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Foreword

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CONTENTS

JANUARY

	PAGE
Foreword. W. Arndt	1
Toward a Lutheran Philosophy of Education. Paul Bretscher	8
Homemade Homiletics. Norman A. Madson	33
Outlines on Old Testament Texts (Synodical Conference)	41
Miscellanea	54
Theological Observer	62
Book Review	73

FEBRUARY

Toward a Lutheran Philosophy of Education. Paul Bretscher	81
Study on 2 Cor. 3:12-18. Th. Laetsch	96
Luther: A Blessing to the English. Wm. Dallmann	110
Outlines on Old Testament Texts (Synodical Conference)	117
Miscellanea	125
Theological Observer	133
Book Review	153

MARCH

The Social Ethic of Martin Luther. Carl Walter Berner	161
Sermon Study on 1 Cor. 15:12-20. Th. Laetsch	179
Luther: A Blessing to the English. Wm. Dallmann	191
Die Taufe Johannis des Taeufers in ihrem Verhaeltnis zu Christi Taufe. M. Leimer	197
Outlines on Old Testament Texts (Synodical Conference)	207
Miscellanea	214
Theological Observer	219
Book Review	233

APRIL

The Meaning of the Formula of Baptism. E. W. A. Koehler	241
To What Extent May and Must Action be Taken in the Case of Mixed Marriages? Ronald W. Goetsch	246
Luther: A Blessing to the English. Wm. Dallmann	262
Outlines on Old Testament Texts (Synodical Conference)	274
Miscellanea	288
Theological Observer	297
Book Review	304

MAY

The Reunion of Christendom. Th. Engelder	313
Huldreich Zwingli, the Father of Reformed Theology. Theo. Dierks	335
Luther: A Blessing to the English. Wm. Dallmann	345
Outlines on Old Testament Texts (Synodical Conference)	352
Theological Observer	363
Book Review	378

JUNE

The Reunion of Christendom. Th. Engelder	385
Huldreich Zwingli, the Father of Reformed Theology. Theo. Dierks	409
Outlines on Old Testament Texts (Synodical Conference)	436
Theological Observer	444
Book Review	450

JULY

The Reunion of Christendom. Th. Engelder	457
Kiefl on Luther. Wm. Dallmann	481
Outlines on Old Testament Texts (Synodical Conference)	488
Theological Observer	496
Book Review	521

AUGUST

Μετάνοια. E. W. A. Koehler	529
The Seminary and the Church. W. Arndt	556
Outlines on Old Testament Texts (Synodical Conference)	570
Miscellanea	580
Theological Observer	587
Book Review	595

SEPTEMBER

The Reunion of Christendom. Th. Engelder	601
The Independence of the Early Irish Church. P. E. Kretzmann	631
Sermon Study on Eph. 6:1-9. Th. Laetsch	643
Outlines on Old Testament Texts (Synodical Conference)	656
Theological Observer	665
Book Review	668

— 4 —

OCTOBER

The Anselmic View of the Atonement. Thomas Coates	673
The Spiritual, Not the Social Gospel in the Church. John Theodore Mueller	682
Outlines on Old Testament Texts (Synodical Conference)	694
Miscellanea	705
Theological Observer	721
Book Review	739

NOVEMBER

The Reunion of Christendom. Th. Engelder	745
Outlines on Old Testament Texts (Synodical Conference)	777
Outlines on the Old Standard Gospel Lessons	784
Miscellanea	787
Theological Observer	795
Book Review	810

DECEMBER

The Reunion of Christendom. Th. Engelder	817
Outlines on the Old Standard Gospel Lessons	852
Theological Observer	865
Book Review	882



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JANUARY, 1943

No. 1

Foreword

Another year arrives, and what a hapless, disjointed, sad, disillusioned world it looks upon! Nation slaughters nation; the globe resembles one huge shambles; civilization apparently is collapsing, the social order disintegrating; the noble inventions and discoveries of science are harnessed to the chariot of destruction and death; the ingenuity of statesmen stands discredited; education has led downward; mankind may be compared to a large monster which is gnawing at its own vitals. Those whose eyes have not been entirely dimmed can plainly discern the seven angels pouring out the vials of divine wrath on the earth.

