures as the inerrant Word of God, but who do not see that this attitude of theirs compels them to separate from those who do not manifest such loyalty. Among the arguments advanced by these critics the following loom prominent: that the strict antiunionistic course sponsored by the Synodical Conference rests on a misunderstanding of Scripture-passages; that the law of love and forbearance, often expressed in the Word of God, makes it clear that an unbending confessionalism is not in keeping with the divine will; and that this sort of confessionalism is one of the factors hindering the progress of the Church. Obviously a foreword should not take on the proportions of a dissertation, and hence our examination of the arguments just mentioned must be brief. But it is necessary that we at least state our convictions with respect to them.

When the frequent charge that we in this matter misunderstand the Scriptures is elaborated, it is usually our appeal to Rom. 16:17; Titus 3:10; 2 John 10 f.; and 1 Tim. 6:3-5 which is attacked.

These passages, so it is asserted, do not speak of errorists who can still be regarded as Christians, but of people that have abandoned the Christian faith, if they ever did believe; and hence these words do not bear on the question whether Christians of churches opposing each other can practice fellowship. In reply we say that it is a pity when a matter which is simple is made complicated. The passages under discussion speak of people that are division-makers, of persons not "bringing" or proclaiming the apostolic doctrine, "teaching otherwise and not consenting to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ." The injunction, expressed or implied,¹⁾ is that people of this kind must be avoided, which certainly means that we must not have religious fellowship with them.

It will be noted that unapostolic teaching and the causing of divisions are the factors mentioned as so grave and perilous as to necessitate separation from those promoting them. Nothing is said about an examination into the spiritual condition of these persons and a conciliatory procedure toward them if it becomes evident that they have not yet lapsed into total unbelief. Whether they are still Christians or not is irrelevant. The apostle, it is true, speaks of their spiritual state in terms of severe reproach. But it is not their spiritual state which makes them a great menace, but their activity, their making of divisions, their disrupting the Church through false doctrine or something else that is sinful, for instance, the nursing of an iniquitous ambition. If a teacher is guilty of spreading unapostolic teaching and thereby disrupting the Church, if he is in some other sinful way destroying the peace and unity in one or more congregations, then he must be avoided. The Church cannot permit anybody to divide its members into warring camps, be he a believer in Christ or not.²⁾ But even if some of us,

1) In 1 Tim. 5:6 the words "from such withdraw thyself" are not found in the best manuscripts. The meaning, however, is not materially altered when the words are omitted.

2) With respect to Rom. 16:17 and Titus 3:10 a special observation may be subjoined. Whatever else these passages may say, they certainly speak of teachers or leaders who sinfully destroy harmonious relations in the Church. A *hairesikos* is simply a person who introduces a *hairesis*, a division. There is no evidence that *hairesis* in the New Testament means anything else than party, division, schism. Usually divisions are caused by divergent teaching. That now and then grievous conflicts leading to the formation of new church-bodies have been produced in the Church through the ambitions of members who rather saw the Church become disunited and broken up into factions than permit their design to be frustrated, is well known. In the above we have not said anything about the expressions "offenses" and "contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned." For our present purpose the emphasis on what the apostle says on division-making will suffice.

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influenced by the interpretation of renowned theologians, should conclude that they cannot conscientiously quote one or the other of the passages under discussion as condemning unionistic relations with erring people that must be still regarded as Christians, there are enough passages remaining which prescribe separation from those that are guilty of unapostolic teaching.

We have to add that the passages pointed to by no means exhaust our Scripture-proof for a strong antiunionistic stand. They do not represent one half of it, we venture to say. There are various sayings of Jesus and the apostles which warn us against receiving or fondling false doctrine. Jesus tells His disciples to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees, Matt. 16:6, by which term, as the evangelist explains, the doctrine of these sects was signified. Paul most impressively raises the danger-signal, saying, "A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump," Gal. 5:9. Let all unionists ponder this text! It is not a forced interpretation when we say this utterance of the apostle implies that we must beware of false teaching and of false teachers. To us it is patent that the person who thinks religious fellowship with people spreading false doctrine is a matter of indifference certainly has not comprehended the meaning of this pithy saying of St. Paul.

