

Concordia Theological Monthly

Volume 18

Article 1

1-1-1947

Foreword

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Concordia Theological Monthly

Edited by
The Faculty of Concordia Seminary
ST. LOUIS, MO.



42,305

St. Louis, Mo.
CONCORDIA PUBLISHING HOUSE
1947

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Concordia *Theological Monthly*

Vol. XVIII

JANUARY, 1947

No. 1

Foreword

As in the distance the summits of 1947 become faintly visible, there are two topics which we should like to discuss with our readers, one dark and distressing, the other a cause for joy and gratitude — the physical and spiritual misery that grips the world, and the centennial of the Missouri Synod.

I

The high hopes which upon the cessation of hostilities were entertained by many people that soon the old rocking world would regain its balance and normal relations and pursuits return have not been realized. Hunger, starvation, despair, stalk large sections of the earth. The fires have been checked, they have not been put out. While the average United States citizen fumes and frets about scarcity of certain foods and manufactures, about strikes and other labor troubles, Germany, covered with rubble and ruins, its towns and villages largely occupied by foreign soldiers, the ill-clad, emaciated inhabitants shivering in half-destroyed homes, is enveloped in black darkness, which apparently has nothing to offer save death. To some extent the latter conditions are paralleled in other countries of the globe. What are the statesmen doing? They meet, confer, dispute, wrangle, suspect, threaten. There are abundant gestures and veritable torrents of words, but apart from these cheap demonstrations the observer notices chiefly impotence and futility. Evidently the wisdom of the leaders is bankrupt. The atomic age has come, but man is not competent to use the tremendous powers put at his disposal.

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II

The darkness in the physical field is not relieved by a compensating and cheering improvement in moral and spiritual conditions. It is universally admitted that a crime wave of appalling proportions, reaching its maximum height in matters of sex, has engulfed the country and the world. People have played fast and loose with the authority of the Ten Commandments, and now the results of that course are becoming terrifyingly visible. The evil eggs have been hatched, the birds of prey—mischief, disorder, sensuality, sordid selfishness—are upon us.

In the strictly religious sphere, Roman Catholicism is making considerable progress. Widely discredited in Europe, the Papacy finds America rather promising, game-abounding hunting grounds. Protestantism, sad to say, is weak, not only because it is divided, but chiefly because large sections of it have left the historic foundation, the Scriptures. What these people rely on is philosophy and the cult of naturalism and rationalism. The Modernists have not evinced any desire to return to the faith of the fathers which they abandoned. It may be that the ranks of the Fundamentalists have increased in number and effectiveness, but, unfortunately, alongside the valuable positive contributions they make in defending the divine character and the authority of the Bible, one finds the negative one of the denial of what the Scriptures teach on the means of grace, coupled in most instances with a chiliastic dispensationalism, which defies sound principles of Bible interpretation. And above the noise of theological debates we hear tumultuous shouts exhorting Christians to forget their differences and to establish fellowship with each other. The question whether such a course, uniting disparate elements, would not be foolish and anti-Scriptural is given scant attention.

III

What are we to say of the Lutheran Church here in America and the outlook for its immediate future? While it admittedly exhibits much virility, the divisions continue. When one anxiously inquires whether all the various synodical bodies and their pastors and teachers accept the Scriptures in the manner of the fathers as the inerrant Word of God, one finds with sorrow that influential leaders turn their

back on this time-honored position and bid us distinguish between what is true and what is erroneous in the Sacred Volume. Of all the questions that agitate Lutheranism in America at present this seems to be the chief one. It is not the laity which is at fault. Broadly speaking, the laymen of the various synods wish to remain on the old foundation of the infallible Scriptures. They plainly see that the Lutheran Church is a Bible Church, and to them it seems inexcusable that now the Lutheran bulwark, the Holy Scriptures, should be made insecure in this and that particular. The fault lies with certain theologians who maintain that in the light of modern critical research they can no longer accord a hundred-per-cent acceptance to the Holy Book. When their arguments are investigated, one finds them thoroughly shopworn and antiquated, fit objects for a museum, because many a time they have been refuted. But again and again they are brought out of the closet when an attack on the old Book is contemplated. It is this critical attitude toward the Scriptures which more than anything else, if our observation is correct, keeps Lutheranism in America divided.