As the attempt is made to determine the causes of these lamentable conditions, it is often stated that the churches have been remiss in the performance of their mission, otherwise these catastrophes would never have come to pass. We shall not discuss the charge except to say that clearly the social gospel preaching which has been the vogue in many churches during the last three decades has proved entirely impotent for the curbing of the elemental passions of man, greed, selfishness, hatred, the lust for power. A stronger force than honeyed morality discourses is needed if the human tiger is to be restrained. We shall furthermore admit that undoubtedly we Christians have failed to assert ourselves as manfully as we should have done in our efforts to act as the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Everyone of us will have to bear his share of the guilt that is assessed against the disciples of Jesus Christ these days. May the unprecedented calamities from which we suffer be regarded as a loud call to repentance by all of us!

In the confusion which reigns on all sides the cry is raised with much insistence that to prevent the recurrence of such widespread bloodshed and internecine strife and to rebuild the shattered world, the churches will have to unite. If the churches

have been powerless in the past, the cause, so it is stated, must, at least in part, be sought in the divided state of Christendom. In England no less a person than the Archbishop of Canterbury has proposed that a committee representing all Christian churches be formed in which the Pope is to be the chairman, which is to assay the task of putting the world's house in order.

In our own country the sentiment which favors the uniting of churches is quite strong, and we see that some church bodies are actually engaged in effecting mergers. Committees are at work to bring about a union of the Congregational and Christian Churches with the Evangelical and Reformed Church. Two other church bodies making plans to unite are the United Brethren and the Evangelical Church (Albright Brethren). The argument which furnishes the foundation for these efforts is, of course, the old slogan "In union there is strength."

The chief developments dealing with union movements among Lutheran bodies have regularly been reported on in our Observer section. A factor which has focused general attention in America on the Lutheran camp and the views held there on the uniting of churches has been the invitation of the Federal Council of Churches addressed to the U. L. C. A. to change the status of its relations to the Federal Council from one of a consultative nature to that of full membership. The daily press, and among prominent religious journals the *Christian Century*, took notice of this invitation and the debates engendered thereby. A lengthy editorial in the latter paper with the heading "Lutheran Isolation" dwelt on the positions of the various Lutheran synods and evaluated them from its own point of view. The CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY, though always advocating the establishment of fellowship among the various Lutheran bodies if the right foundation for such action can be achieved, has consistently opposed every union which was not based on unity of doctrine. We may well in this Foreword ask ourselves whether the arguments and considerations which the *Christian Century* advances compel us to modify our position.

The editorial in question is too long to be reprinted here, and we shall have to content ourselves with summarizing the views it contains. The chief thoughts expressed there appear to us to be these: The faith which the Lutheran Church stands for is beginning to be reaffirmed in the other Protestant churches — a sign that Lutheran teaching embodies essential truths. It would be a fallacy to think that the preservation of these truths necessitates isolation. They can be more effectively maintained and imparted to others through fellowship rather than through a separate stand of their exponents. That American Protestantism

is returning to the faith of the Reformation is not due to the efforts of the Lutherans in America, but to the work of Barth, Brunner, Nygren, Kierkegaard, Visser 't Hooft, Keller, and many others. American Lutherans cannot claim credit for it. Hence past experiences do not justify the continuation of such a policy of isolation; the good which it is hoped isolation will produce was not accomplished by it in the past. If it is thought that acceptance of full membership in the Federal Council on the part of the U. L. C. A. will make it more difficult for that body to enter into fellowship with other Lutheran synods, that consideration will probably hold with respect to the "extreme conservatives" of the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods. But these bodies will hardly be willing to establish union on any basis whatever. "They represent more recent waves of immigration, and at the present rate of progress it will take another generation or two before they become sufficiently indigenous to American culture for them to trust themselves in the warmth of fellowship which American Christianity affords." That membership in the Federal Council will not hurt the cause of Lutheran unity was demonstrated by the offer of pulpit and altar fellowship made to the U. L. C. A. by the A. L. C. without the stipulation that the U. L. C. A. would have to keep out of the Federal Council if the fellowship was to become a reality. The proposal made by the A. L. C. of a Lutheran convention in which all synods will be represented points in the same direction. The Augustana Synod may even accept full membership in the Federal Council before the U. L. C. A. does. The three bodies just mentioned (the U. L. C. A., the A. L. C., and the Augustana Synod) represent two thirds of the Lutherans in America. They cooperate with each other and with several other Lutheran bodies in the National Lutheran Council. If the U. L. C. A. joins the Federal Council of Churches, the other bodies are sure to follow.

