

# Concordia Theological Monthly

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Volume 16

Article 33

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5-1-1945

## Miscellanea

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### Recommended Citation

Lotz, Benjamin (1945) "Miscellanea," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 16 , Article 33.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol16/iss1/33>

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## Miscellanea

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### What Was the Formula of Concord Trying to Say?

#### A Reply to Dr. C. B. Gohdes \*

Dr. Gohdes' article in the October, 1944, issue of the *Lutheran Church Quarterly* concerning the doctrine of the Lord's Supper makes one ask a question in regard to the Formula of Concord. What was this document trying to say? Does it have a message for us in the formulation of a new Lutheran dogmatics?

If this had been Dr. Gohdes' purpose, we might have let it go unchallenged. But the very first and the second sentences that he writes give us some ground for raising this question. The first sentence speaks of articles and tracts in defense of the traditional Lutheran view of the Lord's Supper and indicates that they are of frequent appearance. It would have been very helpful if Dr. Gohdes had listed a few of these writings that we might judge whether the frequent appearance is also a recent appearance. The second sentence speaks of the restiveness which had made itself felt in regard to the traditional formulation of the doctrine of the Holy Sacrament. What evidence does the author give for this? This has certainly not been indicated in meetings of commissions on Lutheran unity or in seminars held from time to time throughout the country. In such gatherings Lutherans are apparently still laboring on the peripheral problem of verbal inspiration!

The real point of his approach is doubtless the assertion that the Formula of Concord is so argumentatively "implemented as to express the idea of consubstantiation and to connote the very Capernaite eating and drinking which it reprobates." Dr. Gohdes might charge almost all of the Lutheran Confessions with the same charge of *consubstantiation* if he were so minded to keep company with the Webster of the dictionary! For they all say about the same thing.

On the other hand, Dr. Gohdes stresses that he accepts with all his heart the Lutheran doctrine of the Lord's Supper. It might then be implied that his conception of the Lord's Supper is stated in his own words which read as follows: "Christ is present in the Holy Supper, as He is present in the Word and Baptism, and received savingly in faith, so that the Sacrament of the Altar becomes the means whereby the Kingdom is covenanted to the disciples; that is, to all poor sinners who grasp Him as the pardoner and the healer of sin: there is the essence of the Sacrament."

Many years ago Dr. Philip Shaff described the conception of the Lord's Supper as held by Philip Melancthon, who "represented the idea of a vital union and communion with the person of Christ as the one and only essential thing in the sacred ordinance." I have put this down that Dr. Shaff's estimate of Melancthon's view might be compared

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\* This article, written by the Rev. Benjamin Lotz of Bethlehem, Pa., appeared in the January, 1945, issue of *The Lutheran Church Quarterly* and is here reprinted with the permission of the latter journal.



with that apparently held by Dr. Gohdes. It might further illuminate the subject to quote a few words from the Formula of Concord. "Others, however, are subtle Sacramentarians, and the most injurious of all, who partly speak very speciously in our own words, and pretend that they also believe a true presence of the true, essential, living body and blood of Christ in the Holy Supper, however, that this occurs spiritually through faith. . . . For with them the word *spiritually* means nothing else than the Spirit of Christ or the power of the absent body of Christ and His merit, which is present; but the body of Christ is in no mode or way present, except only above in the highest heaven, to which we should elevate ourselves in heaven by the thoughts of our faith, etc."

It is not possible in a brief note to discuss in any detail Dr. Gohdes' article. Neither is it possible to examine his assertion whether the Scriptural quotations in the Formula of Concord are applicable or whether the process of reason is relevant (p. 341). Much of this can be passed over if the important thing is considered. For the historian the first and important task is to inquire how the document arose, and on the basis of this knowledge he ought to judge it. In a confession of faith, he ought to seek out what spiritual values its formulators were trying to conserve, even if they perhaps applied Scriptural passages which would not be relevant for the purpose or used terms that could not be used today. Perhaps one of these was the *oral reception of the body and blood of Christ!*

Those who formulated this Confession wanted to make it perfectly clear that in the Holy Supper, Christ came to men. They did not come to Him. In so doing, they were true to the Lutheran Confessions which had gone before. They had rejected not only the Roman doctrine of the Mass but the philosophy which was necessary to support it with any claims of reason. They would not have cared whether men called their reasoning *inconclusive* and derided them for holding "two mutually exclusive concepts." On the other hand, they wanted to assert with all of the power within them that Christ comes to the impious, to the scoffer, to the hypocrite, and to the unbeliever in the Sacrament even "where there is no vital union or communion" possible.

For the Formula of Concord wanted to make certain this fact that, at the reception of the elements, Christ is not absent from them. And any modern doctrine of the Holy Supper must safeguard this truth even if it must reject the reasoning, the terminology, and the exegesis of our Lutheran fathers. It might be asserted that after four hundred (or less) years, the appeal that Dr. Gohdes makes to a conjectural Aramaic text might seem just as strange to those who follow in our train. But one seeks in vain in the article for a sympathetic consideration of what the Formula of Concord is trying to say!