IV

In Germany, the cradle of the Reformation, the Lutheran Church meanwhile is battling for its existence as a Lutheran body. Numerous voices urge it to merge with the Reformed so that the two churches, forming one communion, may present a united Protestant front against Roman Catholicism on the one hand and atheistic Communism on the other. The temptation to follow this course is strong indeed. Lying prostrate both through blows it suffered from the former cruel Nazi dictatorship and through the calamities which in the national defeat have befallen the whole country, German Protestantism eagerly longs for peace and brotherly fellowship in its own household. Will the ill-conceived union project of 1817 be introduced on a national scale? Will the voices of sturdy Lutheran leaders, who counsel against the merger because it would mean the death of Lutheranism in Germany, be potent enough to ward off the disaster? If Lutheranism remains, will it be truly confessional? Will the Scandinavians strengthen the hands of the Lutherans to the south, re-enacting in a spiritual way the mission which Gustavus Adolphus accomplished more than three hundred years ago in the political

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field? These are questions which come from many anxious lips. It is an hour of destiny for continental Lutheranism. In the above we have not taken into consideration the stand of the so-called Lutheran Free Churches, which, we trust, will with God's help continue to manifest loyalty to the flag of the Reformation, regardless of what will happen to the State Churches. How serious the struggle going on in Germany for the survival of Lutheranism as a strong denomination is can only be realized if one bears in mind the impoverishment of the whole nation, the hunger and general physical wretchedness, the breakdown of all restraints, the cruel disillusionment, and the abandonment of high ideals for the observance of law and order which formerly characterized the German people.

V

But while the sky is dark and threatening gloom hangs over the landscape as the old year makes its exit, the heavy clouds have a silver lining. How grateful we should be that in 1946 the world war did not blaze forth again, that America had a most bountiful harvest, that at least some food and clothing could be sent to the sufferers in Europe and elsewhere, that the sea lanes for the travel of missionaries were in part re-opened, that the old Gospel could be preached and taught under fairly favorable circumstances, that the Kingdom of God day in, day out came to us and our fellow believers in its quiet, unobtrusive way through the means of grace, that children were baptized, instructed, and confirmed and the structure of the Church grew apace. Man's inhumanity to man often was enormous and shocking, but the love of God was new every morning, and His faithfulness was great. While the statesmen stumble and fumble, let the star of charity shine all the brighter!

VI

In thinking of the centennial of the Missouri Synod, one tries to visualize the religious situation that obtained when the fathers founded our church body. It was a time of considerable confusion in matters of doctrine, but likewise of energetic and joyous planning and building in the precincts of Zion. In Germany the old Rationalism had run its course and was definitely being abandoned. Springtime had come for the churches, and even the vehement onslaughts of David

Friedrich Strauss (*Das Leben Jesu*, 1835) and the ponderous negative scholarship of the Tuebingen School could not hinder the sprouting and the blossoming in God's fair garden. In America the Reformed sects were largely relying on revivals, camp meetings, and other high-pressure methods for "ushering in the Kingdom of God." Many Lutherans were affected, and the mourner's bench was introduced in some of their churches.

There was a strong tendency in the General Synod to change the character of the Lutheran Church and make it as much like the Reformed churches as the constituency would tolerate. Dr. S. S. Schmucker, teacher of dogmatics in Gettysburg, Pa., was wielding a strong influence inimical to the interests of confessional Lutheranism. In 1846 he went to London to attend the first meeting of the Evangelical Alliance, a gathering at which fifty denominations were represented and where the objective was not a better understanding of Bible doctrine, but collaboration in spite of fundamental doctrinal differences. The little Tennessee Synod manfully opposed such indifferent tendencies, but its testimony did not reach wide circles. Alongside the effort to divest Lutheranism of its distinctive features there was to be observed a shocking ignorance of what the Lutheran Church actually teaches. The Symbolical Books and the writings of the great Lutheran theologians were *terra incognita* to large sections of the clergy. How could treasures that were unknown be prized and cherished! Theological training was, and often had to be, of a hurried and superficial type. The frontiers called for pastors, and it is not surprising, when one considers the scarcity of Lutheran seminaries, that men were employed as shepherds of the flocks who had but little knowledge of the spiritual food which they were to dispense. An anticonfessional wind was blowing. Practical exhortation, not the presentation of Bible doctrine, marked the pulpit work of the ministers.