To specific texts dealing directly with the evil we are speaking of must be added the general principles of honesty, candor, uprightness, principles which are often placed before us in the Scriptures and universally acknowledged to be right, but which are violated in unionistic practices. An adherence to these standards of probity and complete truthfulness is insisted on by public opinion in secular matters. The advocate of government ownership of public utilities is expected to have the courage of his convictions even when the sentiment of the community where he has taken up his residence is opposed to his views. The person who changes his politics in keeping with the prevailing opinions in the States where he travels, who is a Republican in Vermont and a Democrat in Alabama, is treated with contempt. Even in some religious questions, if they are of a practical nature, consistency and truthfulness are universally considered indispensable. The speaker who today in a religious meeting poses as an ardent leader in the prohibition movement and tomorrow compliments the representatives of breweries and distilleries on "the splendid service they are rendering humanity" will soon become a social outcast. In this way the conscience of mankind approves all such sayings in the inspired Scriptures as "He that speaketh truth showeth forth righteousness, but a false witness, deceit," Prov. 12:17. If people fully applied this principle in religious matters, they would see that

a believer in the deity of Christ cannot practice fellowship with a teacher who denies that deity, or that those who rejoice in the doctrine of the Real Presence cannot consistently share in the religious activities of those who treat that doctrine as a silly superstition. They would see that a person cannot be for a doctrine and against it at the same time, that he cannot avow loyalty toward Lutheranism and simultaneously give his support to Calvinism.

Besides, let no one studying the subject overlook the class of Bible-texts in which the Lord teaches us to be and remain faithful to everything that His Word contains. Let him ponder whether the well-known words of Jesus "If ye continue in My Word, then are ye My disciples indeed, and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free," John 8:31, 32, and, "Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you," Matt. 28:20, and the equally well-known words of St. Paul, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness," 2 Tim. 3:16, do not imply that we avoid having religious fellowship with those who fail to accept everything the Scriptures teach? Can we be loyal to Jesus and at the same time approve of disloyalty toward Him? How can we, if we believe that Jesus and the apostles meant what they said, regard with complacency or indifference the rejection of any part of the divine Word?

As for the second charge, that in our antiunionistic course we disregard the command insisting on love and forbearance, we, of course, admit at once that the Scriptures frequently teach these virtues and that no action of ours must violate them. We state that, if it could be proved that in our course we lacked love and forbearance, this would be evidence that we are traveling a wrong path. It may be that one or the other of us now and then in his zeal for the truth forgets what love and forbearance demand of us. Certainly we are as fallible as any other Christian. But till evidence is furnished us to the contrary, we refuse to believe that our course necessarily involves a flouting of these important principles.

Love does not dictate indifference toward error; on the contrary, it demands that errors and imperfections be pointed out. The attitude which condones deviations from the truth and wrongdoing is not an evidence of love but of pseudolove. Whoever loves his neighbor wishes to see him lay aside the errors which are still afflicting him; and there is no more effective way of protesting against them than that of withholding the hand of fellowship. With respect to forbearance we know how strongly St. Paul insists on this virtue toward those that are weak and how remarkably he practiced it himself in his contact with the stumbling, halting

congregations of his day. Above everything else we hope that we shall never forget the divine example of our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, of whom it is written that He does not break a bruised reed and quench a smoking flax, Matt. 12:20. But there is a vast difference between gentle forbearance toward those that are weak and the indifference which marks the policy of the advocate of unionism. To be sure, the line separating the sphere of Christian forbearance from that of sinful indifference is hard to draw, and in concrete situations opinions may differ widely on the question where the former ends and the latter begins. But all who love the truth will join us in saying that just as certainly as forbearance must be manifested, indifference must be shunned and avoided. Let us beware of permitting the evil of iniquitous laxity to enter our ranks as it approaches us disguised in the garb of Christian patience and charity.

There remains the third argument of our critics, which states that our course causes harm and hinders the Church's progress. Again we say, If the charge were true, our course would have to be condemned. Whatever hinders the spreading of the kingdom of God cannot be right and God-pleasing. If our strict confessionalism is ruinous to the cause of the truth and leads people into skepticism and unbelief, to darkness rather than to light, it must be abandoned. But as we look upon the history of the Church, we find that the very opposite is true. The strict adherence to the doctrines of the Holy Scriptures as confessed by the Church on the part of Luther was not a hindrance but a great blessing to the world. Humanly speaking, if he had wavered and adopted the course, let us say, of Erasmus, Thomas More, and other Humanists, who wished to see a merely moderate reformation introduced, the world would long ago have sunk into the mire of radical doubt and unbelief, unless, of course, God in His mercy would have sent some other rescuer leading the Church back to its original purity in doctrine. What would have become of the Lutheran Church in America if in the last century there had not come forward staunch, uncompromising defenders of the teachings of the Lutheran Confessions? The virus of doctrinal laxity that had begun to enter the body would have spread, and the Lutheran Church would have all but disappeared from the religious arena. In saying this, we are not sponsoring the attitude of persecuting intolerance, which many people think is the only alternative if one does not espouse the cause of unionism and indifference. There is a *via media*, a golden mean, between persecuting zeal and doctrinal indifference. Wherever the Lutheran Church has remained true to its standards, it has followed this course. One of its glories is that it has never sponsored the persecution of heretics. On the other hand, it must