Perhaps a reformulation of the Lutheran doctrine of the Lord's Supper ought to start with a new Christology. For the same objections raised against the Real Presence can and have been raised against the Incarnation of the Godhead in human nature. And the same objections can and have been raised against the ascended and regnant Lord being present in the Holy Sacrament. But for Luther heaven was nothing



local or spatial, and the Ascension of our Lord meant that He was no longer bound by the limitations of time and space as in the days of His flesh. In this, Luther anticipated the great philosopher Kant. It is true that the Formula of Concord is less reticent than we to speak of that which is in the final analysis ineffable. But the Formula of Concord arose in the days of cruel and bitter controversy when men are forced to stress definition where it would be better to bow in mystery and faith.

### Lutheran Unity

(From an essay delivered at the Free Conference in Madras, October 2 and 3, 1944, by the Rev. M. L. Kretzmann, Missouri Synod Missionary at Ambur, India.)

When representative Lutherans of South India met in Madras last fall, our brother Missionary M. L. Kretzmann delivered an excellent paper on the principles that would have to be considered if a God-pleasing union of the various Lutheran bodies represented was to be formed. We regret that we cannot well print the whole essay, but we submit here an important section. Perhaps at a later date another section of it can be printed. In his prefatory remarks the essayist stressed the proper motives with which the whole project was to be approached. He pointed out two legitimate reasons for forming a united front, "that we should unite so that we can do more work" and, secondly, "that we should be able through such an organization to do not only more work, but also better work." Then he began the discussion of principles. He stressed that unity of doctrine was required. The section that has to do with this thought we herewith submit.

1. The union must be a real unity, based on unity of doctrine and practice.

This is not a red herring introduced into these discussions for the purpose of distracting and diverting your attention. I believe that the acceptance of this principle alone can give us a reasonable assurance of a sound organization based on Scriptural principles. Anything less than this would be only an admission of spiritual paucity and would carry within it its own promise of decay.

The question may be asked whether the assumption of differences in doctrine and practice is not unwarranted in a group of Lutherans, all of whom officially accept the historical Confessions of the Lutheran Church. If such an assumption should prove to be unfounded in fact, it would be cause for sincere rejoicing. But the relation of the various bodies to each other in the past, as well as the present practices of some, clearly indicate that there is ample room for open and sincere discussion of our present stand in relation to those Confessions. The first missionaries of the Missouri Synod's work in India left a Lutheran group which is now part of the Federation because of a tendency to laxness in discipline of those holding false views on the inspiration of Scripture. Another branch of the Lutheran Church in India is in Communion fellowship with a non-Lutheran group. The three American Lutheran Church groups represented in India are at present carrying on negotiations for unity in America but have not yet reached full agreement.



I believe that we have a priceless gift from God in our common confessional basis and that we should never lose sight of nor minimize the measure of unity which already exists among us. But this should make us all the more eager to assure ourselves that this unity is one of fact and not mere historical connection. We would be less than completely honest if we did not discuss frankly and openly the points on which we differ and, God willing, arrive at a real unity of profession and practice.

This has been the historical position of the Lutheran Church. The very existence of that Church is proof of her insistence upon a non-compromising attitude toward the truths of Scripture. She was founded as a protest against the doctrinal decline of the organized Church of the Middle Ages. It was this attitude of tenaciously holding fast to the truth and defending it against all errors which found expression in the Book of Concord: "From this our explanation . . . everyone may clearly infer that we have no intention of yielding aught of the eternal, immutable truth of God for the sake of temporal peace, tranquillity, and unity. . . . But we entertain heartfelt pleasure and love for, and are on our part sincerely inclined and anxious to advance, that unity, according to our utmost power, by which His glory remains to God uninjured, nothing of the divine truth is surrendered, no room is given the least error."

Luther realized that he was disturbing the peace of the Church. He was forcibly reminded of this by dignitaries and officials of the State and Church. Yet for the Word of God he would cause contention and discord to arise. He was aware that a peace at any price, a united front at any price policy, would bring terrible consequences in its wake. A Church which endeavored to restore quiet by setting aside the Word of God would at the last be overwhelmed by a deluge of intolerable evils. To him nothing mattered when the Word of God was at stake.

We have much to be thankful for in the fact that there has been a definite trend toward confessionalism in the Lutheran Church in America, in which so many of us have our roots, in the past century. Where there was at one time confessional indifference and indiscriminate altar and pulpit fellowship with Reformed pastors and churches of varying degrees of unorthodoxy, we now find a growing concern for purity of doctrine and faithful adherence to Scriptural principles in practice. We would lose much if through hasty desire for a union we would sacrifice this historical principle of Lutheranism.