We have tried to present a fair digest of the views of the editor of the *Christian Century*. Surveying them, one finds that they do not contain much that can be called argument. Perhaps most striking is the assertion that while American Protestantism is moving more closely toward the Lutheran position, the credit for this *rapprochement* belongs to European writers, not to the efforts of American Lutheran theologians and bodies. Have American Protestant churches actually been approaching the Lutheran position? There has become evident some disillusionment with respect to the social gospel, that is true. There has been a drift toward the views sponsored by Barth and Brunner, to mention only the two men that are best known among the theologians enumerated in the *Christian Century* editorial. But their positions cannot be called Lutheran. They are more conservative than

the positions held by many preachers and teachers in our country, inasmuch as they insist on the teaching of doctrine. But Barth and Brunner are not Lutheran; they are Reformed in their fundamental views. That Lutheran writers and speakers have not exerted much influence on the most publicized currents of theological thought in this country may be true. There have not been Lutheran teachers of theology whose works have been sold as widely as, let us say, the works of Fosdick and Shailer Mathews and other Modernists. But we can say that in the Lutheran Hour, on which Dr. W. A. Maier is the speaker, we have an agency which is certainly helping greatly in molding the thought of preachers and Christian laymen outside the Lutheran Church. If Lutheran books have not had the vogue that those of the writers of other denominations have had, the reason largely is that Lutheran books have taken the conservative point of view, which has interfered with their popularity, though not with their usefulness in their special sphere. The Lutheran Church in America, counting the members of all synods, now numbers about five million people. Even if the influence of the Lutheran Church does not extend beyond the sphere of these five million people (which, of course, we do not admit), it has made a remarkable impact on American life. No movement that numbers so many adherents can be said to be of slight significance. We are here, as will be perceived, arguing merely from the premises of the *Christian Century* and not endorsing the thought that seems implied, that a Church which desires to fulfill its mission must seek to be a body which exerts a strong, noticeable influence on the people about it. Every Church which is loyal to the teachings of the Scriptures will exert an influence. But let us not forget that this influence is rather a by-product, not the primary objective. The Church's mission is to preach the Gospel. The results it should and may safely leave to the Head of the Church.

The *Christian Century* argues that the truths which Lutheranism possesses will not suffer if the Lutheran synods enter the Federal Council of Churches. Is that true? Let the reader visualize what full membership in the Federal Council implies! The Lutheran, believing sincerely the truths set forth in his confessional writings, has to join hands and practice fellowship, for instance, with the Auburn Affirmationists, claiming the right to deny the inerrancy of the Scriptures, the virgin birth of Christ, our Lord's substitutionary atonement, the actuality of His bodily resurrection, and the reality of His miracles. With people of this type he is to work together in a fraternal way. He abhors what they stand for, but he has to be their brother and cooperate with them in spiritual enterprises. What becomes of

truthfulness, what of sincerity? To one who does not look upon these things as sacred truths but merely as human opinions which may be right or wrong such fellowship does not give any concern. But it certainly must be different with one who looks upon these matters as teachings coming from God Himself and who regards them as the base for his hope of everlasting life. How can he be in the same camp with people who tread these precious things under foot? If he does stay in such a fold, his own sense of what is true will be blunted, and gradually he will descend to the level of these Affirmationists.

The *Christian Century's* position that the truth can be safeguarded and maintained better in fellowship than in a status of isolation is tenable only if the fellowship conceived of here is of the right kind, a fellowship with people who are eager to bow to everything the Scriptures say and to look upon Jesus as their divine Redeemer. But what of a fellowship in which by many members the divine Word is not acknowledged to be the only source of religious truth, in which, moreover, the Bible is considered a book of errors and the doctrine of the substitutionary atonement of Jesus is regarded as a superstition? That in such an atmosphere the salient Gospel truths will prosper and become increasingly powerful is hard to believe.

We have full confidence in the divine power which dwells in the Word of God. We believe that where it is spoken, the Holy Spirit is tugging at the heartstrings of people to exert His benign influence. We believe, furthermore, that this Word should be disseminated as far and as widely as is possible. If in the meetings of the Federal Council of Churches the Gospel truths are uttered, we rejoice. But whoever becomes a member of the Federal Council of Churches signs articles of friendship and amity with opponents of the Gospel truths and thus in advance creates conditions unfavorable for a full, unhampered testimony to the truth.