VII

It was in such days of confusion and disloyalty to the old standards that the Missouri Synod was founded. Its distinctive feature was a strict, uncompromising confessionalism. Here there was no attempt to win the favor of Reformed fellow citizens and neighbors by watering down doctrinal differences. The Lutheran flag was unfurled; whoever did not like that ensign could bestow his allegiance elsewhere. The Synod

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proposed to remain loyal to the Lutheran Confessions, believing that their teachings are in full agreement with the Scriptures. Though not the only group in America at the time to place itself on a strictly Lutheran platform, the new body did not fail to command attention. It had at its head eminently gifted and very determined men, who were not minded to hide their light under a bushel. What they in severe mental struggles had come to recognize as the truth they desired to share with their fellow men, and especially their fellow Lutherans. A zeal for the propagation of the old Lutheran teachings was displayed which still evokes our admiration. At the very first meeting of Synod an itinerant missionary was commissioned to look up the scattered Lutherans in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Wisconsin, and steps were resolved on to take over the mission carried on by a European society among the Indians in the State of Michigan. Verve, energy, enthusiasm, characterized the body from the start.

VIII

Withal we can say that the fanaticism which so easily besets a body that is determined at all costs to abide by its principles, was avoided. The Lutheran doctrine was preached as true in every detail, but the Lutheran Church was not declared the only saving Church. There was insistence on faithful adherence to Scripture teaching in faith and in life, but the perfectionism taught by some of the sects was rejected. The doctrine of the universal priesthood of believers was exalted, but there was no desire to belittle the voice of the ministry or to rob it of any of its God-given functions. The divine institution of the office of the ministry was emphatically taught, but the temptation to make the pastors the lords instead of the servants of the Church was firmly resisted. The factor which kept the fathers from a centripetal as well as a centrifugal course was the doctrine of justification by grace through faith, which they through the grace of God had definitely apprehended, which they placed at the very heart of their teaching, and which constantly drew them back to Christ, the Redeemer. We must not be understood as contending for the view that the fathers were perfect in whatever they said and did. We, their sons, while we study their work and their writings with gratitude, can well see that imperfections, weaknesses, and mistakes could be pointed to in their

career. But today, one hundred years after the founding of Synod, we state that the platform on which the fathers placed themselves, the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions, was the right platform. We thank God for this position of our fathers. And we thank Him for having kept our body on this platform for a century.

IX

That the Lord blessed the work of the Missouri Synod and that it became a mighty force in the development of Lutheranism here and abroad, everybody will admit. We shall not dwell on that topic here, but ask, What of the future? As one of the exponents of Missouri Synod Lutheranism, the **CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY** declares: "The Scriptures and the Confessions — that must be our slogan as we advance into the second century of our history." Not because the fathers flew that banner! We should be very poor, degenerate Lutherans if we were content with a certain course merely because it is the traditional one for our church body. Whatever position we take must be occupied by us because we have ourselves become convinced that it is in agreement with God's Word and the truth. But we take for granted that throughout our Synod there still burns that holy fire which animated the fathers — the joyful assurance that the Scriptures are God's holy, infallible Word and that the Lutheran Confessions have given expression to the truths, especially the central, saving truths, which are taught in the Sacred Volume. That in our age, which is averse to doctrinal controversy, takes little interest in abstract teaching, desires to devote itself to what is immediately profitable, makes utilitarianism its guiding star, stresses sociology rather than theology, and follows the line of least resistance in its endeavors — that in such an age the battle cry "the Scriptures and the Confessions" is regarded as outmoded is evident enough. But that consideration must not keep us from going forward with this message, as little as it kept the fathers from doing so. Resolved, then, to work as faithful witnesses of the grace of God in Christ Jesus, set forth with matchless clarity and power in the Lutheran Symbolical Books, we commend ourselves and our whole church body to the faithful God, "by whom we were called into the fellowship of His Son Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Cor. 1:9).

W. ARNDT

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