Let us understand that it is unity of faith alone which can bring about a unity which is more than "a fellowship of uncongenial minds," as other types of union have been described. It has been argued that getting together is the main thing and that all else will follow. There is a certain getting together, a co-operation in externals which is outside of the confessional concept, which is both desirable and necessary. But to use this getting together as an approach to union or as a substitute for real unity is not right. There is real danger that, when we get together merely on the basis of activities, the result will be an organization large in size and small in spiritual power, and there may



be room for the justifiable charge that we "have a form of godliness but deny the power thereof." Neither is it enough to say that love alone is a sufficient basis for union. The *Lutheran* emphasized this when it said: "Before churches and sects can be united, they must find a common authority and bow before it. . . . No real unity is possible on the basis of Christian love. Get men together on a common basis of faith, and Christian love will have something to feed upon."

An attitude of indifference to unity of faith and doctrine is against the concept of the Church. The Church, the *ecclesia*, is a body which is called out of the world for the express purpose of bearing witness to certain specific facts taught by Holy Scriptures, and any organization which contains those who deny or ignore those facts or the Scriptures which teach them must be inherently unsound. The charge has been made against the Lutheran Church that it perpetuates the divisions of Christendom through its uncompromising attitude. But this is in the nature of the Lutheran Church. She realizes that true, ideal Christian fellowship must be real fellowship based on the truth. God has made the Church the steward of the saving Gospel, and she must ever be aware of the great responsibilities of that stewardship. Dr. M. Loy, in writing on the Augsburg Confession, has aptly said: "We Lutherans could get along very nicely with all the world and with all the churches if we would only stop pressing the exclusive claims of the Bible and the way of salvation which it teaches and quit—being Lutherans."

If we want, and there can be no doubt that we do, a powerful church organization in the best sense of the term, then we must adhere to this Scriptural principle that unity of faith and doctrine is a prerequisite of union. There is tremendous power in honest convictions. Conviction based on the truth constitutes one of the richest assets of the Church. There are unions which seemed to be based on a least common denominator. The greatest evil resulting from a union of compromise is the loss of spiritual integrity which is always involved when error is consciously given a place side by side with truth.

The way to real unity is not easy. It requires much expenditure of time and labor, much intellectual and spiritual struggle. There is no short cut, and we should not give room to the temptation to seek one. As long ago as 1868 Dr. Walther said: "Patience, gentleness, mutual fraternal esteem, frank exchange of the convictions of each side, close study of Scripture, and constant prayer will be the necessary weapons for those who wish to attain the agreement for which we long and to frustrate the schemes of the devil." It is not out of place to say that in our discussions toward unity we must bar the spirit of suspicion, uncharitable judgments, quick-tempered impatience, and, particularly, all self-conceit and self-exaltation.

On what basis can we get together, what is needed for unity in doctrine? I am not able to improve on two quotations which I found bearing on this subject.

The first is from the *Living Church* (March 14, 1943): "A man can be won over for the truth more easily if he believes that his teachings are based—and must be based—on the Holy Scriptures than if he



cares little for what Scripture states. For in the former case the power of Scripture has a chance to work on him. Where two parties are one in their love of the truth, one in their conviction that Holy Scripture is inviolable, and one party misapprehends some of the truth, there is still good prospect for their becoming one in doctrine. Devotion to the truth of Scripture is the indispensable prerequisite for the full apprehension of the truth."

The second is from *The American Lutheran*, December, 1942: "It is of utmost importance for the Church ever to remember that the Scriptures alone are the God-given norm and rule of faith and life. While a given historical setting makes it advisable to set forth controverted elements of Biblical truth in special confessional statements, these documents must never be substituted for the Scriptures themselves. We believe that the teachings of the Bible have been correctly set forth in the historical confessional writings of the Lutheran Church and that whoever accepts the Lutheran Confessions as the true and correct exposition of Bible truth deserves to be called a Lutheran. Biblical Christianity and sound Lutheranism we believe are identical."

I believe, then, that the further study of present-day problems as they affect our relations with each other must be based on the proposition that the sacred Scriptures themselves and the historical confessional writings of the Lutheran Church are a sufficient basis for the establishment of a God-pleasing doctrinal unity among the various Lutheran groups in India.

It may be countered that we are speaking chiefly now of a union of national churches and that we should not impose on them the confessional basis of a Church of another age and land. But it is not a denationalization of the Indian Church nor a stultifying of its spiritual life to ask of it that, if it wishes to be Lutheran, it accept the Confessions of the Lutheran Church. I believe that the Confessions deal with the essence, the material of Christianity, not with its form. In the former there can be no latitude if we are true to our call to preach the Gospel; in the latter, the form, the national Church may adopt whatever is suited to its temperament, environment, and national genius.

Let us hold fast this concept of true unity and, though the road be long and hard, pray God to give us the wisdom, patience, and strength to labor for a true union.