be said that this Church, which has always frowned on any attempt to practice religious coercion, has been known for its insistence on orthodoxy, on confessional loyalty. We do not see that this particular attitude of the Lutheran Church has meant disaster to the world, but it has rather helped to preserve that amount of Gospel-preaching which is still going on on our globe.

That strict confessionalism will never become popular we admit at once. If anybody thinks that the Church, in order to succeed, must have a message which will meet with universal acclaim, then the preaching which is based on strict confessionalism is not what he is looking for. But to spread a message which all will accept is not identical with promoting the true progress of the Church. What the world needs is the preaching of the Word of God, especially of the blessed Gospel of Jesus Christ. This message will always be a savor of death unto death to some, while—God be thanked for it!—it will likewise be a savor of life unto life for many. Those people that think it is an infallible sign of genuine success when large numbers turn to a church and declare themselves ready to carry its banner are very much mistaken. While every one of us should strive to bring as many people to Christ as possible, true success cannot be estimated on the basis of the length of lists of new adherents. "The kingdom of God cometh not with observation," says the Savior. He did not come, so He asserts likewise, "to bring peace upon earth but the sword." The outward peace and success which millennialists dream of will never come to pass. If there should come a situation resembling it, it would not be one to be welcomed, because it would simply signify that the great majority of people have dropped into spiritual lethargy and drowsiness and are no longer concerned about the great truths of the Gospel.

We, then, refuse to plead guilty to the charges of some earnest Christians which we have looked at but rather urge our critics to reexamine the whole subject in the light of the Holy Scriptures. Our hope is that through renewed prayerful study they likewise will arrive at the conviction that what we must strive for is not the creation of so broad a platform that everybody can stand on it, but manifestation of that loyalty which places itself on the rock of the Holy Scriptures and, while trying earnestly to bring everybody else to stand on that same foundation, will not surrender one inch of it.

Lest we be misunderstood, we must, before concluding, say that nothing in what we have stated above should be construed as implying that we look upon the intersynodical conferences conducted now in our country and Canada as unionistic ventures. In our view they are the very opposite, a protest against unionism, a visible

demonstration that there are still some religious circles left which take doctrine seriously, which, instead of treating divisions in religious matters with indifference, are bent on removing these divisions in a God-pleasing way. It is our conviction that to quote Rom. 16:17 and similar passages against the holding of such conferences would involve a serious misconception of the import of these scriptures. Through such conferences of American Lutheran Church and Synodical Conference pastors, we trust, unity will by and by be reached likewise with respect to the proper application of the principles touching unionism as contained in the *Brief Statement* and the *Minneapolis Theses*, principles to which in neither church-body objection has been raised.

To close our discussion on an appropriate note as we think of the odium falling to the lot of opponents of unionism, we shall reprint a paragraph from Krauth's *Conservative Reformation* (p. 21), written with reference to struggles and heartaches which lie ahead for the Church if it is faithful to its trust: "Shall we despond, draw back, and give our names to the reproach of generations to come because the burden of the hour seems to us heavy? God, in His mercy, forbid! If all others are ready to yield to despondency and abandon the struggle, we, children of the Reformation, dare not. That struggle has taught two lessons, which must never be forgotten. One is, that the true and the good must be secured at any price. They are beyond all price. We dare not compute their cost. They are the soul of our being, and the whole world is as dust in the balance against them. No matter what is to be paid for them, we must not hesitate to lay down their redemption price. The other grand lesson is that their price is never paid in vain. What we give can never be lost, *unless we give too little*. If we give all, we shall have all. All shall come back. Our purses shall be in the mouths of our sacks. We shall have both the corn and the money. But if we are niggard, we lose all—lose what we meant to buy, lose what we have given. If we maintain the pure Word inflexibly at every cost over against the arrogance of Rome and of the weak pretentiousness of Rationalism, we shall conquer both through the Word; but to compromise on a single point is to lose all and to be lost." W. ARNDT