To all this must be added the consideration, not adverted to by the *Christian Century*, that in striking up an alliance with avowed enemies of definite articles of the Christian faith one is denying Christ and His holy Word. One is establishing fraternal relations with a number of people whom a conservative Lutheran cannot conscientiously regard as brethren. Their case is not that of weak Christians who accept all the fundamental teachings of the Word and who through ignorance are still in error on one or the other non-fundamental point of Christian doctrine. What these people reject are fundamental teachings of the Word. In fact, by rejecting the inerrancy of the Scriptures they destroy the foundation on which the Christian faith rests. How can a conscientious Lutheran enter into fellowship with them without

denying his heavenly Lord? "No one can serve two masters." "He that is not with Me is against Me."

What has been stated above will, of course, not make much of an impression on the *Christian Century* editor and all those that share his position. They will classify it as coming from one of the "extreme conservatives of the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods" and pay no further attention to it. But their disapproval must not influence us. Whether men regard our teachings as outmoded, anachronistic, antiquated, wrong, and untenable, or not, is not the important matter. The query which fills every child of God with awe is whether loyalty is shown to the holy Scriptures and to Christ Crucified, who is their center.

In referring to the attitude of the A. L. C. and its offer of fellowship to the U. L. C. A., the editor of the *Christian Century* hardly is sufficiently informed to evaluate correctly all that is involved. He does not seem to be aware of the words in the A. L. C. resolutions in which fellowship with the U. L. C. A. is made contingent on full, wholehearted acceptance of, and adherence to, the Pittsburgh Agreement on the part of the U. L. C. A. It is a proviso which has not yet been complied with. We hope the A. L. C. will not allow this clause to be disregarded. If without insistence on such compliance the A. L. C., listening to the urgings of its liberal wing, will declare pulpit and altar fellowship with the U. L. C. A., conservative Lutheranism will receive a severe blow. Such a move will mean the eventual absorption of the A. L. C. in the U. L. C. A., if not organically, then at least ideologically and theologically. If that should come to pass, we should sincerely regret it. Not only should we consider such a course a violation of divine directives, but we believe that both historically and on account of the convictions of many of its members the A. L. C. does not belong in the liberal camp of Lutherans. We, however, much though we should like to establish fellowship with the A. L. C., could not on that account change our own course and likewise become a liberal Lutheran body, condoning or approving tacitly the membership of many pastors of the U. L. C. A. in the Masonic lodge, the almost indiscriminate pulpit and altar fellowship practiced by many U. L. C. A. churches with sectarian congregations, and the denial of the inerrancy of the Scriptures which is voiced by prominent U. L. C. A. theologians. There might be "warmth" in such a broad fellowship, but that would be entirely offset by the icy coldness in our hearts caused by the voice of conscience accusing us of having become unfaithful to our trust and of having denied our Savior.

An issue of an altogether different nature confronts one when the question of participation in a free conference or convention of

Lutherans arises. The illustrious ancestor of our **CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY, *Lehre und Wehre***, eloquently sponsored the cause of free conferences, and when one of its friends in Europe, Lic. Stroebel, criticized the undertaking and characterized it as an unwarranted attempt to aid God in His work of spreading the Church, *Lehre und Wehre* replied with spirit and vigor and asserted that it could not conceive of anything more God-pleasing than the gathering of sincere adherents of Lutheranism convened in the fear of God to remove the misunderstandings and differences that divided the Church. We strongly favor the continuance of free conferences where they have been held and their inauguration in sections where they have not yet been instituted. It need hardly be emphasized that they must remain free conferences and not become organizations presupposing fellowship. Let the divine teachings of the Scriptures as set forth in the Lutheran Confessions be studied at such conferences. The object should not be in the first place to unite the synods, but to see jointly what rich treasures our dear Lutheran Church possesses in the doctrinal heritage which Luther and other God-given leaders have bequeathed to us. In that way unity will quietly, unobtrusively develop and finally, if it please God, find expression in the attitude of the synods toward one another.

To sum up: Lutheran isolation will have to continue as long as the church bodies about us, and especially the Federal Council of Churches, deny fundamental teachings of the Holy Scriptures. In their own camp let Lutherans endeavor through earnest discussions to remove the doctrinal differences which now keep them apart and which cannot be ignored if the truths revealed in the Scriptures are to be maintained and handed down to posterity. Such a course, though it involves debates and controversy, will be more blessed for the Church than the establishment of outward solidarity accompanied in some sections by inward strife and bickerings, and in others by a complete doctrinal coma and indifference. "Now, the Lord of peace Himself give you peace always by all means. The Lord be with you." 2 Thess. 3:16.

W. ARNDT

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